Building business communication skills: Storytelling

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Abstract: In our present-day information-driven world, oversaturated with data and facts, storytelling – or the ability to create and tell stories – constitutes a competitive advantage. Storytelling is not only a very important social 'glue', a skill that allows people connect with peers, but also a business tool used to persuade, inspire, or trigger emotions. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the use of storytelling in a Business English teaching context, that is, as an essential communication skill that business learners should master. To this purpose, we carried out an analysis on a sample of 60 students enrolled in the second year at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi. The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, and it revealed that storytelling enabled students to engage more easily in classroom activities, it stirred their interest and boosted their confidence when speaking in front of their peers.

Keywords: business communication, storytelling, Business English, presentations

Rationale
Nowadays, delivering effective presentations in English constitutes a competitive advantage in the world of business and not only. The ability to keep your audience engaged, from the opening line to the Q&A session, requires competence and talent, as well as charisma and, why not, a little bit of humour. While there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for a successful presentation, we argue that storytelling could just be that miraculous ingredient that is likely to bring presentations to life and persuade, inspire, or trigger emotions in the audience.

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Introduction

Convinced that our present-day information-driven world, oversaturated with data and facts, requires a new approach in as far as presentations are concerned, we argue that the answer resides in mastering the art of storytelling. Consequently, in the present paper, *storytelling* is understood as the ability to create and tell stories (in everyday life and in business alike) and, thus, it constitutes a competitive advantage. More than just a mere social 'glue', one that allows people to connect with peers, storytelling has turned into a powerful business tool, one that can be successfully used to persuade, inspire, or trigger emotions. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the use of storytelling in a Business English teaching context, that is, as an essential communication skill that business learners should master. To this purpose, we conducted an analysis on a sample of 60 students enrolled in the second year at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, within the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași. The study was carried out during the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, and it revealed that storytelling enabled students to engage more easily in classroom activities, it stirred their interest and boosted their confidence when speaking in front of their peers.

Theoretical framework
Defining storytelling

As Karia (2015, 3) argues, what great speakers share in common is in fact the mastery of the art of storytelling, i.e., a solid understanding of "how to craft and present their stories in a way that allowed them to share their message with the world without seeming like they were lecturing their audience". As we can infer from the above quote, one of the most important advantages of storytelling resides in the fact that it allows the presenter to convey a message without placing unnecessary burden upon his/ her audience, that is, without giving the audience the impression that they are being preached. This, in turn, guarantees better reception of the message, as the audience is likely to be significantly more responsive to a message transmitted in the form of a story, rather than a plain account of facts.

Bob Dignen (2015, 31) defines storytelling as "an essential part of human existence" arguing that it is deeply embedded in tradition, as ever since the "ancient times, stories functioned as oral history, in which the wisdom of the past was passed on to future generations.

Legends and fairy stories were created to symbolise key human experiences and values". Even more so, stories may even have a therapeutic function; it appears that "our brain lights up when we hear a good story" (Capras 2021, 20). Luckily, we tell or listen to stories in almost all instances of our life – including at work. More precisely, in our professional lives, presentations are perhaps the most prominent illustrations of storytelling. Stories are used as a means to reinforce data and numbers, thus providing a more compelling and persuasive image of reality. In what follows, we will be looking into the ways in which business communication skills (i.e. storytelling) can be built or enhanced in our students, in an attempt to equip them with the basic toolkit required in the present-day corporate environment, help them find their "identity as a storyteller" (Dignen 2015, 31) and deliver outstanding presentations.

Research has shown that the most effective stories are in fact the ones that draw on personal experience. Thus, from this perspective, storytelling provides great opportunities not only to enhance the quality of business communication, but also that of human interaction among people sharing the same work environment. Personal stories that can be included in business presentations usually build on details regarding one's hometown and background, circumstances that shaped one's values, contributing to one's becoming, professional achievements and work-related expertise, or merely things one had learned or came to understand, or even plans for the future.

Among these, stories of success and/ or failure are probably the most likely to win the audience. As Dignen (2015, 32) shows, "with stories of success, we can underline our competence. With stories of failure, we show humility, as we are talking about our weaknesses." We believe that the second category is more likely to build stronger report between speaker and audience, as it creates a sense of intimacy. Moreover, these stories are also more likely to bring about stronger messages and turn weaknesses into potential sources of success. Stories of personal success can also be complemented by success stories of famous people – this is likely to increase the weight of a presentation, by the mere utterance of a well-known public figure, which adds credibility to the presentation.

Storytelling patterns to be used in presentations
Duarte's model
In her article entitled 'Structure Your Presentation Like a Story' (HBR 2012), Nancy Duarte argues that the most effective presentations are in fact those that resemble and read like stories; Duarte's reasoning builds on Aristotle's *Rethoric* and his three-part structure, as a possible framework for designing messages that are "easy to digest, remember, and retell" (Duarte 2012, 143), namely beginning, middle part and end. The same view is held by Philip Freeman in his introduction and translation notes to the 2022 edition of Aristotle's *How to Tell a Story*, arguing that Aristotle's "insights into storytelling are applicable to all kinds of modern literature, drama, and film" (Freeman 2022, xi). However, of the lessons taught by Aristotle's *Poetics*, we argue that there are three in particular that match the meaning of storytelling as suitable for our discussions.

As such, according to Aristotle, storytelling is a sort of *imitation*, and even the most imaginative stories are grounded in reality. This brings us back to our previous remarks on the need to use *personal stories* to connect better and more deeply with our audiences. Moreover, as Aristotle argues, stories need to have the appropriate length. This is all the more important in terms of the use of storytelling as a presentation technique, since a story that is too long may either bore the audience, or get them right off the discussion track. Finally, and perhaps most importantly (for the purposes of our discussions), stories need to be clearly structured and have a beginning, a middle part, and an end. As Philip Freeman (2022, xiii) states, "many stories fail terribly at being whole and complete. They often start strong but lose their way and end weakly or with an unbelievable event to bring the story clumsily to a close". In order to build powerful presentations, speakers need a strong sense of consistency and coherence. "A strong story, as Aristotle says, builds on itself, is consistent, and never loses its path." (Ibid.)

Drawing on Aristotle's tripartite model (beginning, middle and end), Duarte puts forth a persuasive storytelling pattern that she designs as an ascending and descending movement towards the climax, which is, especially in business presentations, a call to action. Duarte's storytelling model can be compared to a balanced dance between the *status quo* (things as they are), and what they could turn into, describing a "path to a better way" which "set(s) up a conflict that needs to be resolved", a tension that enables the speaker to persuade

his/ her audience, by means of "a message that's easy to digest, remember, and retell." (Duarte 2012, 143)

The first step in Duarte's model – the beginning – consists in establishing rapport with the audience, a baseline to be used as a starting point for discussion, setting the ground for them listening to the speaker's message. Ideally, the beginning should be crafted on something that the audience already knows and is able to recognise – what is – and then move on to what can be. The same pattern should be relied on for the middle part, and especially for the end. Ending the presentation with a vision of what can be constitutes in itself a call to action, an invitation to act, not just to react, as well as a guarantee that people are on board.

Dignen's storytelling framework

In his 2015 article 'Telling a Good Story', Bob Dignen puts forth a ten items recipe for drafting and delivering a successful presentation. These items read as follows:

✓ *Choosing the presentation flow* – i.e., if the presentation will read as a story, it needs to have not only logic, but also a 'sense of flow', a red thread that will be guiding the audience. As such, Dignen suggests building stories that are oriented towards the past, present, or future, in the attempt to give a sense of direction. In addition, as the author argues, irrespective of the type of flow chosen (past, present, or future), what really matters is to find a flow that can be summarised in less than a minute – this ensures coherence and conciseness and guarantees success.

✓ *Telling our own story* and *Making the story personal* – by adding details from the presenter's personal/ professional life – in an attempt to build and enhance rapport with the audience.

✓ *Introducing success stories*, by referring to famous business personalities that are likely to bring weight to the talk. Moreover, familiarising students "with the experiences and stories of others can bring some perspective, authority and credibility to your arguments" (Dignen 2015, 33).

✓ *Referring to stories outside the area of business* (e.g. politics) in order to find other sources of inspiration that can be easily applied to business settings.

✓ *Using parables*.

✓ *Using culture* (skilfully and cautiously, so as not to fall into the trap of overgeneralisations and stereotyping) as a way of

challenging one's own assumptions and enhance cultural understanding.

✓ *Refraining from telling jokes, using anecdotes instead*, so as to avoid offending or embarrassing the audience, especially since "joke-telling is a sophisticated narrative skill, even in one's own language" (Ibid., 34).

✓ *Building one's team* (particularly for team presentations) – by reinforcing group cohesion.

✓ *Practising, practising, practising,* which cannot be emphasised enough.

Duarte and Dignen's models of storytelling can be used successfully in building the students' presentation skills. Combining the two models, we came up with a working pattern aimed at developing a sense of structure in our students' presentations. This focused primarily on finding a red thread for the stories to be included in the presentations – one that would match the topic and send a powerful message to the audience. Then, another goal was to have students identify the aim of their stories (whether it was to inspire, to inform, or to amuse, etc.). Equally, our in-class training aimed to get students acknowledge the importance of the brevity rule, as a guarantee of increased clarity and coherence. Finally, we tried to allot enough time for preparing the presentation, guided by the fact that failing to prepare is almost the same as preparing to fail.

The Study
Needs analysis
The ability to deliver presentations constitutes a core skill in the present-day business environment. As such, for business students (and not only) it is a competence that they must necessarily acquire by the end of their training, as part of the essential toolkit that will ensure their successful insertion in the job market. Consequently, given the importance of this 'soft skill', presentations are also part of the final assessment in Business English for the students enrolled in the second year at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi. Throughout the second semester of their second academic year, students are exposed to lectures and participate in seminars designed to develop their presentation skills and, finally, are required to deliver a presentation of their own, either individually or in a team of two.

Interested in discovering new ways to build and enhance the students' presentation skills, we designed a study that we conducted throughout the entire semester.

The first step was to assess our students' attitude towards presentations, identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their 'fears' and expectations. To this purpose, we selected a sample of 60 students (male and female) and applied a questionnaire designed to reveal (based on their previous experience) aspects related to: the elements of a good presentation (in terms of content, graphics, etc.), what they liked best/ disliked about presentations, their worries, their strengths, etc. Our initial assessment revealed that students were generally reluctant to delivering presentations – and the fact that presentations had to be delivered in English enhanced their reluctance considerably. Moreover, the questionnaire revealed other major concerns related to their fear of speaking in front of peers, or the fear of not being able to keep their audience engaged throughout the speech. However, most of the students were willing to take up the challenge and try to improve their speaking and presenting skills.

Storytelling practice
Drawing on the theoretical framework presented above, we set out on our journey to building presentation skills. At the beginning of the semester, the sample of students was divided into two sub-samples (corresponding to two seminar groups), and different methods were used in teaching and practising presentations. With Group 1, 'traditional' presentation strategies were used (basic structure of a presentation, key phrases, effective introduction techniques, how to deal with numbers, use of visuals), while in Group 2, storytelling was the preferred approach. In what follows, we will describe the methods used with Group 2.

The study was conducted during a fourteen-weeks interval, corresponding to seven seminars (biweekly meetings with each seminar group) and it relied on an approach combining the two models presented above, namely Duarte's persuasive storytelling pattern (drawing on Aristotle's tripartite model) and Dignen's ten storytelling ingredients to creating a memorable presentation.

Seminar 1
The first week focused on getting students familiarised with presentations they could draw inspiration from. Along with the general

guidelines regarding business presentations (structure, key elements, signposting, rhetorical devices, e.g. the rule of three, etc.) students were introduced to the concept of *persuasion*, as a core element of (business) presentations, defined as an attempt to "take the audience from where they are, to where you want them to be" (Chan 2019, 76.), or, in Perloff's terms, the process by means of which the speaker attempts "to convince other people to change their own attitudes or behaviours regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice" (Perloff 2017, 22).

In *Public Speaking in a Nutshell* (2020), drawing primarily on classical theories of persuasion and established rhetorical devices, E. Ciortescu provides a framework for analysis, focusing on the same three-parts structure – introduction, middle and final part, and offering valuable advice on how to enhance presentation skills. During this first week of presentation training, students were introduced to one of the most memorable business speeches, namely Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford speech ("You've got to find what you love") and the analysis of the rhetorical devices carried out by dr. Ciortescu.

Seminar 2
The second seminar was dedicated to helping students identify the message they intended to convey, the flow that was most adequate for that respective message (whether related to the past, present or future) and point to an aspect of their own personal story that could be used to support their message to the audience. During the same seminar, students practiced a variety of essential phrases they could rely on while drafting the presentation of their background, their values, achievements or expertise, or even their plans for the future. The structures practised in class included: 'I come from a family…'; 'As a child, I was taught that…'; 'One of my greatest achievements to this date…'; 'For several years I trained as…'; 'My dream is to…'.

Seminar 3
The third meeting was again a foray into the lives of famous (business) people. Students were asked to research a person they admired, note down some quotes or interesting aspects of their lives. Alternatively (although this did not work out well with the entire group, as some students were reluctant to share personal details of their lives), trainees were asked to recall personal stories of success or failure, and talk about the lessons they learned from them.

Seminar 4
During the fourth meeting, the students were asked to reflect on the elements that make up for a good presentation (based on the lecture notes and the information gathered during the previous meetings) and share their thoughts and experience regarding the best/ most interesting or most informative presentation they had ever heard. Finally, they were asked to prepare a two-minute introduction to a presentation that would include their own personal experience or information. One or two examples would be illustrated in class.

Seminar 5
The fifth meeting added a cultural touch to our discussions regarding storytelling in presentations, in an attempt to raise awareness of the importance of culture in (business) communication. The students watched a TEDex talk on cross-cultural communication delivered by Pellegrino Riccardi (2014). The speech was then analysed in class both in terms of content and form.

Seminar 6
The sixth meeting was dedicated to reviewing all the storytelling strategies/ key phrases/ tips identified in the speeches analysed and the ways in which they could be used successfully in actual presentations. Additionally, students were assigned the task to record themselves delivering a presentation, and reflect on the aspects that could be improved, or ask their colleagues (or the teacher) for feedback.

Seminar 7
During the last seminar, the two groups were brought together again, and asked to deliver presentations in front of their peers.

Results and discussions
The experiment proved to be successful since, irrespective of the methods used, students improved their presentations skills considerably. More importantly, most of them argued that they felt more confident with regards to speaking in front of their peers, or even an unknown audience (the students in the two groups, although attending courses of the same faculty, did not know one another).

A questionnaire (similar to the one applied at the beginning) was distributed at the end of the seven training sessions, and the results obtained pointed to some significant differences between the two groups.▪
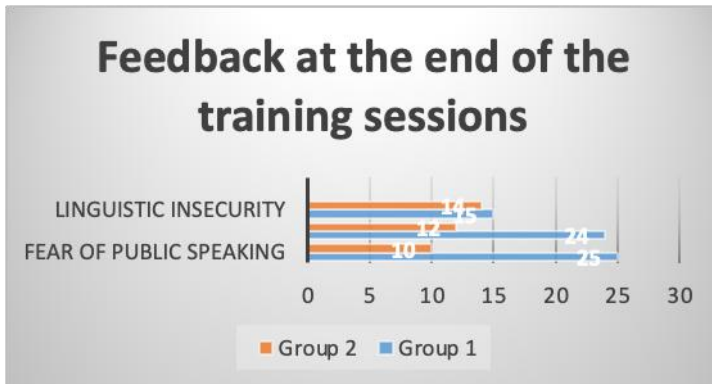
Fig. 1. Feedback at the end of the training sessions

Based on the students' responses to the final questionnaire, we were able to draw some conclusions regarding the use of storytelling for business presentations, and how this skill can be built, or enhanced, in our students. As far as the fear of public speaking is concerned, we notice a decrease in this concern among the students exposed to storytelling (only 10 students in Group 2 expressed this fear, compared to 25 in Group 1), which shows that an increased ability to deliver presentations in the form of a story may lower stage fright. In terms of the fear of not being able to keep the audience engaged, we notice that the number of students involved in traditional activities who expressed this concern (n=24) is twice as big as the number of students engaged in storytelling activities (n=12). This clearly shows that storytelling provides endless ways in which speakers can win audiences and keep them involved throughout the presentation. Finally, we notice no significant differences in terms of linguistic insecurity, students in both groups expressing this concern to an equal extent (n=14 – Group 2; n=15 – Group 1).

Conclusion

Our investigations of storytelling, considered as an essential tool in business communication, have pointed to the fact that stories are powerful instruments that enable people to deliver memorable presentations and, more generally, to become better communicators. Drawing on the activities used in class, a number of important aspects can be highlighted. First of all, the first step in building a good story and, implicitly, a good presentation, is to identify correctly the aim of the presentation. Second, concerns for coherence, brevity and clarity

need to be observed. Third, practice (in front of the mirror, or recorded) is instrumental in increasing (self)confidence and, generally, in augmenting the quality of the presentation. Finally, one important lesson that me and my students have learned is that perhaps one of the most important aspects resides in choosing stories that are relevant and meaningful for us, as speakers. This alone enables us to find (and rely on) a style that is authentic to us and, implicitly, it allows us to enjoy the presentation while delivering it. In the end, if the speaker does not enjoy the presentation, why should the audience do so?

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