

It's story time... for mentors

Sustaining the attention of students in the classroom is a big challenge for teachers. Here is an effective tool that can help

■ SARTHAK SARASWAT

"A teacher who is not a good orator is as good as a dead teacher," says Professor Francis Peter, a faculty at Xavier School of Management, Chennai. Though the statement might sound dramatic, no one can accuse him of not emphasising enough on how essential it is for a teacher to be able to hold his/her students' attention in a classroom. And one of the best tools a teacher can apply to achieve this is storytelling. "This technique can be used for not just the arts, but for all the subjects," says Eric Miller, director, World Storytelling Institute, Chennai.

He was recently at Loyola College, Chennai, as a speaker at a national workshop on training of teachers. "Many senior professors are used to lecturing because their priority is to disseminate information within the stipulated time. Studies have shown that more interactivity is needed in classrooms," he says. He believes that storytelling and small group activities are effective mediums which can facilitate this and get students to actively participate in the classroom.

Different approaches

Different fields require different approaches. One of them is experiential, or activity-based learning, says Eric.

"The teacher/trainer introduces a topic. Students are invited to engage in an activity such as thinking (visualise, imagine), writing, drawing, talking in a small group, and so on. Then, the teacher/trainer facilitates a discussion with all the students and invites some of them to share with the entire group what they did and thought during their activity time," he explains. Students are encouraged to go through the material before the class, by reading, listening to audio recordings, watching video recordings, and so on. Class time is dedicated to interaction between the students, and between the teacher and the students. "The teacher's task is to help students integrate the data, put it in context, and find meaning in it," says Eric.

For subjects such as literature, history, social studies, anthropology and sociology, teachers can zero in on the human experience. "They can have a discussion on the lives of historic figures, such as their hopes, yearnings, fears, struggles, and decision-making processes. Professors can also encourage students to speak as the characters," he says, adding, "Activities such as these involve students at an emotional and imaginary level. Where emotions begin, intellect follows. They will be motivated to think about it analytically if they are emotionally involved."



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Professor P.V. Sridevi, who teaches history at Maris Stella College, Vijayawada, believes that the medium of storytelling interlinks different subjects and leads to a holistic understanding. "Today, all subjects need to be related and connected to the present. As a history lecturer, I can't just go to the past

and restrict myself to it," she says. She often encourages her students to interact with their grandparents and gain from their knowledge. One can gain unexpected insights through this exercise, she says. "I collect folk songs as they carry an oral record of our traditions and are never formally recorded. This helps students when they opt for post-graduation or higher studies. It adds value to narratives and helps them understand a topic better."

A question that would come to one's mind is, how can one use storytelling to teach science subjects? Eric has a simple answer to this. "Use personifica-

tion, give examples and review case studies – inventions, discoveries, advancements in a field, and so on."

Professor S. Vani Latha, who teaches chemistry at Maris Stella College, agrees. "Storytelling can be a useful tool, but one needs to plan things properly. To facilitate better understanding of chemical reactions and other concepts, we conducted a play which included some lab experiments. It proved to be quite helpful and enabled students to grasp concepts easily," she says, adding, "Since we have a hectic schedule, it is not always possible to conduct activities frequently. But they are really effective and should be tried more often in the classroom."

How can teachers hone their storytelling skills and employ them in the classroom effectively? "The World Storytelling Institute conducts various workshops. There is also a lot of reading material available on the Internet," says Eric. "Engaging a consultant who knows about storytelling can also help. The consultant can work with the faculty to implement it," he says.

Online resources

- Notes on storytelling workshops for teachers: www.storytellinginstitute.org/12.html
- An interactive documentary on story and storytelling: www.biologyofstory.com
- Links to recordings of storytelling-related video conferences: www.storytellinginstitute.org/av.html