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Using Seinfeld to Enhance Storytelling Speeches

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ABSTRACT
This classroom activity uses video clips from the sitcom, Seinfeld, in order to provide students with examples of the characteristics of exceptional storytellers and their ability to convey meaning. By applying the Freytag’s Pyramid to storytelling, students have found a tool to assist them in constructing a captivating narrative. These visual skits offer students an opportunity to view how a story is effectively organized, what elements comprise an extraordinary narrative, and how to dramatically display emotion.

Goals/Objectives
1. Students will be able to recognize essential elements of storytelling.
2. Students will be able to identify effective delivery techniques associated with public speaking and storytelling. These include natural hand gestures, genuine eye contact, and the use of vocal variety.
3. Students will be able to identify the importance of the use of descriptive adjectives and figurative language.
4. Students will be able to recognize the components of Freytag’s Pyramid.
5. Students will observe how to convey emotion through the use of facial expressions, hand gestures, and vocal variety.

Courses
Public Speaking, Literature, Theatre and Film Studies Courses.

Resources Needed
Internet connection or Seinfeld DVDs, DVD player and LCD projector.

Rationale
As an instructor of introductory speech courses, I became disenchanted with the typical introductory speech where students were asked to give a short speech introducing themselves or their partners. This assignment did not seem to convey real insight into the identities of the students. Consequently, I assigned my students the task of giving a storytelling speech about a
significant event that has happened to them in the past that highlights who they are as a person. This storytelling speech allows other course members to get to know their fellow classmates’ personalities, identities, cultural backgrounds, and past experiences in a less explicit manner.

The next hurdle that presented itself was organization. Students would typically give away the climax of the story too early, causing the audience to lose interest in the speech. To help solve this problem, I had students use Freytag’s Pyramid to organize their narratives. In 1863, German Scholar, Gustav Freytag constructed a pyramid shaped illustration to describe the plot sequence of narratives and dramas (Thursby, 2006). Thursby’s (2006) description of Freytag’s pyramid is comprised of seven steps or elements that create a narrative or drama. These include the exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and the denouement.

- An excellent illustration and description of Freytag’s Pyramid can be found at Professor George Hartley’s website at http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~hartleyg/250/freytag.html

Using Freytag’s Pyramid to visually illustrate plot construction has increased the organizational success rate of students, as well as, lowered the anxiety of students. Most students have been exposed to this model of story construction in elementary or middle school English courses and usually recall the elements of Freytag’s Pyramid quite quickly. Students felt more prepared for their speeches by having a model, formula, and process to follow for telling their stories.

By applying Freytag’s Pyramid to the *Seinfeld* episodes, the educator can incorporate a multiple sensory experience into the classroom, which can aid students in memory retention (Jensen, 1996). Students will remember information more readily when exposed to stimulation that engages several brain functions (Hill, 2001). Hill (2001) states that, “For best recall, multiple sensory experiences should be employed to encode memory with vision, hearing, sound, smell, or movement and relationships” (p. 73). Watching the *Seinfeld* clips clearly engages both visual and auditory stimulation.

Secondly, the human brain has an easier time retaining information when associating the memory in the context in which it would be used (Hill, 2001). Thus, by watching the professional storytellers perform these concepts in context, students will be able to retain and comprehend these new ideas more readily. Students can observe how natural hand gestures look and can hear how vocal variety actually sounds when used to enhance the performer’s story.

Finally, Engleberg and Daly (2005) also contend that audiences remember stories because they create lasting images. If stories create lasting images and the elements of Freytag’s Pyramid was applied to the *Seinfeld* clips, the objectives of the lesson will be easier for students to recall. For example, students will remember what the resolution of the story is because they can associate the resolution with the lasting image of George saving the whale by removing the golf ball from the whale’s blowhole in the Marine Biologist video clip.
Activity Directions

1. The first 15 – 20 minutes of class are spent discussing what stories are, why people use narratives, and what characteristics or components make a good story. This should also include a description and discussion of Freytag’s Pyramid.

2. The next step is to play the video clip in its entirety to allow students to take in the whole story. Then, replay the video, stopping the video to point out the examples of the following concepts:

   - **Effective Delivery** – Hand gestures, vocal variety, facial expressions, and eye contact.
   - **Freytag’s Pyramid** – Exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and denouement.
   - **Figurative Language** – Similes, metaphors, and descriptive adjectives.
   - **Retelling of the Story** – The best stories are often retold. Each video clip provides an example of the story being retold to others.

3. I would suggest beginning with the Pinky Toe Sketch and then repeating this procedure again with the Marine Biologist Sketch. I show both video clips in class because I believe the actors who play George and Kramer use different methods for being engaging storytellers. In the Pinky Toe sketch, I point out how Kramer uses a broad range of body movements, hand gestures, and facial expressions to tell his story. Whereas, in the Marine Biologist Sketch, I emphasize the fact that George uses more figurative language and vocal variety to be an effective storyteller. While viewing the pinky toe sketch, I pause the video to I point out the plot elements of Freytag’s Pyramid. Then, after showing the second sketch, I ask students which elements of the story mirror Freytag’s Pyramid to garner some discussion.

   The Pinky Toe Sketch should begin when the camera pans in on Kraemer’s face and you hear Toby scream. The sketch should end when Elaine’s co-workers are recounting the story to her about Toby losing her pinky toe. The Marine Biologist Sketch should begin when George rolls up his pants and walks into the ocean. Play the video clip until the very end of the episode for this sketch to reveal the denouement.

   - The Pinky Toe Sketch can be found on You Tube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpvON6IpNs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpvON6IpNs) (Note: The You Tube version does not include the concept of retelling the story).
   - The Marine Biologist Sketch can be found on You Tube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u8KUgUqprw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u8KUgUqprw&feature=related).

4. After showing the Pinky Toe Sketch have your students then view the animated version of this sketch. The animated version of the skit gives them a visual idea of what might occur in the brain of an audience member who is hearing the Pinky Toe story or the Marine Biologist story. By viewing the animated sketches, it will help reinforce the importance of vivid imagery.
• The Pinky Toe Sketch with animation can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA4CO6YxiHU&feature=related

• The Marine Biologist with animation can be found on You Tube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nescbncEOZM&feature=related

Both of these sketches can also be found on the bonus features section of the DVD.

Additional Follow-Up Activities

1. Divide the students into groups of four or five. Then have the groups create a short story about an inanimate object using Freytag’s Pyramid. Students can complete the story by creating an autobiography of the object involving a crisis the character needs to solve. Groups should strive to create a descriptive, entertaining story that uses figurative language and vivid imagery. This activity will allow them to apply the information they have just learned. The groups should read and share their stories to the rest of the class at the end of the activity. This activity usually requires 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Students really enjoy this activity since it allows them to be highly creative in a group setting.

2. Ask for 3 or 4 volunteers to pick a note card with a famous person, an object, and an item of food listed on it. Give the volunteer students 5 minutes to think about how they can incorporate these three items into a story. Have the students give a short impromptu speech that uses Freytag’s Pyramid and the three items on the note card. Their goal should be to make it believable and cohesive. This reinforces the idea that a good story has to be probable and should have fidelity. The entire class should guess at the end of the speech which famous person, object, and food item was used. This activity should take about 20 minutes. This activity works best with classes that do not exhibit high levels of communication apprehension or public speaking anxiety. As you may observe as an instructor, some classes are more open to creative, impromptu activities than others. I have had both success and failure with this follow up activity.

Conclusion

Precisely because of the listed benefits, incorporating Seinfeld into the storytelling speech assignment pulls my students into the material and casts off apprehension. Students who are not natural storytellers found that by using Freytag’s Pyramid to organize their speeches they were able to more successful when delivering their stories. Secondly, by being able to view excellent storytellers, students appeared to have a better grasp on how to enhance their stories through the use of hand gestures, facial expressions, and vocal variety. Finally, as an instructor, starting with the storytelling assignment in the beginning of the semester has assisted me in introducing other concepts later in the semester including the use persuasive appeals, identification, and transitions. This assignment and activity has been a continual favorite of my students. Therefore, I encourage you to consider using this activity in your communication courses.
References


