# Tell me a (theoretical) story: moving beyond application to deepen critical-thinking skills

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ABSTRACT

Helping students link theory to practice is central to the learning experience if students are to leave the classroom equipped to make full use of acquired knowledge in order to enrich their professional interactions. Because some students view theory as uninteresting and too abstract, instructors may compartmentalize discussions such that real-world examples are emphasized over, though linked to, theory. The exercise described in this article is based on the premise that theories <u>are</u> stories. Students are invited to explore theory more deeply by discovering the theoretical story within the real-life examples.

Keywords: theory, pedagogy, experiential learning, storytelling, case studies
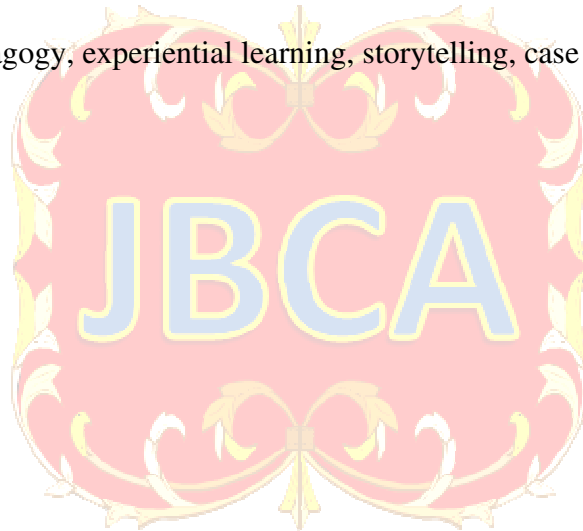
INTRODUCTION

Helping students link theory to practice is central to the learning experience if students are to leave the classroom equipped to make full use of the acquired knowledge to enrich their professional interactions. Because some students view theory as confusing, uninteresting, and too abstract, instructors may compartmentalize discussions such that real-world examples, the more engaging conversation, occupy one—and possibly longer—segment of the class discussion while theory, the less energizing component, is relegated to a separate, albeit linked, conversation. This boundary does not necessarily occur intentionally, but instead emerges as the instructor shapes and responds to the level of student engagement. Nonetheless, Orum (1980) supports teaching theory to undergraduates, noting that:

> Students seem to have come away with a deeper appreciation for the nature of theorizing as well as for particular theoretical ideas than in the conventional courses I have taught; they seemed to sense the difference between abstract and concrete better than in the standard format; and they surely enjoyed this course considerably more than have students even in my best lecture classes of the past. (p. 103)

Thus, even though undergraduates may struggle with the abstract nature of theory, developing a facility for theoretical analysis is an important and desirable learning outcome. Those benefits are perhaps more evident in graduate education, where students are expected to have or develop an appreciation for theory and the insights it can generate about the specific topic being studied. Students can deepen their cognitive, analytical, and critical-thinking skills throughout their time in higher education. The potential impact that Matthews and Callaway (2015) described makes a compelling argument for doing so:

> Theory opens the door to critical thinking, and this process will only take place if students are given the tools to evaluate factual data. If we simply provide them with facts and no means by which to evaluate those facts, we are doing students a disservice. We must allow them to question, analyze, and criticize information, and the means through which this happens in [International Relations] is theory. (p. 191)

The application of theory to real-life problems is a time-tested pedagogical approach. Part of its effectiveness rests upon the responses of students, who enjoy discussing real-life examples and "trying out" concepts that generate new insights. Application may be especially important in contemporary classrooms, where opinion and self-generated logical explanations are highly valued. While students enjoy giving an account of the real-life example, they may view theory as having a logic only partially or tangentially related to the real world. The example is viewed as meaningful and relevant, while the theory is perceived as a necessary but not essential framework for understanding what actually happens in the real world. Students may experience theory as an ill-fitting, uncomfortable garment, and view the application process as a struggle to make the theory fit.

The exercise described in this article is based on the premise that theories <u>are</u> stories, though students do not typically think of them that way. Further, concepts are characters that relate to each other in complex ways to create a compelling theoretical story. This exercise invites students to explore theory more deeply by discovering the theoretical story within real-life examples.

THEORY AND STORYTELLING

If a key goal is to make theory more accessible to students and to deepen our discussions about theory, there is ample evidence that the use of stories, captured in real-life examples, narratives, and case scenarios and studies, is a powerful and effective tool for increasing engagement in the analytical process. Highlighting the connections between theory and practice adds texture and nuance to classroom discussions. Flanagan and McCausland (2007) noted that "small-group case study analysis encourages the application of abstract theoretical concepts to simulated real-life situations and promotes the use of higher level critical thinking skills: application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (p. 313). The authors used a game to teach nursing theory to undergraduate students. Similarly, Trnka (2017) used a brief ethnographic assignment to help students "better understand the relationships between theory and empirical data" (p. 28). These approaches allow students to express the case information in their own words, which invites them to bring the theory to life in a way that seems relevant and intentional.

Nanton et al. (2016), arguing for the use of storytelling in adult education, emphasized that storytelling makes use of prior experience in a way that generates new learning:

> Telling stories helps us to make these connections. A theory is no longer something in the abstract; we make sense of it through our stories. Telling or writing down our story is one way to make these connections. Sharing our stories in dialogue with others helps us to understand the concepts at a deeper level. (p. 67)

Landrum et al. (2019) also argued persuasively for storytelling as a teaching method, saying that it allows space for "the purposeful introduction of complexity" into a discussion and for increasing the student's ability for "addressing nuances introduced within the narrative they encounter (p. 250).

Steslow and Gardner (2011) summarized the potential and benefit of storytelling aptly:

> Students first studying law may react negatively to what they perceive as new, uncertain, and abstract legal principles. They may further become focused upon legalistic rules and theories rather than integrating these theories into practice. Storytelling can address these challenges by illustrating theoretical concepts, allowing a student of the law to become an active participant using not just intellect, but imagination and emotions to comprehend the law. (p. 257)

THEORY AS A STORY

While the term "stories" has been used thus far to refer to real-life examples and case scenarios used in classrooms, it is also possible to think of the narrative that is embedded in theory. Here, the suggestion is that theory <u>is</u> a story. That is, a theory can be viewed as defining a narrative about characters (concepts) and the interactions and relationships between them that lead to story endings (outcomes). During application, students are asked to consider a real-life problem and to outline the relationships — match concepts to facts, identify areas of similarity and difference between the problem and the theory—in order to understand how the theory might yield new ways to envision and resolve the problem. Being able to effectively apply theory to a case is, in itself, a meaningful and fruitful exercise.

This exercise adds an additional step by asking students to articulate a theoretical story, or a theoretical telling of the real-life challenge. Students first begin by digesting key aspects of the theory; secondly, they apply the theory to a challenge, and thirdly, they return to theory with the goal of uncovering the specific way in which the theory plays out within the context of the problem being considered. Students who become adept at telling the theoretical story begin to see the flexibility and versatility of the theory, e.g., this "telling" is a particular instance or use of the theory. In this way, theory is not viewed as a static and rigid interpretation of the topic. Instead, many theoretical stories can emerge from a single theory, just as there are many ways to apply a given theory. Extending the application process by adding this analytical exercise makes the range and scope of the theory more visible to and accessible for students.

OBECTIVES OF THE EXERCISE

- To enhance analytical and critical thinking skills.
- To help increase student understanding of, and memory of, the essential elements of the concepts and relationships that comprise a theory.
- To illustrate the usefulness of theory to real-world situations.
- To broaden and deepen a student's capacity to apply theory to practice.
- To highlight the interplay between theory and practice by having students develop the ability to tell the theory's story.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Prepare posters/flipcharts/PP slides in advance.
- The theory
- The case scenario in everyday language
- Application of the theory to the case scenario
- Telling the case scenario in theoretical language

CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

First, invite students to share a story, or review a case on the topic of interest. Highlight the major points of the scenario on flipcharts or PP.

Second, review key points of the relevant theoretical framework, including how the theory operates.

Third, invite students to tell the case scenario story using only theoretical language, e.g., omitting identifying information for characters, including conceptual terms, and outlining relationships between the concepts.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

Discuss the extent to which the theory "fits." Highlight the places where the theory requires more information than is presented in the case scenario. Make note of places where information from the case scenario is not used in order to call attention to the way in which theory guides our thinking and our determination about what information is or is not relevant to the analysis.

Discuss whether or not the theory is helpful, e.g., gives the manager useful guidance about how to understand, interpret, and/or handle a business challenge.

Discuss the usefulness of understanding theoretical perspectives as a way to "hear" differences in various viewpoints. Distinguish between hearing different versions of the case scenario in everyday language and hearing different theoretical perspectives. Comparing theoretical lenses helps students understand the logic and thinking behind someone's opinions.

Discuss how theories are developed and refined.

Discuss students' internal logic and how that might map onto established theory.

VARIATIONS

There are two variations of this exercise that might be useful, particularly when multiple theories are being taught:

1. The instructor may want to present one case scenario and ask students to consider the case using several theories. For example, motivation has a number of theories that can be used in turn to analyze and understand a case scenario. In the example presented later in this article, the case scenario is analyzed using expectancy theory. The instructor may also want to complete the exercise having students use Maslow's Hierarchy, Herzberg's Dual Structure Theory, and/or McClelland's Needs.
2. The instructor may want to present one case scenario and then ask students to develop their own explanation or logic. Students typically give atheoretical explanations of case material, which could then be compared to the application of an established theory. When attempting to tell the theoretical story based on their own logic, students will often realize that their opinion or analysis, though rational, lacks the clarity of an established theory.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The exercise has been used with undergraduate students and students in executive education. Three key pieces of feedback have emerged from students who have engaged

in this exercise. First, students report having "lightbulb" moments as they begin to tell the theoretical story. Initially, they hesitate to articulate the theoretical story and instead recount information from the case rather than de-identifying individuals and using the concepts, and the relationships between the concepts, as a framework for telling the story. As they continue working through the theoretical story, however, they reach a point where they say, "I see it!"

Secondly, students who become adept at telling a theoretical story become more confident at applying the theory to a variety of cases and telling multiple theoretical stories. They recognize the versatility of the theory while building their own capacity for understanding different variations of the theory. Lastly, students indicate that they are more receptive to learning theory in general. Theory no longer seems too abstract or irrelevant. They can envision how to use theory as a powerful analytical tool to understand and better handle business situations.

CONCLUSION

This exercise highlights the interplay between theory and practice by challenging students to deepen and broaden their understanding by going beyond application. Students strengthen their critical thinking skills as they both apply the theory and discover the "story" embedded in theory. Students who participate in this exercise will understand the case scenario in new ways and will develop a greater appreciation for the complexity and utility of theory. As Elafros (2019) stated, "The future of theory is applied . . . [w]hat is key is to get students to do things with theory" (p. 121).
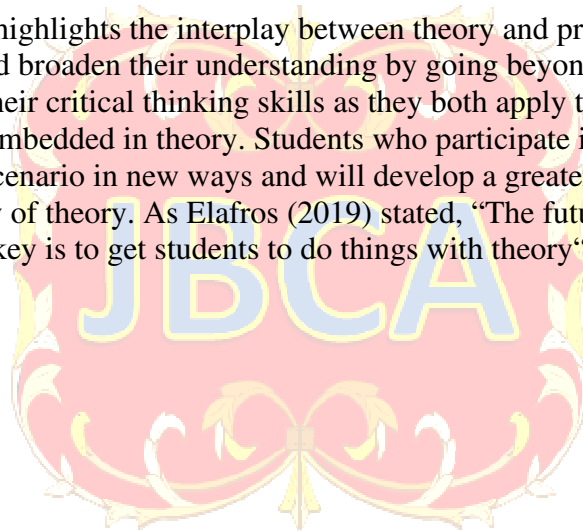
APPENDIX A

Visual Aids—Posters/Flipcharts

(1) The Theory

(2) Review of Case Scenario

(3) Application of Theory to Case Scenario

(4) Telling the Theoretical Story
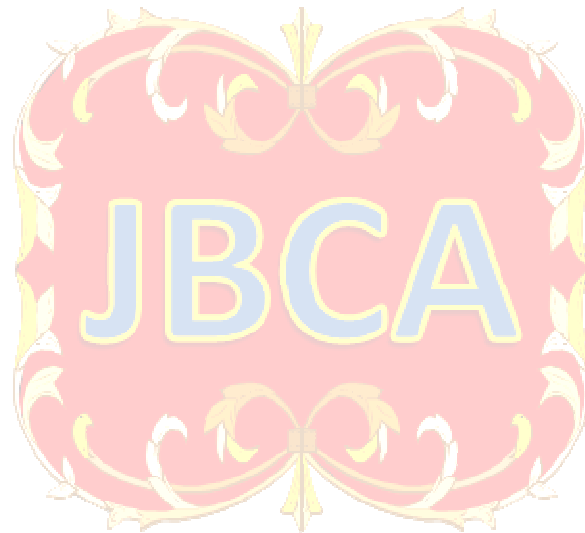
APPENDIX B

Sample Timeline (60 minutes)

In advance: Have students write a real-life story or read a case.
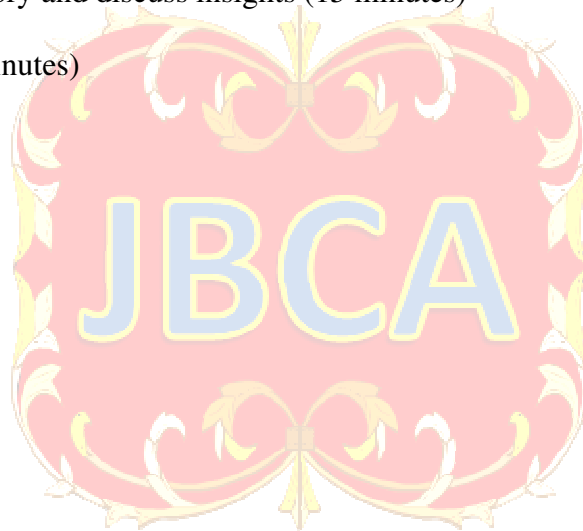
Introduction (5 minutes)

Lecture on theoretical material (15 minutes)

Review case scenario (10 minutes)

Apply theory to case scenario (10 minutes)

Tell the theoretical story and discuss insights (15 minutes)

Final comments (5 minutes)

APPENDIX C

Sample Case and Visual Aids

Safe Enough to Work?

Naomi Stephens entered the Apex Company facility one cloudy summer afternoon. She had left her home early, just in case there were any traffic delays. She did not want to be late for the important meeting that was about to take place. In fact, she fully expected that all of the senior managers would arrive well before the session started in order to chat informally with employees. Naomi needed a few more minutes to gather her thoughts, though. She had spoken with her family the previous evening, and was focused on the topic at hand. There would be time to mix and mingle after the important decisions were made.

Like the rest of the country, Apex was struggling to maintain a safe and productive workplace while in the midst of a global health crisis. Several months ago, a dangerous virus had been detected in the eastern part of the country. Over the next few weeks, the virus seemed to spread quickly and broadly. New cases were being detected all over the country, and, two weeks ago, the Apex manufacturing facility joined the list of companies directly affected by the crisis. The plant had been in operation for over 20 years, employed 2,000 workers, and was a major employer in the small town it called home. So far, 230 workers had tested positive for the virus, an increase of 200 people since management first announced that 30 workers had been infected. No one had details about how, when, or where the employees had been infected, which only added to the stress and frustration of workers. Some employees were angry, and they demanded answers from their supervisors and managers. Today, management would brief everyone on the precautions that would be taken to keep workers safe—or, management would notify workers that the facility would close down. No one knew for sure. But Naomi had already been thinking about whether or not she wanted to continue working with so much uncertainty about safety.

It would not be an easy decision for Naomi. She had been working at the plant for 15 years, enjoyed her team, and was happy with the pay, benefits, and other incentives that Apex offered. She'd been promoted several times, and hoped to continue progressing now that she had seniority along with a solid record of achievement. But this situation was troubling. Watching employees get sick day after day was heartbreaking for Naomi and all of the team members. Naomi believed that the job, though a good one, was not worth risking her life or those of her family.

Who would take care of her family if she became ill? Worse, what would happen if she became infected and then passed it on to her husband or children? There was no treatment or vaccine for the virus yet; how long would it take to develop one? Was wearing the homemade mask she brought to work every day and the gloves issued by the company enough to protect her and the other workers? What else could the company do to ensure the safety of the workers? Apex had a good track record on safety. There were ongoing meetings and training sessions devoted to safety, just as with most manufacturing facilities. But this situation was much worse. The company hadn't yet provided testing for all employees; some employees only learned that they were infected

after getting sick and going to their physicians. If management decided to close the facility, how long could Apex continue? Did the company have enough money in its reserves to continue to pay employees? Could it generate enough revenue, when people weren't buying as much? The prospects looked bleak: continue working and risk being infected or stop working and come up with a plan to find income. Luckily, Naomi's family had an emergency fund to cover expenses for 6 months. But would 6 months be enough?

Naomi filed into the large meeting room along with other employees. She spoke with a couple of her team members as they waited for the session to begin. She could feel the tension and anxiety in the room. Most people worried about being given an ultimatum—come to work or get fired.

The meeting started on time with opening remarks from the plant manager. As soon as he said, "During these challenging times, difficult decisions have to be made," Naomi knew the situation must be worse than anyone had imagined. The plant manager stressed Apex's commitment to employees. He also acknowledged the hard work and dedication of employees, which had allowed the company to prosper. Then came the news that workers had dreaded the most—he announced that a worker infected with the virus had died the previous day. There were audible gasps throughout the room. Several people began to cry. The plant manager continued, emphasizing that Apex was in touch with the worker's family to support them through this tragedy. He concluded by saying, "Together, we will get through this." Next, the human resources manager stepped forward to discuss the company's plan for moving forward. Naomi tried hard to concentrate, but doubts about continuing to work kept creeping into her mind as she listened to the presentations.

After the meeting, Naomi huddled with her team members. Some had been impressed with the presentation and plan from management. Others were as concerned as they had been before the presentation. There was just too much uncertainty right now. As Naomi drove home, she knew what the right decision would be—for her and for her family.

Visual Aids

Basic Model of Expectancy Theory

- People are motivated by outcomes they are interested in and their chances of attaining them
- E1 Expectancy—Effort-to-Performance: If I put in the effort, will I be able to perform?
- E2 Expectancy—Performance-to-Outcome: If I perform, will I get an outcome I am interested in?
- Outcomes have valences
- Expectancies are probabilities
- Motivational problem is low E1 and/or E2

Naomi's Dilemma

- Naomi is thinking about whether or not to continue working at a plant affected by a virus
- Continuing to work is risky
    - risky for Naomi's health
    - risky for the health of all employees and their families

- Not working is risky
    - the family needs the money
    - would Naomi be able to find another job that is safe and pays as much?
- Naomi reflects on her strong career and loyalty to Apex; she has enjoyed working at the plant
- Uncertainty is high during the health crisis
- Naomi attends a plant-wide meeting to hear management's plan for keeping workers safe

Naomi and Expectancy Theory

- Naomi wants to continue working at Apex; having a job with good compensation, benefits, and opportunities to advance = all are outcomes that have high valences
- Naomi's E1—this is not a motivational challenge; Naomi has a solid record of performance and is not worried about her ability to perform
- Naomi's E2—this is the motivational challenge; Naomi reflects on her health as an outcome having the highest valence = will she stay healthy if she continues to work?
- What can Naomi do to increase E2?
    - Listen to, and ask questions about, management's plan for keeping workers safe
    - Talk with her team members to get additional perspectives
    - Talk with her husband and family to discuss what would happen if she became ill, what precautions they should take at home

      o   Watch the news closely for more information about the health crisis

The Theoretical Story per Expectancy Theory

- A person is interested in working in order to obtain outcomes that have high valences. The person has identified several outcomes that are important; however, in light of a new situation, the person considers a new outcome—one that could have a valence even higher than the others.
- The person does believe that if she puts in the effort she will be able to perform; thus, there is no E1 motivational problem.
- The person does believe that if she performs, she will receive several outcomes that have high valences. However, the current situation highlights a new outcome, and she is very unsure about whether or not she can achieve the new outcome even if she performs. She questions whether this new outcome has the highest valence of all the outcomes. This is the E2 motivational problem.
- E1 is high for the person but E2 is low.
- The person takes in new information and can then determine whether that information raises E2 or the E2 motivational challenge is too great to overcome.
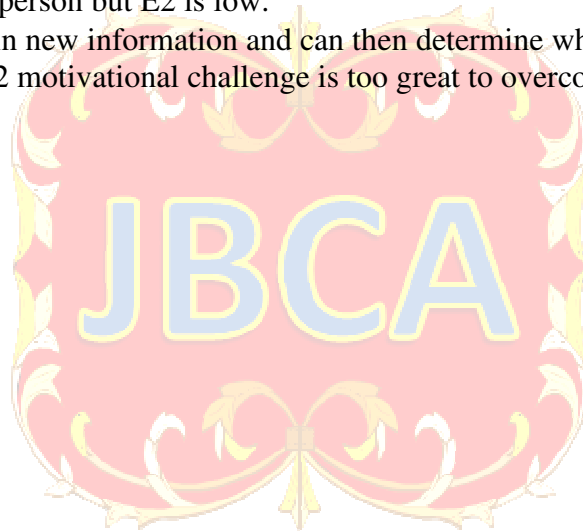
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