

# Situated Learning: Story Strategies for enriching content

Oil painters often use a technique called layering to create luminous works with texture and depth. Using brushes, palette knives, and rags, the artist layers paint, washes, and varnish to enhance interest and depth. Neuropsychologists and other biological scientists use a layering approach to observe an organism's behavior, tracing interactions through successive levels of organ systems to achieve a complex and increasingly rich understanding as it interacts with its environment. When composers score a work for a symphony orchestra, a similar layering approach may be used. Some cooks approach cooking the same way, layering herbs and spices and using different cooking techniques to create a greater variety and richness of taste. The same is true of writers

When writing a story, authors use layering and integrating narrative techniques such as plotting, character development, and storytelling. To enhance interest of a concept-driven teaching case scenario, three general strategies in particular are helpful: tension, emotion, and visualization. After identifying learning goals and deciding how to present, illustrate, and support the content, use the following strategies and associated techniques to layer greater depth and interest into the scenario.

## Strategy One: Build Tension

In a scenario, tension captures interest and drives the reader to continue reading and pay closer attention. Something is about to happen. A change is in the wind. How will the hero resolve the insurmountable problem? "Danger, Will Robinson!" Tension, along with other storifying techniques, improves memory retention. "A story's structure and rhythm, as well as the emotional involvement it encourages, can help us remember important information that might be forgotten if it is delivered to us in the form of reports, lectures, or isolated bits of information. Stories help us remember."<sup>1</sup>

As storytellers know, a scenario usually has a built-in narrative structure. In Western culture, the Dramatic Arc is so familiar that cadence is commonly used when describing many daily events. The basic Dramatic Arc has a beginning, middle, and end with a rise in action and a climax (see <http://narrativestructures.wisc.edu/>). Several smaller arcs may occur within the framework of the main arc. To build tension in a story, identify where the action rises and use the following three literary techniques.



*"Knowledge is situated in a specific context, and meaning-making occurs through interactions within that world with others."*

*Lave & Wenger, 1991<sup>2</sup>*

- **Enhance plot.** Alter the plot to give the main character more to overcome. Make the challenge more difficult or the consequences more severe or potentially more strongly felt. Introduce witnesses or mentors to let down. Add more power or poignancy to the consequences or sequences. Will an entire town be poisoned by one small boy pedaling by on his tricycle while drinking an Orange Crush?
- **Use shorter words.** As tension builds in real-life situations, words are shortened in syllables and length. Examples are: "Get the hose!"; or "Call 911!" Writers create tension by using shorter words as the action rises to the climax. Shorter words help signal to the reader that something is going to happen or someone is in trouble. The shorter words make one read faster and breathe more heavily. Using more words with hard sounds instead of soft sounds also enhances the clipped effect. Use "cook" instead of "chef"; "tango" instead of "cha-cha."
- **Shorten dialogue.** Similarly, as tension builds in real-life situations, dialogue gets more brief; sentences become simpler and less structurally complicated. Examine any dialogue leading up to a climax and see if it can be shortened or simplified. After a climax, when the tension is dropping, see if the dialogue can be lengthened or sentences made more complex. This creates a contrast with the shorter rise in action and heightens the increasing tension.

<sup>1</sup> Ohler, Jason. *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning, and Creativity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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## Strategy Two: Increase Emotional Attachment

Emotional attachment is the connection the reader develops for the main character. Interest is increased for readers when they care if the hero succeeds in the quest. Will that gigantic rock rolling out of the cave crush Indiana Jones? Do we care? Why do we care? In the 19th century, New Yorkers crowded the harbor docks waiting for the next installment of Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* to learn if Little Nell was dead. To help increase the emotional attachment of the reader, identify the main and secondary characters and use the following three literary techniques.

- **Use names.** Give main characters and frequently appearing secondary characters a name. Common names create an Everyman or Everywoman feeling with the character. An unusual name will attach to the situation and help memory, but names that are awkward to pronounce will slow the reader or cause the reader to skip the name, thereby losing any memory benefits. Choose a gender-neutral name, like Avery or Harper if interested in creating a scenario that is not gender specific. Baby name websites and books are a good resource and give lists of names (usually divided by boy and girl), meanings, and histories.
- **Enrich character.** It only takes the addition of one or two appearance or personality features to help cement the story character in the reader's mind and make them care about what happens. Consider whether the character is nervous or confident, colorful or mousy, scattered or efficient, surly or accommodating.
- **Add backstory.** Another way to enrich character is by adding backstory. Novelists often create biographies for their characters with information that never appears in the book but supports consistent writing about the character. For a case scenario, creating a brief biography will do the same thing. Pull from the biography to add information about the character's goals, family members, musical talent, disappointments, or other relevant background details.

## Strategy Three: Increase Visualization

To promote reader visualization within a scenario, utilize a technique called image-building. This involves creating a picture in the reader's mind to complement the content, thus building interest and increasing content retention. Contextualization of a scenario allows for a greater visualization of characters, place, and sequence of events. The reader can visualize the scenario better, make better choices, and have more authentic reactions. To help increase the visualization elements of a scenario, use the following four literary techniques.

- **Add color.** Use color to add color. Referencing a brown leather briefcase or a pink Hello Kitty backpack enhances the scenario and says two very different things about how the character carries his possessions.
- **Replace nouns and verbs.** Select some nouns and verbs to enhance. Switching out "view" for "scenic" or "loped" for "ran" creates a more specific and more interesting picture.
- **Replace adverbs and adjectives** Select the descriptive words in the scenario and check if some can be enhanced. It may be as simple as changing "big" to "large" or "outrageously oversized."
- **Use metaphors and similes.** Metaphors and similes are two literary devices that give a lot of bang for their buck. "More bang for the buck" is a metaphor used to replace "getting more value than expected." Metaphors apply a description usually used for something else, thereby setting up a multilevel comparison. Similes are metaphors that start with the words "as" or "like," as in "she is as courageous as a lion."



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