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2. Science of Storytelling: What Listening to a Story Does to Our Brains

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How stories make our brains work better for learning...

From Deborah Bond-Upson, chief education officer at AwesomeStories:

I wonder, have you ever taken a memory course?

When I was in high school a teacher offered a short memory course. I was intrigued, so during study hall when my friends were having fun passing notes, I sat with 3 other students and a quirky teacher. Our mission: to learn new memory techniques. The "trick" was to make unrelated items into a story--no matter how ridiculous, in fact, better if ridiculous. Making story connections between items enabled us to remember and recite the whole story of strung together unrelated items quickly and perfectly. "Story" made the connections and the connections enabled us to remember the substance.

Researching the way the brain works, we learn that our brains are "wired" more for stories than for data. In "[Why Do We Tell Stories?](#)" author Laura Moss brings together the conclusions of other experts in brain function and stories:

- Lisa Cron, author of "[Wired for Story](#)" writes: "Story originated as a method of bringing us together to share specific information that might be lifesaving," citing a humorous example of one Neanderthal warning another not to eat certain berries by sharing the tragic story of what happened to the last guy who ate them. Because a story involves both data and emotions, it's more engaging — and therefore more memorable — than simply telling someone, "Those berries are poisonous."
- Neuroscientist [Gregory Berns](#), lead author of the Emory University "Brain Connectivity" study: "The neural changes that we found associated with physical sensation and movement systems suggest that reading a novel can transport you into the body of the protagonist. We already knew that good stories can put you in someone else's shoes in a figurative sense. Now we're seeing that something may also be happening biologically."
- Washington and Lee psychology researcher Dan Johnson found that [reading fiction makes us more empathetic](#), and the more absorbed by a story we are, the more empathetic we'll be.

Psychologist Pamela Rutledge in [The Psychological Power of Storytelling](#) lists varied ways stories outperform other modes of communication:

"In fact, reading a story causes heightened connectivity in the left temporal cortex. The neurons in this region are associated with tricking the mind into thinking the body is doing something it's not, a phenomenon known as *grounded cognition*.

- Stories have always been a primal form of communication. They are timeless links to ancient traditions, legends, archetypes, myths, and symbols. They connect us to a larger self and universal truths.
- Stories are about [collaboration](#) and connection. They transcend generations, they engage us through emotions, and they connect us to others. Through stories we share passions, sadness, hardships and joys. We share meaning and purpose. Stories are the common ground that allows people to communicate, overcoming our defenses and our differences. Stories allow us to understand ourselves better and to find our commonality with others.

- Stories are how we think. They are how we make meaning of life. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors, or narratives, stories are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values.
- Stories provide order. Humans seek certainty and narrative structure is familiar, predictable, and comforting. Within the context of the story arc we can withstand intense emotions because we know that resolution follows the conflict. We can experience with a safety net.
- Stories are how we are wired. Stories take place in the imagination. To the human brain, imagined experiences are processed the same as real experiences. Stories create genuine emotions, presence (the sense of being somewhere), and behavioral responses.
- Stories are the pathway to engaging our right brain and triggering our imagination. By engaging our imagination, we become participants in the narrative. We can step out of our own shoes, see differently, and increase our empathy for others. Through imagination, we tap into creativity that is the foundation of innovation, self-discovery, and change."

AwesomeStories was created, and has garnered the support of our team of educators, developers and a worldwide audience because we love stories. We love how we feel when we hear or read a story, how it can transport us and enrich our lives. We notice that when we learn something from a story, as humans have throughout history, that lesson is memorable and retrievable permanently, unlike lectures or articles missing the dynamics and emotional connection of story.

We have found that stories are further buttressed and deepened when they are accompanied by primary sources-- images, videos, audio recordings and authentic documents-- as these media elements further our voyage into the world of the story. With primary sources, we feel we are there, and we actually can verify, refute or extend the story. We become actively engaged in the story.

So it was no surprise to us in 2012 when author Annie Murphy Powell wrote "Your Brain on Fiction" in The New York Times. She begins with these words:

***"AMID the squawks and pings of our digital devices, the old-fashioned virtues of reading novels can seem faded, even futile. But new support for the value of fiction is arriving from an unexpected quarter: neuroscience. Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is showing, stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life."-
The Neuroscience of Your Brain on Fiction - The New York Times***

"The Science of Storytelling" is explored in the next chapter, written by Leo Wildrich the founder of Buffer. This article is provided with his permission.

Footnotes:

1) Rutledge, Pamela, PhD., The Psychological Power of Storytelling , Psychology Today, Jan/01/1970, Aug/15/2016,

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201101/the-psychological-power-storytelling>

2) Moss, Laura, Why Do We Tell Stories?, Mother Nature Network, Jan/01/1970, Aug/16/2016,

<http://www.mnn.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/stories/why-do-we-tell-stories>

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Your-Brain-on-Story-The-Brain-Science-Behind-AwesomeStories>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Your-Brain-on-Story-The-Brain-Science-Behind-Aweso>

Media Stream



How Story Affects the Brain EducatorsTechnology.com, Unknown

View this asset at:

<https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/How-Story-Affects-the-Brain>