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# **Essays on Teaching Excellence**

## ***Toward the Best in the Academy***

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# **The Power of Student Stories: Connections that Enhance Learning**

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## **Starting with Student Stories**

"Tell a story about a (recent) moment in your life when race mattered." That's how I begin my course in African-American history. Students first write, then tell their stories in groups of three or four; and then we hear the "themes, issues, and patterns" that emerged from the groups. The themes from student stories predictably prefigure the enduring themes of the course. Follow-up reading or an assignment connects student themes to the substantive and theoretical material of the course. Thus, students' prior experiences are connected to the larger learning goals and key concepts, ideas, theories, and content of the course. Students become aware that their stories are part of a larger story and that White, Black, Latino, Asian, and racially mixed students all have a story to tell. Student and historical stories about race relations are interwoven throughout the course.

There is a reason for the order in the process of using student stories. By starting with their stories early in the course, or at the start of a new unit, we begin with where they are, with their prior experiences, identity questions, hopes, fears, and aspirations. By inviting students to look for common themes, patterns, and issues in their stories and to debrief them as "texts," we lift the discussion to a higher level of

analysis and synthesis and thereby begin to turn individual stories into a larger aggregate meaning. Joan Didion (1978) wrote that stories fill in the space between what happened and what it means to the individual. Making meaning from student stories is therefore crucial in connecting students with our learning goals.

### **A Little Theory behind the Power of Stories**

In his important article on "Taking Learning Seriously," Lee Shulman (1999) said, "we now understand that learning is a dual process in which, initially, the inside beliefs and understandings must come out, and only then can something outside get in. To prompt learning, you've got to begin with the process of going from inside out" (p. 12). Stories, therefore, are a way to access the learning that's already inside and then to make connections to larger themes and patterns. Using stories affirms the value of prior student experiences both emotionally and cognitively, helps students make their own meaning, and shows that we take learners seriously.

The use and power of stories is consistent with the growing body of literature on the role of emotions in learning and its inextricable connection with the intellect. James Zull (2002) showed how the synergistic interplay of affect and cognition depends on replacing prior embedded mental images or on unlearning prior misconceptions and errors (see also Lee, 2002). The unlearning happens by moving from "neuronal networks" in the inner emotional centers of the brain (i.e., limbic cortex) to the more cognitive, integrative reasoning centers in the outer cortex. Deep learning, therefore, depends on the brain processing first emotionally and then making reasoned connections. Far from "intruders in the bastion of reason," emotions and feelings are "enmeshed in its networks" and indispensable for deep learning. Emotional experiences enhance critical thinking; mind, body, and feelings are all involved in a holistic process of learning (Damasio, 1994).

Stories, along with music, metaphors and memory, best help us access emotions. Stories, Zull (2002) said, "engage all parts of the brain", which makes them key to where "learning is deepest" (p. 228). Stories "come from our experiences, our memories, our ideas, our actions, and our feelings." Therefore, he said, "you can see the

value of stories for the teacher. We should tell stories, create stories, and repeat stories; and we should ask our students to do the same."

## **Examples of Student Stories**

*Especially* we should ask our students to tell stories. But what kind of stories? In addition to stories about race, invite students to tell a story about a moment when gender, or class, or ethnicity mattered. Or about a moment when they felt marginal, discounted and/or when they felt affirmed, important. Or to tell a story about their names and where they came from. Other examples are stories of success: for example, "tell a story about a time when you were successful doing math [or art, a science experiment, or as a leader]." I know several mathematics and quantitative reasoning teachers who invite students to tell stories about moments in their life when they were good at "doing math" or to write quantitative autobiographies. These assignments reconnect students with positive earlier experiences before some insensitive teacher dampened their confidence.

What also happens when a teacher invites the success story is to acknowledge that s/he understands that the students are anxious about their current abilities to do well. The assignment takes an inner embedded mental image and belief that says, "I can't do this," and turns it into a "Yes, you can, because you've done it before." More importantly, the assignment shows that the teacher cares about students' learning by caring about their inner emotional state.

Stories can serve reflective activities as well as build self-confidence. Using a split page, as students on the left side solve the problem, work the experiment, analyze the reading, or interpret the visual, on the right have them reflect on their process by telling a story about what they thought—and felt!—during the assignment. To reflect on the connections between the two sides exemplifies learning from the inside out.

Any story about a developmental issue of autonomy, individuation, relationships, intimacy, identity, career aspirations, and spiritual or political values has the capacity to help students connect their inner selves to course concepts. For example, in teaching the American Revolution, I have often asked students to "tell a story about an experience you have had challenging, engaging, and struggling with

an authority figure in your life." And what 17-27 year old has *not* had such a struggle? In debriefing the stories, looking for common themes and patterns, invariably issues will arise of rights (curfews, clothes, cars), rebellions (fighting with Dad or a step-Mom or coach), and responsibilities (negotiating the responsible use of rights with these adults). By connecting contemporary mini-American revolutions with the historical American revolution, students identify larger themes and thereby make meaning.

Telling stories can also enhance faculty development work. For example, find one or more colleagues and have each of you tell a story about an important moment in teaching when you knew that learning was happening. Then help each other explore how that learning moment revealed fundamental pedagogical principles and style, and look for significant similarities and differences. Or you could each tell a story about a moment when you learned something that was important to you. What did you learn and how did you learn it? Be descriptive in telling your story. What was happening? Where? Who was there? When exactly did the learning happen? How did you feel? How has that learning mattered in your life?

Each of us will have his/her own examples of using stories depending on course content, faculty culture, and creative imagination. Given your current learning goals, what is the story you need to ask your students to tell in class tomorrow? Given faculty needs, what is the story they need to tell in a workshop, brownbag luncheon or other format?

### **Summary of the Purposes of Stories**

Telling stories is sacred work and also multicultural work. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (1988) wrote that stories are an invitation to cross the boundaries of our worlds into the worlds of others including their cultural and religious traditions. Stories are also an invitation to cross the boundaries into our own depths and lived mystery.

Stories take students deeper into themselves. Stories affirm the value of prior experiences. Stories connect student lives, issues, hopes, and fears with key course concepts and content. Stories honor and empower student voices, especially different student voices. Stories

show the value of diversity and build learning communities. Stories connect students and teachers together in learning about each other. Stories help students replace embedded images in the brain with new ones. Stories encode and structure memory for deep learning and making meaning. Stories, in sum, become "texts," pedagogical representations that make connections visible and concrete. For all these reasons telling stories enhances learning.

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