



# Storying a Reflexive Praxis for Pedagogy

Concept, Method, and Practices

*Edited by*  
Ambika Gopal Raj · Sharon H. Ulanoff



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Ambika Gopal Raj   
California State University  
Los Angeles, CA, USA

Sharon H. Ulanoff  
California State University  
Los Angeles, CA, USA

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*To my father, my Appa, Andy Aiyar Gopalakrishnan. This year will mark the tenth year since your passing, but I still hear the cadence of your voice as you say my name “Umbi gaa...a” yes the ‘guh’ not ‘kuh’ (smile). I love you Appa—I am sorry I hardly ever said it when you were alive. It wasn’t our culture. I wish I had storied with you more when you were able to.*

*I wish I had heard you tell stories about your life in your own voice, in your own words.*

*Ambika*



**Fig. 1** Appa and I, 2008

*To the students I have taught during the course of my career. Your success is my success. I wake up every day and am thankful for the career path I chose and for the opportunities I have been given to work with you on a daily basis.*

*Sharon*



**Fig. 2** Sharon leading her class in song, 1985

## A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is a book about Storying—not Storytelling. It is about storying our academic identities, not about elucidating narrative theories. It is about Sharon, and me, and all of the people I invited to contribute chapters storying reflexively. It is about us sharing a space with them to create our comprehensions of storying. It is how we storied our professional selves through our personal selves. It is about us storying our identities as academics, as women, as colleagues, and as friends. So yes, it is personal; it is messy, sometimes emotional; and it is located in the special moments we reminisce about.

It is our way of academic theorizing, positioning ourselves within the relationships we built through the knowledges we constructed through our writing. We made this book “our own”. Unlike most academic writing, you will find that this is a collection of scholarly writing that was specifically curated for, about, and through storying. Most of the contributors are people I, (Ambika), have made a connection with over the years—there are many, many, more that are not reflected in these pages, but this is a beginning. In the last chapter of this book, I reminisce about some of my encounters with each of them. I hope you find the friendship, sisterhood, and companionship in these stories. And we hope you find resonance in our ways of humanizing academic writing.

February, 2022

Ambika and Sharon

## STORYING OURSELVES

### Ambika

My earliest memories of stories told about me by my family were about how much I loved young children, caring for them, holding them, feeding them and so on. Apparently, when I was around three years old, I declared “When I am older I want to have a thousand children”. I remember playing house with my two cousin brothers Sriram and Sridhar who were close in age to me. When I was about 9 or 10, I remember coming home from school each day and running over to my neighbor’s to spend time with her baby nicknamed ‘Goochas’. I believe I cared for him till he was 4, when I moved away.

Perhaps, this is why I was named Ambika or ‘Mother’ or ‘Motherhood’ in Sanskrit. Fast forward some twenty something years, and I struggled with issues around infertility that consumed me. It was as if the universe was playing a trick on me ... My name also means Warrior Goddess, and I fought the universe for six years to have my two boys! Ha! Take that Universe! I don’t give up easily on what I really want ... *words become us*



Fig. 3 L to R Murali, Amma, Appa, Ram and Me 1989

You see, I come from a family that does not give up. There's my father, Appa, who has told us stories about his struggles to be school educated. Of how he was very good at math and helped his big brother manage the accounting for a store. The story as I remember it goes that the store owner, a rich guy, impressed with my father's acumen told him "continue to do well in school and when you're ready for college, I will pay for you to go to college." Well, my father did but the store owner didn't pay his college tuition. That did not faze my father, and he found a way tutoring and working two jobs to put himself through college. As Appa tells it "I thank him [the store owner] for putting the idea in my head that I could go to college, if he hadn't suggested it, I probably wouldn't have thought it possible" ... *words become us*

There's Amma, Murali and Ram—my mother, and my two big brothers—who had their own struggles, of opportunities lost and made, of making the best of what they were given. I see you and I feel your love envelope me even through our arguments and shouts—and we are a LOUD family! I locate my identities in your passion, in your reprimands and in your sometimes judgments of my actions. I am a part of your legacy and take pride in the fact that all of you are manifest in all of me ... *words become us*

Ambika, Feb 2022



## Sharon

I spent almost 14 years as an elementary teacher, the last four years I looped with the same students. This morning I received a message from one of those students—I hear from him from time to time, even though the last time I was his teacher was in 1992. Here is some of what he wrote:

Lovely to reconnect Ms. U. There are things in my day that remind me of you. I was organizing my kids' bookcase the other day and it reminded me of the massive book collection you had in that big closet. I try to read to my kids the way you would read to us. Thank you for all the beautiful memories.

I didn't grow up with books—my dad was a TV repairman so even in the 1950s we had television when there were only three or four channels. While through that medium I watched shows like *Romper Room*, which featured storytelling, I didn't become hooked on stories and books until I started kindergarten. That started a life-long love affair with the printed word and with the school and public library.



Fig. 4 Me with my students circa 1984

When I first became a teacher, I remember learning how to demonstrate that love of stories and books from the teacher next door, Mrs. Troxel, my surrogate mom. She would read to her class at least once a day, and when she did she would run her hands lovingly over the book as she enjoyed the feel of the book, along with the words and pictures. I modeled my read alouds after her and amassed a library for my class. I added computers to give my students even more access to stories. My class and I read stories in English and Spanish and moved from reading stories to

writing stories. I set up a publishing center in the room and taught the students how to bind their stories in several different ways.

I loved my time as an elementary teacher. As I moved into my role as a university professor I brought my love of stories to that role. I read aloud to my MA and doctoral students in content classes and research methods classes. I usually choose picture books so that I can use a whole story to introduce the content we are discussing.

When I first became a professor I was invited to do a guest lecture to a group of teachers who were enrolled at my current campus. My friend introduced me and said “Dr. Ulanoff used to be **just** a teacher but now she is a professor.” I looked at the class and at my friend and said, “no, you have it wrong. I used to be a teacher but now I am **just** a professor.” Being called a teacher is the biggest compliment anyone can give me.

Sharon, February 2022

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Joshua Almos** has taught the elementary and middle school grades in Los Angeles for twenty years and received a Master's Degree in Creative Literacies from California State University, Los Angeles, USA. He believes that educators have a responsibility to create responsive, appropriate literacy instruction that is based on their students' needs, interests, and backgrounds.

**Lois André-Bechely** is Professor Emerita from the Charter College of Education where she established the Ed. D. in Educational Leadership along with her colleague Sharon Ulanoff. She says—"My scholarly interests formed when I was a parent volunteer engaged in school and district-level governance. I was a divorced mother of two without a college degree. The organization and politics of schooling that I was experiencing and learning about opened my eyes to what education feels like for parents, mothers mostly, in their everyday lives. I found my way back to school, earning degrees and eventually ended up a professor—but I really shouldn't be here. Lived experiences matter, which is why I believe storying is so impactful."

**Rebeca Batres** is a dedicated elementary educator of more than twenty-five years. She has successfully taught in an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, where she is known for her positive relationships with her students and their families. She is serving as the PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention & Support) coach and is the 4th grade team lead. Her unique approach to teaching has allowed her to touch the lives of her students and families, and she now wants new educators to experience the same by

incorporating effective teaching strategies that will not only change the course of a child's life but the teacher's life as well.

**Joan C. Fingon** is Professor Emeritus of Literacy Education in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction at Cal State LA, Los Angeles, USA. Her recent publications include “Building Schools of Hope and Dreams: An Expansion of Freire’s Dialogical Relationship Between the Teacher and the Student in a School-wide Democratic Process” In Tricia Kress, Elizabeth Stein & Bob Lake (Eds.) (in press) *Radically Dreaming: Illuminating Freirean Praxis in Turbulent Times*. She also co-authored, “Starting Early: Embracing LGBTQ Children’s Literature in PreK-Classrooms” *New Mexico Journal of Reading* (2021) and wrote her first poetry book (2021) *The Drunken Honeybee: A Collection of Haiku and Senryu*.

**Maria-Lisa Flemington** is an artist and educator interested in connecting the transdisciplinary nature of art to storying revealed through social practice art. She received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in 2018 and currently teaches as an adjunct professor at Cal State LA, Los Angeles, USA. She believes in the healing aspects of sharing individual and community stories as the individual voice is solidified and validated through social presentation and participation. She says “I am from ... love/fear ... past/present/future ... community/individual ... child/parent/ ... participant/observer ... unity/conflict ... exhibited and manifested through art.”

**M. “Shae” Hsieh** is Professor of Communication at Los Angeles City College (LACC), USA, and past Chair of the Department of Communication Studies. She teaches courses on public speaking. She says “I love adventure and imagine winning the Hunger Games. When not indulging in escapism, my reality involves living up to the expectations of my tenured faculty role at a community college and embracing my queer family life as a spouse and parent of two amazing children. The qualitative study I present in this book represents the beginning of my rehumanizing efforts. Learning to cultivate compassion in the present, while unlearning lessons of the past that serve no purpose in the future, has proven to be the challenge of my lifetime.”

**Adrienne Karnofel** is an experienced high school teacher. She received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in 2020 and continues to enrich the lives of her high school students through storying. She writes—“I,

Adrienne McNichols, am a firstborn daughter to young, loving parents. I am an older sister, an enthusiastic learner, a soaring gymnast. I am a safe, sheltered descendent of a pastoral legacy. Disrupted, I am a public school kid, searching for identity, finding my place. Through education I find my security. I, Adrienne Karnofel, am a wife, a mother to boys. I am excited, naïve, optimistic. I am a teacher of English, an adoptive mother to girls, a surrogate mother to thousands of students. I am confident, I am educated. I am privileged, ignorant, blind. Through my students I find empathy, wisdom, perspective. I am my story, grateful for the first half, excited for the next.”

**Gustavo Lopez** the son of immigrant parents, is a public secondary school social studies teacher in Los Angeles. He is also the product of public education. He received his Master’s degree in Creative Literacies in Education in 2020. He is passionate about curriculum, instruction, pedagogy, serving students, and helping prepare a future generation of educators. He loves the art and science, that is teaching. He especially loves to create a passion in his students for history.

**Lauren G. McClanahan** first started working with stories as a high school student during her summers in a local television news station. From there, she went on to pursue a career in education, first as a middle school language arts teacher and later as a Professor of Secondary Education at Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA. Additionally, Lauren is the Executive Director of the Bellingham Youth Media Project, where she encourages K–12 students to share their stories using media. Visit <https://www.bellinghamyouthmediaproject.org/> to learn more.

**Ambika G. Raj** is Professor of Language Arts and Literature in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction at Cal State LA, Los Angeles, USA. She received her Ph.D. in Education from The Ohio State University in 2001, specializing in culturally relevant pedagogy and educational drama. Raj serves as an advisor at the graduate and doctoral levels in various programs such as the creative literacies, early childhood, and curriculum & instruction. She has taught at all levels, from Pre-K through doctoral-level courses, always incorporating concepts of storying and educational drama to enhance learning and enrich the classroom experience. She is the author of two books—*Multicultural Children’s Literature: A Critical Issues Approach* (2010) (under her previous last name Gopalakrishnan) and *The Storying Teacher: Processes and Benefits for the*

*Classroom and Beyond* (2019). Most recently, Raj wrote and edited a comprehensive volume called *Creativity as Progressive Pedagogy: Examinations into Culture, Performance and Challenges*, which includes over 16 chapters on creative pedagogy from instructors across the world who rose to the challenges posed by the world pandemic in 2020–2021.

**Steven Michael Salcido** is the AVP for Enrollment Management and Student Services at Sacramento State University, USA. Salcido was born and raised in the Los Angeles area. He received his Ed.D in Educational Leadership in 2021 and his research is on identifying the hidden pedagogies of successful leaders mentoring multiple generations in higher education. With a fast career progression in higher education, he is always eager to partner with individuals to learn from their experiences and challenge him to keep moving forward. He has a passion for building relationships, learning from experiences, and international travel. By continuing to learn from his travel experiences, his mentors and mentees, and embracing leadership opportunities, his story continues to be enriched.

**Sharon H. Ulanoff** is Professor of Bilingual/Multicultural and Literacy Education at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA), USA. She received her Ph.D. in Language, Literacy, and Learning from the University of Southern California in 1993 and her M.A. in Urban Education with a specialization in bilingual/cross-cultural education from Cal State LA in 1982. She is one of the co-founders of the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Cal State LA and has served as an advisor in the program since its inception in 2009. Ulanoff designed and currently teaches courses in practitioner research, qualitative research, reading research, and diversity and equity. Ulanoff was the recipient of the 2017 President's Distinguished Professor award—the highest at our institution. She is the author of several books and articles including *Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners* (2009) and *Learning from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms* (2013). She also serves on the editorial review board of *Bilingual Research Journal*.

**Frederick Uy** is a Director at The California State University (CSU) Office of the Chancellor. A former Professor of Mathematics Education and K–12 mathematics teacher, he oversees and increases the capacity of his department to provide leadership and support to educator preparation programs across the CSU system. He has contributed to many initiatives



in mathematics teacher preparation as a trainer and as a leader. Uy also has served as a mathematics consultant for school districts and publishers and has conducted numerous professional trainings.

**Arturo Valdez** was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA, into a family of educators. He is a public secondary school social studies teacher in Los Angeles and graduated from the University of Cal Poly Pomona with an undergraduate in History, he received a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Cal State Los Angeles. He enjoys teaching U.S., World, and Music history.

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CHAPTER 1

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# Anchoring Storying: A Quest for Emotional Truth

*Ambika Gopal Raj*

*Is it possible ...?*

*Is it possible ...*

*that words uttered,  
thoughts pronounced,  
feelings shown,  
and emotions felt,  
... become us?*

*Is it possible, ...*

*that speech changes us,  
molds us  
and reflects our true inner selves?*

*Is it possible ...*

*that actually words are what matter, more than actions?  
That where these words are spoken matters as much as who?*

*Is it possible ...*

*that identities are spoken  
... into reality?*

---

A. G. Raj (✉)  
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [ambika.raj@calstatela.edu](mailto:ambika.raj@calstatela.edu)

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*Is it possible ...*

*that the purpose of memories is to keep people alive?  
that how we remember is as important as why we remember?*

*Is it possible ...*

*that voicing our stories is the essence  
of who we are and who we will become?  
Indeed I am a manifestation of my expressions.*

*January 12, 2022*

I can't remember when I began using the word "storying" rather than "storytelling". All I remember is that when I used the word "storying" it felt right—it sat well with me, with what I do, what I believe in. It felt like I was sharing a part of *who I am* in order to make a connection, rather than narrating as the word 'storytelling' signifies. When I am storying I am expressing from a location of all that came *before* me culturally, historically, socially, empathetically, and emotionally. This is perhaps from the idea that 'location' and place have an impact on how a story comes into being, how it is situated, and how "[p]lace becomes an anchor to our memories" (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 3). The words I choose, the gestures I make, the facial expressions I make, the tone of voice I use, and my stance engage with my past as it pushes through me into my expression of what I voice. This is storying to me. To be fully aware, present, temporally, spiritually, of that moment when I utter my words and the impact it makes when I voice it. Indeed, it is a privilege to have that moment, to have a voice, and to be heard.

## ANCHORING STORYING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I identify storying as most connected with personal identity, with one's individuality as described by themselves, as voiced through their own words. Autobiography and auto-ethnography maybe two terms from qualitative research, particularly narrative inquiry, that have tried to define storying similarly, yet these terms do not 'feel' right; they still feel like an impersonation of what is essentially supposed to be distinctively humanistic. The term *storying* is more conducive to identifying all that is shared between researchers and participants temporally and emotionally while also admitting the power dynamic in all research relationships. Phillips and Bunda (2018) "argue for the place of story in research ... storying honors the legacy of our ancestors engaging in theorizing and research from the

emergence of language” (pp. 4–9) as the notion of storying is more connected to being one with identity and reflexivity (Raj, 2019). Although, in defining narrative inquiry, academics have recognized that sites of research are sites where the study of ‘lived experiences’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007) happen, these lived experiences may not be understood *as storied* by the participants themselves, indicating the difficulty in defining narrative inquiry. Rather these become an *examination* of experiences in people’s lives by researchers indicating the textual interpretations that are subject to what Phillips and Bunda (2018) call “authorized knowledge”. To that end, across fields where human connections are imperative, such as in medicine, nursing, journalism, instructional sites, and so on, researchers and scholars are realizing the importance of *storying* lived experiences. But there is a subtle difference between lived experiences as voiced and ‘language’d’ in the words of participants (storying themselves) and lived experiences as reported by researchers who study them as phenomenon. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) makes this subtle difference when explaining how in qualitative narrative research, experience is in the “midst of language” (as cited in Clandinin, 2007). That is, in narrative research, lived experiences are already formulated; it is ‘language’d’ through various media as theorized, categorized, and verbalized through the textual: as “authorized” representations (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Perhaps, this realization of appropriation that misunderstood narrative inquiry may sanction, or the need for more complex ways of giving voice has prompted scholars across fields to prefer the term ‘storying’.

While not using the term ‘storying’, Clandinin (2007) imply a similar argument for creating a more complex understanding of the phenomenon of experience. They recognize that location or the physicality of space is changed by the indelible power dynamics of who occupies that space and call it a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). In this space, narrative inquirers enter ‘always in the midst of a story’ whether it is the researchers’ stories or the participants’ stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), thereby acknowledging the power dynamics. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) further explicate this notion of power dynamics in specifically “issues of relationships” and in “identity” (p. 154), showing how researcher’s epistemological notions and their methodological stances are influenced by the relationships between the ‘researched’ and ‘researcher’. As the dynamics of the relationship between “the knower and the known” changed, so did the story. Narrative inquiry thus becomes a constant negotiation between

the two. Craig and Huber (2007) also speak to the relational aspects of narrative inquiry acknowledging that experiences in shared spaces are changed by those telling the story as much as those listening and interpreting the story because of the relationships that must be negotiated in sharing the space/place. What seems to be common in these well-documented and mapped scholarly works are notions of Deweyan experience, particularly lived experiences, negotiating relationships, imagined spaces, issues of locations, as well as identities when speaking about narrative inquiry (Greene, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Freeman, 2007).

### NEGOTIATING VERSUS CREATING

Negotiating a space is vastly different than creating a space to be heard, where storying *can* happen, where storying *does* happen. Naming is important and who does the naming is even more important as historians, scholars, and anyone who cares about equity will confirm. Storying does not signify negotiating, rather storying signifies emotional meaning-making. Storying conveys that knowledge is situated, dynamic, relational, and constructed, that storying is a form of cultural-historical identity. In other words, the term storying distinguishes the lived experiences sanctioned through storying oneself, from those sanctioned and explicated through narrative inquiry. It is not my intent to discredit any scholarly works thus far that have expounded on narrative inquiry or narrative theories, rather my understandings of storying have been built from the foundations of these works. I find resonance with “[s]torying [as] embodied relational meaning-making” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 43) and I believe that storying builds a deep connection between who does the storying and who listens to the storying or who the act of storying is intended for. In this sense, “meaning is never definitive as listeners will create meaning that is applicable to their lives and experiences” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 10). Storying reflects the humanizing, lived, continuous, intentional, experiences of people. Storying is validating because not only the teller, the listener is also empowered to make and construct their meanings through their unique positionalities. As Phillips and Bunda (2018) indicate, all history is in a sense storying. That is, what has been passed on to us from time immemorial—the ancient, aboriginal, native knowledges—and ways of doing, speaking, and thinking that have been passed on through songs, legends, myths, sayings, and stories are what connects us as humans, as peoples, and as societies

(Phillips & Bunda, 2018). The constant re-interpretations of each iteration, the ratified knowledge that is both sanctioned and unsanctioned, connect us indelibly with all that came before us, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. In this sense, storying is the bond that connects us: that creates a continuum of the past to the present to the future.

## EMOTIONAL TRUTH: A RENDITION OF THE THEORY OF *RASA*

What is the nature of this continuum, this connection, this cultural-historicity? To me, it is the moments of authenticity that we find in each other's stories; it is the experience of legitimacy that is passed on from the teller to the listener: the tangible connections between the voiced and the perceived, the moments of creating and building trust in what we are hearing, in what is being articulated. In my previous work, I have called this *emotional truth* (Raj, 2019) and it is akin to the ancient Indian theory of *Rasa*. In Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language, *Rasa* simply translates to *jus*, or essence, or flavor. However, this theory was first expounded in a text on the performing arts called the 'Natya-Sastra' (roughly translating to *The Rule-Book of Performing Arts*), which is believed to have been written around 200 BC or around the first millennium. *Rasa* theory as explained in the *Natya Shastra* says that when a performer of any art is so deeply immersed in their performance that their soul becomes one with the performative act, then they are able to transport the audience into a consciousness or awareness that is akin to spirituality. There forms a deep temporal, impenetrable connection within the world of the performative act, where each feels what I call emotional truth.

I conceptualize emotional truth to be the perception of authenticity that is passed along from the teller to the listener creating a space that validates both and builds trust for all involved (Raj, 2019, p. 7). This progression of emotion is truthful, genuine, and legitimate in that it creates an evident, indelible connection for all involved. Emotional truth is the almost sacred moment when there is a shared feeling of we "get it", the palpable sensation deep within our core that touches us. "When the story comes from a place that is entrenched in the deep emotional core of the teller, it reaches out ... in a tangible connection" (Raj, 2019, p. 105). I believe that the concept of emotional truth is what anchors storying—it is what helps me understand and explain my feelings of "I get it now".



## FINDING EMOTIONAL TRUTH WITH SCHOLARS THROUGH STORYING

In keeping with the tradition of storying, I must acknowledge the thinkers, writers, peoples who have brought me to this point of anchoring my conceptions of storying. I must acknowledge all those whose works I have read, all those who have storied with me through their scholarly work and through their teaching. I must acknowledge the emotional truth I have felt with the writings of many, a few of whom, I will story about in the following paragraphs.

### *Imagination and the Arts: A Meeting with Dr. Maxine Greene*

It had been just over a year since I had come to the United States as a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Drama at the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison. The School of Education at UW-Madison organized a day-long conference to honor the legacy of Dr. Maxine Greene. Her famous book *Releasing the Imagination* had recently been published and her writings traversed the fields of both the arts and education. Graduate students from across the school were invited to do short presentations showcasing the use of imagination in teacher education.

My partner and I designed a drama activity around immigration and the concept of ‘illegal aliens’ or undocumented persons. In the activity, we first engaged with everyone in a ‘getting to know you’ game and then we role-played immigration officers looking for an undocumented person. We passed around a picture of my partner, whom everyone had just engaged with in the game as the undocumented person. The ethical question of if we should give him up to the authorities was posed. Subsequently, as a group we discussed how our intentions are sometimes motivated by our deep-seated attitudes. We engaged in conversations about how our actions are limited by our biases. We also discussed how these attitudes affect our interactions as teachers.

To my surprise, Dr. Greene not only attended my session, but she also participated and stayed throughout the whole forty-five minutes engaging in the activity and discussions. I will never forget the presence of this small framed, soft-spoken woman and her generosity as she shared the space with me—a newly minted graduate student from India. While my partner and I had planned the activity, we had not entirely thought through the ethical consequences of this role-play, which essentially cheated the

participants into questioning their attitudes, into pressing them to make difficult decisions, perhaps making them uncomfortable. As novice teachers and novice presenters, we both clearly had not taken care to build in a way to create trust amongst us and the participants; we had simply thrown the participants into a difficult ethical situation and then were asking them to untangle themselves from it. I realize that now, more than twenty years later. And perhaps this is why I still remember that incident as if it were yesterday when Dr. Greene came up to me, looked me in the eye, and said “You cheated us!” in a sort of mock manner. In that moment and in my reflecting about why she said what she said, I realized the power of imagination. Even though my activity was an imaginary exercise, it created such a deep empathetic reaction. In the ensuing discussions with everyone (there were about twenty participants in all), Dr. Greene’s charisma was greatly manifest. I have spent many years reflecting back on that incident and trying to remember how I handled it. What I learned from Dr. Greene was that in the activity I had inadvertently “othered” (Fine, 1994) my participants. And that in order to truly reflect on my actions of othering, I must interrogate my position, my identities, my actions and words *with imagination*. I must become aware, critically conscious (Freire, 1970) of the ways in which I story myself in relation to others and how I story others in relation to me. I must become critically conscious of my own cultural-historical self, my cultural-situatedness, temporally and physically in relation to, and in points of connection to, others that I interact with (Greene, 1995) in/through storying. Storying is the authentic quest that one must go through to build deep connections with *who they are*, *how they came to be*, and *why they came to be*.

Mythological stories from different cultures tell us about hero journeys that go on these quests—the Odyssey and the Ramayana are two examples. Cultural legends are told about ordinary people’s journeys into “finding themselves” and through that quest they come to certain philosophical understandings—the story of Prince Siddhartha becoming The Buddha is an example. These cultural-historical tales are our histories; these become our stories; the memories of these tell us of how we came to be (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). These are moments that anchor our storying.

### *Curry Leaves and Dr. Michael Apple*

It was on a cold, snowy Wisconsin morning that I first met Dr. Michael Apple. As a graduate student in the Theater Arts department, Dr. Apple’s

class was not one that was on my planned curriculum. But my advisor had this idea that I should perhaps take a broad variety of course-work as the field of educational drama was just coming into its own. Dr. Apple was offering a special topics seminar on education and the arts or something of that sort. I went to meet Dr. Apple in his office to petition to be in the class, as I wasn't enrolled in the School of Education. I met this man with a tanned, freckled face. He had a thick curly beard and curly locks of hair and his brown piercing eyes stared back at me through thick brown-rimmed glasses. The tiniest of smiles played on his lips as he invited me to sit.

I was able to enroll in his class—there were only nine of us and all the others were in-service teachers pursuing a Ph.D. in education. I was the only person of color in the class. We had class once a week, at around 5 pm. As it was winter, in Wisconsin, it got dark by 3 pm and so we decided that someone would bring snacks or dinner or some sustenance. It was in this class that I was introduced to critical pedagogy; here is that I began to understand how power, hegemony, critical positions, cultural understandings, and so on affect us at macro and micro levels. I remember Dr. Apple talking to us about farmers in South America starving and struggling to eat as their produce was corporatized to the extent that they couldn't afford what they grew. These ways of viewing were new to me; these recognitions of power politics were eye-opening to me. Each day, Dr. Apple began the class with showing us silent film movie strips of cartoons that he juxtaposed with serious current world events, as we ate our meal that we shared for the evening. I tried bagels and cream cheese for the first time! On one of those occasions, I cooked a three-course meal for the class. In my eyes, it was a very simple South Indian meal—yellow daal (lentil), green beans sautéed with coconut flakes, and white rice. To them, it was a three-course meal! I remember Dr. Apple and others eating with great gusto as they tasted home-made Indian food for the first time. Curry leaves are used abundantly to season South Indian food, giving green beans and daal a distinctive flavor. The leaves have no taste by themselves and are really meant to be discarded after seasoning. I pointed that out to them and Dr. Apple confidently said—“Yes I know, these are Bay leaves, you can't eat them”. For a moment I didn't know what to say ... mixed feelings of contradicting authority versus recognizing wrong information flashed through my head as I hesitantly said, “No, these are curry leaves, not bay leaves”. We left it at that, although I don't think he was convinced.

Curry leaves notwithstanding, Dr. Apple's class on democracy, education, and the arts completely changed my outlook on how and what knowledge production and construction mean. The fact that we spent the better part of the class looking at old film negatives from the 1940s and 1950s—I can't explain it, but somehow it made perfect sense for this class. It was the perfect background to story and question our constructions of knowledge. This class introduced me to Freire (Critical Consciousness), Shor (Critical Literacy), Tatum (Race and Feminism), and much more—concepts and constructions that I interrogate with through storying and developing my pedagogy to this day.

*“Show up”, said Dr. Gloria-Ladson Billings*

As I look at my well-read, worn, marked up, and almost in tatters copy of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, on my shelf today, I am reminded of the phone conversation I had with Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings as I was trying to get into her special topics class, which was over-enrolled. The fact that she actually picked up the phone—I clearly remember the cadence of her voice as she said to me “Show up and we will see”. Her words ring metaphorically in my praxis and pedagogy to this day. “Show up” your whole self, show up and reveal who you are, your vulnerabilities, your fears, with humility in the construction of knowledge. Show up and acknowledge your cultural, historical, biased, raced, classed, and sexualized self. Show up was a metaphor for her brand of culturally relevant pedagogy: her philosophy that was entrenched in culturally and critically knowing yourself, your students, in ways that transform knowledge constructions, ways to be culturally competent.

I did show up for the first couple of classes that fall, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I was unable to fully attend her course at UW-Madison. I moved to the Ohio State University in September of that year to continue my doctoral studies. However, I believe that Dr. Ladson-Billings' call to show up deeply influenced me, my research on storying my personal identities and my pedagogy, as is evident throughout my dissertation (Gopalakrishnan, 2001). Show up has undergirded all my teaching and activities as a professor of education these past twenty years, where I have honed my own cultural awareness and identities, to formulate cultural competence with my students and peers in creating storying activities for self-awareness as pro-active cultural relevance.

*Tuesday, Refugees, and Dr. Cecily O’Neill*

David Wiesner’s award-winning picture book *Tuesday* has minimum words with full page, colorful, wildly imaginative, intensely engaging paintings that have so many details as is characteristic of all his picture books. Splashed across the last two pages is a painting of what looks like a crime scene under investigation with detectives, forensic examiners, newscasters interviewing a witness, and so on. This is the mural that Dr. Cecily O’Neill began with in her three-week summer workshop on process drama. I clearly remember her British accent tinged with a Welsh tone as she posed a question to all of us—some twenty-five odd graduate students and teachers. “What do you think is happening here?” Over the course of the next three weeks, I remember the intensely, emotional process drama that she lead us through. Who would imagine that one could connect *Tuesday*, a tale about flying frogs, to taking on the attitude of a refugee? The smoothness with which she lead us to comprehend what it may have been like to walk in the shoes of a refugee; the potent compassion that she ignited in us for imaginary people. That was powerful!

I vividly remember the role-play as I sat tightly huddled along with ten others feeling what it might have been like to be on a boat as a refugee. I could smell the people around me, the sweat mixed with my own feelings of trepidation. I vividly remember that moment in the freeze-frame or tableau that we created in groups of five when we knew we had to say goodbye to all that we had ever known thus far. When we knew in our gut, we would never be here in this place, in this moment ever again. I remember the passionate writing, the depth of our understanding through the frame of this drama process.

This process of experiential learning that educational drama affords has been culturally sustaining for me. Over the years, I have many others to acknowledge in how their craft honed my praxis in educational drama, but this particular workshop with Dr. O’Neill I remember to this day.

**The Brownies’ Book Magazine and Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop**

There was an office opposite to the graduate students’ office full of books. There were shelves from floor to ceiling, big wide tables stacked with books and even the floor under the table stacked with books. This office belonged to Dr. Hickman and Dr. Bishop—two prolific scholars on children’s literature. The books fascinated me—all colors, so many genres; it was a veritable library. Luckily for me, I had the pleasure of taking several courses with both of these scholars and learning not only about children’s trade-books,

but through these books I was transported into the sometimes realistic and sometimes imaginary worlds of Mildred D. Taylor, Jacqueline Woodson, Walter Dean Myers, Tom Feelings, David Wiesner, Pat Mora, Yuyi Morales, Alma Flor Ada, Sook Nyul Choi, Allen Say, Katherine Paterson, and too many others to name here. I learned about awards such as the Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, Newbery, Pura Belpré, and many more. In fact, I would say that I learned American history through the multicultural children's literature that I read in these courses and through the other books that I got inspired to read because of these courses.

It was in a seminar on African American Children's Literature that Dr. Bishop introduced us to *The Brownies' Book* magazine. I remember her calm, even toned voice, her eyes kind and soft as she spoke about the gross indignities and struggles that African American, indeed all authors and illustrators of color, faced. She brought in books—oh so many books—that we could hold, feel, and absorb. She brought in an original issue of *The Brownies' Book* magazine, in production for just two years between 1920 and 1922, from her grandmother's collection! This was truly history in the flesh! And it was history that even the students of today are not privy to. I feel privileged to have known this side of American history that one would not usually find in textbooks of today. Dr. Bishop's ways of teaching and mediating cultural history through children's literature has been exemplary for me. I still follow in her footsteps as I read-aloud choice books to all of my classes.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON ANCHORING STORYING

Storying it appears is the new buzzword of the twenty-first century. Once the forte of wandering minstrels, bible stories, cultural myth and legend, stories were kept out of scientific research, institutions of learning, and corporations. Even in anthropological endeavors, where folklore and lived experiences were warranted, storying was stripped of its humanity, emotions, and reported as dry factual observations.

However, in the last few decades, seemingly like the butterfly effect, everyone has adopted storying. Everyone is concerned about the humanness of storying. There are corporate storytellers who train managers, there are marketing executives who create stories, there are nursing and medical personnel who are taught qualitative narrative inquiry, and so on. Paul (2012) reports that the value of stories and fiction is getting new support from neuroscience as well. "Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is

showing, stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life” (Paul, 2012). The research that Paul is referring to are studies conducted by brain and language specialists in Spain and France in the beginning of this century which prove that storying not only makes us more empathetic but the experiences that we have with reading words and stories are akin to reality as far as the brain is concerned. In other words, storying offers us a way to connect emotionally and imaginatively. We are as it were, a manifestation of our words, of our storying worlds.

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# Cultural/Educational Maps: Storying a Pedagogical Journey

*Sharon H. Ulanoff*

## INTRODUCTION

*I always wanted to be a teacher, but I would say that my educational journey towards teaching began in the summer after I finished kindergarten. After relentless begging on my part, my parents presented me with a large chalkboard and I was off running. I started Sharon's summer school and tortured the neighborhood children with lessons. Parents loved me but the kids hated me. They just wanted to play.*

Teacher development has long been a topic of research (Cole & Knowles, 1993), which often looks at the programs and practices used to educate preservice teachers and induct them into the field (Evans, 2002). While most preservice teachers expect to complete their licensing programs as *fully formed* teachers, the reality is that much of teacher development happens in the field and through continuing education during the first several years of teaching. Cole and Knowles argue that teaching is

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S. H. Ulanoff (✉)  
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [sulanof@calstatela.edu](mailto:sulanof@calstatela.edu)



“complex and a phenomenon continually influenced and made meaningful by factors and conditions both inside and outside classrooms” (p. 474). While teacher development has as one focus the knowledge and skills needed to be successful, there is growing body of research that looks at teacher identity formation as critical to teaching performance (Assen et al., 2018).

Intersecting with the notion and importance of teacher identity development is the role of equity-minded practices within both K–12 and higher education settings. While we talk about teaching diverse populations or using culturally relevant/sustaining practices (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Paris, 2012), teachers bring their personal values and dispositions to their work, regardless of the focus of their teacher education programs (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). It is important to remember that while teacher identity formation is situated within the structures of schooling, teachers “have agency to locate and position themselves within and possibly change those structures” (Barkhuizen, 2016). Barkhuizen further suggests that change can be enacted through stories that “enable us to represent our experiences, including our identities, but they also, in the telling, re-shape those experiences and identities” (p. 30). Given the current emphasis on issues of social justice in and out of school, this chapter will examine the identity journey teachers identify as central to their own teaching practice.

### STORYING PRACTICES IN A CLASS ON DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

*Before 2021 the last time I taught this class was in 2008 and the world had changed so much since then. I realized that much of what I used before needed to be not only updated, but also modified to address issues that currently face teachers. While the class always included content that required “courageous conversations”, with the normalization of racism, homophobia, linguisticism and other forms of “othering”, now I needed to find ways to address these via a technology platform due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.*

To challenge the teachers enrolled in this class I purposefully set out to document how classroom pedagogy can reinforce systems of oppression through actions and language to emphasize how easily these systems are reinforced during instruction (Guerin, 2003; Johnson et al., 2008). I used other narrative practices in the class, most frequently read alouds, to model ways in which the teachers in the class would be able to introduce

discussions/conversations in their own classes (Husband, 2019). I began each lesson with a read aloud—the books I used included *Looking Like Me* by Walter Dean Myers, *A Kid's Book About Racism* by Jelani Memory, *I am Jazz* by Jazz Jennings, and *Antiracist Baby* by Ibram X. Kendi. These books led into what sometimes were uncomfortable conversations about discrimination and marginalization but reinforced the importance of opening up such discussions in the K–12 setting. The students also completed weekly reflections about the content as well as an end-of-class reflection and a cultural/educational journey map assignment that serves as the basis for this chapter.

Educational journey maps draw from the field of customer journey maps that focus on the experiences of customers for businesses to better meet their needs (Marquez et al., 2015) and have been used with students in colleges and universities to help them understand their educational trajectories (Schuhbauer et al., 2020). The journey maps were intended to serve as cultural/educational autobiographies to help the students in the class see how their own experiences shaped who they are as teachers and illustrate how they bring their own assumptions and biases to their teaching (Chávez et al., 2020).

### THE CULTURAL/EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY MAP ASSIGNMENT

The cultural/educational journey map assignment is an extension of a personal pedagogy paper that I originally developed for a different program and that was adapted and improved into its current iteration by Ambika Raj; the current assignment could not have been done without her work. For this assignment, teachers in the class were asked to think about their lived experiences throughout their schooling and as they became teachers. The assignment further rests on a lot of shoulders of those who use cultural journey maps in variety of settings including prisons, universities, and business (Annamma, 2016; Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Marquez et al., 2015).

This chapter uses narrative analysis methods to uncover the collective educational journeys of twenty-one teachers enrolled in a university class about issues of social justice and inequities in society and education. Following the notion of collective narratives as used in writing pedagogy (Margolin, 2000), this chapter looks at various artifacts related to teacher identity that were generated during the class. Expanding on the work of Adler, this chapter uses the notion of educational journeys to mean stories

voiced by several narrators that are storied into a collective tale (Adler, 2011).

The focal narrative texts for these collective tales were submissions for an assignment entitled “Cultural/Educational Identity Journey Map”. The maps were examined along with in-class presentations, initial introductory videos, and class reflections to construct (collective) narratives in-interaction to trace the emergence of teacher identity as described by the teachers (Juzwik & Ives, 2010). The dual goal of the assignment (and course) was to story the teachers’ experiences with teaching for equity in diverse urban settings and to have the teachers think about ways in which to address difficult topics surrounding race, class, gender, age, and so on with their own K–12 students. Figure 2.1 shows a description of the cultural/educational journey map assignment.

Students were asked to be creative with the assignment and given options to create videos, include visuals, other types of media to describe their journeys. They were also told that they would share their maps with

**Purpose.** For this assignment you will be conducting a “self-study” of your cultural/educational identity journey by turning the research lens in on yourself to examine how your beliefs and experiences influence your practice. The purpose of this assignment is for you to create a visual map of your educational and cultural identity journey to becoming a teacher. You will create a timeline of this journey, noting when you learned particular lessons about your identity, by whom those lessons were taught, how those lessons were taught and how they impact your practice as an educator. There is no one correct way to create your journey map.

**Knowledge and Skills.** It is the intention of this assignment for you to explore within yourself your cultural/educational identity journey as a means to linking that journey to your teaching practice within the framework of your own experiences. You will include specific examples of events or situations that you feel shaped your views and your identity development along this journey. Be sure to situate your examples in the context of assumptions about schooling and education, etc. Feel free to relate these examples to the readings and discussions from class. Your journey map should explain and/or describe the experiences that impacted your educational/cultural identity. This is your journey.

For this assignment, you may choose to explore your journey based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or sex, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, histories of incarceration or surviving violence, or any other aspects of your identities. You may choose to do maps that emphasize one aspect of your identity or ones that emphasize areas of overlap. Think about using a central guiding theme for your experiences of equity, access, oppression, and privilege. A cultural/educational journey map is like an historical overview of your teacher identity development.

Fig. 2.1 Description of cultural/educational journey maps assignment

classmates during our last night of class. Only one student chose to do their journey map in narrative form. The rest used a variety of media, including one student who created a game board for the journey of his life.

### EXAMINING THE CULTURAL/EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY MAPS

*I started my teaching career as a teacher aide in a K-1 public school class and got my first teaching job as a bilingual first-grade teacher in 1978. I remember a shopping trip to the market right after I got the call telling me that I was a teacher, walking through the aisles, floating on air. I walked into my first day of teaching the next day and confronted 27 first graders, 25 of them labeled as emergent bilingual students. I would not say my first year as a teacher was successful—I had been trained as a high school Spanish teacher—but I got through it the best I could. What I didn't think about until much later was how to provide equitable instruction and opportunities to all my students because my own belief systems were being challenged—I merely taught the way I had been taught. Now I ask the teachers I work with to consider the role belief systems play in their teaching and to consider that their beliefs and experiences frame who they are and what they do as well as opportunities they provide to others.*

The teachers in the class were representative of graduate programs at my campus; for example, 67% self-identified as Latinx and 38% self-identified as male; they teach in local school districts that are ethnically, linguistically, and socially diverse. Although the class is offered at the M.A. level, two students were finishing up their teacher credential programs. And while the class was offered remotely, all of those enrolled in the class lived in the local service area. Many other self-identities were revealed during the class, although none was requested of the students. The cultural/educational journey maps were due to be submitted during the middle of the semester, although some did submit them later than that. Other readings and activities may have played a role in how the teachers constructed their maps.

*I found I was shifting my pedagogical practices throughout the semester and as we went along, I found I was revealing more of my educational journey as time went on. During one synchronous session I asked students to go to Harvard's Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>) and take one of the Implicit Bias tests. I shared the results of some of the tests that I had taken, but told the students that they were not required to share their results, but would be discussing the experience of taking the test or tests. When we came*

*back together to discuss the tests, several in the class shared that they chose not to take the test on race because they feared the results would say that they are racists. I think that after taking other tests they understood that that was not the purpose, however.*

I analyzed the maps using holistic and analytic methods to look for examples of experiences linked to teaching practice. First, the maps and other data from each participant were viewed holistically to look for connections between early schooling experiences and their paths to becoming teachers. Next each profile was examined analytically through syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; Mishler, 2004) to look within and across teachers to highlight their journeys and to view experiences and practice grounded in everyday life (Cazden & Hymes, 1978).

As I reviewed the journey maps I looked for commonalities within them to highlight storylines related to teacher identity across participants situated in the context of their own schooling experiences. I also examined weekly course reflections on issues related to equity and social justice to look for connections between their schooling experiences and their teaching practices.

### WHAT THE MAPS TOLD ME ABOUT THE TEACHERS

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a teacher but never considered how my experiences would shape the teacher I became. I remember admiring some of my teachers and wanting to be like them when I grew up. Many of the teachers in my class indicated the same thing in their journey maps; they frequently named specific teachers who made a difference in their lives. In another example, one teacher annotated her birth as the day a teacher was born (see Fig. 2.2). This teacher described how her experiences in school impacted the ways she plans instruction.

Teachers in the class consistently talked about powerful pressures in school to disengage with their roots and how either in high school or in college they connected back to their family's culture and history. While they spoke of the fact that it was in the context of their education, often by the comments of one teacher or professor, it was common that the teachers did not consider how their own schooling shaped their views, which was highlighted in their reflections. Throughout the semester I

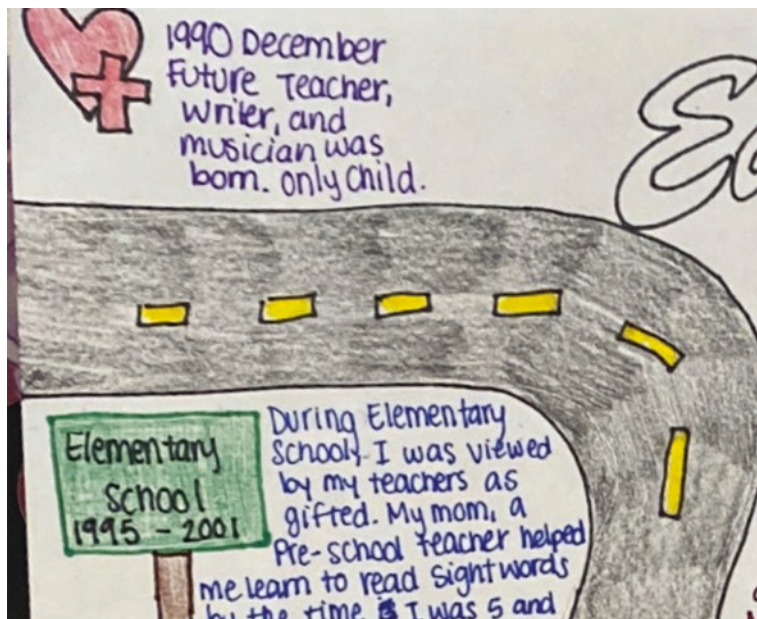


Fig. 2.2 Section of an educational journey map

asked the teachers to reflect on the course content and how that content could/would make a difference to their teaching.

*As a teacher, I understand that it is difficult to change opinions and beliefs and I don't set out to do that in my classes. I set out to present content that asks students to think and to question—if I can plan a seed that makes them question even the tiniest belief I feel that I put them on the road to considering the perspectives of other and in that consideration come to think about issue of equity. The best thing a student said to me in a similar class to this one was “I don't know anymore. I thought I knew how the world worked but now I am not sure and I do not like it.”*

During our synchronous classes, I found the teachers reluctant to speak when we were in the whole group portion of the session; in fact most nights there were few cameras on. But once they were sent to breakout rooms with a task related to course content, cameras came on and the discussions became centered on things that happened in their classrooms.

As I circulated in the groups I heard about events where they felt that they could have done better, where they felt they had failed, but where it sounded to me as if they rose to challenging moments. When I work with teachers I always tell them that if they have a day when everything goes perfectly and could not be improved they should retire—because there is never a lesson that can't be better or a child that can be reached differently. I sensed this kind of self-reflection that was going on easily within a small group but that was much more challenging in the larger group, which was interesting since I grouped them randomly and many of them did not know each other before the class started.

One thing that was common among those who wanted to be teachers was having experiences of marginalization in their own schooling. They spoke about being bullied or laughed at for not speaking English, not being able to read, falling behind. Some of the teachers in the class were raised in different parts of the country and many of them started school as emergent bilingual students; some talked about being ashamed of their native language and now work in schools where they were raised. There was a sense of not only giving back to the community but also working to make sure others are not bullied or criticized for their differences. As one teacher in the class noted in a reflection,

I learned to value my community, my native language, and my cultural wealth. I had never been taught in school to value these things because they didn't exist in that space. Now, as an educator, I want to instill a sense of community and value for cultural wealth in my students. I want them to understand and believe that their bilingualism and multilingualism is valuable and that it has a space and place in academia.

For many of us there are influential teachers who made a difference and helped us to visualize our paths in education. I recall several teachers in elementary and high school who served as role models and reinforced my goal to be a teacher. Several teachers talked about a teacher who influenced them, who awakened them, and who gave them the confidence to go on. For example, one teacher discussed one of her professors who suggested that she might think about becoming a teacher (see Fig. 2.3).

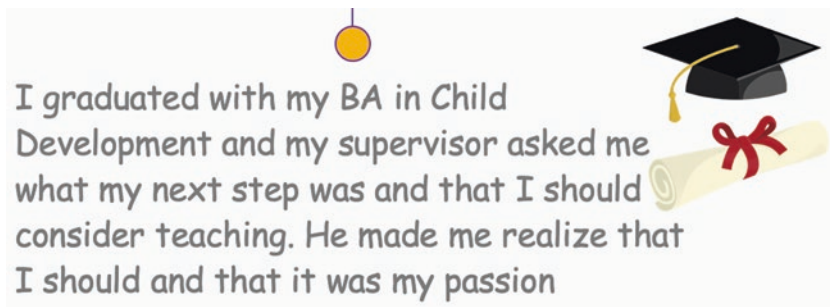


Fig. 2.3 Part of one educational/cultural journey map

### STORYING MY PEDAGOGICAL JOURNEY

*I was excited to read through the cultural/educational journey maps. Not only were the maps creative in nature, they illuminated how the teachers in my class were beginning to think about how their own experiences were implicated in who they are as teaching. But what really crystalized that relevance of the assignment was when they presented their maps to the class. One student asked for an appointment to see me before the presentations were scheduled. He asked if he could present to me alone. His journey had been rough but he had put much of it into his map, telling me it had helped him think through things, but adding that he was not ready to share with classmates. I thought about how to react as a teacher, an instructor, as a human being. I had long ago learned flexibility from my mentors and knew I could support him.*

The cultural/educational journey maps were only one part of the class and an assignment that asked students to share their own experiences. I can't help but wonder if the maps would have been different if they had done them at the end of the semester or if I had asked them to do several iterations. At the end of the class I asked the teachers to do a final reflection on the whole class. I wanted to learn what they felt was important about the class, how they felt they participated, and what the class meant for their own pedagogical stories, and to see what they thought about the cultural/educational journey map assignment. One teacher wrote the following comment.

I am struggling to pick up the pieces and put together my cultural identity, but I am confident in my educational journey. I am now in my penultimate semester before completing the master's program. Working on this cultural



and educational identity map has really forced me to take a close look at my personal journey, and the specific moments that stand out as representing a revelation of my character.

As a teacher educator, it is important that I, too, reflect on my cultural/educational journey alongside the teachers in my classes (Chávez et al., 2020). What I learned from my pedagogical journey is the importance of making myself vulnerable as the class and I navigated difficult conversations about issues that confront all of us. This class took place during ongoing challenges to democracy in the US, during the trial of the police who killed George Floyd, during increasing racism and anti-Semitism taking place frequently, and in the midst of a pandemic. I was learning along with my students as I was updating, reinventing, and designing content to engage the teachers in the class in ways to help them think about how to take such content into their own practice. I still have work to do and am looking for how my practice will evolve the next time I teach this class. But for now, I am excited by the cultural/educational journey maps as well as the end-of-class reflections. I think this final quote from a teacher in the class says it all:

As I go back into the classroom after having taken this class, I walk in as a teacher with a “third eye”, an eye that understands the different injustices each of my students face based on how they identify themselves, how their peers identify them, and how other adults and educators identify them as.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# The First Gen Photo Project: In Their Own Words

*Lauren G. McClanahan*

### PART I: BACKGROUND

Portrait photography has always been an interest of mine. I have no special training, or special equipment, and have always approached it more as a hobby—something I enjoy doing during my downtime. I like the planning that goes into creating a photo shoot with a client, such as outfits, locations, and the overall “vibe” of our time together. I also really like the conversations that happen during the photo shoots, how most people tend to start out really shy, but by the end are hamming it up for the camera and opening up to me as we go along. But most of all, I like the response I receive when people see their finished portraits for the first time. Reactions range from disbelief to excitement to tears of joy, especially when moms see portraits of their little ones. I believe that this process of getting to plan, shoot, and reflect on the process helps people to shape their identities: to design the best versions of themselves that they wish to put forward to the world. It’s a powerful process to witness firsthand.

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L. G. McClanahan (✉)  
Department of Media Literacy, Western Washington University,  
Bellingham, WA, USA  
e-mail: [mcclanl@wwu.edu](mailto:mcclanl@wwu.edu)

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In my day job, I am a Professor of Secondary Education at Western Washington University (WWU), a public, four-year comprehensive university in Bellingham, Washington, that is home to roughly 16,000 students. Of those, approximately 29% of our new, first-year students identify as being the first in their families to attend college or “first gen.” This general university statistic is reflected in my classes in the College of Education as well, with about a quarter of my students identifying as first gen. Not being a first gen student myself, I admire my students who are and understand that the challenges that they face in college are in so many respects different from my own. The unwritten “language” of higher ed, the complexities of financial aid forms, and the culture of campus life mean different things to different students, especially for my first gen students, and all of those elements work differently to shape their college experience.

I remember several years ago being intrigued by the “Humans of New York” photo project, wherein the photographer would make portraits of people he met in the city and ask them to provide some information about themselves so that viewers might get a more complete picture of who they were and what their dreams and aspirations were. Inspired, I wondered if a similar format might work for my students who identified as first gen, who shared with me that sometimes the stereotypes that some first gen students face were in fact not true. Students shared with me that just because their parents did not attend college did not mean that they were not highly supportive of their children and their educational journey. My first gen students shared with me that they sometimes felt awkward in their classes, especially if they were among the only first generation students of color in that class. Together, my students and I wondered if having the opportunity to present counter-narratives of their lived experience would help other, future first gen students feel more at ease and at home in a culture that could sometimes feel cold and unwelcoming. Thus, the first gen photo project was born.

## PART II: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### *Funds of Knowledge*

The funds of knowledge concept, generally attributed to Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992), describe the familial accumulation of various abilities, assets, bodies of knowledge, and cultural ways of being and interacting that were prevalent in US-Mexican households in Tucson, Arizona. These funds include factors such as economics, geography, politics, agriculture, technology, religion, language, and cooking, and are socially and

cognitively complex, yet are rarely recognized in schools as legitimate sites for knowledge. According to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Washington State, K–12 teachers can identify students’ funds of knowledge as

- Academic and personal background knowledge;
- Accumulated life experiences;
- Skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts; and
- Worldviews structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces.

Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) emphasize a lack of recognition of these funds of knowledge in school settings, stating “Public schools often ignore the strategic and cultural resources, which we have termed funds of knowledge, that households contain. We argue that these funds not only provide the basis for understanding the cultural systems from which U.S.-Mexican children emerge, but that they also are important and useful assets in the classroom” (p. 313).

But it is not only public K–12 schools that fail to recognize the vast knowledge and skills that students bring with them to the classroom. Higher education, as well, is notorious for not valuing factors that many first generation college students possess when they arrive on campus. In fact, it can be the case that first generation college students are indeed lacking in some ways, not having had parents who have graduated from college and who, presumably, know how to “play the game.” Here is where negative stereotypes can emerge and where first gen students can become grouped together with other underrepresented groups on campus. According to Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018), “The dominant narrative of under-represented students, particularly those attending community colleges, is that they are unprepared and not as committed to their educational endeavors as other, more successful college students” (p. 4). Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018) continue, stating:

*[A] funds of knowledge approach can help faculty to consider students’ backgrounds and living conditions as sources of valuable knowledge rather than mere impediments to college-level learning. Furthermore, it is important to move beyond knowing that students are busy and have many responsibilities. Instead, faculty could learn in a deeper way about how students (and their families) navigate their resources ... and vulnerabilities (i.e., periods of unemployment, taking care of family members, financial scarcity, illness, etc.) in order to succeed in college. (p. 5)*

According to Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018), inclusive practices within classrooms can help to encourage a more hospitable learning experience for college students. They suggest that practices for inclusive pedagogy can include the following:

- Invite students to share their knowledge in multiple ways
- Collaborate with students as co-constructors of knowledge
- Establish critical dialogues with students
- Foster student choice. (p. 177)

The first gen photo project outlined in this chapter includes and embodies each of the above practices. By inviting students to co-construct knowledge in the form of self-representation using both text and photography, they are able to decide how to best articulate their experience of being a first generation college student. This co-construction includes choice, as well as critical dialogue before, during, and after each photo shoot.

### *Critical Literacy*

Critical literacy invites each of us to focus on issues of power and is always, inherently, political (Janks, 2010; Luke & Freebody, 1999). According to Hobbs (2021), critical literacy asks questions, such as who benefits from specific texts and who is disadvantaged? Who is represented and who is left out? As a literacy professor, I practice critical literacy in all of my classes and encourage my students to continually ask these questions of any text they encounter, be it alphabetic, aural, or visual. Janks (2010) continues that line of thinking, stating:

*A literacy teacher [is] someone who works with others to make meaning with or from texts. A critical literacy teacher is, in addition, interested in what all kinds of texts (written, visual and oral) do to readers, viewers and listeners and whose interests are served by what these texts do. They also help students to rewrite themselves and their local situations by helping them to pose problems and to act, often in small ways, to make the world a fairer place. (p. 19)*

Control over the production of various texts and the associated means of production are central to critical literacy for a number of reasons. According to Janks (2010), the ability to

- *Produce texts is a form of agency that enables us to choose what meanings to make;*
- *Construct texts gives us a better understanding of how texts are constructed and the affordances and constraints of different modes;*
- *Produce texts enables us to act on the world;*
- *Work actively with the combination and recombination of symbolic forms is a requirement for high-level work in a knowledge economy. It helps us think about how we are positioning ourselves and our readers by the choices we make as we write;*
- *Produce texts enables us to redesign our texts and the texts of others. It enables us to think about how to transform texts that we deconstructed to remake the world. (p. 156).*

Along the way, myriad decisions go into deciding how to create, or as Janks (2010) suggests, *design* various texts, regardless of medium. Implicit within each design decision and inherent in critical literacy are always considerations of power. “Designing encompasses the idea of productive power—the ability to harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing discourses ... combining and recombining those resources so as to create possibilities for transformation and reconstruction” (Janks, 2010, p. 25). In the case of the first gen photo project, students were doing just that—challenging existing discourses about what it means to be a first gen college student and creating possibilities to use their identities to transform not only themselves but students who will follow in their footsteps.

Part of the intentional counter-narrative aspect of portrait photography (or, arguably, the act of constructing any message, written or otherwise) involves the act of framing. When framing a photograph, the photographer, in tandem with or independent from their subject, makes choices as to what to include and what to leave out. As Szarkowski (1966) states, “[T]he photographer’s central problem is a simple one: what shall he [sic] include and what shall he [sic] reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture’s edge” (p. 6). Put another way, the act of framing is the ultimate act of power for a photographer. According to Ewald (2001), “As photographers, we have almost godlike discretion when it comes to altering the appearance of things by simply where we look at them from—by changing our vantage point” (p. 66). Whether shooting from the top down, from the bottom up, close-up, or from a distance, framing matters and is key in determining how students want to write their worlds (Freire



& Macedo, 1987). As Ewald (2001) reminds us, “As photographers and writers, we are observers and recorders of the world, real and imagined. Who we are and where we stand when we watch the world determines how we see and what we record” (p. 29).

### *Discourse Analysis*

Throughout the process of thinking more deeply about this long-term photography project, and in the process of translating that project into this chapter, I have relied upon various iterations of discourse analysis. Ultimately, the “texts” I am working from in my analysis include informal conversations I had with students during their photo shoots, the written statements that they provided after each shoot, and the finished product of the portrait with the associated text. According to Shanthi et al. (2015), discourse analysis is “a broad term used to analyze written and spoken text of peoples’ discourse (text and talk) in everyday social context” (p. 163).

One of the goals of discourse analysis is to “understand how people use language to create and enact identities and activities” (Shanthi et al., 2015, p. 163). The construction of identities, in particular, was important to me in this project, and discourse analysis allows for that identity construction to be made visible. Shanthi et al. (2015) go on to state, “This paradigm emphasises conduction study in their natural settings by attempting to make sense of, or interpret the meanings people bring to them by searching for patterns embedded in the data source itself” (p. 160), with data, in this case, being in the form of informal interviews and written text produced. Through informal “interview” sessions, I was able to “access various stories or narratives through which people describe their worlds” (Silverman, 2000, p. 823). Through the act of coding and categorizing conversations and written text into categories and themes, a picture of what the first gen experience was like for my students began to emerge.

## PART III: THE PROCESS

### *Recruiting and Scheduling*

There are several different ways that I recruit students to work with. One way is to simply ask for volunteers in my classes. This is how the project started and how I enlist the majority of my participants. After about two years of photographing my Secondary Education students exclusively, the

Office of Student Affairs caught wind of what I was doing and asked if I wouldn't mind photographing some of their student employees who were first gen as well. I jumped at this opportunity to broaden the scope of the students with whom I worked and enjoyed getting to know students outside of the College of Education.

The next step in the process involves the hard work of coordinating schedules. Since I shoot primarily outdoors, using natural light, the weather always plays a factor. Most photo shoots happen either in the fall or in the spring, but even then everyone must remain flexible. Then there is the trick of working around the students' school and work schedules, meaning that many shoots happen in the evenings or on weekends. Communication about scheduling happens primarily through texting, as students are often reluctant to use email.

### *Scouting a Location*

After a shoot day and time has been established, it is time to start thinking about location. This is one of my favorite parts, as it is fun for me to work with students to consider all of the possibilities. WWU sits on a beautiful forested campus high above the northern end of the Puget Sound. Snow-capped mountains, islands, and ocean views abound. The city of Bellingham also has its quirky charms, as it was once home to lumber and canning industries, leaving behind brick buildings and iron structures that lend themselves nicely to urban landscape photography. Bellingham is also home to several large-scale public art projects, many of which are colorful, whimsical, and very photogenic.

Oftentimes, students will choose a location on campus that is important to them, perhaps in front of a building where their major is housed, or a special cultural or academic center, or perhaps a special tree. The library is often chosen for what it represents in terms of learning. The fountain located in our main square is also a popular choice. But just as often, students will choose to head downtown, maybe to a waterfront park or a sculpture that speaks to their academic interest (I am thinking specifically of a young man majoring in aeronautical engineering who posed for his photo shoot atop a sculpture of a rocket ship).

Wherever students decide to go for their shoot, it is important that the choice is theirs. Sometimes, students ask to go to multiple locations and that's fine, too. Many know that someday they will leave this city and want to have memories of multiple places that were special to them. As a

photographer, I understand the importance of place and how places can recall memories of times long past. The places students choose typically end up as secondary characters in their photo stories, working to complete the picture of the students' identities.

### *Selecting a Wardrobe*

Of all of the elements that students consider when constructing their identities for their photos, none are quite as important as their wardrobe. Since critical literacy invites us to consider clothing as text, I give students complete freedom to wear what they like. Students will often ask me during the planning phase what they *should* wear and I always tell them to wear whatever they want! Students are pleased to hear this, and over the years have chosen to arrive on location wearing everything from t-shirts and tank tops to formal evening gowns and everything in between. Most students choose to wear what makes them most comfortable. Many students enjoy bringing a variety of accessories such as jewelry, scarves, and sweaters that they can change in and out of as the shoot progresses. On occasion, full-on wardrobe changes occur. Once, I had a student bring a small Bluetooth speaker to his shoot so he could play music as he was posing! This same student also live-Tweeted the entire event, which was certainly a first for me.

Part of providing students the agency to write their own scripts is what I want to accomplish with this project. By valuing students' concepts of what helps to create their identity, they feel safe to express themselves in ways in which they might not otherwise. Sometimes I do suggest that they wear something suitable for a family portrait, especially if the photo shoot happens close to Mother's Day weekend, and students consider giving their mothers copies of the photos as gifts. But what students ultimately decide to wear is their choice.

On occasion, students will bring props with them to their photo shoots. One student who was an avid tap dancer brought her tap shoes with her, and we shot her tap dancing in the rain. Another student, a history major, brought a pile of her history books, and we incorporated those into her photo shoot. Sometimes, students even bring extra people to the shoot, including spouses, children, and mentees. There is no limit to how students can individualize their own unique photo shoots.

### *Snapping and Chatting*

There are few things in life as awkward as the first delicate moments of a photo shoot. This is especially true if I do not know the students with whom I am working, but it is true even with students that I do know. There is something incredibly intimate about taking someone's portrait—looking so intently at them through my viewfinder, asking them to pose this way and that. It is also at this time that the inherent power differential between us as students and faculty becomes the most obvious. Those first few poses often look incredibly stiff and staged—so much so that I usually tell students that we're just going to take some test shots to start with. "Don't worry," I tell them. "I'm just adjusting the settings on my camera!" This lets us both get comfortable with one another and for them to establish trust with me that I am going to make them look as good as possible. Humor can be helpful here, and the fact that I often forget to take my lens cap off or turn my camera on signals to students that we all make mistakes! Several students have told me that they have never had their portraits taken before, and so they are nervous and not sure what to do. Others have clearly spent time in front of a camera, evidenced by how they twist and turn comfortably in front of the lens, as if they have a modeling career already behind (or ahead of) them. I need to be attuned to the needs of both.

In order to help students to feel as comfortable as possible during our shoot, I like to talk to them. I like to ask them a lot of questions about a wide range of topics—their families, their interests, what brought them to WWU. It helps that I am a naturally inquisitive person, never one to shy away from asking people to share about themselves. Of course, the depth of our conversations has a lot to do with whether or not the students feel comfortable with me. Throughout each shoot, I am again aware of the power dynamics that are at play, especially if the student is registered in one of my classes. During our shoots, I strive to be on equal footing with the students, stripping away our labels given to us by the university, often allowing the student to lead the session, both in terms of the conversation and in terms of the pacing and design of the shoot.

Oftentimes, our conversations start out by talking about what being a first gen college student means to them. An overwhelming number of students talk to me about the sacrifices that their parents have made in

order to make attending college possible, and this theme comes out in the writing that the students do to accompany their portraits. Some students share with me that they are not only the first in their families to go to college but also the first in their families to be born in the U.S. or that they themselves came to the U.S. at a very young age. I remember one photo shoot where a young man shared with me that his main motivation to do well in his classes was so he could someday give back to his parents—that everything he did in school was for them.

Another pattern that I notice as I photograph first gen students is that many of them plan on continuing their education beyond their four-year degrees. Some of the students are currently enrolled in graduate programs at WWU, but others talk about graduate programs in a variety of fields, everything from aeronautical engineering to social work. To these students, the dream of a college degree doesn't stop at the Bachelor's level, but continues to the Master's or Doctorate level. These conversations are the most fun for me to engage in as a professor, because I can see the passion with which they tell me about their futures—all of their hopes and dreams for what lies ahead. It is usually at this point in their photo shoots that students tend to become more relaxed and really start having fun with the process.

Once students are relaxed, the photos start to take on a more organic and less posed quality. Usually about 20 minutes in, students decide that they are ready to take more risks. Some will decide to try new, “sassier” poses. Some will suggest going to a new location or switch into a new outfit. Some will finally feel comfortable enough to laugh, which allows me to sneak in some candid, unrehearsed shots. These shots typically turn out to be my favorites.

### *Homework: Writing, Reflecting, Editing, and Sharing*

Once the students and I have decided that we have enough material to work with, I assign them their “homework.” First, I ask them to think about their written statement that will accompany their photo. I ask them to take a look at what previous students have written and then come up with a short paragraph responding to the prompt: “What does being a first generation college student mean to you?” This often turns out to be more difficult than it might at first seem, as students will sometimes struggle to find just the right words. When they do finally send me their statements, I

do minimal editing, mainly for length according to what will fit best in the frame. It is important to me that their words are their own. As one student told me after his shoot, “Nobody has ever asked me before how I feel being first gen, so I just want to get it right!”

The next thing I ask students to do is to select the file numbers of the photos that they really like and would like me to edit further. This is the point at which *my* homework begins. Before I send students their folder of photos (typically done via Google Drive), I edit *out* all of the ones that are technically imperfect—out of focus, eyes closed, bad composition, and so on. Once the less-than-perfect shots are deleted, I send students somewhere between 25 and 30 of our “best” shots. During a typical shoot, it is not unusual for me to take over 300 photos. I am a fan of just holding the shutter down and letting the camera fire away, capturing whatever it might. Of those 25–30 of the best shots, I ask students to give me their top two or three that they would like me to consider for their “final” portrait. From those finalists, I consider which one has the best composition in which to place their written statement. I then run the final portrait, complete with their written statement Photoshopped in by each student for final approval.

The students are often blown away by how well the final product turns out. I allow them to keep all of the photos they like and encourage them to share them with friends and family. Many of my portraits have been turned into Mother’s Day gifts and holiday cards, as well as profile pictures on social media. It’s always fun for me as a photographer to see my photos take on lives of their own, off of my hard drive and out in the real world.

Ultimately, I end up printing many of the finished portraits in large format, mounted on foam core, and display them in various locations around campus. First gen photos have also shown up in promotional materials used by the university as well as on websites and in official university publications. For this reason, students always sign release forms before we begin, although the releases are not mandatory. If a student would rather not have their photos shared, I respect that decision. But many students tell me that they would be proud to have their portraits seen by as many people as possible, especially by future first gen students on our campus. Students report to me that they like being mentors, in a sense, to the first gen students who will come after them, letting them know that they are not alone on their university journey.

## PART IV: THE THEMES

When considered as a full collection, many of the same recurring themes emerge from the written statements that the first gen students provide to accompany their portraits. By far the most popular theme is the importance of family, followed closely by how important it is to take advantage of the opportunities that college affords. In the section that follows, I present the themes that occur most frequently throughout the project.

### *Family*

Nearly every student with whom I work mentions in their written statements how important their families are to them. Many even tell me that their families are the reason that they work so hard to do well in school. Mentions of families typically fall into three main categories—how their degrees are dedicated to their parents, the support they received from family, and how much their families (specifically their parents) sacrificed in order for the students to obtain their degrees.

An example of a student dedicating their degree to their parents is Cecelia. An elementary education major, Cecilia not only dedicates her degree to her parents but also mentions their sacrifices that made attending college possible for her. She writes that she wants to make them proud and plans to do that by entering a career for which she has a great deal of passion (Fig. 3.1).

A second example of dedicating their degree to their parents can be seen in the husband/wife team of Talicia and Shelby, who are both human services majors. In their statement, Talicia writes, “When my husband and I receive our diplomas, both as first generation college graduates, it will be because of our parents and grandparents. Generations upon generations of hard work and dedication have paved the way for where we are today” (Fig. 3.2).

The theme of family support is also prevalent in many of the students’ personal statements. In fact, I would suggest that this is the theme that I saw most often crop up in students’ written statements, often in combination in conjunction with the theme of parental sacrifice. In her statement, Lindsay, a graduate student obtaining her secondary education teaching certificate, states, “I am exceptionally fortunate to have a family that has always supported my educational aspirations. I was always encouraged to pursue my academic interests and career goals on my own terms—with freedom, autonomy and perseverance” (Fig. 3.3).

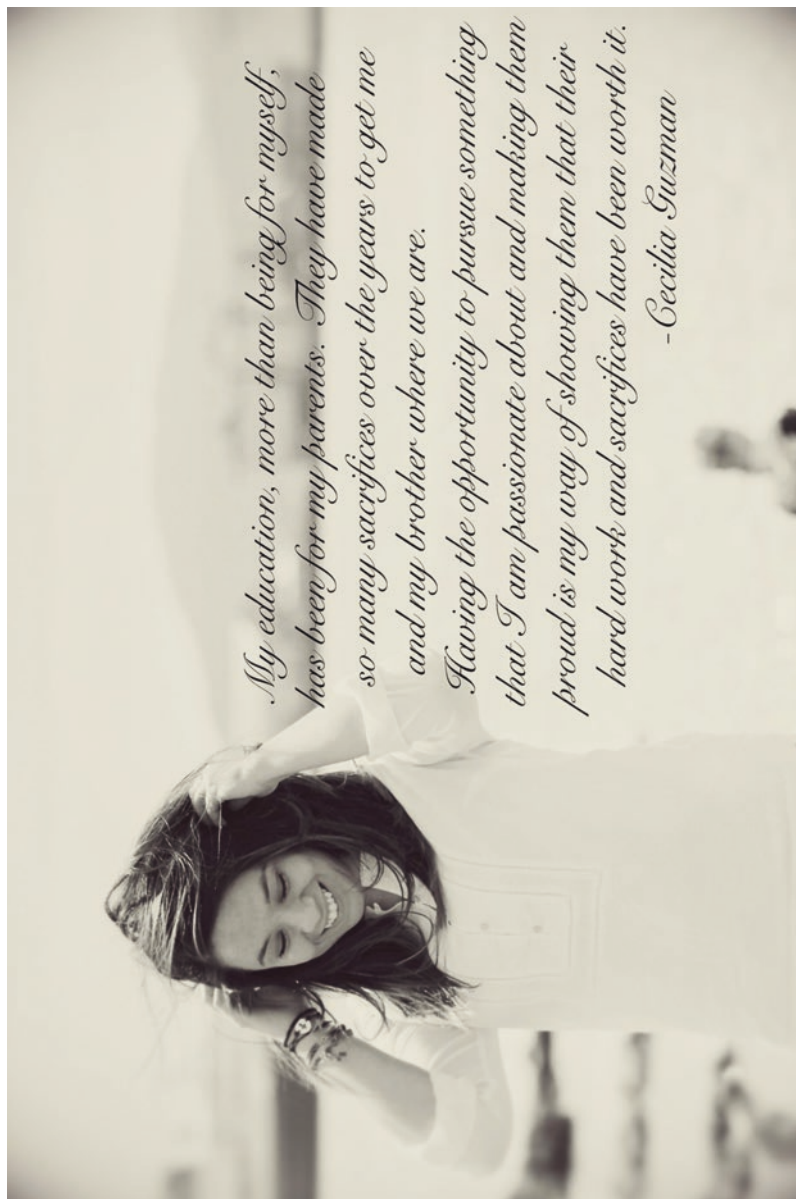


Fig. 3.1 Cecilia Guzman





Fig. 3.2 Talicia and Shelby Miller-Poole

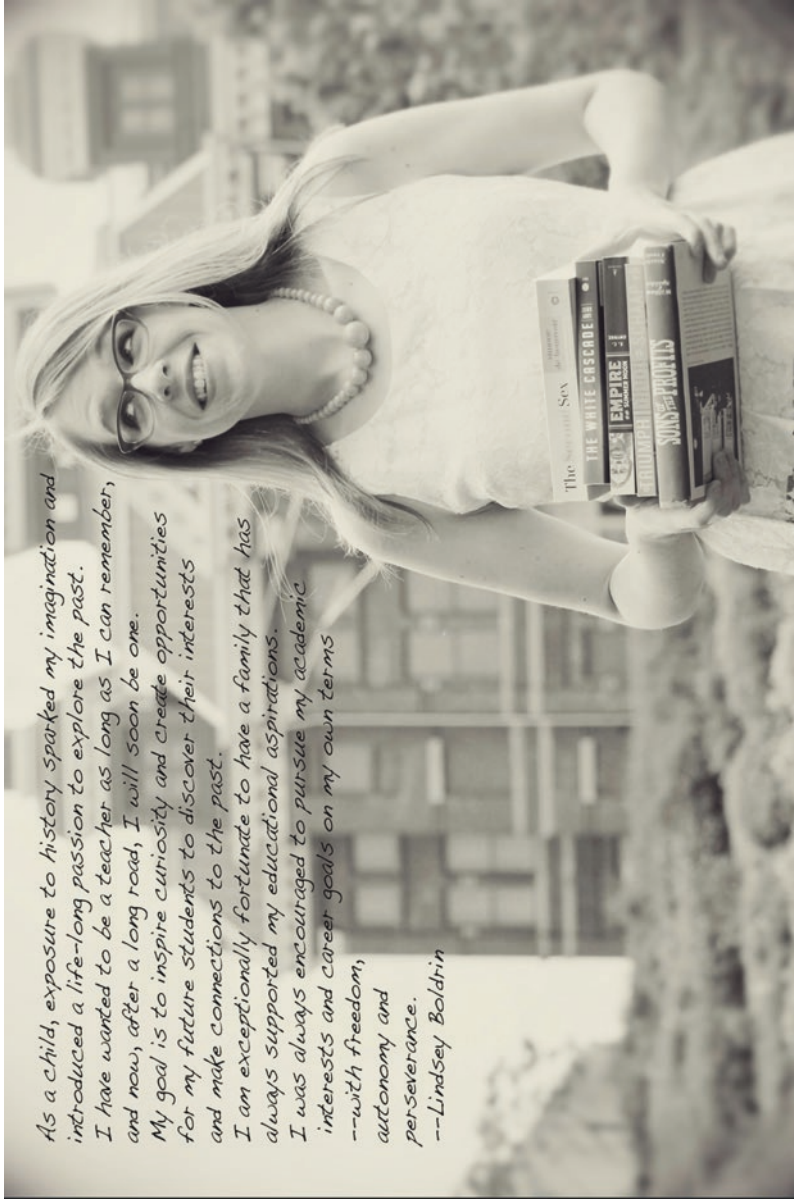


Fig. 3.3 Lindsey Boldrin

Above all, the first gen students with whom I worked identified parental sacrifice as a main contributor to their current success in college. During my time with Irene, she talked a lot about the love that she had for her father and how his sacrifices made it possible for her to attend college. In her statement, she says, “I was granted the opportunity to continue my education at a four-year university because of the sacrifices my father had to make. Without the unconditional love and support from him, I wouldn’t have been able to be where I am today. I am a first-generation student and woman of color who plans to give back to my father for all of his sacrifices to get me to Western. Everything I do is for him”(Fig. 3.4)

Emran voiced the same appreciation about the sacrifices that his parents made for him to be able to continue his education. In his words, “No one said that this was ever going to be easy. That was evident in my parents’ numerous sacrifices they made for me to be here and to receive a college education—an opportunity they never had.” During our time together, Emran also talked a lot about his racial and ethnic roots, and how important it was that he not forget that part of his identity as he worked his way through college and into his career. In his written statement, he says, “But as successful as you can possibly become, I truly believe in the importance of remembering your roots and honoring those who came before you, and to give back to those communities and people who have empowered and motivated you. Never forget where you came from” (Fig. 3.5).

### *Opportunities*

Another theme that came up frequently in both the written statements and my conversation with students was that of opportunity. Many of these students understood that more than anything, their families were providing them with the opportunity to attend college and that was something that they felt both grateful for and obligated to honor. For others, opportunity came through various scholarships. For twins Carlie and Cylie, it was softball scholarships that provided them the opportunity to attend WWU. In their written statement, they focus on the theme of opportunity specifically, stating, “Opportunity. Life is all about the opportunities you are presented. For us, softball gave us a great opportunity to further our education. It was important for us to take advantage of this opportunity, because someone has to be the first person to break the cycle and start a new tradition. Who better than you to be that first person in your family?” (Fig. 3.6).

While growing up, I have realized that life is rocky and has its ups and downs, but one thing I have constantly been reminded of is taking advantage of all opportunities that come my way. I was granted the opportunity to continue my education at a four-year university because of the sacrifices my father had to make. Without the unconditional love and support from him, I wouldn't have been able to be where I am today. I am a first-generation student and woman of color who plans to give back to my father for all his sacrifices to get me to Western. Everything I do is for him.

Irene Bibian  
Biochemistry/Psychology

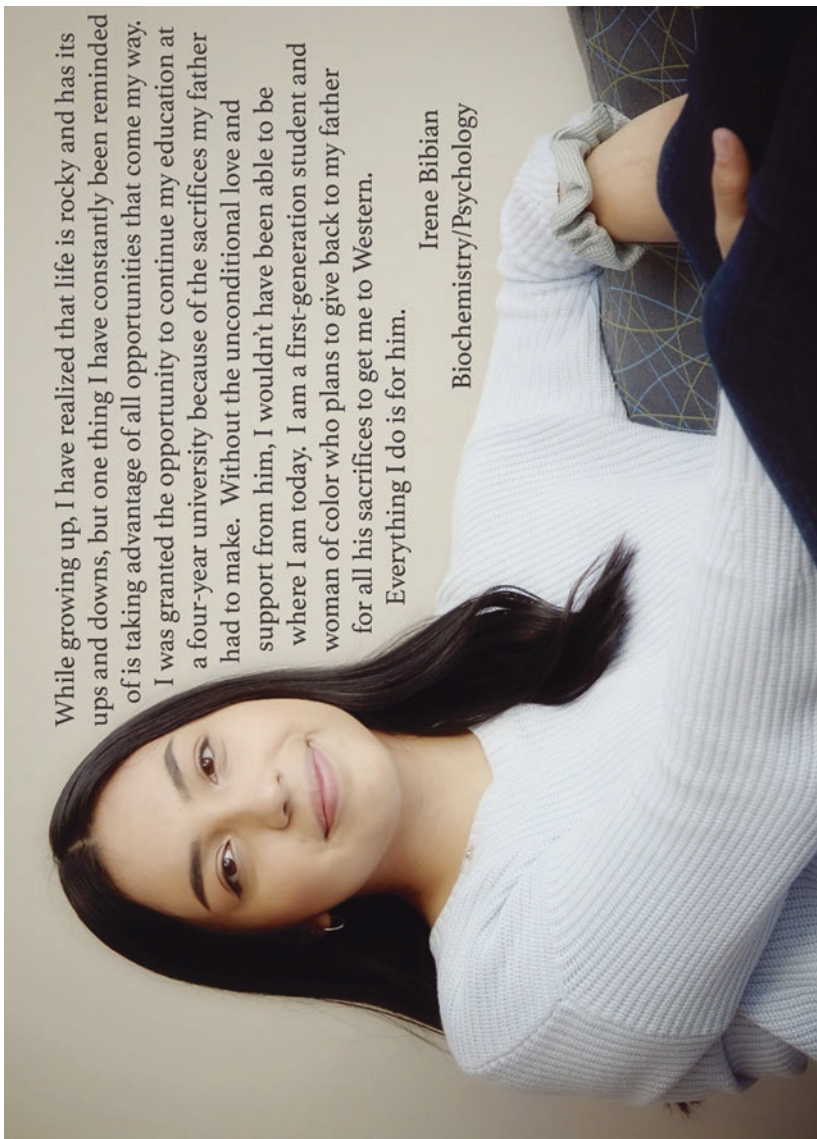


Fig. 3.4 Irene Bibian



Fig. 3.5 Emran Rezaei



Fig. 3.6 Carlie and Cyllie Richards

Irene (see Fig. 3.4) also wrote about the importance of taking advantage of various opportunities that came her way. In her statement, she combines the themes of opportunity and parental sacrifice, stating, “While growing up, I have realized that life is rocky and has its ups and downs, but one thing I have constantly been reminded of is taking advantage of all opportunities that come my way. I was granted the opportunity to continue my education at a four-year university because of the sacrifices my father had to make.”

### *Not Belonging*

A theme that several students mentioned, both in their writing and in their conversations with me, was that of either fearing not fitting in at college or experiencing those actual feelings once they arrived. For some, those were feelings that they also felt in high school, and for others, it was unique to their college experience. For Yalda, those feelings of not belonging in school were with her before entering college. In her written statement, she shares:

*I was always “the other” in my classes growing up, and that did not change in university. Being a first generation woman, I was always forced to prove that I deserve to be here, like my peers, receiving the same education as them, but working twice as hard. Although it’s been hard, through making personal connections in the ESC (Ethnic Student Center), I was able to find a community that related to my struggles where we were able to laugh and cry together.*

Yalda follows this statement with a nod to the sacrifice of her parents and then with a statement of her desire to give back to her community upon graduation. “I hope to take everything I have learned from my years in higher education to give back to my community” (Fig. 3.7).

Ana, an elementary education major, was even more adamant in her written statement, directing her words to the naysayers who predicted that she would not succeed in a college setting. “I was always told that I wouldn’t be where I am today. Everyone thought that I would end up dropping out of high school. Well, those people were wrong” (Fig. 3.8).



Fig. 3.7 Yalda Naimzadeh





*I was always told that I wouldn't be where I am today. Everyone thought that I would end up dropping out of high school. Well, those people were wrong. There are many obstacles that I had to jump to get here. I push myself each and every day--not just for myself, but for my parents and my siblings. I want to make them proud. I want my mother to know that her little girl did it. Being the first is a journey that my family gets to experience with me, too.*

*Ana Cervantes*

Fig. 3.8 Ana Cervantes

In his written statement, Emran (see Fig. 3.5) makes a brief statement about the theme of not belonging, or rather his abilities being doubted, when he says, “I did this for my talented friends, my beautiful family that includes my hard-working sister who was the first among us to graduate, and for those who still continue to doubt me and question if I really belong here.”

### *Setting an Example for Future First Gen Students*

A final theme that was detected in the written statements of the students with whom I worked was that of setting an example for future first gen students to emulate. As we talked, almost all of the students told me that they wished they had more role models as they were coming up through middle and high school. In fact, some asked if their photos would ever be shared with younger students and indeed they have. Whenever I provide photography workshops to K–12 teachers and students, I share portraits of my first gen students and they are always very well-received. Carlos, a student of mine in the Secondary Education department and an amateur weightlifter, wrote on his photo, “As a first generation college student, it is important to me to set an example for my future children and grandchildren to show them what is possible. I feel blessed to have learned the process of filling out college applications, filing my FAFSA, searching for scholarships, and preparing for the SAT’s” (Fig. 3.9).

Nancy, a dual biology/psychology major, wrote about how she would like to be a role model not only to her family but to her community as well. “I also feel a sense of responsibility to my Hispanic community to try and set an example to future students that may find themselves in a similar situation.” She told me in our conversations that she had few role models growing up of Hispanic women in the sciences and how she would like to become one of those examples for young girls today (Fig. 3.10).

In her written statement, Jaimee, an elementary education major, assumes that her audience is fellow first gen students. To them, she writes, “Where we come from doesn’t mandate what we are capable of or the lives we are expected to lead. The only obstacle that stands in our way of gaining knowledge is ourselves.” To this end, she wanted a portrait where she was surrounded by children’s books, a metaphor for the knowledge she has gained during her time at WWU (Fig. 3.11).



Fig. 3.9 Carlos A. Serrano Castro



Fig. 3.10 Nancy Talavera



Fig. 3.11 Jaimee Alonso

## PART V: THE FACULTY/STAFF

Each spring, as part of our graduation ceremonies at WWU, I have large format prints created and displayed at various receptions for families and other faculty across campus to see. After about three years, some faculty and staff began to approach me, asking if I would be willing to work with them to help them tell their stories. This, of course, was a task that I gladly took on. Sometimes, depending on the faculty or staff member, students may not know too much about their background, including the struggles that they may have had to endure to get to where they are in the academy today. It made sense that if faculty and staff would share their experiences as being the first in their families to go to college, it might help to close the gap, especially in terms of power relations, that can form between students and the professionals they interact with each day.

Something that became clear right away was how the faculty and staff themes paralleled the students' themes—themes of parental sacrifice, taking advantage of opportunities, and not always feeling like they belonged. Dr. Karen Dade, Associate Dean of the Woodring College of Education, thanked her parents for supporting her when college was not something everyone in her community could access. In her written statement, she shares, “In coming up, college was not very accessible to those in my community. I thank my parents, who instilled strong education values and the will to achieve despite the odds” (Fig. 3.12).

For Dr. Veronica Velez, Director of the Education for Social Justice Minor at WWU, refusing to be an exception was evident in her writing, stating, “As a first generation college student, I refused to be the exception, the ‘only’ in my classes, my cohort, my program. I refused to accept the terms higher education had set for defining opportunity, educational or otherwise” (Fig. 3.13).

For Dr. Victor Nolet, Professor of Secondary Education, parts of college felt mysterious to him because he had nobody in his family who had ever experienced it. In his statement, he writes, “[W]hen I got to college, I figured that everyone else had some kind of book that told them how to understand all the mysterious code words and complicated systems and social norms associated with college. ... I’m truly grateful that there were so many generous and kind people along the way who helped me get by without that secret book!” (Fig. 3.14).

Dr. Francisco Rios, Dean of the Woodring College of Education, shared in his written statement how his success at college was important for his sense of familial identity (Fig. 3.15):

*I am humbled to have been a first generation college graduate. In coming up, college was not very accessible to those in my community. I thank my parents, who instilled strong education values and the will to achieve despite the odds. Not only did that inspire me to graduate from college, it taught me to reach back and pay it forward. My joy is in doing that over and over again in honor of my parents.*

*Karen Dade, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean,  
Woodring College of Education*



Fig. 3.12 Dr. Karen Dade



Fig. 3.13 Dr. Veronica N. Velez



College was always just an idea that other people talked about, not something anyone in my family actually knew about from experience. It's not that education wasn't a priority for my family, it's just that food on the table and a roof overhead were more pressing priorities. We moved to wherever my parents found work and I ended up attending four different elementary schools and three different high schools in three states. So there were a lot of gaps in my education. I applied to go to college in April of my senior year of high school after a friend invited me to ride along to visit the school he was planning to attend in the fall. That was the first time I'd ever considered the possibility that college was something anyone in my family could actually do.

But when I got to college, I figured that everyone else had some kind of book that told them how to understand all the mysterious code words and complicated systems and social norms associated with college.

I just assumed it was another one of those things I'd missed with all that moving around. I'm truly grateful that there were so many generous and kind people along the way who helped me get by without that secret book! College made it possible for me to enjoy a career and quality of life that was beyond anything my parents could have hoped for.

Victor Nolet, Ph.D.  
Secondary Education



Fig. 3.14 Dr. Victor Nolet

I recall a moment when I was uncertain about returning to the university. I shared this at a family reunion with my *Tia* Ramona, who responded by saying, "You have to go back; you have no choice. Look around at your sisters and brothers, *tus primos y tus vecinos*. We need to know from you who we--our family and community--can become." These words continue to inspire me today.

Francisco Rios, Ph.D.

Dean, Woodring College of Education



Fig. 3.15 Dr. Francisco Rios

*I recall a moment when I was uncertain about returning to the university. I shared this at a family reunion with my Tia Ramona, who responded by saying, "You have to go back; you have no choice. Look around you at your sisters and brothers, tus primos y tus vecinos. We need to know from you who we—our family and community—can become." Those words continue to inspire me today.*

Today, you can find large format photos of WWU students and faculty and staff hanging side-by-side, throughout campus. By being highly visible, the university is making a statement that declares, "We value our first generation students!"

## PART VI: THE QUESTIONNAIRES (REFLECTION)

After I deliver the finished portraits along with the associated text to students, I ask them to answer a few questions via a questionnaire. I don't always get these returned, as it is usually at the end of the academic term by this point and time is limited. However, some do find the time and energy to return them, and I am always appreciative for what they tell me after having a bit of time to reflect.

One question I ask is how they felt when I initially reached out to them to be a part of this project. Overwhelmingly students say that they felt excited. They felt excited to share their experiences and tell their stories. One student responded that they felt honored, to not only participate but to be a role model, so that other students could see "a familiar face" hanging on the wall and maybe not feel so alone.

A related question that I ask is what made them say yes? As I mentioned earlier, some students know me from class, but many do not, and being photographed by a stranger can be awkward, to say the least. Some students said that when they saw pictures of their friends, they wanted to say yes also. The majority of students, however, said they said yes because they wanted to share their experience with others. One student told me during our photo shoot that nobody had ever asked him what his experience was like, being a first gen student. He told me that he said yes because I was the first person to ask.

When asked what the term "first gen" meant to them personally, students had mixed responses. Some told me that it meant being able to represent their families in an academic way, as one student said, "[P]utting my family on the academic map." Others told me that being first gen meant sacrifice, mainly on the part of their parents. Some took a broader

interpretation of the phrase, saying that it represented the first in their families to migrate to a new country. Yet others defined first gen in terms of opportunity, specifically “having the opportunity to be the first in my family to have the opportunity of a higher education.” On occasion, students would tell me that the term “first gen” sometimes had a negative connotation, meaning that others might perceive their parents as not valuing their education, or that their parents themselves were “under-educated.” This reminded me of how oftentimes the funds of knowledge that our students bring with them to college are undervalued and this is not lost on our students.

When asked about how they felt during the photo shoot itself, one student said, “I felt like a star! I’ve never had formal portraits taken of myself before, so I felt so special. I even wore special earrings that my mother gave to me as a gift.” Another student said that although she felt shy at first, she quickly grew more comfortable, especially since, in her words, “You gave me the power to make all of the decisions in how I wanted to represent myself.”

A final question that I asked all of my participants was how their families reacted to seeing their final portraits. One student reported, “They absolutely LOVED it! They especially liked what I wrote. It made my mom cry!” Another student told me something similar, that her parents were “especially touched by my personal statement.” As a portrait photographer, especially of families, I take crying moms as the highest compliment.

Being involved in this long-term photography project has given so much depth and meaning to my work, not only as a part-time photographer but also as a full-time faculty member. One concept that we impart to future teachers in my department is the importance of relationships in education. Relational teaching is the foundation upon which all else is built and we cannot build relationships with our students unless we make an effort to get to know them. By asking students questions about their backgrounds, I am breaking down barriers that could impede their learning. By letting my students teach me, I am learning so much. I will always remember what one student wrote to me on their exit questionnaire. When asked how it felt for them to put themselves “out there” as a role model for future first gen students, they wrote, “It feels so good to have my story laid out for folks to read and appreciate—like having people know about me and what I had to go through feels really good. I hope it can motivate others to succeed.”

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Insights from Our Mothers: An Intergenerational, Intercontinental Story

*Ambika Gopal Raj and Lauren G. McClanahan*

### INTRODUCTION

As the twenty-first century is well on its way and the global world is smaller and more instantaneous, peoples' cultures, ways of living, knowing, and being are still miles apart and set in the ways as represented by the media. We still think dichotomously in terms of "us" versus "them", "my culture" versus "their culture", and so on. Might we find common ground in the wise stories of women? Might we find power in the surprising universality of women's lives and their lived experiences?

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A. G. Raj (✉)  
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [ambika.raj@calstatela.edu](mailto:ambika.raj@calstatela.edu)

L. G. McClanahan  
Department of Media Literacy, Western Washington University,  
Bellingham, WA, USA  
e-mail: [mcclanl@wwu.edu](mailto:mcclanl@wwu.edu)

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Through storying, two academicians learn the stories of two women, their mothers, who are both in their seventies. The mothers, who are both educated and have raised their respective families, have had very different life paths. From growing up in a bustling city in India to growing up on the then-remote Florida Keys, we find similarities in their lives when there was seemingly nothing in common. What insights could these women give us, their daughters, about the last century? What tales could they tell us about similar tumultuous times through the decades? What was happening in each country in the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond that affected both countries and affected these women's lives? What can we learn from their stories about our connectedness and disconnectedness? We, the daughters, "the academics", set out to explore our mothers' stories as an inter-continental storying project.

It had been an idea that finally came to be in the summer of 2017—Lauren coming to visit India and us touring around some sites together. It happened over three weeks in the end of July to August. The sweltering heat in India had turned into cool rainy days in the south but sweaty, humid days in the north. Lauren came with Sandy, her mother, and Sarah, her daughter, from Bellingham, WA. She flew in to Hyderabad, my city, where I had grown up. My children were already in Hyderabad visiting their dad and my mother, Radha, lived there. I reached from Los Angeles, CA, about a week before Lauren arrived (Fig. 4.1).

While we had planned out our travel around India down to the hour, we had only vaguely talked about getting our mothers to tell us their stories. We didn't have much of a plan except to ask them about their childhoods. Over two hot afternoons, we sat with our mothers in my mother's apartment, drinking hot chai and doing laundry. We, the "academics", the scholars (so we thought!), one a professor of media literacy (Lauren) and the other a professor of elementary education (me) (Fig. 4.2).

We invited them to talk more with each other than to us, in answering our open-ended questions. The focus of this project was cultural but also political and beyond—a way to navigate our understandings of *who* we are, *where* we came from, and *who* we became as well as could become. We were especially interested in their stories as women from the last century and us as millennial cuspers. We were interested in their opinions and feelings not just about what life was like in their shoes, but also what life is like now that they see us live our lives in our times. Interestingly, we found many similarities when it came to their roles as women—while one was a home-maker, the other worked part-time outside the home, and yet they



Fig. 4.1 Radha and Sandy in India, 2017



Fig. 4.2 Lauren and Ambika in Bellingham, 2013. We were tenured Full Professors!





**Fig. 4.3** Radha and Sandy, Hyderabad, 2017: deep in conversation

both were primarily responsible for raising the kids, after-school sports, activities, school-related activities, and home chores like cleaning, dishes, shopping, dinner, laundry, and so on (Figs. 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6).

There were also poignant life event similarities as each woman shared about caring for their spouse during their respective prolonged illnesses (one with kidney failure and the other with cancer), and how their spouse's eventual deaths affected them and their lives. What was amazing throughout were their attitudes and finding common ground through emotion, even though they both spoke different languages. Their stories were insightful, inspirational, and above all powerful. We, the daughters, had much to learn. In the following transcript, we stayed true to how they told their stories with only some coaxing from us. Especially, Radha's story is kept in the way she said it without any changes. As Radha is multi-lingual (she fluently speaks over six languages and can read and write fluently in four), sometimes she "literal" translates expressions in English which may sound grammatically different.

- Ambika: “So Sandy and Radha (sorry, Amma), we want to know a little about your early childhood. Tell us where you grew up and how many siblings you had. And a little bit about your life.”
- Lauren: “What years were you born and where and where you grew up?”
- Ambika: (laughs) “They’re pointing to each other.” (As Sandy and Radha looked at each other for the other to begin)
- Lauren: “And speak as loud as you can” (having put her I-phone on the table in front of them)
- Sandy: I was born in 1943 in Miami Florida. Um I have one brother who is two years younger than I am. And I grew up in the Florida Keys, in Marathon to be specific. And then we came back up to Miami when I was in the 8th grade. So, it was very primitive on the Keys then. We had electricity then, but we had a big cistern to collect water because we didn’t have running water. Despite all that it was fun. We didn’t have any entertainment to speak of. We just played outside and swam and went fishing.
- Sandy: We didn’t have movies or even have a hospital then. So, you better not get sick. But we did have fun. I was forced to play with my brother because there was nobody else.

**Fig. 4.4** How Marathon, FL may have been like in 1943 from Google pictures



**Fig. 4.5** Sandy with her brother in 1947



**Fig. 4.6** The main street in Shencottah, India, 1943 from Google pictures



Radha: I am Radha. I was born in India—South India. I was born in Shencottah, that place is very close to Cape Comorin the south most tip of India. The town I was born on the border of the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. I have three brothers and two sisters. I am the youngest in my family. 1938, I was born.

Lauren: You both were born in the southern most tip of your countries!

We all laughed at this surprising fact! Lauren paused her I-phone to check if the recording was understandable. As we had not really planned this in any formal way, we didn't carry with us any formal recording device. And that is the way we wanted to keep it anyhow, given the motive of this storying. That is, we wanted our mothers to share about their past. We, the daughters, were more interested in how the dynamics between the two of them would play out.

When we each first broached the subject to them individually, of learning about their individual lives through this storying, both responded with some surprise and in the case of my mother, mild ridiculousness of the whole thing. I remember she asked, "Why am I important?" "Why would you want to know *my* story?" or "What do you want me to say?" "I had a normal average life, why would that be interesting?" I think Lauren reported something along the same lines as well adding that her mother said, "There's really nothing special to report about my life". Nevertheless, they both indulged us, and for that, we were thankful.

Both Lauren and I were the only daughter, and in Lauren's case, she was an only child. I had two older brothers, although there was a large age gap of seven years between us.

### *My Amma, in My Eyes (Ambika)*

*My mother was the youngest of six children and I was her youngest. From stories that I have heard about her, I knew I was a lot like her. Defiant, independent, cared deeply about justice and doing the right thing. But she was the poet, the writer, the maker of songs for all weddings, the singer who lulled me to sleep with her melodious voice. Living in a foreign country, (Malaysia), as the wife of an up and coming finance executive (my father), she told me stories of hosting "cocktail parties", going to corporate "dinners", learning to eat with a fork and spoon. Although she could rarely eat anything at these dinners as people then didn't understand what being vegan meant! She regaled me with stories of learning English by watching "I Love Lucy", "I dream of Jeannie", "The Andy Griffith Show", and more—shows I had never seen until I saw reruns when I came here as a graduate student more than 30 years later! She was also a rising star vocalist giving professional concerts in Indian classical music (Carnatic music), in and around Kuala Lumpur. Once, I vaguely remember her telling me that she had to stop her musical career because she had three children to look*

after now. Growing up, my mother would let slip her musings about her relationship with me. For example, she has always (seemingly) derided me for my independence in various ways. “Don’t laugh so loudly” or “Right . . ., you know everything right from when you were born don’t you?!” or “You are lucky we allowed you to go out by yourself” or “Please behave like a girl!”, and so on. Please note that these were often said in jest or love and sometimes even in admiration. Further, they were said in Tamil, my language, and don’t really translate well. And yet, growing up in India, I was afforded so much freedom as a girl because of my parents’ belief of not differentiating between my brothers and I. To contextualize this for you, the reader, it was the 1980s and I was in a southern city in India. Going to the movies, or even out to dinner wasn’t a thing yet. The city we lived in—Hyderabad—had a large Muslim population and a rather conservative Hindu population. Girls from respectable families did not wear pants, skirts, or t-shirts. Women generally wore a loose tunic with harem pants (called Salwar Kameez) or Sarees. I believe I was the only girl amongst all my peers and friends in any context to have learned how to swim as a teenage girl. And it was my mother who took me to these classes, waited and sat outside the pool watching me the whole time. She’d say “I became so dark and tanned because of you!” As a teenager, I rode my bicycle all over my neighborhood, and later an electric motorbike everywhere as a young woman. I had a few pairs of “pedal-pushers”, wore my brothers’ t-shirts in the rather conservative city I grew up in. There was never any questions about me bringing boys home as friends or later choosing my own spouse. For these freedoms, I am thankful. In fact, I don’t think I realized these were freedoms afforded to me or that I was any different than other girls until much later.

### *My Mother (Lauren)*

I grew up as a very typical suburban kid in Columbus, Ohio, in the United States. The suburb where I grew up, Upper Arlington, had a reputation for being where the “rich” families lived. It was quite close to downtown, but also bordered the university and was occupied mainly by doctors, lawyers, and professors. My parents were none of those things, and as such, we lived on the “fringe” of the community—within the boundary so I could attend the UA schools, but just far enough away from the country club to live in an affordable house. My father was a journalist, and my mother a dental hygienist. It

*was unusual for mothers in my suburb to work, and I admired my mom for that.*

*My mom was never like all the other moms. After graduating high school at 16, and playing college basketball, she had an independent spirit that she carries with her through today. I remember the day of my senior prom; my mom decided to be crafty and sew my prom dress for me from scratch. I thought it might be a stretch for her skill set but went with it anyway. As my date sat in the living room waiting, there I was, upstairs with my mom as she tried to get the zipper attached to the back of the dress! She made it work, but she cut it pretty close (literally and figuratively). Regardless her domestic skills, she was incredibly supportive of me growing up, always encouraging me to try new things and do my very best. As I am nowhere near as athletic as either of my parents were, I always felt as if I let them down in some ways; however, what I lacked on the playing field I made up for by doing well in school, and being very intellectually curious, a gift I received from both of my parents. To this day, my mother continues to support me and now my daughter.*

After a short break where we replenished on chai, some snacks, and checking the recording device, we resumed our story with Sandy and Radha.

Sandy: My dad managed a wholesale fish company. And it was part of the family business. That's why we moved down there in the first place.

Radha: My father he was an engineer. Civil engineer so he has been transferred from place to place so many times. We moved a lot. So, my eleven years of school up to high school, I have studied in sixteen schools because my father got transferred from one place to another one place to another one place. \*laughs\* And some places we were only there six months and then he will be transferred. That's how I studied. Eleven years in sixteen places.

Radha pauses and looks at us. I coax her on, remembering details that Sandy had given (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8).

Ambika: What was your life like? Like Sandy said, she had electricity but no running water. She had to play with her brother.

Radha: When I was born there was no electricity in my town but when I was 4 or 5 years old we got an electric connection from a warehouse where my father built our house. I have seen many

people who don't have an electric light because they can't afford to get the power. So, they used to use the lights with the kerosene and use that light.

Sandy: Lanterns. We had those. Like the hurricane lamps.  
 Radha: (Nodding affirmation at Sandy) And according to my siblings, I am the luckiest in my family. Because in that time, my father was earning more. So I have all the luxuries in my life. Better than my older brothers. (Laughs) When I was born my father bought a car but each town where my father was working, the school was not far away and we used to walk to the school. Once in a while when my father was passing by that way, he would bring us by car. Otherwise, we always go by walking to our school. I studied in Kerala language that is Malayalam. That is the language of Kerala. I studied in that till the British rule was in India, there was some English schools and all until 1947. But I studied in Malayalam when I was six years old. They didn't have kindergarten and all. There was some kind of a preschool but that's all. We lived in a joint [combined, multigenerational] family so we don't have any daycare center. Because always we have grandparents or aunties and uncles to



Fig. 4.7 Radha and her sisters, maybe 1948

look after us and so we don't have to go to any preschool. We always have help at home. I remember radio and all. We got it first before everyone else in town, because my father was earning more as a civil engineer. The others, they come and sit in our house and listen to some music and I remember all these luxuries when I was old enough to remember things. Because my father was very particular [i.e. detail-oriented]. He retired in 1955. He retired when he was 55 years old. He was born in 1900. So, in 1955 he retired. In our village there was college at that time. I haven't gone to any university. But I have finished high school. And in big cities within Kerala itself, they have good universities and colleges, but my father didn't want us to go stay in hostels ....

Lauren: He didn't want his daughters to be away from him.

Radha: (Nods towards Lauren) He sent his sons. He was ready to send his sons to hostels but his daughters he was protecting so much. So, we didn't have the chance to go to college but after I married, I got married at 22 years old. I got married to Gopal, Ambika's dad, and then that time I had to somehow

**Fig. 4.8** Radha in 1958—studio picture to solicit an arranged marriage





converse in English [referring to moving away] so I took classes and after I had learned how to speak English. Before I had known how to read and write [in school] but after these complications came [referring to managing on her own in a foreign country not knowing the language]. Because of his job, wherever he went I was like, ok that is my life (laughs). [referring to how she followed wherever her husband was] still now I haven't had any problems with financial problems [Referring to how her father, then her husband took care of her needs financially]

We were all so involved in Radha's story, including Sandy, who was just listening. We checked on the laundry and continued on, eager to now listen to Sandy. While Radha had just spoken about her missed opportunity to go to college as her father was "protective", Sandy had finished school early and went to college (Fig. 4.9).

- Lauren: Okay now you (Sandy), talk about your education and what you did right after because you graduated early.
- Sandy: (rather nonchalantly) Yes, I did.
- Lauren: (Clearly proud of her mother) Talk a little about that
- Sandy: I was just going to say something about luxuries we had [As Radha had just spoken about how she had been taken care of]
- Lauren: Go ahead.
- Sandy: When we were living on the Keys we didn't have any television. And we didn't get TV until 1956 when we moved back up to Miami. We had a radio. So, we would all get together and listen to the different radio shows. Like the shadow and Lone Ranger. And the series things. And we thought that was great at the time. We did get electricity later and we also got running water. It was very exciting. It also meant we had to take more baths! (laughs) And then as far as school, one of the reasons we moved back up to Miami in 1956 was because there was no high school in Marathon on the Keys and we would have had to be bused to Key west and my dad didn't want us to have to do that because it was dangerous. So, we decided to move

back up to Miami, so I could go to High school. And I did graduate early from high school I was sixteen. And I went on to college.

Lauren: Why did you graduate early from high school? Was it because you were super smart?

Sandy: No, I skipped a grade.

Ambika: Which grade did you skip?

Sandy: Second.

Ambika: Oh, why?

Sandy: Because we moved down to the keys then and I was too far ahead of the kids in the classroom and so they moved me.

Ambika: Oh, so it was because you were super smart.

Sandy: No, the education was just better [in Miami].

It was funny how both Radha and Sandy were downplaying their achievements (Brown et al., 1998). This, in Lauren's and Ambika's gender equity minded, feministic worlds, was not right! But they were having none of it. Radha projecting her father's refusal to acknowledge his daughters' intelligence as diligence through his mandated no-college or even high school rule as being "particular" and taking care of details. And Sandy insisting that the schools were better in Miami hence she was ahead, it had nothing to do with her intellect! Lauren and I exchanged looks as we let them continue.

Lauren: (Indicating her mother) Let's start with the college part

Sandy: So, I graduate from high school in 1960 and then I went away to college in West Virginia. I wanted to study dental hygiene. And there was no dental hygiene program in Florida at the time. There was no dental school, so I went away to West Virginia which was supposed to be a good school. And I also graduated a little early there. I was 19 when I graduated. I got a BS degree in Dental hygiene. It was a good choice at the time. There weren't too many choices. It was difficult for women to get into engineering or any other field. It was basically nursing or teaching, and I didn't want to do either of those.

Fig. 4.9 Sandy in 1963



- Ambika: Nursing or teaching were the only choices that you had.
- Sandy: Yeah. So, then I got married. I met my husband in college and we got married shortly after that in 1963.
- Lauren: And how old were you when you got married?
- Sandy: Twenty Two. And then I ... wait no ... [Lauren and Sandy debate for a few minutes about how Sandy was when she got married!]
- Lauren: You were 20. If you were born in 1943 then you were 20 in 1963.
- Sandy: I guess you're right. Yes, that's correct. So, you wanted to know about the political climate?
- Lauren: Yes.
- Sandy: So, when I was still in high school the schools were still segregated. Everything was still segregated.
- Ambika: I'm just going to explain what segregated means to my mother. I am sure she knows but she doesn't know the term. Amma, segregated means blacks and white people were separated. You know how in American history black people could not go to the same schools, eat in the same restaurants. ... So that kind of thing is called segregation and so she means that this was still happening.

Radha nods to show she understood (Figs. 4.10 and 4.11).

**Fig. 4.10** Sandy in Miami, 1968



**Fig. 4.11** Radha in Kuala Lumpur, 1965



Sandy: Yeah. I think it was in 1960 when everything began to change after I graduated from high school and then they had everyone—everyone was together after that.

Lauren: They were segregated in your class, right?

Sandy: Oh, yeah. That was probably the biggest thing that happened while I was in high school as far as that kind of thing [referring to the civil rights movement all over the United States at the time]

We turned and looked at Radha and waited for her to comment on the political climate she grew up

Radha: What do I say?

Ambika: You can talk about the politics right after we got our freedom from the British, Amma. How did that affect you? What did you see around you?

Radha: I was too young. I was seven or eight years old. [India got freedom from British rule on August 15, 1947]

Ambika: I am sure you remember things on the radio and things that you were hearing and listening, if you remember. In the 1950s there was the Pakistan-Indian War so that was pretty major. Anything that affected you or your family?

Radha: I can't remember those things. I didn't—we never went that deep into politics in those days because we were children. You know as children don't know anything. Maybe depending on each circumstance too. I told you I haven't went through any difficulties in my life.

Ambika: So, you lived a sheltered life. And therefore, didn't know . . .

Radha: I don't know the difficulties because I never had to face them.

Ambika: (Explaining to Lauren and Sandy) Also, perhaps because she was in the deep south of India. And because my grandfather was pretty well off, he wasn't the middle class or the lower middle class. He was a white collar worker, he was an engineer and things like that. Perhaps life was easier for them than if my father were alive he would have had a pretty different story. (referring to the fact that my father's family struggled financially for many years)

Radha: Yes, my husband, he has many different siblings, and my father in law didn't have a very good job and all.

Ambika: They were not very well of.

Radha: No, so even through his education and all, my husband, he was giving tuition while going to college.

Ambika: Right from when he was in high school, my dad would coach math, he would tutor the other kids in math and the money he got from that he would pay . . .

Radha: He would pay his tuition fee.

Ambika: He would pay his tuition fee because schools weren't free.

Radha: His father could not support the family.

- Ambika: He was the only one who went to college amongst his siblings.
- Lauren: How many siblings?
- Ambika: My dad had four brothers and three sisters.
- Radha: So seven including him.
- Lauren: Wow!
- Ambika: And he was the only one who went to college because he tutored other kids to pay for it. So he had a very different life from my mother.
- Radha: He was having a lot of financial problems which I don't have. But he was well qualified, so my father chose this arranged marriage for me. So, my father decided that this man is the best to look after me—my father decided. So, I was quite happy, even now. He earned money and put so much money in the bank I can be fine financially. But for all the other support I need my children. (laughs) No I don't remember much about the politics.

It appeared that my mother kept going back to the men in her life and the patriarchal trope of men taking care of women. In an effort to bring the topic back to my mother's experiences, I asked her to think about politics again. However, Lauren was excited that my father's experiences also seemed to have similarities with her father's and so the topic changed again.

- Ambika: Anything about politics or anything you can tell us about Amma? Did the politics affect you in anyway? Or do you remember about it? If you don't it's okay.
- Radha: I don't.
- Lauren: Let's let my mother say about. ... Mom do you want to say anything about how dad grew up because he was in a different class.
- Sandy: Okay, yeah, my husband's background. ... His was very different than mine. He grew up in a small town in western Pennsylvania and his father was a coal miner, so they didn't have as many luxuries as we did. They lived in the coal mining housing, they had the housing for the men and families and he played a lot of sports and they had activities for them and everything. But his family grew up having difficulties. He was the first in his family to go to college.

- Lauren: What was the education level of his parents?  
 Sandy: I think both of my husband's parents went to school through the eighth grade.  
 Lauren: I thought his dad had went through the fourth grade, but she went through the eighth grade.  
 Sandy: Yeah, she went through the eighth grade.  
 Lauren: I thought she went through high school.

The topic quickly changed to our fathers and their families—Lauren and my grandparents. Sandy and Radha launched into a long dialogue about their respective mother and father-in-laws with Lauren and I interjecting. Our mothers seemed very excited and began animatedly talking with each other about how difficult life was like for their spouses when they were young. They shared about their spouses being first-generation college students and how they were both not only self-made men but made it possible for their families, that is Sandy and Radha to have a comfortable life. The conversation continued during lunch but we had stopped recording. At one point Radha and Sandy realized that they had both watched the after math of President Kennedy's assassination live on television. The talked about how saddened they both were when it happened. Radha especially empathized with Jackie Kennedy's predicament as she was a mother of two young children by then.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We had started with grand intentions of doing an oral history (Gluck & Patai, 1991) of our mothers and soon realized that it became a storying dialogue among the four of us animatedly talking and sharing as we realized so many similarities and points of connections in our lives (Silverman, 2000). While we didn't formally ask the following questions in these words, the information we wanted our mothers to tell us were based on these (Fig. 4.12):

- Tell us a little bit about your life as you were growing up.
- What was your schooling like? Did you go to college?
- What was your life like as a young adult and beyond?
- Did any political or world happenings have an impact on you? If so how?

**Fig. 4.12** Sandy and her family, 1969



We realized that like many women, our mothers' lives were deeply entangled with their respective husbands' lives. They had both been married to men who were self-made, first-gen college graduates, who had high-profile jobs and professional careers. Both Radha and Sandy had compromised their talents and wishes to be domestic supports to their respective husbands. Radha who was very talented as a classical vocalist and Sandy who always wanted to be a dental hygienist and perhaps could have been a dentist given her intellectual acumen. Lauren and I wondered, were we like that? Did we compromise? It was incredible the grace and dignity with which both women held up their husbands' lives even unto death as they cared for them during their prolonged illnesses. There was a certain stoicism that we, the daughters, noticed in our mothers when they spoke about their husbands' illnesses. Sandy who cared for her husband's battle with cancer and Radha who cared for her husband with renal failure spending seven months in the ICU. The sheer strength of character of our mothers was admirable indeed (Fig. 4.13).

While we, the daughters, had more freedom and independence in choosing our own paths in our lives, there was something commendable





Fig. 4.13 Radha and her family, 1974

and admirable about our mothers' resilience (Hartstock, 2019; Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). Today, both Sandy and Radha are independent women, active on social media, who keep up with politics, current affairs, and still read voraciously. We are humbled by our mothers.

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# Storying the Collective Memories of Women Developing and Implementing a Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

*Ambika Gopal Raj, Sharon H. Ulanoff,  
Lois André-Bechely, and Joan C. Fingon*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the journey and narratives of four women working in collaboration sharing their earliest recollections about their challenges as faculty engaged in different roles in the development and implementation of one doctoral leadership program. We use Memory work to bring together theory and experience (Crawford et al., 1992; Onyx & Small, 2001) to trace our professional identity development in a doctoral leadership program (EdD) and reflect on our pedagogy as doctoral faculty and

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A. G. Raj (✉) • S. H. Ulanoff  
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [ambika.raj@calstatela.edu](mailto:ambika.raj@calstatela.edu); [sulanof@calstatela.edu](mailto:sulanof@calstatela.edu)

L. André-Bechely • J. C. Fingon  
Charter College of Education, Cal State LA, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [loisab@calstatela.edu](mailto:loisab@calstatela.edu); [jfingon@calstatela.edu](mailto:jfingon@calstatela.edu)

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women (Cornforth et al., 2009). The study is anchored around the question: How did we collectively implement a new EdD leadership program that was intentionally socially just, equitable, and accessible?

We describe our storied experiences, rooted in the intersection between leadership and feminist perspectives, which informed our work and memories (both professional and personal experiences) as we developed as leaders in this endeavor. We focused on the concept of “leadership in place” (Wergin, 2007) that best describes the “earned insights” of leadership that the four of us gained, that we “learned from doing,” through our “lived experiences” and critical reflections (Leslie, 2007, *foreword*, p. xv).

Existing literature on women in leadership in higher education focuses mostly on women holding positions such as deans and department chairs and college and university administration (Madsen, 2012). Even less literature discusses how women faculty assume leadership roles in curriculum and program development and implementation, yet we know those are areas in which women faculty in education departments regularly take the lead. However, as in K-12 education these activities are still frequently attributed as “women’s work” (Pease, 1993). Or, often, these are not viewed as true leadership endeavors—simply as organizational or advisory positions (Wergin, 2007). The lack of research capturing the leadership experiences of women faculty working collaboratively to establish a new doctoral program in educational leadership is what this chapter seeks to address through our collective memories.

We use Memory work (MW) to story our collective memories. MW is a social constructionist and feminist research method developed by Haug in 1987 (Onyx and Small, 2001). Broadly, MW is a process of “exploring the past” in order to understand the present or what has transpired historically and how that affects what will happen in the future (Fraser & Michell, 2015). The concept of storying pertains to one’s identity, to the unique positions of *who* one is, *how* they came to be, and *why* they came to be (Raj, 2019). In essence, storying and MW are intertwined and complimentary methodological approaches, blending narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and Freire’s critical reflexivity (1973) in support of story. The very act of storying accesses “emotional truth”—a deeply personal and authentic experience that embodies power as a narrator of one’s own memories (Raj, 2019).

Boucher (1997) describes the use of MW among women as a means of socially constructing the notion of leadership, exploring what women know, and how they use that knowledge to understand and promote

leadership behaviors. Storying is essentially related to MW because “time, context, mood and emotion” affect our memories (Fraser & Michell, 2015, p. 322). We situate our Memory work within the context of socially just leadership (Marshall & Oliva, 2006), guided by our deep commitment to our students (Claiborne, 2013) and to one another.

### OUR MEMORY WORK JOURNEY

Memory work as qualitative method (Onyx & Small, 2001) helped us story our memories in the implementation of the EdD program to explore “how time, space and culture affect identity development but also the re/presentations made about identities” (Fraser & Michell, 2015). In MW, the woman academic positions herself within a group of researchers, blurring the lines between the researcher and the researched, engaging as co-researchers (Haug, 2008) and co-participants. Phillips and Bunda (2018) suggest that storying *is* research. “Storying is axiological, ontological and epistemological” (p. 7) that storying is our way of interrogating the social construction of our roles as women faculty members who designed, implemented, and sustained a social justice leadership program.

Citing Heifetz’s 1994 notion of “adaptive work,” Wergin (2007) says that the operative function in leadership in place is *learning* (p. 15). Wergin goes on to say that “the essence of leadership lies in creating space for important learning to occur” (p. 15). More importantly, he asserts that “creating space for learning does not have to reside with people having formal authority.” While the four of us are tenured faculty within the broad field of education, none of us have held any administrative positions such as being a chair of a department or dean of a college. Two of the authors (Sharon and Lois) were involved in writing the program proposal for the doctoral program and subsequently served as the director and associate director of the program for a few years. The other two authors (Ambika and Joan) were involved in teaching courses, curriculum development, and chairing dissertations. The time frame that we story about is a period of ten years. Using MW we explore what we each brought to our roles developing and implementing the EdD in educational leadership and story how our faculty identities positioned us to do the leadership work in which we collectively engaged.

According to Stephenson and Kippax (2017) as a collaborative group takes on the dual roles of research participants and researchers, their own experiences become the data as they undertake a collective analysis of

these experiences, interrogating the social production of the contexts in which these were produced and as they identify points of shared experiences that have been lived differently. In other words, we *remembered* how we planned together to better serve our doctoral students, who come from culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse positions and perspectives. We remembered how we intuitively guided our students whose dissertations we chaired—often not having the scholarly expertise in the areas that they were researching—but simply guiding and helping them procedurally complete a study. We remembered how we grew as faculty having particular ideas that we wanted to implement instinctively in our courses. We knew that we were a unique team of women faculty building a doctoral program in educational leadership, and working together in the way that we did gave us our voice. Indeed, our stories that are presented here give us our voice and more importantly the credibility to “inspire others to find theirs” (Covey, 2004 as cited in Wergin 2007, p. 242).

### CONTEXTUALIZING OUR STORIES

The EdD program we developed and implemented was established in 2009 as the first independent doctoral program on our campus, a large urban public university in California. Current demographics of the campus include 26,361 students, of which 3735 are graduate students; many students are first-generation college students for whom English is not their primary language.

The authors of this chapter serve as the narrators of the stories of our collective memories, and in order to distance ourselves from the data, we assumed pseudonyms. Therefore, the sample consists of four faculty members from two departments in one college of education. Each faculty member holds the rank of professor, has been at the campus for close to 20 years, and was actively involved in the development and implementation of the EdD program. All participants teach in the program, lead research labs, and serve as dissertation chairs and committee members (see Table 5.1).

### HOW WE CONDUCTED OUR MEMORY WORK

Boucher (1997) argues that MW is used to construct and reflect on commonalities within the collective memories. Therefore, MW as a method is conducted in different phases. Accordingly, we began with many shared

**Table 5.1** Authors/narrators

<i>Name<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Content area</i>	<i>EdD courses taught</i>
Ava	Story and arts education	Pedagogy
Jeanette	Literacy and assessment	Curriculum Theory
Laura	Educational foundations Educational policy	Organizational Theory; Qualitative Methods
Sofia	Bilingual/multicultural and literacy education	Qualitative Methods; Practitioner Research

<sup>a</sup>Pseudonyms author/narrator and area of emphasis

conversations, recorded on Zoom, of our individual and collective memories of our experiences with the EdD program. As we talked and shared about our mutual experiences within the program, we found that our memories served as a review of our stories. Our process of interacting and listening to each other's stories voiced in our own words legitimized and validated the leadership and pedagogical strategies that evolved among the four of us and the student-centeredness that emerged in the EdD program.

After our conversations, we storied memories of key experiences in implementing the EdD program and identified specific cueing words that emerged as we reviewed our stories and the transcripts from our conversations. The four words that organically came to us were leadership, access, identity, and vulnerability. Leadership because we each had an intuitive understanding of leadership as practice, not as a personal trait or position. Identity because we each came from different academic disciplines and scholarly orientations yet drew upon our feminist, constructivist pedagogical identities. Access because we all were committed to ensuring the diverse students that we accepted into the doctoral program would finish their degrees. Vulnerability because none of us had been school site or university administrators and had to make a "place" for ourselves in the new EdD program.

We continued to develop our individual Memory work stories based on these cueing words and then shared those stories in meetings and conversations. We transformed our recollections into third person stories giving ourselves pseudonyms. This allowed us to distance ourselves and view our experiences from the outside. As we stepped away from our individual selves and searched for meaning in the stories of Ava, Jeanette, Laura, and Sofia, we were able to "see" the collective Memory work story that tells of our experiences developing and implementing the EdD program together.

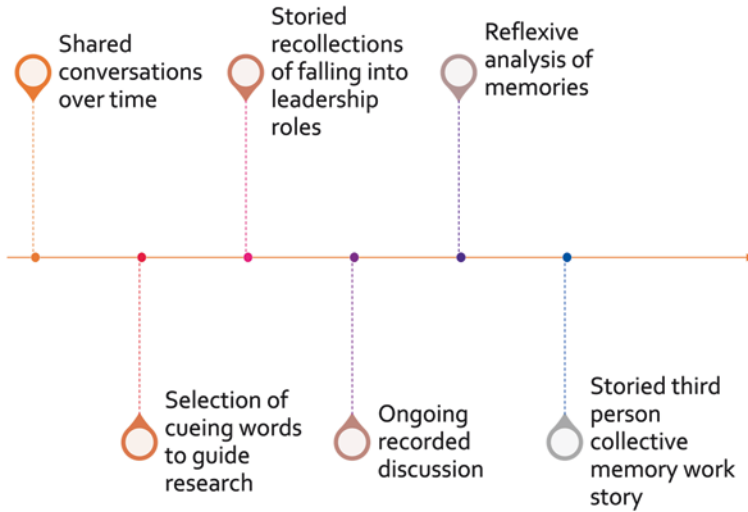


Fig. 5.1 Memory work process

Further, we used the third person stories as references for analysis. Figure 5.1 shows the process we went through during our Memory work.

As we reminisced about our leadership activities and theorized about our way of doing leadership in place, we found that storying ourselves gave us the deep reflexivity to access our emotional truth and a sense of authenticity in our meaning-making. Storying gave us the access to our deep sense of embodied knowledge making, building, and broadening our pedagogical identities as women faculty.

### STORYING OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Our discussions evoked renewed awareness of how strong our commitment was to the mostly Latinx, Black, and Asian students we served, including three students who were blind, one of whom was Native American and two who were South-East Asian. Accordingly, the narratives/stories that initially developed from the cueing words Leadership, Access, Identity, and Vulnerability were coded and organized chronologically along broad themes that emerged out of our shared storying. The

three themes that emerged are Challenges, Responsibility, and Trust. In some cases, the themes overlapped with each other and reflected the cueing words.

### *Challenges*

Each one of us, individually as well as collectively, faced considerable challenges during the process of our involvement in the EdD program. First, Laura and Sofia faced several challenges as they wrote the initial document proposal as part of the writing team. There was no precedent to this kind of program and they both were committed to a social justice agenda that provided access for all students. They essentially were learning by doing. Laura describes it this way:

*Recalling the program's development my first memory is that I never expected I would be leading the proposal writing team for the new EdD, yet the Dean selected me. I approached the challenge of leading a faculty writing team hungry to accumulate and study all the texts related to creating a new professional doctorate program. Remembering my experience at that time, I found multiple versions of the state legislation as it went through committees, interviewed staff involved in the legislative process, examined closely the final approved legislation and the underlying discourse (Griffith, 1992; Janks, 1997) that limited how new EdD programs could be designed. The accreditation agency's website had instructions for submitting a proposal for a new doctoral program as well as instructions for the reviewers of new proposals. After considerable hunting, documents outlining the task of the review team were downloaded providing me with an insider look at the very kinds of texts—curriculum, supporting data, etc.—that the team would ask to see.*

One of the initial challenges that Laura and Sofia grappled with was the existing parameters that surrounded the development of the EdD program. A discursive change was made in which they chose not to use the language of the legislation stating the EdD would be for community college and K-12 administrators. Instead, they used the term educators, a word that included the target population of the legislation but provided more access to the doctoral program for other educators. Further, they made the initial decision to define leadership broadly, focusing on leadership in practice rather than leadership related to administrative or managerial positions. This had implications for who entered and completed the program and was echoed in the curriculum development, which focused



on practice rather than terms specific to educational institutions, acknowledging that educational leadership happens in multiple settings and at various levels in those settings. They also made the decision to write a P-16 program toward the educational continuum from Pre-K to college graduation.

Collectively, over the past ten years, the college had gone through several different Deans whose style of leadership affected each of us. The Dean who initiated the development of the program chose the writing team as a college-wide team with faculty teaching from different divisions and programs within the college and came from a position of more hands off and trust in our work. She was available for consultation and support and gave us leeway in the development and implementation of the program. This shifted when there was a change of administration and the new Dean, who came from outside the university, chose to micromanage the program, including how the postsecondary courses should be developed and “managed.” The autonomy all of us felt during this era was diminished and we watched as decisions that impacted course delivery and program completion change the nature of how we interacted with students.

Our current Dean is supportive of the program but has a different vision than the one that we held when we first implemented the program; however, she is aligned with our initial conceptualization of a P-16 program. Her desire for a more educational administration focus resulted in a shift again in program leadership, some course offerings, and the broader notion of who should be admitted to the program. Furthermore, she took over as Dean during a fiscal crisis within the system and the campus was forced to cut some of the resources and opportunities that were initially provided to students.

A further ongoing challenge is related to faculty workload. While we are all tenured faculty, we each have responsibilities outside of the EdD program in addition to teaching courses, chairing dissertations, and curriculum development. For example, Ava solely coordinates a large master’s degree program with over 70 students in a different department in the college. Jeanette recently finished supervising another MA program in another department as well. Most of the time, she was only one of two other full-time faculty members left teaching in the program and shared a myriad of responsibilities including coordinating and scoring many comprehensive exams, writing in-house grants and budgets, and so on. Laura and Sofia had internal challenges coordinating the EdD program together as the new degree program in the college. For the first eight years, Laura,

as director, and Sofia, as associate director, shared and divided their responsibilities they were in-charge of including budgeting, recruiting, hiring, curriculum development, as well as chairing many dissertations for students who were mostly first-generation college students. After Laura resigned as director, Sofia was the director solely, but later on when a new Dean was appointed, the EdD director role was split into two co-directors, with another core faculty member in the program, changing Sofia's previous status and leadership role. However, throughout all these changes, the support we provided one another and the doctoral program, in many ways, was the bond that maintained the quality and success of the program regardless of administrative turnover.

Due to the level of diversity among our students in the program and their individual interests that vastly differed, it is rare that we chaired a dissertation that fell under our area of expertise. Rather, students chose their research topic and chose each of us to chair their dissertations if they felt a sense of trust or personal and/or professional connection with us. In other words, chairing a dissertation committee in the EdD program is not academically driven, rather it is *personally* driven—due to the relationships we build with individual students. In turn, we make a commitment to the students to see them through to graduation. Over the first ten years of the program, this posed complications for each of us. Often, we had students at various levels of their dissertations simultaneously. As Jeanette put it,

*[T]he biggest challenge was overlapping my chairing duties with a student who was writing a proposal and another student I was chairing getting ready for their final defense during the same summer. And, both students would be at different stages and have different needs and demands of my time.*

There were also challenges in terms of students' lives. Due to the very diverse group of students in the program and the vastly different and sometimes difficult, violent, and troubled backgrounds that many of them came from, they often turned to us as faculty to support them in ways that went beyond academic support. For example, Sofia says,

*As Associate Director one of my roles, early on started to be a kind of student support, not just mentoring but being there and knowing all the things, like when you needed to register or where to find your grades, or how to enroll in class. And so, I took on that role, really a kind of like a problem solver for those students. And since I'm also the IRB (Institutional Review Board or Review of*

*Research with Human subjects) Chair I took on the role of supporting them through their IRB applications.*

While we had all supervised theses before and, of course, had written our own dissertations, we were surprised by some of the challenges we faced as we chaired our first dissertations. Ava reminisces about the very first dissertation that she chaired.

*The very first dissertation that I chaired in this program was a triumph and a failure. A triumph because I was able to get the candidate through the program in the allotted three-year framework with a dissertation that we all (the committee members and I) were quite proud of. A failure because he was very challenging and extremely needy in many ways. To begin with, he was a couple decades my senior in age; he had been homeless and on the streets for a period of ten years due to drug abuse and mental illness. During the final year of the program when he was writing his dissertation, he seemed to lose his sense of direction once again. He would call me on the phone with requests for money for groceries, to get his car, which was impounded, to repair his laptop and so on. His closest friend and cohort member gave him a laptop and a second-hand car. He was kicked out of his living space at least two times, causing him to live in his car.*

Often, we held multiple roles: mentor, parent, sibling, counselor, and hand-holder. We took the students as they entered the program and provided the support they needed to graduate. During the first ten years we lost fewer than five percent of students who made it through the first semester. Jeannette comments on some of her struggles:

*Some students had such troubled lives that as their chair, I asked their committee members to provide extra support to “push” them along to pass their proposals. There were also risks involved with taking on a student who struggled with writing and/or had difficult personal or professional issues, taking a leave of absence, and not knowing if or when they would complete the program. And, with each new cohort different challenges also came up.*

### ***Responsibility***

As we shared our stories, we realized that each one of us felt a deep sense of responsibility on many different levels. At an institutional level, when writing the documents for who could gain access to the leadership program, Laura and Sofia intentionally chose to enact responsibility to and for

the students who come from our local service area, many of whom are first-generation college students. Laura, whose pedagogical background was rooted in a feminist method of inquiry, Institutional Ethnography (IE), was keenly aware of how institutional policies and textual practices help shape people's work such that they may be unknowingly complicit in the inequities and inequalities that persist throughout education. IE incorporates a critical examination of textual trajectories within and across institutional contexts (Smith & Turner, 2014). She reminisced about a Latino student who had been accidentally shot in a drive-by shooting incident, had a learning disability, and although a very committed doctoral student, he *"had difficulty synthesizing academic literature, and he was not a good writer. When he asked me to chair his dissertation, I knew ... my help would need to be comprehensive, all things dissertation—each and every chapter and lots of editing of his writing."*

It was through IE concepts that helped Laura analyze the proposal process to ensure a social justice orientation to the EdD leadership program and to promote access to diverse and historically underrepresented students (Blackmore, 1999; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). When Laura and Sofia were writing the EdD proposal, they wanted to provide supportive and rigorous doctoral experiences for any educator who believed that they, too, were leaders in their field. After studying the many documents that guided the development of an EdD proposal, Laura realized that they could do two things: use the word "educators" in the proposal to open admission to many kinds of leaders working in education or education-related fields and develop the program with a P-16 orientation, welcoming diverse perspectives from across the educational trajectory ensuring the cohorts were widely diverse in nature. Those decisions made by Laura and Sofia allowed the students above (and others) to not only enter the doctoral program, but successfully complete their degree.

At the curriculum level, Jeannette had a sense of responsibility to make academic writing accessible so students could identify themselves as scholar-practitioners. When Jeanette designed and taught the writing courses, she was keenly aware of helping her students complete their dissertations in the allotted time. She says,

*I was committed to getting them resources and support they needed to succeed as most of them were English language learners. For academic writing support, I provided track changes, detailed comments, and modeled how to write certain sections of their draft proposals. I encouraged them to continue writing and revising and set timelines and deadlines to help them accomplish their goals.*

Due to the way in which the program was written to include a cohort model that was self-supported through tuition and fees, students could not take a semester off without paying tuition. Courses are only offered once a year and fees allowed the program to have a certain autonomy. Ava felt a keen sense of responsibility in getting her students through from start to finish, because of the cost of the program; there is relatively very little grant support for the EdD program so most students pay out of pocket or incur large loans to finish. She particularly remembers spending many hours in the library with the student with the background of drug abuse, mental illness, and homelessness. She reminisces,

*During the final year of the program when he was writing his dissertation, he seemed to lose his sense of direction once again. ... There was two days, weeks before he defended, when we worked side by side in the library for nine to ten hour stretches. It came to a point where my seven year old child would say "not him again," when I would get a phone call. But, my colleagues who were on his committee and I had this sense of responsibility and urgency that he would not be able to afford another semester's fees and we pushed him and ourselves to get him to successful completion.*

Sofia's stance from the beginning was that once the program admitted students, it was responsible to them for completion. She asked herself how student support is enacted in an EdD program and how that support promotes equity and access to leadership? She reflects,

*I begin my story at the orientation for the first cohort of students that we admitted in fall 2009. These were the program "pioneers" who helped us set the course for future cohorts. One young man, Lee, sat at his table with his father and stated, "I should not be here" and proceeded to share his educational journey as the son of immigrant parents. Fast forward to June 2020 and I am sitting in a dissertation defense and the doctoral candidate utters the same words, "I should not be here." My identity as a doctoral faculty includes the notion of support—I tell potential students during information sessions that if they are admitted to the program, I will support them until they graduate. I see myself as a mentor and as such it is critical that I create the space where mentorship can take place, given the inherent power dynamic in the mentor/mentee relationship.*

Through MW we reflect on the role of responsibility as it connects to our identities as doctoral faculty. That role has many labels: leader, teacher,

mentor. Barkhuizen (2016) discusses three types of identity stories linked to teachers, which are applicable here: story, the personal narrative related to a teacher's interactions within the classroom; *story*, which includes interaction outside the classroom; and STORY, the "broader sociopolitical contexts in which teaching and learning take place" (p. 30). Those stories equally apply to our work in the EdD program as we supported students throughout the program.

### *Trust*

Why did we do this? What motivated us? Storying our memories helped us understand who we were, what we had come to be through recalling, creating, and interpreting our worlds through MW (Boucher, 1997; Onyx & Small, 2001), capturing memories as insights into the ways we construct our work in relation to the EdD. Crawford et al state: "subjectively significant events, events which are remembered, and the way they are subsequently constructed, play an important part in the construction of self" (p. 37).

We are foremost women who care about each of our students, building relationships with our students and helping them succeed. As with any new program being developed there must be a certain level of trust, responsibility, and commitment from all faculty involved. We constantly reflected and assessed our roles and trusted each other in how we fit into the EdD program and how best to support the students.

Trust was something we built over time before, during, and after we developed and implemented the EdD and constructing this chapter helped us to look at the role trust has within doctoral faculty identity development. But it is also important to look at the notion of trust within faculty-student relationships. This started early on as we admitted our first cohort in the program. Due to the nature of university admissions, application deadlines for the program closed before we had received notification that we would be accredited. This was something that we disclosed to the students, asking them to trust us that the program would be approved before the first day of classes. Several gave up admissions to other programs to be part of our "inaugural" cohort, which helped shape the nature of the program from the beginning.

The doctoral students enter the program as experts in their respective positions. Some are in leadership positions, for example, principals or postsecondary administrators, while others are K-12 teacher or staff

leaders. Yet, our students were humbled in the act of earning a doctorate. Sofia discussed the importance of unpacking how to enact leadership throughout the EdD program—as faculty and students. In her role as EdD program associate director she wanted students to take up and challenge leadership, challenge the system, and in doing so their journeys take many routes. Many of them had poor experiences in graduate school or had been rejected from other programs so were skeptical at first that they could do the work. Sofia recalls one student, Lisa, who was a struggling writer but a hard worker who understood the issues facing the emergent bilingual students she taught. She had difficulty writing her first research paper and was disappointed with her grade. She felt that maybe she did not belong in the program and should drop out. But Sofia knew that Lisa was enacting excellent pedagogical practices in her own public-school classroom and understood the challenges she faced as a teacher and as a doctoral student. Fast forward four months and Lisa submitted her second research paper, which included a note: “I get it! Now I know why I received that grade and what to do about it.” Lisa went on to finish her degree in three years, simultaneously publishing her first article in a peer-reviewed journal.

As faculty members we noticed that our students developed as practitioner scholars and as leaders, but that development did not come quickly or easily. Students began the program tentatively, and through their own research, reading, and writing, they began to take ownership of their identities as academic writers. This was not always easy for some of them. Jeannette found that many students for whom English was not their primary language needed more guidance in actively engaging in reading scholarly text to improve as academic writers. In her work as writing workshop coordinator for the program she broke down tasks to improve their writing and build self-efficacy. She built trust with the students by supporting their work and giving good, but firm, and individual feedback. She then shared what she was learning about student writing with doctoral colleagues. She stressed how they, too, must assume the role of writing instructor if our students were going to produce a quality dissertation that would reward them with authority and expertise on their research topics.

Ava saw trust building first-hand in her pedagogy class. The interactive nature of the storying activities in her class was powerful because students were “in charge” of remembering and narrating their own stories—giving them ownership of building their identities as people, as equitable leaders, and as responsible researchers. As one student put it, “We are so

connected, we have felt heard.” Ava’s memories of what she knew she could contribute as well as what she was seeing in the course alleviated her own insecurities of being on the borders of educational studies and always feeling the need to legitimize her methods but also identify herself as doctoral faculty. As her students gained trust in her, she gained trust in the role she played in the program.

As the students developed as scholar-practitioner-leaders, so too did we grow as leaders. Ava, Laura, Jeannette, and Sofia had re-directed their vulnerabilities in ways that would challenge traditional notions of leadership development. Each year they met students during their admission interviews and watched them develop in different spaces throughout their programs. They noticed that sometime around the third semester in the program students begin to advocate for themselves being more proactive, and develop more confidence, question program requirements, and so on, moving them along more firmly into their identities as leaders. In those moments, Ava, Laura, Jeannette, and Sofia realized how they were increasingly engaged in the co-construction of leadership with their students and the role that trust played in that development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Shulman (2002) recognizes the importance of collaboration within institutions to problem-solve and address changes that take place when EdD programs are developed and implemented. MW allowed us to re-capture the early years of the new EdD program and infuse our own voices as pedagogical leaders into its implementation history. Our work together builds on traditions of narrative studies of women in education (Weiler & Middleton, 1999), women as constructivist leaders (Lambert et al., 1995), and women engaged in social justice leadership (Lyman et al., 2012).

What each of us brings to the collaboration is a chronology of our contributions as women to the values embedded in the practices of the new leadership program. The processes of interacting and listening to each other’s stories as narrated in our own words legitimizes and validates the leadership and pedagogical strategies and student-centeredness that emerged in the EdD program. Storying revealed to us who we are as women faculty professionally. We “fell into leadership” and organically designed and executed the program.

When we developed and implemented the EdD program we had an opportunity to decide what kind of program we wanted to create. Would



it allow for access to students with exceptionally challenging backgrounds? Would our way of “doing leadership” of the EdD ensure that such students who come into the program lacking academic writing skills can indeed earn a doctorate? It is clear now that our intuitive understanding of leadership in practice, when working together as doctoral faculty, that our EdD in Educational Leadership took on a whole other approach as to who can **do** leadership. While we might have found ourselves in leadership roles, that was not what we were doing with our students. Rather, we opened a door for them to *show us* how they, too, could practice leadership—whether in their own work as educators or with us and their peers in the EdD program.

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# A Storying Methodology for Leadership and Mentoring in Higher Education

*Steven Michael Salcido*

## INTRODUCTION

Engaging in a qualitative study and identifying a research methodology that allows the flexibility to get to know your research participants, immerse yourself in their experiences, and still maintain the professional distance expected in research, I found it difficult to commit to a specific method. However, storying as a research methodology developed naturally when I began my research on the hidden pedagogies of leaders and mentors. What began as an idea to retell the stories of my participants in a manner that did them justice and also include what I experienced as they shared their stories with me, evolved into a methodological project I had not expected. I quickly realized that storying was taking place and I was engaging in moments of *emotional truth* with them (Raj, 2019). I was invited to share in their experiences, share in their emotions, and internalize what they had experienced as they storied their experiences. There were many advantages utilizing storying as a methodology that became apparent immediately. It did not break the rules of qualitative research,

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S. M. Salcido (✉)

Sacramento State University, Sacramento, CA, USA

e-mail: [stevensalcido@outlook.com](mailto:stevensalcido@outlook.com)

but it pushed the boundaries of research and participation in a positive direction. I had discovered how to use storying as a research methodology.

A fundamental interview method is to ask the relevant questions, however, not to participate or show reaction when a participant answers the questions. This is so that one does not encourage a participant in either direction based on the interviewer's reaction. However, I found this method to be ingenuine and slow at building trust. Instead, I incorporated storying in the research methodology where I still maintained the questions, but instead I allowed myself to be part of the participant's storying when they invited me too. It is important to note that I was invited to participate and not the other way around. I believe this approach to interviewing built trust quickly and the storying became more in-depth and meaningful. It allowed me to laugh, get angry, sad, and even cry with my participants. Most importantly, I was inspired by my participants' stories, and they were inspired in retelling them.

## STORYING THE HIDDEN PEDAGOGY OF HIGHER EDUCATION MENTORSHIP

In this chapter I utilize my doctoral research as an example of how storying was used as a research methodology. I conducted research on identifying the hidden pedagogies of leaders who mentor in a higher education setting. This chapter is written in a storying format as I present the research and summarize the results.

A brief introduction to the study sets the stage for how the elements of storying emerged in the context of higher education and mentoring leadership development. Higher education organizations, like the rest of the United States workforce, face an ever-changing world to which they must adapt. Organizations are recognizing that their workforce ideologies are also changing because their employees consist of multiple generations working together. These multiple generations do not necessarily always agree on processes and outcomes; however, the continuity of the organization is dependent on them working and communicating together. There are leaders in organizations who successfully lead multiple generations with strong positive outcomes. Some of these leaders may also be mentors who mentor across the generations successfully. Hidden in the leaders' mentoring styles are unrecognized pedagogies used to successfully prepare the multiple generations of workforce. My study identified the personal pedagogies and leadership styles of mentors in higher education

institutions and how they help their mentees and workplace teams move forward. The stories I include in this chapter show how leaders help their mentees and teams communicate with multiple generations and inspire change. Their stories of career advancement center around mentors helping the mentee find their inner voice. It was incredible to witness their re-experiences as the participants storied their journeys in their workplaces.

The research identified the leadership characteristics of leaders and the intersecting mentoring characteristics they possess. It provided a better understanding of the manner in which current leaders mentor multiple generations in the workforce. Moreover, the study explored a personal pedagogy of mentoring among leaders and how it was developed over time through their experiences. An understanding of the characteristics and practices of those who have successfully mentored new leaders is vital to public higher education due to the presence of internal and external forces that higher education leaders encounter (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015). A deeper understanding of a mentor's personal pedagogy and how they utilize scaffolded learning to guide their mentees could be used for future development and planning. New leader cohorts must have flexible leadership styles to address continuous change and the survivability of the services they provide to students in higher education (Black, 2015). Equally important is the knowledge and understanding of the characteristics the incoming workforce generations will bring to the workplace.

It was my intent for the larger study to show how successful leaders who mentor the diverse generations in the workforce can successfully prepare their institutions in terms of future leadership. The study uncovered the shared characteristics of leaders who mentor successors and highlighted their personal pedagogical practices. Specifically, it investigated the particular upbringing and events that helped shape these leaders. By analyzing their commonalities and differences, the research offered insight into how and why leaders mentor. The results of the research contribute to the development of mentoring pedagogies for next-generation leaders and propose new ways to support them as they achieve positions of influence in higher education.

The following questions are what inspired me to conduct the study. Can an understanding of a leader's own personal pedagogy, derived from personal life experiences, be key to understanding their leadership style? Once these characteristics are identified, could they be used in the workforce? Is this style effective in a mentoring situation and, if so, what makes it valid?

## STORYING AS A METHODOLOGY

The study focused on engaged higher education leaders, administrators, and their mentees in their current workplaces. For the purposes of this study, the leaders in higher education were currently administrators. Its purpose was to identify the individuals' unique personal pedagogies they practiced and refined throughout their careers. The study took a narrative inquiry approach by listening to the individuals' personal story. However, through storying, each participant's personal experiences on leadership development and mentoring experiences were heard and felt by me. Drawing from Dewey's ideology of experience and given that narrative inquiry has roots based on the Deweyan theory, the narrative inquiry approach was a natural choice (Dewey, 1958). The study set out to capture and understand the personal growth of each individual in the study; the idea of one experience leading to another experience and building upon those experiences is embodied in Dewey's experience foundations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

A critical component that I wanted to capture was the authentic experiences of the participants. I did not want them just to answer the question and then move on to the next. I wanted them to take their time and tell the story how they wanted to, and in a way that I would understand what they were storying to me. It was when the participant felt comfortable enough to get to know me and trust me so they could speak from a position of authenticity, my objective was accomplished. I knew that learning from their experiences would be vital to the success of the research. So I thought about, how I could achieve this and yet stay true to storying? I decided on Clandinin's narrative three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin's narrative, three-dimensional inquiry space approach maintains Dewey's contextual concepts of experience as the main focus in the methodology, which focuses on personal and social interaction (one of Clandinin's concepts); past, present, and future (Clandinin's concept of continuity); and notion of place (Clandinin's concept of situation).

To better understand the personal pedagogical characteristics of the participants' mentoring styles, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection and offered flexibility during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview protocol was developed with questions that stimulate thought and dialogue. This enabled me to ask non-scripted, impromptu follow-up questions as the interviewee responded.

With the foundational research methods in place, the next task was utilizing a tool that would build trust with the participants so that their storying would emerge through our conversations. The “ah-ha” moment in finding the correct research tool was when I read “The Storying Teacher” (Raj, 2019).

Raj (2019) states, “Storying is the concept of making stories your own through telling them from your own unique perspective, positionality, and cultural perspective” (p. 6). I chose this style to stay true to my interviewees as they shared personal experiences regarding their career tracks and views on new and rising leaders in higher education. Storying was much more than sharing a story; the stories were in-depth, emotional, and transparent. The storying comes to life as the interviewees describe their experiences from a personal reflection, self-examining experience by fusing not only the storying, but also the “whys,” “whos,” and “places” into storying.

Storying brings with it an emotional truth. Emotional truth, as described by Raj (2019, p. 7), is an instance when a trust or bond forms during the sharing process, and both the storyteller and the listener have an “aha” moment in which the listener understands what is being conveyed. The teller also knows it is being realized. It is a connection and trust-building moment (Raj, 2019). During the interviews, there were endless moments of emotional truth connections with laughter, emotions, and problem-solving as events were recounted through storying. As a listener, emotional truth provided a space for me to share in the experience as my participants shared their experiences with me. Through emotional truth, I could tell what was being shared was faithful to the heart of each individual and was never perceived as an interview question answered just for the sake of answering it.

Emotional truth was at the core of what I wanted to achieve during the interview process. How was I going to accomplish this? By being genuine to myself throughout the research process. I decided I was going to interview the participants, and when organically invited to engage in their stories, we would each experience the moments of emotional truth. This is when I actively participated. This meant I laughed, I cried, and displayed anger, and other emotions freely. There was one clear boundary I set: I did not offer my opinion or reinforce my participant’s thoughts through encouragement, I just simply engaged and actively participated in the dialogue.

Thus, using Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional inquiry space for analysis, and Raj’s (2019) concept of emotional truth in storying as a method, the stories were analyzed with regard to how

participants' experiences took place in the space of interactions, continuity, and location. Employing the narrative inquiry approach, there is not a strict methodology to follow, but there is a pathway to guide the research objectives. Understanding this flexibility of narrative inquiry, the analytical methodology was intended to guide the research but also to enable flexibility (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Wang & Geale, 2015).

The research questions guiding the narrative study suggested two streams of analysis. First, the stories of the participants were coded and analyzed according to how those stories illuminate key moments and experiences in the mentors' and mentees' lives that give meaning to the ways in which they engaged with one another and other colleagues in their workplace through storying. These individual narratives included leadership epiphanies that were identified as instrumental in the development of a leader's personal pedagogy for mentoring; therefore, the data analysis technique of re-storying is appropriate. A second stream of analysis included close examination of data to uncover patterns and identify themes across the participants as they discussed their leadership styles and how they engaged in the mentoring process. The second stream incorporated methods of thematic narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Below, I present the story of a mentor/mentee relationship that was included in the study. Before doing so, I want to note that as I began the interviews and was listening to their stories, I immediately noticed that much of the dialogue was related to many of the social events taking place across the United States at that moment in time. White privilege, immigration, social injustice, racism, and democracy overlapped with Covid-19. Consequently, I not only was engaging with them through storying but I was relating to their experiences given what was currently happening socially. To the extent that I can, I have made every effort to present the participants' stories as they had been presented to me. However, as I heard their stories and was invited to be a part of their storying experience, I naturally had my own thoughts and own experiences to share about the current social context in the narrative. As the stories are shared, there are times I add my voice along with the participants'. Sometimes it is as interpretation, and sometimes as reinforcing the shared experience. From the larger study, I decided to provide one story of two participants, Adam and Rachel, who are mentor-mentee partners. Their backgrounds, experiences, thoughts, and understandings about their work world are woven together so that they are captured individually as well as within their mentor/mentee relationship. The following is their storying collected in a research setting.



*Adam and Rachel*

The unique mentoring relationship between Adam, the mentor, and Rachel, the mentee, began when Rachel was hired by Adam's team as a student assistant. Adam saw something in Rachel that would turn out to be her passion for succeeding in a male-dominated technology industry. Adam is a White, educated male holding an administrative-level position at Southwest Coast University. He is a member of the X-Generation cohort, born in the years between 1965 and 1979, and works in the technology industry, which, by tradition, is a male-dominated industry. Rachel, Latinx, is a recent college graduate from Southwest Coast University and is a Z generation, born between the years 1995 and 2009, and was raised in the region of her university's location.

Adam, who is very conscious of his White, male privilege, holds an extraordinarily strong social justice core to his leadership style and overall persona. Yet, as a cisgender gay male, he also understands being of a minority social group. He was educated at a prestigious school located on the West Coast of the United States, holds a Master's degree in Public Policy and Administration, and is contemplating pursuing his doctorate degree. In addition to his full-time administrative job, Adam periodically instructs as an adjunct professor for graduate-level courses.

Rachel who recently graduated and recently secured employment at a Fortune 500 technology company has political values that align herself with free education and Bernie Sanders's ideology of social responsibility and liberal perspectives. Examples of this ideology are healthcare provided for every resident, college education for all who seek it, and taxation of the highest earners to help support such objectives. This was re-enforced when asked more about why the Bernie Sanders's ideology, to which she had a very sincere and thoughtful reply. From what I gathered from the interview, the ideology she welcomed was providing a free education to everyone, so students are not in debt. She stated that society should be looking at free education differently. Free education should be available because it is an investment from the government in its own people. The more people who are educated, the less discriminatory they are, and more likely to contribute socially and economically. In her view, the government looks at the budget and says, "We cannot afford free education," and believes that what they really are doing is cutting off access to the education that would better our society as a whole. She is aware of the various privileges and disadvantages social groups have. This awareness comes from her first field of study, child development, before she delved into the

technology world and completed a degree related to the technology industry. An important attribute of Rachel is that being of Latinx descent, she values her culture and heritage. To Rachel, family is important to her and is a factor of influence and encouragement. This is a known characteristic of those from a Latinx descent who are raised in similar communities. It is a goal of a Latinx family to raise good children with cultural values and appreciation of their heritage (Flores, 2018).

Adam and Rachel's mentoring partnership began while Rachel attended Southwest Coast University. Rachel was part of student leadership and was a student assistant in Adam's department. Her first position was in customer service answering technical questions; nowhere near what her major then was: child development. It was not until she met Adam that her major and career changed to technology. When I asked Rachel the question, "Was there anyone who was the most influential to your career path?" she enthusiastically answered, "Oh, yeah. Definitely!" and named Adam as a strong contributor to her career path. Although her career has just started, she has already moved on to the corporate world with a Fortune 500 technology company, starting off with an internship.

### *Mentoring*

Adam attributed part of his success from his own experience with mentors. He recalled a time when one of his mentors asked him to make a career plan, but he did not know how, so he asked for her guidance, "She goes, 'Go research it.' And I learned a lot from doing that," Adam recalled. He saw the value of not being told what to do but given the guidance to complete challenges on his own. However, he remembered that she was flexible in her mentoring pedagogy when she recognized he went to her with a problem that needed more than guidance; he truly needed help with it. During these times, she provided direct guidance and transparent advice. Staying true to her pedagogy style, she never once told Adam what to do or how to do it. Experiencing how she scaffolded him through his problem-solving, he seemed to do the same with his mentees.

When I asked about personal mentoring style, I immediately noticed that Adam's resembled the same characteristics as his own early mentor. He did not make decisions for his mentees, nor did he always provide the solution for them. Instead, he asked them how to solve problems for themselves or give constructive forward feedback. When Adam began to get to know Rachel, he saw a passion for success in her eyes. He began to ask her questions about her career choice and schooling. He noticed she

had a gift for understanding technology and wanted to learn about her goals. It turned out Rachel was unsure of her career goals in the sense of what choices she had. However, she indeed had a distinct goal that she was determined to achieve, and that was to ultimately provide for her mother and family.

Family to Rachel is not only her core support system but also a responsibility. She wants to be able to give back to her family for the support they have given her throughout her life, especially to her mother. Understanding this cultural attribute of Rachel, Adam began to mentor her on many levels, such as career, education, and sometimes personal motivation. For example, as a mentor, Adam helped her acquire another student assistant position within the technical department that was more specialized and would help with her future career. As Rachel progressed in her new position, Adam was by her side, ensuring she was not only brushing up on the skills she possessed but also preparing her for an industry dominated by men. He worked with her on the set of skills needed in the professional workplace but did it in a way so Rachel kept her voice, identity, and culture.

Through our interview, I could tell Adam was a grounded person. Each of my interviewees was asked what their definition of success was, and the answers seemed to be standard everyday answers. For example, success can be defined as achieving a goal, having a team where morale is high, and so on. However, Adam's answer was different and profound, "They are intellectually, spiritually, physically, emotionally, and financially [successful]. And so, for me, being successful is not neglecting any of those things." Throughout his interview, his answers were thought out, clear, and paced in a manner where he wanted to share his experiences. Another characteristic I saw from Adam was how straightforward he was with examples and did not hold back. An example of his straightforward dialogue was when he described a mentoring moment with Rachel. He tasked Rachel with understanding and presenting on a technology matter. He recalled, "Okay. Tell me what your experiences are with this software." She would kind of hem and haw. Adam said:

Nope, that's not it. You need to come back here in a week and to be able to tell me a story, be able to [just] go, "Because this is what it's going to be like when you interview or when you go to one of these meetings and you're just shaking hands with people. You want to be able to say, 'Oh, well, when I did the internship at [ABC Company], I helped with business processes, and we

moved these forms online. And then, part-time as a student assistant, working in IT at the University, I created forms within the software to do X, Y, and Z, and I helped with the upgrade from this release to that release. And these are the things I did with the upgrade.” I go, “It’s got to just roll off your tongue like that. Otherwise, people are not going to hear the confidence in your voice.”

How to accomplish self-confidence was one of Adam’s mentoring practices for Rachel to learn and experience.

### *Leadership*

When Rachel first met Adam, her first passing thought was she would not relate to him because of his racial ethnic identity. This impression of hers was not in a judgmental or negative way, she just was not sure they would relate. This first impression quickly passed for Rachel. Instead, she stated that she was intrigued by his leadership style and also how incredibly supportive and understanding he was with his team. Her example of his leadership style was her description of when she attended a project meeting which brought partners across the various on campus technology departments. “So it was like five different people and they were arguing.” She continued:

But yet, they were all literally saying the same thing to each other. But it kind of sounded like they were arguing to each other. And so the way he explained it was, “Well, it sounds like this is the whole idea. And you, you, you and you have already stated that. And so this would be the result of that. Is that what you all want?” And then they would be like, “Yeah. That’s exactly what we’re trying to say.” And it’s like, “You’ve already been saying it.” So Adam was able to consolidate that for you all, and really put that out on the table.

She learned from Adam’s communication style, how he problem solves without shaming others or dominating the conversation by using his position.

When it comes to leadership, Adam mentioned being vulnerable. He talked about being vulnerable with his team and showing them he cares. Vulnerability builds trust. However, he does not show vulnerability to his boss, as he felt his boss is not emotionally open. He does not mean this as a negative characteristic, but he is conscience of this and respects the boundary. He also noted how ego can get in the way of leadership, “But one of the things I’ve learned is that people’s egos get in the way of doing

good work.” I interpret this as to be vulnerable, one must also be aware of their ego and let it go. As expressed in the previous paragraph, not shaming others to make a point is important to building up teams and a strong indicator why the younger generations would gravitate toward Adam’s leadership style.

Learning from his leadership style, Rachel says her leadership style is in transition. When I directly asked about her leadership style, she struggled and hesitated before answering. She noticed she was hesitating, too, because she acknowledged that she is in a place in her life when her leadership style is still developing and her learning is still taking place. Her hesitation was not a lack of self-confidence or leadership skills, but she was quickly self-evaluating her leadership place where it was, currently is, and where she wants it to be. My observation of her during the interviews was that she is a strong, young, developing leader and in the works of making her leadership imprint. As she described her leadership style, her example came from Southwest Coast University and how she delivered her ideas to management. When she had an idea, she would blurt it out and see where it would go. Now with her new employment, she has learned to be more strategic before giving ideas and make sure her thoughts are thought through before presented. This has taught her how to be adaptable in an array of different situations. She admitted that her experience is as a novice, “I guess, this is real-world experience. And when you’re in college, it’s slightly different. And I didn’t realize that until maybe my senior year going into, now, my traineeship and now the full time [job].” What Rachel indicated is that she is growing as an individual and is aware of the point in time she is in her career and the growth that is currently taking place, self-awareness.

### *Generations*

As I continued to interview Rachel, I could tell there was a definite divide between her generation and both the older (X-Generation, born in the years between 1965 and 1979, and Baby Boomers, born in the years between 1946 and 1964) and younger generations (not yet named generations or younger members of the Z generation). Rachel is a member of the beginning Z generation, born in the year 1995 and later. She thinks that members of older generations see her age cohort as young and she believes the older generation is not open to listening to their ideas. I asked Rachel to expand on the comment of “not open to ideas.” With confidence, she stated that a conversation should at least happen among the

generations, “No. I think it should be a two-way conversation.” She then went on to describe a mock example of her conversation with those who are older. She stated, “Oh, I’m younger so they [think they] should be right most of the time and they should [also] be able to let me know certain things.” She respected the older generation and their knowledge, but that did not mean the older generation should assume they are always right. They should also be able to recognize what knowledge younger generations have as well. Rachel believes her generation has much to contribute when engaged in conversations at work.

Rachel also described her encounter with the younger generation, still yet to be defined. She acknowledged that they seem to have the same struggles with her age that she is encountering with her older generations:

Well, I want to remind them that I’m not—I mean, like yeah, I may be considered an adult but this is still a two-way conversation, so it’s like we should learn from each other. And I think it’s different, too, because younger generations, I feel like when I talk to them, they’re very confident nowadays compared to when I was growing up.

As she spoke, I could not help but make the connection from the literature review of how younger and older generations will for the most part perceive each other negatively (Chillakuri & Mahamandia, 2018; Clark, 2017; Wilson, 2009). She continued about the older generation, “Sometimes, oh no, you have to really, really respect your elders and you don’t always have to contribute to the conversation.” She then pivoted to the younger generation:

Now it’s like, “Now, these younger generations are very exposed to certain conversations.” They really want to contribute their own opinions. But they are still looking for that guidance. And it’s like, “No. I try to kind of talk to them and let them know we’re both working together.” And I’m like, “We’ll form an idea based off of both of our ideas.

What I find unique about Rachel’s conversation is that she is providing the younger generations an approach that she wished the older generations would give to her, mirroring a style like Adam’s mentoring style.

Adam, although from an older generation, provides her with the feedback in a communication style she verifies works for her and her generation. Rachel describes the generation divide well:

And younger generations are. They're a little bit more riskier. Not riskier, but they're more excited to try new things. They're the ones who are in my opinion more creative because they're not really seeing any boundaries. Whereas older generations, especially in current work environments, I think they kind of know like, "Oh, well, how much is that going to cost?", or like, "Who's going to maintain these things?" They start looking at those type of things, whereas the younger generation, it's like, "Oh, no. I just have this idea and I want to do it." And it's a great idea, but now let's start talking about the logistics of it or the details on what it takes to actually get this idea to [come to life] be alive.

Rachel stayed true to a collaboration style of, "Let's work together." From the interviews of both Adam and Rachel, I could tell this is the same style Adam possesses.

When it comes to Adam working with multiple generations, he witnessed older generations are more reluctant to change and can show anxiety toward change. As for the younger generation, his observations are they are more open to change and sometimes overly excited about the change. He cautioned that these are not absolutes, and you can have older generations excited and striving for change and those of the younger membership dreading it. He reminds me that for the younger generation who are eager for change, they are not necessarily thinking the whole process through, "If you've got one person and they're eager to go in and break a couple of eggs, do they have enough information to be able to do that without making the entire shelf fall apart, right, or destroying the room." His example made me think about how to coach a younger generation that is willing to drive change, but still is inexperienced to understand a holistic understanding of the change and the possible impacts. How can a leader encourage novice teams to move forward without the hovering of an older generation? Adam addressed this concern, "And sometimes that's great, and sometimes we kind of scratch our head and say, 'Oh, we wish so and so wouldn't have done that yet.' But at the same time, we don't want to squash their spirit." It is another example of how Adam stays to his core beliefs in guidance and letting the younger generation learn by building upon their experiences.

### *Storying Insights*

The above section is an example of how storying was not only used as a methodology, it is an example of how I wrote the storying recounts in the

research. I recount that during the interview process, utilizing the fundamentals of storying made the process fun. This was because I was able to participate in an unbiased manner which maintained the integrity of the study. When I was interviewing Adam and Rachel, there was so much I could relate to; for example, I understood as a member of the Latinx community how family is so important to Rachel and their advice is weighed in every decision made. As for relating to Adam, being an administrator in a university myself and working among multiple generations, I resonated with the different communication styles.

At times, Adam asked me if I identified with some of the storying he was sharing, and I would concur, which gave him confidence to keep speaking. Toward the end of the first interview, Adam asked me to share my story as a Latino, and I did. He was then invited into my storying where he also shared in my moments of truth with myself. I will admit, at first, I was a little reluctant only because I did not want to break any participant protocols, but I realized I was not. Thus, I began to engage in my storying and I witnessed him feeling the experiences I was presenting.

It was not until the second interview with Adam that I realized the fruits from sharing my own storying with Adam. The second interview with Adam was very deep and emotional. Almost immediately after our salutations and beginning with the first interview question did Adam begin to once again share his experiences through storying and the moments of truth were stronger and more prevalent than before. It was then that I realized sharing my own story created a storying bond between Adam and me, researcher and participant. Trust was established and he trusted me with re-storying his storying experiences. Storying becomes more of an art form than it is a science.

### *Pedagogical Insights from Adam and Rachel*

To add more insight on how storying contributed to my study, the re-storying of the experiences of the study's participants led to several themes. There were key insights from Adam and Rachel as I analyzed their stories. The specific times when Adam and Rachel told the story of their mentoring relationship, I could draw insight into the moments of truth and the pedagogical practices that are the focus of this study. Because of the difficult social conditions taking place in the nation, such as Covid-19, immigration, the social and racial justice movements, and new dangers to democracy, I have chosen one of the themes and the insights that emerged from Adam's and Rachel's social and cultural awareness.



### *Cultural Competency*

Adam's cultural competency with cultures outside of his own is strong, and this is a strength that benefits his mentees. He mentioned during our interview that he went to an integrated public school, and he was one of the few White kids attending. Although I did not get a chance to question more about his experience of being a "minority" in a racially diverse school, I cannot help but wonder if this was the beginning of his cultural competency. While in his Master's program, he completed a culminating paper on cultural competency, and he allowed me to read it in my own time. It was clear Adam's clarity and knowledge in cultural competency has shaped his leadership style. By nature, Adam is an empathetic person, and it is easy for individuals to gravitate toward him and to trust him.

Adam is also very conscience of White privilege to the point where he bluntly calls it out. He told me a story of a trip to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, with some of his White friends. He noticed his friends were somewhat racist in a micro-aggression way and had no clue they were. In a conversation with them, he asked them, "Do you know what White privilege is, or do you believe in White privilege?" He recalled that, of course, they did not. So, in a very expressive confident manner, he helped them get it, "So let me make it super clear to you." He goes, "What's that?" I go, "If you go to rent an apartment or you apply for a job or you walk into a store, do people perceive you as White?" He's like, "Yeah." I go, "Then you have no [*explicit expression*] clue what happens if you were to walk into any of those situations as a Black man. It's that simple."

The passion and emotion that came from him as he told this story was emotionally provoking. It was as if I were there experiencing the moment with him, a strong moment of truth. Another strong realization was during my interview with Adam and Rachel, an observation I made as they answered my interview questions through storying was that they also did something more than recall examples. They were able to bring forth the meanings of their memories via a personal reflection. Again, I attribute that to the participants being comfortable with vulnerability and with me.

### *Social Awareness*

During Rachel's student days at Southwest Coast University, she was a part of the ASI organization, and she recalled an incident in which the university was not taking one of their recommendations seriously. The proposal would hugely impact students who may be at risk of being homeless. She immediately noticed that the answer given by the university was,

“No other university is doing it, and we have already done it this way.” This was the feedback they received. She felt that what the university was really telling them was there was no need for change because they already had a process in place. Adam, as her mentor, was able to help them organize themselves and present their case in a different manner. He gave examples of new communication styles, backing up their position with research and data to re-present their ideas. Upon her reflection of the example above, she recounted how the older generation does not want to change or is not as open to new ideas. Her generation, the younger generation, wants to try new ideas. Her generation is realizing they do not necessarily know how to get through to the older generations, and some communication negotiations need to happen. She used this particular learning experience as a cornerstone to navigating different communication styles.

Adam reflected on leadership and change that happen at an organization. He also takes notice of leaders who are not really leaders. For example, a leader watches for change and changes when needed, “Leaders ideally, like good leaders, they’ll understand the need for change if there is one. And they’ll start moving people in a direction of change but only where there’s value, right.” He gave me insight into how he problem solves change in an almost methodical manner. First, by ways of self-reflection, he constructs plausible present-day scenarios in his mind and rehearses how he would resolve them. However, he is not just thinking about one solution but many solutions and will play out the many possible outcomes in his head. He then will work with his teams to implement one of the ideas to achieve the outcome that produces the best value. During his self-reflection, he reminds himself to be patient with change management. I related to Adam and his problem-solving techniques and I also learned from his recount. As I, too, practice self-reflection, I learned from Adam to invite my team into my self-reflection and problem-solving process because by doing this, we can successfully strategize on synergistic outcomes.

## CONCLUSION OF STUDY

I included the narratives of Adam and Rachel as an example of utilizing storying as a research methodology. It is apparent that my own moments of truth became important in the research. My own thoughts are intertwined with the re-storying of Adam and Rachel. The intent is to add

more understanding to the context of the narratives shared with the reader. It provides an opportunity for the reader to be invited to share in the experiences of the participants as they retold their stories and offers a unique invitation to share my own researcher's experiences as I retold their story. Storying is an experience where all participants, whether researcher, participant, or reader, can share in the moments of truth.

When I began this chapter, I noted the questions that drove the research. Can an understanding of a leader's own personal pedagogy, derived from personal life experiences, be key to understanding their leadership style? Once these characteristics are identified, could they be used in the workforce? Is the style effective in mentoring? It would have been difficult to uncover the personal pedagogy of Adam's mentoring without storying or see Rachel's developing leadership skills working across generations. From my research not only is storying a research methodology, I know now that storying can be instrumental in mentoring and leadership development. Reflecting upon the moments of truth shared in the research and my own leadership and mentoring, I realized I lead and mentor by storying my own experiences which is my personal pedagogy. I do this by being vulnerable and sharing my experiences with others that turn into moments of truth. Furthermore, I mentor by sharing both the stories of success and the stories that highlight mistakes. Utilizing storying as an approach to developing the next generation of leaders and mentors is effective and empowering.

### MY OWN MENTORS AND MENTORING

To end this chapter, I would like to invite the reader into my thoughts in narrative storying fashion. I share a point in time where I began to develop my research with the guidance and reflection from my past mentors intersected with new mentors. They were instrumental in helping me complete my research despite the challenges of the first outbreaks of Covid-19. It was a time where the only thing certain was uncertainty. However, my inspiration for my research started pre-Covid-19.

As I entered the workforce in my early 20s, the 2000's era, I kept hearing over and over the negative stereotyping of the Millennial generation and how they are an instant gratification generation. They were considered lazy, not respectful of authority, and would not value what instruction they received from the older generations. Myself being a Millennial cusper, born between 1980 and 1983, meant I was on the cusp

(in-between) of Generation X, born in the years between 1965 and 1979 and the Millennials born in the years between 1980 and 1995, I acknowledged some of the negative stereotypes. However, did not see them as negative, just as untapped ideologies not yet realized. What I was witnessing was a new way of doing business and generational change on the horizon. I wanted to prove this. I wanted to conduct research that would bring a positive light to the multiple generations currently in the workforce.

Fast forward to my later 30s, pedagogy became important to me when I was first introduced to the subject in one of my doctoral courses. It was an elective that I honestly did not remember registering for. I remember when someone would ask me what courses I was taking that semester, I would list them and some would ask me, “What is pedagogy?” My answer to them was, “I do not know, but I will find out when I take the course.” During the course, I gained the knowledge of what pedagogy is and was introduced to pedagogical practices. What was profound about this pedagogy course was how the instructor used a method of self-reflection and storying. The course was entitled “Advanced Pedagogical Practices in Achieving Equity” and was taught by Professor Raj who had designed a personal pedagogy activity through storying. Unknowingly, as we started storying about our own personal pedagogies, the professor was educating us on how we had personally developed our personal pedagogical styles—through the exercise of storying. As I made myself vulnerable in the course, I started to realize that I, indeed, had a personal pedagogy that had influenced my leadership and mentoring styles.

I am indeed a product of mentoring and have valued the guidance I have received from my mentors. As my mother and grandmother, both Latinas, were the primary sources of influencing and shaping my core values I carry today, it is through mentoring that I attribute the capability and self-confidence for completing my accomplishments. My first true mentor was from my junior high school, Mrs. Mary, a pseudonym. Mrs. Mary, an African American woman, complimented the values my mother and grandmother had raised me with. My mother died the beginning months of my seventh-grade year. Knowing I would need higher educational guidance with the absence of my mother, Mrs. Mary mentored me and helped me stay focused in junior high. When I entered my senior year of high school, she became the principal of the high school. Staying true to being my mentor, she helped me achieve a dream of mine and my mother’s: to attain a college degree. To this day, I still learn from her, and she learns from me as well. One of her lessons that has been imprinted in

my memory is to affirm those around you, appreciate those around you, and always be you.

I have had great mentors guiding me, who challenge and push me professionally. Sometimes the pushing was needed when I felt I was not ready for the next steps, but they saw the potential I had and prepared me for opportunities I may want to take. They never forced me in a direction they wished I would take; instead they provided me with opportunities. It was through my mentors that I also learned to be comfortable with being vulnerable, something I value today. I try to be a leader who is not afraid to be vulnerable but is also not afraid to be vocal and stand up for social justice.

Knowing I had a passion for participating in a workforce made of a variety of experiences from a multi-generational workforce that is leading change in my organization, learning and understanding personal pedagogy, and finally realizing the success I have had with mentors, the study began to create itself. I had the fortunate opportunity to learn about qualitative methods and the value one can gain from observations and interviews. I knew my study would be qualitative as it seemed to me to be more personable and authentic; to which I thank my professors for the epiphany. However, I felt that storying could become a valuable methodology in qualitative research, especially the kind of storying that was described using emotional truth (Raj, 2019). I knew when developing the interview protocol, as a researcher, there is a responsibility to stay neutral throughout the process. However, that was not my style nor was it close to the education I received in my research methods courses. Given the understanding of my research mentor, my advisor, I was encouraged to be true to myself by developing my research using storying as a methodology. She understood, for me to be fully engaged with the research, I also needed to be fully engaged with my participants, which meant I needed to be genuine and authentic myself. As stated before, I interviewed my participants, I did not either agree or disagree with the answers given, but I actively shared in emotions such as laughter, tears, points of pondering, points of self-reflection, frustration, and many more. I did not have a guard up, and when asked a question, I answered it honestly and allowed myself to be vulnerable. This added authenticity to the interview process, and I was no longer an interviewer, rather I was an invited guest into my participants' experiences.

A final note on utilizing storying as a research methodology. For researchers that are looking for a methodology that allows flexibility to

build genuine connections with participants, storying is the solution. It is a methodology that maintains the traditional boundaries between researcher and participant but allows enough out of the box participation to capture the moments of truth of the participants. The participant is no longer giving answers but instead they invite you to experience their stories, and as the researcher you are no longer documenting the process, you are experiencing it. That is the storying methodology process.

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# The Stories WE Create: Storying Social Practice Art (SPA)

*Maria-Lisa Flemington*

## INTRODUCTION

Our stories can reveal our identity and be part of our identity development. Telling a story of a painful or joyful experience enables sharing and healing to occur. Feelings, memories, thoughts, and impressions surface that play out in a shared space. Re-imagining alternative ways of being or knowing can turn tragedies into personal triumphs (Boal, 2009). Storying involves making the occurrences and experiences our own through our distinct and unique perspective, positionality, and cultural historical being (Raj, 2019).

As an artist, I am interested in engaging and interacting with information from various perspectives to offer another representation. By storying as a participant observer, I use sources of insight and subjects of examination (Fonow & Cook, 2005) from socially engaged art experiences and arts-based research methods to portray individual and communal voices.

I became interested in considering the stories of research after learning about *Grace Street* by Diane Austin. Austin conducted research at

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M.-L. Flemington (✉)

Charter College of Education, Cal State LA, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings as a participant observer at them. Austin assembled a vast quantity of stories and songs from a reflective journal she composed of memos and observational field notes. The resulting data was composed to form a musical production, *Grace Street*—<https://tinyurl.com/msty33sr>. The performative piece staged an AA meeting with the members sharing their stories of what it was like when they were drinking, what was the catalyst to help them get sober, and what their lives were like in sobriety. Diane Austin and Michele Forinash (2005) outline arts-based research as either an embellishment or a product. The results of a study can either be incorporated when presenting data from research (adding images to a presentation) or be informed and inspired using the research results of the study to create a piece (create an artwork from the data). I am interested in using the research to create other artistic reflections.

*Blueface* was created by me as a participant observer. This story is meant to encapsulate the apprehension that has lived in me much of my life. Childhood insecurities, secrets, and destinies are components of my identity and thus a representation of myself. *Blueface* is about the parents I have, the daughter I am, and the person any one of us could be.

### **Blueface**

*“Where’s all the furniture?” I ask*

*His response “Do you think Jay will like this whined-up car?”*

*“Will Renee like this harmonic?”*

*I didn’t have the heart to tell my dad,  
... not really because that’s all he had to give.*

*He often gives things away that he owns. There was a period of time that we didn’t have any money so he would give all of the gifts that were given to him to others.*

*“You’re really giving this to me? But Grandpa gave this to you.”*

*The silver blue faced crystal watch ... I remember him wearing it when ...*

*We sat on a park bench and rolled pennies for food ...*

*We made peanut butter and jelly filled tortillas with syrup ...*

*We had to leave the Christmas party after a family fight ...*

*We watched B-movies at the drive-in ...*



*You were abusive to loved ones.  
 You cried as your dad did the same.  
 I got drunk, called and told you the truth.*

*What do I keep and what do I give away?  
 As I am exploring the depth of parenthood,  
 my childhood memories have another layer of depth and perspective.  
 I am choosing to forgive. Regifting what works for me and leaving what doesn't.  
 Parental empathy.*

This poetic reflection of my childhood memory provides a powerful mode to transform an episode of my experience and gain capacity to make positive transformations through self-knowledge and exploration (Knowles & Thomas, 2002). After my parents separated, I often did not know what would happen as things were changing and evolving. It was unpredictable and sometimes chaotic. I was experiencing my parent's divorce as myself and as an empathetic being feeling their struggles. When I think about how my parents managed being alone, my dad expressed a lot of anger and resentment. My mom exhibited her fears in various manners. I still remember the sense of sadness I felt walking into his duplex and realizing he had sold most of the furniture. I thought he was suicidal and wanted to get rid of all of his belongings. I questioned our financial security or maybe he just wanted a fresh start. This feeling is still with me as an adult; I have always felt I need to be concerned about my dad and his well-being. My parents had a tough time and in turn I often did. This is an integral aspect of my identity. This reflection is who I am past and present, as a child and parent.

A workshop conducted by [StoryCenter.org](http://StoryCenter.org) provided a space for me to create *Blueface*, listen and share moments of storying. Each of us shared deeply personal experiences and aspects of our identity. I felt a level of obligation to be authentic and reveal my "emotional truth" (Raj, 2019) as others shared their stories. Emotional truth encourages empathic listening in community spaces and discourse. During our workshop, I provided statements and feedback in the form of, "If I were creating this, I would ...." The process was performative as we read our stories to the group and received input. Additionally, this simple act let me think of the story from their point of view. To some degree, it is often easier to share deep feelings and emotions with strangers as there is little possibility of encountering that individual at another occasion. Trust and respect had to

be established in order to be receptive to sharing and critique. Once we created and re-created our pieces, we then told them to our audience of fellow workshop attendees.

Learning about oneself and others is a primary focus of this work and one I am passionate about. I learned about my former professor and now friend, community members experiencing homelessness, artists, and myself. Practicing listening, and telling stories, while building community, is a creative practice and a civic responsibility (Garoian, 2019). We provided the opportunities for participants to explore their lives and the lives of others while producing insight into their perceptions and challenging behaviors (Foster, 2016). Arts-based methods can provide participants with multiple ways of knowing, as the arts are essential to identity development and awareness (Gerber et al., 2012). The *StoryCenter* workshop connected stories in a socially engaged practice. Each member added a dynamic that was critical to the process and experience. The stories occurred in the manner reflective of the participants in attendance. We are all composed of various experiences, feelings, and emotions. The process of communing and creating is the foundation of socially engaged art and the art serves as a story representation of the community.

Storying carries a collaborative essence and a sense of companionship with the audience. An audience is needed for varying levels of engagement (Benjamin, 1969/2006). The relationship of the teller and re-teller directs and forms the stories shared. Ken Plummer (1995, pp. 20–21) acknowledges the “joint actions” of storyteller and “coaxer” when creating stories. The “coaxer” facilitates and supports the storyteller while creating and uncovering aspects of their story. The objective is to realize an unearthed version and deliver it in a different way. This was my experience when creating and presenting *Blueface*. I would not have created the poem in the same manner without the catalyst of the workshop and the other group members. The “coaxer” in the *StoryCenter* workshop was the workshop facilitator who provided prompts to develop a story and administer opportunities for feedback and support.

In another instance, I attended a workshop session led by Dr. Dirk J. Rodricks, *Voice and Responsibility: Using Arts-Based Methods in Research Exploration*. The session was informed by the idea of *story-doing* and using arts-based methods in research exploration and interactive model applying *mishritata* (mixedness in Hindu) to story-doing methodology (as opposed to informed by story-telling) and implementing arts-based informed methods. This recreating and reframing stories from an inclusive

perspective allowed me to achieve a greater understanding of the various people involved in my story. This method can be used to shift practices that reinforce barriers and exclusionary methods that are defined by a dominant cultural narrative (Rice & Mundel, 2018).

Dr. Dirk J. Rodricks (2021) provided various prompts to answer with the first thought that came to mind. We were then provided a dynamic electronic form to type our answers and provide as much detail as possible about a specific memory. This part of the activity called “Sharing Your Story” was based on George Ella Lyon’s (1999) writing activity response to poet Jo Carson’s (1989) collection of monologues and dialogues, *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet*. I was able to share verbally and write my response in the Zoom chat feature. The activity created a feeling of angst for me and a worry of being judged or valued. I felt vulnerable when asked to contribute the details regarding my identity. Letting people know our stories and identities can be unsettling as it can leave one without a response or shield. The memory of my keepsake triggered emotions of my childhood and feeling helpless. Much like the process that occurred in rendering my story, *Blueface*. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

*I am from ... (place) Pasadena*

*I am from ... (food you love) a meatball*

*I am from ... (where you will go or who you will visit) Denmark, to visit my family*

*I am from ... (childhood toy or keepsake you will not part with) doggy and beary*

*I am from ... (thing you miss the most in quarantine) family*

*I am from ... (place you seek refuge) hike a mountain trail*

*I am from ... (someone you admire) my morfar*

*About my keepsake item:*

*Given to me as a child when my parents were still together*

*I would talk to them and pretend they were real*

*I always wanted a dog*

*My grandmother sewed its neck once it was so loose*

Dr. Rodricks asked us to then “[i]magine the item disappeared and in its place there was a love letter from the item. List the aspects that highlight the larger importance of that object. What would the object say to you? How can you empathize with the object?” Creating a “From me, with love” letter to the prompt of my keepsake toy from childhood that I

could not part with shifted the focus from the item to the me of the time. I began to think about memories of people that had been involved in my life at the time I relied on Doggy and Beary for comfort. My thoughts evolved to various experiences from that time and how they have shaped who I am. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

*My “From me, with love” Letter*

*Dearest Maria-Lisa,*

*You were a wonderful companion and took great care of me when I needed you.*

*I have loved growing up with you and we were able to find our way.*

*Do not lose your curiosity for life and carry me with you in your heart and mind.*

*Love forever,*

*Doggy*

“From me, with love” letter was addressed to me from my stuffed animal, Doggy. As a child, I wished for a dog to be my companion. I was an only child at the time and lonely. Doggy was a gift to me from a neighbor when I was three years old. His fur was a mustard yellow with velvety ears. Doggy went everywhere with me. He traveled to the airport with me to pick up my grandparents, and when I was old enough to study abroad, he traveled to Italy. My grandmother, who did not like to sew, patched his eyes and lips that fell out from petting him too much. She also sewed a neck replacement when his neck began to lose capacity. She said he had a “Ronald Reagan neck, and that was unacceptable.” She was not fond of Ronald Reagan as she did not agree with his politics! I knew who Ronald Reagan was because my family would complain that he was a horrible president and was the cause for ending the reduced lunch that I was able to get at school. Overnight, the cost of lunch went from 25 cents to \$1. It was not a huge burden but it was a message I received: the power one person could hold for so many. I remember thinking, if I was not able to make the payment, would I be able to eat? I worried about many things growing up and financial concerns weighed heavy on me as I knew we did not have a lot.

Doggy comforted me and helped make me feel safe and secure. I would talk to him and pretend he was a real dog. The letter addressed from him noted that the relationship was symbiotic. The fondness of keepsakes is in the memories that they hold which are fluid, blurred, and dynamic.

Negotiating the stories within each of us that become embedded as part of our identity became part of the conversation as participants shared

their, “From me, with love” letters. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich stated, “[R]evision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich, 1972, p. 18). This addresses the notion of challenging stories and perceptions. Sharing these enables the process to challenge and change. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

### **Final Thoughts**

(Be with)

Everyone is a series of moments

Expressions

powerful

Stories let people know what has shaped us?

What is going on?

inside us?

If we are?

(Look inside)

Listening with your eyes

Unspoken elements

Verbal

Textual

(Look outside)

Connections

Imaging freedom

Protect and limit

Actual is reflective

(Be with)

Storying offers the opportunity to approach the data allowing a “third voice” to emerge as interpretive from the discourse that develops between the researcher and the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). Both of the social practice experiences allowed the opportunity for me to acknowledge components of my life that have shaped who I am. The things that represent moments in time hold memories or people and experiences that ultimately make up who I am. I am a physical embodiment of my relatives but also a spiritual and emotional response to my experiences and interactions with them. Realizing I hold the strength and resiliency of my family through hardship and pain provides comfort.

Narrative methods strive for a collaborative process to reveal participants' experiences and perceptions through storying and re-storying to expose compelling data (Leavy, 2015). Arthur Frank (2010) exclaims that "stories are too lively and too wild to be tied up" (p. 1) in discussing placing strict narrative methods. Along with my personal stories and poems included above, I report on poetic inquiry data from my socially engaged art practice dissertation and an arts-informed socially engaged inquiry poem. Research data is elicited to generate stories, poems, and narrative pieces.

In my experience, the *StoryCenter* and *Voice and Responsibility: Using Arts-Based Methods in Research Exploration* workshops disrupted dominant narratives and opened possibilities (Rice & Mundel, 2018). By sharing stories I was able to realize that my individual adversities have social causes (Mies, 1983). I experienced reflective moments informed by methods of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1974). This social practice work engaged participants in storying and provided transformational and self-directed experiences for individuals and communities.

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

Each person is a story. Socially engaged art is a story of community. This work is embedded with a range of individual experiences. Consequently, each practice encompasses individual and collective stories. The pedagogy of socially engaged art is dependent upon the dynamics and contributions generated during the art practice and process. It is a collaborative art practice where the project is co-created and co-produced with the participants and artists. The emphasis on process over product centers the person. Equally as relevant is what is being shared and what is heard during these learning moments. The compilation of the work is social, representing more than an individual, and specified as a collaborative co-creation. Lacy and Helguera (2017) acknowledge the importance the impressions and experiences a given socially engaged practice has on those involved. This process is essential to socially engaged work in the context of community and individual storying. Bringing people together with diverse experiences offers occasions for shared learning with multiple outcomes to occur (Leake, 2012).

Informed by storying, knowledge is "enacted, reconfigured, tested, and engaged by imaginative summonings and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggles" (Conquergood,

1993, p. 337). The dialogical aspect of storying parallels with Freirian pedagogy and offers participants the opportunity to critically reflect on attitudes and assumptions surrounding their positionality. Ledwith and Springett (2010) suggest this reflective occasion can reposition themselves and sharing stories can provide insight that is helpful to understanding “their individual sufferings have social causes” (Mies, 1983, p. 128). Additionally, analyzing the dialogical narrative affords understanding stories. Bakhtin’s (1984) concepts of art are conversations, a dialogic art that is a collaborative practice. It involves examining the evolution of stories as co-constructed through various stages of input and output. Stories can consequently be valued as artful representations of lives. Kothari (2001, p. 151) observes that often the most resistant action that participants can make is in not acting or participating, “exclusion can be empowering and even necessary in order to challenge existing structures of domination and control.” Silence can be a powerful form of dissent and give voice to the oppressed.

When considering the community story, it is about having a conversation with others, listening to the voice of the community, and being part of it. The appropriation of collective narratives into one’s individual story and the development or modification of narratives creates the possibility to generate social change through new communal narratives (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). Realizing the potential for socially engaged art as storying provides various opportunities and experiences for participants to be invested, as socially engaged practice is intentionally a collective. The impetus for socially engaged art practice to be a change agent is dependent on the participants and collective dynamics. Arguably, any variation of an experience is a change. Socially engaged practice is looking to facilitate and organize various solutions and opportunities to create a better human existence. The socially engaged artist creates multiple occasions for knowledge, dialogue, and experiences to occur. The practice focuses on the participatory aspects navigating a way toward change and reflects the storying of individuals and communities.

### SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

“Art as a Catalyst for Change: A Performance Ethnography of Social Practice Art in Community” (Flemington, 2018) is a study displaying the experience of artists and participants as a result of social practice art occurrences.

This study conceptualized social practice art as facilitated by the Center for Arts visiting artists as a catalyst to realize and explore community experiences. Through the researcher positionality of participant observer and complete participant, the research provided insight into the complexities of socially engaged art in a community organized by a community arts center with three socially engaged artists collaborating for a series of workshops. Based on the findings, this study offers recommendations for the field which include the notion that personal experiences transcend the socially engaged practice and create communal experiences and new “ways of knowing” (Fox, 2015) that are about getting together and creating collectively. Socially engaged art offers the opportunity to engage and explore the modes of address in these moments of engagement and can provide those working in social practice a guide to practitioner/researcher and participant experiences. (Flemington, 2018, p. iv)

The concept of art as a catalyst for change varied for each artist. I asked each artist separately, “In your experience, how can or has art been a catalyst for change?” Their responses depended on their positionality, experiences, and their notion of change. Additionally, how their concept of change impacts their view if art can be applied to change. Each makes note of how their work brings people together to share space and knowledge, to engage one another, and to address social concerns. The responses from artists question the measurability and quantifiability of change, binary and deficit lens, and neoliberal notions.

Leavy (2015) references poetic inquiry in social research as an engaged method to elicit emotions, comprehension, and connection. bell hooks (1990) noted, when examining the poems of Langston Hughes, that poems can capture subjective “truths” and identify the connection in the larger social context. Poems create “the essence of an event” by illustrating “a scene” to evoke feelings (Ely et al., 1999, p. 135). Cynthia Cannon Poindexter (2002) explains the importance of data in poetic form as sculpting language to articulate a compelling and vivid scene. Artist responses to art as a catalyst to change:

*[P]ieces that seem the most powerful to me and that I'm the most excited about are pieces that in whatever method have, people from very different walks of life, or people from different backgrounds, people who would not normally engage with each other, find some way to do that ... it breaks the boundary that's between these people because of their age, or their background, or whatever it might be*



... pieces that turn that sort of paradigm on its head and get these different types, different groups of people to talk to each other, do something together ... engage with each other, because that's something I think that more and more we're missing as we communicate by texting, and email, and Facebook, and that sort of thing. ... Having those direct interactions is really powerful, and I think we're losing out on those more and more as we communicate in different ways, especially mediated by technology  
 ... finding ways around that to get people to engage with each other on a personal level, I think is really exciting  
 ... I'm just really interested in **breaking** down those sort of **barriers**  
 ... and fostering a more communal environment  
 ... my experience has been a catalyst for change  
 ... well see, the thing is, **how you view art ... the way I view art**  
 ... and the way I actually live my life ... you know? It's artful, the artfulness, I feel like it's in the richness  
 ... the experience of what is creative and what is not ... it's tricky because it's never a fix  
 ... you're never, like, this is it and it's never a formula.

#### SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AS A STORYING COMMUNITY

*Unpacking the Participant* was an emergent theme from my dissertation “Art as a Catalyst for Change: A Performance Ethnography of Social Practice Art in Community.” Each person is a story and each socially engaged art practice as a story of community. In my notes I have written, “Look at it as the opportunity to look at the people immediately near me, the other artists, as the participants. Looking at it as a more shared situation. Bring out the dialogue or the stories that are written by people because there's the dominant narrative that we constantly hear and are bombarded through the media and then there's the part where we have our own answers” (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes).

Unpacking the participant is described as the process and concept of identifying where both the participant and the artists came from and why they choose to participate in the socially engaged art practice. This involves the many facets of positioning oneself in a socially engaged process. The process of creating artwork and developing relationships that evolved as a result of or during the practice of participating in the socially engaged art is part of unpacking the individual and their lived experiences. Each individual shares and creates differently. A synthesis of these experiences in relation to the community at large occurs for each of the participants and

artists (if there is a distinction). These artists and their work are reflective of the community that has participated. With the praxis of participation, reflection, and action, socially engaged art workshops enable artists to expose an aspect of themselves and in addition participants reveal an aspect of themselves. These stories illustrate how each participant views and interprets from their own experience and perspective. Additionally, these perspectives come from multiple notions and concepts. These notions and concepts can often have social implications if embedded in social practice.

While conducting research, I participated as a participant/observer in a socially engaged art practice. The socially engaged art serves as a story representation of the community and identity building. The inquiries outlined highlight notable exchanges that reference these occasions and impressions. One of the artists re-conceptualized their perception of a participant, connecting to where the participant positioned themselves as opposed to where the artist had positioned them. One of the artist, Sam, reflected on how the experience impacted their practice:

*I kind of switched myself over to looking at it as more of a case study within a case study ... looking at the people who are the other two artists, as the participants on my project. Since Dylan helped make the control panel, and then I worked with Chris yesterday. Other people ... have made suggestions about the boat. And I'm kind of open and flexible to what those suggestions have been.*

This example demonstrates how the experience of contributing to the socially engaged art workshop made an impression on how they are viewing participants as it relates to their positionality. Sam's workshop project was reliant on participant contributions to create and propel the direction of their project. The shipwrecked boat installation evolved in real time with the input from participants. Each of the workshops requested participants to contribute in a different way but always related to the shipwrecked boat. The workshops ranged from giving feedback to question prompts, making a button for a motor-control panel, painting self-portraits, and participating in a sing-along. Sam's workshop integrated the participant input with their own twist on it. Sam used that feedback and developed the idea to have participants create self-portraits as children around the shipwrecked boat and sing-along. Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

*When asked by Sam, “What are the greatest challenges we face in today’s society” and “what gives you hope?” As a participant observer, I responded, “That people aren’t feeling compelled to listen to each other anymore but rather be heard and this is a source of conflict. There are many people just trying to have the loudest voice and ultimately, nobody gets heard because everyone is screaming in the end. Children and youth are what makes me hopeful. Seeing people show up to something like this fills me with hope.” I was then instructed to write a version of that answer on a sticky note at the table and place it on a large drawing the artist did of the shipwrecked boat at sea. The drawing of a lone sailor on a small sailboat being overwhelmed by the encroaching storm included the message:*

*The Shipwreck is a collaborative artwork in the form of a reconstructed vintage cruiser boat, Tequila. Elements of the boat, such as the control panel, treasure chest, transmitter, life buoys, are based on public interpretation and feedback. With the premise of a ship lost in the Bermuda Triangle, (our society in demise) (which way are we going?) the project aims to generate conversation and optimism through imaginative play. What are the greatest challenges we face in today’s society? Which direction should we head in? Some of the sticky notes responses read:*

#### *RACISM*

*Lack of community support*

*Everyone is greedy*

*Affordable housing*

*Apathy*

*Fear of others*

*Fear of poverty and those in poverty*

*Lack of community support*

*Fear the reduction of people to others*

*President Trump*

*Issues of deportation as a result of immigration status*

*Educational inequities*

*Homelessness*

*Systemic violence*

In reviewing the other participant responses to this prompt, many references to politics at a global and local level were mentioned, as were personal experiences within these realms. The responses to what gives people hope extended from children and youth, grassroots politics, and community art programs. Additionally, asking feedback about personal

and global experiences encouraged the development of personal connections with the artist and other participants. At this point in the practice, there were a couple dozen people participating in the practice and engaging with each other. The artist was available to ask questions, deliver instruction to individuals or small groups, and converse with the participants.

There was a point in the workshop that I was able to have a private conversation with Sam about their experience as an artist working in social practice. Once the conversation developed, Sam shared their educational experience and other prominent artists they had partnered and worked with on other community projects. I mentioned that I went to hear Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy speak at an artist talk. We discussed their passion and different styles. I felt that this was a necessary step in gaining trust and relatability. My relationship in this conversation and activity fluctuated between participant observer and complete observer. As a participant observer, I was engaged in the conversation regarding my research and setting the tone for our relationship in that capacity. As the complete observer, I was voluntarily and actively engaging in the directives of Sam and providing input based on my positionality.

#### AT THE NEXT WORKSHOP OCCASION

Sam was greeting people as they arrived at the entrance of the socially engaged practice. They were involving participants by offering them avenues to engage with the shipwrecked boat installation and contribute their thoughts and creations to the process. Next to the boat was a table with supplies (paint brushes, paints, and canvas) to provide participants the opportunity to paint the canvas stationed at each of the buoys. Participants were requested to create a self-portrait as a child or a representation of a child. When the participants contributed feedback to the question “What gives them hope” and a participant responded that “children give them hope.” “Children rescue our future” was a sentiment shared by an individual at the workshop and symbolic to the function of a buoy. The buoy self-portrait stations were located surrounding the boat on the black asphalt. “We look to children to rescue the future and do not give them the resources to do so.” There was one child participant painting a canvas on their own as their parent spoke with the artist. The child started the process of painting. They needed some guidance to stay painting the buoys as they were more interested in exploring the boat installation space.

The parent was talking with the artist while the child attempted to paint. Once the child started to climb on the boat, the parent was alert and was attentive to their child. Another artist and a couple painted their own canvas toward the latter part of the workshop.

The artist facilitated the initial prompt that generated the idea to have child portraits on buoys and the contribution of the participants producing the content. Sam was providing people the space, tools, and resources to create a component of the piece. In discussing with Sam how they felt the project was progressing, they mentioned looking at the “difference between interactive and participatory.” When not as many participants from the community were represented, Sam’s thinking of participants shifted to include the other artists that were part of the workshops. How the community, especially the kids, responds well to the art and it gives them a chance to be able to express themselves. “You know, there were a few kids here, the ones that did come, seemed to be really interested and engaged.”

*Dialoguing and Engaging* was another emergent theme from my dissertation. Expressions revealed (or lack of) during developing and connecting relationships through meaningful action to catalyze change. The concept that art is solely created by artists and observed by participants is a notion that socially engaged practice negates and challenges. Participation, creation, and reflection are necessary components for the success of a project. Additional guidance, direction, and encouragement may be needed to nurture contributions. Artists should position themselves as relatable to all the various participants, viewers, and contributors by positioning themselves in the various scenarios that accompany each of these roles.

These various roles accompany individual and communal narratives. Individual stories are reflective of personal experiences and are formed by the various community narratives prevalent where the individual identifies (Rappaport, 2000). This concept illustrates the notion of different narratives that are embedded in popular society. These perspectives to the social implications and considerations realized through dialogue and reflection in their work embody the community story. These experiences are the narratives or stories shared with other community members.

Artists working in socially engaged art can inspire ways of being and “ways of knowing” that motivate communities and increase awareness of issues (Fox, 2015). Social practice artists generally place more emphasis on the method of engagement and process of creating (Leake, 2012). It’s not just about the socially engaged concept or idea but the notion of getting

together and creating together. Locating oneself in the practice can offer a tool to be more aware of how experiences are impacted by these interactions and relations (Langhout, 2006). Equally as integral to knowing individual impact is the community experiences and narratives as the community is reflected in each individual.

Storying is a method to understand socially constructed arrangements and structures. When participants actively share their stories while collaboratively generating meaning, their dialogue is co-created (Passila et al., 2013). Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography (Fig. 7.1):

*All the projects themselves are community experiences because they are in dialogue with the community and they are co-created with the participation of the community. So, I would say the workshops themselves are the things that have been generated, the things that have been generated from this project, from the*

Fig. 7.1 Puppet created at SPA workshop



*experiences of the community. Everything has been co-created through direct participation with the community, the visual aspects of what has been made of the boat itself. I know it sounds kind of redundant but to say that it's the artist's work themselves because those are made by the community maybe that means that is the community. The workshops themselves carry the community experiences within them. It's not just about the socially engaged art concept or idea but the notion of getting together and creating something together. Hearing the needs of the community and the expression of the community in a different way than they usually do through the work. (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes)*

*The Everyday Puppets Guide to Basic Hand Puppets—Puppets were a part of my childhood and I collected them. My dad loved puppets and would take me to shows in Downtown Los Angeles. He would wake me up in the morning with them peeping around the corner saying hello and an entire skit. I naturally gravitated towards this event as I had fond associations with the content. This workshop was at the focal point of the socially engaged art activities. The ambiance resembled a large festival with many people talking, communing, and creating. Detailed instructions with drawings created in black marker on reclaimed cardboard allowed for participants to cut, glue, and assemble their puppets at various times. At the end of the puppet making table an assortment of masks and puppets were featured to use as inspiration. Various supplies were available for participants to assemble and add to their puppet.*

I was greeted by Chris and asked if I wanted to make a puppet. The artist facilitating the workshop was also engaging and dialoguing with others as part of his process. I observed, as the other participants made puppets that were representations of themselves, monsters, or other fictitious characters. Chris informed me that the puppets would be part of a performance utilizing aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1974). This component was scheduled to occur toward the conclusion of the workshop once more puppets had been created by participants. I utilized the illustrated diagram to construct the puppet and other participants provided instruction and assistance to me. One of the participants that assisted me at the puppet station was a teaching artist. Several children created puppets and were guided by the artist to participate in the Theatre of the Oppressed dialogue and activities. The participants used the puppets as a representation of themselves and acted out issues and situations that were of concern to them. Chris noted about the workshop,

[T]he intention is not to solve a problem, but rather to really bring out the dialogue ... the stories that are written in people because there's dominant narratives that we constantly hear and are bombarded through by the media and then there's the part where we have our own answers. At the same time, we have to also relate to others, too. And if anything, developing some kind of empathy or compassion for others because when we hear a story we see this thing and then hear the labeling of things and then we see that story, but we frame it. I feel like it gives a sense of relief in these types of community experiences. It's a place where you can let go. That's what these community experiences embody, just take a step out of your life and come here and create, talk, discuss news with people. Just a break from everyday.

The activities and exercises informed by Theatre of the Oppressed were to allow for participants to re-frame inequities and situations of their life to experience success or different solutions. The practice also enabled an avenue for people to disclose and discuss occurrences. Giving this time was valuable to the process of creating a space for trust and empathy. The important aspect of this happening is sharing dialogue and engaging with others. The puppet making facilitated the process of creating in a shared space and developing the dialogue for the Theatre of the Oppressed exercises and the conversation that naturally occurred. Creating a version of ourselves and language that we control is very liberating and empowering. These various modes to engage was a strong aspect of this socially engaged workshop.

*Robotic-toothbrush paintings*—“Let’s create a giant robotic toothbrush!” proposed Chris. While Dylan and Chris instructed participants on how to assemble the miniature robots and attach them to toothbrushes, they discussed future projects. They spoke of hypothetically planning a large-scale toothbrush robot that would combine technology and graffiti to paint large sections of cities. Participants could assemble the robots on the toothbrush at their discretion, dip the toothbrush in paint, and place the motorized toothbrush with paint on a sheet of paper. Participants started placing their creations on the same sheet of paper and the robotic toothbrushes would create paintings together. I observed through their dialogue and engagement, how the socially engaged practice impacted the socially engaged artists by discussing future projects. The process of creating, dialoguing, and engaging together contributed to their “ways of knowing.” These “ways of knowing” reference the aspects of the art and more importantly, the aspects that encompass each other. Each artist had their own level of expertise and area of specialization to share. Unloading those ideas in a space that breeds development was one of the catalysts that appeared to make other participants feel inspired. As an artist, I think for me it is always inspiring to see other artists doing what makes them happy and serving their purpose



*in life. It also inspires me to continue to make sure that I'm pursuing my own artistic practices ... to hopefully one day do my own workshops and activities and to continue this type of community engagement. Seeing all of the people working and creating together was inspiring.* (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes)

*Sense of Belonging* was the third emergent theme from my dissertation. The phenomenon of contributing in a collaborative way or in a collective manner gives a feeling of belonging to a community. The notion that the artists and participants were involved in something that provided meaning and helped them feel connected. This component is an idea socially engaged practice strives to accomplish through the various points of engagement and unpacking. Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

**Sing-Along**—As the resident artists and visiting artists played guitars, bass, and harmonics with their installation piece as a backdrop, we began to position ourselves throughout the space encompassing the socially engaged practice. The process of participating in this practice was familiar and not exactly comfortable. There was a sense of anxiety as we were congregating and some people were not as comfortable singing in a group. Once Sam introduced the visiting artist as a friend and announced they would play as we sang-along. The featured songs all related to being at sea and going somewhere by boat; *Blow the Man Down*, *What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor*, *I Want To Go Home*, and *Kokomo*. The lyrics for all of these songs were placed on a folding chair next to the shipwrecked boat with a green resin diamond-shaped paperweight so the wind would not blow away the sheets. We faced the artists and fanned out in a half-circle with holding the lyrics. Small percussion instruments were distributed to accompany the music and singing. Sam directed everyone to contribute either by singing, playing, or listening. Upon hearing that, people started experimenting with the instruments and looking over the lyrics. Dylan and I stood next to each other and I held the lyrics for both of us to follow. Dylan helped keep the rhythm by playing a percussion instrument and guiding participants as Sam and the visiting artist played. The first song played was *Blow the Man Down*. The lyrics began ...

*“Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow the man down.  
To me way-aye, blow the man down.  
Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow him right down.  
Give me some time to blow the man down.”*

The melody was slow and about the sea overtaking the sailor. Some of the participants appeared comfortable with singing, while others that placed themselves in the outer edge of the half circles towards the back of the par-

ticipants did not sing. As we sang the second song, What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor, someone announced their father would sing the song to them as a child. We sang ...

*“What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*Early in the morning!*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Early in the morning!”*

The first two songs were sailor shanties, popular in the nineteenth century, while the final two were songs created by twenty-first-century artists. It was about midway through the song, “I Want to go Home,” that I felt the feeling of belonging and that we were making something together. People started to sway and move their bodies in place. The final song was “Kokomo” that makes reference to the Bermuda Triangle. Answering the question that was asked, “Which direction should we head in?” Kokomo as a paradise destination as one version of where our society (ship) should navigate toward. Both of these songs were created by The Beach Boys and did not feel entirely relevant to some of the participants. At the final song, many participants were singing, playing instruments, and slightly dancing. The crowd was large enough that the participants could be engaged as a group and not as single participants with a vocal performance. In this moment, I feel a strong sense of community as we created the sounds together. At that moment, the art was a representation of our community story as a shared moment and experience.

The fourth theme was *Exploring, Making, and Playing* in my dissertation. The concept of creating together enabled a sense of confidence and a communal practice. This theme resonated with me as a participant observer and complete participant. The various socially engaged workshops afforded participants the opportunity to make art in an experiential manner with various methods and subjects. Additionally, what transpired during the process of creating in collaboration allowed for people to just consider “ways of knowing” and not focus on solutions. This opportunity promoted the freedom to address issues, experiment with new media, and create art in various capacities. These modes of expression were focused on the creation without expertise or an emphasis on critique but rather on what is

revealed about identity or others when making and exploring. Researcher-voice poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

*Walking into the workshop site, I could hear David Bowie's Space Oddity playin,  
 "This is Ground Control to Major Tom  
 You've really made the grade  
 And the papers want to know whose shirts you wear  
 Now it's time to leave the capsule if you dare."*

There was a cluster of a few people watching the next rocket launch just inside the workshop space. Each rocket canister had its own individual launch that involved a countdown announcement with steam and artist introduction accompanied by a song. The workshop direction was to create your own personalized rocket from repurposed film canisters. Each rocket could be decorated with stickers and colorful pipe cleaners. Inside each canister, the participant placed an Alka-Seltzer tab. Once the rocket was ready to launch, water was placed into the canister and recapped, concealing it. The rockets were placed on Stanley Station Launch pad area for the simulated countdown music (Fig. 7.2).



Fig. 7.2 Launching rockets in the space museum

Dylan prefaced the discussion with, “Have you ever traveled in space? I can send you to assist me.” As I began to create my rocket, people joined and watched the various stages of process. Some rockets propelled and successfully launched. Others did not. I design my rocket with the canister lid at the top of the rocket. Dylan let me know that mine was the first rocket to be completed in this way and it might not launch. After embellishing the container and quickly putting the explosive mixture in, I placed the rocket on the circular launch pad and waited; during this time the artist mentioned the importance of experimenting and testing the limits of what we can do. My rocket did not depart, so I assembled the ingredients to create the rocket again and placed the canister lid on the rocket facing down on the launch pad. Rockets that had launched were removed from the launch pad after the countdown event and placed in the space museum display. The reaction of the water and Alka-Seltzer mixture placed in a sealed container caused the explosion. There was a margin for error with a few of the steps involved but key to this aspect of the socially engaged art process is exploring and experimenting. This form of discovery and play is essential in sharing knowledge, learning, and development. Participants cheered for “successful launches” and encouraged those to rework the canisters that did not launch. The artist framed the objective as “Exploring” to focus on the practice and process rather than the product. The danger being for participants to strive for a “successful launch” might imply replicating and not discovering through play.

### REFLECTIONS FROM RESEARCH

Poetic transcription and analytic code weaving is a method derivative of a grounded theory perspective, in which codes were drawn from the data by reviewing the interview transcripts for themes and language and the words and phrases organized to form the poem. This poem solely reflects the exact language participants expressed (in vivo) during research interviews. I identified the elements of the data to feature in the poem and maintained interpretive control, while weaving together personal narratives into a community narrative. Using the selected words as the source of the poem preserves the authenticity of speech (Faulkner, 2005; Glesne, 1997). A “third voice” in poetic transcription evolves from conversations between researcher and participant and transforms during interpretation (Glesne, 1997).

These reflective poems were generated from analytic memos using Saldaña's (2016) method. The analytic memo-writing process is a nonlinear process that transcends the spectrum of data collection and coding from the beginning to the end of the investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Birks et al. (2008) present a mnemonic for analytic memo writing: (M) mapping activities in the research process, (E) extracting content for the data, (M) maintaining perspectives, and (O) opening exchanges. "Memos are sites of conversation with ourselves about our data" (Clarke, 2005, p. 202). The poetic transcription code weaving encompassed the analytic code for four of the themes generated in the findings from my dissertation: (1) Unpacking the Participant, (2) Dialoguing and Engaging, (3) Sense of Belonging, and (4) Making, Playing, and Creating. This process gives life to the data through another lens and representation. Interpretive poetry (merging both researcher's perspective and participant's words) and analytic code weaving from performance ethnography:

*[S]tories written in people  
looking from an outside perspective  
see different perspectives  
evolution of people making*

*... unpacking the participant  
what a participant is  
where they came from  
why  
artists as the participants  
make a difference*

*... sense they are contributing  
see each other with more empathy  
expand possibilities  
creates a healing space  
don't know if art helped or changed her ... it was important for her to be there  
contributes to wellbeing as a person*

*... feeling of belonging to something  
being able to be around people  
it's one thing to facilitate the workshop  
it's another thing to actually be in the workshop and facilitate at the same time  
part of ... something bigger than themselves*

*want people to feel like they own part of the work*  
*find personal meaning*  
*impacted my perspective on how are can open people up*

*... open up certain dialogues (1)*  
*create connections with different types of people*  
*being asked a question*  
*considering it*  
*answering it*  
*takes you to another place*  
*hear the needs of the community*  
*hear the expression of the community*  
*in a different way than they usually do through the work*  
*studying*

*... exploring things*  
*... making a piece*  
*creating a scene that is a cross-section of many places*  
*enables people to just consider*  
*we're focused on happenstance*

*... we develop into stories (2)*  
*different dynamic ... face-to-face with people*  
*you are there with this person*  
*an evolution of people making*  
*getting people to*

*engage (3) really directly with each other*  
*relationships out of these projects*  
*1-all*  
*2-artists*  
*3-participants*

## CONCLUSION

“Stories convey both what we do and do not know about ourselves, creating a productive tension between our self-expression (meanings we convey) and our self-knowledge (our current knowledge of ourselves)” (Rice & Mundel, 2018). This creative tension enables discoveries about self and the embedded experiences (Brushwood Rose, 2009). Stories hold ideologies and discourses giving opportunity to create narratives about ourselves

and be the subject for others. The opportunity for socially engaged practice as storying brings moments of shared identities and community by revealing aspects that are otherwise uncommunicated.

Utilizing arts-based research to re-construct stories from data allows for envisioning the data as dynamic. Applying the methods from this chapter invites possibilities. The implications for using these methods to tell stories are endless by invigorating data in multidimensional capacities. Conceptualizing stories in various capacities as socially engaged practice to create community narratives that reflect dynamic and marginalized communities is necessary to be at the center of the story. Sharing stories and spaces will create greater inclusion and more ways of knowing and doing. Everyone has a story and therefore it is a way to relate and empathize.

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# Storying in a Community College Classroom Using Reflection

M. “Shae” Hsieh

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone has a story about their educational journey. Mine begins like this:

*It was a sunny fall semester day. I was enrolled at my local community college and after class I discovered a job fair in the quad. Walking toward it I saw a Marine Corps recruiting booth. Intrigued with the military—I had always liked the camouflage and boots look—I was hoping to get a free sticker. ... I ended up getting a 4-year contract. It may have seemed like a sudden decision to the folks around me, and it was, but the opportunity to escape was presented to me during a period of my life when the desire to discover something other than my current reality was unknowingly greater than I could have anticipated. I was ready to prove that I was capable of more, so within a few months, I left everything and everyone to become a United States Marine. The few. The proud. I trained hard during my four years of active duty and was promoted meritoriously, twice. I deployed on multiple operations, experienced the back-*

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M. “Shae” Hsieh (✉)

Communication Studies, Los Angeles City College,

Los Angeles, CA, USA

e-mail: [hsiehm@lacitycollege.edu](mailto:hsiehm@lacitycollege.edu)

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*drop of war and the reality of death, all while navigating my environment stoically and in the closet (Don't Ask, Don't Tell was still in effect). After completing my contract, I returned home and immediately enrolled myself back into the same community college I had left four years prior. This time things were different. I was different.*

Whenever I am prompted to tell my educational story, this is the period I begin: my first semester back in college. The story involves unexpected challenges with readjusting to my civilian role, regret because I did not reenlist, and the revelation I had about my career which would eventually follow in the footsteps of my community college faculty mentors, leading me right into the classroom of higher education. Admittedly though, the story I had been telling that begins with adventure and ends with pride has its omissions. After all, I was so far removed from what once was, I found no need to disclose what I considered irrelevant information. This abridged telling of my story, however, had inadvertent consequences. As Le Fevre (2011) explains, when we "tell the same particular narratives it can lead to narrow ways of seeing the past and thus being constrained in our future directions" (p. 780). In hindsight, my inability or reluctance to acknowledge my entire story resulted in a tainted perception of what I believed to be true about teaching and learning.

The truth is my story begins before adventure, during a time when cultural influences, family dysfunction, and unstable adolescence were interfering with my education and disrupting my desire to succeed within the traditional notions of school. I have always felt that my educational journey into higher education was one of irony (and one that I have kept to myself), given that the actual trajectory of my earlier schooling is incomplete. Meanwhile, I'm carrying around this hidden shame I have around my educational experience, feeling a little like a fraud in my academic role. Soon enough, despite my perceived inadequate cultural capital, I overcompensate in the classroom by *weeding out the weak* like my drill instructors did in boot camp because *only the strong survive*. A similar sentiment might be heard in a college classroom—turn to your left and right—not everyone is going to make it to the end of this course.

*Early in my teaching career, I would often start the first day of the semester with an introduction narrative that included a segment on my plan to re-enlist to be a drill instructor but due to unforeseen circumstances (like the emotional toll of serving under Don't Ask Don't Tell) I only completed one four-year contract.*

*Disappointed because I always thought I would become a Marine Corps Drill Instructor, my return to community college introduced me to the possibility of becoming a Community College Professor. With a great sense of responsibility, I told my students that instead of training recruits to be U.S. Marines, I would be training students to become effective communicators. The military, oddly enough, operates like college—a group of mostly young people introduced into a system of compliance and authority with the goal of accomplishing the mission. Using tough love and discipline, the institution’s principle is to lead the Marine/Student from point A to point B in the most efficient way possible ... and you better keep up, more importantly, you better survive.*

The power of our narratives—the way in which we story and restory our lives—is of significance when it comes to theorizing about effective pedagogies (Le Fevre, 2011). By ignoring parts of my story and only focusing on what I wanted to remember, I limited my pedagogical perspective which hindered me from acknowledging my students’ stories, traumas, and barriers. I never sought to reproduce inequity or to perpetuate the stifling practices of the academy, and yet, here I am at odds with what I wanted to do, with what I have been conditioned to do. As a result, I was unable to express true compassion toward my students and instead socialized to maintain “the roles prescribed by an inequitable social system” which is pervasive and often unrecognizable in the classroom (Harro, 2018, p. 27). My point of view from the front of the classroom was influenced by my perception of what it was like from the back of the classroom. Drawing from Bruner (1987), Le Fevre writes, “The ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing ... become recipes for structuring experience itself ... for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (p. 780). Rather than tell my students a story about my own struggle with school and identity, I detached myself from a truth I was ashamed of and began my story after I had pulled up my bootstraps. When we neglect to acknowledge the impact of our own stories, we are left dismissing the lives of each other, particularly that of our students. Given this awakening, I set out to explore what can occur when stories are at the center of the classroom experience.

## PURPOSE

This research study arose out of my recent interest in storying as a means of speaking emotional truths (Raj, 2019) and connecting individuals through a shared experience. By creating opportunities for students to story their lives while meeting learning outcomes, I wanted to maximize our time together. The purpose of this study was to engage in a reflexive practice around storying each semester. Students enroll in my communication courses with similar goals of passing the class and gaining confidence and skills. While my course design and teaching approaches have always been about facilitating student learning and skill, it is only recently that my pedagogy has shifted from practical to personal. My goal to rehumanize the classroom experience led me to place great emphasis on stories of personal experience as part of the learning experience. In the process, I wanted to explore the impact of my commitment to creating authentic learning opportunities, which encourage students to tell their story, challenge myself to tell mine, and emphasize our lived experience as heuristic possibilities in the learning process.

The methodology behind this study was to employ narrative action research to examine how a compassionate pedagogy works to ensure equitable practices and transformative outcomes. The purpose of conducting narrative action research into the effects of storying is so that contributions can be made in the scholarship of teaching and learning so that practitioners can collectively begin a movement toward compassion-oriented practice. In my quest to create authentic learning experiences, I encourage my students to story their lived realities as they work to complete various assignments by creatively weaving aspects of their identity and experiences. My research interest in the pedagogical experience of storying led me to inquire about the following questions: what effect does storying have in cultivating compassion among members of a college course? Specifically, how do students describe and reflect upon their experiences of storying their lived realities as part of the curriculum and how do I describe and reflect upon the ways in which I experienced my students' storying?

Participants in this study were students enrolled during the spring semester of 2020 at an urban community college on the west coast. Students were enrolled in one of two general education courses: public speaking or oral interpretation of literature. Because of the nature of this study and the research questions I wanted to answer, using this convenient sample was most appropriate. However, in order to discover "information

rich cases for in-depth study,” I used purposeful sampling by selecting particular students’ work based on the quality of the information they provided in their assignments (Patton, 1987, as cited in Martella et al., 2013, p. 306).

As a practitioner-researcher, I locate myself as a participant in my study as well. I enrolled in public speaking my first semester back in college when I returned from the Marine Corps. Oral interpretation of literature was the first class I co-taught as an intern during my master’s program, alongside my mentor and former professor/speech coach. It has been over a decade and these two courses are among my regular course loads. I often adjust the way I teach certain topics by switching up the order, modifying an activity, or changing an assignment, but it was not until right before starting my Ed.D. program that I began to emphasize personal stories as something to infuse into the curriculum. Students take up this challenge to varying degrees and I am humbled by their efforts.

Right about the time I received approval to begin collecting data, the state was issued stay-at-home orders due to a pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus. This resulted in the largest pedagogical and technological shift in higher education, where in person classes were canceled and faculty were expected to transition a newly started semester online within one week. Tensions were high, anxiety was evident, and students and faculty alike were trying to stay afloat during the socio-political chaos. Occurring simultaneously with the pandemic was the nation’s uproar against the multiple cases of violence and injustice against people of color, namely Black Americans at the hands of white supremacy and the police.

## DATA COLLECTED

### *Documents of Student Work*

The primary source of data was in the form of prepared narrative presentations and post-performance reflections. Students from two different communication courses were assigned to create a narrative speech or narrative program.

At the start of the semester, public speaking students were assigned to craft a personal narrative speech of about 400–600 words as an official debut to the class. Students had a couple of weeks to prepare and present their speeches live and in the classroom. Themes and insights gathered from the narrative speech serve to inform students on their future speech

topics for the class, as they continue to include narrative aspects in their remaining speech assignments. Students enrolled in oral interpretation of literature were expected to write the same length, and in addition, they were to gather other kinds of text or literature that supported or reflected their personal prose for a thematic collage of various voices resulting in 7–9 minutes of performance. Students had a couple of months to prepare their narrative program, which due to the pandemic response ended up being presented asynchronously online using EdTech tools like Flipgrid—a video-discussion platform—and Canvas, the college’s learning management system.

In both classes, students are instructed to write a reflection paper about their storying process and their experience in being a part of their peers’ storytelling. In total, I collected forty individual students’ work—and a couple of notable email exchanges—that were completed at the beginning and end of the spring semester. Every document was printed, reread, and sorted into initial categories that were identified after conducting a pilot study prior to the current study.

### *Analytic Memos and Reflective Journals*

To complement my use of secondary data, I also collected my own analytic memos and reflective journals over the course of this process. Critical in action research and in learning is deliberate reflective practice: a process to examine performance and increase awareness to create opportunities for growth and development (Hase, 2014, p. 3). As the practitioner-researcher, I followed the cycle of self-reflection (plan, act, observe, reflect) in accordance with action research; I recorded observational data during or immediately following critical phenomena encountered in the field (Tenzek, 2018) and recorded analytic memos used to keep an account of my responses including my biases and assumptions (Corbin, 2011). Journaling reflexively is a method common to qualitative research like autoethnography which allows the researcher to self-reflect and analyze their own experiences in the context of the phenomenon they are researching (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Part 1 of this chapter will address the question: how do students describe and reflect upon their experiences of storying their lived realities as part of the curriculum? Part 2 of this chapter will reveal the answer to, how do I describe and reflect upon the ways in which I experienced my students’ storying? The final question will be acknowledged

in the implications section: what effect does storying have in cultivating compassion among members of a college course? This chapter ends with recommendations.

## PART 1: INSIGHTFUL STORIES—FEELING INSPIRATION AND IDENTIFICATION

*Upon completing my contractual obligation with the military, I returned to college without hesitation. I was eager to complete what I had missed for so long, although I never anticipated the posttraumatic experiences I would eventually endure back in school. I was enrolled in a public speaking course and the first speech I had to give was a narrative speech about something memorable, so I shared about my military service and tour in Iraq. It was one of the few times that I would speak about my experience in the Marine Corps in detail. I remember having one of those unexpected existential moments when you can see yourself feeling the discomfort of your current reality and having to fight through it to regain control of your emotions. Eventually I learned to tell my story to prevent such occurrences. But I would continue to experience this sort of discomfort again in my educational journey.*

In Part 1, I elaborate on how students made sense of a storied classroom and present the first major theme: stories offer insight. One student explained,

In college you don't usually get to know your classmates on a personal level at such an advanced pace. I appreciated the level of honesty and personal sharing that the class provided. ... We became a family, fast.

The act of storytelling in my courses was not necessarily a new feature; students told stories in many ways. From the anecdote included in a larger piece of writing to the personal example shared during a class discussion, storytelling occurred often in my courses. However, as I gained a new perspective of my role and how class time could be maximized, the intention for storying began to crystalize as a pedagogical method. Rather than a form of entertainment, we storied as a form of empowerment. "Tell your story," I tell them, "Speak about your identity, your experience, your truth to whatever degree you are comfortable sharing." Baxter Magolda (2001) encourages educational practice to create conditions for self-authorship by validating a learners' capacity to know, situating learning in learners' experience, and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning. In my



attempt to create these conditions, I was hoping to accomplish something beyond learning course content and meeting expected outcomes. I wanted to listen to their stories.

My newfound desire to learn about my students contrasted with my initial reluctance to listen. But my willingness to get to know them beyond their student identity allowed me to begin practicing a pedagogy of compassion. What started off as a new assignment twist in one section turned into a curricular goal of mine for all courses I teach. I was valuing a different kind of classroom experience, one with interpersonal depth. I saw students taking up the challenge to narrate their lives and I was witnessing deeper connections as we saw each other's humanness. Curious to learn more, I asked students to reflect on how they experienced authoring their story as part of their learning experience and what they had learned. Regarding his preparation, this student reflected,

[Preparing my narrative] proved to be a very cathartic and therapeutic experience to express pent up feelings and sensations. So many thoughts swimming around in my head I was finally able to get on paper and out of my psyche. To parlay that into a performance that captured the essence of my intended message was very satisfying and rewarding.

This was a familiar sentiment from students since using this sort of narrative framework to personalize the course experience. When encouraged to do so, students will seize the opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Several students alluded to the authenticity they perceived in the stories they heard. Two students used a similar word to describe their observations:

There were many speakers who took this opportunity to speak about personal issues or family life that gives incredible insight into who these people are. In a guarded society like ours where people brand themselves falsely, this was *refreshing*.

I like [listening to my classmates] more in depth "about me" rather than the lazy "here are three fun facts about me" that 99% of other classes begin with, I thought that it was *refreshing*.

Overwhelmingly, students expressed their surprise and appreciation for the depth that they witnessed, describing the revealing nature of the assignment as one that was unlike any other classroom experience.

Specifically, students made sense of their classmates' stories in one of two ways: inspiration and identification.

### STORIES OF INSPIRATION

Many students chose to talk about seeking higher education in relation to their life's story and students responded positively, inspired by the stories of their peers' perseverance. Listening to stories about facing challenges and overcoming adversity offered the listener's perspective about their own life. As one student reflected,

I knew we had a diverse class of students but hearing all of their stories and the things they've been through was honestly very moving and humbling for me. The stories that I heard in our class remind me that I do come from a privileged background and I am very fortunate.

This student was full-time at a four-year institution but working on their oral communication requirement at the community college. They continued to express that this opportunity "would not have happened at [university]." I found their certainty about this exclusive experience telling of perceived and performed classroom dynamics.

Another student who happened to be full-time in high school while dual-enrolled in my course reflected,

Some of these speeches talked about returning to school and continuing their education. I thought if they could overcome their challenges and come back to school, then the least I can do is work hard.

Listening to educational stories reiterated that effort is necessary in achieving success. I found this sort of sensemaking, to use a familiar term, refreshing. Moreover, listening to personalized stories encouraged members to produce quality work in the class. As this next student remarked, "[L]istening to others' stories makes me want to better myself, to deliver authentic work."

My initial endeavor into stories with my students was about challenging them to speak authentically as they met learning outcomes. I knew of the potential impact listening to their stories would have on me, but I did not anticipate the overall impact it would have on the class as members of the audience. However, the impact of storying was multifaceted, affecting the

listener as much as it did me and the storytellers. First, being an audience to these personal presentations motivated them to create with intention when it was their turn to share. Second, it offered reassurance for students that seeking higher education is a shared goal among other students in the class. The notion that students believe that education is the key that will unlock doors is evident in this student's reflection,

My perception of education has become stronger after hearing everybody's story. Everybody had gone through obstacles I would not have imagined. We are different from one another, but we all have something in common: the love in furthering our education.

For this student, the communal experience of storying confirmed the collective desire to use education to one's advantage. Another student who immigrated to the U.S., surprised by their classmates' narratives, stated,

It is really true what people say, if there's a will, there's a way. All the stories conveyed hope in different ways. It helped me realize that no matter what I go through in life, I hold the decision on how to live my life. Just continue no matter what, especially with education.

Educational stories inspired listeners to remember their purpose in seeking higher education and offered students a shared experience.

### STORIES AS COLLECTIVE IDENTIFICATION

Sharing personal truths created a community among students because a sense of belonging was fostered. Storytelling allowed a bond to form, creating in the audience a collective identification. One student wrote in his reflection,

Watching people's [narrative programs] made me feel less alone. It made me feel connected to the people I have spent this semester with. It was really interesting to know that we all, on some level, face the same doubts and issues as each other ... that there were people who understood why I was doing what I was doing.

This student expressed his sense of belonging as his perspective shifted from one of isolation to one of connection with his peers, reducing his

feelings of loneliness. This sentiment of community was shared by multiple students having experienced a full course where storying was part of their curricular experience.

Building community through stories allowed students to see each other's strength and in turn acknowledge their own resilience. A different student recalled a classmate's story about determination after setbacks, "I need to believe in myself more and tell myself that I can do it." When students opened up about their journey, they not only gave strength to their own voice but also reminded others to have strength in their own. Having belief in oneself to achieve one's goal is critical for students. A nontraditional student shared her feelings of insecurity about her recent return to school after a long hiatus. She was pleasantly surprised by the type of disclosure her peers engaged in and remarked in her reflection paper,

Like me, [the other returning students] shared how certain choices they made pushed them to start again. It made me feel like I wasn't the only older student who battled with taking education seriously at an earlier age and that gave me confirmation that I too was on the right path.

Knowing others whose stories were similar gave her reassurance. In addition to feelings of confidence, came feelings of self-acceptance. A younger student reflected that an older classmate's story on perfectionism challenged her same tendency. She wrote,

I am a young adult and learning to become the best version of myself as a woman today. I am constantly busting my butt to live up to that impossible standard. I learned [from her story] not to be so hard on myself ... we're human and it is okay not to be perfect.

This student acknowledged the importance of self-compassion. To reach one's maximum potential, it is imperative to accept one's humanness with kindness. Otherwise, actual and perceived limitations will continue to hold us back and prevent us from seeing a way around the blockade (Neff, 2003; Selva, 2020). Identifying each other's stories through the act of listening allows one to see themselves as resilient and assured: to see themselves as human and forgiving.

## PART 2: COURAGEOUS STORIES—FEELING COMPASSIONATE AND CONFLICTED

*It was the first night of my third semester as a doctoral student. Sitting in a seminar centered on pedagogy, I was asked to draw my neighborhood map with the intent of storying my early life experience in relation to my schooling and learning. I struggled with this task greatly because I did not anticipate ever having to recall a period in my life that I do not talk about. I sensed my peers swiftly drafting the grid of their early life as I sat frozen only able to draw a few small boxes in the middle of my large sheet of poster paper. Eventually, the boxes multiplied and so did my anxieties. When it was time to share, I appreciated the opportunity to learn about my colleagues on a deeper level, but for me it was an unexpected trigger for the first day of class. On my way home that night my mind was racing. I was reminded that discomfort is a part of learning, and that my relationship with school is fraught with anxiety and doubt—something I had yet to overcome.*

In Part 2, I present how I experienced my role as a practitioner/researcher and explore the impact of the second major theme: courageous stories. I had a student who compiled a narrative I liked so much that I asked to use it as a future example of student work. She expressed having a sense of responsibility to help others if given the chance. In her reflection she wrote,

I am at a comfortable place in my life that I can talk about [my anxiety] freely with anyone. I know that is not the case for many people. If I have the opportunity to let another person know it's okay to have [it], then that's what's important. People need to know they are not alone in their anxiety.

My shift toward a humanizing pedagogy has allowed me to create a space where students do express some degree of their authentic self. When I tell students to make their learning personal, I realize this is not easy to do when we are accustomed to learning impersonally. Even in my intent to encourage storying, the visceral feeling of apprehension in telling certain stories, specifically ones related to my educational journey, is something that I continue to struggle with. In learning about the lives of students, I am recognizing the emotional risk involved in being open. As observed by a student,

It seemed to me that many were comfortable enough with our class setting to be able to express a part of their vulnerability so freely with one another. Many of them have suffered in silence and I would've never known or been able to tell that that was the case had they not opened themselves to talk about such a sensitive subject they dealt with.

While I am grateful that I can hold a space students describe as safe to experience, I am most appreciative of them for taking on the challenge to tell their story and helping to create a compassionate space. Being authentic is challenging when we have been conditioned to live a life where we separate aspects of our identity as a safeguard and present certain versions of ourselves in relation to the context we occupy. But the students in this study, in varying degrees, presented a truth that typically would not exist in this space. I have heard all about the experiences that have shaped their existence. From first jobs to lost jobs, becoming a parent to losing a parent, going to war and returning from prison, being homeless to being a professional gamer, being in recovery to celebrating remission—the collective strength of my students is undeniable. This next student reflection shares the same sentiment,

It takes a sense of vulnerability to divulge extremely personal stories, but they came across as genuine. I appreciated [her narrative] about regret ... because I am slowly trying to do things that make me uncomfortable versus staying in my comfort zone, because I realized that is the only way I'll grow as a person.

To sit in the discomfort of vulnerability is, I think, the ultimate form of bravery. For some, the act of speaking out and letting your thoughts be known is extremely challenging and uncomfortable to do, but when students are emboldened, storying their reality can feel empowering. I have learned from my students a kind of depth I could only imagine. In his final reflection, one student who started off the class ambivalent about the idea of putting together a personal story wrote in his reflection about how gratifying it was to bring his ideas together. He stated,

It is rare that I get a platform to speak my mind and about how I feel ... and make a performance out of it. I learned that I have a lot more to say than I thought I did.

To help others know they are not alone, it was important for this student to put words to his thoughts and to speak up about the friends he had lost to suicide and about his own struggle with suicidal ideation. My interest in rehumanizing my relationship with my students began with my willingness to listen to their truths. My call to listen was their call to courage.

### STORIES ALLOW COMPASSION

Student reflections indicate that their calling to speak for self or other was less about being courageous and more about the acknowledgment of suffering. They recognized the inevitability of life's challenges and coming from a place of compassion had the inclination to offer relief by putting words to their experience. Students spoke about the sometimes mundane, sometimes traumatic, sufferings of human life—so those who needed to hear them could find solace in their story.

My interest in a compassionate pedagogy has not always been at the foreground of my experience. Despite the teaching philosophy I put together at the start of my career about a decade earlier which included a sentence on remembering "the hurdles of being a student so that I can offer compassion towards my students," upon revisiting this document I paused at what I wrote because I was not convinced that I had kept up that part of my statement. Obviously, my understanding of compassion has changed, or I have become awakened after being temporarily sedated with the privilege of being faculty and mindlessly living up to the conditions set forth by institutional policies that normalize oppressive practices. Because of this new compassionate perspective, the frequency to which I use the word compassion or think about it throughout the workday was a little strange to me initially.

But to have the inherent authority to ignore truths is something we must actively work against, and I have realized that as I shifted my practice to a kinder one, I have in some way given myself permission to listen, as to keep me grounded in the realities of life. Take one student, for example, whose character I initially found unfavorable, so I had to remind myself to practice kindness around him.

His narrative, which was written in the third person, was a cautionary tale about rebellion and consequences. Though his story resonated with his peers, it was difficult for me to dismiss the mediocrity of his

performance. However, it was the truth he revealed in his reflection to me that moved me most:

I learned I have a lot of pain inside me and I'm still healing. I try hard to always act like I'm fine, but honestly, I have a lot of sadness and regret in me I'm working through. This stuff isn't easy to admit to myself and others.

I did not anticipate this sort of revelation, particularly from this student. In telling his experiences, he recognized hurt and he disclosed that to me. It was at this moment, at the tail end of the semester, where I was able to see him with compassionate eyes without having to try.

For a long time, I have been ashamed of the incomplete trajectory of my educational history and found it ironic that I ended up in higher education. So, the narrative I tell begins at a point in my life where I was most proud of achievement, omitting the actual start of my story, because, like my student reflected, “this stuff isn't easy to admit to myself and others.” The problem as I see it now was that I chose not to remember the complete truth where pain hurts, fear haunts, and insecurities suffocate. I was not remembering my whole story until now. I started emphasizing storytelling around the time I realized I was struggling to tell mine. I know what can happen when we suppress our story and I also know that recalling it is uncomfortable.

When I read the story of this next student during a review session, I was intrigued by the first-person account of his metaphorical journey on a lifeboat while lost at sea. His performance highlighted his poetic language and the audience witnessed his longing for connection; however, it was his reflection that spoke to me at a visceral level. He described his recognition of self and his feelings of discomfort in rehearsing his story—looking in the mirror at his own reflection, he stated,

This story is me trying to reach out, something I avoided, but this time I lent my hand out and stared at my reflection face to face. This story is the me I never acknowledged.

In my own writing process as a researcher participant, I am in constant examination of myself, as storied and in story, so this student's comment is one that hits home. Encouraging storytelling in my classes has reminded me of the responsibility I have to actively work toward cultivating what Dewey (1938) refers to as educative experiences, or highly reflective and



deliberately forward-moving experiences, to alleviate the suffering that comes with schooling and because of schooling. This mental exercise is undeniably overwhelming, considering my uncertainties about being an academic. Asking my students to face their story as they tell it, while negotiating my story as it has been told, is the epitome of a storied classroom where all parties are affected by truths exposed. Through their courageous act of storying, compassion was centered, while unexpectedly feelings of conflict on my part also arose.

### STORIES INVITE CONFLICT

During this action-oriented and reflective process, I discovered that when stories of lived realities were invited to be a part of the learning experience, I struggled with feeling conflicted about knowing too much about students' lives and with my assessment of them knowing too little about course requirements. In a personal memo I wrote,

*Knowing my students and feeling helpless; I can't ignore their stories, can I? But I feel that I'm unable to serve in a meaningful way. Resources are unknown. Time is limited ... especially now. I recognize in myself a sense of defeat. I have worked to cultivate an atmosphere of collective engagement where stories of truth can exist as part of the learning experience, and yet, I wondered if my purpose is valid enough to continue. How do I negotiate my compassion for them and my responsibility to grade?*

The respect I have for students as they grapple with being authentic in their story is great, and while some students have expressed surprise with their peers' openness, I was never shocked by the hardships or trauma they shared having had similar experiences myself. However, during the time of this study I experienced a student's story that left me speechless, not because I was moved by it but because I could not fathom it. I was already familiar with the student from a different course a previous semester. We had established a friendly relationship and I knew a little about her personal life, like that she was recovering from a brain injury and would need my assistance occasionally. This semester I met with her weekly to answer questions and give feedback on her narrative assignment. She wrote openly about past events she had endured, bizarre details I could not comment on. All I could do was validate her experience and offer her objective feedback about her work. Rather than focusing on content, I commented on structure and style. The turn of events happened when she submitted her

reflection at the end of our course when once again, I was taken aback. Here is a short passage:

Though I was proud of my [narrative], I got a very low grade, which perplexes me. I can only guess this grade was out of me not sticking to the original texts, but I feel it was not fair as I was not given all the information the rest of the students were. That feels like discrimination.

I share this excerpt because it is the most coherent but also because I find it upsetting. The notion that I was withholding information is baffling to me and the accusation that I was discriminatory is unjustified. The original texts she speaks of are the first drafts of her story and this had nothing to do with the grade she earned. While she did not earn the highest grade possible, it was not a poor grade. I take her accusations with a grain of salt; however, I am still conflicted because of her comments. How do I negotiate encouraging storying and grading stories? In the process of storying, I am realizing the emotional toll it takes for me to care about my students' holistically and then to evaluate their work which sometimes involves so much personal trauma. This brings me to my other conflicted realization which is highlighted in this next student's reflection:

While I found some of the stories presented to be mildly inspirational, none of them led to any deep personal insights for me. Rather, I discovered the importance of having clear points in mind, and structuring what one says in such a way that it is easy to follow those points (since some of the speeches felt disjointed and difficult to follow—things I would hope to avoid in my own presentations).

I remember initially reading this student's evaluation and feeling disappointed that he could not see the power behind the narratives. His inability to acknowledge the collective strength of these stories admittedly influenced my perception of him. But as much as I disagreed with his lack of insight regarding the stories he heard, I could not ignore what he said about the technical aspects of writing an oral performance. Granted, in his class, the narrative speech is assigned at the start of the semester when I have not gone over the specifics of speech writing yet, so although I want it to be organized I am mostly interested in a story that they can tell confidently about who they are in life. Nonetheless, his observations remind

me that the work to empower students involves more than a *good* story. I want them to leave my class and be able to tell it well too.

### SUMMARY

My findings assert that storying a classroom humanizes the learning experience which students find meaningful (Herbert et al., 2018). Stories offer insight and inspire students to persist in their education as they recognize in their peers a sense of self. Evident in students' courage was a willingness to allow vulnerability, which promoted compassion for self and others (Jazaieri et al., 2013, Brown, 2017). But this boldness also challenged me when it was time to evaluate assignments based on their stories (O'Brien, 2010). The storied classroom experience allowed students to be a source of knowledge in their course pursuit, empowering them to write and tell their story as they journey toward their academic and career goals.

In examining my work with students in the classroom through narrative action research, I have learned that emphasizing stories of lived experience also allowed me to connect with students (in a way that I had not previously allowed myself) and to build community (in space that can feel discomforting and dehumanizing). Having spent the early part of my teaching career forgetting my story to cope, I am confronted with the importance of reaffirming student identities rather than faulting them. Consequently, this study has also highlighted that individually I can only do so much in the time I have with students and challenges will only continue as the classroom space expands into a virtual one.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

During this study, the mode of instruction and learning transitioned within a week's time from face to face to entirely online because of a global health crisis. The unprecedented disruption caused the semester under study to feel like a blur as the pangs of police brutality and racial injustice reverberated the nation's soul. The constant examination of self in relation to students in the current context has challenged me to take this single unit model and scale it at large with collaborative effort. My findings, though unique to this period and my positionality, are generalizable and translatable, particularly in our digital adjustment. I conclude this chapter with the following implications for practice: Storying as Method of

Practice, Compassion as Resistance and Responsibility, and Negotiating Storying and Evaluation.

### STORYING AS METHOD OF PRACTICE

The first implication for practice asks faculty to implement storying as a method of pedagogical practice. Educators concerned with creating authentic connections and facilitating authentic learning with their students should frame lived realities as a valid form of knowledge to incorporate into the curriculum. Storying is a medium through which we can explore what we must learn and who we are learning alongside. Raj (2019) defines storying as “a form of reflective telling where the emotional truth of the teller is created through each story that is told” (p. 19). This form of information exchange is necessary for humanizing educational experiences as it allows the teller and audience to acknowledge at a basic level the interconnectedness of our lives.

Storying serves to empower students, cultivating in them a sense of self-acceptance as they position and reposition themselves in the context of their story and their learning. This process is invaluable in our effort toward self-development. For instance, at the end of the semester one student wrote about how they came to understand their experience:

I learned (as I learn and forget and learn again, over and over) that these emotions need to see the light of day every so often, and allowing them to fester even after you feel you’ve “dealt” with them is a hearty step in the wrong direction. It was uncomfortable to relive some of these memories ... but reliving them in a creative context was definitely a way of defanging them.

The ability for storying to offer this kind of insight enriches students’ academic journey. Through storying, we can work to defang the discomfort of school by acknowledging the intersecting dimensions of socio-emotional and intellectual growth. The same student continues:

I think the most profound thing for me was the chance to recontextualize what that event means for me now, twenty-some years after the fact, and the acknowledgement that I will need to do so again at certain points in my life as my life changes, and that this acknowledgement of a future reckonings carries no foreboding or ill-feeling; just a calm recognition of something that will have to happen.

The opportunity to examine our story is critical in understanding ourselves as *becoming* rather than being static. Through his poignant reflection, I too was reminded that the tensions I feel regarding my journey in education and my current role in higher education are a reckoning I will continue to acknowledge. I have recognized my own personal process of authoring a dissertation as ultimately my way of storying myself as a researcher into my own practice, and it has offered me the great challenge of recontextualizing events that led me to my current institution: doing the work I do with the motivation I have to do it.

In order to move past the superficiality of schooling that dehumanizes, isolates, and prevents authentic experiences, we must be willing to engage in a practice that is relational and revealing. Storying as a method of practice is situated in educative experiences that are not only a benefit for students, but frankly for faculty as well. No matter the discipline, educators committed to culturally relevant experiences must humanize learning, especially during this digital era of online learning. Wherever the learning environment is, whether it is a brick-and-mortar building or a zoom breakout room, it will be critical for us to maintain our connection with others by incorporating storying in the classroom.

### COMPASSION AS RESISTANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

At the most basic level, our desire to improve the student experience and to guide them through education at our respective institutions should be grounded in our collective desire to relieve suffering as opposed to a college's bottom. Providing an equitable education requires cultivating compassion as an implication for practice. Our motivation must be in the right place. We must prioritize transformative experiences that empower all knowers and learners of the class. Educators must recognize suffering not as a deficiency but as a state that can be alleviated through compassion. A pedagogy of compassion is an action-oriented value aimed at actively resisting practices that normalize compliance and the perpetuation of conditions that do not liberate our students or ourselves.

A commitment to social justice means compassion as a value must be explicitly acknowledged and intentionally cultivated. My findings led me to accept storying as beneficial for students and faculty. Students expressed being moved by their storied experience as teller and listener. Storying offered my students the opportunity to process their personal growth and to establish social connection while in school. The process served to create

a sense of community in the class, while also broadening my understanding of each student so that I may approach my work with them compassionately. However, the calling to resist current dehumanizing practices is coupled with our responsibility in facilitating positive student outcomes that extend beyond the course. For instance, at the time of this study a public health crisis forced us indoors and the cries for racial injustice brought us to the streets. In protest, citizens demanded justice and compassion for the people who made up and made this country.

During this time of civil unrest, I noticed in my analysis that while the stories and their impact were personal, they were not political. When students made sense of their peers' stories as one of shared experiences and of self-resilience, I began to wonder about the unanticipated consequences of their views on each other. Instructors who implement storying as a way of resistance must acknowledge their responsibility in facilitating this process. How are we using our time together to prepare them in greater ways? Specifically, the questions an equity-minded practitioner who believes in the liberatory function of education must ask themselves: what is the broader responsibility of the instructor who facilitates storying? Is the purpose to promote self-authorship or to encourage social advocacy? Does the positive effect of storying establish a concern for humanity or contribute to colorblindness? How can storying be used for inward reflection and outward activism?

Compassion as a mindset allows us to rethink our role in education. It demands reflection and redesign in our approach as we achieve our purpose. It refuses to participate in the banking model of education and rejects the notion that school is about passing and gaining currency, rather than about learning and enlightenment. We cannot be content with reproducing what we know because it is all that we know, nor should the unfamiliar be a reason to refuse change.

My current journey in education sheds light on the pedagogical necessity to resist by way of compassion. I have come to understand the role of education and the specific role of faculty in the classroom must be reimagined. At the institutional level, recent initiatives like Guided Pathways should include conversations about how compassion could be included. We need to be comfortable and willing to talk about teaching and learning in a specific way, one that emphasizes authentic transformative experiences that are grounded in anti-oppression and rooted in compassion.

## NEGOTIATING STORYING AND EVALUATION

The final implication for practice is about the inevitable tension between knowing our students and having to grade their work. Storying is a vulnerable act and grading is an act of administrative authority. The challenge lies in negotiating these processes, because once you humanize your class by way of storying and relational building, it is difficult to reduce their existence to a mere grade. As I evaluate how I carry out expectations and policies, I have come to realize that the grading and assessing portion of my responsibility in its current form contradicts with the view of education as liberation. This research into my problem of practice has shifted my philosophy on grading and how I view learning. In fact, my views on grading as part of my responsibility as faculty have evolved from complaints about the act to critiques about the process. Stommel (2017) writes:

Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another. Grades ... reduces teaching and learning to a mere transaction ... tak[ing] humans out of the educational process.

Inherent in the act of grading is the authority to assign a value to student work. Although my attitude about the importance of centering student voice and experience in their learning have shifted to a compassionate one, the semester under study highlighted for me the discrepancies in how grading occurred in my class. I found myself at times feeling conflicted with wanting to be compassionate and still falling trap to the transactional nature of assessment. Penalizing student work based on noncompliance is an aspect of practice that faculty will need to reckon with.

Education as an institution creates overwhelming pressure and anxiety to maintain certain grades and grades reinforce identity. Even in my experience as a doctoral student, being graded has caused me angst and frustration in the way it was operationalized by certain instructors. So how I could be upset when during this study, a student unabashedly interrogated me in front of the class on Zoom about how I would grade their final narrative performance? Regarding a technical expectation in the performance, the student demanded to know if I was going to "take away points" if it was not executed. This confrontation came as a shock. I had spent a significant amount of time helping this student with her assignment; she was

close in age and we had become friendly. Later in the day I received an email from the student apologizing,

Tough day today. I am sorry if I was being a bit pushy and/or frustrated, I am feeling a bit raw with this project. [*Online learning during a pandemic*] is just a tough time for us all. ... I am guessing you are frustrated that we each have not taken more responsibility to work on this and check Canvas to see what you have shared. I am speaking for myself when I say that I could have looked over that stuff in more detail. It felt overwhelming to me, so I just started the project and have been sort of “winging” it. ... I’m sure this has been one of the most challenging semesters you have ever taught.

The truth is, I was upset when this episode took place and this was a challenging semester, and while my frustration stemmed from multiple sources, grave disappointment lay in the fact that grades carried more weight than anything else. Grading produces the transactional exchange embedded in school where performance is rated and quality is measured, leaving the relationship that formed out of story and compassion feeling objectified and impersonal in the end. To detach yourself from the inherent authority you have as an instructor to grade is an act of liberation.

## CONCLUSION

Faculty interested in promoting self-awareness through story and in developing capacity for compassion in relation to each other should consider how to implement storying into the curriculum, realize the potential and weight of facilitating this type of learning experience, and how grading operates in the assessment of student learning. Humanizing a classroom involves more than the relational aspect of being among one another as learners, but also encompasses the way we function within an educational system based on grades.

Faculty as leaders of curriculum and assessment need to have conversations around pedagogical strategies rooted in theory, grading, assessment, and student learning outcomes. These conversations are essential in our development as classroom educators. Formal and informal conversations around what we expect our students to learn, how they are experiencing their learning, and the ways in which we assess that are authentically examining the expected outcome are undoubtedly a form of professional development. Being in dialogue with each other about our work with students



helps with our sense of self as faculty. Our profession allows for faculty to work in silos as we carry out the college mission in our respective courses. Only with intentional conversations and deep reflection can we begin to challenge compliance-driven approaches to grading and move toward compassionate and authentic learning experiences for all involved, assessing what truly matters.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was born out of the realization that a pedagogy without compassion reduces teaching and learning to impersonal transactions. Moreover, the specific direction of this study was inspired by an awakening into story as a medium to generate compassion in a space that operates dialectically, stuck in between emancipatory intentions and oppressive practices. As a result of this study, my recommendations are matters of practice and educational research.

The first recommendation for practice involves intentional course design where student voice and experience are centered. Faculty should foster a climate where stories of lived realities can exist and a community of learners can thrive together. These stories should include all members of the class, including the teacher. Humanizing school and promoting authentic learning begins with a sincere desire to know each member of class beyond the roster and gradebook. Storying as a pedagogical practice is a way to remind us of our capacity to be compassionate educators committed to the emancipatory purpose of education.

The second recommendation asks faculty to commit to working collaboratively within and across disciplines. Through creative approaches, a culture of story can extend beyond the course and into campus discourse: moving away from lecture-oriented learning toward project-based learning communities where student work is highlighted publicly. Faculty partnerships can address the isolation that faculty may experience by encouraging them also to story themselves in the process of their own classroom inquiry and then by sharing their findings with each other. The professional atmosphere where faculty mostly reside is another space in need of rehumanizing.

The final recommendation for practice is directed at the institutional level. Calls for accountability and equitable outcomes require administrators to recognize that a climate of compassion and a spirit of story must also exist from the top down. Institutional progress requires a shift in

mindset and practice at all levels. Administrators need to be involved with shaping the discourse around our collective responsibility as educational practitioners by providing the resources faculty need to initiate and maintain this imperative shift that is needed in education. Institutions of higher education, particularly community colleges in densely populated urban areas, must recognize their role in the community and prepare our students using critical compassion, and this includes equipping our faculty and staff with the confidence and compassion they need to cultivate transformative learning experiences.

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## CHAPTER 9

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# “Miss, I Think I Found my Story!”—What’s Your Story?

*Adrienne Karnofel*

### INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability—the willingness to occasionally let go of the labels—transforms these walls into thresholds. Differences don’t go away ... nor should they. But if we posit a shared factor of identity ... we can be open to the differences among us. Through conversation, through exchanging stories, through exploring our differences without defensiveness or shame, we can learn from each other, share each other’s words. As we do so, we’ll begin forging commonalities. (Keating, 2002, p. 529)

Senior year of high school is complicated. It is a time of immense pressure, difficult choices, and coming of age. Students are wrapping up one phase of their lives and preparing for another. At the same time, they are becoming adults and trying to figure out their own identities, values, and beliefs. Sometimes that looks like a sort of idealistic rebellion from their family’s values, while other times it looks like a tight adherence to the values they’ve always known. For me, that looked like moving away to

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A. Karnofel (✉)

Whittier Union High School District, Santa Fe Springs, CA, USA

e-mail: [adrienne.karnofel@wuhsd.org](mailto:adrienne.karnofel@wuhsd.org)

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college as quickly as I could to get out from under my parents' rules, straight to a conservative religious college that someone in my family had attended for the past four generations, where I consistently objected to and defied their rules, for which I had knowingly and willingly signed a contract to uphold. Needless to say, I didn't know who I was or where I was going, only that I wanted to do things *not* the way I was raised. I'd like to say I have a better idea now, but it has taken me much longer than I would have liked to get here. After a few decades of exposure to others' experiences outside of my religious and cultural bubble, the journey of raising my own children, and twenty years of teaching, I have a more solid grasp of my identity and how my story helped shape that identity. In my teaching practice, I strive to help my students figure out who they are and what they value before they step out of the safety net of their family homes.

For over a decade I have started the school year with an assignment called the Shadow Box. It is one that was passed along to me when I first started teaching seniors. The assignment consists of a shoe box set up diorama-style with items that symbolize a student's life. Then they write up the explanations for each item and present the Shadow Box to the class as the first speech of the year. Ideally it is a way for students to get to know each other better and to dig deeply into their figurative language skills as they use a small plastic owl to symbolize their ongoing search for knowledge, or a ladder to symbolize how they will continue to climb, building upon the steps their parents laid out for them. But what happened more and more over the years was something like this: "Um, this is my iPod, to symbolize that I ... I like music. And this is a medal from my last track meet to show that ... I like track. And uh, these are the keys to my car to symbolize that I have a car. Uh, Miss, can I take my keys out of the box after class so I can get home? Oh, and the iPod, too." But really, there was. What kind of music is on that iPod? Who introduced you to that music, and why do you appreciate the music you do? What is it about track that makes you enjoy it so much? What or who encourages you to run? Do other people in your family run track? How do you feel when they watch you run? And the car. Did you buy it by saving up money from your paychecks? Did it get passed down to you from an older sibling? Do you and Dad spend weekends working on it in the garage? These were some questions I asked to help them to dig deeper. I knew that there were so many stories behind these objects and I wanted my students to find the richness in their everyday lives.

I realized that the students were struggling to find meaning in the objects that comprised their lives as seventeen-year-olds. There was clearly a disconnect between my intention of facilitating students’ validation of their identity through the stories of their everyday object and what was actually happening. I didn’t know how to get them to invest in this assignment emotionally and deeply. I needed a way to model the storying journey for and with my students.

I teach at a public high school outside of Los Angeles, California. Over 90% of the students are Hispanic and 74% qualify for free or reduced lunch. As a white woman from a middle-class background, my story is very different than that of most of my students. I naturally teach through my experiential lens and I need to glimpse the lenses through which my students are viewing life. More importantly, students need to see the validity and significance of their own backgrounds on their unique stories.

During my doctorate program, I conducted a pedagogical self-study for a class assignment (Raj, 2019). During that process I learned a tremendous amount about myself and how my personal history has impacted my teaching practices. I traced my family, education, religious, and cultural experiences, and was struck by the degree to which they all were reflected in my teaching. My own childhood family norms, how they valued higher education, my fundamental protestant beliefs, and my Southern California upbringing as a middle-class white woman permeated my life into adulthood and then into my pedagogy. What a gift it would have been to have realized this at a much earlier age. Through that thinking, when planning my courses for the following fall, I saw a way to change the Shadow Box assignment so that my students could find the deeper meaning within their own life stories.

The title of the new assignment is “What’s Your Story?” It is adapted from the assignment I completed during my doctoral program. I made a few changes, but it stems from the same prompt (Raj, 2019). The project had a major impact on finding my identity through storying and I hoped it could have the same effect on my high school students. When I first introduced it, I was met with blank stares. At seventeen, most teens don’t feel they have a story; their story is just getting started. I wanted them to look at their interests and personality and family history and use that to frame what their story is or how those elements make them who they are today. But with some brainstorming activities and modeling, we slowly worked to find their stories. The brainstorming process looked like this:

- Give an historical overview of your life. You may use the following as a way to think about this:

What/Who has been a strong influence in your life? These can be positive or negative.

Think about and recollect incidents or events in your life that have contributed to your development.

How has your race, ethnicity, gender, identity, and so on influenced your journey into becoming the person that you are today? As you think about your autobiography be sure to connect it to influences of race, gender, identity, and so on, as you begin to explore issues of equity.

Why are these particular times/points/events that contributed to your becoming “aware” of who you are significant?

This part took a lot of work, encouraging students to travel back into their childhoods and see the significance and impact of events. Even more challenging was for them to see how parts of their identities fit into their story. At their age they haven’t seen the world through any other lens but the one in which they were raised. Also, our town is a small one, where families live for generations. There are many shared experiences here that students do not realize are unique for our area, such as a large Latinx population and a general acceptance of all sexual identities, cultures, and socioeconomic levels. But these challenges also created incredible teaching opportunities to address the topics of childhood and identity.

The second part of the assignment was the presentation. It was important that there be freedom in the presentation. Students could choose any format in which to present their story—a photo essay, a digital video, a musical piece, art, collage, or any other medium that fit their personality and story (Raj, 2019). I first modeled my own story for them. Being of a certain age, I had been working through a deconstruction of sorts. The Franciscan monk Richard Rohr (2002) talks about a universal concept of life transitions he refers to as order, disorder, and reorder. Philosophy and world religions have other terms for the same concept. I bought a small wooden crate from the craft store and divided it into three sections. Using washi tape, I decorated the outside of each section to represent the emotions entailed in each box of the process. Then I placed items that represented facets of my life—heart, mind, spirituality, family, work, creativity—into the different boxes. I talked about my journey thus far and

in what stage of order each part of my life was currently in. I took my time explaining the process through which I created my box, modeling that the visual aspect was part of finding and framing their story. Ultimately, though, most students chose a traditional speech with a slide show as a visual aid. I think that the pressure of “finding” their stories was so much that the visual tool became an afterthought. The attached instructions include the updated presentation guidelines. Next year I will spend more time modeling how integrating other modes of presentation can add to the design of their stories.

What happened next was deeper and more profound than I ever could have imagined. As each student got up to share their story, they began slowly, stumbling over their words, taking us through their childhood milestones. Then suddenly they would latch onto one event or realization and take off, newly understanding the lasting impact that detail had on their life’s journey so far. Note: all names are pseudonyms and these stories are retold from memory, so there may be some gaps. In future years I will take notes as students present for my own records and self-evaluation. However, I do not record the students in any way or collect their visual representation. The promise of safety is imperative.

### SAMI

Sami’s life had been marked by fear of deportation that would tear her family apart. Her father Ruben had been brought to the United States from Mexico as a child. When he was seventeen, Sami’s dad was in a car accident that resulted in the other driver being seriously injured. Because he was undocumented, Sami’s dad fled the scene. As a result, he spent four years in prison and was then deported. While in Mexico, Ruben met and married his wife. When they were expecting their first child, Ruben knew he wanted a better life for his family and that life was in the United States. So Ruben borrowed his twin brother’s passport and crossed the border. Soon after his pregnant wife crossed over into the United States under the pretense of a day shopping trip.

Now a family of five, Sami’s parents need to wait for her oldest brother to turn 21 so he can help his mother get her green card. Only after she becomes a citizen can she begin the process of helping her father get his green card. While this is a decades’ long process, it was further complicated by Sami’s father’s arrest when he was a teenager. Because he has a felony on his record, he is not able to come back to the United States for



twenty years. So for the more than twenty years they waited for the documentation process to even begin, Sami's family lived in fear of her parents being caught and deported back to Mexico.

Sami was a straight A student who was active on several school sports teams. Until she shared her story, I had no idea she was carrying this burden with her every day. And at that moment, when she invited us all into her story, Sami seemed to fully acknowledge the weight of what she had been carrying. She began to cry and tell us how scared she was for her father every time he had to cross the border into Tijuana for work, fearing that he may never come back. Every day was a day closer to when both her parents could become legal residents of the United States, but just one mishap could derail and tear apart her whole family. Not only did Sami's story invite empathy from her teacher and classmates, but it also drew out similar stories.

Stories of undocumented family members and deportation are not rare in this area, but they are rarely shared. Children are told to keep the information private to avoid someone calling Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or just to keep the family's issues private. Because of this, students do not have a place where they can safely share their fears of losing their families. When Sami shared her story she unknowingly made my classroom a safe space for those conversations and me, as a white teacher, a safe person with whom to trust with those stories.

### KAROL

The day after Sami shared, it was Karol's turn. I have known Karol since she was a freshman, and she always seemed like an old soul to me. When other students in the class would act up, Karol would give me a knowing look that said, "[T]hese kids." While she didn't rush through her schoolwork, it always seemed like she completed it to check it off her list in order to move on to something else. She often stayed in my classroom after class or during lunch to finish her homework. Now it was three years later and Karol was in my senior class. She still had that air of being mature beyond her years, and she seemed to treat school like a job, not a social experience to enjoy.

When Karol stood up to share her story, I expected it to be about her drive for good grades and her future college plans. But what came from her heart and out of her mouth shocked me.

Karol told us the story of her Monday through Friday reality. The reason she works so quickly and efficiently during the school day is because she goes home after school to care for her fifteen nieces and nephews. Fifteen. But her responsibilities go far beyond feeding them their afternoon snack, monitoring play time, and making sure they complete their homework. Her older siblings came to the United States as children and do not yet have their immigration papers. Karol is the only one of her parents’ children who was born in the United States, and as such, a citizen. Each day when Karol babysits her nieces and nephews, as the time draws near for their parents to come pick them up, she waits in fear that one of her siblings will not come to pick up their children. That their workplace will have been raided by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and that they will be deported.

Her family has a plan that Karol must be constantly prepared to carry out in the situation that ICE officials come to her house after school. She knows her rights and that she must protect the children in her care. As a seventeen-year-old in high school, Karol is a teenager, a potential college student, and from three to seven each weekday, the sole protector for fifteen of her most helpless family members.

As Karol neared the end of her story, her voice drifted off as though she was no longer talking to her classmates, but rather seeing and feeling the emotions behind her daily routine. After a pause, Karol quietly, almost as if to herself, said that she feels she has an obligation to protect her family. As the oldest person in her family with legal status in this country, she bears both a privilege and a burden. She told us she feels a sense of guilt because she does not have to carry the fear of deportation with her every day. So she does the only things she can do to alleviate that guilt and to keep her family together: she keeps her grades up so that she can be the first in her family to attend college and she protects the children in her family with a fierceness that drives her to continue day after day.

At this point I would like to mention that the directions for this assignment include a time guideline of ten minutes per presentation. But after the first few days, the speeches were averaging thirty to forty-five minutes each. Two different times an administrator walked into the room to make an announcement, and after waiting in the back for a few minutes quietly left, acknowledging the heaviness and significance of what was happening in my classroom. What started as an introductory assignment had turned into a methodology. It became a practice that set the tone for the rest of the year. The curriculum in this class includes topics that cover cultural

norms, the American justice system, and the exploration of future life plans. All of these require critical thinking skills and an ability for students to self-reflect on where they came from, who they are, and where they want to go. Telling their own stories with authenticity and vulnerability opened the doors for a powerful and productive school year.

### ANDREW

After hearing a few of his classmates' stories, Andrew came to talk to me after class one day. He had thought and thought, and the only idea he had to bring for the visual for his speech was a soccer ball. He was on the school soccer team and that was his passion. He felt more confident in himself when he was holding a soccer ball, so he thought that would help him not to be nervous. Andrew also told me he didn't have a powerful story or testimony of overcoming great obstacles to share. He decided he didn't really have a story; he just had a "regular" family. I probed Andrew for more information for a while, asking him what he planned on doing with the soccer ball to make it less of an object and more of a visual symbol of his presentation. He said maybe he could tape pictures of each family member on each white pentagon of the soccer ball. His family is very important to him and he would like to share a little about each of them. I then asked him more about soccer. I asked him if there was any connection between his story and soccer. Andrew's initial response was "not really," but after a pause, he continued talking.

Andrew has loved soccer since he was a little boy. He can't remember a time when he didn't know how to play soccer. When he was very young, his father taught him to play soccer. His father had been an avid soccer player growing up in Mexico and taught his children to play as a way of connecting them to his own childhood memories. Andrew has an abundance of fond memories of his family playing soccer at the park and of his father attending all his and his siblings' practices and games. That was significant because other than soccer, his father was distant and for the most part absent. Soccer was where and how they had a relationship with their father. I then asked Andrew if all of his siblings play soccer. He responded that yes, all of them play. Then he retracted and said that his older sister recently stopped playing. When I asked him why he paused for a few moments, then carefully, as though putting the pieces together, told me that his older sister and his father had a major falling out in their relationship. Soon after that, his sister quit playing soccer. I asked him if he

thought those two events were random or tied together somehow. Andrew immediately replied that he thinks his sister quit soccer as a way to push back against their father. Then Andrew looked up and me and said, “Soccer is how my family bonds, and it represents my family’s relationship. Miss, that’s my story. Soccer is my story.”

The stories continued to flow, and as I looked out on my class, on that sea of faces, I could see them thinking about their own stories and searching for the underlying current in each of their own histories. As each student got up to present, it brought our class closer together. At first students stepped up to the front of the classroom and began their rehearsed speech. Then one by one, their true stories unfolded as though lifting from the words of their note cards. It was like those art pieces that were popular in the 1990s, where if you looked at them in just the right way, a 3D picture would emerge. Students would suddenly see their past and their path from a new perspective, in a new way. And as more students shared, I sensed a wave of freedom in the room. Students began to start their speeches with less hesitation, almost in anticipation of what they would discover about themselves. But others used their presentations as a declaration, as a way to call out wounds in their family and draw them out of the shadows.

### LORRAINE

Lorraine was a “west lawn” girl. She hung out with the kids who boldly wear furry hats with cat ears or squirrel tails hanging from their belts. Sometimes she would come to school dressed in full cosplay. Her group of friends talked about anime shows and video games in animated, loud voices. It was common to see her group of friends reenacting anime scenes during lunch. That was Lorraine’s social public side. However, in the classroom, she was quiet. She would walk into class before the bell rang and continue her private conversation with a friend in full outside voice, but once class started, she would fold in on herself. There was clearly a social dynamic outside of her friend circle where Lorraine did not feel she fit in with the general population of the school. I fully expected Lorraine’s speech to be superficial and “safe,” where she would talk about her hobbies and pop culture interests. I think the rest of the class did, too. Instead, Lorraine stepped to the front of the class and shocked everyone.

She started off with a fairly typical introduction, apologizing for being nervous and for her voice shaking. Her hands shook as she clasped them in front of her. She relayed that she labored over what part of her story to

share, but ultimately decided that this was the time, as she was nearing adulthood, for her to share this part of her story for all to hear. Lorraine paused, and then with complete confidence (yet still visibly shaking) and authority announced, "I come from a family history of rape and incest, and that generational curse ends with me." She then shared a very clear retelling of the rape she had endured at the hands of her grandfather and the generations of similar stories going back far in her family. The descriptions were appropriate for the classroom, but she was very detailed as to the frequency and routine of her grandfather's attacks on her body and psyche. It was as though she was testifying in court, making sure that the jury was fully aware of the extent of the abuse and denigration. For forty-five minutes the class was silent. At the end of her presentation Lorraine declared that while this was extremely difficult for her to share, she knew that she needed an audience for accountability and to break the silence that was part of the abuse. She acknowledged her awareness that her classmates have not accepted her over the years and consider her an outcast, and that by her sharing this very personal information she now leaves herself even more vulnerable to ridicule and bullying. But for Lorraine, this was about taking a stand. All of the victims in her family have, until this point, kept the family secrets and therefore allowed the violence and evil to continue. But she refused to stay silent and would not pass this legacy of evil on to her own children. (As a teacher I am a mandated reporter. The crimes and violence had been perpetrated when Lorraine was younger and had been reported and dealt with within the judicial system. I also asked specific permission of this student to share this story due to its nature.)

When Lorraine finished speaking, the class went silent. Then suddenly there was a round of applause, and the students began to gather around her, waiting their turn to give her a hug and affirm her strength. Now I cannot speak to what, if any, changes occurred socially outside of the classroom, but the social dynamics definitely changed for the positive inside the classroom. Lorraine began to participate verbally much more in classroom discussions, offering her opinion on unit topics and sharing answers from her own work. Even more striking, though, was how the other students' reactions to Lorraine changed. I noticed the other students connecting to her responses, beginning their comments with phrases such as, "Going off of what Lorraine said" or "I agree with Lorraine's point and want to add." When Lorraine shared her story, she allowed others to help

carry her burden and allowed them to see beyond her outer self and into her humanity.

I was stunned. I never expected to hear such a raw, traumatic experience shared by a teenager to forty of her peers. My first inclination was to stop her; this was clearly not an appropriate topic for the classroom. Then I realized Lorraine had done exactly what I’d asked of her. She was telling us her story. The traumatic events of her childhood set the stage for her story and the assignment allowed her the opportunity to see the victory she declared over the trauma by bringing it into the light that day. My initial reaction could have stopped that. As much as it pushed back against my teacher instincts to keep the discussion light, I remembered that by assigning this and asking students to be open and vulnerable, I had asked Lorraine to do exactly what she was doing. If I had shut it down, I would have told her that my room and this space were not safe for her to share her story. That response would have caused significant damage. I am so glad I paused before I reacted and that Lorraine was able to share her powerful words with us.

## MARK

The day after Lorraine presented her story, her friend Mark asked if he could be the first to present that day. His friend had given him the courage to get up and share his story with the class. Mark shared privately with me that he had intended to take a zero on the assignment because he was too terrified to get up and speak in front of the class. But after going to school with the same group of people for the past twelve years, Mark knew this would be the last time he would be able to share a part of him that his peers wondered about, but he had never openly discussed.

Mark was born without the sense of hearing. But unfortunately, his deafness was not identified until he was almost school-aged. His parents sent him to a school for the hearing impaired, but because he had not received any therapy or teaching during his early formative years, Mark made little and slow progress in school. In the four years I had known Mark, he had never volunteered to share in class and would only reluctantly respond when called on. Often he would point to his answer on the paper instead of speaking aloud. Yet that day in class, everything changed.

Mark stood up in front of his peers, and with very shaky hands, and a shakier voice, pulled out a piece of lined paper and read directly from it. Then, Mark shared his story. He talked about always being behind in

school, even though he was very talented and excelled in his own creative work at home. In elementary and middle school, Mark tried to stay under the radar. He stayed with the other kids who had special needs, even though he felt that his needs were very different from the other kids'. He just needed to be connected in a way that his body wouldn't allow. Also, in his younger years, there were not a lot of accommodations that he could use in the general education classroom. He felt trapped. In high school, Mark received a cochlear implant. While this tool eventually improved his hearing greatly, Mark now had visible outward evidence of his disability. He shared how when he came back after the surgery and activation of the implant, he felt very conspicuous, as though suddenly everyone knew he was deaf. Before, he could just pass as being anti-social or very shy. Now he could feel everyone looking at him, and even worse, now he could hear them whisper about him.

Mark then shared that while the cochlear implant allows him to hear, it doesn't always differentiate between the sounds he wants to focus on and all the other sounds around him. So many times, he just hears a cacophony of noise, and because he is accustomed to silence, the noise causes him extreme anxiety. As a result, sometimes Mark "forgets" the outer part of his cochlear implant at home to give himself a day off. But that choice doesn't come without its consequences. A day without the implant means a day with only about 10% of his educational experience. It also means a day of isolation.

This is when Mark's demeanor transformed for the first time in his speech. For a few minutes he wasn't talking to the class; we were merely humble observers to his inner monologue. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully about how lonely he feels when he is in his own world of silence. During lunch, he hangs out with his friends, who are his lifeline, but when he forgets his exterior implant device he is left out of the inside jokes and the latest news. So then he attends his classes without the social lift of interacting with his friends. He sits in class, only catching a few words or assignments, based on what the teacher presents visually or what he can pick up by reading lips. He knows he's falling further behind, which only increases his anxiety when he gets home and can't do the homework. That frustration causes Mark to go deeper inside himself, which only makes him want to disengage more. It becomes a vicious cycle. He then looked at the class and explained that while most people cannot choose to really shut out the world, he can. And that is both a blessing and a curse.

Mark quickly came back to the present and wrapped up his speech, remembering that he was nervous and now embarrassed. Yet as he tried to scramble for his seat, a student raised her hand and asked if she could ask him a question. With great hesitation and irritation, Mark conceded. She first told Mark that while she has known him since elementary school and always wanted to ask, she never asked him about his experience. She thanked him for sharing and apologized for not having the courage to ask him before now. She asked Mark to explain how the cochlear implant worked, which Mark gladly did. He removed the outer piece and explained exactly how it worked, and what type of sounds he heard. As soon as he finished another hand shot up. That student asked about Mark’s FM unit. The FM unit is something that Mark gives to each of his teachers to wear around their necks. It helps him hear the teacher more distinctly and quiets more of the background noise. But as he hands it to each teacher to wear, it is another clear marker that he is different. Yet that day Mark proudly explained how it worked, even asking me to stand up as his model. At the end, multiple hands went up with students thanking Mark for sharing his story and being so open. When it was finally done, the class applauded for Mark.

While the students knew Mark was hearing impaired, they didn’t know the story behind his hearing loss; but more importantly, they didn’t know Mark. Honestly, I thought Mark was not going to complete the assignment. Of all the assignments in school, one where he would need to verbally share elements of his physically evident personal struggles would seem to be the most daunting. Yet as Mark saw the importance of telling his story, of revealing his fears and difficulties to his peers, he gained a freedom from not hiding in the quiet. Mark became much more verbal in class after his presentation. Students in the class approached him more, and while Mark had already felt safe with me, I saw that he now interacted more as a student and as a peer with his classmates. It was as though sharing that piece of himself broke down a barrier, allowing him a broader path to academic and social progress.

Now these are five remarkable stories. I had almost ninety senior students that year. There were some who read their notes and sat back down. There were others who admittedly waited until the last minute because, as one of my sons always says, “If you wait until the last minute, it only takes a minute.” And that was perfectly alright. We all learn and grow at different rates and we need to respect others’ process. Also, listening to others’ stories helps us connect to our own. I choose to believe that many of my



students found their story through listening to the stories of their peers. The final story I would like to share is from a student who took a different approach.

### CHRISTOPHER

Chris had been patiently listening to his classmates' presentations over the course of many days. On one of the last days, he volunteered to present. He shared his story, his family, their legacy, his upbringing. While he had learned much about himself during the process of the assignment, there was nothing shocking or life-altering about his story. He realized he didn't have anything in his story that was nearly as traumatic as many he'd heard but was clearly impacted by the stories of his classmates. After Chris shared his story, he explained how he'd been affected by the stories of people he'd known almost his whole life. He talked about how we don't really know much about the people we sit in classrooms with every day. Then Chris declared he would always be available for those who did share traumatic stories that he will always be there to listen and walk alongside them, and even to pray for them.

Chris' story played an important role in the success of this assignment. When he said he didn't have a story to share, he was in fact sharing his story. He showed us through his words how he grew in empathy; how a stronger bond had been created between he and his classmates. His story showed his confidence in his faith and his generosity of character. The recognition of these traits and the cultural consciousness in knowing his classmates' stories made Chris an ally and advocate for his peers.

This activity changed the climate of my classroom in a way I never fathomed. I expected that at the very least it would be an extreme icebreaker, a way to create a sense of safety and vulnerability for students as we ventured into the emotional roller coaster of their senior year of high school. And it did accomplish that. But it did so much more. It felt like that scene from *Dead Poet's Society* where Robin Williams' character gets his student Todd to shake off his fear of academic compliance and release the poet within. An activity like this requires risk. It does not come with a rubric or a calculated outcome. It is messy and fluid. There can be tears or there can be silence. It can last one week or several weeks. But the results make the messiness and risk worth it. Starting the year with a foundation of trust and a deeper understanding of who we are and where we have been created a buy-in from the students that set the tone for a positive and productive academic year.

In terms of pedagogy, the story assignment functions under the constructivist approach. It was also an inquiry-based approach, as I presented students with specific questions to begin their brainstorm process. The students then found meaning within their own learning process. I, as the teacher, was merely an instigator and observer. Each student created their own masterpiece and underwent their own transformative process at different levels. The assignment also meets the California Common State Standards for writing, speaking, and listening. In my reflection of this assignment, I will add more structure in the initial phase with much more modeling of options and freedom for the presentation aspect. I will also adapt it for different grade and learning levels. Finally, I know that my students can be the best sources of feedback for altering assignments. I will use their feedback and suggestions to make the assignment stronger each year as they continue to allow me to learn from them.

Storying is a way for students to see the power of their history and the influence it has on their life paths. At a time when they are working through the process of coming of age, knowing where they came from is crucial to knowing where they are going. They can then choose to continue that path or forge a new one.

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
 Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
 And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
 Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. (Whitman, 1892)

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# Citizen of the Week: Shaping the Whole Child Through Storying

*Rebeca Batres*

## INTRODUCTION

Educators are truly tasked with teaching so much more than basic academic skills. They are asked to develop the whole child. To me, this means developing inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring students who are motivated to learn and succeed. One approach to learning that I will discuss in this chapter is to use a writing activity to support growth and confidence in each of my students. Through this activity, I am able to help my students tell their own story, to learn about their ancestors and family culture, and who they want to be when they grow up. A child's self-esteem, self-awareness, and confidence will all be fostered throughout the school year when a new child is recognized and celebrated each week.

*"Ms. Batres, you are building the whole child"* (*Jacqueline, 4th grade*). This statement reflects what many of my students think about the benefits of an activity called Citizen of the Week (COTW). A simple writing activity, yet this one activity helped me build a foundation of trust and

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R. Batres (✉)

Rowland Unified School District, Rowland Heights, CA, USA

e-mail: [rbatres@rowlandschools.org](mailto:rbatres@rowlandschools.org)

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Pedagogy*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0_10)

community within my own classroom year after year. More so, the Citizen of the Week structure provides a useful bridge to other subject areas as students explore who they are, their hobbies and interests, and future aspirations.

In this chapter, I hope to illustrate how the activity of Citizen of the Week can positively impact your teaching, the lives of your students and their families, and your own classroom community. To better illustrate, here are a few examples of friendly letters written by students, parents, and myself (Figs. 10.1, 10.2, and 10.3).

December 9, 2020

Dear Isabella,

*I hope you had a wonderful birthday and a great COTW. Your presentation was great and I especially liked your spark video. I was already great friends with you in third grade but it was still cool learning all about you in your amazing presentation. We also have many things in common like*



*we both like to draw and that we were both nice babies. We also have some things not in common like how you like to watch anime and read mangas but I like to read novels about mystery and mythology. However, I do watch Avatar the Last Airbender if you do count that as an anime.*

*Did you know that the name Isabella means “devoted to God” and “God is perfection” and is of a Hebrew origin. Your name means that because the element representing God “el” has adapted to the “bella” in “Isabella.” Fun fact: The name Isabella has been around since the 12th century. That’s a long time! Isabella, you are an amazing person and everybody should be asking you for tips on how to be the best person they can be. I know that Santa will definitely give you gifts this year. My mom says that Santa will probably have to send his gifts to children this year because of the pandemic. At first when I heard this I was a little sad but after doing the calculations, I think it’s for the best. After all if Santa were to visit all the independent states and taking into account that he will need to quarantine for 14 weeks each country, he would need to quarantine for 2,730 weeks. That’s around 52 years!*

*Lastly Isabella, I hope that we can see each other in person after this pandemic is over and that you have a wonderful safe Christmas with your loved ones. Fun fact: We use evergreens as Christmas trees because in ancient times it reminded people of what spring would bring as the trees were green all year long.*

*Love your your best buddy,  
Jacqueline Lau*

Fig. 10.1 Letter to a classmate

To our beautiful daughter Jacqueline:

We want you to know how precious and special you are to us. You have brought so much joy to our lives since the day you were born. You mean the world to us. We love you to the moon and back. We will always be there for you...through thick and thin, rain or shine. You have our support 200% always so please don't be afraid to ask for our help whenever you need us. We will always be there for you.

We are so proud of your accomplishments and your hard work in school. Please keep up the good grades. You will achieve great success in the future with your determination and hard work.

Never forget how much we love you. As you grow older, you will face many challenges in life, please remember to just do your best. Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain. Every day may not be good, but try to find something good in every day. Follow your dreams and believe in yourself. Remember to always be awesome!

With lots of hugs and kisses,  
Mommy and Daddy

Fig. 10.2 Letter to child from parents

Reading a friendly letter to the Citizen of the Week is incredibly empowering to a child's self-esteem. A current student of mine commented, *"It feels like you can do anything, and you have the support of everyone."* Another student said, *"Whenever you have a bad day, my letters make me feel better."* A parent recently thanked me for the opportunity to participate in her son's Citizen of the Week project. She mentioned that this was the first time she was able to sit down and "really" talk with her son about his birth as he was their family's miracle baby, born prematurely. So many emotions were felt as she described telling her son about his incredible birth that she couldn't wait to thank me for doing the activity. In addition, in response to his story, his classmates praised him for being courageous in sharing his story and for being a miracle baby.

Similarly, a mom sent me the following message after her daughter's COTW (Fig. 10.4).

She expressed her joy in hearing the encouragement for her daughter's future aspirations to become a marine biologist because she had not yet asked her daughter what she wanted to be when she grew up. Another parent message read, *"I wish all the other teachers could incorporate the COTW for their students too. The COTW helps students build friendships and confidence."*

Every summer, as each new school year approaches, I eagerly anticipate setting up the Citizen of the Week activity for my incoming students. I

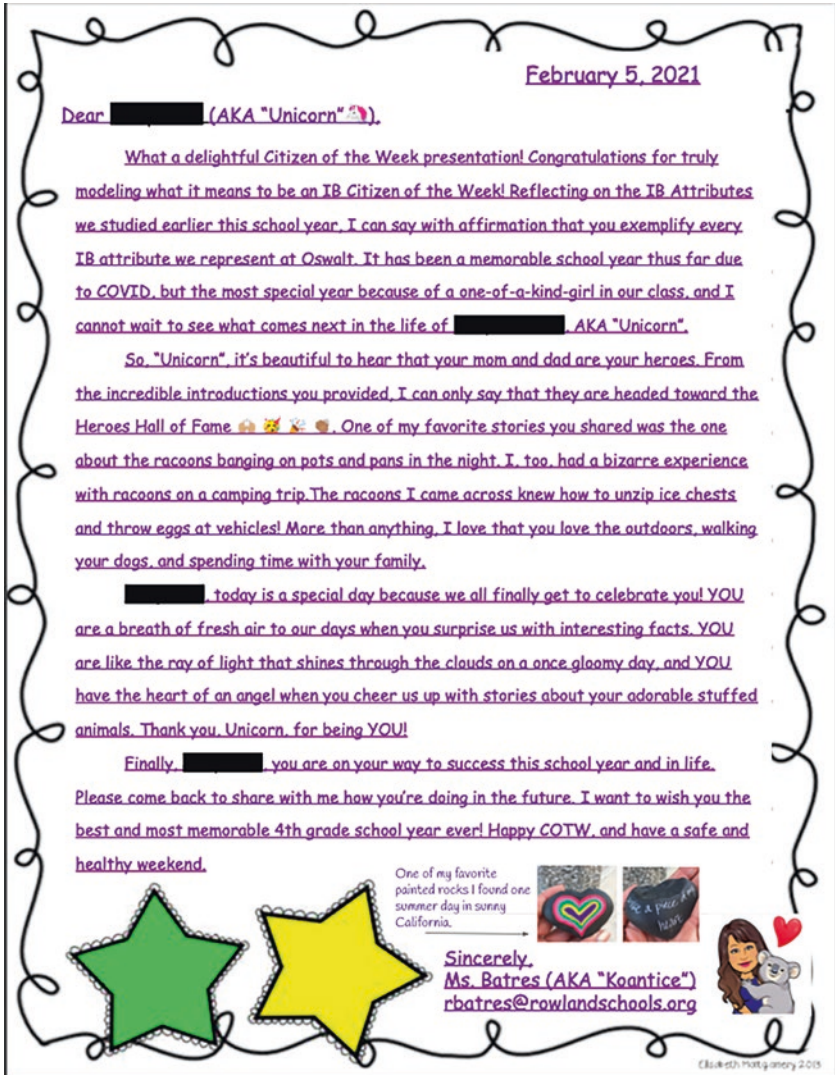


Fig. 10.3 Letter from teacher to student

Thank you for having me.

I think you have done a fantastic job with COTW given that it's on zoom. I think it so important especially now that kids have this social interactions, and to feel special while getting to know each other. I laughed, I cried, and I felt really touched by many letters from Megan's friends and classmates. She is so very lucky to have such compassionate classmates, and you have a such great students. I can't wait to put those letters into a book. Thank you have having me and making Megan's birthday special. Have a good and safe weekend!! All my best, Quan.

**Fig. 10.4** Letter from parent to teacher (Ms. Batres)

wonder who I might meet, what incredible stories I may hear, and what new friendships might arise in the new school year. I reflect over the hundreds of students and families who have participated in this meaningful journey with me, and many who have returned to describe a school year never to be forgotten. More than 20 years ago, I was introduced to the activity of Citizen of the Week by my fifth grade colleagues. To my delight, I discovered that through the use of this activity, I was able to make deeper connections with my students and their families. In fact, a former student of mine recently reached out to me through social media as a way of keeping in touch and sharing her successes with me. She is now playing NCAA women's basketball and wants to become a teacher! What strikes me is that I have a vivid recollection of her goal of wanting to play for the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association). As her fifth grade teacher, and through the Citizen of the Week writing activity, I encouraged her to go after her dreams and to remember that I would always be cheering for her continued success in life. After more than a decade, she couldn't wait to share her story with me. The lasting relationships I have developed with my students are due in part to my commitment to keeping Citizen of the Week as part of my yearly academic routine. And now, I want future educators to have the opportunity to experience the same.

### WHAT IS CITIZEN OF THE WEEK?

The overall purpose of the activity is to provide each student an opportunity to be celebrated through various activities for one week of the school year, while raising the student's self-esteem, self-confidence, and to

promote positive attitudes toward others. The student being recognized for Citizen of the Week (COTW) prepares an Autobiography Essay, an All About Me video or slideshow, and completes an All About Me poster provided by the teacher. The student presents these on the first day of the student's scheduled week. Throughout the week, all other students in the class and the teacher focus on learning more about the COTW and write a friendly letter to the student, which is presented at the end of the week. Special assignments and classroom roles such as line leader or library monitor can be given to the Citizen of the Week. On the Friday of the student's COTW, parents and guardians are invited to attend and participate in the letter reading presentation. The teacher, students, and parents (may include support staff and siblings) write a friendly letter to the Citizen of the Week and present their letters to the student. The "celebration" day can also include a 15-minute lesson shared by parents about the child's culture or family traditions. In my class, the celebration takes place after lunchtime, and the COTW may bring in a treat to be shared at the end of the day. Any special activities involving the family will make the event more meaningful and memorable.

### GETTING STARTED

Establishing the Citizen of the Week routines from the first day of school is essential to its success. Students will build on these routines for the remainder of the school year. Thus, modeling each part of the overall activity is strongly recommended. My students begin their first day of school by reading a friendly letter written to them by students from the previous year. The letter is written in the same format that is used throughout the year for the activity, helping to lower the anxiety that so many students experience in writing. To better illustrate, here is a friendly letter written by one classmate to another (Fig. 10.5).

Imagine each child in the classroom receiving letters of praise and encouragement every week throughout the school year and the positive impact which results from these letters. Students are then encouraged to write their first friendly letter to a former teacher (or someone they look up to). The teacher models how to write a complimentary letter by writing his/her own friendly letter to a colleague. All letters are then delivered to the recipients either by me (by placing them in each teacher's mailbox or by the student) only to be received with an abundance of joy and appreciation as you can imagine.



January 27 2021

Dear Jacob (A.K.A BO),

Congratulations on an astonishing presentation! It sparked the interests of all of us in the class. You are also a very talented writer, the story you told us touched my heart and I am so glad that you are in the same class as me this year. My favorite part was your adobe spark video. We all watched in awe as we saw all the places you've been. Just like you I have family in Australia and sometimes we visit them. Once, we went to a store and we tried Australia's specialty, meat pies! They were okay but I did like the veggies and pie crust.

Jacob, you are a very kind person. You always think about others and I am grateful for that. Nomatter what people look like you are always so kind and caring to them. I am so happy that you are following your dad's footsteps and becoming a doctor. You will do so well in the medical field. It's the perfect job for you because you get to meet and help new people. I am so glad that you want to be a doctor, I bet that you will save many lives. Maybe you can even advance different medicines. Just remember that we will be here rooting for you.

Furthermore, it is so cool that you have a turtle named Tizzie. I think that name really suits her and it is so cute! It must be fun having a turtle because unlike cats and dogs they don't bite or scratch. Also, it's cool that you watch the Madelorian! My dad also watches the Madelorian but whenever my uncle or my brother start talking about an episode he didn't watch he is like "Shhhhh, stop, don't give spoilers!" I don't really watch the Madelorian, the only times I do watch it is when baby yoda does something like putting a frog in his mouth (which is a part in the show).

Additionally, me and you have something in common. We both like to play pokemon. I got Pokemon Sun and Moon on my 7th birthday when I got my own DS. I got Pokemon Let's Go Evie this christmas. Maybe someday we can play together and explore new places.

In conclusion, you did a fabulous job on your presentation! I got to learn so much more about you! I loved hearing all the trips you've been on and I'm looking forward to hearing about even more trips. I can't wait to see you in person and work together. Have a wonderful day. Also, don't forget to chase your dreams! :)



Hello, my name is  
Dr. Jag. How are you  
feline to day?

Thank you to:

-Your old Catechism buddy,  
Isabella Dimalanta  
Ms. Batres  
4th Grade

<https://theconversation.com/from-jaguar-teeth-to-the-nail-of-the-great-beast-the-evolution-of-animal-medicines-107821>

Fig. 10.5 Letter from a student to classmate

During the first few weeks of school, teachers are setting up classroom routines and expectations. At this time, my students will create a list of Essential Agreements that support the overall behavior expectations in the classroom. When students take ownership for a successful learning environment, they are more apt to follow their own “rules.” Most elementary schools also follow an overarching citizenship program. Character development is a key component of instruction at the school where I currently teach. In my class, students participate in a group activity to define and present posters on attributes such as *Inquirer, Knowledgeable, Thinker, Communicator, Open-Minded, Principled, Caring, Courageous, Balanced, and Reflective*. Using these attributes as part of the writing process for Citizen of the Week offers a topic for writing about in the friendly letter and also helps children recognize these attributes in themselves and others. This is why it is important to begin early, so all students are equipped with the necessary tools to succeed in the writing activity.

Moreover, this is a great opportunity to introduce yourself to your students by *modeling* your own “Autobiography Essay” and “All About Me” Spark video or something similar like a Google slideshow, iMovie, and so on. Once your video is presented, every child should begin his/her own video through direct instruction. Students should be provided class time in order to explore making their own video. As their presentation day approaches, students will refine their videos and make them unique. As with any learning experience, defining the expectations of the activity and modeling behavior will set the foundation for the remainder of the school year.

### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT BEING RECOGNIZED FOR CITIZEN OF THE WEEK?

The student prepares his/her information for all three components to the Citizen of the Week “project” as early as they would like. The project requires the COTW to research his/her interests, hobbies, family experiences, goals, and so on. The presentation guidelines may be modified by the teacher to reflect his/her classroom needs. The following is an example of the rubric given to each student (Fig. 10.6).

### **IB Citizen of the Week Project** **Guidelines - 100pts.**

# \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Due Date (Due the **Monday** the Week of your

Celebration Day.) \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_



### **Written Autobiography (30 points)**

- Choose a creative title AND put your #, name, date
- Use good spelling, correct grammar, and use descriptive language
- Each paragraph needs a topic sentence
- Write FIVE indented paragraphs:
  - Introduction on your early life (3 sentences minimum)
  - body paragraph on your family (5 sentences minimum-do not list names of relatives)
  - body paragraph on your your hobbies and interests (5 sentences minimum)
  - body paragraph on your achievements OR on trips that you've taken (5 sentences minimum)
  - Closing paragraph on your goals (3 sentences minimum)

### **Poster (20 points)**

- Decorate the poster provided by your teacher. Be creative and make it your own!

### **Oral Presentation & All About Me Spark Video (50 points)**

- Rehearse/practice your presentation in front of your family before your presentation day!
- Make eye contact with your audience. Speak clearly and loudly.
- Present your autobiography & poster to the class
- Create a Spark video (<https://spark.adobe.com>) all about YOU. Include information about your family/ancestors, your hobbies/interests, and your future goals. Have fun and make it your own!

Fig. 10.6 Directions to students on activity

After the COTW presents this information (on the first day of the week), all other participants may ask the COTW follow-up or clarifying questions. This only takes a few minutes after the overall presentation. Throughout the week, students are encouraged to continue asking questions about the COTW's presentation and to compliment the COTW for sharing about themselves. Teachers should always take care to be sensitive to the needs of every student, especially for those who may not want to share more personal experiences.

Kicking off Citizen of the Week should take place at Back-to-School Night, allowing time for students to have a week of their own on the school calendar. After going over the year's curriculum, I always end with stories of former students who returned as adults to share in their successes with me. These stories have encouraged families to participate fully in the Citizen of the Week activity. The evening concludes by having parents select a date for their child's Citizen of the Week (most often near the child's birthday or at the parents' convenience). Giving parents ample time to think about their role in the Citizen of the Week activity will only make it more successful. By the end of the week, assign any remaining students to the available dates on the schedule and send home the Final Schedule along with the rubric and sample templates the following week. Here is an example of the schedule I create for the school year (Fig. 10.7).

## IB Citizen of the Week 2021-2022 Schedule

Dear Parents,

Listed below are the Fridays on which we will be having our "Citizen of the Week" celebrations. These will promptly start at **12:00p.m.**, but on occasional Fridays may need to start sooner due to scheduling conflicts. I have assigned each student a week in the school year where he/she will be our IB Citizen of the Week. As explained at Back-to-School Night, on the Friday of the designated week, complimentary letters will be read to your child, and you are invited to come in and participate in our Zoom Meeting. Parents will be receiving a reminder letter prior to your child's week. **Please remember that your child will be presenting his/her autobiography, poster, and Spark video on the Monday (or \*Tuesday in a few cases) of the assigned week.** I'm looking forward to celebrating your child! Thank you in advance for your participation in this special day!

Sincerely,  
Ms. Batres & The Fourth Grade Team

STUDENT NAME	DATE OF PRESENTATION	IB Citizen of the Week Celebration Day
	September 7 (Labor Day Sept. 6th)	September 10
	September 13	September 17
	September 20	*September 24 (No School on the 22nd-conferences)
	September 27	September 30 (No School October 1st)
	October 4	October 8
	October 11	October 15
	October 18	October 22
	October 25	October 29
	November 2 (No School on Nov. 1st)	November 5
	November 8	November 12
	November 15	November 19
Thanksgiving Break	Thanksgiving Break	November 22-26
	November 29	December 3
	December 6	December 10
	December 13	December 16 (No School on Dec. 17th)
Winter Break	Winter Break	December 20-January 7
	January 10	January 14

Fig. 10.7 Letter to parents and guardians on activity

## IB Citizen of the Week 2021-2022 Schedule

STUDENT NAME	DATE OF PRESENTATION	IB Citizen of the Week Celebration Day
	January 18 (MLK January 17)	January 21
	January 24	January 28
	January 31	February 4
	February 7	February 11
	February 14	February 18
	February 22 (PRESIDENT'S DAY February 21)	February 25
	February 28	March 4
	March 7	March 11
	March 14	March 18
	March 21	March 25
NO SCHOOL (SPRING BREAK)	NO SCHOOL (SPRING BREAK)	March 28-April 1
	April 4	April 8
	April 11	April 15
	April 18	April 22
	April 25	April 29
	May 2	May 6
	May 9	May 13
	May 16	May 20
	May 23	May 27




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## WHAT IS THE PARENT/FAMILY ROLE?

Parents are asked to participate in the Citizen of the Week activity by preparing a “love” letter or complimentary letter to their child. There are no specific guidelines for the parent letter, but I do ask them to use this opportunity to express their love and support for their child in a letter. If the parent is unable to attend the presentation day, the teacher can read or present the letter to the student. Remember to stress the importance of this special day for the student and that its success is heightened by all who participate. Parents will remember this day for many years to come. Again, I have illustrated this point by sharing some messages from parents in Fig. 10.8.

Mrs Batres, Thank you for allowing us to participate in an event that nurtures encouragement, motivation, curiosity and many other cognitive learning. It made it more special to feel the energy be propelled to our offspring, our Emma. A special thank you to you for making the current WORLD dynamics feel like we can feel a bit grounded. Your efforts are not unnoticed and are appreciated.

Regards,  
The Aguilar Family

Hi Ms. Batres,  
Thank you so much for your lovely letter to Jacqueline for her COTW. I wish all the other teachers can incorporate the COTW for their students too. The COTW helps students build friendships and confidence. Thank YOU and the class for making Jacqueline's birthday extra special. ❤️❤️❤️

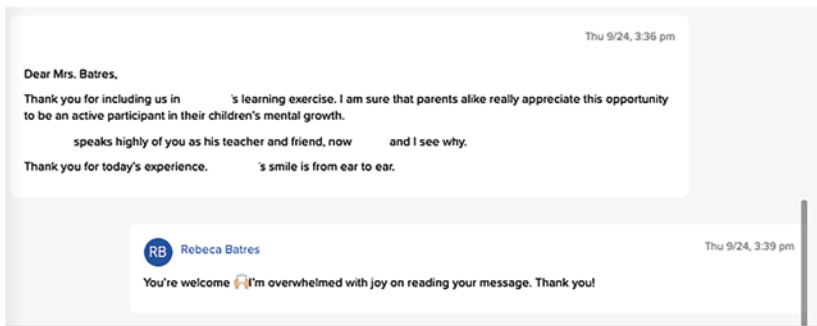


Fig. 10.8 Letters of appreciation from parents and guardians

## CREATING A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT: THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Getting to know your students through low-stress activities in the classroom can go a long way in building trust. Students' willingness to share about their lives outside of school can be challenging, so teachers can play a variety of trust building or team building games appropriate for their classroom. One team building game my students play is to build a puzzle together without speaking words. Writing about shared classroom experiences is a great way to use Citizen of the Week. Stories read during English Language Arts can be used as topics for the friendly letter. Even a math lesson can become a shared experience to write about. Consider having your students welcome each other every morning by sharing their "favorites" or perhaps one goal for the day. In my classroom, the COTW gets to choose the topic. For example, one of my students began our morning greeting with, "What animal name would you give yourself and why?" The questions are sometimes more serious like, "What is one goal you have for today and why?" Starting each morning with a greeting lets everyone know that they are welcome and supported. Most importantly, the teacher can create shared experiences if he/she wishes to use instead of the traditional outline. Again, consider the child, his or her family situation, be willing to adjust the criteria, and model the desired behavior outcomes from the start.

All students need affirmation by their peers and teachers, especially during their formative school years. Affirming a student's story helps build a strong sense of self-esteem in a child. As part of the Citizen of the Week presentation, students are asked to consider their future goals such as, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and "What are your academic goals?" One student noted in her "All About Me" slideshow, "*When I grow up, I would love to be a writer. I love writing and trying to teach a lesson to young children with characters that can relate to them. I hope that young children can learn an important lesson about the real world.*" If a student shares about his/her love of a specific subject, encourage everyone to look into careers the student might be interested in. Helping students explore career options as early as in the upper elementary grades helps develop a child's self-esteem and confidence to go after their passions. What better way of building a child's self-esteem, but by taking the time to help them explore and consider themselves in the future.

Furthermore, Citizen of the Week helps create a positive and safe learning environment in the classroom. Exploring character attributes and



attitudes not only provide the foundation for a safe learning environment but also teach the importance of being a good citizen. With Citizen of the Week, students are learning so much about themselves, building character and developing leadership skills all at the same time. Students become familiar with presenting in front of an audience on a weekly basis as letters are read in front of the class every Friday. Public speaking is one of the most difficult skills to acquire. The practice of reading friendly letters in front of one another builds confidence in all students. I encourage my students to rehearse their letters in front of their family the night before we read our letters. Allowing students to practice lowers the anxiety that comes along with speaking in public. Teachers can also pair students with a supportive friend if the child becomes too anxious. Reducing any anxieties of presenting in front of the class will make the experience more enjoyable for everyone. Overall, teachers can utilize Citizen of the Week to support other areas of instruction such as in the development of writing strategies, learning how to conduct research, and fostering strong communication skills.

Now more than ever, students need to see in action the support of their peers and teachers. When students reach high school, they begin to learn about the concept of networking. College-aged students are more likely to consider building a network of friends that will help them on their professional pathways. This idea of developing a network in the business world also applies to student life. Creating a network of supportive friends and family helps children build upon these support systems later in life. Life can be challenging for many students and their families. Several years ago, I met a child with a unique family situation. This young boy was being raised by his older sister and her husband, and he would soon become their adopted child. Unfortunately, his biological parents had lost their parental rights due to drug addiction. This young boy showed immense courage and confidence in sharing his story with his fellow classmates. He explained to a group of nine- and ten-year-old children that his biological parents were very sick and could no longer care for him. He also shared that through a lot of love and support from social workers, counselors, and his older sister, he would soon be able to be adopted by his sister. An unexpected reaction from one of his classmates was to give the child our class hand symbol of saying, "I understand. I can relate to you." After this, I watched with pride as the other children expressed their empathy and appreciation for the student. This authentic reaction showed me that children have the strength to overcome terrible crises with a network of

supportive friends, family, and community. Thus, it is important to show students how to create a network of support at an early age.

Building lasting relationships with students and their families is one of the greatest and most profound benefits of Citizen of the Week. Each week of the school year is met with anticipation for getting to know each other more deeply. The bonds I have created between my students and their families have lasted for many years, and I am sure will continue for years to come. When speaking to a former parent and now friend about her son's experience in my class, we reminisced together and remembered how her son had difficulty making connections with his peers and teachers, and his grades were declining. Through our communication and support, her son soon started engaging with other kids at recess. By the time his COTW arrived, he confidently shared about his passion for cooking. My friend tells me today that I changed the trajectory of her son's life because I showed him what it looked like to be supported and appreciated for who you are, without judgment.

### LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Over the years, I have had the privilege of witnessing my students go after their dreams, whether it be running for student body offices in middle school or having the confidence to share their research findings in college and beyond, and many who have returned with praise for having an opportunity to express themselves so clearly at such a young age. I hadn't considered the wonderful benefits which were to come year after year. I realized that the Citizen of the Week activity could change a child's path in school for the better. I believe wholeheartedly that by building relationships and establishing trust between students, their families, and the teacher, students can achieve greater success in school. There is no doubt in my mind that if done with the fidelity of building the whole child, Citizen of the Week can take your classroom to the next level of learning engagement. One particular story that will stay with me took place at the end of the 2020 school year, during the COVID-19 Stay-At-Home Order. I received a message from one of my former students, asking if I would join her on a zoom call. To my complete surprise, she was also joined by three of my other students from the same class! We reminisced about our time together, and they thanked me for being responsible for fostering their friendships, which would last a lifetime. Looking back, I can now easily see how our bond was created—through our COTW activities.

Today, we stay in touch through social media, and I can revel in their love of life, family, and their motivation to succeed.

Since January of 2020, the world experienced a terrible pandemic, which has also changed the way we provide instruction to students. Before starting the 2020–2021 school year, I pondered how I could incorporate Citizen of the Week. Knowing that students would be less inclined to want to share their screens on zoom, I knew I would have to find a way of bringing my teaching style into the virtual setting. With that, I made a commitment to include Citizen of the Week as part of my online teaching. The devastating effects of COVID-19 have impacted all of our lives, but especially the lives of children. Many parents this year have praised me for bringing a lot of joy into their child’s world during the pandemic and in spite of the pandemic. With much patience and consideration for the barriers of online instruction, the COTW activity fostered a caring, supportive, and friendly classroom environment. The bonds between students, parents, and myself blossomed into what I know will be lasting friendships. Citizen of the Week has been the one activity that my students look forward to every week, knowing that their parents may join us on zoom from work or home. Our online class has become “*our online family*” as one student said. Fridays are my favorite day of the week, not because the weekend has arrived, but because I know that one of my students and their family will embark on a new journey in school and in life.

\* \* \*

There are four files that should be maintained and updated each year. They include (1) Parent Introduction Letter, (2) Parent Sign-Up Schedule (as shown earlier), (3) Rubric and Guidelines for the Citizen of the Week Project (as shown earlier), and (4) the Parent Reminder Notice (Fig. 10.9).



## Citizen of the Week

Dear Parents,

A bulletin board has been set aside in our classroom to introduce and celebrate a different child each week. Your child will write an autobiography essay, create an All About Me Spark video, and fill out a poster (provided by the teacher) to be shared with the class on the Monday of their scheduled Citizen of the Week. We will schedule these dates at Back-to-School Night.

Along with having a bulletin board for the week, all other students will write a complimentary letter to your child as an activity in raising self-esteem of all my students and building positive attitudes towards one another. They will read their letters each Friday afternoon.

In addition to this, I am asking each parent to write their own personal letter to his/her child telling your son or daughter why he/she is so special. You are invited to join our class (on Zoom) in reading these letters to your child. If you are unable to make it, please send the letter with your child in a sealed envelope so I may read it to him/her. I'm sure this will be a very uplifting and positive experience for your child. You will be given advance notice as to when your child's week will be so you can write your letter. If you have any questions, please feel free to let me know. Thank you so much for your participation.

Sincerely,

The 4th Grade Team



Fig. 10.9 Remote learning adaptation of COTW

Date \_\_\_\_\_

To the Parents of \_\_\_\_\_,

Next week is your child's chosen week to be Citizen of the Week. Please make sure your child comes to school prepared to present his/her typed or hand-written autobiography and pictures and mementos on a poster board about his/her life on **Monday**, \_\_\_\_\_. Please also make sure your child follows the attached rubric when preparing for his/her presentation.

Furthermore, at this time, I would like to remind you that you are to write a complimentary letter to your child. Separate letters from the mother and from the father are preferred. You are invited to join our class in reading the complimentary letters on **Friday**, \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ in Room P-41. If you would like to teach a **brief 10 minute mini-lesson** to the class about your culture, please let me know in advance. Thank you for your participation in this activity! I'm looking forward to celebrating your child with you!

Sincerely,  
Ms. Batres

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent(s) Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Please check those that apply:

- I will be unable to attend on Friday, but I will send in my letter for you to read to my child in a sealed envelope.
- I will attend on Friday to read my letter, but I will not be teaching a lesson.
- I will attend on Friday to read my letter, and I will also be teaching the class a lesson or sharing a story. The 10 minute lesson I plan on teaching is:

\_\_\_\_\_  
I will contact you if I should need any help or supplies.



# Storying a Teacher's Writing Pedagogy: A Self-Study

*Joshua Almos*

## INTRODUCTION

*Then there is the instinct of making—the constructive impulse. The child's impulse to do finds expression first in play, in movement, gesture, and make-believe, becomes more definite, and seeks outlet in shaping materials into tangible forms and permanent embodiment.* (Dewey, 1915/2001, p. 30)

Several years ago, for my MA thesis topic, and in response to the challenges I had faced teaching elementary age students for 15 years in a large, urban school district, I reflected on the strength and weaknesses of my instruction to identify successful strategies in the hopes of developing a stronger and more responsive writing pedagogy. The Common Core State Standards and standardized tests had set rigorous writing goals for students but did not specify how educators are to successfully prepare students to attain proficiency according to the metrics (Lohman, 2010).

In many urban schools, educators and their students often struggle with the integration of mandated programs, language barriers,

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J. Almos (✉)

Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, CA, USA

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A. G. Raj, S. H. Ulanoff (eds.), *Storying a Reflexive Praxis for  
Pedagogy*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0_11)

overcrowded conditions, and teacher training that is poorly aligned to unique instruction. Literacy programs often fall short of addressing all the difficulties put in place for these teachers. Faced with this dilemma, educators are often left to scramble for solutions. Out of necessity, some even make the decision to do the hard work to create their own curricula. To add to the problem, until more recent tests were developed, authentic student writing performance was not a focus of testing.

Many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching writing. Writing sections of literacy programs often resemble how-to shows for do it yourself home repair. Success seems to hinge on perfect conditions and minor challenges. What do you do with students who are two or more years behind in their skills? What do you do with students that have a fear of writing or have no interest in writing? What do you do with students who may never have received strong writing instruction before coming to you? What do you do with students struggling to learn to write in a second language?

While research studies exist that describe the effective use of writing strategies in improving student writing performance in the elementary setting, there is still need for further study on the ways in which alternative methods and strategies involving dramatization, visualization, and verbalization can be incorporated into effective writing instruction. Research supports that the integration of the arts in literacy instruction can motivate and promote writing performance and expression. The following reflection began as a search to find strategies and improve instruction, and I was surprised to find that success was invariably generated from my observations of the students themselves and the actions I took after reflecting on these observations.

One clear pattern that emerged as an important and common vehicle of expression for the students was that of storying. Raj (2019) defines storying as “remembering, retelling, or narrating an event for a particular audience that holds emotional truth for and validates its audience” (p. 7). The desire and need to express oneself is integral to the development of our identity, the development of our language, and the development of our social and emotional health. Storytelling in all its forms is one of, if not the most important, vehicle of expression that humans have developed during its history. Whether it is with words or sounds or images, we have the need to tell each other these stories on a daily basis. In my definition, stories include even jokes, songs, the answers to questions, and the questions themselves. To me, sentences and paintings are stories with beginnings,

middles, and ends. Even the flight of a bird across the sky tells a story, if one responds to the experience with thought and feeling.

To tell and to engage with a telling is a mostly untaught facility that allows us to navigate, enjoy, and survive life. I initially searched for a solution to the challenge of improving students' poor writing performance and test scores, but over time it became clear to me that students' interests, expression, and identity formation through storying were not only integral to the development of engaging writing instruction, but could also address the deeper needs of students such as healthy identity formation and self-expression, as well as their ability to communicate effectively.

### VISUALIZATION AND WRITING

During my first few years of teaching mostly third and fourth grade students that were learning English as a second language, I struggled to improve their organization in writing, as well as their ability to use appropriate, expressive content-related language and vocabulary. Graham and Perrin (2007) recognized that "explicitly teaching strategies for planning, revising, and editing was effective" in improving student writing performance (p. 467). However, as I reflected on my teaching I saw a development in my ability to use visualization strategies to improve my students' performance in planning, revision, and editing. Between the periods of these two reflections, dedicated writing time during the week had diminished and major challenges to effective writing instruction remained. I found that during conversations with the students about their writing the majority could not visualize what they were writing about. If they had no purpose and no interest, writing would be like pushing a boulder uphill.

This affected their abilities to organize their compositions, allowed them to retain focus throughout structure, as well as describe characters and events effectively. Revision for description, structure, and clarity was extremely difficult, as many students finished this part of the writing process too quickly, making sparse changes to their papers. Student memory and retention of the content of their own writing became a focus of my pedagogical improvement.

However, when my students wrote narratives, the majority nevertheless struggled with organization in their writing, the use of transitions and descriptive vocabulary. Above all, students found it difficult to know what to write about, and even more so, to find something interesting to write



about, and to become engaged with their writing as a living extension of themselves. They need to see it. The teacher must somehow help students put their thoughts and feelings in front of them. I realized that my students were regularly exposed to narrative texts through both reading and writing, which led to my decision to improve their writing through this genre. I decided to have students visualize their narratives with illustrations before writing them as text. This visual organization could stand as a focus to help them say and show what was in their minds. Not yet arriving at an effective way to get students to proofread and revise their papers, and the related writing lessons in our reading program being dry, limited, and uninteresting to the students as they were, many students finished this part of the writing process too quickly, making sparse changes to their papers.

In the first few years I was teaching, I let students draw and color when they had finished writing early, yet had not made the connection to use the drawing in any manner that would directly support their writing. To motivate students to write, I made it a requirement for some written narratives that students include a similar illustration to go along, specifically focusing on the creation of labels.

After a few days of observation, drawing a simple picture that went with their writing seemed limited in use. I realized that students needed a visual scaffold, a reflection of what was in their heads that could guide their writing. I wanted to help them “speak” visually. Norris et al. (1997) found that third grade students’ writing improved when they integrated drawing and writing. Observing that my students had difficulty remembering what they read or wrote, it became clear that I had to find ways for the students to visualize and to communicate what they were writing. This prompted me to pursue drawing as a means of visualization for the students before and during the writing of their drafts.

During the time I was considering possible instructional strategies that connected drawing and writing, a student showed me the illustration she made to go with a narrative she had written. She had labeled the characters and some of the objects in the illustration. She had also written a few words of dialogue made by the characters. Other students wanted to do the same thing. After a week, two ideas came to me. I created a simple template that mirrored the three-part structure of a narrative. Students would include labeled illustrations for the three parts of their stories—beginning, middle, and end.

I taught this process as a means to help them put ideas and feelings into words because I could see that actions that were difficult for them to do

would take some time to learn. I knew that visualizing what they would write about was something that would have to come before something like a conventional outline could be used effectively. I thought back to the cinema classes I had taken in college that trained me to write for the screen and how I had used illustrations to make sense my writing.

Learning from prior experience to capitalize on student interest, as well as my own studies of screenwriting, I decided to have them make a labeled storyboard for each of the three parts of their stories. I felt that they should be led through this novel visual template slowly and step-by-step. We also created an organized classroom bank of language they could use to elaborate on their narratives with their partners.

The other idea was rooted in the challenge I faced with teaching students to pre-write. Planning a paper was crucial, but somewhere between brainstorming writing topics with the students to write about and the first draft was a creative, conceptual gap for the students. I had been having students make a list of the things they wanted to put into their narratives in outline form, but the students still could not visualize specific things to put in their paper.

I decided then to try a visual pre-write and used this three-part illustration template as a way of visualizing their paper before they started writing in text. Visualizing your story before writing it down on the page was something I had never tried before in the classroom. I decided to have them create a labeled storyboard for each of the three parts of their stories. Students would now write their beginnings first, then their endings, and their middles last. I found it easier for students to connect their beginnings and their ends prior to visualizing their middle sections.

From this activity, students got to know each other, better engage, and play with each other. I explained the uses of the template to the entire class and had them first fill one out for a story we had read, including illustrating parts of the narrative. In whole group discussion, we clarified that we would use to plan our own stories. I modeled its use with a story I made up on the spot, thinking aloud as I did so, including labeled illustrations with some brief dialogue. The next day, I orally presented a brief narrative based upon the information in the template to them and left it on the wall as a model for them to access and refer to.

Soon after, we started our narrative cycle. After brainstorming and choosing story ideas, specifically imaginary, I passed out the template with the assignment that they were to make one illustration each of the next three days. This helped me divide the class into small groups for

differentiation. The first day, students would only be making an illustration for the beginning of the story, including their characters, the setting, and the situation they found them in. They were required to label the character names, important objects, any descriptive terms for the setting, or the feelings of the characters. I figured that they could add some dialogue, so I allowed use of dialogue in the illustrations for those who felt comfortable using them. This process allowed them to express, gave them the tools for expression of themselves, to tell, to learn about others while also experiencing their own expression and content. Along the way, the students became more confident in using language and description, stating cause and effect, thinking through their writing, getting validation of who they are in safe space of play, and speaking through their characters. It wasn't them, and it was them.

When they had finished the illustration for the first part of their story, they had to describe their main characters, their setting, and the situation the characters found themselves in at the beginning of the narrative. If they were ready, they could tell me the event they created that changed that situation and any ideas they had to illustrate it. Elaborating on these two elements of their story really excited the students.

Over the next few days, I made observations of students as they worked, making suggestions and working with students who were struggling with elements of the assignment. I also worked with small focus groups that needed extra attention and time. Several challenges arose. One of these was assisting students in their drawings. Some became frustrated because they did not know how to draw what they needed to express their thoughts. I decided that students would need to develop a simple visual vocabulary for drawing what they needed. I started a simplified visual journal/dictionary for the students in which I taught them how to draw stick figures, faces, houses, mountains, buildings, cars, dogs, and streets. These were done in a very simplified way that allowed everyone to communicate in drawing in a quick fashion.

Over time, we would add to them as a class and add to them as individuals. As students began to see the illustrations of others, they learned from each other how to make more sophisticated and specific drawings. I made another model template that included a story in this simplistic fashion to encourage everyone. Identity and need. I tried this out as a trial run with a few students in a small group and realized that, while the template needed to remain simple and easy to understand and give space for student illustrations, it would also be good to include transitional sentence starters for them as suggestions to begin their three parts as well as brief reminders

of what to include, such as characters, setting, situation, problem, and solution. During these trial small groups, I was reminded of a recurring problem. Many students had difficulty starting their writing. The decision to break with the conventional narrative instructional requirement that students think of their beginnings first, their middles after that, and finally their endings yielded positive results and great improvement over previous lessons on narrative structure.

Another challenge occurred when we created our illustrations chronologically—beginning, middle, and end. Students typically became bogged down in the middle. There would be no clear difference between the middle and the end. The simple beginning-middle-end sequence didn't work that well. After listening to students elaborate on their frustrations, it became clear that it would be easier for them to identify a beginning situation followed by a change, as well as an end situation that would be different than the beginning. Ends, beginnings. Identity, maturity, development, understandings of world around them, and their relation to it. They know how to start and maybe end—or a moment—but they are young and need help with endings. This is from a lack of life experience. We can't expect to know how things end or how a story gets to its end.

In the meantime, I left the template as it was, but the use of it changed. They would identify and describe a situation with characters in a setting, create a change if they could, then decide upon an ending. The overall frustration diminished. Students would confer with each other on what would be an interesting change they could introduce, as well as what a good ending for their story could be. The middle would come later.

It became much easier for them to imagine how a character would get from point A to point C, and then get from point B to point C. As I reflected upon my own struggles with screenwriting, the middle act, that long, murky road of character and plot development, always presented the biggest challenges, even for professional writers. And students now had a framework that they could use to assist each other. From then on, most students could choose to plan their narratives visually, which most of them did. Each illustration would eventually become a paragraph. This became a lot easier for them to understand. Without consciously intending to, I had also made other areas of writing instruction easier. This practice now made it easier to teach paragraph structure and meaning.

Many students could now visualize their "movie." Their ideas and feelings were validated, who they are, they can see their reflections in their work, some for the first time as young kids. These visual aids made it easy

to identify and discuss the central action of that part of their story. Before this, many stories typically had a beginning, an event that happened, and then small events that kept happening until an abrupt end. Characters did not change or learn anything. The reality of the central character at the end was essentially the same as it was at the beginning. With visual exploration, a student could identify any development going on in their stories much easier than if we were looking at a single block of writing. While the sight of this block of writing often intimidated the student from wanting to reread their work, let alone proofread or edit it, discussing their illustrations in parts was much easier to do (see Fig. 11.1).

These illustrations were also useful in the writing conferences as reference points and stimulators of conversation about the students' narratives. During the conferences, the students and I now had a point of reference from which to clarify ideas before writing began. These images helped us clarify foundations of ideas from which to write from (Norris et al., 1997). Images transcended the language of words and allowed us to search for the appropriate words and meaning from those very images.

I had never reached this stage of engagement in my instruction. I took advantage of this by highlighting the advantages of using the writing of other students as a model for their own writing. Other advances followed. I learned about the kids and I could design lessons and instruction with more intuition about what students needed and what would work. I realized that I had to take risks with my instruction if I wanted to improve my practice. I concluded that, over time and with some application, I could become more effective through a process of dedicated reflection on my trial and error.

From these efforts, there had developed a significant change in students' development of writing organization, grasp of text structure, and use of appropriate, content-related vocabulary. Students had labeled their illustrations; the vocabulary and sentence structures in their texts became more sophisticated and specific. The texts were more descriptive, showing that students were becoming more interested in their work, becoming especially proud and excited when their illustrations were shown alongside the text. In addition, the writing output of all students increased dramatically. The process of visualization translated to writing with more elaboration and articulation (see Fig. 11.2).

My happy discoveries mirrored those of Norris et al. (1997) who found that drawing was instrumental in giving students opportunities and time to think about and reflect on their own ideas before they started to write.



Fig. 11.1 Illustrated pre-writing

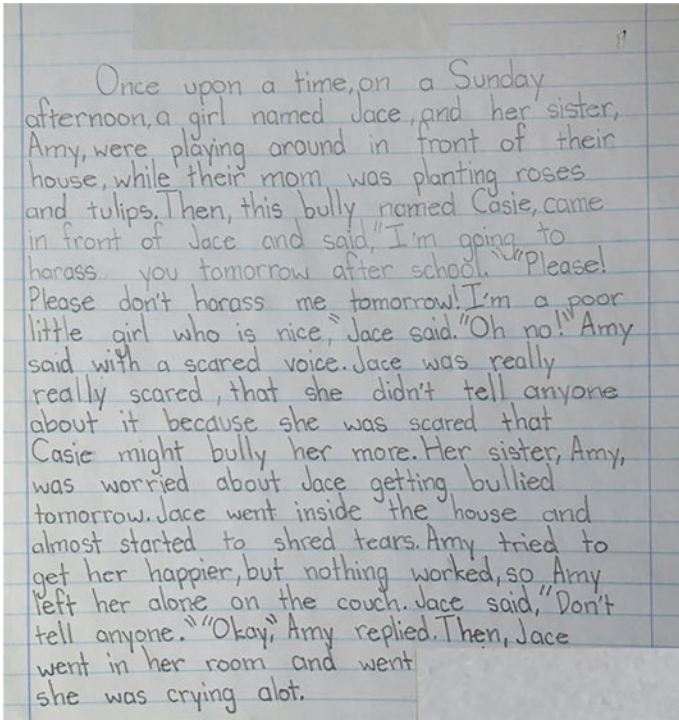


Fig. 11.2 Final draft from pre-write seen in Fig. 11.1

I saw my students use their drawings to help them improve their own writing. My students worked through narrative problems and developed oral language using their illustrations as reference points for discussions about their writing. They then used the oral language they learned to write better stories.

### STORYTELLING AND WRITING

For the next several years, I continued to develop an instructional model for third and fourth graders that focused on the use of student illustrations to improve story structure. Compared to the students from my first year of teaching, my students appeared to care more about their work and enjoyed making and using their illustrations to improve their writing. There was less fear of the act of writing. Nevertheless, I realized that most

of my students still struggled with their writing. Their drafts often lacked the descriptive elements necessary to communicate crucial character and plot development. The student writers were not adept at using dialogue as an effective tool. Most importantly, students lacked dramatic tension and personal energy in their writing. They lacked a literary “voice.”

An author’s voice is apparent in fiction when they choose words and phrases that express their emotion, their point of view, and their attitude. An author’s written voice can mirror their attitude when speaking in person. An author’s voice is distinct from other authors. This imparts the author’s personality to the reader.

When students first start to write fiction, they often lack this distinctive voice as they struggle with written expression. At some point, they start to write what they want to write in the way they want to write it, and through this, communicate their individual identity. They are then able to see a reflection of themselves in print for the first time. This allows them to reflect on their ideas and refine them, refine themselves.

At this point in my teaching, a close set of realizations propelled me forward. Like before, these transformations in my thinking were initiated by unexpected experiences with my students. And, as in the past, success depended on attendant reflections, followed by experimentation in the classroom. A pattern in my pedagogy was evolving. But this time around, I was becoming aware of the pattern and using this knowledge to build a reflexive, conscious approach to my instruction and to the observations I made of my students.

Around this time, I took notice of how, without direction, students would be drawn to go to the writing wall and read the other students’ stories along with the accompanying illustrations. Many students remarked that the illustrations looked like pictures in comics. A lot of conversations between students began to happen around those illustrations and the stories. These text-enriched illustrations freed them to discuss whatever interested them from the stories, including those ideas prompted by the images.

Up to this point, I had never considered comics as useful texts for rich literacy instruction. Sealey-Morris (2015) observed that, when comics are compared to conventional printed text, “the mixture of images with words presents no less than a whole new set of interpretive tasks.” (p. 37). As I watched and listened to students discuss their images with their peers, I was reminded that, as with comics, my students’ comic-like pre-writes clearly promoted their oral language development.



Sealey-Morris (2015) further elaborates on the “unique interpretive challenge” that comics present to students, in that “there can be no prescribed order, as a comics reader may start with words, with images, or with various combinations” (p. 37). I wondered how I could use the illustrations in a more effective manner to develop an approach—a lesson sequence—that could help students improve their writing in general, but most importantly, their “voice.”

I watched the students tell informal stories to each other about their illustrations. Graham et al. (2015) found that strategies for writing can “include generating possible ideas for writing by thinking about the characters, the setting, the main character’s goals, action to achieve those goals, characters’ reactions, and how the story ends” (p. 515). If I could formalize and frame their informal, unstructured discussions in a way that focused them to elaborate on specific elements of their narratives such as description and voice, their written and oral expression might improve. My lessons would have to be targeted and specific (Graham & Perrin, 2007).

In answer to this challenge, I had several realizations in a row. One day, I paused at a colleague’s open doorway as I was walking during lunchtime. Class was in session. The teacher was working with a small group. Almost all of the other students were working with partners. They were excitedly helping each other as they answered a prompt written on the board about the reading selection they’d been studying and discussing in whole group. It was clear that they had a protocol they were following. They were asking each other questions and challenging each other, referring to the actual text to settle a challenge or assist each other. While getting excited at times, they took turns speaking for the most part.

At no time did the teacher look up from the small group to quiet them down. It was a bit noisy, but unlike my class, the noise never rose above a certain, productive level. At some point I noticed that the students were using terms and phrases that could be found on charts on the wall. The class was running itself and the students seemed engaged and happy. And above all, they were using academic vocabulary and clearly using and developing their critical language skills. I asked myself the painful questions: Do I talk too much in class? How much of instructional time is me talking? How much time are students allowed to engage in constructive conversations?

For the next week, I made a great effort to listen to myself and evaluate how much I spoke during lessons. It was not a pleasant reality. My students did not get many chances to speak. When they did, it was usually in

response to questions I asked that had specific answers. Discussions in the class were brief. There were brief, infrequent periods throughout the week in which partners worked together, mainly while peer editing or discussing a question I had given them during our daily reading. This reinforced my original question that while their illustrations were useful as a pre-write, why couldn't they also work as a reference point for a focused, collaborative process? I wanted to see them working together and having productive conversations like I'd seen in my colleague's classroom.

Another realization transpired later that week that guided me toward an approach. One evening, I was revising a personal writing project. I suddenly became aware that I spoke silently or aloud while rereading the text that needed revision. I would then make the changes—what didn't sound right—to make the text say what I wanted to say. It occurred to me that speaking to oneself was part of the development of one's voice in writing. A person finds their way to say something the way it makes sense to them. You choose, or edit, what you wish to say. You hear your voice, which is you speaking to yourself. In editing this way, you are developing and revising and reframing who you are—your identity.

Blinne (2012) examined the use of storytelling in the classroom as a strategy to develop language, voice, and self-confidence in students. In the activity, Blinne observed students working together “to create a whimsical story that deconstructs a mundane, everyday ritual (event, activity, practice) into a mythical or folkloric re-vision,” the process of which fostered conversation, critical problem-solving, and risk-taking (p. 216). Yes, my students would need more opportunities for storytelling. Why would they want to improve their ability to express themselves if they did not have opportunities to express themselves?

There might be a reason to write and to improve their writing, if they heard their own voices telling their stories—and if they received validation from others for their stories. I set about designing storytelling-to-writing instruction that would emphasize and build on the oral language and social discourse of play that had been largely absent from my classroom.

As I worked on creating a sequence of lessons, a final, integral experience with my students cemented my approach. One day, I read a short story to the class to get them in the mood for revising their writing. I was trying anything to get them motivated for this most difficult and dreaded of tasks. During the revision work time, while conferencing with a student about their revision work, they remarked how much they liked it when I acted out the book as I read it, especially when I spoke in the characters'

voices. I told them that I liked the book a lot and explained that the author made me see and feel things. I was then caught off-guard when they asked me what made the writing good.

I replied that I felt like I was “in” the story when I read it. I wanted to know what the main character would do whenever things happened to them. I wondered what would happen to that character in the end. I told the student I wanted that feeling when I read their writing. They replied that they wanted to be a good writer, but that they didn’t know how. On an impulse, I decided to make up and dramatize a story for the student then and there, hoping to find answers while we engaged in more story dramatization. More inspiration moved me to draw illustrations before each part of my story, dramatizing each part as we looked at my illustrations. It was clear that “reading” the flow of images as I told the story helped the student grasp the story. It also helped me to clarify the story for myself, freeing my mind up to focus on my imagination and dramatization.

I could not find a solution through explanation. I had to do things. I had to try things out. And these things I tried out had to come from student interest. They enjoyed storytelling. I also felt that the student and I bonded during this storytelling. We were getting to know each other better as I told the story and they asked questions. It was the dramatic oral storying that the students enjoyed. The storyteller came alive with voices and body movement, conveying their personality and individuality vividly. As I dramatized, I was making personal choices about how and what to tell. This was how I would get the students to tell better stories that mattered to them.

I suggested to the students that they tell me their story from their illustrations alone—without the printed story they had written. At first, they simply told me what was in the illustration, making objective statements as to what it contained. They read the labels next to what they pointed at as if running off a list. I suggested that the students make voices for the characters. I took a character role and had them tell me what to say as I acted it out with them. This became exciting and fun for both of us.

Many students stopped working and began to watch. I stopped the class immediately and told them that I would like them to tell me their stories from their illustrations as I visited them at their desks. I asked them to make the characters speak in different voices and that I would help them if they needed it. At first, some were a little nervous, but they made a huge improvement over a short period of time.

I was amazed. To me, it was evident after this one day that good writing might begin with the personal connection of oral storytelling and that maybe the next step was to simply get their verbal storytelling down on paper. I reflected on how the use of illustrations as a pre-write improved the quality of students' narratives. Could this be another way of using their illustrations to improve their writing? I wanted to go beyond the physical act of drawing and actually have the drawings be used in verbal storytelling.

The next day I told the class that I wanted them to try one more writing activity before their first draft—and that I hoped that it would make their writing more interesting. When I added that the activity would be something similar to what the student and I had done the day before, they became very excited as most had stopped to watch us. I told them that they were going to use their illustrations to tell each other their stories and modeled for them how it would be done. This process would not only help to guide their partner through the events of their stories, but also be used to help the listener visualize the events and the characters. I hoped that it also be fun for them to do.

After an explanation, I modeled the activity by narrating a set of story illustrations I had created, stopping to emphasize and explain and model phrasing, intonation, pacing, body language, and character voicing. Students were noticeably excited. When I asked for suggestions for voices and physical actions to improve the story, many contributed ideas. They watched as I acted out the story. At intervals, I stopped to write out the story on a big paper. Students corrected me or added things that I forgot from my oral storytelling.

I also intentionally engaged in poor storytelling—speaking in a voice inappropriate for a character or using inappropriate pacing. I told them that this is what we would be doing with our partners, adding that the two most important things were to help each other and to have fun. They were excited.

Students took turns verbally narrating their illustrations to each other. Some were partnered together, but others were put into groups of three. I found that this particular grouping of students provided a greater feeling of support for the readers, offering more opportunities for validation and that later appeared to ease the transition to performance in front of the whole class. With encouragement, the listeners in each group would increasingly make suggestions to the storyteller using voices and body

language. Students got more excited as they made their illustrations come alive by reading them aloud. They created voices and described settings.

The importance of the illustrations as reference points also became clear as students began noticing that readers would often leave out interesting elements of their illustrations or discussed things that were not in their illustrations. During the storytelling sessions, listeners used voices and body language to show the storyteller their suggestions. The storytellers would then retell parts of their stories with changes made from the feedback. Blinne (2012) observed that, “through storytelling, students are experimenting with performance while learning to integrate vocal variation (pitch, pace, power, pauses, and exaggeration) with gestures, movement, and sensory-rich language” (p. 216). I saw this with my students, too.

The students began noticing the differences between the illustrations and the texts they came from, identifying things they had left out of their texts. These led to more revisions. All these changes and additions were spurred by individual student interest and not only included plot events and character action, but also involved stylistic considerations such as tone and expressive description. After this, the students used the listeners’ suggestions to write down their stories the way they told it to their classmates. The results impressed me. Students that did not previously use dialogue or include descriptions of settings or events or characters now did so. Those that had, improved upon these elements.

Many students began to discuss writing with each other, giving and using the feedback to improve their work. This also often led to shier students having more confidence in speaking during whole class discussions (Blinne, 2012). Other studies support the idea that a thoughtfully designed protocol can provide a framework and an environment from which students can collaborate to improve their writing and their oral language at the same time. This includes the paired writing method (Yarrow & Topping, 2001) where students work to keep each other on task.

Even revisions became easier for the struggling students. Their writing had become much more important to the students in my class. They persevered more. While typical revisions had often been worked out during the oral storytelling phase, students spent more time in making further revisions.

I realized that my role as a teacher of writing was changing before my eyes. I needed to foster collaborative discussions and activities, especially the use of oral storytelling, that would allow students to motivate each other, articulate their interests, and develop the voice they needed in their

writing. It had become clear that I needed to be systematic and observant whenever there was a problem, a challenge. I had to be prepared for the solution to happen at any given time and to be able to utilize the information from my observations of students. I should watch and listen to students, create experiences and opportunities for play and engagement, and carefully piece together the experiences to form appropriate and responsive instructional approaches.

### THE JUMP TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Several years later, I transferred to another school, jumping from the elementary grades to a position teaching English Language Arts to seventh and eighth graders. With no experience teaching middle school, I was extremely anxious. You can attend trainings, read books, and get advice, but nothing replaces experience in the classroom, and I had heard middle school students were very different than the younger kids.

That very first semester, I had planned entirely new writing lessons based upon the literacy program mandated by the district. The students did not write very much. After having success teaching in elementary school, I was at a loss. I felt like I had returned to my first or second year of teaching. I experimented by implementing illustrated pre-writes with one of my classes, but the students took too long with the illustrations. I soon found that focus was easily lost with this age group.

One central challenge was that, in secondary, there is a lot more emphasis on writing to nonfiction sources. Another challenge was that I needed to completely reimagine instructional time and how reading and writing assignments could blend together. I reflected. I knew that I had to teach the narrative writing. The biggest problem these students had was starting stories. Most could not figure out what to write about. The flood of student interest I thought I could count on to inspire my lesson planning never came.

The writing component of the Common Core also now requires the writer to reference nonfiction texts as they develop narratives, reports, and argumentative papers. I had been teaching reading and writing as separate curricular areas. I knew I needed to combine them in some way. I needed to stick to a topic, but I also wanted to give them some choice, something to give them a direction and, hopefully, writing ideas. I decided to have the students in one of my classes read and analyze two articles related to a unit topic—and write a narrative that was connected to that unit.

Things moved slowly, but students were finally starting to come up with ideas. I met with students in small groups to help them think of ideas related to the topic and the articles. Then, as in the past, a student propelled the instruction forward with a personal request. She asked if she could find extra articles on the topic or related topics to develop other parts of her story. I almost missed another opportunity for inspiration from my students, but I had apparently and unconsciously developed a secondary nature and jumped on the chance to reframe her request into a solution. Schon (1983) believed that a practitioner must reflect “on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior” (p. 68). To my relief, I found that I was becoming more aware of what students revealed, and quicker about reacting to these interactions.

From then on, I allowed students to add extra articles from the Newsela site to develop their stories, with the rule being that they had to include ideas and vocabulary terms from all the articles—the assigned articles and the ones they chose.

After this, writing instruction took off. Students became more engaged in the reading discussions because their narratives were based on the readings. They became more interested in writing their narratives because, while they were partly based on the required readings, they were also partly based on articles on their own interests.

The writing conferences were more productive because every student had a story that was related to the topic but was also different from everyone else’s story. They developed research skills because they had to find articles with ideas that could support the story they were already writing. The articles became reference points for discussions during conferences and peer-revision. They gave students ideas for plot events, characters, and settings. To support conversations around their writing, students color-coded sections of their narratives to correspond to articles their ideas may have come from or been inspired by (see Fig. 11.3). This not only made it easier to discuss the parts of their story, but it also made it clear which parts of their stories did not come from the articles.

Students were paired up with each other to give peer revisions. Student conversations kindled from the sharing of their own narratives and the nonfiction sources the narratives drew from.

The comments on one narrative show how the author responds to a peer’s question about character motivation. The comments section was a safe space for students to discuss their stories. This tool eliminated the

By:

**Chapter 1. The Car Crash**

I was about the age of five when my mom, dad, and I were going on a road trip. We were driving by a forest not that far from home. The pitter and pattering of rain hit the roof of the grey car. Puddles of muddy water filled the rocky roads. Each adding a bump or splash with each drive by. Looking outside through my window, I saw the giant redwood trees.

I think my mom told my dad... "Honey, look at all those beautiful redwood trees."

"They truly are beautiful, I can't remember the last time I saw one of these." is what he responded back.

Then, I believe my mom turned back to ask me... "How are you doing back there sweetheart?"

The next thing that I remember was a big loud sound and a strong impact. I really don't know how I got there because I blanked out completely. But, when I woke up I was in the hospital with my best friend's mom and my mom's closest friend. From there on out, I don't remember much until they told me I had to be put into a foster home. I didn't know what it was, I thought I was going to Disneyland or something.

The reason Riley seems to not feel much pain about her parent's death is because she never had a strong bond with them since she was so young.

I recommend that you say what happens it sounds weird.

The way you say what they said is very confusing.

The correct one "Their"

No "Their" means like something

Yeah, is correct.

Strong impact

https://www./ c -foster-care-

Fig. 11.3 Peer conversations on digital narrative color-coded for sources

ffective filter that would typically discourage verbal communication in whole class discussions. Since the author shared the document with only trusted peers, the participants felt freer to respond without judgment.

All this allowed the authors to get the necessary feedback to improve their written communication. Safe environments have become a necessary consideration in today's classroom. That students with different backgrounds and experiences need to feel safe and accepted is now a reality understood and accepted by many. Safe spaces are necessary for students to take risks and express their most personal ideas and feelings without fear of judgment or harm. Storytelling is personal, and the peer feedback to these stories is an element that many students have clearly enjoyed as a means of giving and receiving validation and encouragement.

The digital process also made it clear which articles were chosen by the students, which articles were chosen by myself, and which parts of their narratives were derived from their own imaginations. This made them aware of their own ability to create and opened a door into their writing process. During the conversations over the stories, an awareness grew among many students that other students shared their interests, as well as their concerns and fears. Students also discovered that, while others may write about the same topic or concern, their understanding may be different. An appreciation for differences as well as similarities blossomed.



General student writing performance also improved. Length of narratives improved. Use of content vocabulary improved. Use of writing strategies improved. Student engagement and constructive conversations flowered and transformed what would most likely have been a dry, academic exercise (see Fig. 11.4).

Raj (2019) explains that “storying is the concept of making stories your own through telling it from your own unique perspective, positionality and cultural historical being” (p. 7). Not only were my students telling stories and discussing them with their colleagues, but they were invested in their stories, tying together research founded from their own interests to strengthen and illuminate storying based on their own need to express ideas and feelings.

These experiences built a vehicle from which meaningful conversations and interpersonal social development could flourish. The engagement that was generated from students telling their stories to each other fostered a communal building of personal identities. While it is a “quest that an authentic storyteller must go on to build connections with *who* they are, *how they came to be*, and *why* they came to be” (Raj, 2019, p. 6), it is the storying together with others that validates this crucial process of personal growth.

The screenshot displays a digital narrative interface. On the left, a student's text is shown with several paragraphs. On the right, a list of peer comments is visible, each linked to a specific part of the text. The text and comments are as follows:

**Text:**

→ "Noah what about you?"

→ "I don't know why you ask the same question every day if nothing different or exciting happens around here."

→ After Noah made that comment, everyone just sat and ate in silence it was pretty awkward if I say so myself. Then, everyone left one by one. I kind of felt bad for Martha because she takes care of three kids that aren't even her own kids and we still treat her like that. I also thought that she would probably have to take some time off from fostering. But, I just brushed that feeling off and I walked upstairs to my room. I decided to lay down on the carpet in my room and look up to the ceiling, because I had nothing better to do. While I was looking up, something caught my attention, the window. When I looked at the window I remembered all the times I tried to escape the different foster homes. I haven't tried to escape for a while because every time I tried, I was always found and brought back home. They also kept on moving me from place to place because no one was able to handle my behavior and no one was able to keep me put. But to be fair, I mostly used to act out because my foster parents just happened to be people who didn't really listen. They also didn't exactly care about what we had to say. I had a sudden urge to be free. So, I climbed out that window and I ran as fast as I could with no care in the world. I was certain that I would get caught as I always have, but just that feeling of running cool air, feeling as if no one could stop me was worth it.

No one has come looking for me yet and I thought that I might actually have a chance of successfully escaping. So, I decided to actually try and hide some place where they wouldn't find me. I thought about going to my best friend Ava's house but everyone knows that I am so close to her and her family so that would be the first place they would go looking for me. Then, I just began to wander around the streets looking for a good hiding spot.

**Comments:**

- <https://www.-foster-care-ai>  
This article gave me the idea for this part because Noah has behavior issues and this results in attitude
- <https://e/foster/>  
2 comments
- no need for comma.
- 3 comments
- <https://foster-care-problems/>
- <https://foster-care-problems/>  
This article gave me the idea for Riley to escape the foster home.
- 3 comments
- Change this to "to" instead of with

Fig. 11.4 Peer conversations on digital narrative

## CONCLUSION

The development I experienced during these years would not have happened had I not learned to build a strong awareness of student need and interest during classroom interactions. Recognizing and capitalizing on these led to my most important instructional breakthroughs as a teacher.

I learned that students themselves are the source of effective strategies and approaches and that teachers must develop a natural and reflexive ability to integrate their observations of students into appropriate planning. Accordingly, teachers should become experts in writing their own pedagogy. This will prepare them to modify instruction as needed to better teach their students. Improvements and advances in my praxis all came from interaction from the students. The solutions come from reflection upon these interactions, from inside the classroom, not from without.

The solutions derived from the students always involved the need to tell stories. Storying, verbal or written, is the ability to reason, to connect to ourselves and others, to hear our voices and the voices of others, and to understand how we connect to our world. Storytelling can reveal a lot about us as human beings and can also be a foundational purpose for students to discover a love for writing.

In my first years of teaching, I had no respect for, or awareness of, the importance of storytelling. I saw it as an artifact of the primary grades with no real use past a certain age. I planned instruction without considering the students' preferred modes of communication, social interaction, or interests. But my personal journey showed me that storying is a part of being human at all stages of our lives; an instinctive, intuitive, and natural form of communicating, recording, and narrating who we are and how we came to be. Storytelling is at once cultural, social, innate, unconscious, collaborative, and subjective.

Along with these realizations, I also saw that the typical literacy programs usually fall far short of addressing the challenges of teaching writing. Nor do they engage by themselves. A teacher needs to adapt and create. There must be a balance between the requirement of institutions and the agency of an experienced teacher with their students' well-being foremost in mind.

My experiences led me to believe that teachers should make far more use of narrative in their instruction throughout the curriculum. Especially for secondary school students, the Common Core and recent nationalized assessments (and the corresponding literacy programs that are ostensibly

designed to prepare students for these tests) put a high value on writing applications such as informational reports and argumentative writing that respond to mostly nonfiction texts. While important, these applications do not easily invite personal expression about topics of interest. Rather, they deemphasize the study and development of personal narrative—storying. From studies of standards and their related curricular programs, Shanahan (2015) explains that “the emphasis of these standards is definitely on public writing—the writing of the academy and the work-place—rather than on the more personal or private forms that have dominated writing lessons in recent times” (p. 471).

It is teacher’s role to grow into a reflexive practitioner, transforming their instructional praxis. When a teacher becomes reflexive, they respond to the data students provide by using it routinely in their planning to frame instructional approaches. Over time, this will result in a transformation of perspective that Mezirow (1991) described as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world” (p. 167). Teachers should focus on this perspective with respect to what students reveal about themselves.

Through the recounting of these episodes and reflections, I hope to share the development of an approach to the teaching of writing that can be learned from a respect for the social and emotional needs of students, careful observation of how and what students express, and what can be built from reflection on these observations, if one is willing to do the work.

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# Storying History in the Classroom

*Gustavo Lopez and Arturo Valdez*

## INTRODUCTION

As we are writing this, quarantined within our homes with every semblance of normalcy relegated to memory, circumstances have given us the opportunity to take a hard look at our practice. It has challenged us to rethink curriculum and pedagogy in order to rework them. In a time of such uncertainty, of such change, of such loss, much has been revealed about ourselves, our societies, and the way we live in them. Our circumstances compelled all of us to recognize what was important, what was valuable, what was essential. If you had toilet paper as one of those valuables, then you surely had a better understanding of the crucial resources that govern our very existence within our society. Regardless, what had become abundantly clear was just how essential our profession was. The profession of teaching.

But even the best of us can sometimes forget. We get so bogged down, so immersed and almost solely focused on the task that lies before us; the task of growing the minds of the youth of our society and preparing them

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G. Lopez (✉) • A. Valdez

Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, CA, USA

e-mail: [gustavo.lopez@lausd.net](mailto:gustavo.lopez@lausd.net); [arturo.valdez@lausd.net](mailto:arturo.valdez@lausd.net)

for the world they will embark into. As teachers, we still struggle to comprehend the potential impact our work has on the lives we touch. Sometimes we lose sight of how our work is acknowledged or appreciated by those we serve, often because we're not looking for it nor are we expecting it. However, when the youth remind us, it's unmistakable, always remarkable, and hard to forget.

This is one of those times we were reminded. It happened at a culminating ceremony of sorts—a graduation. A moment that is both a glorious ending to one chapter of life and a beautiful beginning, full of possibilities for many more chapters to come. The grass was warm, but the sun was forgiving as clouds between us stole its attention. As we stood on the football field, families had poured down from the stands to meet their kids and capture a beloved memory, we found ourselves completely surrounded. This is when the taking of photos began. Many of the photos taken are of students in their graduating attire, some are taken with friends, with family, but many, and boy do I mean many, are taken with us, their teachers. As we moved quickly from photo to photo laughing more and more with every flash of the camera, one of our best students approached.

“Me next, mister!” she exclaimed with her family following closely behind.

“Five bucks,” we responded jokingly as we held our hands out.

“You see!” she explained to her family as she burst out laughing. She walked over and stood between us as her family crowded around to snap photos.

After taking a few photos, a voice called out to us from the back of her family's group.

“Mister!” they yelled. Did we mention most of our students call us mister? But we digress.

A young couple in their early 20s emerged from the family crowd. Their faces were familiar. As our faces surely depicted that we were struggling to sift through the many names and faces stored within our memory banks, they asked, “Do you remember us? We had you for History.”

Finally, a match was made in our heads. They were both former students that we had taught long before!

“Whoa! Oh my gosh! What are you doing here?” we asked.

“I'm here for my cousin,” the young man responded.

“Who? Her?” we questioned as we pointed to the student we had just taken photos with.

“Yes,” they replied.

“I can’t believe you never told us you were related to them!” we playfully shouted toward our current student.

“How are you guys doing?” we asked our former students.

“Great! Finishing up school and working part time,” they explained.

As we conversed with the couple, we couldn’t help but notice a newborn in their arms.

“Hey, wait. Who’s this guy?” we asked.

“Yes, mister,” the young woman replied.

“We wanted you to meet our son,” the young man added.

“Holy Moses!” one of us yelled, I can’t quite remember who, while the other added, “He’s so beautiful!”

“What’s his name?” we asked.

“Leonidas,” they said almost simultaneously.

“Leonidas!” we exclaimed, “Like the famous Greek king of the Spartans!”

“Yeah,” the young man responded, “from the story you told in class, the brave one who led them into battle, protecting democracy. That was my favorite story, mister.”

The story to which he was referring to was one that we had told in our classes often. It was one that depicted the origins of Greek democracy and told of the struggle and sacrifice made by a people who desired to live free. In the telling of this story, we transported ourselves to an ancient civilization. We cast our psephos (voting pebbles) or erasers like Cleisthenes and the Athenians. We howled and raised our spears or rulers as King Leonidas and the Spartans did as they stood before the enormity of the Persian army to defend their sovereignty and their way of life. It’s one of the many stories that we tell in our classes, storytelling that we wish to elaborate on here. But back to our former students on the football field full of celebrating students.

Needless to say, we were absolutely stunned, nay flabbergasted, to think that our work, our teaching, created a moment so moving, a memory so treasured that it influenced the naming of our former student’s child. “Did you really name him Leonidas because of the story?” we asked, in disbelief. Before the young man could answer, the young woman replied, “Oh yes he did, cause I had to hear all about it when we were deciding!”

“Yup,” the young man confirmed, “your classes were my favorite, I wish I never had to stop taking it. You guys were the best teachers I ever had.”

We had always taught with the goal of making the content of our subject matter meaningful to our students both in school and in their lives outside of school. To make real connections with our students through learning experiences and relationships built over time. While this is not exactly how we imagined the impacts of our teaching manifesting itself, it was nevertheless revealing. It revealed how deep of an impression, of an impact we could have on the lives of our students, if our work was done in a manner that surpassed their often fatigued expectations of school learning. It revealed how long our work can endure, how cherished and beloved it could become if we somehow made our work memorable. It revealed the power of story in the classroom and how effective it can be to communicate, connect, engage, and inform our students.

Our names are Gustavo Lopez and Arturo Valdez. We are both middle school history teachers greatly interested in improving secondary school history curriculum and instruction. Among the many pedagogical tools we have examined, implemented, and reflected upon, the use of story and storying in the history classroom have been very effective. We believe these pedagogical tools have the power to excite, connect, bridge, and even heal people.

## HISTORY AND PEDAGOGY

A critical examination of history curriculum and pedagogy reveals ample opportunities for educators to include story and their students' voices through the use of storying. The act of using story and storying as pedagogical tools in the discipline of Social Science may lead to greater student engagement and mastery of historical content and skills. In addition, perhaps most importantly, it will give students not only a greater sense of belonging in their immediate Social Science classroom but also a sense of being part of the ongoing narrative that is the story of humanity.

In our minds, history and story go together like peas and carrots. Story did the job of history long before its discipline and methods were developed. Then, as the discipline was created, it served as one of its crucial elements. This connection between History and story goes all the way back to the father of the historical discipline. Enter Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the Athenian historian who wrote what is considered the first historical work from which the modern historical discipline stems. Were there others that preceded him which most likely contributed to the approach employed by Herodotus? The answer is almost definitely yes,



but since their work did not survive, it's Herodotus' work that remained to guide us. His work begins by stating the purpose of his approach which is in fact the safeguarding of people's lives and legacies. He begins by stating:

Here are presented the results of the inquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks. (Herodotus et al., 2014, p. 1)

This is his attempt to prevent the loss of man's acts in time, which he would call *The Histories*. The work of Herodotus is largely notable for its movement away from the use of the supernatural to explain historical events. As Herodotus himself tells us, he simply wrote, "What he has seen and what he has been told" (Murray et al., 1986, p. 163). The gods have no say in his version of history. The foundation of his historical work was oral history, believing it to be the manifestation of living history. Herodotus rarely used written documentary sources as he perceived them to be lacking and perhaps more importantly, limiting in his research as the Greek language was the only language he had command of.

Herodotus' approach to history can essentially be watered down to two simple steps. The first is the gathering of stories. Herodotus was a traveler who gathered stories throughout Greece, the Mediterranean, North Africa, Egypt, and parts of the Middle East. It is also significant to note that when Herodotus recorded these stories, he made an effort not just to record them as they were told but within the cultural context within which they were created as well. He often paired research on the cultural customs and beliefs with the accounts he gathered. This approach that embraced and accepted other cultures was one he was greatly criticized for and one that was often discarded as the discipline of history evolved (Murray et al., 1986, pp. 162–163).

The second step was the reporting of a story or stories or "logos" to use the Greek term. Reporting history in the form of a story preserved the essence of the oral histories which he compiled and made history discernable and relatable to the people. Herodotus believed that fact alone did not do justice to history. History needed a story because "a story has a shape, a purpose: it is not an isolated fact preserved for its own sake; it may be true, but it must be interesting" (Murray et al., 1986, p. 164). Although

his process was far from systematic, his approach took the first crucial steps that would lead to the construction of a system of inquiry, steps that the discipline of history has employed but has also walked away from. The latter of which we argue to be problematic and one of the things that drives our approach to teaching history.

But Herodotus did not have all the answers. In fact, the methodology of history practiced today would be attributed less to the work of Herodotus and more to the work of his contemporary, Thucydides. Herodotus may be considered the father of the historical tradition but he clearly didn't provide all the tools necessary to develop a system of methodical inquiry. Enter Thucydides, a self-proclaimed rival and eager critic of Herodotus.

Thucydides' approach provided some of the core tenants of the historical methodology still in use today, the first being the identification of the value of recording history contemporaneously. He believed that the only way to provide an accurate historical account was to have it derived from sources that lived to experience the historical moment in question. He believed this so much that, oddly enough, he believed it was impossible to accurately write about the past that you did not experience (Murray et al., 1986, pp. 166–167). Clearly this is not the case, and while contemporaneous accounts of history are of great value, they are not without limitation. An overemphasis on the use of contemporaneous sources also ignores the value of cultural knowledge passed down through oral tradition, a value which we happen to be focusing on here.

The second major contribution made by Thucydides was the emphasis on the use of multiple sources. No single account of a witness or primary source is sufficient enough to provide the full scope of what transpired in any given event or time period. The fullest or clearest picture of what is at the focus of a historical investigation is mined out of an analysis of multiple accounts (Murray et al., 1986, p. 166). Analyzing the accounts and information provided from multiple sources, even when the accounts were conflicting, was what Thucydides found to be the key to making historical conclusions. It is this contribution that creates the critical study of History, culminating in the birth of the historical tradition from which the modern academic discipline is rooted, the western historical tradition that is. And therein lies the problem.

If we as teachers of history are to invite students to study the past, the past of our people, our culture, our nation, and of those of people throughout the world through the discipline of history, we must acknowledge its

flaws and limitations. Without doing so, risks committing a great disservice to our students and to the study of history itself.

As the discipline of history within the social sciences is rooted in the western tradition, it makes the discipline of history to be somewhat exclusionary. The study of history is an imperfect one specifically because the western tradition isn't everyone's tradition. This comes from the very application of science itself as the study of science is rooted in western culture.

Since the dawn of the scientific revolution, the application of scientific methods has spread to almost all disciplines. It has led to any knowledge being required to achieve a sort of certification through rigorous critical analysis and questioning in order to be recognized and valued within the academic community of any discipline (Bristow, 2017). But when the knowledge and methods used to scrutinize knowledge are centered in the cultural understandings and traditions of a specific culture, naturally knowledge drawn from outside this culture struggles to find its value and merit recognized (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). This is because the cultural understandings needed to grasp its value and the context from which that value is often derived are absent. In this absence the knowledge, cultural understandings, and historical traditions of non-western cultures have been left invalidated. We have seen this throughout history and throughout the world. Even within western culture, the culture had long excluded its own with the knowledge and skills necessary to partake in the practice of establishing knowledge being only accessible to the educated, the upper class, the men, the privileged (Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

In order to address this ostracizing flaw, the very least that we as teachers of history can do is create a space for story, and all of the rich oral traditions that come with it, within our discipline. In doing this we are returning to the approach of Herodotus that embraces historical accounts from all cultures and recognizes the cultural contexts within which they were created. By inviting story into the teaching of history we can begin to recognize the value and knowledge offered by histories recorded in story. We can begin to see these histories based in the tradition of story as just another one of the multiple sources to be recognized, giving it a place within our historical discourse. If the traditions of oral history and the telling of stories are practiced and embraced by cultures throughout the world, across classes, then by inviting story into the historical discourse and into the teaching of history we are also welcoming those marginalized classes and cultures (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). And by giving voice to

these marginalized classes and cultures we can create an avenue to allow our students to voice their story no matter the cultures and classes they come from.

### STORY AND STORYING IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

We would like to share with you our experiences using story and storying in the classroom through a series of observations, reflections, and informal interviews we conducted of each other. We will share what we've observed, what we've learned, and what we've built with the use of story and storying, breathing new life into our teaching and into the learning of our students.

**Valdez:** One of your many approaches to teaching history, one of the pedagogies in your tool belt that you were already using by the time I met you was the use of telling stories. Something you simply call "storytime." What is "storytime?"

**Lopez:** It's the telling of a short history story that employs simple theatrical elements like playing with pitch of voice, facial and hand gestures as well as the simplest of props. The stories are usually no longer than 15 minutes long and there is typically one story per unit which equates to about 10 stories per school year. The stories are drawn from primary sources as much as possible and if not, then from reputable secondary sources. While the short history story is researched, prepared and told by the teacher, it usually invites student participation in the telling of the story. The collective act of telling a story not only helps develop social listening skills but also contributes to the further development of a positive classroom environment. Having a story unfold collectively leads to the building of trust among all the participants which is foundational for all positive relationships.

The stories are usually introductory in nature but can be used strategically to promote inquiry and challenge critical thinking. While on one hand, they aim to make difficult concepts and/or ideas more understandable and relatable. On the other hand, they're not meant to be definitive or conclusive when it comes to how historical events are remembered. This is largely because the story presented by the teacher is seen as another source to be analyzed within the historical discourse. The objective is to generate student excitement, engagement, curiosity, and a desire to further investigate the topic at hand and engage in an inquiry or offer

resolution to a historical dispute. Think of the story as the tip of a spear. Beyond it, students conclude the story through a historical investigation.

But within the process of telling or performing the story it becomes so much more. It becomes storying. Story is the language in which we present the history, and storying is the process in which we share that story. We understand storying to be a process focused on the making of meaning through stories (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Storying “claims voice in the silenced margins; ... is embodied relational meaning making; ... intersects the past and the present as living oral archives; and ... enacts collective ownership” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 43). The drawing of our stories from historical documents grounds the “knowing” of the teacher and establishes a connection to the past and to the lives, positions, and experiences we share with our students within these stories (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). As the teacher tells the story they embody the words of the historical documents, they embody the historical context, and they embody history. The telling of stories in this way becomes the continuation of the oral tradition that Herodotus so highly prized so long ago, bringing new life to the past.

The very recognition of the teacher as an oral source creates a space for story and oral historical traditions within the historical discourse. This process creates a connection between the past and the teachers and students of the present. Through this connection we, the teachers and students, are allowed to make new meaning. The process of storying, often being quite reflexive, also opens opportunities to access and share authentic emotional truths through the sharing of one’s own stories (Raj, 2019). The ability to voice our stories and experience the stories of others offers a greater sense of self. The sharing of these stories always being a collective process relinquishes ownership of these stories, making authors of all involved in this process.

**Valdez:** Where in the world did the idea of literally telling students stories in the History classroom come from?

**Lopez:** Necessity. That’s the short answer. I was responding to what I thought was an important need in an earlier time period in my teaching career. I would not have incorporated this strategy if it wasn’t for this fact. My rationale for telling stories and the way I tell stories and use stories in the history classroom has evolved over time and as it did so did the practice evolve to eventually include my students’ stories into the historical discourse.

I first started toying with this pedagogical tool of telling history stories in my first year of teaching middle school, which was also my fifth year of teaching Social Science. My first four years were spent teaching high school. I had every intention of spending my entire teaching career as a high school teacher. Embarrassed by it now I actually used to cringe at the idea of teaching middle school, but like with so many educators, I too was displaced by the reduction in force resulting from the economic recession that started in late 2008. One of the few places that could actually hire me was a middle school that could bypass seniority union rules. I accepted the position which consisted of six sections of eighth grade U.S. History. The average class size was hovering around 40 students and because of the school's block schedule, I would only see my students every other day for 84 minutes. In comparison to a more traditional 52- or 54-minute period, I would see my students roughly a third less time on average.

Back then, we had the California Standards Test (CSTs) which were administered toward the end of the school year. Although I repeatedly heard and was told that test scores didn't matter, a whole lot of fuss was made about test scores. School administrators would compare how different departments fared and make judgments about an individual teacher's performance based on these test scores. In fact, at the interview for this middle school teaching position, I was asked to bring my test scores which I complied with. I knew that despite the rhetoric that deemphasized testing, schools gave a lot of credence to these test results.

As much as I would like to say that I didn't care about these test results because what they really reflected, according to research, is a student's economic and social background. As a person of color teaching in a predominantly low-income school composed of children of color, I could not help escape falling into the trap of minding these tests to some extent.

The Social Science CSTs more than anything covered content, essentially measuring how much students could recall content covered throughout the year. As a result, I was laser focused on covering the content standards set out by the state. As someone who had just been hired to teach eighth grade U.S. History, I started drawing up my curriculum by reviewing the state's standards for this grade level. To my utter surprise, eighth grade Social Science students did not only test for eighth grade content but also seventh and sixth grade content. Regardless of how much or little a student had learned in those lower grades, eighth grade teachers were ultimately seen as responsible for what was really a three-year cumulative test.

In other words, for better or for worse, an eighth grade Social Science teacher was seen as responsible for the results of three years' worth of Social Science instruction. When this first became clear to me, I was nervous. Later, I administered pre-assessments to inform me how much my eighth grade students had learned or could recall from seventh and sixth grade history. I did so in order to draw up plans on how I would review two years' worth of instruction, in addition to covering new eighth grade content. The results revealed that either my students had not been taught the content or had completely forgotten what they had previously been taught. I was utterly mortified.

Also, there was the fact that as much as I did pay attention to the content standards, I really did want to use meaningful instructional practices. I really love history and hated the idea of reducing it to mere recall of content. My instruction early on was driven by the use of primary documents with an inquiry-based approach where students make sense of the past by analyzing historical documents. This resulted in either verbal presentations like debates, symposiums, socratic seminars or a writing assignment like an essay, historical fiction or short historical reflective writing piece. The weight, however, of the CSTs drove me to consider how I could quickly and efficiently deliver historical content to my students that they would then be able to recall on a multiple choice quiz or test.

The first major decision I made was to proceed with eighth grade history material in what I know are theory-based, best practices. That is, I would not be focused on the simple recall of content for eighth grade material. Instead, I would be driven by pedagogy and practices predicated on everything I knew was wonderful about the study of history along with trying to teach the whole child and raise their critical consciousness. This would be how the majority of time would be spent in our classroom.

The second major decision was to spend the first semester covering sixth grade content while the second semester would be focused on covering seventh grade content while simultaneously covering eighth grade material throughout the whole school year. Since the period consisted of 84 minutes, I decided that the 60 minutes would be eighth grade material and the remaining 24 minutes would be covering the earlier grade level content.

Third, I decided I would assess my students' learning once a week to see whether they were learning the content I was covering and how to best proceed. I must admit that I felt lost at the prospect of covering so much material in so little time. I distinctly remember nearly breaking down

thinking it was impossible to do. Nevertheless, I somehow convinced myself that I would figure it out or at least give it a good try.

To deliver the content quickly, I tried a variety of different strategies that included various reading strategies, games, short video and audio clips, student cooperative learning techniques, as well as classroom gallery walks and peer teaching. While the weekly quizzes and tests did show my students retaining some of the content, the results were far from where I thought they should be. I also turned to short lectures and this resulted in a slight improvement, but after a few lectures, my students started to complain about having to take so many notes.

Also, for as long as I have been in the classroom, the use of lecturing has been perceived as an antiquated, teacher centric approach that if used, should be used as sparingly as possible. So when I did lecture, it was with a lot of trepidation. I also tried a combination of all these approaches in an attempt not to bore my students along with trying to find a successful combination.

This process was so taxing and stressful that I literally ended up in the emergency room thinking I was having heart failure. The attending physician told me that the electrocardiogram indicated nothing was wrong with me physically and that while more tests would be run on me including blood work, more likely than not, I simply seemed like I was under a great deal of stress resulting in a lot of anxiety.

While I managed to control my stress levels and anxieties, I still worked on trying to figure out how to best deliver large amounts of historical content to my students quickly and efficiently. It then occurred to me that as a high school teacher, I had seen a tremendous difference in student reaction from one year to another when we went from learning about the tragedy of Emmett Till through a reading to me recounting the episode as a story. I remember that first year when I covered Emmett Till through a reading, I had sensed that my students didn't fully grapple with the gravity of what we had just read. The reading was meant as an entry point on the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. While the reading covered the events well enough, it failed to convey the urgency of the human tragedy and societal failure.

The following year, I decided that instead of having my students do the same reading or even a different reading, I would present this tragedy not as a reading or as a lecture but as a story that I would tell my students. While everything that I described in the story was age appropriate (this was to my eleventh grade U.S. History students), the impact was palpable



and profound. After the telling of this story to five different U.S. History classes, a change in my students and class culture was evident. I had touched a nerve like I never had before and my students repeatedly let me know afterwards how much this story had changed the way they viewed history and the importance of history. It was also the only real time that as a high school teacher I had told a story not simply presented information or historical context to better understand a primary document. I used story to make sense of a larger historical time period, to make meaning of another's position, to make understanding of another's lived experience. It was with this added intention that it became storying.

It occurred to me then, what if along with the strategies I was already trying, I tried incorporating the telling of some of the historical contents as stories. I did and the reception by my eighth grade students was beyond anything that I could have possibly imagined. Engagement soared and there was an air of excitement that simply wasn't there before. Coupled with this were the weekly test results that immediately demonstrated improvement across the board. According to the results, my special education students and English Language Learners (ELL) also seemed to get a lot out of these stories. It was then that I realized the impact that short little stories could have with connecting with students. From there, I began to play with this idea of conveying historical content through the telling of short stories which ended up being called storytime. The name of this approach actually came from the students. I remember students in different classes started to refer to this practice as "storytime."

"Mr. Lopez, are we going to have storytime today?" Almost every single time that I answered yes, it was followed by a "yay!" Shortly thereafter it became, "Can we please have storytime today?"

**Valdez:** It's interesting to hear the teacher's perspective on how a practice came to be. It wasn't a decision made out of luxury but from the need to get through a lot of content quickly and have students actually retain that content. But I also think there is a good reason for why it works. There's something about the telling of stories that allows students to connect with the teacher in a unique manner. This in turn allows them not only to feel connected with what we're learning, what we're discussing and what we're analyzing but also to feel connected in a uniquely human way that other methods or modes don't usually do. It's because the use of stories, as well as storying, are really fundamental to what it is to be human (Gottschall, 2013). In fact, it may have been one of the earliest human cultural behaviors (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Communicating through stories is one of the most common ways that we connect with each other, share things, express things, and of course learn. This was true early in the history of humanity and it is true in humanities today. In our current world, we are surrounded by story, both with oral and with communal traditions, as it was in the past and with art, literature, cinema, television, and practically every aspect of modern media. From family histories to gossip to teen novels to movies, story is the language we all speak. It is a kind of universal language and so it is particularly effective at reaching all of our students because it permeates any kind of communication or language barriers.

I often think of how our use of story is often what opens our ability to connect with our English Language Learners (ELL) both on a personal level and with the content. Where they might struggle to comprehend and understand content from within a dense textbook, or historical excerpts written in language that is either dated or far above their own developing reading comprehension levels, students thrive when absorbing content through story. I often see students, and particularly ELL students, making sense of what they read in historical documents by calling back to or making connections to the story that was previously told. They do this by either corroborating evidence or recognizing similarities and differences made in the arguments presented in both accounts. Story renders the privilege of language command null and makes the knowledge of history accessible. History shouldn't just be for readers. Consequently, the use of story thus makes the teaching of history much more effective and expedient.

And then there is an element of entertainment which we don't usually associate with learning and perhaps we should reconsider this. Why not? Why can't it be fun? More natural and akin to the way we learn outside of the classroom as we explore the world as children through a creative and fun experience. This pedagogical tool can be used the way all great stories have been used to garner interest in a topic, place, people, person, event, or even ideas. Whether it's to create suspense, excitement, or mystery, or as we employ it in our classroom to leave students with questions that need further exploring, thinking about, and analyzing. In addition, anything being either taught, shared, or expressed through story all of a sudden becomes that much more attractive. The experience of connection made as the story unfolds opens students up to further learning and inquiry. The experience in many ways is an invitation to be part of the discourse at hand.

**Lopez:** Yes, and it wasn't an approach that I had come across in my credential program or learned about through one of the many Social Science professional developments that I have participated in. It wasn't even read about in my search to further incorporate best teaching practices.

**Valdez:** But now let's be honest here, it's one thing to tell a story, and it's an entirely different thing to perform a story. Your storytime definitely has a performance element to it. How did that aspect come about?

**Lopez:** The performance element arose rather quickly once I had determined to tell stories, but at first it was unplanned and then it became thoughtful and methodical. I remember the difference there was between telling a story and incorporating a performance element to telling that same story when I was covering the rise of Alexander the Great and the spread of Greek culture. The more I played with the pitch of my voice to lend greater emphasis to a certain aspect of the story or to create suspense or made greater use of facial expressions as well as hand gestures, the more I held my students' attention. Whereas before, whenever I would be presenting information, my students rarely looked at me. They now followed me with their gaze even turning around their bodies to keep eyes on me as I moved around the classroom. The more I incorporated a performance element, the more my students positively reacted to the stories I was sharing.

It would not be long before my students wanted to actively participate in the telling of the stories. This was great. Rather than simply connecting by listening, my students started to verbally and physically be part of the stories being told. It started out very naturally and organic before I started to methodically think of how I could include them in the stories. The stories became an active group participation activity. In some instances, students acted as a chorus or as historical characters. For example, when telling the story of the major causes of the American Revolution, students chant with little prompting, "Without representation!" after I say, "No taxation!" It doesn't take much at that point to get all of my students to stand up and continue the chant as they put their fists up in the air. As easy as it is to get whole class participation, a few hand gestures indicating to sit down and stop the chanting is all it takes to move on.

**Valdez:** How did the use of props or "imaginary" props become part of the performance?

**Lopez:** I was going to be teaching about Hammurabi's code, which is 6th grade content, and I remember I had an excerpt from the document from the code that had to do with building codes and an "eye for an eye"

type of punishment. So, I came up with this story where I embody the role of a builder and my students, the residents. The premise revolved around the building falling on the residents, where I'm liable or responsible. And as I'm telling this, there were books, textbooks. I just started stacking the textbooks as I'm telling this story. They probably had no idea what I was doing with the books. They might have not even been paying attention to the fact that I was stacking up books until all of a sudden I start telling them, "these are your books and this, this is your house." And all of a sudden they're paying attention to the books not just as a prop, but as this house. I start to get them to see something as something completely different. "You've hired this person to construct this beautiful home," I say. I start to point at the stack of textbooks calling out imaginary features. Then, I start to bring my students into the scenario by asking them to tell me what other features the home possesses. They respond and say things like "a third story" and "a garage."

As they start to do this, I start to gesture to the students around me to start handing me books, to help me build the "home." I continue by telling them that this is where they're going to live with their families, that they're paying very good money to a builder to build them this home. That this home is going to be a sturdy home and it's going to be a fine home. And then ... BOOM!

"It was an earthquake!" I yell as I shake the table.

The books collapse and I have them. They've completely imagined this scenario and are fully engaged in whatever is about to happen next.

I react in shock, "oh my goodness the home! It has collapsed! Where's all of our stuff?" I ask.

"Where's, dare I say ..." I stop mid-sentence and turn and ask one of the students near me what the name of their dog was.

The student replied excitedly, "Chuchis!"

Then, I ask again with a trembling fear in my voice, "Where's Chuchis?" as I look at the pile of books.

The class gasped, and I screamed, "No! Chuchis No! Not my Chuchis!"

The class was then suddenly filled with giggles.

"Who's responsible for this?" I say with a slight tone of anger.

"Chuchis as it turns out," I say, "was safe after all. But it's not too hard to imagine what could have happened."

From there we begin to think about legal consequences and dive into Hammurabi's code and it just clicks. The students are engaged and the story becomes a fictional example that we can refer back to. From there I

start to think, *okay, so this is working, and this can't be accidental. This has to be a whole lot more methodical. This has to be really thought out.* Then I started thinking about props.

**Valdez:** Wow, so something as simple as a textbook huh? I love how the use of props can create opportunities and moments to connect with your students. When you ask them to grab the book, you're suddenly pulling them into that performance. You're not asking them to do too much, but they're a part of this process. And when you get that name of the student's dog, you're getting a piece of their life that you are then injecting into the process. It creates this opening to share a piece of our lives with each other, with the other kids that are listening. You're creating memories too because that moment is not only something they're not going to forget on their tests, but it's going to be something they remember on a grassy field at a graduation. If we have this ability to harness story, to create many of these memories or moments in our classroom, and have our content and intended understandings attached to them, then the content can ride these memories into their brains. If we can do that, then we'll have some real magic.

There's also something quite endearing to our students about the low budget affair that is the way we use props. It's silly when textbooks stand for buildings or when we use practical effects such as placing a water bottle in front of the projector lamp to blur an image to make it seem as if we were trying to see through water or through a dense jungle. They respect the effort and the risks we take in the classroom so that our dedication to the class is never in doubt. The fact that we are willing to let them see us regularly take risks with them, they're all of a sudden a lot more comfortable to express something, a thought or an opinion.

**Lopez:** Absolutely. Since then I quickly realized that if I was referring to a historical document and I held up a piece of paper, students' gaze would be fixed on the piece of paper, now acting as the document I was referring to in the story. In the same story recounting the causes of the American Revolution, I use a few boxes with the word "tea" written on them to dramatize the tossing of tea into Boston Harbor. I point to an open space in the classroom that I suggest is Boston Harbor and get several students now acting as protesting colonists to reenact the Boston Tea Party with me. All eyes are fixed on the tossing of these boxes as a protest to British taxation. I might also turn off the classroom light to indicate that the story takes place at night or play music to set a tone. Student

inclusion and the use of simple props helped to further animate and dramatize the stories being shared.

I have been careful, however, and sensitive not to include students in stories that are particularly sensitive or deal with difficult topics. The last thing we would want is to be offensive, belittling, or disrespectful. For example, I would never include my students in a recounting of events like slavery or the Holocaust. One has to be judicious and use good judgment.

**Valdez:** I totally agree. Using props definitely creates a path for student participation. And the more students participate the more authorship they begin to take in the collective process of storying. But sometimes this participation is spontaneous. As this is a collective process, we can't expect everything to go as we, the individuals, have planned. The stories we tell are impacted by how we as human beings are feeling in that moment, or perhaps influenced by what's happening in current events. It's going to be impacted by the knowledge and experiences that our students possess. This is part of what makes this a shared experience. As we share this experience with our students, they can inevitably shape the way stories are told.

In teaching seventh grade, the civilization of Rome is covered. Most particularly, the transition from the Roman Republic to the Imperial Era. There was a story I told about Julius Caesar. The story revolves around his rise to power to the bloody end of his assassination. While I'm telling this story, I had this idea that I was going to walk around the classroom as if I was Julius Caesar in the theater where he was assassinated and that all my students were the senator that awaited Caesar. Standing in the middle of the room I was completely surrounded by "senators." Around the room I walked and greeted each "senator" I locked eyes with.

"Senator Clarisa, Senator Michael, good to see you again!"

As I continued to greet senators with names that were coincidentally the same as my students, my students giggled. Until I came across a student who was deciding to interact with the story quite differently. This student had a ruler on his desk. And I assume that he had some kind of familiarity with the history of Caesar. Or maybe he hadn't.

He just kind of realized that I was getting to this moment because as I was acting this out, I was starting to act as if I had become scared of them, that they were starting to turn on me. The student holds out his ruler as if it was like a blade. And he had this devilish grin on his face as he sat in his chair.

I see him and I just roll with and respond, "Weapons? W-w-why would you bring weapons?"

The whole class is laughing because this kid is sitting in his chair with a ruler and I look terrified of him.

“But we’re friends!” I continued and it became part of the performance of the story.

Now to be clear, although the story of Caesar involves assassination, I am never asking my students to participate in the story by pretending to stab me with rulers. That would not be appropriate, would be ridiculous, and completely missing the point.

I don’t ever have to emphasize the death other than to say he was killed because the violence was not the focus of the story. The focus is always to transport them into that moment and focus on the human experience, which in this case was betrayal. A betrayal that led to a power struggle that would define the era of Roman Imperial rule and lead to the rise of the actual focus of that particular unit, Caesar Augustus. But ever since, that single performance had completely opened my eyes to the level of participation and agency the students have in interpreting and authoring the story within the process of storying.

I mentioned my students laughing in this story and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t happen often. What about the use of humor? How does it factor into these storytimes?

**Lopez:** If appropriate and the story lends itself to it, I do not shy away from the use of humor. In fact, I welcome it. This does not mean that I am trying to do standup or to get a laugh for the sake of a laugh. Rather, I use it as a device to keep the flow of a story going or to emphasize a point that I really want my students to retain. The humor, however, never makes fun of people, past or present, or cultures as that would be counterproductive and harmful to our students.

**Valdez:** I agree. Humor can be a powerfully captivating tool. If you can make someone laugh you have their ear. That is particularly valuable when in the classroom your audience isn’t always a willing one. Humor can in a sense disarm an audience and penetrate any barriers that they put up because humor entertains. If the students feel entertained it opens them up to what the teacher is offering, it opens them up to learning. But when using humor, how do you make sure that doesn’t make students go off topic?

**Lopez:** So I have to make expectations clear that when I’m using humor, it’s on purpose. I do want you to laugh and it is okay to laugh. I hope you get a laugh. Or sometimes these stories will be more of a sad nature, and it’s okay to feel sad. But what is not okay, is for you then to

start cracking your own jokes because it becomes disruptive of the process that we're co-creating here.

**Valdez:** So initially you were mainly using story as a tool to deliver historical content but that changed over time. What brought the initial change?

**Lopez:** The delivery of story evolved very quickly as I have already described. A few months after a school year had started, we were informed that the state was dropping the CSTs for history. I was elated and relieved and decided there was no longer a need to use story to deliver historical content. I informed my students that we would no longer continue to review sixth and seventh grade content and that we would solely be focused on eighth grade content.

In all of my classes, my students asked about "storytime." The use of story had not been a part of my eighth grade instructional practices and as a result, I informed my students that we would no longer have storytime either. They expressed their disappointment and I thought they would quickly forget the practice. Much to my surprise, as the weeks and months went by, my students continued to bring up storytime and how much they missed it.

I was convinced of the practice's ability to excite, engage and motivate students, but could it continue to serve a purpose beyond its original intent?

I asked myself, "What other purposes can storytime serve beyond a delivery tool of content?"

I started to imagine and design storytime as a historical topic introductory tool with the express purpose of sparking curiosity and engagement in historical inquiry. In this regard, storytime would no longer solely inform, but would spark student longing to continue investigating. This would be done by leaving off the story with a cliffhanger so to speak. This made their motivation to go digging into those documents so much higher because a lot of them imagined as if they were trying to solve a mystery.

The story I told would just be viewed as another source to be analyzed and run through the historical investigative process along with other accounts. This is particularly effective if you were going to leave it with a kind of "Who done it?" For example, if you're looking at the Boston massacre, you could tell a story of the build up to the massacre, ultimately finishing with the climactic event. They are now left with the task of having to figure out who shot first (which is another Stanford based lesson).



All storytimes would since then be designed with a question or a series of questions that students would ultimately answer using the historical process. Whereas before, I had told a story from beginning to end or from A through Z, I would now simply tell A and allow my students to conclude the story with the aid of their investigation.

**Valdez:** Using story in this way does a great job of promoting inquiry. Since I taught 7th grade content as well, I saw that it presented the possibility of many different ways to use story to challenge our students. I had to explore different topics, different cultures, and there were often a lot of different scenarios regarding the focus of potential document based investigations. I then thought that maybe I could use these stories to do different things. I started thinking about great stories in movies. How sometimes a story or a movie will kind of lead you into one direction then all of a sudden reach this point where everything gets turned on its head. And I thought, what a great way to use the story to lead them, or to make them think I'm leading them, in a direction when I know that the challenge that I'm going to place before them with the historical documents. If they are using the historical skills the way they should, they'll begin to question the story that I told as they eventually navigate those documents.

There's a lesson that I did about a historical figure. And in that telling of the story I, very purposefully, based the story on sources that built him up as this kind of larger than life and legendary figure. But through the investigation they're led to question, was that really who he was or was there some more complexity? Was there something else? Or was he not what he was presented to be in the story I told all together? Then I realized our stories are used as another secondary source that is just a part of the historical discourse to be questioned and critically analyzed in the same way another historian or textbook should be questioned and analyzed. Once I saw I could do that with story, I saw a multitude of different ways to challenge our students.

I thought this strategic use of story was really fascinating because it really tested a lot of our students. As they pointed their fingers at me and accused me of being a liar, I couldn't help but feel so satisfied. Satisfied that they overcame the challenge, by comparing evidence from multiple historical sources to the story I told, to discover flaws in the historical claims presented. Coming up with their own historical conclusions and questioning things, even if it's me, the person in the position of authority. And that is so powerful. And one of the main goals that all Social Science

teachers have for their students when you're trying to teach them to become critical thinkers.

By the time I get to a lesson, like the document-based lesson revolving around the meeting between the Aztecs and Cortez and the Spanish conquistadors, they are ready for the ultimate test. I consider the historical investigation of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire the ultimate test because they're dealing with historical sources and historical material that has come completely entrenched in bias and specifically controlled by one party involved to fit their particular narrative. This is a narrative that has been purposefully crafted to have the voices of the marginalized silenced. And so having them question these other things, having them question their own teachers and the historical account they present through story prepares them for the point where they have to question history itself. To then completely take the reins and control of historical understanding for themselves.

Let's discuss how storying brings life to historical documents. A lot of these documents that we use are super rich. But sometimes for some of our students, who only had 12 or 13 years of life experience, sometimes they struggle to imagine certain things or really see certain things the way we need them to see things for what they were. You know, in order to really have a full picture, which is kind of required to have a historical investigation. So I wanted to ask you, how does the use of the storying process bring these documents to life?

**Lopez** At their root, the stories seek to draw on human emotions and experiences. The goal is to make the history tangible, relatable and easy to imagine. When I use story to look at Christopher Columbus, my story starts by mirroring the textbook accounts. The textbooks talk about how Columbus went around asking for funds from different European royals and how he was searching for spices and silks. It explains the need to find a shortcut to Asia. But in my telling, I have a little wicker chest that I bring out, containing all the things that Columbus hopes to find. I bring out spices, including peppercorns. And we smell these and I have them imagine what this does to food. Then, I bring out a piece of silk, which is actually a shirt that I borrowed from my wife. And I let them in on the joke that, "Oh, my wife must be looking for this blouse. Don't tell her that it's here!" Cue the laughs.

But I say, "Imagine dressing in this fine silk."

Then I go around asking my students if they will fund this trip. And they know to say, "No, no, we will not."

I continue to ask students, “Oh, your majesty of the Italian state of Milan would you ...?”

“No, no, no!” the students replied. “We’re not going to follow you.”

“Oh, Your majesty from Norway would ...?”

“We said no!”

And then I finally arrive at a couple of students and I say, “Oh, you’re king Ferdinand and you’re queen Isabella. You’re so magnificent and so brilliant. You will fund my trip, right?”

“Yes, yes, we will fund your trip,” they reply quite nervously.

We create this story. And when I say create, we’re not fictionalizing this. This is very much aligned with the historical record, but how rich it is then for us to collectively embody these figures, to embody this history.

The story then moves on to the three ships with Columbus, *La Nina*, *La Pinta* and *La Santa Maria*. Once there, they were transported to the Atlantic Ocean in 1492. They are imagining that they are on these Spanish dailies as I yell in search of land from atop of a student’s desk.

And I, as Columbus, famously puts out a reward, “Whoever first sees land will be granted a year’s worth of wages!”

As I peer out of the classroom windows in search of land, I say, “Who? Who sees land?”

Eventually, one of them gets the subtle request for participation, that one of them has to spot land, and a student shouts, “Oh me! Me! I see it over there!”

The story ends with a careful selection of lines from the primary documents and I embed them in the story to bring to life the tragedy that Columbus brings to the Native Americans through his actions.

Something in the reading of a source, whether it’s primary or secondary, simply doesn’t do that for us. Not initially, but hopefully by bringing it to life through the process of storying. Then they will start imagining as they are reading the primary sources. This connection with the past, this understanding, this enthusiasm and engagement carries over to the analysis of historical documents.

**Valdez:** Yes, I believe that this is when storytelling is at its most powerful. It has the ability to transport our students into the historical context and have them imagine vivid lived experiences by those of the past (Benjamin & Arendt, 1999). Imagining people in stories is the first step to having them understood (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). This aspect of storying is particularly impactful when we address the tragedy and trauma of history.

History has never been easy to look at and I doubt it ever will. When history becomes tragic and horrifying is also when it becomes hardest to understand and make sense of. It is uncomfortable. It is a burden, and one that, for the sake of humanity, we cannot shy away from. It is our responsibility to those who lived these traumatic experiences of injustice to take on the burden of history. I think about how important it is to history teachers in the U.S. to teach about the tragedies of this nation's history no matter how controversial. "Either the classroom becomes a site where we learn to talk to one another, or we will suffer the enduring consequences of never having learned to do so" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 230).

The process of storying is the key to addressing these sensitive moments of history with appropriateness and respect. Giving voice to the lived experiences of slaves and their descendants, of Native Americans, of all those whose voices have been marginalized, and of those whose lives have been invalidated is the first step in resurrecting them in our cultural and historical conscience. As many of them have passed from this world and are silent partners in this collective process, we can ensure respect for their stories by using their words they left behind to tell them.

The process of storying can also create profound understanding and empathy through the imagining of these lived experiences and recognizing their humanity as they existed within them. This type of imagining is what is referred to as sympathetic imagination (Nussbaum, 1997). In order to reach a true sense of compassion and understanding, one must first recognize their own vulnerability by imagining that these lived experiences, filled with trauma and injustice, could have been our lived experiences (Nussbaum, 1997). Through this genuine understanding fostered by storying, we can begin to make sense of these historical traumas, recognize the positionalities of those who have left us these stories, and acknowledge the cultural historical contexts from which these stories originated and that we are now a part of.

For our students, storying brings power to all the words they read in these documents. After bearing witness to these traumatic lives, it is not surprising for them to feel emotional as they reside in their newfound compassion.

They reach out to me in their confusion, often asking me during class and outside of class, "Mister, I can't believe that someone would do something like that to a person."

They declare their bold recognition of these injustices they have observed. They pour their newfound passion into the history that they are now co-authors of, reaching out on a very human level to make sense of the impact of this history, both in the past and now in their present. But it isn't easy. That's when I remind them that the weight they feel is the weight of history, and it is heavy. But if we all start lifting it together, we just might raise ourselves up.

The use of story and storying empowers history and connects our students to it. But we have seen how it can impact our students beyond the history of the past. How did the focus of the use of story transition from history of the past to the stories of our students in the present?

**Lopez:** While sharing stories of the past through storying was surely a collective process, creating a space for the sharing of our students' stories was the natural progression of this communal bond we were creating. I began to wonder what our students could gain from recognizing their role and place in history. What they could learn about themselves through the sharing of their stories, as well as the stories of others that are derived from different experiences, positions, and cultures. Ultimately, in seeking to make our study of history evermore relevant, I started to wonder if the experiences of our students could help us make greater sense of historical events. While history is fundamentally a study of the past, it nevertheless helps to explain the contemporary. The discipline of history, at least in the western sense, has also more recently embraced the tradition of using oral histories. I started to give a lot of thought to what student experiences or stories could be incorporated and how they could be incorporated. Could they be incorporated as entry points to historical topics? Maybe they could be used as part of our content? Or perhaps students' stories could be used to make sense of historical skills and ways of thinking.

If we examine the past simply through the lens of historical guiding questions, such as what events led up to the Boston Massacre or how Christopher Columbus should be remembered, then it's a bit more complicated to include students' own experiences. This is because the historical lens is too time and space specific to be relevant to students' lives. If the questions are, however, more transcendental in nature, such as essential questions, then it's easier to find places where students' experiences can inform past events. Essential questions pull back from the specificity of a particular time and place. Therefore, it is more universal in the students' gaze. Consider essential questions such as why do people choose to leave their home countries, or what attracts people to immigrate to specific

places or countries or how have immigrants been treated? While the historical content might be based in a specific time and place, such as looking at immigration during colonial America or immigration during the Great Wave of Immigration between 1880 and 1920, the essential questions allow for students' personal experiences or those of their family members or community members to be made part of the historical discourse.

Our unit on immigration was a place where we could invite our students (given the specific demographics of our school) to bring their personal stories into the classroom and make it part of the historical content. By bringing in their own personal stories or those of their family members or community members through storying, students not only added to the historical record but also found that their personal narratives to be part of the larger unfolding story that is history. In this regard, students found that their own personal plights and struggles are part of a much larger historical trend.

Rather than simply learning about the historical experiences of others, students found themselves reflected in the content. For example, numerous students have described the plight of fleeing war-torn countries or fleeing poverty. While others have described political persecution and the lack of educational opportunities. These students' personal experiences very much reflect the reasons why millions of people one hundred or two hundred years ago left their home countries. I didn't realize it initially, but the student's act of storying would also foster empathy among our students and create bonds that would not have been created otherwise.

I know you have a lot to say about this and I want to transition and ask you about your experiences with using story and storying in your classroom. Why do you think these particular pedagogical tools are so effective?

**Valdez:** Most of our students will end up saying that it's their favorite part of our class. I think it's for a lot of reasons. I think it's because to a certain point or to a certain degree, it's unexpected. It stands apart from other things that commonly happen in the classroom. They see their teacher in a new role. It's the way that things are being communicated and shared and the experience that is co-created between the storyteller and the listener in the classroom which is very different from the norm.

**Lopez:** This past semester though, rather than using a story that is drawn from the stories and history of the past, in your introductory history unit you decided to instead use storying in a very creative and timely manner. You decided instead of sharing a historical account through story to introduce your students to historical concepts and ways of thinking, to

instead incorporate storying where your students would share their stories describing their experiences with the pandemic. Their storying, however, was not only meant to create ‘emotional truth’ and connection between the teller and the listener, but also introduce your students to historical concepts and ways of thinking. It sounds like a tall order that you were trying to accomplish. Can you elaborate?

**Valdez:** Yes it was a real two for one deal. The approach that I employ when it comes to teaching history is heavily focused on introducing, practicing, and applying historical analytical skills. This approach is very much rooted in the approach that has been championed by Stanford University. The Reading Like a Historian curriculum which really has the aim of students assuming the role of historian and taking the reins of history in order to make greater sense of the past as well as making connections to the present (Wineburg et al., 2013).

The Reading Like a Historian curriculum has introductory history lessons that are not necessarily based on historical content but on these fictional accounts reflecting the kinds of experiences students might have lived or at least might be more relatable to their own immediate reality. The lesson that I usually have used to introduce students to historical concepts is about a fictional lunchroom fight between two students. The lesson is this kind of investigative, kind of mystery, of who started this lunchroom fight which parallels a historical investigation where students use multiple sources of information to engage in a historical inquiry.

Students are asked to take on the role of a principal who did not witness the particular events surrounding this fight. Nonetheless, in this role, students have to make sense of what happened and come to a conclusion based on the analysis of evidence of multiple sources. The process in short includes determining the reliability of each source, determining each source’s claims, while paying particular attention to how language is used. In addition, taking into consideration the context under which each source was created to ultimately cross-examine the sources to determine where and what the sources corroborate. The lesson does an excellent job of introducing all of these historical elements and concepts.

**Lopez:** What is it about such an account, even though it’s a fictional account, that makes it excellent for introducing these historical concepts to students as well as telling it as a story instead of having them read it as a passage that then needs to be resolved?

**Valdez:** At its core, it’s the element of connecting these historical skills through story and wanting to resolve the inquiry at hand. Again, it has a

lot to do with the connection that a story brings. A story connects because the experience related in the story is something we already know. The experience in the story is something they recognize. An experience that they've probably either possibly experienced themselves or an experience that maybe someone they know experienced. Even though the account is fictional, the experience is nonetheless recognizable. Since it's an experience that's not too hard for them to imagine, their concentration and energy can be more effectively directed into understanding and applying the historical skills without the added challenge of difficult context. This approach streamlines the introduction and the practicing of historical skills.

The pandemic and having to teach remotely changed a lot of our practice and approach. One of the biggest and most apparent challenges to educators was just trying to keep our kids engaged and excited and being able to connect with them and what they were learning. The distance between us could be felt. The distance between the learning of the students and the learning could be felt.

It became imperative to make sure that whatever we were teaching and how we were teaching connected with their lives and their experiences so much more than ever before. Their presence and reality in what we were learning became even more urgent and valuable if we hoped to connect and teach our students. Using the lunchroom fight as an introductory unit of study this year was tabled for a unit that would connect even more directly with their ongoing lived experiences. Similar to the lunchroom fight, it would introduce students to historical thinking skills and concepts but in a much more relevant and profound manner. It wasn't something they could simply see themselves in but something that they were actually in. The pandemic was something they had all lived and were still living, and because they were living in at that very moment, it wasn't any struggle to imagine it.

There was no need for fictional sources. The lunchroom fight unit has students work with fictional experiences or knowledge about these fictional characters that were involved in the fight. Whether they were the students involved in the fight or their friends who might or might not have witnessed the events or the parents of the students in the fight. Instead, we would actually use ourselves. We used ourselves as the sources to understand and connect.

I started by first having our students recount their lives during the pandemic from the moment that they were sent home under the impression that they were only going to be quarantined at home for about two weeks



to the moment they were sitting in front of a screen trying to continue their learning and so on. Their world was turned upside down. Many recounted their struggles, the loss of family members, the loss of friends, the loss of hobbies and activities that filled their lives, and in many ways a loss of self and where they belong in their world.

As they recounted their experiences with the outbreak of the pandemic, other events also surfaced that factored into their lives like the Black Lives Matter movement, wildfires, and the loss of cultural figures. They asked whether they could include this or couldn't. It was stunning how much had happened and not just in their lives, but in all of our lives collectively. I remember sitting there thinking, *Oh, my God*. I should also note that I plan to continue this creation of student accounts next year with the hopeful return to in-person learning. I just can't help but think how intense those accounts will be, as I'm sure they will address the election of 2020 and the insurrection that followed, the vaccine rollout, and whatever challenges a return to in-person learning will present.

Once they shared, we had a body of sources detailing their individual experiences. In their accounts, students could detail as much as they wanted to and be as open and as honest as they felt comfortable with. Their experiences became valuable sources of information through which we could begin to understand historical skills and concepts. Students started by creating source information for their own accounts. Then, we began to introduce the concept of sourcing to determine a source's reliability as well as the concept of close reading and corroboration.

This approach allowed students to take a step back and make sense of what they had experienced and shared through a historical lens. Our students' experiences, which they had documented and shared, were put on equal footing with any other major historical event. In this regard, our students' lived experiences were just as valuable as any other historical experience we would learn about throughout the school year. Their experiences about this time, and what it was like to live in it, reflected a historical moment and their place in society and their connection to this truly global experience. Asking them to bring in their experiences placed our student's lives front and center into our historical discourse.

We took the next step of having our students share their experiences with other students, but this time applying the historical process of making sense of the past. As they analyzed their experience through a historical lens, they quickly uncovered that their own experiences often corroborated with the experiences of their fellow classmates. While other students

had very different experiences from the rest, for some students, the level of struggle was different.

Some had a really hard time relative to the experiences of their classmates and sometimes just by looking at the experiences of others, it allowed them to make sense of their own experience. These differences in experience changed student's perspectives. Being exposed to the experiences and positions of other students made them rethink what they had gone through. In that realization, they could make new meaning of the historical moment they lived through and start to view their own personal experience as part of a much larger shared experience. This process, in addition to teaching students how the historical process works, also helped students connect even further with each other. Together they were able to develop a deeper understanding of this historical moment than they would have ever done apart.

**Lopez:** Having your introductory history unit engage with students' pandemic experiences through storying had a lot of academic value. Everything from students exploring historical thinking skills, engaging with content of historical significance and learning the process and methods that historians use to make sense of the past but equally important, if not even more important there was a socio-emotional component to your unit.

When your students were sharing their stories with each other about who they are and how they came to be at that moment as a result of their pandemic experiences, they connected with each other. As they told their stories and listened to each other's stories they developed compassion and they grew as human beings. Can you talk about the value of the unit from that lens? From the lens of the importance of social-emotional pedagogy?

**Valdez:** It allowed students to understand each other's struggles on a very human level. As they shared their experiences, they examined their own experiences to make meaning and sense of what they were hearing. It was an acknowledgment that they weren't the only ones that faced struggles. They weren't the only ones that were scared. They weren't the only ones that were confused. They weren't the only ones that were dealing with rapid and sudden changes and struggling to adapt.

This understanding allowed them to empathize. They empathized with each other's experiences whether that was the experience of boredom that was so prevalent as the world around them shut down and confined them to their homes or the anxiety of the unknown and to the sadder reality of witnessing loved ones get sick and in many cases losing a loved one. The

experience created a place for their voices and gave them the sense that they weren't alone and that they were being heard. As they shared and listened to each other, they created bonds that I don't see being created in more traditional academic approaches.

But it wasn't all negative either. Many students also shared the experience of feeling happy at the beginning of the pandemic when they were first sent home. They thought it was like an extra vacation. They no longer had to get up early in the morning or get dressed for school. They also found that they had a ton of extra time with family members that they hadn't had before. They described staying up late binge watching series as well as playing online games way past their more usual bedtimes. This too was part of their collective experience that was validated as they shared with others. This was all part of the social-emotional learning component of this introductory unit.

Storying as a pedagogical tool allowed students to bring "emotional truths" that a more traditional introductory history unit approach would have missed. The "emotional truth" aspect provided an authenticity that made the unit real and relatable, both for the teller of the story and for the listener.

This approach allowed them to make meaning of real events and experiences and connect with each other, to empathize all while still learning how to do history and think about human experiences as elemental and foundational to the study of history. This in turn allows students to also appreciate the connection they have with all past peoples across time and space by the simple acknowledgment that their story is very much their own story and that ultimately history is very much about people just like them. That sense is often overlooked or lost in more traditional approaches to history.

**Lopez:** You have described students changing, growing and connecting with each other in profound ways as a result of using storying in history. How does it change you as a teacher?

**Valdez:** Such an approach, especially at the start of the school year makes what would normally be historical content, rich and meaningful content out of our students' lives and their experiences. Instead of, say, reading student essays about the meeting between Montezuma and Cortez, which eventually does happen, I'm starting the school year with reading about my students' lives but in an academic and historical manner. In the limited time that we have with all of the students that we're serving, it definitely provides valuable opportunities to connect with their lives and

their experiences and understand where they're coming from. As an educator, it allows me additional ways to better approach my students and support them and be more understanding. It allows me to better see their humanity and that changes one in profound ways. It makes them care much more, not only about their academic well-being, but also the well-being of the whole person.

## CONCLUSION

History textbooks, along with the accompanying instruction of K-12 History, have excluded large swaths of the population for varying reasons, some benign while others less than benign. We know that representation matters. Doing a better job of recognizing historical sources rooted in the oral tradition within our historical discourse will go a long way toward acknowledging the cultural knowledge and understanding of those who have been less represented.

Story and storying can be used to make the content of history more accessible and more engaging for students all the while forging deep connections and understandings of the lived experiences of those that lived in the past. With reflection, a critical lens, and a little creativity, Social Science educators can find a myriad of places to have their students' realities represented in the curriculum. The use of story is an effective way to achieve this. While our Social Science practice employs surgical use of story throughout the school year to generate excitement and engagement in historical inquiries, our practice also focuses on bringing our students' personal, family, as well as community stories into our discipline. Through their own stories, predicated on storying, students find that history, far from being removed from their lived experiences and communities, is very much part of who we are individually and collectively. In this sense, history is not something that happened a long time ago in a faraway place to people far removed from our own realities, but rather the ongoing and yes, very much debated collective story of people.

Where textbooks and more traditional approaches to history fail to be more inclusive, using students' lived experiences along with their families' and communities' experiences serve to bridge the all-too-common inequalities of representation in the discipline of History. Any opportunity an educator has to use storying and/or invite students to share their stories should not be missed.

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# Story and Creative Writing as Pedagogical Practices in a Mathematics Classroom for Pre-service Teachers

*Frederick Uy*

## INTRODUCTION

*[I]n real life we encounter problems and situations, gather data from all of our resources, and generate solutions. The fragmented school day does not reflect this reality.* (Jacobs, 1989, p. 1)

In a busy, self-contained, elementary classroom, where time is precious, cross-curricular integration is particularly important. The need to integrate the core curriculum in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies becomes critical in times when literacy programs take up a significant amount of time in the school day. Incorporating writing and literature in a mathematics classroom is the subject of this section as we illustrate how a group of pre-service teachers used multicultural literature, and in particular folktales, to compose endings to stories incorporating

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F. Uy (✉)

Department of Educator Preparation and Public School Programs,  
The California State University Office of the Chancellor, Long Beach, CA, USA  
e-mail: [fuy@calstate.edu](mailto:fuy@calstate.edu)

mathematical concepts and problems. Critical reasoning skills were used as they made logical connections and developed strategies to problem solve endings to stories from different cultures. The author begins with the need for an integrated curriculum, discusses how mathematics and writing are integrated, illustrates samples of student work, analyzes the discussions of the pre-service teachers, and finally draws conclusions for this chapter.

### NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

There are several reasons why there exists a pressing need for pre-service teachers to experience an integrated curriculum. First, there has been a tremendous growth of knowledge in recent years. Second, school schedules have become fragmented, affecting the relevance of the curriculum for the lives of students (Jacobs, 1989). Every so often in both mathematics and language arts there are new national or state laws mandating the inclusion of newer knowledge in the curriculum and, therefore, students must meet the challenges of being responsible for even greater and greater amounts of information. This information must be integrated within a schoolday where the length of time has remained the same for many years. The fragmented school schedules, even in elementary school, partition one discipline from another as students learn in 40- or 50-minute time blocks. Donald Graves (1983) called the chopped-up curriculum the “cha-cha-cha” curriculum. Just when students get interested and involved in one project, the schedule demands that they move to another subject.

Students often find mathematics and writing difficult when used in isolation from their application. “Only in school do we have 43 minutes of math and 43 minutes of English” (Jacobs, 1989). Outside of school, problems occur within a milieu of many disciplines and within a flow of time not constricted into 40-minute blocks. Outside of school, students must make connections between disciplines for real-life and real-time experiences and use higher order thinking skills to solve problems. Further, the interdisciplinary approach to teaching is endorsed by subject-area professional organizations (Post et al., 1996).

### PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

The teacher preparation at this campus was a fifth-year program. Students have earned their baccalaureate degrees already upon entering the teacher preparation program. Many of the students were commuter students and were the first in their families to go to college.

Further, they represented various ethnic backgrounds, languages, college majors, and ages. Most of the students were women and most also had jobs while earning their teaching credentials.

For this particular study, two of the same elementary mathematics methodology courses were scheduled at the same time. During the first meeting, both classes were met by the professors in a large room. The pre-service teachers were then informed of a specific activity in which half of them would participate. In order to remain fair, all names were written on a piece of paper and put in a brown paper bag. The two professors took turns in drawing names until half of the names got called. This process would give the pre-service teachers an opportunity to work with non-classmates. The last pieces of information given to the pre-service teachers before they were asked to go back to their own classes were the date and time of when the activity would happen.

### INTEGRATING MATHEMATICS AND WRITING

When pre-service teachers enrolled in the elementary mathematics methods course at Cal State LA, the last thing they expected was that the writing would be incorporated into the coursework. The author believed that this course was a vehicle for bringing the issue of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching to the attention of pre-service teachers. Integrating the teaching of mathematics and writing seemed to be particularly challenging for beginning teachers. Also, about 71% of the post-baccalaureate students in teacher education programs conveyed being very comfortable with general writing compared to about 24% with academic writing (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007). Together with this claim was the realization that colleges of education and teacher education programs needed to increase academic writing skills of their students for the simple reason that they were responsible in the preparation of teachers that would teach many school subjects including, of course, writing (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016).

Additionally, the courses were conducted via a course management system; the instructor was teaching primarily the course online. This scenario gave the author another opportunity to illustrate to pre-service teachers how to make use of multiple resources and disciplines while teaching mathematics. When the day of the activity arrived, everyone in this group was asked to go online and to login synchronously.

The newly formed class was divided into four groups and each group was given an unfinished multicultural story to read. These stories were



based on folktales from around the world (Shannon, 1991) and involved a mystery or problem to be solved by the characters. Stories that were chosen for the pre-service teachers to work on not only allowed their originality and creativity to shine but also provided an occasion to demonstrate their understanding of mathematics (Halpern & Halpern, 2005). The task for the pre-service teachers was to creatively end the story with a mathematics problem-solving activity and to develop a bulletin board that would reflect both this folktale and the intended mathematics topic. The instructor assigned each group to a “chat room” where the members of each group might have an online discussion on how to end the story. By doing so, it gave pre-service teachers a nonthreatening environment where they could express their thoughts and contribute their ideas freely.

Otherwise, this might not have occurred in a real-time classroom. Often at this urban university the students were strangers who entered classes, and because of shyness, anxiety of speaking in public, or fear of not giving the right input, they did not offer their personal opinions. However, this online course management system enabled students to work in small groups by *writing* their ideas rather than *speaking* them. Also, this system permitted those less verbal students to offer ideas through written language.

After forming their ideas on how to end the story, the students then selected a member to post their work on the course management system bulletin board. This electronic bulletin board allowed students to readily obtain, at their convenience and request, messages or files that were available to them. The following are examples of the kinds of endings by the pre-service teachers, which were written collaboratively online, and the teaching methods they developed to integrate mathematics, writing, and multicultural literature.

### SAMPLE ENDINGS TO STORIES

One of the stories that was presented to the pre-service teachers was from a Korean anthology.

Once upon a time, there were three children with their grandmother. The children all decided to build the biggest snowman the village had ever seen. The three children each began rolling their snowballs. They continued to roll and roll and the snowballs got bigger and bigger. When each ball got too big for one to push, two pushed, then all three together. When they could not move the biggest of the three balls anymore, they stopped.

The children tried to lift and stack the second ball on top of the first, but they could not.

They had done such a remarkable job of making them so big that they were too heavy to lift. They were beginning to scrape the snowballs down to make them smaller when their grandmother came out of the kitchen to check on the children.

They explained their problem to their grandmother. After looking into the situation, the grandmother said, “Hmmm, I see the problem now. Why ....”

One group of pre-service teachers discussed and wrote the following ending to this story.

[I]t looks like we are going to have to make these snowballs a bit lighter so we can lift them. If they all weigh 20 pounds to begin with and we want them to each be light enough to lift, we are going to have to scrape some snow off of them.

Let’s leave one snowball on the ground and not scrape anything off of it. The middle snowball needs to be 5 pounds lighter than the bottom one. The top snowball needs to be 5 pounds lighter than the middle one.

The grandmother asked the children how much snow they were going to have to scrape off the snowballs all together to make them light enough to lift. What would the weight of the bottom snowball be? What would the weights of the middle and top snowball be?

The next step for them was to develop a bulletin board that could be used to teach a particular mathematical concept. The students in this group created a bulletin board that was linked to learning centers and focused it on problem-solving:

The bulletin board would contain a picture of three children, and the three big snowballs. Then the next consecutive picture would have them scraping snow away and measuring it. Then the last picture might have them with the Snowman they had built and the village people around cheering since theirs was the largest snowman ever built. The bulletin board would also contain some addition and subtraction equations. For example:  $20 - 5 = \square$  and  $\square - m = 15$ .

Their ending used critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which included ending the story creatively. They also adapted the ending to the particular subject matter that they were studying, which in this case was

mathematics. This group of pre-service teachers developed a bulletin board that focused on addition and subtraction equations, which basically highlighted the process of composition and decomposition of numbers. Showing that addition and subtraction were inverse operations was also demonstrated. Notice that this group had written equations on their bulletin board:  $20 - 5 = \blacksquare$  and  $\blacksquare - 5 = 15$ . These equations depicted the early concepts of the unknown or, more formally, the *variable*. This gave an early introduction of algebraic thinking in the elementary grades, particularly with equations.

Not only were they thinking mathematically, but also they were using strategies drawn from their expertise in writing. Pre-service teachers were given opportunities to write in different genres by following the form of the specific fable that was used. In doing so, they had to read the text to discover who the characters were and how they acted and spoke. They learned how to use dialogue in the precise way that was used in the beginning of the story. In order to continue the story and write an ending, pre-service teachers had to develop a style of writing that would correspond to the beginning. They also realized that the vocabulary of mathematical writing differs from that of historical writing or scientific writing. Teachers used the words of mathematicians such as “measuring” and “equations.” Additionally, these pre-service teachers were able to work collaboratively in small groups, thus realizing the potential of using a variety of resources when writing. Because reading and writing are inherently social processes, students realized how much easier writing could be when done with others (Dyson, 1989).

Another group of pre-service teachers came up with this ending to the same story. When the grandmother said, “Hmmm, I see the problem now. Why ...”

can't you three kids pick up the snowball? Because it is too heavy. So, how do we solve it? If 3 kids cannot pick up the snowball, and we want to make the biggest snowman ever, don't make the snowball smaller! Get more kids to help lift!

They then created a bulletin board to teach multiplication. The following describes their bulletin board.

Our bulletin board will have flannel backing, showing a white flannel snowball with a “50 lbs.” on it, equaling 5 figures of children with the number “10” on them. (This symbolizes that each child can lift 10 lbs.)

five kids times 10 pounds each = fifty pounds Or in symbols,  $5 \times 10 = 50$ . We will also have a 2-pan scale to visually depict 50 base-ten units equaling 5 bags of 10 base-ten units in each. The students can play with these units, seeing that indeed, 50 units = 5 bags (of 10 units each).

This group focused on the concept of multiplication for their selected ending to the folktale. They also included some modeling of the number 50 by representing it with concrete models. Also, this group made use of the meaning of the equal sign as “balance” or “is the same as.” The future elementary school students of this group would get the benefit of being able to use a multicultural folktale and weave in writing and mathematics. Although this group developed a different ending to the same story, they used the same processes of mathematics and writing. Not only were mathematical concepts involved in this ending to the story but also the pre-service teachers widened their thinking about the problem and included principles from physics. In doing so they illustrated the kinds of higher order thinking that was possible when students were encouraged to integrate different disciplines.

Another story that was presented to the pre-service teachers came from Chile and involved a young ruler and a maiden named Carmelita:

In Chile, there once lived a young ruler who thought cleverness was the most important thing of all. He was forever outwitting his advisers and often played jokes on others by asking them the riddles that were impossibly difficult to answer. When it came time for him to marry, the young man said that he would not marry anyone who was not as clever as he was. And so, everywhere he went, the young ruler asked the same riddle: “If you care for a basil plant tenderly, how many leaves will it grow?” In village after village, the young women ran away, embarrassed at not knowing the answer. That is, until he asked Carmelita. She looked into his eyes and said, “I will tell you, but only after you tell me how many fish now swim in the sea?” This time it was the young ruler who had no answer and left embarrassed. But he was also impressed. The next week, when Carmelita outwitted him again, he decided she was clever enough to be his wife. Carmelita agreed to marry him, but only if she could be granted a last request. The ruler was puzzled about her request and

One group ended the story this way:

pondered and pondered with it. He eventually agreed to it. He said, “So, you want me to divide my 100 acres of land in the way you decide. How do

you want them divided?” Carmelita replied, “Please keep  $\frac{1}{2}$  of your land to yourself. Then,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the original size of the land, you will give equal amounts of land to 50 village families,  $\frac{1}{8}$  will go to a public school, and  $\frac{1}{8}$  will go to the village as a park.” The ruler was so touched with her kindness and said, “Carmelita, you indeed are a wise woman and we shall live happily forever.”

The group decided to design their bulletin board for this story in this manner:

The bulletin board will have a background of the countryside, with a castle in one corner. Next to the castle are cutouts of the ruler and Carmelita. At the top of the boards, it will say, “A Last Request ....” To the right of the castle, it will say “Carmelita agrees to marry the clever ruler, but only if he grants her a last request: to divide his own 100 acres of land in the way she decides” in smaller letters.

Finally, in the middle of the board it will pose this question, “Interpret Carmelita’s request for the ruler.”

The bulletin board would then show the criteria Carmelita had on how to divide the ruler’s land. At the bottom of the board, this question will be stated: Carmelita already knows the ruler is clever. What else is she trying to find out about the ruler through her last request?

This group used this story to illustrate the concept of multiplying fractions. To teach this, the group included a learning aid—a grid of 100 squares. The grid would be used as the visual representation of 100 acres of land. Using this grid will help the students see how division of the land works. These pre-service teachers successfully showed complementing symbolic manipulation with a visual representation of how to solve a problem.

This special ending was another example of how this activity could give students opportunities for higher order thinking that include application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Their intent here was to introduce and to develop the concept of multiplication of fractions but because this concept was embedded within the context of a multicultural story and because this group had an interest in social issues, their ending widens the mathematical concepts to also include real-life problems of hunger and educating the poor. Issues of equity and social justice were critically important to our diverse population of pre-service teachers who liked the idea of

mathematics being used as a pathway to “level the playing field.” Different groups of pre-service teachers came up with various endings to the same story.

Carmelita’s request is for the young ruler to give some presents to each member of her family. All these presents would come from the ruler’s warehouse. All the presents in the warehouse must be given away. Now, if each person gets two presents, then three presents will be left; but if each person gets three presents, then the ruler will be short of two presents. The young ruler looked confused after listening to Carmelita’s request. Let’s help the young ruler solve his problem so the story can have a happy ending. To do that, we need to find out how many people are in the family of Carmelita? And, how many presents should be prepared?

The ending for this group used the mathematical concepts of solving simultaneous linear equations and applied it within the context of direct application to the real world. Their ending also considered the possibility of using other strategies in solving this problem instead of using variable equations; an example of which is guess-and-check.

Here is another ending to the story:

The ruler was puzzled about her request and was determined to win her hand in marriage. Carmelita stated her request, “You will give me one rose every 12 hours and I will accept your proposal of marriage upon receiving my 62 roses.” The next day the young ruler gave Carmelita her first rose and continued until she received the 62 roses. The wedding was a beautiful event and they lived happily ever after. QUESTION: How many days did the young ruler had to plan the wedding?

This group was able to come up with a different twist to the ending. This ending was something quite familiar to all and had a more common scenario.

Another group ended the story as follows:

The ruler was puzzled about her request and agreed to abide by her wishes. Carmelita’s request for the ruler was to make the seating arrangements for their large reception for 1,000 guests. Carmelita insisted on using 2 sizes of tables only, one that seats 10 guests and the other seats 5. Using both table sizes, how many tables will the ruler need to seat his guests?

This group focused on concluding the story with an emphasis on open-ended problems. Students should possess a previous knowledge or exposure to the division process. Depending on who solved it, the number of 10-guest tables and the number of 5-guest tables would vary. The group even made sure that there was a hint to help solve the problem. By following the first hint and solving the problem, the answer was 200 tables all in all for the guests. The second hint suggested that there were other solutions possible, which led the students to use various combinations of 10-guest and 5-guest tables.

A final example of the work of the pre-service teachers follows:

The ruler was puzzled about her request, yet accepted her challenge. Carmelita told the ruler that if he were clever enough to solve the following problem, she would marry him. The problem was: If we invite 21, 30, or 42 people to our wedding, and we want to order equal number of taquitos with none left over, How many taquitos do we need to order?

This ending to the story was focused on Least Common Multiple (LCM). The objective was to find the number of *taquitos* (a Mexican food consisting of a small, thin, rolled-up flatbread made from finely ground corn and some type of savory filling and then crisp-fried) that will be shared among 21 or 30 or 42 guests so that there would be no left over (remainder).

Normally, one would be given routinely two numbers to solve for the LCM. Here was an opportunity for the students to look for the LCM of three numbers emphasizing real-world connections. A lesson similar to this could be truly exciting for the students. The inclusion and use of *taquitos* added to the multicultural flavor of the lesson as well!

## TRANSCRIPTS OF DIALOGUES

The ending to these stories and the bulletin boards was developed through online discussions. The course management system allowed an examination of some of the online language by recording the discussions. It was discovered that the challenges of delivering this activity through a course management system created a context in which students were learning about technology as they were learning about mathematics and writing instruction. For instance, four students were successful in logging onto the course management system and began talking about the problem but

were constantly interrupted by other students who were trying to log on or who were pushed out of the system. Just as one student wrote: "Do you want to first come up with the solution to the story, or do you want to work on the bulletin board first?" Another student logged on and wrote: "hi gals. sorry i am late ... tried really hard to get in."

During one period of the discussion, the students began to wonder whether or not the number 1000 was appropriate for the grade level: "I think 5th and 6th graders could work with 1000 if not higher. No?" Another member wrote: "I teach 6th grade and the numbers are still high. We are teaching concepts and don't want that to get muddled up in large numbers." Then one of the members wrote that she had a 6th grader sitting beside her who said that "100 is better." Another in the group redirected the detailed discussion of which number to use and focused the group back on the assignment. She wrote: "OK, lets move on from numbers we need to decide 100 or 1000 it doesn't matter, as long as we come up with a clever solution." An analysis of this discussion revealed that these students were actually finding that specific number that was most developmentally appropriate.

Upon the examination of the transcript of their online discussion, it was also recognized that a new kind of modified language was created among these pre-service teachers. Students in this course were using language in ways that were typically technological. In their discussions, they were not always concerned with correct spelling or punctuation (e.g., "[I] think we should come out with the answer first then design the bulletin board"). To do so would have meant that they could not quickly join the online discussion. They also learned to make their entries short and concise since lengthy replies would take longer and by the time they would be ready to send it, the group would be on to something new. Therefore, it seemed to us that these textual discussions were more like real speech than text. The transcript showed that if students could not navigate this textual terrain, they soon dropped out of the discussion. In one instance a student wrote: "Wait!" but soon after left the discussion room.

As the transcript was further reviewed, it became evident as to how students wanted the ending to be mathematical but at the same time "tricky and clever." They thought of the personalities of the characters in the story about Carmelita as they agreed that the solution not only had to "test his brains" but also "tie into his heart." As one group member wrote: "Is the guy a prince or a king?? so it can tie to his personality and also the way he rules his kingdom." At this point, one of the members



remembered another multicultural folktale called “The Empty Pot” and told that story. By bringing in past knowledge that might help them create a new ending to this story, members were using intertextuality to compare and contrast textual ideas.

### PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS’ REACTION

When this actual activity was done with the pre-service teachers, their skepticism about the inter-disciplinarity of mathematics quickly disappeared as they saw the functionality of mathematics. Their old schooling of memorizing procedures and formulas without understanding now had been replaced with a new vision of bringing life and context to lessons. They also realized how assessments should not be limited to Q&A but should be varied and ongoing. Lastly, the pre-service teachers needed little or no convincing that students need to take charge of their own learning. Fitting all students in a single way would just result to frustration, pointless struggle, and low self-esteem. They should be able to carve their own path, process, and procedure of learning.

### AN ACTUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY LESSON

Teaching mathematics, integrated with the teaching of writing, poses some challenges and hindrances for many teachers. Many teachers report that they simply have no idea how to integrate mathematics and writing while other teachers mention the inadequate time for this practice to happen. However, teachers can integrate mathematics not only with writing and literature but also with other subjects. In fact, this integration can combine problem-solving, storytelling, reasoning, critical thinking, cooperative grouping, and technology. Indeed, the teachers make use of multiple resources and disciplines. To demonstrate how this process is carried, the author focused on an urban first-grade class in the Los Angeles, California area. Most of the students were in free lunch or discounted lunch programs and many students spoke, aside from English, another language at home. They still were developing and growing as readers and spellers.

The authors chose a common Aesop fable entitled “A Drink for Crow” (Shannon, 1991).

Some students were familiar with the story and knew how the story ended. As these were first graders, the teacher needed to read the story to

the students. In order to capture their attention to the fullest, the teacher had to use some props so that the students could identify the main character and could get a clear image of the setting. However, due to lack of a toy crow, the teacher had to improvise and used a toy dog. So, the teacher began reading the story with some improvisations.

*Once there was a dog (crow) that had grown so thirsty that he could barely move. He jumped (flew) down to a big pitcher where he had gotten a drink the day before, but there was only a little bit of water remaining at the bottom. He tried and tried to reach it with his tongue (beak), but the pitcher was too deep and his tongue (beak) was too short. But just as he was about to give up.*

The teacher suddenly stopped reading to the surprise of the students. The students then were instructed to get back to their groups and to listen to further instructions about the forthcoming activity. Once back in their groups, the teacher said to the students that she wanted the group to discuss the story and to come up with an ending. However, this ending also had to have a mathematics problem involving the operation of addition in it. Additionally, they were told that in order to help in the writing of the ending to the story, they had to do a *quick-draw* of what the ending would be.

Each group of students brought out a sheet of paper and folded it into four parts. They were supposed to draw their ending to the story in a four-part sequence. Before letting them work, the teacher reminded them again to be creative and let their imagination work for them. As soon as the teacher finished giving instructions, the students immediately began working. Sample quick-draws and story endings are found below. Because these were first drafts, the students were allowed to use invented spelling (Fig. 13.1).

The story ending for this group is indicated below (Fig. 13.2):

*The dog cood not dringlk. One little gril had a cup that had water. She put the water in the pitcher. The dog drank the water and he shaked. the drops were weting the flor. There were 3 drops at the start and then anader 5 drops. How many drops of water in all?*

*[The dog could not drink. One little girl had a cup that had water. She put the water in the pitcher. The dog drank the water and he shook. The drops were wetting the floor. There were 3 drops at the start and then another 5 drops. How many drops of water in all?]*



Fig. 13.1 Quick-draw for Group #1

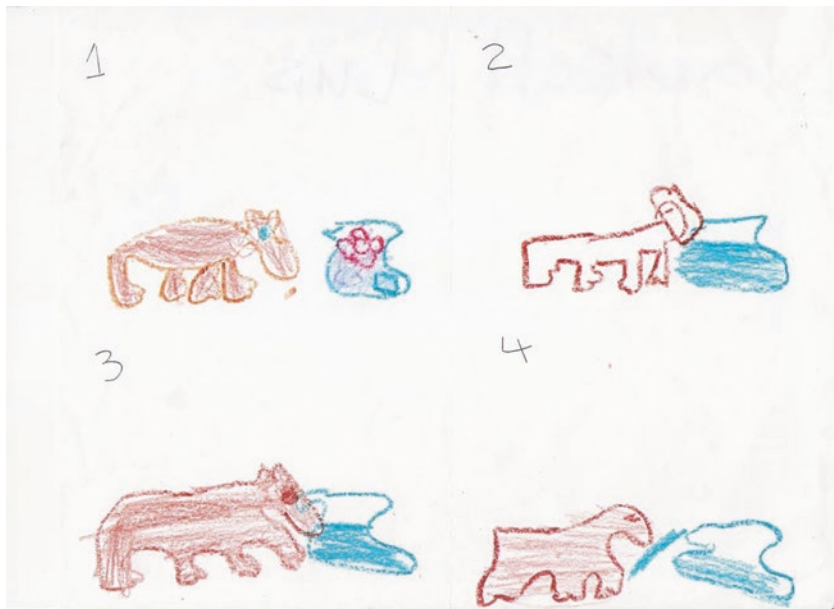
Another story ending for the second group is found below:

*First the dog sees the pitcher. then he walks to it. Then he pusheis it 5 tymes. He then pusheis it agen 2 tymes. Then he drinks it walle the water is falling down to the ground in his mouth. How many tymes did the dog push the picher so that the water falls down.*

*[First the dog sees the pitcher. Then he walks to it. Then he pushes it 5 times. He then pushes it again 2 times. Then he drinks it while the water is falling down to the ground in his mouth. How many times did the dog push the pitcher so that the water falls down?]*

From these two examples, one could see how an activity like this one may be adapted to all grade levels and to students of varying abilities, backgrounds, and interests.

When the students were working, this particular teacher immediately observed the high level of involvement and excitement they were demonstrating. The students were conferring and giving input to the story ending and the discussions among them involved an astonishing exchange of



**Fig. 13.2** Quick-draw for Group #2

ideas. Many Second Language and English Learners were involved in a safe, low-risk environment where everyone shared ideas and contributed to the activity.

Incorporating mathematics, art, literature, and writing into an activity clearly gives the students the training they needed regarding their regular writing skills and allowed them to use their creative energy. A bonus for this type of activity was that they also honed and polished their composition skills and used the writing process. When the activity was completed, the teacher asked them to showcase their work to each other. They hanged their work similar to a gallery. As the gallery walk ensued, children proudly displayed their ideas and drawings. They were seen by all students who at this specific age had very vivid imaginations. Students also were confident in their presentations and showed signs of being proud of their group work.

Having students integrate mathematics and writing meant that within a 60-minute block of time, students engaged in both mathematics and literacy. Students were given the task of creating a mathematics problem involving addition. The students experienced an atypical mathematics

activity, which was not in the textbook. Further, this did count as an alternative form of assessment and might be used to check for understanding. Ordinary paper-and-pencil worksheets were fine some of the time, but this additional activity for assessment would increase student interest.

In particular, this activity also involved an addition problem. However, it did not have to be restricted to one topic but may be substituted with another. For instance, the teacher might ask for a subtraction problem or even a geometry problem. Teachers might even ask the students to decide on their own what concept or topic in mathematics they want. Imagine what the students would do if they were asked to decide on their own! Truly the possibilities in this situation became endless!

As a reminder, the integration of writing with another discipline does not have to be exclusively in mathematics. The other areas of integration may be in science, social studies, physical education, or even music. In this story, a natural topic to connect in science is *volume displacement*. The crow wants the water level to reach the top of the pitcher, which may be achieved by putting pebbles in the pitcher. It surely is exciting to find out how teachers and students will integrate this story in other disciplines.

Finally, it provides an opportunity to use multicultural stories in the classroom. At this day and age of information technology and globalization, teachers need to assure that their students develop an appreciation for other cultures, languages, and ideas. As teachers use literature from other cultures, students experience the traditions of others and how they live.

### FURTHER RESEARCH

This activity integrates mathematics, creative writing, and literature. It has demonstrated the importance of connecting mathematics with other subjects like reading and writing. One suggestion for further research is to develop the connections among science, creative writing, and literature. It will be delightful to see how science concepts like electro-magnetic forces or chemical reactions are written creatively into a story ending.

Another area of research is to see how an approach like this one will play in a bilingual classroom. The activity presented here is geared toward a monolingual classroom. The author wonders if code switching between two languages will impact students' creative writing.

Lastly, another area of research will be on gender differences. Will connecting mathematics or science concepts with arts and/or humanities activities illustrate a greater preference among girls or boys or there is no difference at all? The potential for further research and study indeed is abundant.

## CONCLUSION

Reading and writing play an important role in the classroom. Not only do teachers instill in our students how to read, but they also ask them to read to learn. Teachers also expect students to use reading to learn about the world. However, most of the time students see reading and writing in isolation rather than in connection with other disciplines. Experts often recommend that an integrated approach will be the best way to combat this notion. Teachers need to show that reading and writing are present and are utilized in all subject areas. Using stories from other cultures is a useful strategy to use in the classroom with all subjects. Teachers will find this approach will continue to bring better opportunities and more ideas to their students and greater professional growth for the teacher.

The author has discussed using mathematics and writing together because these two disciplines are particularly suited for describing to pre-service teachers the importance of an integrated curriculum. Both disciplines lead students to think clearly and critically. Both also use tools and processes that can be easily maneuvered and manipulated, and both use terms such as *list, brainstorm, predict, estimate, chart, map, draw, sketch, summarize, pose questions, observe, and express opinions*. Using these two processes together allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to operate with higher order thinking skills and use those skills to read, talk, study, and create information to solve problems. In doing so they illustrate the kinds of higher order thinking that is possible when students are encouraged to integrate different disciplines. Simply put, writing and mathematics go together (Frank & Uy, 2004). It is through interdisciplinary approach that a real representation of the nature of knowledge is demonstrated (Post et al., 1996).

The author also wants to dispel the notion that mathematics and writing are disciplines that contains problems in which only teachers have the solutions. As mathematicians and writers, it is realized that these disciplines are basically creative processes in which there are no “right answers.”

The author aspires that for these pre-service teachers to understand how both disciplines are tools that people use in their everyday lives to solve problems in multiple ways. In developing an integrated curriculum involving multicultural literature, students have many diverse opportunities to use both the tools of mathematics and writing to solve problems in various ways.

Because the author feels that mathematics and writing are disciplines that include a particular kind of *language*, one needs to make sure that the development of these languages be addressed. Key words and terminology must be clearly identified so that students will communicate in these languages fluently. Like any language, mathematics is a vehicle *to explore the fantastic, the fictional, the conceivable but unreal* (Clader, 2016).

The author also wants to integrate mathematics and creative writing to show a way of incorporating other disciplines. By starting with these two disciplines, extending to a third or more disciplines will now be less complicated and more practical. A teacher who wishes to incorporate different disciplines shall examine the curriculum carefully and identify common themes or topics.

Finally, these pre-service teachers are now able to work collaboratively in small groups, which make them realize the importance of utilizing different resources when writing and/or doing mathematics. They also realize the value of doing work cooperatively. They also have the experience of incorporating a multicultural approach in teaching writing and mathematics. By using inter-disciplinarity of mathematics, the learning of mathematics by the students is not done in isolation but in a much needed, contextual, applicable, and real-world situation. Indeed, there is no better way of bringing learning to our students.

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## How I Met My Contributing Authors

*Ambika Gopal Raj*

### INTRODUCTION

If you are on this page, I hope you are here after you have read all the chapters in this book. If you are here, I hope you see how the contributing authors in this book have furthered the idea of storying as reflexive praxis. How they have, through their practice, exemplified what it means to really story, to imagine, to empathize. Each of these authors was either my students, my kids' teachers, or my colleagues and now I am honored to call them my friends. Sharon Ulanoff, my co-editor, knows many of these people as well, although these letters are a depiction of my encounters with them. In the following pages, I write a personal letter to them in which I recall certain pivotal moments in our meetings that endeared them to me. I reminisce personally in these letters, talking directly to them about these incidents and thereby giving an insight into what our relationship may be. These letters are meant as a way for the reader of this book to build trust in the process of storying. It is a way for me to show you,

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A. G. Raj (✉)  
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
e-mail: [ambika.raj@calstatela.edu](mailto:ambika.raj@calstatela.edu)

the reader, that, essentially, storying must build trust. These letters were not read by my authors before being published—therefore they are purely a one-sided insight and I take responsibility for that opinion. My hope is that these insights or opinions (whatever one may call them) will give, you, the reader a deeper understanding of the people that they are. The following letters are written in the order of the chapters in this book.

## Sharon Ulanoff

*Dearest Sharon,*

*I will never forget the first time you invited me to your home and we had the holiday party with everyone in the college. I will never forget that day when your friend gave me the Kokopelli necklace (I still have it) and wished for me to have a baby. I will never forget you were the only one to visit me in the hospital when I had Akhil. You sat with me when the nurse came in to teach me to nurse my baby. I will never forget the endless bananas and boiled eggs you ate during meetings. And your love of Sushi, and your allergies, and buying you medicine from India, wishing I could take you to India to share with you where I grew up. ... I will never forget your infectious laughter and the times we stayed together in motels for conferences, the long walks, the endless Starbucks and your morning exercises!!*

It was September 3, 2001, and I was a newly minted doctorate coming to campus for training. In a few short weeks, I would be starting work as an assistant professor in the Charter College of Education at Cal State LA. I came to King Hall on the third floor where my new office would be and met four other hires in the hallway—Lisa, Lois, Diane, and Sharon. Lisa was my roommate and Sharon and Diane would be sharing an office diagonally opposite ours. Lois was in a different division. I was the only one who was fresh out of graduate school. All the others seemed so ... knowledgeable! I had no idea how this worked—what it was like to be a professor and what it would be like to navigate tenure. I remember thinking how confident Sharon looked, how friendly she was to all, her ready smile and kind word. That year the college hired the largest cohort of new faculty—around fifteen of us—and we quickly bonded together going to each others' for lunches, dinners, and holidays. It didn't last ... but, my bond with Sharon has lasted two decades now—because that is the energy she put out ... the way she is.

There is a saying in my language that roughly translates to “Once I hold your hand, I never let go”; it speaks to commitment. Sharon not only exudes that commitment, she ensures it through her actions. Those first six years, which were my toughest personally as well as professionally, she guided me, she collaborated with me, presented at conferences with me, showed me avenues to publish, research, walked me through tenure, co-taught with me, laughed with me, cried with me, and in every other way has served as a mentor, guide, and friend.

*Sharon, I don't think I will ever meet anyone as giving as you my friend! I am honored that you call me your friend. Here's to many, many, more years of collaboration, eggs, bananas and Starbucks!*

– Ambika

## Lauren McClanahan

*Dearest Lauren,*

*Perhaps you don't know this, but I remember Ohio State with fondness because of you and Angie. You both, but especially you, were my "White family," you both taught me what it is like to live here. I will never forget the charming two bedroom two-bath apartment you and Chris lived in ... how you made it a point to tell us that "a girl needs her own bathroom" ... how beautifully you kept it (not just the bathroom, the whole place!). The pictures, oh the pictures! seemingly casually strewn around or framed or set on coffee tables. I remember this one frame that was like a ferris wheel with many dangling pictures that rotated. The pictures of Paris, and other places in Europe (where I have not visited even now!) and your red food mixer in your kitchen, with darling coffee mugs! That time you did portraits for us, for Bala's film—my, we never looked so beautiful!*

*It was on a sweltering day in September that I arrived at Columbus Ohio, having driven from Madison-Wisconsin. It was my first time in this small mid-western town with few Asian people and absolutely no other Indian people in the College of Education (there were plenty in the Computer Science/Engineering schools—go figure!) I walked up the steep steps of Ramseyer Hall to attend class—I believe it was one of our earliest ones with Patti Lather (remember her?!). I remember sitting around these big roundish tables in rather uncomfortable chairs and looking down at the reddish dirty carpet. I remember a gaggle of girls and amongst them, your friendly smile. Later that week, I was craving rice and found a tiny Chinese restaurant across the street from Ramseyer ... and there you were ... also waiting in line. You recommended the garlic green beans. It was yummy!*

*Lauren, I am amazed by how talented and artistic you are in photography—the photo gallery show you had at the tiny studio on Main Street in Columbus. Wow!*

*I will never forget that first Halloween when we came to your mother's place for dinner. We sat outside with a tray of veggies and dip as we handed out candy to trick or treat-ers. Remember that kid who took a huge handful of broccoli screaming ecstatically? Ha! That was so much fun. Sandy, your mom had made white bean chilli—I think because she wasn't sure if I ate meat—it was just the thing on that cold October evening. Years later, before we all went our different ways, I will never forget the graduation party in your apartment, the barbecue and beer!*

*You were one of the few people I have kept in touch with. I visited you in Bellingham during spring break after we were both in our respective jobs “professoring” and how generous Sandy was in letting us stay in her home. Lauren, your humor (have you ever tried Stand-Up? You’d be good at it), your down-right, no nonsense, “tell it like it is” ness, is contagious. And Sarah, gorgeous, talented Sarah, takes after the strong women in her life.*

*Here’s to many more laughs, photographs, and visits my friend!*

– *Ambika*

### Lois Andre-Bechely and Joan Fingon

*Dear Lois and Joan,*

*Thank you for folding me into your storying and inviting me to be part of your pedagogy. Both of you will be missed—I can't believe you've retired!*

*Lois, I remember your office—the last one down the third floor of King Hall, I remember how neat (compared to mine!) you kept it with your small mirror and a comfortable couch and plants on the windowsill. You have always included me, supported me and encouraged my academic work when I felt insecure. You fearlessly spoke up in meetings and I will always admire that about you. Do you remember when you and Paul came to my place for lunch at my tiny apartment? Conversations about the Dean that hired us and how patriarchal he was? Whether you know it or not, you have played an important role in my pedagogical journey.*

*Joan, I never knew till recently that you are the Haiku queen! That is fascinating and awesome. I remember you telling me about your children who were identified as gifted, when I didn't know what that meant as I was not familiar with the school system here. I remember you shared how to navigate that for my son. While you seem the quiet and stoic one, I am thankful for our recent collaborations.*

*And for all of us, I think it was Sharon that kept us together. The unlikely team of three white women and an Asian Indian woman! May Laura, Jeannette, Sofia and Ava have more opportunities to collaborate!*

– *Ambika*

### Steven Michael Salcido

*Dear Steven,*

*I remember you clearly from a few summers ago when you took my summer course on pedagogy. You sat there looking a little bemused and unsure and yet, something about your demeanor was so ... humble. As I began introductions you made it clear that you didn't think this class would do any good in furthering your educational journey. You weren't alone in that declaration. I gave you the choice of staying or leaving after the first session. I am so glad you stayed.*

*Steven, I remember when you stood up in class (although I said you could present any way you wanted) and with trepidation began telling us about losing your mother at 12, of coming out to your family and of finding your way in your educational trajectory and eventually your career after your mother's passing. Your face was flushed and you were trying very hard not to be tearful and yet, we were all moved to tears by how you presented your story with humility, courage and a ready smile that suddenly lights up your face.*

*Steven, you have given me a gift—of validating my work on storying when you felt the process was valuable as a method in qualitative research. I credit you and Dr. Andre-Bechely for putting that idea into my head and I am going to pursue that train of thought. And, would you stop calling me Dr. Raj already?! Or I'll have to start calling you Dr. AVP Salcido! No—I know that is your culture speaking ... call me what feels comfortable!*

*I am so honored to have you in my circle of friends. You are the kind of leader the world really needs—kind and modest. Even though I have never met your mother, I feel your mother's love, depth of character, and deep aspirations for you in everything you do. She must have been a fantastic role-model and I want to be that inspiration for my sons!*

– Ambika

### Maria-Lisa Flemington

*Dear Maria-Lisa,*

*Rarely have I met a woman like you who is so self-assured and knows what she wants. And yet, at first glance you appear to be very quiet, your soft, expressive, smiling eyes belying your strength and confidence.*

*I remember when I first met you—your area of interest in the arts preceded you as you entered the doctoral program and eventually, I was delighted that we had a chance to work together during your study. It was through your study that I learned about the powerful practice of social practice art. While I recognized the medium, I wasn't familiar with the name or how it might work. Your dissertation was such a refreshing take on art that is both a service as well as a reflexive practice.*

*In our collaborations, you have become someone I aspire to be—a mother to Zoe-Ray who is such a self-assured kid like her mother! I will never forget the conversations we had around motherhood and the connections we made around how we had our children. I learned a lot from you, whether you know it or not.*

*Here's to more theater, more art and music in our lives Maria-Lisa!*

*– Ambika*



## M. “Shae” Hsieh

*Dear Shae,*

*I remember we first got acquainted in my summer pedagogy class and you were part of the same cohort of students as Steven. While everyone sat in the U of chairs I had placed, you sat elsewhere sending me the message loud and clear—“I don’t want to be here!”*

*There was something about your tough exterior that belied your uneasiness though. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Believe it or not, I saw you and felt your anxiety. I believe you also let me know you may not continue in the class ... like Steven did! And like him, you chose to remain and I am so happy that you did! When you did present and you let us know that you have served as a Marine in Afghanistan (was it?)—Wow—it left me with my mouth wide open!*

*Shae, you know you have a gift—not just in writing and public speaking but in actually presenting—have you ever tried theater? You should, you’re a natural improv performer! You mention in your biography that you love adventure and imagine winning the Hunger Games—of course you would! And you’d kick ass doing so!*

*You are really an inspiration to your students I am sure! I see that in the care with which you plan every detail, the concern you show when you get behind a project. I see your compassion and reflexivity in being vulnerable—indeed you have been even though I can see it does not come easy to you—that is surely courage! And perhaps it is not my place to say but, trust yourself Shae—you have much to give and don’t be surprised when people show admiration! I truly admire how you seem to jump right in especially when you are feeling afraid.*

*I hope that we will continue to collaborate in this storying reflexive way for many years to come.*

– Ambika

**Adrienne Karnofel**

*Dear Adrienne,*

*That summer you and I met was the largest group of students in my pedagogy class. You chose to present first and brought us yummy tacos—but that's not what attracted me to what you do in your classroom. It was what you shared with us and how you mediated your cultural historical story with vulnerability, humility and a certain abandonment as if you had suddenly been set free. You were one of the few who really saw the emotional truth of what I have tried to do with storying.*

*Adrienne, your life story of being a foster parent to teenagers and subsequently adopting them touched me deeply. You see, I always wanted to do that but have been afraid of letting them down. It takes a special kind of person to be so open hearted and so generous.*

*Later, towards the end of 2019, after what was one of the worst semesters for me personally, and I was at such a low point, I got your email one day—of how you had adapted my assignment in your class, of how it had made a deep difference to your class in the quality of what they shared. I received validation for what I do. You have no idea what that meant to me at that point Adrienne! It was like a salve to my soul, very fulfilling and uplifting my friend.*

*When all this is over (the pandemic, the isolation, the fear of human contact), we need to go celebrate with some tacos and tequila!*

– *Ambika*

**Rebeca Batres**

*Dear Rebeca,*

*I am so glad that you finally found the time to write down the fantastic work that you are doing! I remember the first time I met you and thinking—Oh my God! What a fast talking, personable, fun teacher—I am sure Akhil will have fun in her class. You just brought a big smile to my face that day when you greeted each of your students at your door as they filed in.*

*Your citizen of the week project is such a fulfilling project not just for the students but for parents as well. I think, as parents just getting through with the everyday nuances of raising our children makes us so busy, that we don't often pause to reflect on what our children mean to us. Your project forces us—parents to do that. Your project validates children, raises their self-esteem and establishes for them their identities. For both parents and for your students, you model through your writing to each child how much you value them as individuals. Becky, that is truly admirable!*

*I think I can say with confidence that of all the teachers that my sons Akhil and Ashish have had the opportunity of having, the time they spent in your classroom will have the most impact on their future lives!*

*I hope that this will be the first of many collaborations for the two of us—and I am serious, we need to get you to write a book with your 25 plus years of experience as a teacher—My, the stories you must have to tell!*

– *Ambika*

## Joshua Almos

*Dear Josh,*

*I remember the first time I met you a few years ago ... I noticed someone lurking outside my office door in King Hall, it was you ... I wasn't sure if you were waiting for me or for someone else—and I think you weren't sure if you were waiting for me either! Anyhow, you eventually came in very unsure and said "I am not sure if I want to do a Master's degree or not but the creative literacies program sounds interesting" And before I could say anything, you continued with—"I've been a teacher for many years now and I don't really need a Master's degree, except everyone says, I should go for it, but I don't want to be sitting in classrooms feeling bored" and on and on as I learned later how you just follow your stream of consciousness! (I'm pulling your leg here, I hope you know that!) Anyhow, after having you in my classes a few times, I now know that you are a passionate and creative teacher who cares deeply about all your students and who likes the chaos. I am sure your students love you!*

*Anyhow, I am glad I not only convinced you, but you wrote a thesis for your MA, when most students took the more structured route of an exam. We saw eye to eye on a lot of things pedagogically and I am so glad that you paused enough to write down your thoughts in this chapter.*

*Here's to many more collaborations in the future my friend!*

– *Ambika*

### Gustavo Lopez and Arturo Valdez

*Dear Gustavo and Arturo,*

*You two are the funniest pair! I remember the first time you both began communicating with me via email and for some reason Arturo your email stuck in my head—turo the turtle (Ha!), I pictured an old and wise man—not the gangly, almost teen-looking person. When we finally met, I remember Gustavo being the calm talker who “took charge.” You both complement each other so well it is amazing.*

*And yet, you are both such an unlikely pair—Gustavo who is so organized, meticulous in most everything you do—at least what you have always projected in the work that you did for me. And Arturo, always late, always last minute—with kind of a self-assured attitude of “oh my work will be accepted because it will be good”—yes it was, but it doesn’t take away from the fact that you drove me a little batty! Remember the email I sent you with a subject line of “Are you trying to drive me crazy?” or was it “Are you trying to fail?” ... Sorry if I was ever too hard on you, I realize now that you are the quintessential creative person who won’t be contained by structure.*

*Gustavo, I must acknowledge how you validated my storying and how you quietly let me know in many ways that you were always in my corner. Thank you my friend!*

*Honestly, I cannot wait to visit you both in your classrooms and see you both in action bringing history alive for your students. I want to learn from both your practice and wish my kids could have you as their teachers.*

*I hope this will be the first of many collaborations in the future!*

– Ambika

## Frederick Uy

*Dearest Fred,*

*You have become like my third brother, my family in Los Angeles as it were. I have felt your support, your quiet endorsement of my pedagogy in my professional life and your big heart in my personal life. I can't tell you how thankful I am for the many times that Vanessa, you and your beautiful daughters Marisol and Jade have embraced my family and me, the numerous times I have come over and crashed at your place on lonely holidays, the excellent food and companionship.*

*And Vanessa! My sister that I never had, the wisdom, the giggling, the deep bond I have felt with her is unlike any. Fred, I knew you first as my colleague, then as my supervisor as you chaired our division and now I see you as my mentor. The magnanimity with which Vanessa and you have encompassed my boys and me into your lives fulfills me. Remember the time you taught Akhil and Ashish to make pasta from scratch? Remember when Vanessa organized an Easter egg hunt in your garden? The many thanksgiving and Diwali meals we have shared! I can't wait to take you all to India and return the hospitality.*

*The numerous ways in which you have all enveloped us with your warmth and care speaks volumes about the genuine humans you are! Here's to more collaborations, meals and sharing my friend! Salud!*

– Ambika

In conclusion

*I hope you, the reader finds your ways of storying and I hope those ways of storying are culturally sustaining for you and helps you build trust in all your endeavors.*

– Ambika

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