

## Ada Chat Transcription

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Kevin Cordi: Well, thank you. It is indeed an honor to be part of the first Ada Chats. And when you think of storytelling, what comes to mind? Think about that, what does that mean. When you think of storytelling at a university, what is the purpose of storytelling at a university? Does it have a purpose at a university? So, in this address I'm going to talk a little about as a student why you should listen more to stories. And as a faculty member, maybe why you should use stories. So, let's go with that. And when you think of storytelling, what is a story? Does the scene come up that you're simply telling stories at a campfire? Or that you're thinking about fairytales and folktales? Or that famous, "Once upon a time"? For that's a strong way that we begin stories. But that's not the only way to begin stories. If we think about it, it is fairytales and folktales and tales of "Little Red Riding Hood," but as my students once wrote, "Little Red Riding in the Hood" is a little different than "Little Red Riding Hood." And so, stories can be a tool for meaning making and not just for imagined worlds. But, let me show you an experiment, and why I show this video. I simply want you to watch it and be ready to share what you see. So everybody breath in for just a minute, concentrate on this video, there's no music, just concentrate on this video for just a second. It's a short video. And as you watch it, be ready to share what you see. Let's hope it works.

[Video Plays]

Kevin Cordi: Okay, I want to take a moment and listen to what you saw. So, don't be shy, just kind of tell me what you saw. I'm going to walk up to you, and you can give me a little bit, or you can give me a lot. But tell me what you saw. So, your first name.

Shannon: Shannon. Um...Triangles going around that square, is what I saw.

Kevin Cordi: Thank you. Triangles going around that square. Sounds good to me.

Megan: Megan. Um...I saw an adult who was abusive to two children.

Kevin Cordi: Say that a little louder, one more time.

Megan: An adult that was abusive to two children.

Kevin Cordi: An adult that was abusive to two children.

Jenny: Jenny, and I saw abuse destroys a home.

Kevin Cordi: Abuse destroys a home.

Chris: I'm Chris. I saw someone trapping somebody and hiding from them. And then the person that was being hidden from getting ticked off and destroying whatever room they were in.

Kevin Cordi: Someone being trapped and look at all that that happened. And.

Austen: I'm Austen, and I kind of saw people working together to overcome conflict.

Kevin Cordi: Wow, people working together to overcome conflict. One more person, right here.

Jenna: I'm Jenna and I saw the big triangle bullying the little shapes.

Kevin Cordi: So we saw everything from abuse to big triangles, back and forth. Wait a minute! It's just squares and a triangle. On a film. This is the exact thing that they showed to thirty-seven different people and thirty-six people created a narrative from what they saw. They created a narrative. We have one person who saw squares and a triangle. But, at the same time, everyone else that we heard created a story. And so, what I want to argue is, that it's impossible not to have story from what we have and from what we think. And, when we look at this, thirty-six out of thirty-seven people in the psychological trial created a narrative. So, one of the things that Klandenian (sp?) and Connely (sp?) say is that we live in a story-mind. We live in a story-place. And that storytelling is more than just telling fairytales and folktales, it's also very versatile. It can be used in math. It can be used in science. That it's not just for literary narratives, but it can be used because it looks at the particulars of experience and locates that in time and place. And so my challenge to you is to think, when did you not have a story fill your day? When sixty-five percent of all communication is in narrative, why don't we use that same pedagogy to teach and to learn?

After all, according to Luisa Kahn, we're wired for story. We're hard-wired for story. Did you know that bzzz, you're hard-wired for story. The synapses actually see and feel narrative. But a story has so much power. If it's critical to our well-being, why do we tend to brush it off as mere entertainment? Oh, it's just a story. I'm only telling a story. And that's one of the most powerful ways we remember ideas and concepts and incidents. You don't get on the phone and go, "let me tell you about the quadratic equation." You get on the phone and you tell narratives. And they're not always from beginning, middle, and end. You can say, "Oh, you think that happened, let me tell you what happened to me." And good friends interrupt each other constantly. You know what, is this right?! And in formalized, performance-type telling, and then we don't normally interrupt, unless we're heckling. My wife's a stand-up comedian. So, you know she deals with some of that. Sometimes I do it. But, that's another story. And, so the whole idea is, Richard Bowen said that in every speech act, it's performative. That we are immersed in story. That narrative circles our lives. And so, regardless of what we've decided to do, story follows us.

So, what's it mean to be wired for story? I'm just going to read a little bit. "Story is how we make sense of the world. Let me explain. It's long been that the brain has one goal, survival. It evaluates everything we encounter based on a very simple question. Is this going to help me or hurt me?" I recently heard a friend of mine, Danielle, say, "When the first lion was around you didn't look at the lion and say, 'Are you going to eat me? Could we talk about the ramifications of you eating me?'" You didn't sit and talk about it, you have a rampaging lion coming straight at you. You didn't say, "Stop! Once upon a time I just want to tell you!" Instead, you had that flight. That you needed to get out of there. But we as humans, we have more tools for mediating learning. We have the tools of narrative. We have the tools of listening. Remember, we have two ears and one mouth. We should listen more than we tell sometimes. Because we can hear the narrative that we're in. And Lisa says, "In short, we're wired to turn to story to teach us the way of the world and give us insight into what makes people tick. The better to discern what the cute guy in the next cubicle is really single, is he really single like he says or the plan to perfect confidence if he's not." So, stories are the way we figure things out. We have all

kinds of people who pay for people to listen to their stories. Go to match.com, you'll see what I'm talking about. Go to your psychologist, you'll see what I'm talking about. Go to that person that you have a problem, that they'll sit down immersed in the narrative. But we undermine how we can use narrative to create meaning.

That's because, with what Jonathan Goschel (sp?) says, "We're storytelling animals." Just like a fish doesn't know he's in water, we don't know we're in story. Because we use it so often. It's almost our reflex. It's what we do. But remember, when you're talking about that excellent professor, it's not because they gave you a list to memorize – Oh, am I wrong? – it might be because they told you how they were touched and connected to the passion that they're working on. They tell you about wrestling with paramecium, or they tell you about their time with a monkey, or they tell you about when a client made a connection. It means we're making connections. But instead, sometimes we artificialize the way that we learn. We escape the story and make it more into a single form for learning. I can talk about that more later.

Storytelling is natural and healthy. It is what we do. It is how we breath. It is how we respond. And we need to see it that way. Gotts Charles (sp?) says, "Yet people tell us it's not." People who don't overrate their own personal qualities tend to get depressed. So, the little fictions we make about ourselves are healthy, so long as they don't cross over into narcissism. But that's how we put meaning to our lives. We tell the stories of our day. We create connections. And if we don't, we're silent, we're closed up, and we don't feel connected. So why not in the classroom, have dialogic spaces for narrative? And I'll talk about that.

Let me show you a friend, a colleague Kendall Haven said that our stories, minds are in action. Person one, read it really loud, person one!

Audience member: "Where is John?"

Kevin Cordi: Really loud, so Cleveland can hear!

Audience member: "Where is John?"

Kevin Cordi: One more time! Because only Euclid heard! Go!

Audience member: "Where is John?"

Kevin Cordi: Where's John! Everybody say that! Three, two one!

Audience: "Where is John?"

Kevin Cordi: Person two. Chris is going to take it home!

Chris: "Well, I didn't want to say anything. But, I saw a green VW parked in front of Carol's."

Kevin Cordi: What does that mean?

Audience member: Ooo, John's at Carol's house!

Kevin Cordi: Ooooo, John's at Carol's! Did you see it any other way? What's that mean?

Audience member: [Indistinct]

Kevin Cordi: Do you trust John?

Audience member: No.

Kevin Cordi: No! There's something about John! Well, do you see anything else in there?

Audience member: That's what I saw.

Kevin Cordi: Okay! Nobody wants to have lunch with John! Go!

Audience member: How do we know it's John?

Kevin Cordi: Whoa! How do we know it's John? "Where is John?" "Well, I didn't want to say anything. But, I saw a green VW parked in front of Carol's." Do we have anything in the text that says it's John? Guess what? You've all had Johns in your lives. And you substituted. We've got one person who says, "Wait a minute!" But, all of the rest of you have these narrative stories of mistrust. That's what the brain does. We have one guy over there going, "What's he doing?" Of mistrust! It's part of the narratives. We fill it in. So we don't always have to have everything given to us. We can fill in the story. I do want to know about John.

So, research by Kendall Haven says, and according to Ochs and Capps, that narrative is intentionally, or I say, is intentionally messy. Narrative happens routinely with change. And if I walked over to someone – and I'm going to say something very embarrassing, so that's okay – and I say, "I love you," you'll be like, "Uh, we just met." And you're the speaker. You're going to change the conversation, aren't you? Wow. And that's what the narrative. We have factual information. We have assumptions. We create new information. We misinterpret. That's what makes us most alive. If it was all clear, we would be bored. It's the stories that give us meaning. It is the connections that give us meaning.

How I view storytelling? Well, my shirt says, "Storytelling the original Social Media." So, I see it that way. But I also see storytelling as intentionally messy. We organize and disorganize meaning. And so, we don't always have to be apologetic for not getting the story the first time. It is the listening again that helps create more of that meaning. They say reading research is, you have to hear a word thirteen times before you own it, unless you can connect to it. And story helps build those connections. So, when you're thinking about studying, think "What is the story? What am I telling?" Ochs and Capps wrote an amazing book called *Living Narrative* and said that storytelling or stories are not simply flat, but they're interactive. They depend on dimensions that occur in high and low degrees. But think about just that act there, of I said "I love you," you'd be changing that interaction. You'd be changing the way the story is perceived. And that can happen on a moment. Somebody could walk into this room. Somebody, I don't know – the President of the United States – I don't know – a singer – somebody could take away my power, my tellership. And that's what stories do. They have different dimensions. And so, I'll talk to you about that.

We need to work on how understanding narrative is a way of reading and learning. Tellership – as an English teacher I taught rising action, denouement, things like that – you've heard of this, yes? I say we can do a lot with narrative dimensions as well. Tellership is where somebody controls the story. Well, if the father's an alcoholic and the son is talking, the father may have more tellership through the son's voice, but that's not covered in literary dimension, that's covered in narrative dimension. Tellability – who has the right to tell this story? Who owns more of the reason you can listen? The President may

have more authority, may have less than some. It depends. Embeddedness – how is the narrative connected to other narratives? And as we're teaching or we're learning, we need to think – what does this do, how is this connected to something else? Moral stance – are we looking at someone who says, "You will not do drugs." I mean, do people listen to that? We had a whole campaign, way back, say "Just Say No." But, moral dimensions of narrative is, let me present to you a big bad wolf who gets eaten because he made this action. And that's how students and people learn not to get eaten. Very simple. Linear and temporarily where is it aligned?

And, the living narrative will speak to that. One of the things that I think is that really moves narrative in new ways, is to give ourselves permission to play. Socrates said that he could tell more about one man in one day of play than all their lives. Some people say that play is a rehearsal for life. It's not. It's a place to rewind what you did. It's a place to change what you did. In a very real sense, in play contexts, it is the work of changing the story. And so, sometimes imagine you're reading something and you're playing with what it would be like to be there at that time. Or, you play out loud with some of the ideas that are there. We need to give ourselves permission to play. And we'll do that for a minute. Raise your hand. Say, "I give myself"

Audience: "I give myself"

Kevin Cordi: "Permission to play"

Audience: "Permission to play"

Kevin Cordi: "To take risks"

Audience: "To take risks"

Kevin Cordi: "To have fun"

Audience: "To have fun"

Kevin Cordi: "To be connected"

Audience: "To be connected"

Kevin Cordi: "To story"

Audience: "To story"

Kevin Cordi: "Because it connects to me"

Audience: "Because it connects to me"

Kevin Cordi: "And it connects to you"

Audience: "And it connects to you"

Kevin Cordi: And so now you've gotten permission to play with your ideas, and wrestle. So if you make a mistake, just say, "Cordi gave me permission, we're okay." Alright? But there's so much more about play that I could say. And I want to.

If you're a faculty member, how often do you ask your students to step into the world that you're talking about? You're the expert in the room. And you can move a landscape of knowing. Cathy Shortcall's (sp?) story, "A Landscape of Knowing". And imagine stepping into that world and saying, "look at it the way I see it." As a student once said to me, "Mr. Cordi, what you know isn't always what we know." And we have to remember that. Can you heighten scientific understanding by role-playing the time that you are teaching? Imagine the two women who discovered DNA that we don't hear about and creating that situation through play. Can you have the students understand the cause of the Civil War by being a reporter talking about if they should tear Columbus state's statue down? Of Columbus. A whole different world of play. Vygotsky, that social psychologist, said that in problem-based play, you are quote unquote, "A head taller in your learning just because you're working together." So why do we cower to separate desks to be creative or to think of ideas? As faculty members, as students, we need to think of these ideas. Students, have you ever considered playing inside the world you're studying?

Aiden Chambers (sp?) wrote a book called *Tell Me*, and he said instead of asking students "why did you do this," ask the words "tell me." Watch. What did you have for breakfast today?

Audience member: Coffee

Kevin Cordi: Coffee. Okay. It's like, uhh. Tell me about your breakfast.

Audience member: It woke me up. It was coffee.

Kevin Cordi: Good. Well, yep. It was coffee. Which one are we hearing more? From the person with the lived experience? When we ask why, it's because we as the teacher, the professor, or someone else, are asking because we want to know. But, if I say tell me more about your coffee, you could say...

Audience member: It was brewed perfectly today.

Kevin Cordi: It was brewed perfectly. I'd like to be there for that coffee. It's brewed. Because it creates a whole image. It creates a narrative. And so as teachers, as students, when you're studying with someone look at someone and say, "tell me more about that." Cause they're going to use their own language acquisition to paint their narrative so that you understand it better. Instead of memorizing lists, facts, and figures.

"Tell me," is very strong. As I tend to get to a close here, I want to talk about Pixar. It wasn't actually Pixar, it was Invisible Inc., but they stole it a little bit. Everybody who works with Pixar is told they must create the story's spine. And so, "Once upon a time...Everyday...But one day...And because of that...And because of that...Until finally...And ever since then..." Is the backbone of story. So, I'm going to give you an example and then I'll have you do it. I don't want to creep into time.

Once upon a time, I was very interested in the work of Houdini. Everyday, I would study about Houdini, finding out that he went toe-to-toe against Sherlock Holmes. That he was the first astronaut. No, he wasn't. He was the first person to fly an airplane. He may have been an astronaut, I have no idea. To fly an airplane in Australia. But one day, I wanted to know what was the deal about Houdini trying to come back from the dead ten years from when he died on Halloween, intentionally? And because of that, I started looking into the manuscripts of Bess, and Kellogg, and a whole bunch of other people. And I started wondering, how Houdini actually espoused spiritualism, and said that if he could come back he would trade a secret word in a secret key in a secret language with Bess. And she tried ten years at

Radio City Hall. Until finally, it was the last of the ten years. And she sat at Radio City Music Hall, and they had everything from a gun to bells to the key. But, no Houdini. Never showed. And Bess said, "It is finished, I am done. I know I do not want to return." And ever since then, we hear of Houdini. But, no one has actually seen him again. Even that's in question.

If we had time, I'd have you do this formula. And if you need it, just look under story spine. But it really does help you learn. Not the story, but the content that you're working on. As a student, as a professor, there's more to telling than performance. It's a natural way we make meaning. We connect ideas. It's how we respond to learning, and how we learn. We're wired for story. We use play to engage. Tell me, I will listen. Tell me, I will learn. And, I'd like to just end. Why not end with a story about stories?

There was a young man, who wanted to follow a wise man. And the young man travelled with this wise man. He went up mountains, over mountains of unseen places, unseen faces, until he finally found him. And he said, "I want to know everything that you know. I want to learn everything that you learned. I want to be able to pass on the knowledge like you do. I'd like to travel with you." And he went to places that there were unhappy faces that turned into happy faces. He went to the rich, he went to the poor. He went to the impossible and made it probable and possible. He travelled with him so long that he indeed grew a beard that echoed his age. And the old man, who was getting older and older and older, he too was growing older and he looked at the young man, who was no longer young and he said, "I must leave this world for a better place. You must pass on my wisdom." He said, "But sir, wise one, everywhere that you have travelled, whether it's rich or poor, known or unknown, you have told stories. You have told stories about far away places, you have told stories about politics, you've told stories about history, you've told about science. Everywhere you go. I've listened until I could hardly listen anymore, because all you do is tell stories. I seek wisdom. Please, before you leave this world for another, tell me what is the secret?" And the old man, who didn't have much time, not much longer, he sat there, he said, "Come here. Come close. Come so my mouth can be heard with your ear." And he knew it was time, after all these years. He leaned real close and real close and he listened. And he listened as much as he could. And the old man said, "Once upon a time..." And it took him a while, but the young man grew old and realized that the stories were a key to understanding.