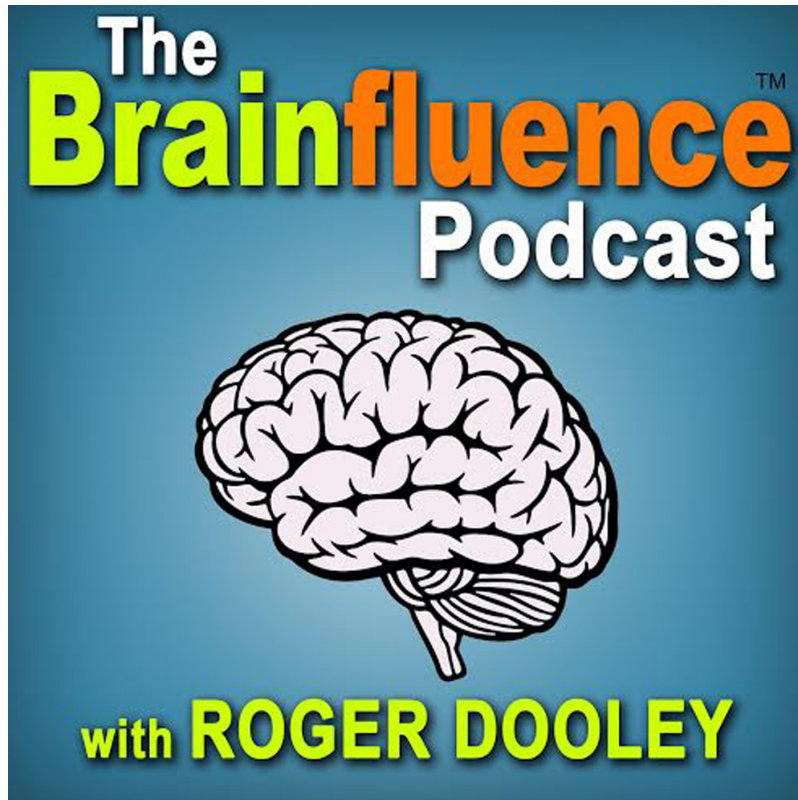


Why You Should Let Your Story Do the Work with  
Esther Choy



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**Roger Dooley**

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## Why You Should Let Your Story Do the Work with Esther Choy

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast, I'm Roger Dooley. Our guest this week is Esther Choy. Esther is the founder and president of the Leadership Story Lab in Chicago and teaches in the executive education programs at Northwestern University's, Kellogg School of Management and she's the author of the new book "Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success." Esther, welcome to the show.

Esther Choy: Thank you so much for having me.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, you know Esther, we have something in common and that is an interest in elite college admissions. For a while, you worked as an admissions officer at the University of Chicago and in 2001 I co-founded a business, College Confidential that helped students and parents through the admissions process.

Now, the focus of that business was primarily undergrad admissions and you worked in Chicago's M.B.A. program but the problems were very similar. Elite schools get far more applicants than they can admit and often it seems like there's very little that distinguishes those who got in from those who did not get in.

Esther Choy: Yeah.

Roger Dooley: I remember somebody, I think might have been the Admissions Director of Yale commenting, and this is their undergrad class, they could take all of the people that did

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not get in and form another admitted class that would have just as good stats as the one they did admit. It's really perplexing for students really both at the undergrad and graduate level when what separates those who got in from who didn't get in is so hard to pin down. And often people with superior stance don't get in and why did that other person get in.

I'm going to let you tell your story from there Esther.

Esther Choy: Yeah, I've definitely heard of that same similar story and I think maybe the only difference is that at the end of the story where this Admissions Dean said if I for some reason lost my entire class and I have to go to my wait list and create a second class from there, and then the end was, no one would be able to tell the difference. That's really unsettling to hear or students and applicants. I came to this conclusion the unpleasant assignment of having to give deny feedback.

Roger Dooley: That's pretty unique, isn't it Esther? Usually, it's pretty hard to find out why you didn't get into a particular school.

Esther Choy: Wouldn't it be great every time we get rejected there would be a constructive and common logical conversation with the decision maker and then more importantly, take away something substantive so that we can work on it next time. But I think it's just pure math of it is that it's just impossible, especially when the stake is high, the competition is stiff but at the time, there was this window of opportunity to get feedback for the applicants and I hope we were helpful but it was something none of us was looking forward to doing.

In fact, made that a very different kind of summer for all of us but what I took away from it was that there were so

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many of these denied applicants when we look at their profile, when we look at their application again we thought, oh well, could have admitted this person, not sure why we didn't. We made a decision and we have a class we're very, very proud of, very happy with. So, it's through sort of the roundabout way that I realized that having the right credentials and qualifications and in many cases, the pedigree can only get you one foot in the door. When the competition is so stiff, people are looking for fit.

People are looking for others who remind them of themselves because then and only then can they imagine, you know, we can imagine the future of our school with you being part of it. And so, how else do you do that? Not with a higher G.P.A. but with stories. It's the stories that applicants tell us that serve as a conduit for us to imagine, could we picture of you being part of the class next year. Yes or no or maybe so. That's what really guides the decision making in assuming that qualification is not even a question anymore.

Roger Dooley: How did the more successful applicants show that they had that fit factor versus the ones who didn't?

Esther Choy: They can reiterate their resume. Oftentimes, they can incorporate some highest achievement or most proud of accomplishments and things like that. More or less they're sort of regurgitating their credentials in a sort of essay format. That doesn't do much because we already know what we know and then there are these questions that are meant to prompt them to tell us stories although not enough of them take us up on it.

So I give you an example when people are truly telling stories was when, this is over 10, 12 years ago but I still

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remember this story. This person talked about her family dinner in her application and you would say, wow, that's strange. Application to an elite business school, why are you talking about your family dinner. What she told us was that her working parents make a point to have dinner with her and her two siblings and her parents make sure that they're not just eating or worse eating in front of T.V. Her parents make them talk about their day and also engage them in the news of the days and then her parents asked them for their opinion and debate.

So, in other words it's a ritual, a family dinner but they have a very lively engaging intellectual conversations as well. When she came on campus to visit, she sat in class and then as she listened to the lectures, as she observes how professors at universities engaged students, all of a sudden, she was reminded of her family dinner. And she felt right at home.

Roger Dooley: What a great way to tie your personal story into on how well she would do it at that university.

Esther Choy: Exactly, exactly. And so, that's how people who tend to be successful how they persuade us.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think the same might apply to job interviews where one of the more common questions you get is, well, tell me about yourself. People think it's an open ended question the as you say they might often sort of recite their qualifications or give a short bio or something but I'm guessing you think that'd be a good place to insert a story.

Esther Choy: Yeah, yeah. The challenge is that people interpret that question as let me give you a super abbreviated summary, fact based and see this as a soft opening but

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it's a really huge opportunity missed because you can intrigue the interviewer or by telling a story, a short story that gives the interviewer a window into who you are, much like this family dinner story. It's not long, it's fairly simple but then the tie in the connection is huge.

Roger Dooley: Now we've solved college admissions and job interviews so let's go on to business stories. For starters, how important is emotion as part of story?

Esther Choy: Oh, I think it's not. I wouldn't even call it a story if there's no emotion. If there's no emotion embedded and tie in to it. And why that is important in business is that we need emotion as part of decision making and I'm sure your listeners are well aware that without emotions we can't make decisions. And so, it's sort of a long lost family that should have been together all their lives. It's just thinking about how do you persuade others to make their decisions by invoking the right emotion.

I would say as you think about what story do I tell and when do I tell it, one of the questions people ought to ask themselves is what kind of emotion do I want to elicit, want to invoke through this story. Is it that hope Is it hope, is it envy, is it fear maybe a little bit. Is it hope that you want to inspire. All of that, it's a very intricate tied into the set of decisions that people can make.

Roger Dooley: Not all stories are inherently interesting. We've probably all had a friend who told us some rambling story about what happened on the previous week. And you know, after a minute or two, they've kind of lost us. We're so bored that we're tuning them out. How do you start, particularly from a business standpoint, how do you start

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crafting the story that is not going to put people to sleep but is actually going to engage them?

Esther Choy: I will say that what you don't need and then I'll talk about what do you need. What you don't need is something epic, that you have cured malaria or you have somehow invented a 36 hour day instead of a 24 hour day. Even the smallest and seemingly trivial event can be profoundly interesting if you know how to structure your story. That's why I ...

Roger Dooley: We don't always need the hero's journey?

Esther Choy: Not really. Not in the most epic sense. But then in milestones of that hero's journey, the key turning point, those are the things that we need. In the beginning, we want to make sure that that's intriguing.

Imagine a picture and then half of it is cut off and then that's how you're beginning should look and feel and sound like. That there's enough for the listeners to understand the scenario, the situations, who are involved in the stories, you know, the characters in all of that. But then they don't have everything. Which is interesting happening to our brain is that when you don't know, when you don't see the whole picture, then you will actually start, your brain start to work for the rest, to figure out the rest.

And we're actually quite good at figuring out the rest. The problem is that most of us don't have the opportunity to work for the rest. That's structure to me is so important in a story. In the beginning, make sure you have the hook and make sure your act one is intriguing. And then, once you hold people's attention, then you've earned your right to tell your story, then you can then take them on the

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hero's journey, what a lot of people refer to and that is setback, that is new challenges, new insights and sort of leading to this climatic point, where at the end in act three where there's resolutions and then there's take away and that is satisfying.

So, I just didn't work shop yesterday, just did a book event actually and I just thought of this way to help people remember the structure, the basic structure, this is all you need, and then I spell it out in the book. All you need is remember three letters, IRS. IRS.

Roger Dooley: Easy enough to remember for Americans anyway.

Esther Choy: Not Internal Revenue Service. That will invoke a different kind of emotion but IRS stands for intriguing, intriguing beginning. R stands for riveting, as in riveting middle. And the S stands for satisfying, as in satisfying end. So, intriguing beginning, riveting middle, and satisfying end. That's all you need to remember in terms of thinking about how do you structure your story.

Even the most seemingly boring and trivial event can be really, really compelling.

Roger Dooley: I'm going to put you on the spot then, Esther. Why don't you give me an example of say a rather boring product sales situation, something like that. I can imagine half the people in the audience saying, well, there's absolutely nothing riveting about what I do. I can barely keep my interest. How do you translate that into a story that people pay attention to if you have an example from your own experience?

Esther Choy: Thank you for issuing me that challenge and let me maybe up that challenge by sharing this example



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because yes, sure enough, there are products That seem mundane or boring or overtechnical. That's what I hear a lot. And what actually got me started thinking about the power of story was when I had to unwillingly take statistics in business school. I had no idea why, I didn't realize I signed myself up for that and then I thought I hated every minute of it until my statistics professor started telling us stories.

He told us stories of why people say storks bring babies, that actually is why we say storks brings babies, and that's why that gives us the window of opportunity to understand spurious correlation. And then all of a sudden, I realized, oh my gosh, statistics is actually quite useful. Even though I still find it difficult and challenging, I got through it and then even though I finished as required course, I voluntarily used my precious electives in business school to take three more statistic classes.

Here how's this, here's a student, hated statistic, didn't think she can handle, ended up not only finishing the course and did well but she volunteered for more. All because my professor illustrate the importance as well as the application of why statistics, statistics of tools are important in business and in everyday lives.

Roger Dooley: In your book you've got an example of a real estate investment company and that sounds like a pretty dry boring sort of thing where you're just comparing numbers. Here's the numbers versus the competition. Why don't you explain that one and think maybe that would be one example of how a seemingly very numbers driven cut and dry business can use your technique.

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Esther Choy: And not only that, the parallel to admissions competition is really striking. Is one of the finalist and they're eight of them and their record, their performance track record was stacked about the middle. Just dead in the middle no matter how they play and tortured the numbers, they're in the middle.

And so, they're eight of them, how are you going to stand out if the performance, supposedly that's your most important criterion in being selected as a manager.

So, they went, this is international, this is a software wealth fund from mainland China. They only had 30 minutes to present and including translation. In other words, they have 15 minutes to say whatever it is that they think they haven't said and that is not to go back and rehash the numbers and performance, but instead the main presenter who was the portfolio manager of this product told a panel evaluators a story about his grandmother. This happened to be a fund that they are investing in to start building social security for the quickly vastly retiring seniors.

So he told them about his grandmother who lost her small corner drug stores company to big retail competitions and they thought they were going to have to really somehow step up and take care of her and she's going to lose her home and what not but she didn't because lo and behold, they're Germans, and Germany had none of the gold standard of retirement and pension plans. And so that even for hard working citizens who might have fallen in hard times, the safety net is there to catch them, to take care of them, to preserve their dignity.

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That meant so much to him personally because he was old enough to remember when she had to close down the store that this is not just a piece of business to him, this is part of paying back and giving back because he personally understand the importance of having a strong robust social security planned and what that can do for families and their integrity.

Roger Dooley: So in that case, no doubt the other seven managers came in and rehashed their numbers and how effective they were and presumably even the lower performing ones found some numeric bright spots to highlight but in this case, he told a story that hooked their attention but then also I think the key part was that he tied it back into why he was in that business and gave at least the implication that they would be managing that money in a more personally committed way.

Esther Choy: It goes back to the whole notion that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And stories get to that very point that it communicates how much we care much we care and then it opens up opportunity for them to explore. Or now I want to know what you know but until you get to that point also and all of us looks just like everyone else.

Roger Dooley: Let's change gears a little bit. You've got a section in the book Esther devoted to big data. Big data is something that everybody talks about, not everybody knows what to do with it right now. There are certainly folks doing some amazing stuff and as we get more AI machine learning engaged, I think that really our world is going to change hopefully for the better because of big data.

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You relate big data to telling stories, so why don't you walk us through how that works, how you would suggest people use their data, whether it's big data or even something not quite so big to tell stories?

Esther Choy: It's actually pretty simple and all you have to remember is this image of a seesaw. We've all been playing on playgrounds and seesaws. But just imagine on a seesaw, on the one end of the seesaw is clarity and then on the other end of the seesaw is curiosity. And then as we communicate data, we want to make sure that we play off a balance of providing clarity as well as inspiring curiosity.

So, very much like how you think about the structure of a good story, the beginning should be intriguing. But oftentimes we present to people who are impatient, they just want to know what is the answer. Tell me now and then let's move on and get this over with. When we present especially a PowerPoint that involves a lot of numbers, we want to make sure that in the beginning, we provide the answers that people think they're looking for but as well as leaving, ending your act one with some sort of curiosity inspired data.

The example that I used in the book was the upper management of this company wanted to know all about the new features of their product and how they've done so far. He knew that is really irrelevant but he told them anyway because he knew without answering their questions directly, that clarity, then he's going to lose them.

Before long, he also made sure that he ended with the beginning of what the more our customers use our customer service, the lower that promoter score they tend

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to have. If you're the upper management or the executive that's sitting there, that doesn't make sense. How can our customers become less loyal to us and promote our product even less if they engage with us through customer service.

Roger Dooley: Right. They can't just stop there, they want to know what happens next.

Esther Choy: Exactly. And so, just remember this seesaw that while he was answering the question that they asked him, he also inspired the curiosity.

Roger Dooley: So where does it go from there?

Esther Choy: There is more to this.

Roger Dooley: Not in exhaustive detail but I think it would be helpful to our audience if they sort of understood the structure of how this flowed all the way through.

Esther Choy: Okay. This is how you should set up. Then in the middle, now, with this story he certainly has earned his right to tell the story because nobody in their right mind would ignore it once you realize that, wait a second, the more a customer engage with us, the less loyal they become. What's the deal here? What is wrong here? Tell me more.

Then, he was smart enough to remember that they had other problems that they needed to solve. When they come into their presentation, it's important to sort of remind them that it's the middle of the presentations why are we here in the first place. Is it just about new product features or is it about something else? There's usually a larger or maybe a better questions that we are answering

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and then you can in the middle insert well, this is the study and the analysis and these are these other findings.

Oftentimes, this middle, people mistake it as that's the entirety of my presentation. Let me pull out my Excel spreadsheet, let me pull out my data and show you what it is. That is not to say this is not important but it can't be the entire presentation. This is where it should sit about the middle because the end goal, the end game is not to do more exercise. This is a means to an end. The end goal is there should be some sort of reframing, rechanging of the way that we look at this problem or the way that we conduct market research or the way that we promote this product to this particular demographic. Because change is the core of what makes stories interesting that we're somehow different at the end because of what happened to us.

Then at the end, we want to make sure that there's actions, that long or short term. I spoke to the C.M.O., the formal C.M.O. I should say one of the largest airline in the U.S. and understandably he sits in lots and lots of data heavy presentation and when I showed him this model in my book he smiled and then she said, "Coincidentally when I sat in any of these meetings, I always start with these questions, why should I care and what do you want me to do about it?"

So, to type of on audience, what they tend to want to know really is why is this important and is there anything that I need to do about it. So if we can orient ourselves to what the audience need, then format, what do you include in your presentation will really figure itself out.

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Roger Dooley: Last topic I want to explore, Esther, we think of a compelling story as being merely words yet some of the best speakers or other keynote speakers or any kind of speaker, they don't use slides, they just sort of stand in front of the audience to connect with them. They tell a story, tell multiple stories perhaps and that works out really well but there's a lot of research showing that people retain more information when they both hear it and see it. How do visuals fit into the storytelling process?

Esther Choy: It's so powerful and so simple and unfortunately many of us don't utilize this powerful tool ...

Roger Dooley: I realize we're on an audio podcast here so this would be better if we could illustrate it but you'll just have to try and do it with words.

Esther Choy: Right, but imagine our brain, three pounds worth of powerful muscles that around 40% of them are connected to our visual in some way. And that's why visual is so important. Surely, there are fancy infographics and whatnot that when it's used right it can be very effective but it's also expensive and time consuming. Every time you want to make an important point, you don't necessarily have to spend the time and the money to create a fancy infographic. A simple hand drawn picture when is well-timed and choreographed with your story, I promise you if you do that, it's really nearly impossible for your audience to forget it.

In fact, I give this piece of advice to all my clients who are working on their visuals with me and that is called save the best for never. That means save your best visual from your PowerPoint, from your Pitch Deck, from anything

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that is pre-printed or pre-made. Because there's a huge benefit to impromptu nature of communication.

Let's say you and I are having a meeting and I'm trying to convince you that, hey, you know Roger, you and I should really work together and help you come up with some stories. And then just sort of inconspicuously I pull out maybe a piece of napkin or a piece of scrap paper even or I go to the white board, if that's available, and then just draw simple picture. You don't have to be Picasso material to draw any of these pictures that I talked about in the book. And then I tell the stories as I draw the picture.

The funny thing is that in a meeting, whoever throws his visual first, tends to dominate the conversation.

Roger Dooley: Interesting stuff. We previously had Dan Rome on the show and he's a great visual communicator and I think the comment that he made sort of echoes exactly what you're saying. If you're in a meeting and you pick up a marker and go to the board and start to draw, you immediately have everybody's attention in the room. It's just 100% certain that at least at that moment, everybody's going to be looking at what you're doing and I compare that to if you're blathering on about something and you've got somebody checking their email and somebody else who's thinking about what they're going to have for dinner that night.

We did a great guest post, it's actually an excerpt from his book to on the neuromarketing blog that has a whole bunch of simple shapes that you can use that actually anybody can draw and that's a key point. You're saying the same thing, Esther, that you do not have to be an



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artist to make these very simple drawings that communicate really important information.

Esther Choy: And the long term effect of this is not just that it's simple, it's that anybody can do it. Is that when you observe the entirety of that meeting or the entirety of the conversation, then people tend to keep going back to that visual. And so, that means that you have framed a discussion with your visual and then what everyone else is doing is placing themselves in relationship to the argument that you put out. That's why whoever throw the visual out tends to dominate the conversations because now you get everyone to play in your sandbox.

Roger Dooley: Okay. Well, the moral of that story is be the first one to grab that marker and jump up. That's great advice to close with here Esther. Let me remind our listeners that our guest today is Esther Choy, author of "Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success."

Esther, how can people find you and your work online?

Esther Choy: Well, it's easy. You can find my work at [leadershipstorylab.com](http://leadershipstorylab.com). All in one word Leadership Story Lab or I am learning to tweet and I'm fairly active now and my Twitter handle is [@leaderstorylab](https://twitter.com/leaderstorylab), leaderstorylab. You can find my book through any or all of major online retail stores. We've just also released a guide called, Guide for a Story Club. Basically, you can get together with a couple of friends or colleagues and then it's a do it yourself program once a week for four weeks and that help guide you work through parts of the book and then you can also then use this excuse to get together with people you like and then you can help coach each other

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developing your stories. That's absolutely complementary and it's available on our website and I encourage everyone to check it out.

Roger Dooley: Great, well we will link to that guide and all the other resources we talked about during our conversation on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast). We'll have a text version of our conversation there too.

Esther, thanks so much for being on the show.

Esther Choy: It's been a blast. Thank you so much for having me.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).