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# Inspiring Leadership Through a Detective Story



By Annie Peshkam , Associate Director, INSEAD Initiative for Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence (iLITE)

**The best learning facilitators take their audience on a journey of investigation where everything is questioned.**

The very basic structure of stories -- character introductions, rising action, tension, falling action, and resolution -- are plentiful in discussion-based teaching delivered by an expressive instructor who embodies a journey, and sequences material in a way that supports deep learning. In doing so the teacher, who generates a spellbinding story in the room, inevitably elicits in her audience some degree of “transportation” during that short time.

Transportation invites audiences to identify with characters and their motivations, movements through space and time, successive actions and events, to the point that the real world becomes partially inaccessible in the mind.

It’s no wonder that these teachers are often referred to as “inspiring.”

**Investigative teachers**

Several teachers who implement story arcs during teaching rely on a very particular genre: the detective story.

Here, the teacher sets up herself and the audience as the two protagonists: the teacher as the main professional detective and the audience as the supporting detective. Before, or at the beginning of a session, the teacher presents a problem and together, teacher and audience search for the best resolution examining in detail all the evidence along the way.

## **Cracking the case**

When it comes to large-group, whole-class problem solving and learning, facilitators need to set up a big problem that the group can unravel together (either before or at the beginning of the session), leveraging the audience's strengths and limitations to build momentum and anticipate complexities or challenges along the way, while keeping an eye on the final reveal. The audience should occasionally wander down a leading path in order to reveal misconceptions and mistakes in thinking.

In business education, as in the real world, cracking the case is not about the final resolution as often there is no one black or white answer. Cracking the case is nailing the investigative process – breaking down evidence into component parts, examining each piece in depth, making informed judgments, defending or conceding to others' evaluations, and reaching a common consensus or the best resolution given certain parameters and contingencies.

The gift of learning through the detective story frame is that it provokes, simulates, and reinforces collective critical thinking in learners – an indispensable skill for future leaders of teams.

*An extended version of this post is available on **Annie's blog**.*

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