The Power of Story as an Advocacy Tool

Debra E. Kachel

In a recent article, James LaRue (2018), director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom and the Freedom to Read Foundation, claims that the amount of use by public library patrons, largely promoted as a marketing talking point, does not equal support; rather, public librarians need to focus on communicating the library’s value, not statistics on use. He further states that some of the best library advocates and supporters don’t even use public libraries. This got me thinking in terms of school libraries. School librarians often justify their work through usage statistics: number of books circulated, number of classes taught, number of students visiting the library, etc. Maybe we need to approach advocacy differently when hard statistics on library usage don’t seem to impact the stakeholders we want to influence.

Applying what has been learned from brain science, LaRue (2018) further posits that the best way to change people’s opinions of libraries is through a “powerful and meaningful story,” a strategy promoted and practiced in ALA’s Advocacy Bootcamp, designed for public librarians. The bootcamp trains librarians to develop stories with six components that utilize a real person, a real problem, a library intervention, a happy ending, reinforcement by a single fact, and a tagline. The story needs to be a short, minimalist narrative with a positive outcome that resonates with listeners. Adapting this model, below is a school library story.

1. **A real person.** Often the school library message is too general, such as, “School libraries promote reading.” To personalize the story and connect with an audience, here is a better way to tell the story: “Jose was a gifted but disinterested high school senior.”

2. **A real problem.** Briefly describe the problem or issue: “Jose knew that to succeed he needed to go to college, but thus far no college had accepted him due to his mediocre grades in high school.” An emotional connection with the audience makes listeners want to know how the story ends.

3. **A library intervention.** “The school librarian, working with Jose’s science teacher, helped Jose find a topic of interest for a county science fair competition. By providing guidance, resources, and a place to work, the librarian helped Jose present his research and finish a display board highlighting a robotic arm that replicated a person’s signature.” Thus the story conveys how the library intervened to help a real person’s problem, while maintaining focus on the student.

4. **A happy ending.** “In the county science fair, Jose won his division, and after updating his college application with the help of the librarian, Jose was accepted to a local state college and graduated. Today, he works as a school district’s IT director.” The library has provided a solution to a real person’s problem.

5. **A single fact.** One relevant statistic is included that validates the importance of the school library’s role or contribution. For example: “With an average dropout rate of 30–40%, college students need to be prepared for the rigor of academic learning. School libraries prepare students to learn independently, research, interpret, and present information, modeling strategies needed to be successful in college.”

6. **A tagline.** The ALA bootcamp model also adds a tagline—a short, repeatable phrase that is used to define the library’s role or principle. School library taglines can easily be adapted from AASL’s “Common Beliefs” (2017). For example, “Strong school libraries prepare students for college, career, and life” is excerpted from Common Belief #3.

**SPRINGBOARD STORYTELLING**

Taking the ALA bootcamp model a step further, Denning (2000), a business guru and consultant, describes “springboard storytelling” as a way for listeners to visualize a story in one context and apply it to their organization, thus embracing and enacting change. Hearing about a success story elsewhere helps skeptics imagine how it might work in their setting. In the business world, the purpose of the springboard story is often to spark new ideas or new ways of accomplishing goals. Denning (2005) describes the springboard story as one that

- is based on an actual event that is relevant to the environment/circumstance
ElEvAToR sPEEChEs

Elevator speeches are also similar. Typically an elevator speech is a “short, focused, persuasive speech so named for the approximate time of an elevator ride—about 30 seconds and 100–150 words. Although the ‘speech’ is preplanned and sometimes memorized, the delivery is usually unplanned and often a one-to-one, serendipitous conversation during an unexpected meeting with someone whose support is needed for your library program” (Kachel, 2016, p. 51).

For curated resources on developing elevator speeches, with examples, refer to the author’s LibGuide at https://AntiochLIS.libguides.com/schlibcert/messaging.

MEMORIALIZING SCHOOL LIBRARY WORK

As educators, we sometimes fail to see the impact we make on our students and others with whom we work. Or, worse yet, we devalue our contributions to education. In other words, we don’t consider our work essential and valuable to student learning, effective instruction, and the culture of the school. If you think back, you can recall individual stories in which you made a difference with students, teachers, parents, and others with whom you interacted. Just as advertising agencies spend weeks developing an ad campaign, librarians need to learn to communicate effectively, relating compelling, authentic stories about school libraries and how they impact students, teachers, and parents in a simple, clear, and believable way. This takes time, critical thinking, and preparation, because the story must be concise, compelling, and based on actual events. It’s not “tooting your own horn”—it’s memorializing the good work school librarians do and the value school libraries bring to the learning process.

CONCLUSION

There is plenty of evidence that believable, personalized stories work. They are used in training, politics, fundraising, and advertising, to mention a few. Crowdfunding sites, such as DonorsChoose and Kickstarter, use stories with real people and real consequences to generate understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, donations. Even 30-second TV commercials utilize personal stories to sell products and services while communicating the brand, purpose, and function of the
company or organization.

Storytelling can translate abstract, complicated processes and often impersonal statistics through personalized vignettes, bringing principles alive. Clearly communicating the value and contributions of school libraries and librarians to nonlibrarians has always been difficult for our profession. Taxpayers and school decision-makers want to see results, and not just in numbers and data—they want to see and “feel” the impact of school libraries on students and schools. Relating personal and authentic stories can be an effective advocacy tool, not only to convey what school libraries do but also to secure advocates. Effective stories can visualize needs and inspire action among influential decision makers.

REFERENCES


Debra Kachel is an affiliate faculty for Antioch University Seattle’s —12 Library Media Endorsement program and an adjunct instructor for McDaniel College, Westminster, MD. She received the 2014 AASL Distinguished Service Award for her school library advocacy work. Her email is dkachel@antioch.edu. Follow her on Twitter @SchLibAdvocate.
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