

# The power of storytelling (and curiosity)

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Our head of education, executive coach and [#EdInfluence podcast host](#) Nick MacKenzie shares his reflections on some of the key themes that have emerged from his conversations with leaders.

We all like a good story. They help us make sense of the world. They can diffuse challenging situations and provide context for problems.

Reflecting on the podcasts I have recorded, one thing that I have noticed is how many of the insights from my guests I remember and use. Digging a little deeper, I realised those insights that I recalled were often the ones accompanied by a memorable story.

We can all recognise good advice in the moment, but having the ability to file it away and recall it when needed can be a challenge. This is especially important when advice is all around us. We can sometimes feel bombarded with it on social media, the conference circuit, webinars and seminars (blogs are okay though...!).

## A powerful story from Professor Fiona Forbes

More than a year after [the discussion with Fiona Forbes \(series 3, episode 1\)](#), I easily remember a powerful story she shared from when she was aged 12. Fiona describes a working-class background where both parents worked and being the fourth child of five siblings. Her mum had a stroke, at the age of 42, which left her paralysed down her right side and without the ability to speak.

From that point, roles in the family changed greatly and the experience clearly shaped Fiona. She goes on to share a piece of advice that I believe many of us know but often fail to put into practice, when she said: *"I think it's to look for the gaps. I think that's really important because the gaps actually tell you more sometimes than the words do. And I think that's something that my mother taught me."*

## Sir Chris Husbands on the importance of considering different perspectives

In [our latest #EdInfluence podcast episode](#), Sir Chris Husbands, drawing from his diverse career experiences, highlights the importance of storytelling and curiosity.

While not considering it a "must-have" skill, Chris finds storytelling an effective way to think through and communicate ideas. He recounts a memorable incident from his early teaching career, where a student's practical question about medieval monasteries reminded him of the importance of considering different perspectives.

He tells us: *"Although I ended up running universities, my earliest career was teaching in urban comprehensive schools. I taught history and I can remember teaching a bottom set. The class are drawing and labelling a picture of a medieval monastery, and this kid, Mark, sticks his hand up and says: 'Sir, what did they use for bog paper?' And I thought I had the answer to this, so I said: 'Well, Mark, they used leaves.' And he said '...and what did they use in the winter, then? Holly?!'"*

Chris often uses this story to make the point that when you're running organisations, you're always working with people who look at the world differently from you. He makes the case that you have to spend a bit of time building an imaginative connection with people who see the world differently to you.

I think we can add stories helping to connect with people who view the world differently to the list of the power of storytelling.

# The history of storytelling and historical stories

In leadership, knowing what the story really is, is also really important.

I explored with Chris the impact of his history degree and early career as a history teacher on his use of storytelling. The skill of an effective historian includes approaching a subject with balance and using a broad range of views and sources to share the story.

Chris explains one of the things about history that he finds particularly interesting is where people have picked up staggeringly complex, difficult or remote evidence, and built stories from that.

He adds: *“What do we know and how do we know it? I keep coming back to – do you know what’s the story here? What’s this picture telling us? What’s this data telling us? Which of the data is here? Some of it’s very noisy. Is that what I should be paying attention to? Some of it’s not very noisy, but actually, it might have more in it.”*

Chris concludes that it is fundamentally about being endlessly curious. You’ve got to keep asking questions: What is going on here? Why is this interesting?

There is lots more packed into our 40-minute discussion, so if you are endlessly curious and want to hear about Chris’ black box, or how he draws inspiration from *The West Wing*, do have a listen.

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