

*Why do stories matter?*  
**Narrative learning and the educational power of the tale**

*“A story is the shortest distance between people” ~Pat Speight*

Humans have used stories to communicate, inform, and preserve culture for over 100,000 years. From oratory to documentation, the societal ubiquity of story form has cultivated a neurological predisposition for the creation, reception, and extraction of meaning from narrative.

Evolutionarily, human brains have come to favor information presented through story; babies are born into our society with minds ready to perceive human experience through narrative structure, and their eventual exposure to verbal and written stories solidifies the neural mapping they already possess.<sup>1</sup>

Stories present idiosyncrasies and deviations from social norms—cognitive disruptions that generate suspense, mystery, and a desire for resolution. In the act of solving the “puzzle” of a story, readers must schematize new information—a process which activates prior knowledge (or, in the educational field, prior lessons), scaffolds sense-making, and produces the neural rewiring that accompanies learning. Stories employ structural elements that create relevance, context, and an opportunity for “text-to-self” connection that engages readers affectively and intellectually.<sup>ii</sup>

Educational researcher and theorist Kieran Egan contends that binary oppositions are essential facets of successful stories; while young children typically cannot articulate concepts such as “justice vs. injustice,” “tradition vs. modernity,” or even “hot vs. cold,” his research shows that they are capable of grappling with such abstractions when presented with the latent and nuanced content of stories (whereas “they are unable to understand them through logic argument or rote memorization”<sup>iii</sup>).<sup>2</sup>

Stories rife with binarisms, characterization, conflict, and context improve memory and comprehension across subject matter, as transfer occurs between the study of story in one subject and the ability to interpret new information in another.<sup>v</sup> Facts are more easily learned when presented through story format; reading or listening to stories releases oxytocin in the brain—a neurochemical that enhances cooperation, ignites empathic response, and inspires compassion.<sup>3</sup> Emotional engagement heightens students’ awareness of detail, thus transmitting factual or informative content at a deeper level. Stories are enjoyable and neurobiologically efficacious tools for learning—contemporaneously honing students’ content-related knowledge, inspiring inquiry, and strengthening interpersonal skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Haven, Kendall F. *Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007. Print. <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>iv</sup> Kieran, Egan. *Teaching as Storytelling*. N.p.: Routledge, 1988. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Haven, Kendall F. *Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Zak, Paul J. "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling." *Harvard Business Review*. N.p., 28 Oct. 2014. Web. 03 June 2016.

## Tools and Texts for Narrative Learning: A Water Inquiry Resource List

### **Readings about Narrative Learning:**

1. [\*Story Proof\*](#) by Kendall Haven, a comprehensive review of narratology, narrative psychology, and neuroscience that explicates and contextualizes the neurological impacts of narrative and story-form thinking.
2. [\*Teaching as Storytelling\*](#) by Kieran Egan, an educationist's perspective and research on the interdisciplinary integration of stories in pedagogy.
3. [\*The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human\*](#) by Jonathan Gotschall, a review of the history and science of stories as they shape, and are shaped by, cultures and communities.
4. [\*Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence\*](#) by Lisa Cron, an author's integration of narrative psychology and the compositional craft of writing.
5. ["How Stories Change the Brain,"](#) an article profiling neuroscientist Paul Zak and his work with oxytocin, the "moral molecule," as it relates to storytelling and pro-social behavior.

### **Diagrams for Writing and Teaching:**

1. Character Mapping Storyboards allow student authors (and teachers!) to diagram the structure of their narratives before placing pen to paper in a traditional, textual format: <http://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/education/english/character-mapping>
2. This ReadWriteThink Story Map similarly enables structural organization: <http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/printouts/CharacterMap.pdf>
3. Imaginative Education Infographics provide an organizational framework with which to scaffold classroom discussions of stories: <http://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/literacy/5-ideas-for-using-infographics-to-teach-classic-literature/>