

IS THIS THE ONLY STORY FOR TEACHING: WORKING WITH COUNTER-NARRATIVES WITH MY STUDENTS

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Did my preservice classes in 1990 prepare me to teach school? Is there more to the story of teaching than what I was taught? Pinar (1975) asked, “What is the experience of being ... a stranger in a land not one’s own” (p. 399). I was prepared to be in the land of teaching, or at least, I thought this. I bought the books, listened to the lectures, and engaged in the activities. I should have been ready to teach. Was I prepared to be a high school teacher because I read the texts and listened to my professors? As Pinar (1975) wrote, “before we learn to teach in such a way ... we must become students of ourselves, before we can truthfully say we understand teaching” (p. 412). This is why I return to my own pre-service teaching experiences. I want to dig deeper into how I learned about teaching. I want to step out of my familiar recognition of these experiences and make the “familiar unfamiliar” (Aoki, 2005, p. 146) so that I can comprehend and question the “taken-for-granted” (p. 239) in teaching.

PREPARING TO BECOME A TEACHER

As a young pre-service educator in college, I was like a sponge, soaking in everything. I labored to learn about educational history, methods of teaching, and preparation for content classes. I vividly remember taking a class called “School and Society.” However, the school and the society were the same school and society that I grew up in—a white system that barely recognized schools and societies that were not white. As DeHart (2017) noted,

We teachers have our narratives, too, whether or not we think of them as such. We carry personal myths about where we came from and how we got here. We may share internalized tales of feeling misunderstood and disenfranchised. We may perceive our school communities as allies or obstacles. There are realities, sure, but stories also have the power to create reality. (para. 3)

Was my pre-teaching training an authentic one? Was it one seen only with a white lens? I do remember attempts to step away from the white perspective. I read works such as Kozol’s (1992) “Savage Inequalities” and had healthy discussions around the text. I remember my shock in reading about schools in Camden, New Jersey. Two high schools were literally divided by a railroad track. The school on one side of the track had a state-of-the-art chemistry lab; the one on other side used shot glasses for their lab because they could not afford the equipment. One school had freshly painted walls; in the other, teens ate paint chips from the ceiling. Although I grew up in a poor family, I did not know this kind of poor. This was not part of my narrative.

I wondered if my perspective could widen if I was able to talk with more people who didn’t share my lens. Sure, I read a great deal about teaching, but did I hear from people living it? I stepped into my first classroom as a pre-service English literature teacher in my junior year of college. This was not a school in Ohio, where I was taking classes, but a multicultural school in Sheffield, England. I, along with three other pre-service teachers, had decided to spend our fall semester of 1988 overseas with a brand-new program.

On the first day, the teacher said to me that he needed to go to the dentist and that I would need to take over the class for the day. I not only had to teach unsupervised for the whole day, but it was authentic teaching under fire. I taught an English class where the students read an American story by Angela Gibbs (1940/2021) called “The Test.” In the story, an older white male would not pass a young African American woman on her driver’s test because she was Black. My entire day consisted of addressing questions regarding whether or not all Americans were racist and why they act in a racist manner.

In England, I observed and taught for over 1000 hours and worked with students in every grade level and age and ability range. I was immersed in narratives from people doing the work. However, these stories were not only from teachers, but principals, guidance counselors, custodians, and of course, the students. From these voices, their stories, I learned about teaching.

This made me wonder how much of the narrative of teaching is accurate. How much of what I read and what I did I had simply accepted because it was the only thing told to me.

- I accepted that Lee Canter’s Assertive Discipline plans were the sure-fire way to manage students.
- I understood that the role of teacher was to be separate from students at all times.
- Student stories were not as important as major literary works.

However, this “dominant narrative” was not an accurate one. Dominant or what some call “master” narrative is defined as a “pre-existent sociocultural form of representation” intended to “delineate and confine local interpretation strategies and agency constellations in individual subjects as well as social institutions” (Bamber, 2005, p. 288), and counter-narratives have been defined as “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews, 2004, p. 1). Over time, after teaching, I learned that managing kids is not as productive as deeply listening to them and accepting that sometimes the system creates inequity that pushes a student to act out. I also learned that sometimes it is productive to be a *student* with my students and engage in inquiry-based learning together. And after serving as the first full time high school storytelling teacher in the country, I learned the value of student stories is as important, if not more so, than literary texts. Teaching is about relationships, and knowing my students leads to connections, community, and curriculum.

MOVING MY STUDENTS BEYOND WHAT THEY KNOW: SEEKING COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Fast forward to the year 2020, and I am in the middle of the pandemic and all of my teaching at Ohio University Lancaster is online. I am teaching a class called “Human Development and Learning.” The pandemic has provided that pregnant pause to re-examine how I teach this class. I decide that I will concentrate on assumptions about teaching and learning and what my students can discover when they seek out and talk with someone who knows the subject.

I want them to engage in a process I call “story-ography” (Cordi, 2019). This is taking time for stories to emerge. I share that a journalist is looking for THE story and writes around it. In story-ography, a practice that I have taught and conducted for over 15 years, we take time for stories to happen. We wait them out, we engage in conversations, and when stories happen, we build upon them. We ask questions about the narratives, and we tell, listen, and respond to narratives not as an interviewer, but as a storyteller.

I design a “counter-narrative” assignment. I know the value when students investigate what they are most curious about because they can design authentic questions around their inquiry. This serves as effective places where stories can happen. In preparation, I have them present throughout the semester on myths of learning. For example, are there really left and right processes in the brain? Is multitasking possible? Are girls’ faster learners than boys? We had a productive time talking about what separates real research from hype. One student replies that from this experience he will question everything from now on. After they write their thoughts on a subject, I ask them to conduct story-based interview, engaging in story-ography. After my students listen to podcasts, read articles about counter-narratives, and listen to Ted Talks such as “The Danger of the Single Story” (Adichie, 2009), they seek out people’s stories.

One student, Rachel Dille, begins by questioning the narratives of standardized testing. She travels to a mainstream website that says standardized testing “helps ensure that every student, regardless of school district, receives a well-rounded, quality education” (SchoolMart, 2021, para. 2). However, after talking to three teachers, she discovers there is more to this story. The first educator who had only been teaching for two years stated that her “harder working perfectionist students” enjoy testing, but for others, it is very anxiety-inducing. Dille then talks with a special education teacher and discovers the inequity of testing for special needs students. The teacher shares that her students “are not in the class setting that the other students are, and they are not given the same teaching.” She talks about how she concentrates on the needs of the students and not always the same content of the other teachers. She says her students don’t understand the language of the testing, let alone the test itself. This allows Dille to see that the focus of educators is not always the same. She asks questions such as, “is the test fair,” and wonders if the “School-Mart” narrative considers special needs students in their claim of ensuring quality education for “every student.” The teacher shares:

When I first started as a teacher, I thought my teaching had to be focused on getting them prepared for the test and that’s it, and as I became more interested in teaching and better informed about how students react to this, I learned to change my ways.

Dille learns that the students should be the focus, not the test. She states that, with these story-based interviews, she too changed. “As a new teacher who is scared to ask questions, I think this assignment taught me asking questions is one of the most important things, and by asking questions, I am more informed about issues about teaching.” Standardized testing is something that can be accepted as part of the educational system. It can be the accepted narrative. We need to provide future teachers a chance to listen to those who challenge mainstream, dominant definitions of standardized testing.

As we teach students about the power of narratives, we also need to help them seek places where they can find narratives that are authentic and compelling. They can be found by actually arranging time to meet the people, but students can also use narratives that are found on the web. As educators, we need to show students where to find the stories. Another student, Isabella Ebert, is limited to the people she can talk due to the pandemic, and she cannot access the people she originally intended. She works in a place where customers enter, and she decides to ask them about her subject, school uniforms. However, after hearing vague responses, she realizes she needs to look elsewhere. She turns to data-based websites that include narratives from first person accounts. She reads a story that reveals that African American young ladies are more subject to punishment because of dress codes. She wants to know more. She seeks out more stories. She dives deeper into issues of inequity.

Isabella says about her work, “This assignment taught me to look deeper into important policies and recognize if its beneficial or harmful to the school’s climate. I learned that narratives have value, but they also must be questioned and researched.” The importance of listening is what one student, Ashley Loy, learned from the assignment:

As a future educator I will consider stories that I hear by keeping them in the back of my head ... and generate my very own opinions and thoughts of the school instead of letting others stereotype the school for me.

It is not enough to learn about the issues of diversity and economic scarcity by reading a displaced text. Talking to others localizes the issues. It makes the issues and the stories around them real. I need to create spaces for students to talk to those who know about the issues and show how students’ inquiry can be addressed in a local landscape.

One of my students makes me question my understanding of his issue. He, like me and the rest of the world, asks about the impact of digital teaching during the pandemic. I have read numerous accounts of how teachers feel it is unproductive, but as my student, Jake Smithers, discovers not every educator agrees. One teacher says, “students tend to be finishing assignments on time and (they) hear little complaining about too much or too little work from their student’s parents.” He said these teachers feel they can dedicate themselves to real planning and that students are not earning poor grades. He states that the teachers are able to “do unique things to connect with students, such as doing a scavenger hunt around the house to get to know classes’ likes and dislikes.”

This makes me reconsider my mindset about digital teaching. I had listened to the stories that say digital teaching has less value. I need to reclaim the narrative. As Smithers sates, “Narrative can be an important part of having a discussion. ... With multiple perspectives, one can make a more well-versed opinion on a topic.” I personally find value in digital teaching and need to listen to the stories of what my students and I are learning using digital tools.

MY COUNTER-NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDING

I hoped that my students would find narratives that were counter to what they thought. As Lather (1991) stated, counter-narratives invite students to “ask questions about what (they) have not thought to think, about what is mostly invited in (their) discourses/practices, about what has been muted, repressed, unheard” (p. 156). As we teach, we need to question if we include our classes’ voices such as the special education students’ take on standardized testing. Are we listening to headlines and not the narratives of teachers who enjoy digital teaching? From this work, my students heard stories about students who are in schools that discriminate. From finding and listening to these stories, my students rethought these issues.

This semester I too have been re-seeing and re-thinking what I know. On any given day, a newspaper will speak of those who have served time in a correctional institution as if they were one collective. They place them in a nameless category and talk about high recidivism rates. The dominant narrative of the people is generalized. However, over the last two months, I have been teaching storytelling workshops with people who have recently been released. I have listened to these “restored citizens” and helped them tell their stories. These men and woman speak from a voice of inside, when they were serving time, and outside. However, each story is about empowerment or wishing to be empowered. One of the people I work with is currently in the *New York Times Magazine* for his singing, and another brings “restored citizens” together as artists and creates impressive galleries of their work. The others tell powerful and engaging narratives.

This is not to say the stories are not about defeat and struggle. I take a hard breath when I hear how much neglect has been inflicted those inside during the pandemic. There is no social distancing, and the stories of sickness are rampant. However, these stories are from live beings, each different and dynamic. The stories are not collective and nameless, but instead personal. I often do more listening than telling. I work with them on telling their stories in public formats because, as one person said, “no one else can tell their story like they can tell it.” From this experience, I am reminded of how much clearer an issue is when one listens to those who have or are living in it. Students need to listen to authentic stories as part of their curriculum because, unlike the text, this connection is personal. The impact of this type of listening can resonate when they are in the classroom working with stories that don’t mirror their own lives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

In an on-line storytelling series, run by Storyteller Mary Alice Arthur, Canadian social organizer Vanessa Reid (Arthur et al., 2020) stated that we need to abandon thinking that leads us to conclude that the status quo or our narrow perspective is simply “how the world works.” The world does not always work the way the textbook states. The text can paint a picture that is not accurate. It is not personal, localized, and at times can be outdated. Actual stories hit harder for my students. It is not enough to hear homelessness is a problem in schools. Instead, bring someone in or interview the person who works with homeless students to tell their stories. I vividly remember working in a fifth-grade classroom on a six-week story-drama involving the topic of homelessness. We knew a student who was homeless at the time. We explained what we were going to do, and I will never forget his response. He said, “It is about time I get to tell my story.” People want to share their stories. We need to make spaces for it happen.

As professors, we need to do more than read the narratives; we need to find the narratives as we ask our students to seek them out. We need to be able to connect the world they read about with the world in which they are living. A Louisiana storyteller, J. J. Reneaux once said to me, “Some stories have to die so others can live” (personal communication, 1997). As educators, we need to find the stories that no longer have life. Some stories are not accurate, they need to fade. One way to do this is to offer counter-narratives from the people living the narratives. Aoki (as cited in Pinar & Irwin, 2005) asked: “What insights, what deeper seeing ... does [the] story allow?” (p. 18). As an educator, I need to seek narratives that allow my students to revisit or change. Stories like standardized testing fit for every student, as do narratives that issues of classroom diversity and economics can be solved by formulas and that, when the pandemic passes, everyone will be okay.

We need to ask more of the people who can tell us the stories behind these incomplete or inaccurate narratives. After all, working with counter-narratives has the potential to transform thinking. In reviewing my experiences in teaching, I have realized that I have accepted too often the first narrative of what is said. In order to understand narratives around a concept or an idea, one must have both narratives and counter-narratives acting so one can see how they are at play.

But this is not simply conversation; it is more directed. Battey and Franke (2015) said working with counter-narratives does not consist of “talking in general”; instead, it is about “embedding stories in the practice of teaching” (p. 456) so that teachers can tell stories about “deficit thinking” and instead engage in communication that can change teaching practices (Miller et al., 2020, pp. 280–281). In this age of disinformation, let us talk to people who tell the authentic story that the textbook doesn’t always tell. How this is done ... now that is a different story, or should I say, stories?

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