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## Teaching with relevant (and irrelevant) storytelling in the college classroom

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### ABSTRACT

Instructors tell stories for pedagogical reasons, but not all classroom stories are necessarily relevant to students and their learning. This study examined how instructors tell stories in ways that students find relevant or irrelevant to their lives. Participants were 388 undergraduate students who responded to an open-ended survey asking them to identify either a relevant or an irrelevant instructor narrative and then report on why the narrative was relevant or irrelevant to their classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals. We examined their responses using qualitative content analysis. Results revealed that most students found an instructor narrative to be relevant when it discussed perseverance through personal struggles and decision-making in college because it related to the students' own current difficulties. Many students perceived a narrative to be irrelevant when it mentioned a marital partner and/or children because students felt these stories had little to do with the course content. These results provide preliminary evidence for the types of stories instructors might share (or avoid) to ensure that students find classroom narratives pertinent to their lives.

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College instructors incorporate storytelling into their teaching, often disclosing their own personal experiences or their interpretations of others' experiences (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988). But not all instructor stories are made equally. Instructor stories may have different impacts on motivation and learning depending on how relevant these stories are to students' experiences. That is, instructors might tell stories that are directly related to the content or students' lives, but other times, they might share stories that have nothing to do with either. It is important that instructor narratives remain relevant to students' lives by satisfying their classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals (Keller, 1983); otherwise, stories may be viewed by students to interfere with their learning, especially when they lead the instructor to stray from the lesson subject (Goodboy & Myers, 2015). Simply, instructor stories shared in class should be relevant to students. Indeed, Muddiman and Frymier (2009) revealed that personal narratives are used by instructors to increase students' perceptions of content relevance. When lesson content is relevant, it becomes easier for students to learn and understand how the course material

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is significant to their everyday lives (Keller, 1983, 1987). Therefore, it is important to determine how instructors might tell stories in class in ways that are relevant or irrelevant to their students. The purpose of this study was to identify narrative topics that students find relevant and irrelevant, and more importantly, to understand the reasons why particular instructor stories meet students' needs, interests, and goals.

### Classroom narratives

Rather than providing a straight lecture, an instructor might choose to incorporate a narrative to reinforce lesson material because students perceive it as an entertaining form of discourse (Norton & Nussbaum, 1980). For the purposes of this study, we defined a narrative as a significant occurrence comprising a beginning, middle, and end that involves characters, events, conflicts, and a fundamental take-away message (Koenig Kellas, 2015; Kreuter et al., 2007). The terms *narrative* and *story* are typically used interchangeably in the literature; both terms signaling communicative constructs that help people interpret and construct meaning from their everyday social experiences (Koenig Kellas, 2015). This is because a narrative offers a social interaction episode that provides insight into the narrator's thoughts and actions (Mar & Oatley, 2008) and allows the listener to take the perspective of the narrator (Koenig Kellas, 2015). The interactional meaning-making process between narrator and listener suggests that narratives may have pedagogical value in the classroom.

Instructors often share stories during instruction. On average, instructors share nine narratives during a 50-minute lecture, which may include the instructor's accounts of their own personal experiences or accounts of others' experiences (Downs et al., 1988). The regular use of instructor storytelling may be an effective teaching behavior because students have reported that stories made class interesting, placed content into a vivid context, and helped them recall for important facts on exams (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003). Some researchers have asserted that individuals learn information and experiences in the form of narratives (Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002). Other researchers have found evidence that instructor stories may provide a detriment to student learning (Goodboy & Myers, 2015). Recent research has shown that students are better able to sustain their attention during a lecture and score slightly higher on a test when course content is reinforced by an instructor narrative; on the other hand, students also remember superfluous details of the story that may increase their cognitive load (Kromka & Goodboy, 2018). Ultimately, the effectiveness of instructor narratives may depend on if and how the story's content is relevant to students' lives because content relevance motivates students to learn (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Keller, 1987).

### Content relevance

When students question how the content they are learning is actually important for their lives (e.g., When will I ever need to use this in my life? Why I am learning this? Why does this matter to me?), they are grappling with issues of content relevance. Content relevance refers to the perception that what is being taught satisfies students' classroom needs, similar interests, and/or future career goals (Keller, 1983). When students perceive

course material as relevant, they become more motivated to learn the content (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

Keller's (1983, 1987) ARCS model of motivational design helps to explain the importance of content relevance in classroom instruction. The ARCS model comprises four components: *attention* (gaining students' interests), *relevance* (meeting the students' needs, interests, and/or goals), *confidence* (making students feel efficacious in learning the course material), and *satisfaction* (helping students feel gratification from the learning experience; Keller, 1987). According to the ARCS model, students are more motivated to learn course content that they perceive as relevant because the content fulfills a personal need, interest, or goal. Keller (1983) uses relevance as an umbrella term that comprises the three value dimensions: personal-motive value, cultural value, and instrumental value. Personal-motive value refers to the increase in motivation when instruction offers student satisfaction to specific classroom needs such as power, affiliation, and educational achievement. Personal-motive value caters to students' needs to be successful in the classroom. Of the three relevance values, Keller (1983) suggested that personal-motive value is the most important because it relates closely to education and learning. Cultural value refers to an increase in motivation when instruction is consistent with the values of esteemed groups such as the instructor, parents, peers, and culture overall. If students perceive instruction to involve personal interests similar to their own, it is tapping into students' cultural relevance value. In order to utilize cultural relevance value, researchers suggest that educators act as "positive role models" by sharing personal examples and stories connected to the lesson content (Keller, 1983, p. 415). By doing so, it may enhance the positive value of a subject matter and increase students' motivation to learn more about the lesson content (McConnell, 1977). Instrumental value refers to the increase in student motivation when instruction offers insight about desired future goals (i.e., career and/or professional accomplishments). Raynor (1974) demonstrated that student motivation increases when students perceive a current task as necessary for attaining future goals. Each of these values are present in the content relevance definition (Frymier & Shulman, 1995) comprising students' classroom needs (personal-motive value), similar interests (cultural value), and career goals (instrumental value). By utilizing these three relevance values within Keller's (1983) framework, researchers offer a comprehensive understanding of how to enhance student motivation in the college classroom.

The difficulty with relevance is that it is unique to each individual student and depends on her/his/zir<sup>1</sup> unique classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals. However, instructors may be able to make their storytelling more relevant by focusing on certain topics and meet general needs, interests, and/or goals of college students broadly. Researchers have argued that relevancy-enhancing strategies are a pedagogical skill that instructors can improve upon by consistently and explicitly illustrating the value of lesson material and course assignments (Fedesco, Kentner, & Natt, 2017). Sánchez, Rosales, & Cañedo (1999) discovered that expert instructors were better at connecting lesson material to students' previous experiences than novice instructors. Other research has found that award-winning instructors are more skilled at highlighting content relevance than less experienced instructors (Webster, Villora, & Harvey, 2012). Sharing classroom narratives may be one teaching behavior that instructors might use to make their lessons more relevant and connect to students' prior experiences (Keller, 1983; Muddiman & Frymier, 2009).

## Research questions

As mentioned previously, narratives have an episodic structure (Koenig Kellas, 2015), which allows one to easily identify the narrative topic. We defined narrative topic as the general subject of what a narrative is about (Kuppevelt, 1998). The narrative topic may play an important role of whether students find a story relevant or irrelevant to the classroom context. Of course, different topics may be relevant to different students based on their lives and interests. However, Muddiman and Frymier (2009) identified evidence for topics students find relevant (e.g., popular culture and media) and mention that there may be certain irrelevant topics (e.g., boring topics). There may be some general topics that college students can more easily relate to than other less relevant topics. Thus, we proposed the following research questions:

RQ1a: What topics do students find relevant when instructors tell stories in class?

RQ1b: What topics do students find irrelevant when instructors tell stories in class?

Keller's (1983) three relevance value dimensions broadly capture how instruction is relevant to students' classroom needs (i.e., personal-motive value), personal interests/values (i.e., cultural value), and future professional goals (i.e., instrumental value). However, researchers do not know the specific reasons for why students perceive these value dimensions as relevant in instructor storytelling. A relevance reason provides the specific answer for why instruction meets a student's needs, interests, and/or career goals. Determining the relevance reason would allow us to provide suggestions for how instructors should share classroom stories in ways that are relevant for their students, and in doing so, better understand how the three relevance values are tied to student motivation (Keller, 1983,1987; McConnell, 1977; Raynor, 1974). It is equally important to identify the irrelevance reasons, which explain how instruction does not meet students' needs, interests, and/or goals. Identifying the irrelevance reasons would reveal recommendations for how instructors should not tell stories at the risk of being perceived as irrelevant and demotivating their students. Therefore, we asked the following research questions:

RQ2a: How are instructor stories relevant to students' classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals?

RQ2b: How are instructor stories irrelevant to students' classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals?

Finally, it is important to examine the role that narrative topic plays in the reasons for why students perceive the narrative to be relevant or irrelevant. Identifying how relevant narrative topics and relevance reasons align may provide a better understanding for how particular narrative topics lead to relevance outcomes. In other words, students might frequently mention a particular relevant narrative topic with a specific relevance reason, which could lead to implications as to why certain topics are perceived as relevant in the college classroom. The same implications might also be made for particular irrelevant narrative topics and specific irrelevance reasons. Thus, we asked the following research questions:

RQ3a: How often do students' relevance reasons match with relevant story topics?

RQ3b: How often do students' irrelevance reasons match with irrelevant story topics?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 388 undergraduate students enrolled in communication studies courses at a large university. There were 189 participants in the relevant narrative condition and 199 participants in the irrelevant condition. The total number of participants consisted of 151 men and 235 women (2 participants did not report sex). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 58 ( $M = 20.14$ ,  $SD = 2.53$ ) with 138 first-year students, 100 sophomores, 83 juniors, 66 seniors, and 1 reported as "other." There were 301 participants who identified as Caucasian, 10 identified as Asian/Asian American, 29 identified as black/African American, 10 identified as Hispanic, 1 identified as Native American, 31 identified as Middle Eastern, and 6 identified as mixed race. The students reported their current GPA ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ , Range = 0.00–4.00) and their current major (39 different majors; e.g., Psychology, Business, Engineering).

### Procedures

We advertised the study to college students via email and bulletin board announcements that provided a link to complete the anonymous online survey with open-ended questions. Upon accessing the survey, participants were first provided the definitions of *story* and *relevance*. We defined story as a type of discourse that includes characters, a setting, and a plotline to recount a noteworthy event (Koenig Kellas, 2015). We defined relevance as the perception of being related to and important to the student's classroom needs, personal interests, and future goals (Keller, 1983). Second, we asked participants to recall all of the college instructors that they had over the past year and think about a time that one of these instructors shared a story in class. The online survey randomly assigned participants to recall either a story that was *very relevant* or a story that was *not relevant* to their needs, interests, and/or goals. The survey asked participants "What was the relevant/irrelevant story about?" and were instructed to be as detailed as possible when recalling the instructor's narrative.<sup>2</sup> Third, the online survey asked "What were the features or characteristics of this story that made it very relevant/not relevant to your needs, interests, or goals?" We chose this phrasing to capture all of the relevance subdimensions and allow participants to report the relevance values in the instructor's story that were most salient to them. Both questions provided large essay boxes to encourage students' detailed open-ended responses. Fourth, participants reported their demographic information, which concluded the online survey. Altogether, the surveys produced 83 single-spaced pages of text.

### Data analysis

We analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis, which is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic

classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). As opposed to more traditional content analysis procedures that count the number of times a word or phrase is used (Morgan, 1993), qualitative content analysis emphasizes an intense examination of the data to interpret meaning and organize large amounts of text into comprehensive categories that signify similar ideas (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of analysis includes quantitative properties that allow for replicable valid inferences and qualitative properties that focus on the contextual meaning of the open-ended responses (McTavish & Pirro, 1990). We chose qualitative content analysis because it allowed us to systematically code topics and reasons without sacrificing the context of the participants’ detailed stories and responses. This inductive type of analysis is appropriate when prior research or theory is limited because it allows specific categories to arise after a thorough analysis of the data to help lead to concept development (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

We conducted the qualitative content analysis by using procedures outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Beginning with narrative topic coding, the first author conducted multiple immersive readings, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the data. Second, we labeled each narrative with a specific keyword or phrase (i.e., codes; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to capture the main topic of the story. These codes often used the participants’ own words to remain faithful to the text and maintain objectivity (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). For example, if a student reported that an instructor shared a story about their personal struggles with time management when they were in college, it would be coded as “personal struggle” for the specific subtopic and “college” for the general topic. When newly encountered data did not fit into an existing code, we developed a new code. We used Owen’s (1984) three criteria (i.e., recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness) to identify salient topic codes. Recurrence refers to multiple mentions of the same idea using different words. Repetition refers to certain words and phrases that occur multiple times. Forcefulness refers to emphasis on specific utterances such as through capitalization and punctuation. If an instructor story could possibly fit into two different topics, the criteria helped distinguish what was the most salient overarching topic of the story.

Third, after all data were provided a specific code, we then organized these codes into subtopic categories “based on how different codes were related and linked” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). During this process, we also organized subtopics into broader general topic categories, which provides a clear hierarchical category structure of the analysis. In total, the qualitative content analysis resulted in the same general topics for both relevant and irrelevant instructor narratives (with the exception of “Food,” which was only present in the irrelevant narrative topics). Overall, participants described stories with an average length of 87 words for relevant instructor narratives and 66 words for irrelevant instructor narratives.

Multiple metrics were used to demonstrate a rigorous and replicable qualitative analysis. First, the first and third author reviewed the general topic categories, specific subtopic categories, and exemplars to be sure that the results were trustworthy and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We discussed the categories and exemplars until both authors agreed that the categories made sense with the data, which helps to establish credibility for the analysis (Denzin, 1978). Second, the first author created a codebook to guide the identification of both relevant and irrelevant narrative topics. The codebooks included

the general topic names, descriptions, and examples of the nine narrative topics in total. The first author recruited two independent coders (unaware to the purposes of the current study) and trained them to interpret the codebook using rules for when to (and when not to) code for a specific narrative topic. In accordance to the rules provided in the codebook, the two coders systematically coded 20% of the data (Benoit & Holbert, 2008) assigning a single code to each response. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha (1970) and 95% confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrap samples (KALPHA; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The coders achieved acceptable interrater reliability for both the relevant ( $\alpha = .9324$ , CI: .8648, .9865) and irrelevant narrative topics ( $\alpha = .9855$ , CI: .9564, 1.000). Any disagreement between the coders were resolved through discussion. Third, our results provide tables and thick description examples of the story topics to further illustrate the credibility of the data analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010).

To address relevance and irrelevance reasons (RQ2a, RQ2b, RQ3a, and RQ3b), we conducted another qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using Keller's (1983) three relevance dimensions as a framework. We sorted participants' open responses into categories as to whether the student perceived the instructor's narrative fulfilling their classroom needs (personal-motive), personal interests (cultural), and/or future goals (instrumental). For this part of the analysis, we unitized the data into units (Neuendorf, 2002), which represent a single, distinct idea. Because many students' reason responses included multiple relevance (or irrelevance) reasons, it was important to segment these responses to identify discrete and easily definable ideas in order to have a more effective analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). Next, we created a new codebook based on the three relevance values and trained the two independent coders (the same two coder who previously coded the narrative topics) to interpret the codebook using rules for when to (and when not to) code for Keller's (1983) personal-motive, cultural, or instrumental relevance values. The coders performed coding on a new 20% portion of the data and achieved acceptable interrater reliability for both relevant values ( $\alpha = .8901$ , CI: .8116, .9686) and irrelevant values ( $\alpha = .8841$ , CI: .8014, .9669) with any disagreements being resolved through discussion after coding. Participants provided sufficient responses with the average length of 33 words for relevance reasons and 26 words for irrelevance reasons.

After we coded all responses into one of the three relevance dimensions, we used qualitative content analysis once again to identify specific categories for relevance and irrelevance reasons under each of the three relevance dimensions. Following the previously described qualitative content analysis procedures, the first author thoroughly read through the data, coded each relevance and irrelevance reason, and organized the reasons into distinct categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analysis resulted in 13 relevance reasons for relevant instructor narratives and 8 irrelevance reasons for irrelevant instructor narratives. In order to demonstrate credibility and reliability for the analysis, we conducted the same metrics used for narrative topics (i.e., all authors reviewing categories, providing thick descriptions, creating codebooks). The first author created another new codebook with information for both relevant and irrelevant reasons. The first author trained two new independent coders (who did not participate in any previous coding and were blind to the study's purposes) and had them code another new 20% portion of the data to attain acceptable intercoder reliability for relevance reasons ( $\alpha = .8630$ , CI: .7260, .9657) and irrelevance reasons ( $\alpha = .8803$ , CI: .7008, 1.000). We resolved any disagreements through discussion after coding.

## Results

Research question one explored the narrative topics of instructors' relevant and irrelevant classroom stories. See [Table 1](#) for specific subtopics and additional examples of relevant instructor narrative topics. The differences between the subtopics are discussed throughout this section. We identified eight general topics of relevant instructor narratives (RQ1a). *College* ( $n = 57$ ) was the most prevalent general topic, which comprised stories that focused on the general college experience. It included specific subtopics such as persevering through college and deciding on a major. One male Caucasian student recounted a story about his physical therapy professor's college experiences:

The professor told the class his difficult journey to getting his masters in physical education. He too was having doubts about the profession because a lot of people were telling him there was no money in the field and that he may want to pick a different major like one in science or medicine. While he struggled with the decision, he suggested that the class stick to the major because it is one of the best jobs in the world and he has had a great experience being a physical educator. Although the major won't make as much money as others, he suggested we keep pursuing and not let anyone tell us which path to take for it is our decision and our lives.

In this story, the instructor struggled with the decision to choose a major after having second thoughts about going into science or medicine. Many students shared similar relevant instructor stories about difficult major decisions, persevering through college classroom obstacles (e.g., exams and research papers), and personal struggles in college (e.g., time management). In general, these stories discussed the instructor overcoming some type of obstacle or adversity during their college years.

**Table 1.** Relevant instructor narrative topics.

Percentage	General topic	Specific subtopics	Example
30	College	Perseverance, personal struggles, deciding on major	My professor "said that he originally did not get a job out of college, but he persevered and eventually found a good position where he could step in and learn immediately."
22	Interpersonal Relationships	Casual dating relationships, friendships, roommates	"The story was about a guy at the bar observing a girl from across the room and trying to learn more about her."
18	Popular Culture	Movies, television shows, current events, economy, business, politics	"My professor was talking about the concept of power by relating it to stories about Game of Thrones."
13	Health	Illness, death, injuries	"The relevant story was about what happens when we get scared and about the human body's response."
9	Workplace	Coworkers, job struggles, clients	"My professor told a story in which she made a simple error early on in her career during her first year and how she learned from it."
5	Sports & Recreation	Football, basketball, soccer	My professor "told me about his experience here at a football game and I felt connected right away."
2	Travel	Visiting out of town, getting outside comfort zone	My professor "told us how he was born and raised here but left home at 17 to begin traveling within the United States and seeing beyond his comfort zone."
1	Animals	Snakes, ferrets	"My biology professor was explaining how when he was doing research, he had to go out into the forest that had a lot of snakes that were found in trees and how he had to get up early when it was still cold so that the snakes didn't chase him."

The second-most frequent relevant instructor general topic was *interpersonal relationships* ( $n = 41$ ), which included stories about close relationships between two or more individuals. These narratives typically involved subtopics focusing on dating relationships and friendships. For example, a female Caucasian student recalled an interpersonal communication instructor sharing the following personal story to provide context about the lesson topic on jealousy:

He told a story about him and his girlfriend he was dating when he was younger. Apparently, they were at a restaurant and he saw from afar that a guy was hitting on her. So naturally, he got jealous, went over to his girlfriend, gave her a kiss, and walked away. He let all of the guys know that she was his and no one should be hitting on her.

Many of these story topics involved relational transgressions during casual dating relationships when the instructor was younger. Other stories discussed close friends (e.g., “He was telling us how he had a friend who was a close talker”) and roommates (e.g., “Her roommate didn’t know how to use a regular household appliance ... it was a vacuum”).

*Popular culture* ( $n = 35$ ) was the third most frequently mentioned topic for relevant instructor narratives. This general topic included all narrative references to general occurrences in society and culture such as economy, business, politics, and popular movies and television shows. A male Caucasian student appreciated it when his instructor provided “real-life stories of the terms and definitions happening in the world currently.” Students typically found these story topics to be very applicable to their class. In other words, most stories within the popular culture general topic were specific to the class subject being taught.

The general topic of *health* ( $n = 24$ ) comprised narratives about human well-being. Specific subtopics within this category included personal injuries, diseases, and death. It seems as though the relevant subtopics revolved around health problems that are inescapable. One female Asian student recounted a biology professor’s story about aggressive allergies by explaining “a mild rash after receiving penicillin and how she was marked as allergic, and she realized it was to prevent a more serious reaction in the future.” Other students shared relevant instructor stories that referenced topics such as life-threatening diseases (“The patient found out they had cancer”) and death (“She died before the surgery”).

The *workplace* general topic ( $n = 17$ ) included stories about clients, coworkers, and struggles during job employment that the instructor had to learn from and overcome. A male Middle Eastern student recalled a story that his gender studies professor shared, “She was required to attend a board meeting, which ended up with her being the only female in the room. Whenever she tried to voice her opinion or make a comment, others would talk over or completely ignore her.” Other stories involved topics such as working long hours (e.g., “He was working 80+ hours a week just to get experience in film writing”).

Lesser reported relevant narrative topics were *sports and recreation* ( $n = 9$ ), *travel* ( $n = 4$ ), and *animals* ( $n = 2$ ). Relevant sports stories involved pastimes such as football (“The story was about him working for facilities when the school won the national football championship in 2013”) and basketball (“He told a story about shooting a free throw if you get fouled in a basketball game”). It seems as though relevant stories revolved around the popular national sports in America. For travel stories, instructors shared

stories about getting out of your comfort zone and seeing places across the globe for the purpose of self-expansion and getting out of one's comfort zone. For example, one female Caucasian student said her instructor "told a story about when he first went to Korea and how his mother cried when she was saying goodbye to him, but he did not cry because he was ready to travel." For animals, a male Caucasian student mentioned how an instructor shared a story about how "her ferret that ate a chocolate cake that was for her mother-in-law's birthday."

We also analyzed the topics of instructor's irrelevant classroom stories (RQ1b). Our analysis identified nine prevalent irrelevant topics in instructor narratives. See [Table 2](#) for specific subtopics and examples of irrelevant narrative topics. *Interpersonal relationships* ( $n = 78$ ) was the most prominent irrelevant general topic with specific subtopics comprising family and married relationships. These stories typically involved the instructor sharing stories about their wives, husbands, and children. For example, in response to a biology instructor's story about his pregnant wife, a female Middle Eastern student stated, "It was not relevant to me because I am not married, nor am I pregnant or plan to be any time soon." A female African American student recounted a story that her economy professor shared about his daughter:

I was taking Economy 201 and my professor always tried to tell stories about his 4 year old daughter and connect them to the topic we were talking about. I can't even remember what the topic was but I remember he tried to connect it to a story about how his daughter is obsessed with Peppa Pig. It was so absurd that I focused more on the fact that he was talking about his kid rather than focusing on what he was trying to relate to the content.

**Table 2.** Irrelevant instructor narrative topics.

Percentage	General topic	Specific subtopics	Example
39	Interpersonal Relationships	Married relationships, family, wife, husband, children	My professor "continued to go on about his love life and how he met his wife, which had nothing to do with our class material."
20	Popular Culture	Video games, cars, social norms	"My professor went off track and told a story about how he played video games in his free time."
12	Animals	Pet dog, pet cat	"The professor talked about her cat for 20 minutes. She described how she thought the cat and her house was haunted."
7	College	Partying, recreational marijuana and alcohol, past poor college choices and behaviors	My professor "gave a story about his college days and how lit they used to be. He talked about living in a house with plenty of alcohol and have a good time. It wasn't related to class at all."
6	Sports & Recreation	Baseball, fishing, rafting	My professor "was talking about when he went whitewater rafting and how people fell out of the boat, but in class we were learning about diseases."
5	Travel	Vacations, seeing outside the country	My professor "told us about what she did on vacation the summer before. She said that she went to Mexico and talked about all of the exotic things that she saw there."
4	Health	Smoking, accidents	"My professor went off on a tangent about how people need to stop vaping because it's bad for you and it was irrelevant to a math class."
4	Workplace	Past intro-level jobs, low-paying jobs	"I had a teacher that told us a long story about how he used to work in an ice cream shop."
3	Food	Preferred sodas, favorite candies	My professor told a story "about how much he loved Pepsi. He literally only talked about Pepsi."

*Popular culture* ( $n = 41$ ) was the second-most frequent irrelevant general topic. Specific subtopics included instructor stories about books, cars, and video games. For example, one male Asian American student had an instructor who shared a narrative about video games:

One time, my business professor discussed a video game in class about how it related to a specific class topic. Although this was a great professor I enjoyed having, I had difficulty understanding the point of the story. My professor thought that it was a common video game that was played a lot but me and a lot of my fellow peers in the class did not understand what the professor was trying to say.

Even though the instructor had the intention of clarifying material with the video game story, it seemed to only confuse the student and lead to perceptions of irrelevance. Other irrelevant popular culture specific subtopics involved cultural differences such as holidays (e.g., “She went on a rant about Halloween”) or public facilities (e.g., “My political science professor wouldn’t stop talking about the difference between public and at-home toilet seats”).

The general topic of *animals* ( $n = 24$ ) within irrelevant instructor narratives included specific subtopics focused solely on pet dogs and pet cats. For example, one male Middle Eastern student asked the following about his chemical engineering instructor, “What do I learn from him talking about his cute cats and that he misses them?” A female Caucasian student said, “My professor used to go on and on about how her dog would just pee all over her house, but that had nothing to do with Biology 101.” Many students mentioned that these types of animal stories distracted them from the classroom lecture.

For the general topic of *college* ( $n = 13$ ), these specific subtopics differed from relevant college subtopics because they emphasized instructor stories about partying, using marijuana, and consuming alcohol in a college setting. For example, one female Caucasian student shared, “In my political science class, my professor stopped lecturing one day to tell us a story about himself, how he drank so much in college and never went to class.” Other students talked about how their instructors shared stories about “smoking weed” and “cheating on an exam in a 200+ person class” in college, which was perceived as irrelevant to their respective courses.

*Sports and recreation* ( $n = 12$ ) included specific subtopics such as baseball, fishing, and rafting. This category seemed to include lesser known aspects of sports and recreation. One female Caucasian student shared how her chemistry professor “got off topic and started talking about a baseball game that he went to over the weekend where he got to meet his favorite player, he went on and on about this player.” Other irrelevant topics included stories about fishing and rafting. However, the relevance of these subtopics may vastly differ by region and popularity of sport. *Travel* ( $n = 10$ ) appeared with specific subtopics focusing on elaborate stories about instructors’ vacations such as lengthy international trips to destinations such as Japan or Mexico. For example, at the end of instructor’s impromptu Mexican vacation story, one male Caucasian student reported, “Nobody asked you. We are just here to learn, not to listen to your vacation.” In these instances, students typically perceived that the instructor was bragging and felt frustrated by the instructor’s travel escapades.

Lesser reported irrelevant narrative topics were *health* ( $n = 8$ ), *workplace* ( $n = 7$ ), and *food* ( $n = 6$ ). Irrelevant health topics included specific subtopics such as smoking in

general (e.g., cigarette and vaping use) and accidents. These topics tended to revolve around issues that an individual should be able to avoid if they are healthy (not smoking) or safe (multiple participants noted that motorcycles are too dangerous). A male Caucasian student shared how his nutrition professor “told the story of how he used to be a personal trainer and was riding his motorcycle when a car hit him at an intersection. Since then, he hasn’t been able to use his arm.” The student reported that this instructor’s injury stories were “always irrelevant.”

As for the topic of workplace, these instructor stories included specific subtopics about previous introductory, low-paying jobs that the instructor had before entering academia. When sharing these job stories, instructors were perceived as complaining about these old jobs. For example, a male Asian American student said that his chemistry professor would go on “tangents about his old job before he became a professor and what he used to do, and how he makes more money now.” The general topic of food was only found in irrelevant instructor stories. This topic describes stories about things that people consume, which included specific subtopics such as favorite sodas and candy. For example, a female Caucasian student reported how one instructor shared a tale about how they “had to choose between what color of Tic Tac they bought and how they came about doing so.” Students reported being unable to see the point in such stories relating food to content. Students may simply see food as a mundane topic for instructor stories.

Our second research question explored the reasons why students perceived an instructor’s story as relevant or irrelevant to their classroom needs (personal-motive value), personal interests (cultural value), and/or future goals (instrumental value). Our analysis identified 13 total relevance reasons for relevant instructor narratives (RQ2a). See [Table 3](#) for the list of relevance reasons, frequencies, descriptions, and examples. For personal-motive value, students stated that the instructor’s narrative was relevant because it *helped them understand lesson material* ( $n = 22$ ), *helped to capture or sustain their attention in class* ( $n = 8$ ), *provided practical context for lesson material* ( $n = 40$ ), *helped them understand classroom protocols* ( $n = 7$ ), or *helped them remember material for an exam* ( $n = 6$ ). Students reported that the instructor’s story helped them understand lesson material with statements such as “the story helped to explain a mechanism that we were trying to understand in class” and “made me understand the topic better instead of her just reading things off of a slide.” Stories may also act as attention-sustaining devices given that students said they “made me more engaged in class” and “kept everyone’s attention.”

Instructor stories seemed to be used frequently to provide practical context for course material. Students stated that the story was relevant because it illustrated how the lesson content could be used in real life. One male African American student explained, “The story was relevant to me because it was put in a way that I could look at things in my own perspective in real-life circumstances.” Students also perceive instructor stories as relevant when these stories help them understand the classroom rules. One Caucasian male student reported, “It gave us a better understanding of her expectations when we gave our professional presentations” as the reason why the instructor’s story was relevant. Other students believed that instructor narratives helped them remember important exam material with statements such as “I remembered the material I needed to based off that story.” These reasons helped meet students’ classroom needs.

**Table 3.** Relevance reasons in relevant instructor narratives ( $N = 226$ ).

<i>n</i> (%)	Value	Relevance reason ( <i>n</i> )	Description	Example
83 (37%)	Personal-Motive	<b>R-P1.</b> Helped Understand Lesson Material (22)	The story helped students solidify their understanding of the lesson/lecture.	"It helped us understand the concept of AIDS and how it affects the immune system."
		<b>R-P2.</b> Helped to Capture/sustain Attention in Class (8)	The story helped catch and/or hold students' attention in class.	"It made students want to pay attention and engage more."
		<b>R-P3.</b> Provided Practical Context to Lesson Content (40)	The story served as an example for how lesson material applies to the real world.	"The story was relevant because it was a great example to why prices of products fluctuate or environmental protection is done."
		<b>R-P4.</b> Helped Understand Classroom Protocols (7)	The story helped students better understand classroom protocol, regulations, and/or rules.	"It gave me a better understanding of why she ran the class the way that she did."
		<b>R-P5.</b> Helped to Remember Material for Test (6)	The story helped students remember/recall material for a quiz or an exam.	"I think I will remember these details a lot more on a quiz than if simply stated without the story as a supplement."
115 (51%)	Cultural	<b>R-C1.</b> Related to Student's Own General Interest (18)	The story related to students' personal interest in a topic/subject/issue.	"Personally, I have a strong interest in the human body."
		<b>R-C2.</b> Similar to Student's Own Past Experiences (32)	The story related to students' own personal past experiences.	"I can relate because I have also had family members with cancer."
		<b>R-C3.</b> Appeal to Emotional Reaction (12)	The story was solely relevant because of its emotional appeal.	"The story was funny."
		<b>R-C4.</b> Related to Student's Own Current Difficulties (40)	The story related to personal difficulties that students are currently experiencing.	"I feel like I am also having a rocky start in school right now."
		<b>R-C5.</b> Emphasized Importance of an Out-of-class Topic (13)	The story highlighted the importance of an out-of-class topic that the student had not thought about previously nor experienced personally.	"This story just showed how real the epidemic is and how it could be affecting so many people around that you don't even realize."
28 (12%)	Instrumental	<b>R-I1.</b> Matched with Future Career Goals (10)	The story directly and specifically related to the career, job, and/or profession that the student plans to acquire in the future.	"This was extremely relevant to me because I want to work in the NFL one day, too."
		<b>R-I2.</b> Matched with Future Professional Expectations (9)	The story helped the student better understand and/or recognize general future professional expectations that he or she may face in their future career, job, and/or profession.	"The main feature that appealed to me was learning how to respond to a very difficult interview question. Since I will soon be looking for jobs and having interviews this information was very relevant."
		<b>R-I3.</b> Inspired Confidence to Achieve Future Professional Goals (9)	The story inspired confidence, encouragement, and/or reassurance that the student can achieve their future goals.	"The story my professor told me inspired me to pursue a career in college athletics."

Note. **R-** denotes Relevant, **P** denotes Personal-Motive, **C** denotes Cultural, and **I** denotes Instrumental. Relevance Reasons are labeled and numbered for interpreting Table 5.

For cultural value, the instructor's narrative was relevant because it *related to the student's own general interests* ( $n = 18$ ), *was similar to the student's own past experiences* ( $n = 32$ ), *appealed to an emotional reaction* ( $n = 12$ ), *related to the student's own current difficulties* ( $n = 40$ ), or *emphasized the importance of an out-of-class topic* ( $n = 13$ ). Students appreciated when the instructor's story related to their own interests. For example, one female Caucasian student reported that her instructor's story was relevant because "we both share the same engineering interests." Instructors' stories were also able to relate to students' past experiences such as with relationships and college experiences. One male Caucasian student wrote that the instructor's classroom narrative was relevant because "they have college life experience to share that is similar to my own." Students reported being able to relate to the instructor because they had done the "same things" previously in their lives.

Instructor narratives also have the ability to tap into students' emotions. Students reported that these stories were relevant because they were funny (e.g., "it incorporated some comedy") or even sad (e.g., "she was able to express a lot of sad emotion"). The most frequently mentioned relevance reason was that the narrative related to students' own current difficulties. In response to an instructor's story about time management struggles and test anxiety in college, one female Caucasian student wrote, "She was able to express feelings that I am feeling in college now like exhaustion." Other students felt that instructor stories regarding decisions about majors were relevant because of responses such as "I too am struggling to find a major that interests me." Lastly, narratives have the ability to bring attention to an out-of-class topic. For example, one female Caucasian student felt that her instructor's story "helped me realize why I love doing community service." While this topic did not seem to directly apply to lesson content, it gave the student a newfound appreciation for volunteering in her community. These reasons helped illustrate similar interests and values between the instructors and students.

For instrumental value, the instructor's story was relevant because it *matched with future career goals* ( $n = 10$ ), *matched with future professional expectation* ( $n = 9$ ), or *inspired confidence in the student to achieve their future professional goals* ( $n = 9$ ). When it came to future career goals, these instructor stories paralleled the jobs that the students wished to obtain in the future. One female Caucasian student stated, "I want to be a wonderful doctor in the future and she was telling us the route of travel to get where she is now." Students felt that the stories were relevant because of reasons like "I want to have the same job as him one day." Even if the story did not match directly with a future career, instructor narratives were able to help students recognize future professional expectations that may confront them in the future. This was particularly relevant for a female Caucasian student who wrote, "As a woman about to embark on the professional world, this story was very relevant to me because I am now very aware of how men will address me." Other students reported that the story inspired confidence for their future goals with responses such as "his encouraging story helped me stay on the path to getting my masters." These reasons helped students feel better about their future plans and goals.

We also identified 8 total irrelevance reasons for irrelevant instructor narratives (RQ2b). [Table 4](#) includes the irrelevance reasons, frequencies, descriptions, and examples. For personal-motive, students stated that the instructor's narrative was irrelevant because it simply *had nothing to do with class* ( $n = 88$ ), *did not contribute to class discussion, lecture,*

**Table 4.** Irrelevance reasons in irrelevant instructor narratives ( $N = 234$ ).

$n$ (%)	Value	Irrelevance reason ( $n$ )	Description	Example
159 (68%)	Personal-Motive	<b>I-P1.</b> Nothing to Do with Class (88)	The story was not relevant to the course overall.	"His kids had nothing to do with what we were learning about."
		<b>I-P2.</b> Did Not Contribute to Class Discussion, Lecture, and/or Quiz (48)	The story got "off topic" and <i>specifically</i> did not relate to class discussion, lesson, lecture, and/or quiz/exam.	"The class discussion was about the Cold War and when my professor started to tell the story, the discussion got off topic."
		<b>I-P3.</b> Harder to Remember Important Material (9)	The story made it more difficult to remember exactly what the student should be learning.	"The whole story plot was hard to follow because it is hard to find the relation between a show you watch with something you are trying to remember and learn in politics."
		<b>I-P4.</b> Spoke Too Long/wasted Class Time (14)	The story went on "too long" and "took away" from important class time.	"Waste of class time that we could have spent working on class material."
73 (31%)	Cultural	<b>I-C1.</b> Dissimilar to Student's Current Experiences and Knowledge (41)	The story was difficult to understand because it does not relate to the student's current experiences, attitudes, preferences, interests, thoughts, and/or behaviors.	"I am not an old coal miner, nor the daughter of an old coal miner. I have no idea what life was like then and I have no desire to learn about it."
		<b>I-C2.</b> Inappropriate (27)	The story made students uncomfortable was not appropriate for the classroom context.	"His language/choice of detail was too personal and uncomfortable. I do not need to know about his personal life."
		<b>I-C3.</b> Asserting Superiority (5)	The story acted as a platform for the instructor to exercise superiority over the students by bragging or patronizing students.	"Just seemed to be bragging about his time abroad in the peace corps."
2 (<1%)	Instrumental	<b>I-I1.</b> Hurt confidence for achieving future career goals (2)	The story made students feel as though their future goals, career, job, and/or profession was unattainable.	"Because I am working hard to get my dream job in my desired major, I do not want to hear about how you can work hard and then not even need what you worked so hard for."

Note. **R-P1** = Helped Understand Lesson Material, **R-P2** = Helped to Capture/Sustain Attention in Class, **R-P3** = Provided Practical Context to Lesson Content, **R-P4** = Helped Understand Classroom Protocols, **R-P5** = Helped to Remember Material for Test, **R-C1** = Related to Student's Own General Interest, **R-C2** = Similar to Student's Own Past Experiences, **R-C3** = Appeal to Emotional Reaction, **R-C4** = Related to Student's Own Current Difficulties, **R-C5** = Emphasized Importance of an Out-of-Class Topic, **R-I1** = Matched with Future Career Goals, **R-I2** = Matched with Future Professional Expectations, **R-I3** = Inspired Confidence to Achieve Future Professional Goals. **I-** denotes Irrelevant, **P** denotes Personal-Motive, **C** denotes Cultural, and **I** denotes Instrumental. Irrelevance Reasons are labeled and numbered for interpreting Table 6.

or quizzes ( $n = 48$ ), made it harder to remember important lesson material ( $n = 9$ ), or wasted class time ( $n = 14$ ). The majority of students in this category explicitly stated that instructor's narrative was not relevant to the overall course. Students reported reasons such as how "not any part of the story was relevant to what we were learning." One female Caucasian student studying biology reacted quite strongly by saying, "I came to learn about the 23 chromosomes we have in our body not about her life and her dog's bladder infection." Other instructors shared stories that strayed from the particular lesson topic and/or did not specifically contribute to class lecture, quizzes, or discussions. Students stated that the story "did not go with what we were discussing" and that the instructor went off on a "tangent." One male African American student stated that his professor "got off track talking about soda and did not link it to the discussion well."

Students also reported that irrelevant instructor narratives had the potential to make it more difficult for them to remember important lesson material. One male Caucasian student response included "the story didn't do anything for me to help remember the vocabulary, it was just its own confusing tangent." Other students reported that an instructor's narrative was irrelevant because the story went on for too long and wasted precious class time. Students reported reasons such as the instructor "wasted class time that we could have spent working on class material" and "went on for over a half hour talking about things that were not relevant." All of these reasons distracted from students' classroom needs to be successful in the course.

For cultural value, the instructor's story was irrelevant to students because it was *dissimilar to the student's current experiences and knowledge* ( $n = 41$ ), was *inappropriate* ( $n = 27$ ), or seemed like a moment for the instructor to *assert his/her superiority* ( $n = 5$ ). Many instructor stories were irrelevant because students found them difficult to understand given their experiences and interests. One female Caucasian student reported her instructor's story was irrelevant because "I don't like Star Wars video games and I don't want to hear about them in class." Students were unable to relate or simply did not like what the instructor was sharing.

Other students found some instructor narratives to be irrelevant because they were inappropriate for the professional classroom context. In these instances, students reported that the stories were "too personal" and that these deeply personal tales made them feel "uncomfortable." For example, a calculus instructor's story about his infidelity with his wife led to one male African American student to state that it "made the students feel uncomfortable hearing the rest of the story about cheating and having babies." Students also felt that instructor narratives were irrelevant when the instructor used their story to demonstrate superiority in the classroom. Many students perceived these stories as an opportunity for "bragging." One female Hispanic student felt that "much of the plot revealed his sense of superiority" after her instructor shared a story about marrying his "trophy wife." These reasons distanced students from their instructors.

For instrumental value, the instructors' stories were irrelevant because they *diminished a student's confidence in achieving his or her future career goals* ( $n = 2$ ). For example, one female Caucasian student reported that her instructor's negative story about low-paying jobs "drained me of my inspiration for my future goals." Students felt their future plans were unattainable.

Research question three asked how often students' relevance/irrelevance reasons coincided with certain relevant/irrelevant narrative topics. To better understand which

narrative topics were more or less relevant to students, we created two tables to demonstrate the trends between relevant/irrelevant narrative topics and relevance/irrelevance reasons. Table 5 displays the frequencies of the specified relevance reasons (RQ3a) within each of the relevant instructor narrative topics. The one notable trend for relevant topics and relevance reasons was college relating to a student’s current difficulties ( $n = 30$ ). As an example of this, a female Caucasian student provided the following instructor story:

Last semester my political science teacher told me a story about when he was in college. He said for the first two years he was a biology major and thought he wanted to go to medical school. For four whole semesters, he worked towards that goal but he began to feel unhappy and like he was on the wrong path. However, he felt like he was stuck on that path because he had been on it for so long. Eventually, an advisor of his convinced him it would be okay if he wanted to switch, so he switched to political science as his major. He graduated on time and now is very happy with his life.

The student stated that “this story was related to my needs because I too felt like I was trapped in my path in college and he made me realize that everything will end up working out and that I just need to follow my heart.” Stories like these occurred the most often in the data and seemed most likely to be perceived as relevant by college students.

Table 6 provides the same frequency information for the specified irrelevance reasons (RQ3b) within the irrelevant instructor narrative topics. The most frequent trend for

**Table 5.** Narrative topics and relevance reasons in relevant instructor narratives.

n (%)	Narrative topic	Relevance reason												
		R-P1	R-P2	R-P3	R-P4	R-P5	R-C1	R-C2	R-C3	R-C4	R-C5	R-I1	R-I2	R-I3
64 (28%)	College	2	1	2	2	0	5	6	3	30	0	4	2	7
53 (23%)	Interpersonal Relationships	7	2	14	0	3	3	13	3	5	2	1	0	0
48 (21%)	Popular Culture	6	4	11	1	1	5	8	2	2	4	3	0	1
24 (11%)	Health	4	0	2	4	1	2	2	1	2	4	1	1	0
17 (8%)	Workplace	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	0	6	1
10 (5%)	Sport & Recreation	2	0	5	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
7 (3%)	Travel	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
3 (1%)	Animals	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

**Table 6.** Narrative topics and irrelevance reasons in irrelevant instructor narratives.

n (%)	Narrative topic	Irrelevance reason							
		I-P1	I-P2	I-P3	I-P4	I-C1	I-C2	I-C3	I-I1
15 (6%)	College	3	3	2	1	2	3	1	0
89 (38%)	Interpersonal Relationships	37	9	2	5	19	14	2	1
53 (23%)	Popular Culture	16	16	2	2	13	2	1	1
9 (4%)	Health	5	1	0	1	0	2	0	0
9 (4%)	Workplace	4	1	0	2	0	2	0	0
17 (7%)	Sport & Recreation	6	6	2	0	2	1	0	0
10 (4%)	Travel	4	3	0	0	2	0	1	0
27 (12%)	Animals	12	7	1	3	1	3	0	0
5 (2%)	Food	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0

Note. **I-P1** = Nothing to Do with Class, **I-P2** = Did Not Contribute to Class Discussion, Lecture, and/or Quiz, **I-P3** = Harder to Remember Important Material, **I-P4** = Spoke Too Long/Wasted Class Time, **I-C1** = Dissimilar to Student’s Current Experiences and Knowledge, **I-C2** = Inappropriate, **I-C3** = Asserting Superiority, **I-I1** = Hurt confidence for achieving future career goals.

irrelevant topics and irrelevance reasons was the topic of interpersonal relationships and the story having nothing to do with class ( $n = 37$ ). As an example of this trend, one female Caucasian student taking a speech pathology class shared the following about her instructor:

I was in a course this semester and felt that every story that my professor told was irrelevant. She would just tell us stories about her husband in the middle of lectures. She also once told us a story about her daughter having a baby in the middle of another lecture. It is very irritating to me because I enjoy going to class, getting the notes, and going home. She wasted an enormous amount of time with her storytelling.

This student stated that “It was not relevant because it had nothing to do with our class and I did not care. Our class is not about her husband or her daughter, it is about hearing deficiencies.” These types of instructor stories about interpersonal relationships appeared the most frequently in the data and seem to be most likely to be perceived as irrelevant by students.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, we wanted to identify the topics of instructor’s relevant and irrelevant personal classroom narratives. Second, we wanted to better understand the reasons students perceived an instructor’s story as relevant or irrelevant to their classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals. Third, we wanted to determine which narrative topics were relevant (or irrelevant) to students and based on their reasoning. The results obtained in this exploratory qualitative study provide preliminary evidence for how instructors might share their narratives when they teach.

### *Prominent relevant and irrelevant narrative topics*

According to the study’s results, the same general topics were found in both relevant and irrelevant instructor narratives (with the exception of food in irrelevant instructor narratives). Obviously, relevant story topics may differ depending on the instructional context, educational level, and students’ individual interests. However, the current study sought to identify the general narrative topic trends of instructors who share stories in the college classroom. Even though the current study found the same general topics in both relevant and irrelevant instructor stories, we identified some specific narrative subtopics that help distinguish between what students perceive as relevant and irrelevant in the general narrative topic categories. Specifically, we highlight the three most reported general topics: college, interpersonal relationships, and popular culture.

Our analyses illustrate that an instructor’s story about the general topic of college can be perceived by students as either relevant or irrelevant depending on the story’s specific subtopic. Overall, the topic of college tends to be relevant to most college students. Relevant instructor narratives were about persevering through college (working hard, studying for standardized tests, motivating oneself to graduate), overcoming personal struggles (poverty, discrimination on campus, others’ comments on inability to complete degree), and deciding on a major (changing one’s major, finding a major that you love is important). McAdams’s (2006) research on redemptive self narratives has demonstrated that many people share and appreciate stories by which there is a “deliverance from

suffering to an enhanced status or position in life” (p. 81). Relevant instructor narratives were ones that conveyed a positive message that students still have a chance to persevere through any personal struggles they are currently experiencing. It may be that students appreciate these redemptive self stories and find them relevant because they relate to their own adversities in college.

Conversely, the majority of irrelevant instructor narratives about college made references to partying (recreational marijuana, alcohol consumption) and poor choices (not attending class, police encounters, slacking off). While the topic of partying may be relevant to many college students’ current experiences, Borzea and Goodboy (2016) found that instructor self-disclosures about risky behaviors, including drinking and drug use, are offered by misbehaving instructors and interfere with students’ learning. While some instructors may share these stories in an attempt to be perceived as relevant, it might actually have the opposite effect as it may “muddy the professional boundary between instructor and student” (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006, p. 96) and be deemed inappropriate. In other words, students do not want to hear stories from instructors who think they partied in the past like students might today.

The general topic of interpersonal relationships occurred frequently for both relevant and irrelevant instructor narratives. Relevant instructor narratives were those that involved casual dating, friendships, and college roommates. Irrelevant narratives typically involved an instructor’s marital partner (husband or wife) and children (daughter or son). According to the life-span perspective, emerging adults (i.e., 18–25 years of age) tend to prioritize friendships (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998) and casual dating relationships (Heldman & Wade, 2010) over long-term romantic commitments and family relationships. Thus, many college students might prefer to hear instructor stories about dating and friendship because they are at the stage in their lives when these relationships are most important; marital partners and children may not be in an 18-year-old students’ near future so those stories might be too far off for them.

Popular culture was a general topic that was fairly even for both relevant and irrelevant instructor narratives. Our findings are in line with Muddiman and Frymier’s (2009) suggestion that relevant topics may be ones that discuss “popular culture” (p. 136) because it was a prominent general topic in our findings. Movies and television shows seem to be relevant popular culture story subtopics; however, instructor stories about subtopics such as video games were perceived as irrelevant. Many students may play video games in general, but few students may be aware of a specific video game that an instructor is referencing in class unless it is a very popular, trending game. Moreover, it may be that video games are less accessible (due to cost and video game console availability) than movies and television shows that are widely available through streaming services and consumed more readily by the general public. Ultimately, we would suggest that instructors who share stories about popular culture make sure that those stories are about popular movies, television shows, and current events that relate to the lesson and might be understood by the majority of students as a popular culture reference (i.e., not use more narrow media content such as a specific video game).

Within the general narrative topics, the specific subtopics provide us some direction of how to tell classroom stories. However, these narrative topics alone are not very useful because they do not tell us the full story of why students perceive instructor stories as relevant or irrelevant. That is why we also examined the relevance (and irrelevance) reasons.

### **Relevance and irrelevance reasons**

Our study delved deeper into Keller's (1983, 1987) ARCS model and relevance dimensions to examine the specific reasons why instructor narratives were perceived to be relevant or irrelevant to students' classroom needs, personal interests, and future goals. The study adds support for the ARCS model's proposed relevance strategies (e.g., relating to students' general interests, past experiences, and future goals), while also building upon the model to highlight the relevance dimensions that are most important to students. Our results illustrate that an instructor's narrative was relevant when it addressed either the cultural or personal-motive relevance value. For cultural value, the most frequently mentioned relevance reason was that the narrative related to students' own current difficulties. Many students also felt that a story was relevant because it was similar to their own past experiences. The high frequency of these two relevance reasons may be explained by students' perceptions of homophily, which refers to the perceived attitude or background similarity between the student and instructor (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). When students perceive homophily, they believe that they have things in common with their instructor and may then be more interested in narratives relating to those commonalities. Instructors can share stories that illustrate their own past experiences and personal difficulties—such as indecisions about a major, struggles with test anxiety, inability to focus in a class—because these stories may demonstrate that the instructor understands the plight of college students. In other words, if students believe that they have shared the same difficulties as their instructor, the students may be more likely to perceive an instructor's story as relevant.

For personal-motive value, the two most frequent responses were that the instructor's narrative provided practical context to lesson content and helped students understand class material. Researchers have found that teacher narratives have the potential to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical application (Strangeways & Papatraianou, 2016), which might explain why students perceived an instructor's narrative as providing practical context for abstract lesson material. Moreover, instructor narratives help highlight and clarify the most important concepts from a lesson (Downs et al., 1988; Green et al., 2002). An instructor's story may be very relevant to students' learning if it allows them to clearly understand the most significant ideas from a lesson and how these ideas apply to real-life situations.

Instrumental value produced the least amount of relevance reasons. The instructor's narrative was perceived as relevant if it matched with a students' future career goals/expectations and when it inspired student confidence to achieve future goals. Students are in college to help them obtain a future career. Unfortunately, many students report feeling stressed about the career path that they will choose after finishing college (Kimes & Troth, 1974). An instructor narrative that inspires a student to follow a specific career path or demonstrates success in a sought-out profession may be relevant because it helps reduce the anxiety students are feeling about their postcollege decisions.

The majority of students reported that the instructor's narrative was irrelevant because it mainly did not satisfy the personal-motive value followed distantly by the cultural value. The two most frequently mentioned irrelevance reasons were that the instructor's narrative had nothing to do with the overall class and that the narrative did not contribute specifically to class discussion, lecture, and/or quizzes. Most students come to class with

the purpose to learn and succeed in the lesson material, so when an instructor shares a narrative that relates little to the lesson or does not relate to the lesson at all, students may become confused as to how the narrative fits with the material. Sass (1989) suggests that instructors should use explicit explanations as a means to demonstrate the relevance of classroom content to students' experiences. An unclear explanation between the narrative's purpose and the lesson material might have the potential to lead to student frustration rather than student understanding.

Students' irrelevance reasons within cultural value focused on how the narrative was dissimilar to students' current experiences and knowledge. Many students reported that instructors' narratives were irrelevant because they had no idea what the instructor was talking about and how it related to the lesson. If an individual is unable to construct a referent for a particular experience, meaning is lost (Hirtle, 1994). In other words, instructors who share stories about personal experiences—that most college students have not yet encountered—may confuse students because they are unable to make sense of how these experiences apply to their own lives and the current lesson topic. Ultimately, instructors should be mindful of sharing stories about events and knowledge that most college student would be familiar with at this stage in their lives.

The second-most stated reason within cultural value was inappropriateness. The instructor's story included some features that made students feel uncomfortable whether the story was too personal or seemed unprofessional the classroom context. Many of these narratives simply shared too many personal details that students felt that they did not need to know about their instructor. Another feature of inappropriate instructor stories was that they tended to include sexual innuendos. Some of these stories also described instructors as being hypocrites because they engaged in behaviors not allowed by their students. All of these features are present in previous research that has found that instructors misbehave when they talk too much about their personal lives, make sexual remarks, and demonstrate double standards during instruction (Goodboy & Myers, 2015). It seems that students perceive these types of features as neither suitable nor relevant to the classroom context and their personal lives.

The least reported relevance value was instrumental value with the identification of only one irrelevance reason category: the damage of students' confidence for achieving their future goals. The very low number for this category may suggest that students are more focused on how an instructor narrative should be helping them learn in the present classroom environment rather than in the future. Researchers have found that many college students are undecided on their major during their first two years, do not have concrete academic goals throughout school, and do not report a clear sense of purpose for what they will accomplish after college (Damon, 2008). It might be that some students may not have the foresight as to how an instructor's narrative relates to their future careers during the early stages of their college education because they have not yet begun to think of their postcollege plans.

### ***Narrative topics and relevance/irrelevance reasons***

This study examined which narrative topics were relevant (or irrelevant) to students for specific relevance reasons. The most frequently mentioned relevant instructor narratives were those that related to students' current difficulties in the general topic of college.

Even though some instructor stories were not necessarily relevant to lesson content, these stories may be relevant to students' interpersonal needs. Frymier and Houser (2000) argued that the instructor–student relationship is an interpersonal relationship because students expect certain interpersonal skills from their instructors in order to perceive them as effective. One of these interpersonal skills that students expect is ego support; the instructor's ability to make students feel good about themselves (Burlinson & Samter, 1990). When an instructor shares a personal narrative about their past difficulties in college, it might help support students' ego during their own current difficulties. Students appreciate the supportive words at this stressful time making these types of instructor narratives especially relevant to them.

The most frequently mentioned irrelevant instructor narratives were ones with the general topic of interpersonal relationships that students perceived as having nothing to do with class.

Many students strongly disliked listening to instructors talk about their families, especially if there was no clear connection between the narrative and the lesson content. Instructors may choose to self-disclose about their interpersonal experiences in their stories as a means of tapping into student affect (Kromka & Goodboy, 2018); however, the personal and unrelatable nature of instructors' stories about their own family members (that students do not know) may not be well received by students because the instructors may not be fulfilling their first and foremost duty of synthesizing necessary lesson content.

### ***Implications for teaching and learning***

From our results, we can provide some practical implications for how instructors might share stories that are relevant to their students' classroom needs, personal interests, and future goals. Instructors could create relevant classroom narratives by incorporating interpersonal situations that are familiar to college students in order to help provide real-life context for complex lesson material. It may be wise for instructors to include pertinent college student relationships, such as casual dating and friendship, into their narratives because these topics are most likely to be similar to students' experiences and may be more likely to help students make the connection between abstract lesson content and practical application (Strangeways & Papatraianou, 2016). Specifically, we might suggest that instructors share appropriate interpersonal stories of when they were younger and attended college. Moreover, instructors could make an effort to connect with their students by sharing stories about their own past classroom difficulties experienced in college. In the current study, instructors were perceived as relevant when they shared stories about their past classroom difficulties because students were able to relate these struggles to their own current difficulties. These past difficulties may include hardships such as test anxiety, learned helplessness, time management struggles, or indecisiveness with one's major. If an instructor chooses to share a narrative of personal struggle, they should use it to explain how they overcame the obstacles because students find these stories to be most relevant to their lives.

Instructors should make sure that their personal stories are related to the course and explicitly state how each story is associated with the lesson content. If students cannot make the connection between an instructor's story and lesson material, they may find

the story to be irrelevant to their classroom learning. Researchers advise instructors to provide a meaningful rationale (i.e., a verbal explanation describing why task effort is useful) when employing teaching strategies and sharing lesson content (Reeve, Jang, Hardre, & Omura, 2002). In other words, before instructors decide to use a personal narrative as a pedagogical tool, they should provide an explicit rationale as to why listening to this story will help the students better understand the current lesson topic. By doing so, instructors might be able to help students engage in the story and recognize the narrative's purpose, which could ultimately improve students' understanding and recall of lecture material.

However, storytelling may not be for everyone. Some instructors may not feel comfortable sharing detailed episodes of their personal lives in the classroom. Others may not be effective storytellers (as evident in our data). If either of these are the case, instructors may simply choose not to share stories and offer brief self-disclosures instead. Brief instructor self-disclosures may be enough to connect to students on a more interpersonal level without sharing a lengthy, detailed narrative that could overload their cognitive resources (Kromka & Goodboy, 2018).

### ***Limitations and future directions***

First, our findings are not generalizable and perceptions of relevance may vary depending on culture, discipline, and classroom subject. Second, every student has unique interests and telling a relevant story is somewhat idiosyncratic to each individual student. Third, some participants did not fully elaborate on their instructors' narratives as much as we would have liked in the online survey format. Future researchers may wish to conduct in-depth face-to-face interviews in order to gather participants' deep meaningful experiences about narratives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Fourth, we did not assess the specific course topic in which the instructor shared the narrative. It may be that students enter different courses (e.g., calculus versus interpersonal communication) with different expectations of instructor behavior (e.g., personal storytelling frequency), which could impact their perceptions of what is relevant to that particular course. Fifth, this study only focused on students' perception of relevant (and irrelevant) instructor storytelling. Future research may wish to incorporate instructors' perspective on their own classroom storytelling. An instructor may share a story because he or she believes it is relevant for a lesson, however, students may not make the connection and evaluate the narrative as irrelevant. Researchers could ask instructors to report their own stories and examine if they believe students would perceive the narratives as relevant or irrelevant. Sixth, future researchers could also test this study's qualitative results by incorporating them into a teaching experiment that manipulates relevant and irrelevant instructor narratives. By doing so, researchers will be able to model the causal processes that result from instructor storytelling and determine if students benefit from authentic gains in learning (Goodboy, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

At some point in the semester, most instructors will share a personal story while teaching. When instructors tell these stories, they should try to make them relevant to

students' classroom needs, personal interests, and/or future goals. To make a story relevant for their students, instructors must carefully consider the topic and how it meets personal-motive, cultural, and instrumental values. By doing so, relevant storytelling should remain an effective teaching behavior and meet students' needs, interests, and goals.

## Notes

1. Zir is used as a gender-neutral third-person singular possessive adjective.
2. The prompt did not specify that the instructor's story should be about the instructor's own personal experiences. The stories could have involved others' experiences (e.g., colleagues, friends, family, etc.). Thus, the stories may or may not have included self-disclosure, which may have influenced how students perceived the narrative.

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