

# Communication by Story: A Pedagogical Device to Animate the Dismal Science

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## Abstract

This research investigates the educational value of storytelling. For countless millennia, great teachers in all societies from Plato to Gandhi have relied on stories to communicate their thoughts. Indeed, in view of the effectiveness of storytelling as a strategy to engage students, motivate them to learn theoretical content, and depersonalize instruction in lecture theaters, it is acclaimed as the foundation of the teaching profession. With curriculum-specific stories based on personal experiences as well as history, this paper demonstrates the narrative format as a powerful means of communication, thus mitigating ambivalence toward the strategy as a pedagogical embellishment.

## I. Introduction

This is an exploration of storytelling as a pedagogical tool to enhance the comprehension of theoretical concepts and engage students in large classes. To retain their attention in mega size classrooms, a consequence of the fiscal constraints that plague just about every college and university, instructors must aim for a more “user-friendly” methodology. Years of teaching introductory economics in an auditorium spacious enough to accommodate 200 have taught me that mastery of the subject matter may be the necessary condition for success in classroom, but by no means a sufficient condition. For students to digest the abstract ideas that are the mainstay of economics, and not just memorize the terminology, instructors must lasso them in the subject matter with a more seductive approach. One such technique is storytelling, an instructional design to prime the cognitive process of the inattentive in the audience.

If a grasp of the fundamental principles that undergird the workings of capitalism is the desired outcome, the goal may be achieved more efficiently through a livelier narrative format, a story that forms a prelude to the riveting drama that the vicissitudes of political economy unfold. With a personal anecdote, the lecturer can project a professional voice that facilitates the transmission of course content by evoking the emotions of students, a visceral connection vital to the long term retention of the subject matter in their memory banks. Indeed, as Blaustone argues, storytelling can greatly “assist students in their ability to understand, store, and later retrieve information from their memory” (1992, 458-459). Egan recognizes “the story form as an appropriate part of a teacher’s professional equipment,” adding “stories work by embedding their contents into vivid events and images that carry strong emotional coloring” (1989, 456).

Section II of this paper consists of a review of the literature on storytelling as a pedagogical device. In Section III, I narrate five stories that constitute an introduction to topics in economics,

such as the importance of the rule of law in a market economy, the arguments against trade restrictions, the efficiency in resource allocation, education as an essential ingredient of productivity, and the rationale for international trade. Section IV incorporates suggestions for developing storytelling as a pedagogical tool. The paper ends with my conclusions in Section V.

## II. Review of the Literature

In her article entitled *Storytelling: How to Enrich the Learning Experience*, Lickorish describes the story as a recollection of events in a long-ago place or time. Because the listeners are at a remove from the occurrence, they must rely on their imagination to create the missing details. Stories thus trigger the creative process and activate unconscious learning. She points out the similarity between a story and the metaphor -- a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that specifies one thing is used to specify another, making an implicit comparison -- and notes that “our understanding becomes richer and more complete through metaphor” (2009, 21). In the same vein, Loughlan refers to Komesaroff’s observation that metaphor can take us to “the silent territory just outside what has hitherto been said” (as cited in Loughlan, 2006, 226) and identifies it as one source of metaphor’s power to persuade and enchant.

Lickorish urges her readers to craft stories from “a snippet of your life” (2009, 22). Likewise, Kaye and Jacobson discover grist for meaningful stories in the multiple events of our lives that coalesce into a pattern, in the chronology of incidents that evolve into a plot with educational value. They assert that “stories tap into our emotions and intellect in ways that get us to remember and to use the information and wisdom of the past to help us make informed choices in the future” (1999, 50). According to Gargiulo, “stories can emphasize shades of meaning and feelings often left hidden or inadequately expressed in didactic forms of communication” (2006, 6). *Tales as Tools: The Power of Story in the Classroom* (1994), a publication of The National Storytelling Association, recognizes the broader applications of storytelling as a pedagogical device in these words:

as a vehicle for communicating concepts, a way of providing perspective on topics that would otherwise be inaccessible to the student, a means of depicting the rich potential of the human mind, or a springboard for students’ own creative endeavors (1994, 3).

Sharp recognizes the potential of stories as tools for communication and rhetorical persuasion for law students, whose “position at the intersection of law, society, and fiction already gives them an involvement in storytelling, evident as they express ... their understandings via anecdotal stories” (2005, 22). In her critique of legal pedagogy, Thiemann also considers storytelling crucial because “our legal system is based upon narration and retelling of facts. Whichever party casts the relevant facts in the best light can win the proceeding” (1998, 38). Scheppele articulates her thoughts on the role of stories in courts in these words:

Courts can exacerbate and reinforce the differences and disagreements that invariably exist in a pluralistic society by clinging to the views that there is only one true version of a story and that there is only one right way to tell it. Listening to the stories of outsiders does even more than provide a necessary

corrective to monolithic and domineering majority stories; it also provides a way for courts to built into the structure of legal reasoning the pluralism that it is the business of the courts to protect and the respect for persons that it is the business of the courts to enforce (1989, 2098).

Stressing communication as the *raison d'être* behind storytelling in a business organization, Forman (2007) identifies the following dimensions of the narrative approach that an instructor can adapt. Create a repertoire of stories that are not only pedagogically serviceable but also reveal the humanity of the teacher. Elaborate on the overarching story behind the litany of facts and figures. Narrate the story with the rhythm and tone of a conversation as if literally interacting with your listeners. Improvise by stretching some and eliminating other segments of the story in response to the nonverbal cues from the audience. Arrange the beginning of the story, its main theme, and the logical conclusion in a sequential order that captures the attention of students.

In their paper entitled *Storytelling as a Teaching Technique*, Davidhizar and Lonser idealize the pedagogical appeal of anecdotal accounts in these words: “The simplicity and immediacy of the storytelling tradition offers a powerful tool that contextualizes and humanizes ... knowledge as well as facilitating a deeper understanding of self and others within ethical and cultural contexts.” They conclude by pointing out that “storytelling offers the potential to facilitate learning, capture interest and attention, and promote the critical thinking necessary for the complex ... world that current students must be prepared to enter” (2003, 218- 220).

In the same vein, Coulter, Michael, and Poynor (2007) argue that stories allow us to make sense of the world and our experience. Barge notes that “stories represent one of the oldest tools people use to make sense of and transmit their history, beliefs, culture, and meanings about life to subsequent generations” (2004, 106). Postman makes the same observation in these words, “Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence,” adding that by stories he means:

the more profound stories that people, nations, religions, and disciplines unfold in order to make sense out of the world .... Without stories as organizing frameworks we are swamped by the volume of our own experience, adrift in a sea of facts (1989, 122-123).

In her article entitled *Storytelling as a Teaching Tool*, Bergman quotes Chinen’s recitation of an old Hassidic proverb: “Give people a fact or an idea and you enlighten their minds; tell them a story and you touch their souls” (as cited in Bergman, 1999, 154). Denning reaches a similar conclusion in these words: “Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart” (2004, 123). Nonetheless, in their quest for receptivity, instructors must not disregard relevance, as Abrahamson stresses in his study, *Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education*: “The art of the educator, when using storytelling for this purpose, lies in helping students reach an understanding through sharing stories that pertain directly to the course content” (1998, 443).

### III. Storytelling as a Pedagogical Device

For forty years storytelling has been my favorite method of introducing a topic, whether teaching *Principles of Economics*, *United States in the Global Economy*, *International Trade and Finance*, or *Comparative Economic Systems*. Following are five of the stories I have shared with my students.

#### A. Mahatma Gandhi and the Rule of Law

Rule of law, due process, property rights, and enforcement of contracts are the bedrock of capitalism. Without the protections provided by its legal system, participants in the economy will not be inclined to work hard, save, and accumulate property. I prime my audience for this salient feature of a market economy with the following vignette from India.

One day in 1950, I accompanied my father to the office of Delhi Municipality to obtain the building permit for an addition to our home. The clerk in charge handed the necessary form to my father, which he filled out promptly and waited to hear of the next step. The lethargic clerk seemed to be in no hurry to attend to my father's application. Finally, after several polite reminders, the gentleman pointed to the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi hanging on the wall, with his usual stance of benediction, the fingers of his raised right hand spread. "Look what the great man is saying. Five rupees will do it," the venal bureaucrat informed my father, with a sheepish smile on his face.

This blatant attempt at bribe seeking came as no surprise to my father, who submitted to the extortion without any fuss. The payment of five rupees did indeed expedite the process. The clerk issued the building permit, but the sordid episode stayed in this teenager's memory forever. A decade later, now graduated from college and gainfully employed, I toiled around the bustling city on a scooter. When stopped for speeding, I would shake hands with the police officer, with a five rupee note tucked in my palm. This time-honored practice in New Delhi was mutually beneficial: the donation supplemented the cop's meager income and saved me from the hassles of a court appearance.

However, adherence to this standard operating procedure produced an unexpected consequence for my old teacher from Delhi, newly employed at a university in Virginia. When stopped for a traffic violation in Norfolk, the distinguished professor attempted to slip a twenty dollar bill in a hand shake with a very startled police officer. The ensuing mess festered for several months and required pleas from the university president and sizable legal fees, before Dr. Singh (pseudonym) was absolved of the charges. Obviously, America's rule of law was in sharp contrast to the mutually beneficial understanding between the police and offenders the professor would have expected back home.

The same nonchalance toward the law was on display that day in São Paulo when I had joined a university colleague for an evening of conviviality. In spite of the prominently posted no-parking sign, he left his car in front of the downtown bar and so, hours later when we emerged from the establishment, he noticed an officer in the process of writing a citation. "Do you know who my uncle is?" My colleague demanded, reminding the cop of the name of São Paulo's

police chief. Confronted with this piece of information, the officer profusely apologized and tore up the ticket. Brazil, like India, is a hierarchical society in which one's place in the class structure is more important than the dictates of law.

The rule of law is a necessary condition for the workings of a market economy because capitalism thrives only in a rule-based society where both the citizens and officials abide by the law. How can parties to a commercial transaction commit to a contract if the enforcement mechanisms of a country are arbitrary or capricious? India's crotchety legal system may be one reason why foreign direct investment remains stunted in spite of the impressive economic growth in the subcontinent. High Court Justice V.V. Rao estimates that "Indian judiciary would take 320 years to clear the backlog of 31.28 million cases" (as cited in *Times of India*, 2010, 3). The sclerotic legal system hampers the completion of major infrastructure projects. The international airport in Bangalore will be ready before the road connecting the airport to the high-tech capital of India because of a lawsuit relating to property at a key junction.

The economic transformation of Russia, one of the four fast-developing countries known as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), is undoubtedly hampered by the rampant crime and pervasive corruption. Levy (2011) reports in *The New York Times* that in 2003, when Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil magnate, challenged Vladimir Putin, the then president of Russia, he was convicted of tax fraud and dispatched to a Siberian jail where he continues to reside. The confiscation of his oil company, Yukos, without due process, breeds cynicism about Russia's legal system and undermines the confidence of international investors. Fareed Zakaria (2012) believes that such challenges to Russia's economic development can be overcome only through genuine rule of law and transparency.

## **B. Ronald Reagan and the Voluntary Trade Restraint**

Before I discuss government's role in foreign trade -- trade protections and subsidies -- and the three well-known arguments for protection -- increased domestic employment, protection against dumping, and cheap foreign labor -- I warm up my audience with Ronald Reagan's famous stand on the Japanese penetration of the American auto market. Of course, the dialog in the May 1981 meeting between President Reagan and Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki is the product of my fertile imagination.

In the early 1980s, when the Japanese automakers had captured over 20 percent of the American auto market and auto production in Detroit had declined by 30 percent, Ronald Reagan, U.S. president at the time, was concerned about the Japanese invasion of the American market. After all, as Schiller points out, the auto industry "accounts for nearly one-fifth of our gross national product and provides jobs for one-sixth of our workers" (1981, 71). One day during this economic crisis, Japanese Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki visited the White House. After the usual diplomatic pleasantries -- how is the weather in Tokyo; how is your family -- the president got down to business.

"Mr. Prime Minister, as you know, we have a problem in Detroit. The unemployment in the automobile industry is at an all time high. I am getting an earful of complaints from my friends in Detroit about the unfair trade practices of your automakers. Sir, have you given any thought

to this serious situation?" The Japanese are innately deferential and circumspect. The prime minister, cognizant of Reagan's popularity and political power, responded cautiously. "Of course, Mr. President. I am aware of the situation. What do you wish for me to do?"

Reagan, although an inveterate free-trader, continued to urge his visitor for trade protection. "Mr. Prime Minister, I am hoping that you would talk to your friends in Osaka and Tokyo and persuade them to curb their exports to the United States. Surely these gentlemen would appreciate the gravity of the situation and choose to exercise restraint." The Prime Minister, not accustomed to such unreserved candor, felt ill at ease. He knew that 500,000 of Japanese subcompacts were lying in American ports and his country had "facilities to turn out six million more a year" (Schiller, 1981, 72). "Mr. President, Japan is a democracy with free markets. I don't have the authority to impose such a restriction on our automakers," he pointed out politely.

Reagan was innately gracious and amiable, but on this occasion he couldn't hide his impatience. "Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, I know all about the democracy and free enterprise in Japan. However, unless we reach a gentlemen's agreement on the issue, I will have to propose to the U.S. Congress a hefty tariff on the auto imports from Japan. Announcement of such protectionist legislation would make headlines and sour our otherwise friendly trade relations. Believe me, I am most reluctant to resort to this measure." The Prime Minister was not immune to Reagan's coercive power. "Mr. President, I will discuss the matter with our automakers and do my best." On this agreeable note the meeting in the White House ended.

As acknowledged earlier, the preceding dialog is fabricated. The negotiations between trade representatives in Washington and Tokyo concluded with a quota of 1.68 million auto imports from Japan (Berry, Levinsohn, & Pakes, 1999). Although euphemistically heralded as a voluntary export restraint (VER), there was nothing voluntary about the agreement: wielding his presidential power, Reagan had intimidated the Japanese into limiting their exports to the U.S.

Who was the winner in this sorry saga? Not the automakers in Detroit, who were deprived of the opportunity to improve their engineering and compete with the Japanese quality and cost efficiency. Certainly not the American consumers, who were forced to pay a higher price for the Japanese cars. U.S. auto dealers were the only beneficiaries of this so-called voluntary export restraint. Around this time a beautiful, sporty car named Miata made its debut in the U.S. market and suddenly became a sensation among the young auto aficionados. Thanks to the artificial shortage created by the VER, Miata's retail price swelled, which was a bonanza for the auto dealers in California.

The voluntary export restraint was indeed a quota designed to curb Japanese imports. The desired result could have been achieved just as effectively with an import tariff, which would have yielded additional revenues to the U.S. Treasury, instead of additional profits to the auto dealers. Berry, Levinsohn, and Pakes (1999) estimate that the revenue forgone by using a VER, instead of a tariff, was \$11.2 billion in 1983. More to the point, as Woodworth observes, in the 1970s and 1980s Japanese automakers had captured world markets because of "their superior quality, careful business focus, and aggressive export drives" (1994, 11). Renaissance in the American automobile industry started only when the engineers in Detroit learned the art of making reliable and affordable cars, not the gas-guzzling lemons they were churning out.

### C. The New Airport in Bombay and Efficiency in Resource Allocation

Allocative efficiency is vital to economic growth. How efficiently an economy allocates its resources determines the pace of its economic growth more powerfully than the absolute size of its resource endowment. I introduce this important topic with the following story from India.

Bombay, a bustling metropolis like Shanghai, is the financial hub of India. The enormous growth of the mega city since the country's independence sixty some years ago has rendered its old airport woefully inadequate for the burgeoning population of over 12 million. Bombay needs a larger, modern facility to meet the demands of its fast increasing air traffic. Fortunately, even in this densely populated city, land is available for the construction of a spacious airport, such as the new terminal of Beijing International, the one China built for the 2008 Olympic Games.

Jacobson explores the Dharavi slum, a parcel of land ideally located for the new airport that is currently occupied by squatters. Developers have presented to the government their plans for the airport and high-rise buildings with enough apartments to house the current denizens of Dharavi. The residents, however, regard these high-rises as "vertical slums" and vehemently oppose the development, which threatens the lucrative businesses they run from their ramshackle dwellings. Economists emphasize the urgent need for a larger airport, the efficiency of space allocation in the high-rise housing, and the generosity of the state's offer. After all, the squatters will get new apartments, with modern amenities like electricity and indoor plumbing, considerable inducement "in a place with one toilet for every few hundred people" and the acrimonious "politics of defecation." In their opposition to the development the slum dwellers are abetted by the venal politicians pandering to their "vote bank" (2007, 81-87). With such convoluted politics, Bombay is not likely to have its new airport any time soon.

Such inaction in India contrasts sharply with China's alacrity in building the Three Gorges Dam, a project of monumental proportions requiring the forced displacement of 1.4 million people. The largest construction project since the Great Wall faced only anemic opposition from the public, despite serious environmental consequences and human rights violations. In *Deep Water: The Epic Struggle over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment*, Leslie (2005) reports the emotional, economic and cultural devastation of reservoir refugees. Similar authoritarian efficiency in planning and execution undergirded the construction of the two airports in Beijing, each a symbol of China's commitment to expand the physical apparatus of its economy.

Chinese leaders appreciate the crucial importance of well functioning infrastructure -- roads, bridges, airports, sea terminals, and power grids -- to economic development. Their no-fuss approach to resource allocation expedites the expansion of their highway system and supports the ambitious program of high-speed trains connecting major urban centers; China boasts the largest network of high-speed trains in the world. Its politburo determines the country's priorities and allocates economic resources accordingly, without the protracted and rancorous debate endemic in a democratic society. In the United States, because of the opposition from local politicians, high-speed trains remain an unrealized goal of the Obama administration. And,

thanks to the sharp divisions in American polity, lawmakers squandered an entire year debating the national health care plan.

### **D. A Sweat Shop in India and the Pursuit of Higher Education**

Education is not just a means to higher income. By improving labor productivity it also bolsters the competitiveness of an economy in the world markets. I introduce my students to the economic significance of education with the following story about my stint in a sweat shop.

One day when I was a ninth-grader and not much interested in high school, my father took me to his brother's garment factory in Delhi and entrusted me to his tutelage for the entire summer. The atmosphere in my uncle's hosiery was brutal: sweaty men in shorts sitting shoulder to shoulder, temperature hovering above 100 degrees, the air thick with grease and humidity, and the relentless din of textile machinery. The hellish experience cast an indelible impression on my young mind. Even before the summer of 1951 came to an end, I was determined to do well in my studies and avoid the fate of those scrawny men in my uncle's sweat shop -- exactly the lesson my father wished to instill in me.

For years, on the first day of every semester, after a discussion of grading and makeup examination policies, I have rhetorically asked my students, Why have you decided to spend four years of your life and a hundred thousand dollars of your or your parents' money on higher education? Those courageous enough to venture their opinion in front of their classmates, invariably blurt two words, "money, job," a skeletal response that needs to be fleshed out. I proceed to inform the freshmen that years of submission to the requirements -- demands to read so many chapters from the text, take so many exams, and write a term paper on an economic issue -- of cantankerous professors like me will not only enrich their understanding of themselves, of this boisterous nation called the United States, and of America's place in the hierarchy of nations. College education will also furnish them with marketable skills -- expertise in economics, finance, or management, for instance -- which will enhance their productivity, the dollar value of their contribution to the economy that ascertains income and standard of living. At this point I take a pause and, with a straight face, inform them that if charm and sex appeal were to determine income, I would be fabulously rich.

The injection of humor offers me a perfect segue to launch into a discussion of the relationship between productivity and competitiveness. By raising the productivity of workers education powerfully contributes to the competitiveness of domestic producers in the world markets. America's high productivity can be mostly attributed, not to any intrinsic characteristics of its workers, but to the excellent education available to its citizens, a social priority its rivals in the global economy can emulate -- which they are, with impressive zeal. As Shirley Ann Jackson, the 2004 president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science observes, China annually produces six times as many engineering graduates as the United States. The technical prowess of America's workers that had fueled the innovation and new product development of times past ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity in the country. Jackson is alarmed by the current decline in education in the United States -- which dampens its drive for innovation and threatens its pre-eminence in the global economy -- and calls it "the quiet crisis" (as cited in Friedman, 2012, 84-86).



We return to the pivotal importance of education in our discussion of comparative advantage and international trade towards the end of *Principles of Macroeconomics*. On the first day of the semester, however, my students learn that the most pragmatic reason for why they are in college is the higher income that the market offers to those with a college degree: \$40,100, compared to the \$25,000 that a worker with a high school diploma earns annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, 210-211).

The insertion of humor in my lecture on education and productivity not only provided a much needed cognitive break. It also contributed to teacher-student rapport, relaxed atmosphere and content retention. However, for humor to be more than an ornamentation of lecture it must be curriculum-specific, as Garner (2006) and Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988) emphasize. Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979) caution against tendentious humor and argue that self-disparagement laced with humor can facilitate learning most effectively. Nussbaum, Comadena, and Holladay (1987) also recognize humor, along with self disclosure, as a pedagogical strategy employed by highly effective teachers.

## **E. Commodore Matthew Perry and the Opening of Trade with Japan**

Again, before I delve into the political rationale for state intervention in foreign trade, U.S. trade deficits, international allocation of resources, and the impact of tariffs on consumer welfare and productive efficiency, I capture student attention with an episode from American history, a time when the United States aggressively preached the gospel of foreign trade.

One day in 1854, when Japan was a backward, agrarian society, a flotilla of black ships appeared in the Bay of Tokyo, at the time known as Edo. The United States was frustrated in its efforts to establish foreign trade with the xenophobic nation, averse to commercial or diplomatic relations with foreigners. Commodore Matthew Perry delivered America's demand to open up with the roar of canon fire in the background. The defenseless island nation submitted to Perry's command and opened the country to foreigners.

The humiliating episode convinced Japan to emulate Western technology and modernize the state. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 abolished the Tokugawa Shogunate, the warrior class, and a cadre of a thousand young technocrats began to spearhead Japan's economic development. The government sent contingents of the country's youth to Europe to learn the Western technology. They brought toy trains from Europe to figure out their engineering. Today, Japan is one of the leaders in the production of high-speed trains which crisscross the country. The economy started to grow so precipitously that by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan had become a military power, defeating Russia in 1905. The country would not have become an economic and military power without participating in foreign trade and embracing Western technology. The specter of Perry's black ships forced the Japanese to abandon their anachronistic ways and transform themselves into a modern industrial nation.

Japan is a resource poor country, bereft of oil, iron ore, or coal. How it was, by the 1980s, able to outperform the U.S. steelmakers, with their two centuries of experience in steelmaking and access to rich ore deposits, is a fascinating story. The Japanese would come to the West coast to

procure steel scrap, iron ore, and coal. They would start the manufacturing process on ship and continue it en route to Tokyo. The finished steel they brought to the U.S. market was cheaper than that produced by the Americans, in spite of the two way cost of transportation. Barfield traces the secret of this industrial triumph to “a new electric arc furnace technology that transformed scrap steel into semi-finished and later finished steel products” (2003, 43). After the devastation of World War II, the Japanese had to build new plants and so, starting from scratch, they adopted the minimill technology that realized “economies of scale at much lower production levels” (Tornell, 1997, 14). American steelmakers, deterred by the enormous expense of obsolescence, continued with the retrograde technology of their century-old plants and, consequently, surrendered the cost advantage to the Japanese.

That Japan would not have become an industrial powerhouse and a prolific exporter without its embrace of free trade is a lesson that Americans seemed to ignore in the 1980s when the island nation was challenging the U.S. steel and auto industries in their own backyard. Erecting barriers to imports from Japan, justified by dubious claims of unfair trade practices, was not the appropriate response of a nation that had zealously pursued free trade for two centuries.

Metz (2006) asserts that by stubbornly clinging to antiquated technology American steelmakers squandered their competitive advantage. That’s why Bethlehem Steel Corporation, a titan of American industry, known for building the aircraft carrier *Lexington* and the battleship *Massachusetts*, as well as playing a prominent part in the construction of the Holland and Lincoln vehicular tunnels, had to shut down its plants and file for bankruptcy in 2001. If the U.S. steel industry is now gingerly making a comeback, it is because it has replaced obsolete plants with new mills embodying cost-efficient technology, which would not have happened without competition from abroad.

I conclude my lecture on the stimulus to competition that free trade provides with an observation from Barnett and Crandall (1986). Barnett and Crandall believe that the rise of minimills from the ashes of a distressed industry should provide a lesson for the U.S. policymakers: instead of resuscitating inefficient, ossified producers with protective legislation, they should encourage the growth of newcomers eager to embrace new technology and improve labor productivity.

#### **IV. Suggestions for Improving Narrative Skills**

Teachers are natural yarn spinners because they communicate daily with diverse contingents of students. Nonetheless, this strategy can be only as effective as the caliber of the instructor’s communication skills and rapport with students. Storytelling is an acquired skill. I offer the following suggestions as guidelines for developing the talent, not as strictures about *the* right way of telling a story.

*Practice the story in front of your class.* An episode becomes a captivating story only after you have shared it with an audience a few times, watching for their reaction to determine what parts are to be omitted and where fresh details to be added. Although telling a story for the first time can be challenging, resist the temptation to read it from prepared notes -- which can be helpful in finessing the structure and sequence of the story. Students cotton to a story that is presented extemporaneously, in spite of the occasional glitches.

*Be spontaneous in the timing of your story.* Didactic instruction can be soporific. Use the power of storytelling to create a state of receptivity in your students -- in the beginning of a lecture if the topic is overly technical, towards the end when they are at the point of diminishing returns, or any time during the lecture when you sense their attention waning. Be enthusiastic in your delivery, paying particular attention to the choice of words and the pace of your narrative, but not so fervent that the story becomes the focus rather than a means to foster learning.

*Adapt your stories to the caliber of your audience.* Students in my *The United States in the Global Economy*, a graduate level course, hear a story with multiple textures -- theory, policy, and international relations -- and they feel free, any time during the seminar, to engage me in a freewheeling discussion, which reinforces the group's understanding of the issue. My students in the undergraduate level *International Trade and Finance*, on the other hand, hear a simplified, self-explanatory version of the same story as part of a structured lecture in an auditorium, not an ideal forum for spontaneous interaction.

*Expand your repertoire of stories.* Stories of instructional value can be mined from all kinds of sources -- impromptu discussions among faculty, evening news and weekly magazines, as well as overseas teaching assignments, to name a few -- and shared with a broad range of audience. One evening my wife, a middle school teacher in Pennsylvania, returned home irked by one of her students who had refused to sign the no-smoking pledge she had circulated, telling her that he would make up his mind when he grows up. Years later, discussing disparity in cultural values, I shared this episode with my students at a university in China. Steeped in the Confucian respect for authority, they pronounced the refusal an act of impudent defiance that qualified for punishment. Students in my *International Studies* back in Pennsylvania, however, considered the dissidence an endearing assertion of individualism that deserved respect.

*Plumb personal experiences for educational value.* When stymied by the lack of participation in my seminars, I nudge the demure with a story from my graduate school days. A new arrival in the country and intimidated by my loquacious classmates, I was reluctant to join the discussion. Dr. Nickson, the professor for whom I worked as a graduate assistant, considered my shyness detrimental to my prospects in the academe and so asked me to substitute for him in one of his introductory economics classes. Next day, with my voice quivering and my legs shaking, I delivered the lecture, anticipating giggles from the freshmen. Much to my surprise, there were no snickers or whispers. They listened quietly and took notes. Public speaking gradually became easier for me as the good professor, God bless his soul, continued to inflict teaching assignments on his reluctant assistant. Whenever I share this vignette with my students today, my candid acknowledgement of vulnerability encourages them to confront their own taciturnity.

## V. Conclusion

All teachers cherish significant memories of their early education and the teachers who inspired them to learn. How can I ever forget my high school economics instructor who explained industrial productivity by telling his charges about a country called America where a new automobile rolled off the assembly line every minute? Or the history instructor who, with his picturesque description of the Great Wall, instilled in me a fascination for the antiquity of the

Chinese civilization? Their words have lingered in my memory for over half a century because these gifted teachers anchored their economics and history lessons in poignant stories.

Stories have circulated in human societies for uncounted millennia. In fact, in oral societies they were the only means of conveying the wisdom of one generation to another. Troubadours entertained their patrons in the inns and courts of the medieval period with tales about the vicissitudes of life and great teachers from Plato to Gandhi have relied on stories to communicate their thoughts to their disciples. Storytelling has always taken a legitimate place in the repository of educational methodology and constitutes an especially expedient strategy to mitigate the depersonalization that today's large scale instruction in capacious auditoriums engenders.

When instructors present the curriculum as a collage of the venerable stories of their culture, they encourage students to integrate the vast volume of content and cull meaning from the mountain of seemingly detached facts (Egan, 1989). Postman also acknowledges the need of stories that help students "sort through the collection of disconnected, fragmented diploma requirements that is called a curriculum at most universities" (1989, 123). All economic theories encapsulate stories of the human society at various stages of its maturation and seasoned teachers know how to harness the power of story in the service of their elucidation. Fiscal policy becomes immediately more accessible to our undergraduates when explained in conjunction with the expanding role of the government, an issue that Americans have been debating since the beginning of their republic.

Although I had occasionally used stories in my teaching, 27 February 2008 was the day when, after much deliberation, I decided to resort to this strategy regularly. The following entry in my reflective diary explains what brought me to this turning point:

They are shuffling their feet and clicking pens, their eyes darting from the window to the blackboard, giggles barely suppressed. A dozen whispers coalesce into a crescendo of hum. Doodling on display in the front row, texting in the back rows, and hazy eyes everywhere. They are not present mentally and would rather be somewhere else. The chatty lady from third row informs me after the class that she is taking economics only because it is a required course. How do I cope with this pervasive atmosphere of apathy and passivity!

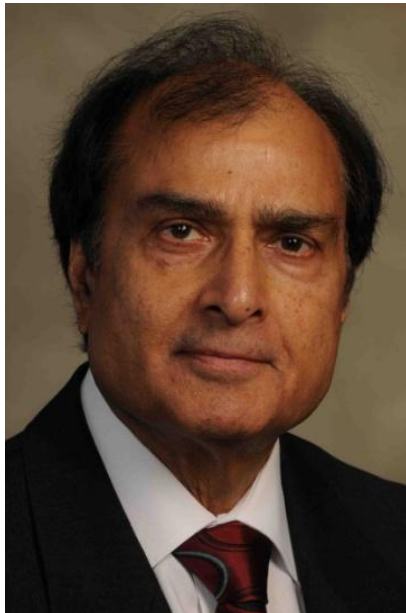
Next day, as soon as their attention started to waver, I put down my notes, got seated in a swivel chair in front of the auditorium, looked straight into their eyes for a moment, and asked: would you like to hear a story? Suddenly the whispering ceased. I waited for a moment longer as they put away their notebooks and settled down, and then told them, at a deliberately slow pace and complete with the concocted dialogue, the story about Ronald Reagan's encounter with the visiting Japanese prime minister that culminated in the famous import quota. There was a hushed silence in the capacious lecture theatre. No tapping, no fidgeting. Some of them even leaned forward, determined not to miss the weave and warp of the tale. Their body language changed, they were absolutely focused, as if in a trance and receptive to my instruction. Now was a good time for me to introduce the doctrine of free trade.

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## Biography



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