

Chapter 12

“Critical Storytelling” as an Endowed Teacher Educator



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Abstract This chapter draws on a concept that my colleague Brandon Hensley and I have called “critical storytelling.” I share my experiences in teacher education, experiences riven within a field that is neoliberal, and my path to finding a non-neoliberal liberal arts college where I am happy. Further, I reflect on the deeply complicated interrelationships I have as a department chair who is committed to social justice working with state and national accreditors.

12.1 Introduction: A Little Background...

Prior to Berea College, I had never attended or worked for a private or “independent” school. The only interaction I had with private/independent schooling was when my first daughter (then a 3-year-old) attended an independent, tuition-based, Montessori pre-school in Milwaukee while I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Two years later, after I finished my Ph.D. and had taken my first tenure-track faculty position at Illinois State University, she played in a violin “strings” academy at Illinois Wesleyan University, an independent, liberal arts college in Bloomington, Illinois. Other than these brief brushes as a parent/client, I have had little experience with private education and schools.

I was raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and I took pride in the fact that the Green Bay Packers were owned by the “people.” Citizens owned shares of stock in their professional football teams. The Packers epitomised my station in life growing up: the working class. I thought working-class people were kind, while the wealthy were entitled, arrogant, and mean-spirited. I attended “public” schools, attended “public” institutions of higher education, socialised with the working class and poorer people, and up until I began working at Berea College during the fall of 2019, I have only attended or taught in “public” P–12 schools and public state universities. The fact that I did not attend or work for private schools was a badge of honour for me

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because I thought “private” institutions were places that served only well-to-do or “wealthy,” “arrogant” people. I perceived these private institutions in narrow ways: that their “rich” traditions were patriarchal, elitist, and abhorrent because it was not my reality nor something I desired. In the end, I came to realise my perspectives were ill-formed. They were misperceptions based on limited life experiences. A little more background would help...

12.2 A Little More Background...

When I taught in the public schools in Rochester, Minnesota, and then in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I trusted that it would be only temporary. Deep down, I knew I wanted to be a college professor. In addition to needing a terminal degree (usually a Ph.D.), I knew you had to have a minimum of 3–4 years of P–12 teaching experience to be a Social Foundations of Education professor. So that is how long I taught (the minimum) while I completed my doctorate. The path to the professoriate is the road I travelled.

When I began my first tenure-track position at Illinois State University, I began to teach my Social Foundations of Education courses and attempted to establish my research agenda. I had been in the P–12 classroom long enough to understand how schooling reproduced the inequities that I saw as a citizen in the greater society, but I sought to write scholarly papers. I internalised the “publish or perish” mantra. I worked so hard because I did not want to “perish.”

The Sociology of Education scholars, Education Studies scholars, and other experts that I read wrote voluminous amounts of literature explaining how and why outcomes were as they were. Explanations were proposed, and counter-responses were given. However, while I was living a life of the mind, I saw and experienced things that tired me. Mostly these tiring experiences stemmed from the “adulthood” and “racial battle fatigue” I was experiencing as a young scholar of colour (see Hartlep, 2015). Racism from my teacher educator colleagues, tied to institutional pressures that seemed to benefit the institution but led to no systematic change, made me to feel as though Illinois State University was not the place I would stay to further build my career. So when I saw an opening for a position at Metropolitan State University, a public state university in St. Paul, Minnesota, I applied. Metropolitan State University was a “public” university, and it was also an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). It served older students; the average age of the student body was older than I was when I began teaching there (33), and I was excited to be in a School of Urban Education working with pre-service teachers who were diverse—not the middle-class, White, mostly female students I had worked with at Illinois State University. Moreover, my Ph.D. in Urban Education aligned well with the work I would be doing at Metropolitan State University. I still experienced “adulthood” and “racial battle fatigue” (see Hartlep & Ball, 2020), but I did receive opportunities due to a supportive dean, something I write about elsewhere (see Hartlep & Antrop-González, 2019). Ultimately, though, the drawbacks were too

many—an accretion of straws that broke the camel’s back, and convinced me that again, it was time to look for work at a different institution of higher education.

Working at a minority-serving institution did nothing to insulate me as a professor of colour from institutional exploitation. I began to see some of the similarly problematic things that I saw at Illinois State University occurring at Metropolitan State University. White racial resentment by colleagues, institutional racism, lack of transparency, and problematic colleagues of colour, again, caused me to reflect on my work and the impact I was (or was not) making when it came to teacher education and broader society. I had a sabbatical coming up during which I was looking to finish my book *What Can Be Learned From Work Colleges? An Education that Works* (Hartlep, Forthcoming), when I saw a position for a Department Chair position in the Department of Education Studies at Berea College, in Berea, Kentucky. Berea College is a “private” college. I knew a little about Berea College, only because Berea College happens to be a Work College, and I had a trip planned for *What Can Be Learned From Work Colleges?* for my sabbatical project. I applied for the Department Chair position, and—lo and behold!—they offered me the position.

It was an easy choice for my family and me to pack our bags and head south. Berea College had so much to offer, and I was excited about new possibilities. The move was not me being a “free agent” trying to get a sweeter deal. I had just earned tenure, and I was a Department Chair. My family was settled, and uprooting them would be stressful for the whole family. But after thinking about my campus visit, the experience I had, and the people I encountered, I ended up declining my sabbatical just months before it was to start in order to begin my new position at Berea College during the fall of 2019. In addition to being department chair, I learned that I would also be named an endowed professor in the department: the Robert Charles Billings Chair in Education. What an honour!

Some readers of my story will ask, “How do you know things won’t deteriorate at Berea College?” “What will you do if your new Berea College colleagues express racism? What then?” “Racism exists everywhere. How is Berea College any different?” These are thoughtful questions and questions to which I have no answers. I truly believe that those who are not good, decent people leave Berea College. It is not a place that racists feel comfortable working at, but that’s just my impression.

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Why have I elected to write these vignettes to begin this chapter on storying pedagogy? It is because I have always been a lover of stories, and I now work at an institution that values people’s stories. During its fall 2019 commencement, Berea College’s President, Lyle Roelofs, stated that he was not simply the president, but that he was the Chief Storyteller. Bereans, myself included, all have stories to tell. My students during spring 2020 all contributed stories that were published in *Stories from Berea College: Opportunities of Attending a Work College*. The focus of the volume was on how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their thoughts about Berea College’s response and decisive action to close the college (see Neelakantan, 2020).

Fig. 12.1 Billboard sign
<https://www.kare11.com/article/news/verify/verify-are-minnesota-schools-worst-in-nation-for-students-of-color/89-aff38b41-5412-4967-9bca-967d1b3cf987>



It may seem ironic to begin a chapter on working at a private institution by sharing the story of how little I knew about such institutions, but the irony is embedded in the fact that my notions of “private” and “public” were so narrow and misinformed. In my co-edited volume *Racial Battle Fatigue in Faculty: Perspectives and Lessons From Higher Education*, I share a story about how the mostly White union at Metropolitan State University was racist and seemed to only make matters more challenging for racial equity work (Hartlep & Ball, 2020). Metropolitan State University was, on paper, the perfect place for me to do the work my heart and head wished to do. I worked with non-traditional students, mostly non-traditional students of colour, in St. Paul, a seemingly diverse capital of Minnesota, a “blue” state. Yet, the institution, a “public” one, was not one where doing this work was easy or impactful, in my experience. The narrative that the midwest is a great place to work and raise a family is pervasive, and one I thought I believed, but the everyday racism I experienced made me question the veracity of this belief. Driving the highways of Minnesota, I would see signs that said, “Minnesota schools are worst in the nation for our children of color” (see Fig. 12.1).

Moving to the South was not something I had envisioned would ever happen. I had never been to Kentucky before my campus interview. Moreover, I would never have thought that I would work at a “private” liberal arts college, where a large percentage of students are White (but economically poor), much less find myself to be happiest there. But let me explain why I am happy and why I believe I can do equity, inclusion, and justice-oriented work at a “private” liberal arts college. My explanation will require me to unpack how Berea College is a unique institution of higher education.

12.3 The Berea Bubble: Irony, Complicatedness, but the Importance of Ethics and Transparency

I also see the irony in the fact that I now work at an arguably radical, progressive, private, “green” or eco-friendly, liberal arts, federally recognised work college in a “red” state. When I began writing this chapter, President Donald J. Trump had just been impeached by the House of Representatives. A week or two prior, the incumbent Republican Governor Matt Bevin was ousted in his re-election bid by Andy Beshear. Kentucky has been “red” for quite some time and is highly partisan. For example, in 2016, Trump won Kentucky by 29.84 points. Based on this result, a senator was statistically predicted to vote with his positions roughly 88% of the time. However, Senator McConnell (R) voted with Trump’s position 94% of the time. And based on Trump’s election, a House Representative was predicted to vote with Trump’s position 86% of the time, yet Representative Barr voted with Trump’s position 96% of the time.

So how does a college like Berea, in the midst of a sea of so much red, exist? While this question is outside the scope of this chapter, a great article that does address that question is “Berea College—Coeducationally and Racially Integrated: An Unlikely Contingency in the 1850s,” written by Richard Day, Roger Cleveland, June O. Hyndman, and Don C. Offutt and published in 2013 in the *Journal of Negro Education*.

And how, exactly, is Berea College a “green” campus? The administration, as well as the faculty and staff here, are committed to being environmentally conscious. I heard an anecdote about the college trying to use “used” recycled oil in the elevator mechanisms. That, according to the story floating around, was why the elevators had to be serviced so much. That might scare some who might think, *Is that even safe?* I think it shows how authentic the college is when it comes to sustainability and earth consciousness. I also read on our website the following: <https://www.berea.edu/news/berea-college-cited-as-top-performer-in-sustainability>.

Berea College gained the No. 1 spot in the nation for Campus Engagement in the *2019 Sustainable Campus Index* (SCI). The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) recognises top-performing colleges and universities in 17 sustainability impact areas and overall by institution type, as measured by the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) reporting system. Berea, long-known for a strong commitment to sustainability, was recognised with a perfect score for campus engagement. Since 2017, Berea College has had a “gold” STARS rating.

12.4 Facile Renderings and Readings of Neoliberalism

The history of Berea College is something that breaks many stereotypes of private colleges. While it has an endowment currently over \$1 Billion (although this was impacted by the COVID-19 situation, just like in 2008 when its endowment was impacted negatively by the great recession), it uses virtually all of it directly on its students. Students do not pay tuition and the great majority graduate from Berea College with little-to-no student loan debt. In 2017 Berea College was named as the Number 1 College with Lowest Average Graduating Debt by *Kiplinger*. The fact that Berea College graduates its students with so little debt testifies that it deplores student loan debt and understands that graduating indebted students does not serve them well at all.

To me, working at Berea College as a department chair is complicated because while we are a Department of Education Studies, we also have a teacher certification programme, which means we must remain accredited by the state and the national accreditation body, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Gorlewski and Tuck (2019) are worth being quoted at length when in their introduction to their edited book *Who Decides Who Becomes a Teacher?: Schools of Education as Sites of Resistance*, they stated the following:

An irony about the field of education is that it is such a contested terrain that what it is, from one perspective, a policy “solution” represents, from a different perspective, the “problem.” Attend a major education conference, and in one session, the architects of a high-profile neoliberal education policy may be praising their invention, while in the session next door, critical scholars are sharing findings that refute the effectiveness of that same policy. Often these contestations have to do with the way that what constitutes the problem needing research intervention, itself, is framed. (p. 4)

Another complicating factor in maintaining national accreditation is its high cost financially. The immense costs that go into maintaining these accreditations and the neoliberal machinery we must placate also create mental fatigue. Consequential and expensive teacher examinations are just one cog in the machine.

Costs of accreditation are more than financial. There are also mental and emotional costs for department chairs such as myself. Maintaining accreditation is a complicated and time-consuming task because of some of the regulations we must abide by (such as high-stakes teacher certification examinations that serve both as gatekeepers and guarantors on who can become a certified teacher in the state of Kentucky). A further complication stems from the fact that I, as an endowed teacher educator (and critical pedagogue), know very well how these consequential examinations are problematic, and yet I must actively perpetuate them because our programmes’ students must take and pass them.

Now it could be said that I am resisting the examinations because I am part of a working group that wants to propose alternatives to the high-stakes examinations. If that is the case, then, yes, I am raging against the machine as best I can. However, it could also be argued I am not doing enough to push back; it could be argued that I am raging with the machine. According to King and Hampel (2018), “Some

2,300 colleges and universities, or one third of all postsecondary institutions, award degrees and/or certificates in education” (p. 7). If so many postsecondary institutions award degrees and/or certificates in education, then couldn’t it be argued that we—a collective we—have ceded our power to high-stakes testing companies that are enriching themselves and their shareholders by making the rules by which we must abide? This conundrum of wrestling with compromise is a timeless and universal part of the human condition: Often, instigators of change exercise their agency most effectively on the inside—not raging against the machine or with the machine, but labouring to change the machine from within.

I chose to work at Berea College because the students who attend the college have their education paid for, and they must be financially “poor.” That is the mission and the history of the college. Yes, the students work on campus, but they do not need to engage with the neoliberal higher education marketplace that a student at the University of Kentucky, the state’s public flagship, or the University of Louisville, the state’s urban university, have to because of decreased state funding of higher education, which leads to increasing tuition for students (Spalding, 2019). In fact, in 2019, Berea College was number one in the state in terms of the debt that its graduates left with. That means it is better than the sports universities mentioned previously. Berea College relies on its endowment to make all of this good happen. And an endowment’s health and financial value depend on neoliberal machinations, namely returns on investments and stock portfolios. Then isn’t Berea College part of the neoliberal network and tapestry?

When scholars invoke the term neoliberalism, it is typically in order to critique “privatisation” in overly cut-and-dried lines of reasoning and logic. From a purity standpoint, Berea College muddies the lens by which we make these anti-neoliberal critiques. But to me, it is clear that I have found my spiritual home. Although I work in Berea, Kentucky, my children attend schools in Fayette County Public Schools (in Lexington, Kentucky). FCPS has been the first school district in which my children have had teachers of colour, counsellors of colour, and a superintendent of colour (Manny Caulk was named superintendent of the year in 2019)¹. When I worked at Metropolitan State University, my family and I lived in Hudson, Wisconsin. My children did not have a single teacher of colour. The narrative of “the Midwest has great schools” cannot be entirely true if there are elementary schools that don’t have a single teacher of colour. Can it be? At least not for the students of colour who go through their entire early education without seeing a single adult instructor who looks like them.

And now we return to the facile belief I harboured. There are no “good” or “bad” categories of institutions per se. The publics are not necessarily better than the privates, or vice versa. Minority-Serving Institutions are not necessarily better than Primarily White Institutions or vice versa. However, I do think that some institutions are more neoliberal than others, and I do not think bigger is always better, even though our society may reinforce that view. Berea College, I would argue, is less neoliberal than my former employer, Metropolitan State University, but Minnesota is a union

¹ Manny Caulk died unexpectedly in 2020. He was 49 years old.

state while Kentucky is a right-to-work state. Although the former is “public” and the latter is “private,” it is a false equivalency to believe public is non-neoliberal or less neoliberal than “private.” Let me unpack why. Berea College’s endowment very much relies on the “market” and on returns. If the endowment does not grow, Berea College is harmed. So, Berea College is neoliberal under that definition.

Metropolitan State University, a public institution, also is neoliberal insofar as the less it receives from the state of Minnesota, the more it must ensure it covers its costs through more efficient budgeting and raising student tuition and fees. However, the bulk of students at Berea College leave debt free because they do not pay tuition. And in the Department of Education Studies, students do not pay for their teacher licensure examinations; the department does that on their behalf. The fact that someone can graduate with a teaching degree and licensure from a public college or university carrying huge student loan debt is a neoliberal problem (Hartlep et al., 2017). The idea that someone can graduate from a private liberal arts college with a degree in teaching and be certified by the state with little-to-no student loan debt is remarkable and not a neoliberal phenomenon.

The critical storytelling I would like to share is that as an endowed teacher educator, I believe in walking the talk and embracing the outcomes. I think that outcomes are the true litmus test for value and ethics. Metropolitan State University had a radical legacy (see Bute, 2017), one deeply personal and anti-racist, but it was far from those aspirational legacies when I worked there.

And what do we make of Berea College’s endowment? Harvard University and Stanford University are both “private” institutions of higher learning that have massive endowments. They both have expressed concern about their endowments being taxed. While an endowment tax may be a liability for them, I would label their liabilities far more neoliberal than, say, an institution like Berea College, which also has tax liability due to the fact that its endowment is over a billion dollars. I cannot support the historical legacies and foundations of the former institutions; I can support the latter. Harvard was created with slave labour. Berea College is a “labour” college, one that worked to educate slaves and recently freed slaves as well as poor whites (see Day et al., 2013). Stanford College, named after Leland Stanford, a notorious sinophobe, xenophobe, and racist, was built with the labour of Chinese, who were later excluded. As Janet Lorin (2020) wrote in her *Bloomberg* story, “Stanford University faces as much as \$43 million in taxes under a new levy on college endowments included in President Donald Trump’s tax overhaul, the first time private colleges will pay such a fee” (para. 1). Stanford’s legacy and the way it has conducted its business is a far different reality than how Berea College has maintained and grown its endowment. In my opinion, “Stanford – the third-richest U.S. private college with an endowment of \$27.7 billion” (Lorin, 2020, para. 2) should pay a tax, whereas Berea College ought not to have to pay such a tax.

12.5 “Critical Storytelling” as an Endowed Teacher Educator

The purpose of this chapter has been to share critical storytelling experiences I have had as a teacher educator who traversed two institutions of higher education before I could finally be “home.” In my research on endowed professors, the fact that all of the endowed and distinguished faculty didn’t seek their endowed positions is fascinating and true of my own path. I would never have believed that I would be teaching at a liberal arts college. I actively write, despite the fact that at liberal arts colleges like Berea, the focus is on teaching. But I don’t write necessarily out of forced compliance or obligation to institutional dictates. Rather, I write because I am a critical storyteller, and I have thoughts I wish to share with a broader audience. As a teacher educator who chairs an education studies department, I’d like to conclude this chapter with a last story: a story about fear.

12.6 Fearless Leadership

I am fearful. The stakes are too high to not be afraid. Early in my career, I wrote about my fear that educational studies would go extinct. The patterns of its marginalisation were clear, something colleagues and I documented (see Hartlep & Porfilio, 2015a, 2015b; Hartlep et al., 2015).

My first academic position was at a predominantly white institution in a Foundations of Education Department. I wrote about the marginalisation our field was experiencing. I left that department for a School of Urban Education. I wrote less about the foundations of education issues. Now, as I write this chapter, I am back in the Education Studies Department. I am finally where I need to be. I am finally happy.

As a leader, I am fearful that the more things change, the more they stay the same. I am afraid that our students at Berea College won’t have access to diverse clinical field placements due to the fact Berea is rural and remote. As I wrote earlier, I am currently untenured. I am afraid that the Praxis is racially and class-biased and harms our students at Berea College. I am afraid that I will make a major error as department chair. I am afraid ... but I will continue to do my best. I will continue to write my stories and share them with the world.

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