

The eLearning Coach Podcast #66: How to Write Compelling Stories with Lisa Cron

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Connie Malamed: Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast online at thelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

Hi everyone. We're hearing a lot these days about how important stories and scenarios are for learning, but most of us haven't been taught how to write compelling stories. This interview with Lisa Cron will give you a good start in this direction. As you'll see in the interview, Lisa has a real passion for talking about stories.

Lisa is the author of a great book called *Wired for Story*. She also teaches writing, has worked in the publishing field, she's been a literary agent, and a story consultant. Here's the interview.

Hi Lisa, welcome to the podcast.

Lisa Cron: Hi Connie, it is a thrill to be here.

Connie: You know, people who use stories to improve learning often write short scenarios and vignettes; although we might also use the story form throughout an entire eLearning course, or video, and probably all of us would like to get better at this. I'm so happy to speak with you.

For starters, how did you get interested in the brain science associated with stories?

Lisa: I've always been interested in brain science for the same reason I think that I'm interested in story, which is, I want to know what makes people tick. I have sort of come to my theory about story after spending, I hate to admit it but, decades reading manuscripts and screenplays and seeing why it didn't work. It became clear, early on, that the reason they didn't work was real different than what writers thought. It had very little to do with writing well and everything to do with what I expected in a story.

I began to notice that there were certain very specific things that was missing in almost everybody's story, those stories that didn't work. At the same time I started to notice that what I was looking for really had to do, and was echoed in, everything I was reading about brain science; in terms of how we process information and what we look to information for and the way it comes into us. In other words, I realized story is the language of the brain. At that point, I just dove into the neuroscience of it and it was really thrilling because what, for me, had felt, like, kind of a theory – I noticed how my brain worked but I didn't realize I could extrapolate it to everybody's brain.

Reading the brain science just really cemented that; in terms of, what a story is, what we look for in a story, what it is that pulls us in, and what will keep us paying attention, and what we turn to story for because story really is a hard-wired survival mechanism. It's what got us here.

Connie: Related to that, can you tell me what researchers and you think the purpose of a story is?

Lisa: Absolutely. I think this really will change how people look at story from here on out; whether you're reading one, or you're listening to one, or you're watching an ad or any level where story comes at you. We tend to think of story as something that's really, really enjoyable; we all love stories. In fact, there's not been a human society, ever, that didn't have story telling. It's a human universal, which kind of clues you into there must be some purpose for it beyond just enjoyment.

We do enjoy them so much, we tend to think that they don't really serve a purpose; our lives would be far drabber without them but we'd have survived just fine. That couldn't be further from the truth. Story was crucial to our evolution; story is how we got here because story is the world's first virtual reality. Story allows us to envision the future and to plan for the thing that, to this day, scares us the most; the unexpected, the unknown.

Think about it in your own life, how often is what you expect to have happen, actually happen? When it does, how often does it feel like what you thought it would? Stories are simulations that allow us to experience things we haven't yet gone through, problems we haven't yet faced, and feel what it would feel like to actually have to solve them and overcome them. In fact, story was more crucial to our evolution than opposable thumbs; all opposable thumbs did was let us hold on. It was story that told us what to hold on to; like, I see those red berries

over there and they look delicious. I'm starving and, did I mention it's the Stone Age, so I can't go to the market and buy something, take it home, and nuke it; but I heard this story about the Neanderthal next door who gobbled down a couple of handfuls.

The way they said he was writhing on the ground before he died – I mean he died, that should be enough, but it sounded really painful. I think I'll forego the berries and make due with a couple of cold bugs and live to see the dawn. In other words, story was so crucial to our survival that nature found a way to make it enjoyable so we'd pay attention and not eat the red berries. The point is that great feeling that we get when we're lost in a story, it's not arbitrary, it's not ephemeral, it's not pleasure for pleasures sake; it's physical, it's biological, it's chemical, it's a survival mechanism. What it is, is dopamine; it is your brain's way of rewarding you for following your curiosity and finding out how the story ends, because you might learn something that better helps you make it through the night.

The takeaway here is, we don't turn to story to escape reality; we turn to story to navigate reality.

Connie: Wow, Lisa, you're turning my whole world upside down. What you're telling me is that story is for learning and for increasing our wisdom and for maybe even increasing our skills. That is the perfect alignment with what the training industry is looking for; is some way to improve learning some way to grab people's attention.

In terms of writing a story, what do you think the most important element is?

Lisa: Well, again, that goes back to what we were just saying; which is, the most important – the only really non-negotiable part of a story is you have to make the reader want to know what happens next. In other words, you have to make them curious because that's what gives the dopamine rush and that's what pulls us through. You don't have to be a great writer, I mean, that's kind of good news.

It's not about writing well; it's about writing a story that puts us in someone else's shoes that's dealing with a difficult situation. Now we're dying to know, well, how are they going to solve that problem? What do they need to learn in order to do it? I don't mean necessarily learn externally, but what do they need to learn internally? What's it going to cost them emotionally to solve that

problem? Once you've got that element down, once there's something that's pulling us in, we're there with you. Without that, we're not going to go anywhere.

Connie: You're making me realize that the little vignettes and scenarios that we write could probably use a little bit more drama than what we often put in there; also, that we should be peaking listeners, or the readers, or the learners curiosity. When I was reading your book, and by the way I love your book *Wired for Story*, I was wondering if you could explain what the protagonist is and what is the importance of this character to a story.

Lisa: Absolutely. To answer the first part of the question, which is simple, the protagonist is the main character. Without a protagonist, there is no story because the protagonist is our way into the story. They are the person who is solving the problem and who becomes our surrogate, or our avatar in the story. Everything that happens in this story is going to get its meaning and emotional weight based on how it's affecting that character who is in pursuit of some sort of difficult quest.

Think of a story as what happens when someone is forced to deal with a situation, that they would really rather not, and what they have to learn in order to have to solve that problem. If you don't have a protagonist, you don't have a story.

Connie: Sometimes we do write full-length stories throughout an entire video or throughout an entire course, but we often write short ones. One of the main things we've been taught in instructional design is we have to grab the learner's attention quickly, right at the start. It sounds like stories need to do that too. What are some ways we can capture the learner's attention quickly, how can we hook them?

Lisa: That is a great question. The answer is surprise; you have to surprise them, you have to break a pattern. Stories are what happens when our expectations aren't met. The best way to get anyone's attention, with anything, is to break some sort of a pattern. For instance, every morning the sun comes up and every evening the sun sets; that's a pattern. Once something becomes a pattern, the way the brain works is, we forget about it. We don't have to think about it because it's a safe pattern. I know when I go to bed at night, I don't have to worry, is the sun going to come up in the morning?

If there's a story and something happens and the sun doesn't come up in the morning, now I'm surprised and I want to know why. What does that mean? How is that going to change what I do? What do I need to do in order to get the lights back on? The answer is, is some sort of a surprise; some sort of a breaking of a pattern. Often, interestingly sometimes – here's a great example of this – sometimes it so goes to what we expect in a story that, when something doesn't happen, that's the surprise and that's what pulls us through because we're waiting for something to happen.

There was a great – I can't remember if it was a commercial or a PSA. It opens with – you see a family of happy people and they're in a van, they're driving down the street, everything is really good, everybody's having a good time. The reason that you're really riveted is you're thinking, okay, they couldn't possibly show me a PSA or a commercial of just people driving down the street having a good time because, who cares? Something has to happen.

The longer it doesn't happen, the more tense we are until, sure enough, another car slams into them. That's breaking all of our expectation because we knew something was going to happen and that's what pulled us in, was waiting for that surprise.

Connie: So we have to really bring surprise into our stories. I'm really seeing now how much better my stories could be. What about the structure? That's one thing I don't think I understand enough. Do compelling stories have a specific structure?

Lisa: That's another great question. On the surface, yes, they do. The problem is, is that good structure is really the byproduct of a story well told. The problem with looking at just structure – for instance, a lot of writers really revere. There's a book called *A Hero's Journey* and if I could take a match and burn every copy of it, I would. The reason is because it causes writers to think of the plot level. What is going to happen in the story; the external part of the story. That is not what the story is about. The story is about how the plot affects the protagonist.

So that, really, if you want to talk about the structure of a story – can I just talk about what a story is for one sec, on that level, because I think that might help clarify this.

Connie: That would be great, please.

Lisa: A story is how what happens affects someone in pursuit of a difficult goal and how they change as a result. To kind of break that down, what happens is the

plot; that's what's structured. It happens to someone; that's the protagonist that we've been talking about. In pursuit of a difficult goal; that's that story question, the problem that's going to be solved within the story. What they learn as a result, that, Connie, is what the story is actually about. Story is internal, it's not external.

The plot is constructed to force the protagonist to go after this thing that they want, to go after this goal; to learn what they need to learn in order to actually achieve it. There are two things that every protagonist comes into the story with; before the big problem occurs. One is, they want something really, really badly. The other thing is, there's something that holds them back; there's some reason they can't get it. There's something they have to learn, a misbelief, sometimes it's called a fatal flaw; it's some way that they're seeing the world that is keeping them from being able to get what they want.

The story then, the plot, kind of forces them to go after that thing that they want. With most of us, we have something that we really, really want; since change is hard, we think, I'm going to go after that thing tomorrow. Which translates, if you look on a calendar, tomorrow is a week from never. What happens - tomorrow becomes today, outside of our control and then we have to go after that thing we want. In order to get it, we have to give up this thing that we don't want to give up. The events of the story propel your character towards really having to give up this thing that they need to give up or learning this thing that they need to learn, bit by bit.

What do we always want? We want to have our cake and eat it too; we want to get that goal, we don't want to learn the lesson. The story structure that we're talking about, stories escalate because it gets more and more urgent that the character has to solve this problem and more and more they've got to dig deep and really overcome something that they don't want to. That really is the way the story escalates. In a story, everything that can go wrong must go wrong; do that right and the story structure that they teach you on the outside will be there naturally and you won't have to worry about it at all.

Connie: It's not about plot; it's really about what the protagonist, internally, goes through.

Lisa: Right and what they want. Can I give you a great example of that?

Connie: Oh yeah.

Lisa: From a movie that everybody knows. Great example – I love teaching from movies because we’ve all seen way more of the same movies than read the same books – is, believe it or not, *Die Hard*. I think *Die Hard* is a great example of that. The plot of *Die Hard* is what? There are terrorists and Bruce Willis and John McClane got to stop the terrorists to save his life, the life of everybody in the building, and his wife. That’s not what the story is about and that’s not what he wants. He comes into the story wanting something really, really badly. What does he want? He wants to get his wife back.

That’s what that whole movie is about; will Bruce Willis get his wife back? What he’s got to overcome in order to do it are two things. One, he needs to realize that, just because he’s the guy, doesn’t mean they get to stay in New York; that he’s got to treat her as an equal partner. Really, she got this great job in L.A. and he probably should’ve supported her and gone. The even deeper thing he has to learn has to do with identity.

He sees himself as a New York City cop, that’s who he is; if he goes to Los Angeles, he’s not going to be able to be that. He’s really scared and that fear keeps him in New York. He’s got to overcome that in order to really win her back and if you watch the movie, that is really why we’re rooting for him. We want him to win her back, we want him to realize and overcome the things that had him let her go so that he can win her back.

In fact, he does both things and that’s why we’re cheering and we’re so happy at the end; when he trances all the terrorists because it is really exciting on that level too. What gives it meaning and what really pulls us through is, is he or isn’t he going to get his wife back?

Connie: That’s a great analysis. That makes me wonder, how explicit do we have to be when we’re showing how someone has changed or what they have learned? Can we just assume that the reader or viewer is going to get it? Or do you think we have to be somewhat explicit about that?

Lisa: You have to Be explicit. I think one of the biggest mistakes that – I mean, not explicit in that you’re going to tell me, but explicit in that – and this is really interesting in narrative, especially if we’re talking about written narrative; movies also, all of it. Especially anything in terms of pros or any story you’re going to tell someone. Story really is about how your character is making sense of what’s happening. Everything in your story is going to get its meaning and emotional weight based on how it’s affecting your character in pursuit of their

goal. The way that we know that is, how are they making sense of what's happening, right? It's about this internal change.

Absolutely, that needs to be on the page; that needs to be in the story. We need to see how have they gone from believing one thing to believing something else. If you just show a change happening, we're not going to know how they got there. What we really want to know is, what insight did they need to learn in order to make that particular change? It's like in life, what do they tell us? They tell us never let them see you sweat. Stories are about sweating.

Stories are about the difference between what you say and what you think. I mean, in your real life, how often is what you're saying and what you're thinking the same thing? Which one is more interesting? Which one is more revealing, what you're thinking? That's the level that story plays out on and, yeah, you really need to give us that what have they learned but in the moment they learn it. We're watching them, their vision suddenly changes.

In fact, there's a great scene in *Die Hard* where Bruce Willis – it's towards the end and it's where he thinks - he really thinks, okay, this is it, he's going to die; no one's making it out of here alive. He's talking to his buddy, Al, and he's saying to him, "You know, when this is all over and if I don't make it, find my wife and by then you'll know how. You've really got to tell her that I messed up and say I told her a million times that I loved her but she never got to hear me say, honey, I'm sorry."

We're all sobbing.

Connie: Right.

Lisa: We really feel that because he's made that change and he says it out loud. Otherwise, we would have to guess what they felt.

Connie: Yes. One thing I wanted to say about stories being compelling and it not being about the plot. I just had this realization the other day when I went to see the movie *Les Mis*; I realized that I had seen the show, twice, and I was still going to see the movie. I used to think that only children liked the same story over and over and over again. Yet, this will be my third time hearing the story, and even though I knew what was going to be happening, I cried for two hours; the entire time.

Lisa: Absolutely. When you're pulled into a story, it quiets down the analytic part of your brain or the part of your brain that's thinking you are so involved, that things that – it still feels like it could go either way when you're watching it. I have a similar thing – it's a musical too. My favorite movie of all time, since I was a kid, is *Westside Story*. Every time I see it I think, maybe this time Tony is not going to get killed and they really are going to go away and have fifteen kids named Don. Even with things where you haven't seen it before and you know what's going to happen, you're still pulled in.

For instance, and this is kind of an embarrassing admission; I resisted watching the show 24 for years and finally someone said, you know, it really – you should just try it just for the story form. I started watching it. Now it was in its eighth season and I was watching it on DVD. First of all, it was like crack cocaine, I couldn't stop. My husband and I would get to four in the morning going, oh just one more episode. Here's the thing, they're making the eighth season; it already had premiered and in every episode of that show I was convinced Jack Bower was going to get killed before the show ended.

Now obviously, he wasn't, right? I mean, they're in the eighth season and yet my palms were sweating. I couldn't look, I was so tense because I was convinced that bomb was going to go off, or that person was going to shoot him, or the poison was going to take effect, or whatever it would be, because I was so involved in this story. The part of my brain that could go, excuse me, time out, wait a minute, they're in eighth season; it just didn't matter, it just didn't matter. I was right there because really, it is biological; it really is hard-wired. We are affected by it whether we want to be or not. That goes to looking at ads and listening to political rhetoric; it affects us, even when we think it's not affecting us. It's as hard-wired as our desire for sugar, fat, and salt.

Connie: Right. When I'm writing a story, I'm never sure which point of view to use. Is there an advantage to writing in either the first or the third person? Which one is better?

Lisa: When you're telling stories, I really think that the first person is better and here's why. It doesn't have to be but because the first person is more immediate; it is I. When you're writing stories, actually, it can be easier too because one of the most difficult things for writers to really wrap their brains around is that we need to be in the character's head. Often that's done poorly, you know, some long Ulysses like stream of consciousness, which is not what you want.

When you're in the character's head, it's just how their making sense of what's happening in the moment. You can bring the past in, what they believe or what happened the last time they were in the situation, you can bring the future in, what they think is going to happen because it really is how we process information. It can be easier and, as I say, it's much more immediate because your listener is going to be in that character's skin. In fact, they've done MRI studies that show that when we're lost in a good story, the areas of our brain light up that would light up if we were doing what that character is doing; so, first person can be great.

Third person – there are two different types of third person, well, three but two that people use mostly. One is called third person limited, which is we can only be in one person's head. The same way we can only be in one person's head in first person, obviously, except it's he or she. I don't - frankly, I don't understand why anybody would write in that – to lose the immediacy of first person. As with first person, the one drawback is, is that you can't tell us anything that that one person isn't seeing, right? So you're locked into that. Nothing else could come in that they're not aware of.

The other way that people write, and sometimes you hear it's fallen out of favor – I don't personally think so– is what's called third person omniscient, which is when you can go into anybody's head and tell us what they're thinking and how they're feeling. Just only one person per scene or else it's known as head hopping. Which is, then you're kind of going back and forth with characters, in each person's head, and that's really disorienting.

Connie: Okay, that's good information. I know you teach writing at times. What is the most common mistake you see people make in storytelling?

Lisa: The most, kind of overarching common is that the story in their head just doesn't match the story on the page. They're so well aware of what they're writing about that they'll give us the briefest hint of it because they know what the character's thinking, what they're feeling, what they want, it doesn't occur to them that they have not put that onto the page. That happens all the time, especially because people do have a hard time putting the character's thoughts and feelings onto the page.

When I talk about feeling, I don't mean I'm happy, sad; I mean, literally, how they're analyzing what's happening, what it means to them. That probably really is the biggest mistake. The other mistake is, it kind of goes to the same, is that

they don't realize that everything in their story is going to get its meaning based on how the character is reacting to it. Especially, you know, the protagonist. Therefore, in order to make that clear, the protagonist needs to react to everything that happens in the moment, in a way the reader or listener can see.

When they don't realize that, they just show us things happening; not how it's affecting someone, so we don't feel anything. If we're not feeling, we're not reading. All story is emotion based because all life is emotion based.

Connie: Okay, so you're saying that we really need to write fairly explicitly and specifically.

Lisa: Stories and the specifics, absolutely. It's another way that the brain is wired, which is really interesting. We're not wired to think conceptually; we're wired to think in images. Images make things concrete. Something that is conceptual is so amorphous that it means absolutely nothing to us. I mean, even if we're going to talk about the concept of love, well, we all have really different meanings of that. We all conjure very different images when we think of love; fantasies of Johnny Depp notwithstanding.

The point is, is that anything that is conceptual needs to be brought down and made specific. It's kind of counter-intuitive but the universal is really only accessible through the very, very specific. We can talk about the horrors of the Holocaust, in a horrible way, not feel anything where we're being statistical. If we talk about *Sophie's Choice* or we think of *Schindler's List* and that little girl in the red coat, then you really feel something. You see how it's affecting someone and that allows us to feel how it would affect us.

I think this kind of goes to your audience and to just story in general; as opposed to I want to write a novel or I want to write a short story for its own sake. Stories allow us to take the objective and turn it into something subjective so we can experience what it means to us; how it would affect us. That's how we decide does this matter to me, is this going to help me, is it going to hurt me, do I believe it, why is it relevant to me in my life? When you're trying to impart information to people, if they can't see why it's relevant to them, if they can't feel it, they are not going to pay any attention to it whatsoever.

The biggest problem I think educators sometimes have is they'll give you a piece of information and, because they understand it so well, they think you're going to understand the context that it fits into and they think you're going to know

what they want you to do as a result of that. To you, it might just be – like with climate change, in the year 2100 the temperature will rise 5.2 degrees Fahrenheit worldwide. Yeah, okay. Is that good, is that bad? I don't know. What will the consequence? I don't know. What can I do to stop that? I don't know.

So I'm not going to do anything; I'm going to forget it, as a matter of fact. Whereas if you translate that into some sort of story so I could see what the effect of that might be on someone, who I empathize with and feel what they're feeling viscerally, now you've got my attention. Now I understand why it's relevant. It doesn't have to be relevant just in the sense of something physical to me in the moment, but relevant in the sense of how I feel about myself, how I feel about my place in the world, how I want other people to see me. I mean, at the end of the day - and this comes down to advertising in particular – with advertisers, their goal isn't to tell you their product is the best, their goal isn't to tell you why their product is going to solve every problem in the world; their goal is to show you, through a story, why using their product, or believing what they want you to believe, will make you your most authentic self.

How does it make you feel about yourself? That's what it comes down to. Honestly, I think in education, it's exactly the same thing. We use - story is literally the language of the brain. We use it to analyze everything; we view everything that way. We're the protagonist in our own story and so everything out there gets its meaning based on how it affects us.

Connie: That aligns so well with what we know about motivation. When we connect with learners on an emotional level, they are much more motivated than when we just try to throw dry, overloaded information at them.

Lisa: They won't even remember it.

Connie: Exactly.

Lisa: It's not because – see, the thing that kills me is it's not because they're not interested. It's not even because they aren't even trying hard. It's literally how we're wired; it doesn't penetrate and so it becomes really hard to pay attention. We're wired to pay attention to things that matter to us. A teacher or someone could be talking and if it doesn't penetrate, even if we're trying to listen, we really start to think about stuff that matters to us like, I wonder when lunch is; stuff that will have an effect on us in our lives. I think the other mistake that people make, is they don't realize that every decision we make is emotion based.

That if we couldn't feel emotion, we couldn't make a logical, rational decision; it's all to do with emotion and very little to do with logic.

Connie: Yes, I have read that emotions and cognition are just completely intertwined, so that makes sense.

Lisa, just so we can try to remember some of this great information that you've given us, what's just one guideline that we can just all take away with us? Just really summarize everything all at once.

Lisa: I think the biggest point is that the story is not about the plot; it's not about the things that happen. The story is about how the plot affects the protagonist in pursuit of a very specific goal that becomes our yardstick; are they going to get the goal or aren't they? We evaluate everything in the story based on that and what they're going to learn as a result. What they need to learn in order to achieve that goal. Therefore, story is internal it's not external. I tend to look at story, this will sound sort of odd, as an emotional cost benefit analysis of taking a certain course of action; it's not about what happens. It's about how what happens affects the protagonist.

That means when you're creating a story, the first thing you want to think of is what does my protagonist want? Why does he or she want it? Meaning, what does it mean to him and what do they need to overcome internally? What's holding them back in order to get, or achieve, what they want in order to solve the problem?

Connie: That's a great wrap up. I've been sitting here nodding my head and smiling the entire time because I'm just loving what you've said. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom about story with us.

Lisa: My pleasure, there's nothing I love more than talking about story.

Connie: I hope you enjoyed this episode. Lisa is a powerful speaker, and she makes me want to sit down and write a novel or screenplay. I think she had some great suggestions for how we can write better scenarios and stories that bring relevance, emotion and motivation to learning experiences. Just an FYI because thinking in images came up in our conversation. The science of visual thinking is still being debated and researched. And it's possible that some people think more visually than others do. You can find the show notes at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/66. Take care and I'll talk to you next time.

