

Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

Spinning Tales:

The Power of Storytelling in Teaching

by Jennifer Ross

When Professor Amy Yorke needed a way to illustrate her point about listening to patients, she decided to tell a story:

“When my patient originally came in, I did not know what was wrong, but I knew she had a vestibular issue. On her third visit, I was still struggling to figure out what was causing her problems, and she stated ‘This is when I get my symptoms’ and she put herself into a position that caused her symptoms. Mystery solved, I was able to correctly diagnose her and successfully treat her.”

So began Yorke’s interest in the use of storytelling in the classroom.

Amy Yorke graduated from the University of Michigan – Flint in 1993 and, after earning her Masters in Physical Therapy, practiced clinically before returning to teach full-time in 2008. Currently she is working on her PhD at Western Michigan University and is planning to graduate this June. As a physical therapy instructor, Yorke uses stories “to deliver content and drive clinical reasoning” as well as to help students “understand that no one is perfect, we all make mistakes, and that the important thing is that we all learn from them.” To more fully develop her theories about the classroom use of storytelling, she recently explored the subject in her TCLT-sponsored Marian Wright Teaching Circle, “Once Upon a Time: The Use of Storytelling in Teaching and Learning.”

In her teaching circle, Yorke and other faculty participants representing the Physical Therapy, Physics, Africana Studies, Education, and Theater departments, discussed the teaching and learning benefits of storytelling, as well as “how to engage students with the stories, how stories can deliberately be used in teaching,

and the process of remembering details.” To further their conversations, the group read *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling* by Annette Simmons. The participants then practiced telling stories, discussed how a story can

influence or persuade listeners, and debated the mechanics and characteristics of good stories. At the conclusion of the teaching circle, the participants described how each member intended to incorporate storytelling into their future teaching.

As a professor and health care provider, Yorke often uses stories to help students relate to the material. “I think there’s power – a lot of power – in storytelling,” she says. Through stories, we relate to or persuade people, analyze situations, draw conclusions, and reflect on our experiences. In Yorke’s classes, stories personalize abstract course material by helping students associate their academic work with real life, thereby creating an access point through which students can better relate to the information.

While she had incorporated real-life examples into her lesson plan even before leading the teaching circle, Yorke came to recognize that weaving a story



Amy Yorke, Assistant Professor
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The Power of Storytelling (continued)

based on multiple cases or other aspects of her work was a viable teaching option. Until leading the teaching circle, she had always told her students true stories based on real occurrences; she had never considered creating fictitious stories to illustrate a point. Now though, Yorke sometimes crafts her own stories, always incorporating the threads of truth and experience that give it its foundation.

In reflecting on the nature of stories, Yorke discovered their power to evoke emotion. Not only do stories assist academically, but they also encourage students to engage emotionally. Yorke created an assignment in which her students composed a story about something meaningful that happened to them during their clinicals. She then gave her students feedback “intended to help them . . . fill in the gaps” resulting from a lack of self-reflective emotional engagement. Through this assignment Yorke wanted her students to examine and interact with the emotions of their experience, not just the facts. For the most part, she says, students “responded positively,” one even reporting that the assignment “allowed me to learn more from the experience.”

When asked what changes she would implement were she to conduct another teaching circle, Yorke replied that she would make Blackboard a more integral part of the process. Although the participants had access to a teaching circle-specific Blackboard site, Yorke admits that the program wasn’t used to its fullest potential and that “there’s a lot more use for something like that,” such as posting discussion questions ahead of time and carrying on conversations outside of the selected meeting times. Additionally, Yorke would rotate facilitator and discussion leader responsibilities so as to spread out the work load and take advantage of the participants’ varying backgrounds and viewpoints.

Yorke also responded that she would do more to meet consistently, thereby capitalizing on the opportunity for “networking with other people across campus.” For Yorke, the strength of the teaching circle was that the “wide background of

the participants . . . provided varying perspectives, enriching the conversation.” She says, “It is not often that faculty from across departments are able to come together and find mutual interest.” Yet, the teaching circle proved to be one venue through which faculty could do so.

However, the very diversity that created such a dynamic atmosphere also made it difficult for all the participants to meet. The teaching circle convened six times over the course of the 2011-2012 academic year, but frequently not all of the participants were able to attend. Based on this, Yorke reports that she would establish a firm date and time to meet all semester, secure participants’ commitments early in order to establish those times, and offer multiple sessions depending on differences in schedules. She also suggests compressing the teaching circle into one semester rather than having it span the course of a year because trans-semester schedule changes complicate the meeting schedule.

The TCLT’s Marian Wright Teaching Circles provide faculty with an opportunity to interact with engaging ideas and with each other. Amy Yorke’s session, “Once Upon a Time: The Use of Storytelling in Teaching and Learning,” not only offered its participants a chance to meet “other people passionate about teaching,” but also provided them with a forum in which to discuss the use and purpose of stories as a teaching method. In exploring these ideas, Yorke devised an assignment designed to engage both students’ minds and emotions with the theoretical course material and their hands-on experiences. The students’ positive responses and interest lead Yorke to conclude “there is power in creating a story.”

Written by **Jennifer Ross**

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