

HOW TO CREATE GENIUS STORIES



Do you lack the creativity to use storytelling to enthrall your learners? Matt Brewer draws inspiration from a surprising frame of reference.

Here's a question for you. When creating your next online learning module, what one thing could you do to make it more engaging to the learner? In addition, it should: a) cost nothing; b) require no new software; c) require no fancy graphics, professional video or audio; and d) allow you to use your imagination... *The answer is simple: Tell a story.*

Now, before you start building the case against this by assuming you're not creative or imaginative enough to come up with interesting stories that contain the required learning points, let me give you an

example. It's not from an online learning course, an instructional video or any other source that you might normally consider for inspiration.

Here's the outline. The story is set around a school and a particular family with three children of varying academic abilities, a daughter who's very clever and two sons who aren't. The headmaster announces to the school that one student is the first ever to have achieved a perfect score in a particular aptitude test, and has therefore been sent to a Government institute for further 'experiments'. The student singled out is one of the sons. This horrifies the

family, and the daughter (who actually took the test) starts pretending to be a fool – in case the same thing happens to her.

The other brother then vows to get into the institute as well, to help his sibling. He throws himself into studying, despite not knowing how to use the internet or indeed read a book. Other students (including a robot) assist him in helping him to learn. Meanwhile, the children's parents are distraught at having their child taken away. So, when another student who's having problems at home asks if he can stay with them for a while, they agree but under the slightly disturbing condition that he makes

himself look like the child who was taken away. They then ask him to call them 'Mum' and 'Dad'.

THE PLOT THICKENS

The remaining brother's attempts at learning are then summarised, with him being aware that his brain has been underused in the past. He uses different training methods (some unorthodox) to raise himself to the standard required to get a perfect score in the aptitude test. But when taking the test, he accidentally assaults the headmaster.

All hope therefore seems lost. But back at the family home, two Government agents arrive to return the first son, as after extensive testing they now know he couldn't have taken the original test. However, they do know someone from the family is the real genius and they intend to take them away instead. To protect his sister, the other son tells the agents that the student who is now staying with them is the genius – and that student is more than happy to go to the institution to escape his new 'family'. This is the first clever thing the son has ever done, and is therefore proof that studying makes a difference.

As you can tell from reading this synopsis, there's a lot happening in the story. Some of the main topics you could take from it include: education, the validity of exams and tests, Government intervention, sibling rivalry, methods of learning, family life and loss, adoption, psychological issues, assault, the effectiveness of studying, collaborative learning, the use of technology for learning...and probably others that I've missed.

While the content of the story won't fit with anything that you'll be creating learning modules for, the structure of it is common to many stories. The main components are listed below:

- A Position of Peril working through the story and its associated background information will lead you to a successful conclusion
- Explain the problems the Position of Peril is causing and the probable outcomes of a successful and unsuccessful resolution
- Introduce the main characters. Whether you introduce all of them at the beginning may depend on the type of module you're creating. To make the story more realistic, introduce new characters only when they need to appear
- Work through some scenarios that help the learner understand some of the smaller issues that have led to or arisen from the main problem at hand

But if presented with a topic for which you need to create a module, think about how you could weave a story around it using the components listed above. What message must be understood?

- Introduce a second, minor story or sub-plot resulting from the original problem. This should run alongside the main story and reach its conclusion at a similar time. A sub-plot adds more complexity but also increases the challenge and realism for the learner. They will rarely work on a single problem at a time in the workplace. In the synopsis above, the main story centres on the second brother's attempts to improve his learning, while the sub-plot looks at the effects on the parents and their misguided attempt at 'replacing' their son
- Look at ways of resolving the problems. Where possible, get your learners to identify the issues, and determine the points in the story where other choices would be more effective. Get them to suggest alternative resolutions.
- Show the ideal resolution, making sure all loose ends are tied up. Alternatively, if the module is part of a larger programme or campaign, why not leave something unanswered or introduce a new issue at the end? This 'cliff-hanger' can be tackled in the next module.

This story outline would easily have enough content and scope to fill a book or perhaps even a series of some sort. There are enough junctures where branches to the plot would allow other areas and topics to be explored in more detail.

However, I didn't read this story in a book, magazine or newspaper article; nor get it from a new, gritty TV drama that aims to explore family life and education. To give you an idea of where I saw it, I'll explain a little further. The mother and father are called Nicole and Richard, the daughter is called Anais. The brother taken away is called Darwin; the other brother is simply referred to as Gumball. Not that strange, until you know that two of them appear to be cats; two appear to be rabbits; and Darwin has actually evolved from their pet fish.

I got it from a ten-minute cartoon called *The Amazing World of Gumball*, shown on the Cartoon Network (the episode was entitled 'The Genius'). So why relate a kids' cartoon to learning technologies? It all comes back to the story. Too many of us assume we aren't imaginative enough to create a good story. And if we do try to

include a story in an online learning module, it's going to look 'bolted-on' and will therefore only have the effect of turning off the learner.

FREEDOM TO IMAGINE

But if presented with a topic for which you need to create a module, think about how you could weave a story around it using the components listed above. What message must be understood? What are the consequences of comprehension versus misunderstanding? What secondary information must be covered, but preferably in a related sub-plot? Who are the characters going to be? What is their connection to the main story? Will you be able to use them in subsequent modules?

It is not necessary to watch every kids programme – but some cartoons have impressive plots when you take a step back and look at the complexities of the story, the characters and the settings. Especially when condensed into a ten-minute 'module'. I've watched several of them with my children – purely for research purposes of course. *Gumball...* is one of their favourites, along with *Regular Show* and *Adventure Time* (my personal preference).

The visuals, the characters, the script and the action enthral the kids. They also pick up on some of the 'learning points' the writers have included. It is not heavy-handed, or moralistic. Those who remember the *He-Man* cartoons of the '80s will get my drift. It is done in a way where the story is critical for the message to be understood.

Compared to L&D, cartoon writers have a different sort of freedom within which their ideas take shape. But we impose too many self-restrictions that stifle our story-making imagination. This ultimately lessens the impact of the message.

Here's a recommendation I never thought I'd make as a responsible parent. *Watch more cartoons*. You might learn something.

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