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Storytelling in the Higher Education Classroom: Why It Matters

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ABSTRACT

Life stories, while a powerful method in social sciences and humanities scholarship, are still not widely accepted and used in the higher education classroom. This commentary encourages college and university professors, particularly those of minority backgrounds, to feel at ease in using storytelling as a classroom pedagogical tool. Stories can illustrate the complexity of current pressing issues such as immigration, identity development, and injustice, among many others. They open up possibilities for student engagement in interpretative and relational learning, and opportunities to examine the narratives that are widely told.

KEYWORDS

Student engagement; higher education classroom; storytelling; minority teachers; justice; immigration

For quite a while now, life stories and narrative inquiry have been regarded as powerful methods in social sciences and humanities scholarship. They assume that individuals “live storied lives” and construct their social worlds (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). These inquiry methods are also well suited to provide understanding of a person’s cultural and socialization perspectives, and to gain insight into social life, cultural practices, and an era in history. Personal and collective narratives provide accounts of stories and experiences that, otherwise, would have not found their way into traditional and “presumptive neutral” empirical academic research (Marshall and Rossman 1999).

It has been said that while an inter subjective practice, the act of narrating a story, opens possibilities for engagement in interpretative processes and relational interactions; it also provides human beings a venue to feel, empathize, and process experiences, both their own and of others. In short, storytelling is a humanizing practice, which, if properly grounded in thought, can guide inquiry and foster critical thinking (Gallagher 2011).

We give voice to people of all ages and backgrounds in our own research as “data” and cherish teachers for using different forms of “show and tell” pedagogical strategies in the K-12 classroom environment. Nonetheless, personal storytelling is still a highly contested approach in higher education (Jones and Young 1997). Critics question its objectivity, validity, and capacity to maintain the professional

neutrality professors must bring to the higher education classroom. However, the materials we select as classroom readings, the speakers we bring to campus, the activities we organize, and the institutions’ strategic plan and mission statement do not tend to be questioned, at least not to the same extent. These approaches all tell a story, one we choose to tell, decide how to tell, and determine who should tell it. So why is it that we are still quite reluctant to embrace our own stories in the classroom? The director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at my institution asked me this question when he came to observe me teach during my first year of service in 2002.

As a young White Hispanic new immigrant woman of Jewish and Christian backgrounds at a Jesuit university, I was then teaching a multiculturalism class. When teaching, I abstained from commenting on my own culture, upbringing, and experiences in the United States and beyond. I certainly could not see my background and ethnicity as a medium for classroom discussion. Moreover, I thought that doing so could risk my own academic success and professional advancement. At that time, I was searching to find my own identity in a new land.

To some extent, I still am, as I come to terms with my education and training at research one institutions of higher learning, and the teaching expectations of a mid-size liberal arts college. In 2002, I was inexperienced, too vulnerable and too naïve. Relatedly, I needed to keep under control all aspects of the

classroom as well as attend to the power dynamics that existed. For the most part, my story was kept private, only shared during coffee hours with one or two colleagues and, with reservations, for the several committees I was asked to join that served the institutional goals of advancing campus diversity.

Eighteen years later, I now see the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence's point. He was encouraging me to assist my students in their learning by using storytelling as a powerful method to search for the experiences and truths that some decide not to tell, or to question the narratives that are widely told (Arendt 1977, 1982). The story my students deserve is not about me, necessarily; but rather about how stories can illustrate the complexity of current pressing issues such as immigration, identity development, and injustice, among many others.

I see my responsibility as recognizing and unmasking stories and histories of oppression and survival, in response to a worldwide call for social justice in all areas of life. My story uncovers ways by which being disenfranchised and marginalized affects one's sense of cultural identity and belonging. At the same time, my story can guide reflection on how these difficulties can provide channels for resiliency, action, and change in conduct, both personal and institutional (Méndez, Astiz, and Beltrán 2000).

A student once told me that my whiteness functioned as a passport to inclusiveness, as long as I did not speak. Indeed, once people hear my voice, they notice an accent and often, with uncertainty, respond with what they believe is a compliment: "I love your accent; where is it from?" "I am originally from Argentina," I reply. Surprised, and doubtful, they make what they consider to be their next reinforcing comment. "Oh! You do not sound Hispanic" (although what they are really thinking is you do not look Hispanic; you do not fit the stereotype). Not recognizing this microaggression and still not knowing what to make out of me, I answer back: "How does a Hispanic person sound (and possibly look like)?" Perplexed by my question, and without knowing what to say, they either end the conversation there or change the subject altogether.

My story offers opportunities for probing questions, challenging the status quo, and examining

commonly used categories to classify individuals. My story also offers opportunities to illustrate how different topics are interwoven, how challenges may be common across groups, and how experiences could differ (Johnson 2003). In general, my story can be, and usually is, a means to spark students' interest by providing a familiar face to the experiences discussed in the classroom. Similarly, this approach helps them to understand that promoting equity requires intensive work and intentional behaviour at both individual and social levels.

I can say that I am now better equipped to examine and, when needed, challenge the prevailing general academic practices and consensus through my own story, which is no longer as private as it once was. Hopefully, my students can use these stories as a springboard to begin inquiry both in and outside of my classroom.

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