

Unit Plan in Storytelling: Understanding the Human Experience

by Adam Jacobi

Master creative writing expert, author, and leader of the highly praised *Story Seminar*, Robert McKee has inspired award winning screenplays and novels. His poignant words capture the essence of why storytelling is so important: “Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.”

Generative Topics

A unit in storytelling works well in either an introduction to acting course, or a broad forensic course. Storytelling is applicable across age groups and cultural boundaries. In many tribal cultures, sharing stories serves the important purpose of passing that group’s history on to a new generation. Among groups of elders, it can be a way of celebrating life, reflecting on experiences and sharing perspectives with others.

Acclaimed playwright, actress, and professor Anna Deavere Smith understands the value of personal narrative as a vehicle for telling stories, and her series of one-woman Broadway shows have brought vital issues to the fore. Her process is exquisite; her style unique. It is not uncommon for Smith to interview several hundred people to prepare her scripts, as she did for the poignant *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, an account of the racial violence that proliferated the city of Los Angeles after the Rodney King police brutality trial.

In her performance, Smith plays members of the trial jury, the LA Police Commissioner, a Black community activist, a Latino journalist, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, Cornel West, and a Korean liquor store owner, among others. She splices and weaves segments of narrative monologues together, much like the collegiate American Forensic Association event of Program Oral Interpretation. The result is a cogent dialectic that shows

Smith brings credibility as a MacArthur Genius Award winner and scholarship as a professor at New York University School of Law and Tisch School of the Arts (and previously at Stanford University). She also brings experience as a television actress on such shows as *The West Wing*—where she played national security advisor, Nancy McNally—and *Nurse Jackie*, where she plays Gloria Akalitus. Several years ago, I attended a coaching workshop led by Dr.

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how individuals construct their own interpretation of a situation through their own experiences and reality, and allows audience members to arrive at their own conclusion, based on the perspectives presented. “We need to reach for the core of our humanity with all its glory and all its challenges. I am looking to illuminate something about our humanness. The solutions lie not in my monologues but in the collaborative humanness of audience members who walk out of the theater with the potential to make change.” (Smith)

Peter Pober, now director of forensics at George Mason University. Pober eloquently described how performance theorist Antonin Artaud conceived of a *walking scrapbook* notion, where a performer would draw on observation of mannerisms of the people s/he encountered throughout life.

Anna Deavere Smith certainly captures distinct subtlety in her performance of myriad characters without appearing superficial. Smith’s lifelong fascination with language and linguistics also allows her to convey the verbal nuances, enhancing the authenticity of the dialogue, and therefore,

performance. In fact, Smith describes the way people share their experiences as being like singing, which has varying rhythm and passion. Her interviewees, who provide the real life experiences that Smith transcribes verbatim into dialogue for performance, often take a circuitous path to elucidating the heart of the story they're telling. Smith upholds the importance of this as providing insight into the reality of that individual.

The stage script was adapted to a screen version that aired on PBS—complete with footage from the LA riots—and is available for a reasonable cost with several teaching aids. There's also an episode of *PBS NOW*, where Smith is interviewed about *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and it provides some valuable perspectives about her process. While as a matter of practice, I would usually show just excerpts of films in the classroom, there is a particular benefit to seeing Smith's argument develop, holistically. The quality of reflective journal entries, discussion, and inspirational stimulus to students is worth the investment in a few class periods.

Understanding Goals

The art of storytelling as performance can be traced to ancient Greece, where Thespis was acclaimed as the first winner of a theatrical competition in Dionysia, Athens. Along with Western society's rhetorical roots in Aristotle, the Dionysian festival provides theatrical lineage, which is why actors are often called thespians to this day. In fact, the Educational Theatre Association's International Thespian Society, the honorary society for theatre, calls its chapters "Thespians."

In the interpretive realm of forensics, performance theories and techniques are akin to theatre, and all can find their root in the tradition of storytelling. In the NFL, Storytelling as a competitive event exists as a consolation event at the National Tournament, whereas several state leagues offer it as a regular category. In Wisconsin Storytelling, for instance, a student must prepare four or five stories based on prescribed annual topic areas, and deliver

a different story of up to eight minutes, each round of competition, at a singular tournament.

Storytelling involves endowing a sense of audience mood through the tone of performance. In forensics, this tends to be children, but depending on the circumstances, could be a council of elders. There's also a sense of spontaneity. Acting theorist Konstantin Stanislavski advised actors to rehearse to be spontaneous on stage. The paradox here is that the repetition of practice would seem to create a uniform product. The challenge is to be as impulsive as a good jazz musician, to play off the audience and the energy of the moment.

The beauty of this unit is that in the development of a coherent, cohesive story narrative, it encourages critical thinking that extends to the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. In terms of National Standards for Theatre Education (developed by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education and the Educational Theatre Association), it meets all content standards enumerated, especially if an analysis of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is used as a generative topic.

Performances of Understanding

Lessons to accompany *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* may vary, depending on the course, and in a more traditional speech communication or social studies class, could be done as an ethnographic study of cross cultural communication. Encouraging students to actively listen and watch, take notes, and write a two to three page reflective journal entry for homework following each class period is a great way to ensure they are thinking critically about their observations. Subsequent class discussion of the issues, Smith's process of gathering the interviews and her subsequent performance tactics are also relevant.

A great benchmark lesson to use in tandem with this unit is the Physical Analysis described in this *Rostrum* column in March 2009. Building on the tenets of physical analysis, ask students to interview someone in their neighborhood, place of worship, family, or workplace. Teaching

students effective interviewing techniques is important, but in this context, it's important for them to allow the interviewee to tell the story on his/her own terms and in his/her own time. Audio recording the interview is encouraged, so the student can replay it, to study the paralanguage, tempo, and filler phrases the interviewee uses. If the student is unable to audio record that, they should take detailed notes, and add observations of those aforementioned qualities as soon after the interview concludes as possible, so as not to lose the authenticity of characterizing their subject.

It helps to conference with students as they cull their interview material to create the narrative story. Depending on the time constraints, students may have to condense, but they should include the major plot devices. Professor of theatre education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Dr. Robin Mello calls the individual moments of stories "bones," and students should assemble a skeleton outline. This allows them to deliver the story extemporaneously to sustain spontaneity. Dr. Mello's Storytelling course provides much of the model for this unit plan.

Students also should workshop their story with a partner, or in a small group setting. This allows students to work collaboratively, give each other direction, and to help them bring details to the surface.

Along the way, so that students understand and appreciate the development process involved in building their story, they should keep a reflective journal. This also provides documentation of how effectively students are learning. They should also journal about classmates' performances, as well as debrief their own. As a culminating journal entry, they should describe what they have learned about the human experience as a result. ■

Resources

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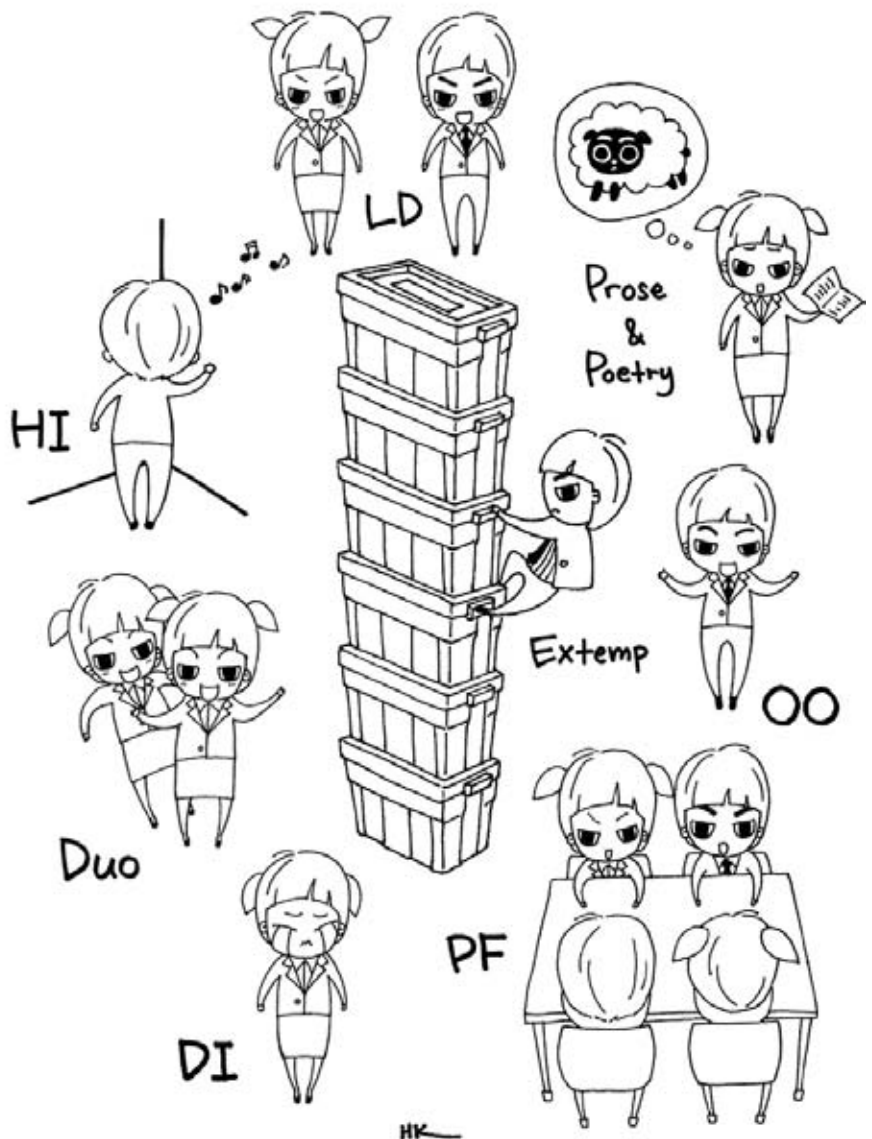
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Illustration by Hyunyoung Kim
North Allegheny Senior High School
Coach: Sharon Volpe



About the Author

Adam Jacobi is the NFL's Coordinator of Programs and Coach Education.

A former two-diamond coach of three NFL champions and an NCFL champion, he has taught courses in speech communication and International Baccalaureate theatre.

About the Artist

Hyunyoung Kim is a senior at North Allegheny Senior High School. Born in Tucson, Arizona, she and her family moved to Korea when she was just three years old. Growing up, she participated in various intellectual and artistic activities ranging from choir concerts, school plays, and dance to art, piano, math, and science competitions. Through these experiences, she found her special talent in art and science. She came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 8th grade and later joined numerous clubs, including the speech and debate team. She currently plans to attend Cornell University.