What Is Storytelling in the Higher Education Classroom?

Diane Ketelle

Storytelling is popular and engaging, but also difficult. Professors in various disciplines who would like to use stories in their classrooms ask questions such as: "What stories are a part of the curriculum?" or "What constitutes a story?" This special issue addresses the theme of "storytelling in the higher education classroom" and attempts to answer some of the questions that surface from this practice. The ideas presented in this issue are meant to challenge readers' conceptions of storytelling and present storytelling as a classroom pedagogy from multiple perspectives. The authors in this issue illuminate many possibilities for story; they also explore the power storytelling can hold in instruction and in the life of a teacher.

It could be said that life is conducted through story; we make sense of our experiences by telling stories about how we live, and we learn about others through their stories (Fairbain). Stories capture the richness of life and convey the complexity of experience. The scholar Andrew Sparkes notes, "In the telling, listening, and reading of stories the opportunity arises to share experiences about our own lives and the lives of others" (1). In this way, we live storied lives and build stories through our life experiences.

All of our experiences can be characterized from a story perspective. Stories

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are cognitive because they contain ideas, but stories are also effective because they involve emotions. Further, stories are volitional because they involve activity or behavior. Our thoughts, feelings, actions, and even our personal identity can be understood through story.

Further, stories are a legitimate form of inquiry and knowledge construction (Bruner). In narrative inquiry, stories are used to describe human experience and connect us with others. Through stories, teachers gain powerful insights into the complex subjective reality of a student; teachers also catch a glimpse of the lens through which a student interprets and creates meaning in his/her life.

Storytelling as Listening

The question of how we hear, or fail to hear, aspects of stories and how we decipher their meaning is critical to the act of storytelling. Storytelling is an inescapably human activity that happens anywhere people come together, and can be considered, at its most fundamental level, an act of listening. The storyteller has to be engaged and has to connect to his/her students or audience. A storyteller, in this way, can learn about a story in the midst of telling it. Listener responses reveal what is funny and what is not, or what is boring and what is exciting. Storytelling is about painting a picture, and whether the story is a fiction or a part of the teller's life, it is a story.

A good storyteller can spark the imagination of listeners and interrogate topics like possibility, courage, companionship, love, and humanity. Through the telling of a story the storyteller cultivates empathy for others and gains personal insight.

Storytelling as a Pedagogy

By framing classroom instruction in a storytelling pedagogy, it is possible to see different, at times contradictory, layers of meaning and to bring these opposing layers into useful dialogue with one another. The process of storytelling also gives way to increased understanding of the individual and increased awareness of social justice. By taking a storytelling stance, teachers are able to investigate not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work but also who

produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; how narratives are silenced, contested, or accepted and what effects they have. Issues like status and power dynamics are also embedded in stories.

Leroy Little Bear notes that in Aboriginal societies, "storytelling is a very important part of the educational process. It is through stories that customs and values are taught and shared" (81). Stories can be passed down from generation to generation and are used to teach values and other important lessons. Linda Cleary and Thomas Peacock echo Little Bear's argument; they point to traditional American Indian culture, which uses storytelling as a central teaching strategy.

In conventional school settings, Kieran Egan has argued for the conceptualization of teaching as storytelling. Egan states: "the story, then is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience" (2). In this way, storytelling can be perceived as tangible when individual awareness advances storytelling into the educational content of the curriculum (Abrahamson). Storytelling opportunities can offer voice to students. Storytelling strategies that work to offer voice to the silenced and that emphasize aspects of the story, like testimony, autobiography, and memory, are particularly valuable to students. Storytelling can demonstrate the importance of celebrating experiences of all kinds, and the elision of individual perspectives can be damaging—excluding stories risks erasing the experiences of students and perpetuating forms of oppression and struggle.

Fairy tales offer a chance to examine unique, distinctive, or metaphoric language in the classroom. Students can dig into topics like aesthetic intention and style, diction, and fittingness of form. Fairy tales integrated into classroom pedagogy introduce fantasy and mythic themes, such as love, hate, courage, cruelty, and fairness.

Storytelling in the classroom can also be a negotiation of power. By giving voice to previously silenced groups, and by surfacing and describing their experiences, readers can delve into their own experience and bias. If subjectivities are fragmented, then it follows that stories do not necessarily represent an essential truth or understanding. Instead, they draw on memories and snippets of life experience; stories can offer teachers the opportunity to develop critical pedagogies that are socially just. Storytelling, then, can be central to building a class community that allows a teacher to make connections to a student's broader world.

Critical Approaches to Storytelling

Critical approaches to storytelling use life experience as a way to challenge the status quo by engaging the lives and voices of the marginalized (Couser). Using the term *critical* signifies a values system that challenges predetermined social boundaries. One of the advantages to critical approaches to storytelling is that in addition to refuting stereotypical depictions of oppression, it also opens a space for intersectional analyses, complex representations. Kimberlé Crenshaw proposes that intersectionality theories help elevate the possibilities for teachers by exploring the ways in which intersecting aspects of one's identity can influence lived experience. Using an intersectionality framework in storytelling demands that teachers guard against theoretical elision; it prevents them from erasing aspects of their own identity or the identity of their students. Intersectional analysis examines the intersections in our lives and identities instead of focusing on the false separation and hierarchies related to gender, race, or gender subsumed within race. The intersectional approach is a powerful response to deficit-depictions of disability, gender, sexuality, and race, and resists the social models of the same. As Beth Ferri conjectures, storytelling that resists social models in addition to deficit-depictions should "not be seen as something to suppress, but to embrace" (2276).

The Organization of This Issue

The naissance of this issue was a phone meeting of a Special Interest Group (SIG) in the National Storytelling Network. The SIG is focused on Storytelling in Higher Education (SHE). Members of the SIG discussed how teachers might have an impact on increasing the use of stories in higher education classrooms. Each member of the SIG participated in the phone call by sharing how they were using stories and at some point, someone—I do not remember who—decided we should pursue a special issue of this journal in order to emphasize our interest and concern. Our vision for this issue is to present not only a wide range of ideas about storytelling but also to share a range of approaches to writing about storytelling. Some of the articles in this issue reflect traditional scholarly approaches, while others explore alternate ways of presenting ideas; all the articles' strategies are founded in rigorous inquiry. The authors in this issue offer many ways stories can

be used inside and outside the classroom. This collection of articles is exciting in its breadth of interpretation of storytelling and how storytelling can manifest and influence both teacher and student.

Pedro Nava writes about the influence of his grandmother, *abuelita*, on his life and teaching; the heart of his work is his grandmother's stories and the lessons he learned from them. Pedro causes us to reflect on the notion that all interpretations are provisional. Through the course of our lives we change, and those things we thought we knew can eventually seem strange to us, while objects of affection can grow closer or suddenly seem further away. All of this affects us as people. Nava's grandmother's stories, which are internalized family stories, took on new meaning when he became a professor. Nava notes, "These insights consisted of reimagined possibilities where normative expectations and power structures are questioned, and more humanizing pathways are unveiled" (167). He continues, "pedagogical processes for higher education are offered that incorporate the strengths of storytelling and lived experience as a way of preparing future educators to enter the classroom space with greater critical insight" (167).

Brian Sturm and Sarah Beth Nelson present their findings of an analysis of thirty-nine folktales in relation to the way teachers are viewed. The teachers in the stories they analyze emerge as primarily constructivist teachers (modeling and experiential learning), and they vary in their levels of wisdom and virtue. All the teachers they examined struggle with the inherent power dynamic between teacher and student.

Charles Temple provides an experience-centered approach to storytelling. Through vivid examples of his teaching and collaborations in Albania and Tanzania, Temple offers a context-rich framework by paying attention to social discourse as well as cultural mores. His work is driven by event stories that are sequential and meaningful. The focus of this work is on story as a tool of transformation and, as such, the teller of the stories (the teacher) and the participants (who listen to the stories) contribute equally as they come together in search of a good tale. Temple notes, "stories offer case studies that can draw out our beliefs and interpretations, while safely removed from real life consequences" (200). His examples bring this idea to light as citizens debate and learn together through making meaning from the tales he shares. He further notes, "sharing tales brings to light important issues from the human condition, and makes people care" (207). Temple gives attention to the complex subjectivities that tales can provoke and champions this feature as one of the most important aspects of storytelling in teaching.

Adrienne Oliver highlights smaller-scale, interpersonal aspects of storytelling in the classroom. Her aim is to demonstrate the complexities of understanding that can be achieved through differing levels of analysis in the writing and interpretation of a story. Through the process of writing down one of her student's school experiences after an interview, she is brought closer to her student. Cultivating empathic understanding is her central goal while emphasizing the importance of understanding how some of her students have felt "othered." Oliver describes herself as a person who has experienced racism. She pushes readers to consider how to gain insight relative to issues of race and silencing, and how position and positionality enter into discussions of story. Oliver's work is particular to time and place, but she encourages us to consider transferability when she recommends that all teachers write the stories of their students to gain insight into their students' learning lives.

G. T. Reyes picks up the threads of the relationship between social discourse and giving voice to the silenced. Reyes helps us understand, through his work with youth in Oakland, that stories constitute realities and shape the students' social reality. Reyes emphasizes how teachers as storytellers use many different symbol systems to guide students toward engagement in a process of co-creating story worlds. Reyes is concerned for the youth he teaches, noting, "when continuously in oppressive conditions, hope is systematically rendered inert" (229). The youth involved in the project he describes find their voice, and in turn they find hope. Reyes is focused on building an interpretive community where youth have the opportunity to construct a collective identity. The stories told operate as presentations of power for the disenfranchised. Reyes further emphasizes his commitment to staying connected to the community in order to develop teachers and leaders who can situate themselves in the community. He also notes that community activism informs the story of his life as an academic.

Alison McDonald reflects on the public life of stories through examples of her work in developing school leaders. Using stories as case studies, she challenges her students' ideas about leadership, and she suggests that telling stories helps her students claim their own leadership stories. McDonald emphasizes the dual nature of her stories; they are durable in the sense that they are used, and reused, and stretch across time periods, but they also have a kind of simplicity. McDonald shows us how stories can be reworked and recycled for different audiences, in different moments in time.

The authors in this issue traverse a broad terrain; however, some common

themes emerge. Each author connects story and teaching to the human experience, and each emphasizes, in different ways, how story can inform and enhance the richness of their lives as teachers and the effects of story on their students' experiences. Several of the authors take a critical stance, using story to dismantle and uncover omissions and give visibility to the previously invisible narrator. This sort of work is nuanced, and it pushes us to understand the intersectionality of identity constructions, while reminding us that the way we construct stories can create the conditions for social change. In a democratic society, we are responsible for bringing forward a vibrant notion of pluralism, both in thinking and in human interaction. Storytellers taking up topics of race, class, or gender do so with the supposition that encouraging pluralistic thinking and knowing is valuable and essential.

This issue's authors also help us understand that the stories we tell are bound up with our way of being in the world, inseparable from the relationships we enjoy, emotions we feel, and commitments we make. Each author offers a kind of poetic perspective on teaching. But, they also offer us a theory, a way of seeing that may help teachers reconnect to the everyday world and forge a more soulful expedition into their work. In the end, it is left to each of us to account for ourselves as storytellers in the classroom, to consider the impact of our positioning and that of our students. There are many pathways through these chapters, and I have mapped only a few. It is my hope that this collection will provide readers with much to think about as well as new questions to answer.

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