

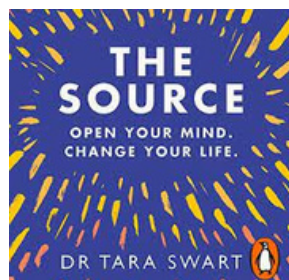
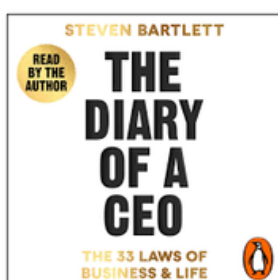
HOW DO YOU TELL THE STORY OF YOUR WORK?

written by Dr Anita Collins

I am deep into the power of storytelling at the moment, and I mean deep. I am simultaneously reading and/or listening to books by [Steven Bartlett](#) ([The Diary of a CEO: The 33 Laws for Business and Life](#)) and [Tara Swart](#) ([The Source](#)), completing courses by [Ben Crowe](#) ([MojoCrowe](#)), and basically inhaling every episode every recorded of [The Imperfects](#) podcast with [Hugh van Cuylenburg](#), [Ryan Shelton](#) and [Josh van Cuylenburg](#).

Here is some detail about these somewhat varied sources.

Steven Bartlett's new book is about the storytelling behind entrepreneurship, business and social media, Tara Swart's new book is about melding cognitive science and spirituality in a way that can change your life trajectory, Ben Crowe's MojoCrowe course guides you to find and stick to your story and purpose and The Imperfects podcast shares stories of people who appear to have enormous success on the surface and invariably have several difficult and transformative stories happening underneath. These sources have a common thread, storytelling.



As humans, we are built on stories. The stories we were told, or told ourselves, when we were young, carry through to our adulthood. We share wisdom through stories, and we teach through stories. While I am currently enjoying being in this ball pit of exquisite human development with these books, courses and podcasts for my development, I have been asking myself this question – how do we as music teachers tell the story of our work?

First of all, a very common story I hear is “I’m just a music teacher”. The word “just” makes my skin crawl. Do we ever hear someone say “I’m just a doctor” or “I’m just a pilot”? Why do we as music teachers include the “just”? It says two things to me, the first is that we may not value ourselves, and second that we may be afraid that the person we are speaking to may not value us either.

Then the story continues. We teach a specific instrument, we take classroom music, we teach early childhood students, and we conduct a choir. All the explanations of what we do are based on the music, and if the person we are talking to has never experienced music learning, they may not have a frame of reference for what we are describing.

I also wonder if there is a good dose of “Let the results speak for themselves” in our stories as music teachers. We create incredible concerts, guide students through multiple years of learning and teach them skills they use way beyond music learning. But then we expect a deep understanding of the value of the many things we bring to a student’s development to be understood from a seat in the audience, without any further explanation.

This type of storytelling could be what leads us to our exasperated response “They just don’t get what I do”.

It is not surprising, that we are telling our stories from a place of low worth and using language and examples that might as well be in a different language.

What would happen if we told our stories without using the word “music” or the word “teacher”? How differently would our stories be received?



Job Value Description

“I work with young people to guide them through a process where they develop skills in thinking critically, in working together as a team to produce a high-quality result, to manage their own workload and be understanding and compassionate towards each other.

These young people learn to trust and become masters of their own lives and the work I do with them transforms their futures. I have worked for decades to build my own skills in this field, seeking out expertise and support to perform at the top of my game every day.

My achievements haven't come without failures and disappointment, but I, and the young people I work with, have benefitted from the times that were difficult and where I felt low.

I am consistently rewarded with the pride I have in these young people and know that my contribution to the next generation is significant and will mould the world of the future.

And by the way, I'm a music teacher.”

Storytelling is about framing, framing the listener to enter into your story of success, accomplishment and value in a way that has nothing to do with the profession we are in.

Dylan Alcott or Serena Williams would never say “I'm just a tennis player”, and we would be perfectly comfortable with them speaking about the hard work, dedication and disappointments that had moulded them into the champions they are.

The way we tell our stories matters to us and to everyone else. To complete my name-dropping I think my favourite episodes on *The Imperfects* are with [Dr Emily Musgrove](#), the show's advisory psychologist, and a rising podcast sensation herself.

In the episode [Other People Matter](#) she spoke about the theory of [eudaimonic happiness](#) which is pursuing happiness by finding meaning and purpose. Self-fulfilment and self-improvement both contribute to this form of happiness. While this type of happiness or fulfilment does start with a focus on ourselves, it ultimately means that the other people in our lives, and how we work and share learning with them, really do matter to our level of happiness.

As music teachers, we are very familiar with the *Other People Matter* idea, and for the most part, our other people are our students. But the other people that matter are their parents, their teachers, their school leaders and every person they ever come in contact with.

If we could reframe our stories, as Ben Crowe says, then others will reframe their story about us. And we may never have to lament that “they just don't get what I do” again.

Try telling your story without the words “music” and “teacher” as if you are Dylan Alcott or Serena Williams at a press conference after a big win. Just do it once, and you will never use the word “just” again.

This article has also been created into a team building activity for BBBTeams. [Learn more here.](#)

Tuning up our brain for the test

As a music teacher, how often have we heard the phrase, “I have to skip rehearsal, I have a test”? In my school, as in many schools, we have our only rehearsal time in the morning prior to school starting, and I hear this comment regularly through the school year.

Sometimes I ask the students what they will be doing instead of coming to rehearsal. A common answer is “I need to study”, to which I wonder how effective study done one hour before the test begins will actually be for the outcome. Research into effective test and exam preparation has shown that last minute cramming does not guarantee improved test results. Indeed, in one study they found napping was more beneficial to learning outcomes than cramming.[1]

Another common answer is “I will be too nervous/worried/hyped up” to play my instrument. This answer makes me wonder if this is the best emotional state for students to be in prior to a test or exam. Research has shown that students with higher test anxiety tend to perform worse on exams.[2]

If cramming before the test and experiencing worry and anxiety before the test is unlikely to improve the test score, why don't they just come to rehearsal? This approach speaks to the idea that students might as well come to rehearsal because they don't have anything else to do.

But what if we could change the reason why students should attend music rehearsal before a test. Students could see the music rehearsal prior to a test as a valuable, even essential, part of their preparation to ensure they perform as well as possible on the test.

Let's take the nervous/worried/hyped up factor before a test. Making music together has been found to lower cortisol levels which means students could normalise their pre-test stress and enter the test space with lowered anxiety.[3]



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2. Richardson, M., Abraham, C., & Bond, R. (2012). Psychological correlates of university students' academic performance: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological bulletin*, 138(2), 353.
3. Vollert, J. O., Störk, T., Rose, M., & Möckel, M. (2003). Music as adjuvant therapy for coronary heart disease. Therapeutic music lowers anxiety, stress and beta-endorphin concentrations in patients from a coronary sport group. *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* (1946), 128(51-52), 2712-2716.
4. Greenberg, D. M., Decety, J., & Gordon, I. (2021). The social neuroscience of music: Understanding the social brain through human song. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1172.