Quick! What do you remember of our first three classes together? Without looking at my materials, I have difficulty recalling each of the nine or so papers we’ve read and discussed so far. The authors, titles and ideas seem to be floating around in my brain, and I have trouble sorting them out. In contrast, I have no trouble remembering how Jason learned to tell his right from his left. And I remember an old Toyota with smashed windows and a stare-down with a big black kid who blocked a revolving door. How could this be? I have read these assigned papers. I have concentrated. I have noted, underlined, re-phrased and even written about some of the authors’ concepts. We even reviewed them in class! How could I remember the details of a story told during a break better than I remember Sternberg’s theory of successful intelligence? Because I’m human. And humans are built to live and to tell, to learn and to remember, to conjure and to read… stories.

Our adult classrooms need more stories. I am proposing the use of storification to help adults to teach and learn.

By ‘story’ I mean an account or recital of an event or a series of events, either true or fictitious. By ‘adult classroom’ I mean any learning situation where ideas are shared with individuals who are expected to internalize the material independently.

Stories are a powerful way to get all sorts of complex ideas across, in an efficient, effective, and recallable way. But as adult devices of teaching and learning, they have been neglected for too long. As adults, most of us have relegated stories to the bedside table, or the kids’ room. Many of us even fail to capture the stories played out in our daily lives. We’re more likely to hear the recounting of a TV show plot at the dinner table than a personal anecdote. We leave storytelling to screenwriters or to friends and colleagues brave enough to share their tales at a party. In school, stories rarely make it out of the first few grades except in writing classes. How unusual (and how lovely and memorable) it was when my high school chemistry teacher read a Sherlock Holmes story to help bring home the concept of deduction. It would have been even more unusual in one of my university science classes to have heard a story used to illustrate any concept. What potential we’re missing!

Stories are in our blood. It is for good reason that so many of the world’s cultures and religions are founded on great stories. No surprise, either, that advertisers use the power of stories in vignettes, and testimonials to help sell brands. Stories take advantage of our universal, instinctive and immediate connection to personal drama. They are the perfect package for learning. They grab and hold attention. They stick bright, powerfully magnetic images onto the fridge doors of our memory, allowing us to hold together stacks of complex and subtle information.

Some people view stories as un-academic or unscientific. Perhaps they need to be reminded that Plato gave lessons by telling stories about his former teacher Socrates. And
that Einstein helped to explain his theory of relativity by imagining the streetcar that he was riding on accelerating to the speed of light.

Others may think that story-telling requires a skill that they lack. Here, I would like to set their mind at ease.

Storification is a new way of thinking about stories that will help simplify their use in education. Imagine the smallest possible unit of story. Let’s call it a mini-story. Now think about the ingredients that could make this little packet simple but irresistible (think of advertisements). Usually, this means personal drama, action and emotion. Now think of Storifying, bringing a teaching concept to life with a mini-story.

Here’s an example: Archimedes wrote: “Any solid lighter than a fluid will, if placed in the fluid, be so far immersed that the weight of the solid will be equal to the weight of the fluid displaced.” First, try to get a handle on this concept without a story. Imagine having to remember it for an exam! Now attach a familiar (probably apocryphal) story to the mathematical concept: the great man is floating in a Greek bath. He suddenly cries “eureka!” and in his excitement to jot down his theory, runs home naked. Can’t you see the naked figure displacing a volume of water, then, the light dawning…? “The mass of the water that I am displacing and that is keeping me afloat must be equal to the mass of my body that displaced it!” But we can do better. Now imagine the deep, oval bath is full to the brim, and there’s an encircling trough to catch the overflow. Archimedes convinces a doubting Pythagoras to climb in, sending the displaced water over the edge of the bath. The trough leads the water, via aqueduct, into a vessel that sits on one side of an ancient scale. The mathematician floats. Then Archimedes asks Pythagoras to rise carefully from the bath up and to climb onto the other side of the scale. The scale balances!

Now see if you can forget the concept.

Storification is a theoretical technique based on what I think is sound reasoning. The technique could further be supported by research. It would be interesting to explore any research in the area of what I call mini-stories, in order to resolve the most basic elements of a compelling story. It would also be fascinating to define the factors that are most responsible for the image that comes to represent a story in our minds. How is the image created? How is it stored? And how is it recalled and unwrapped to reveal layers of stored meaning.

We could really use more stories to bring all sorts of adult learning material to life. Not only to entertain, but to increase our chances of retaining, recalling, applying and re-appraising what we come to know. In stories, we have a means naturally adapted for our brains – to teach, to share, to illustrate ideas and concepts efficiently. In this paper, I have presented a simple and fun way of integrating stories into any teaching and learning experience.