

Establishing Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Practices via ‘Storytelling’

by Colvin T. Georges Jr.

American predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education have become unsafe and inequitable spaces for students of color nationwide, especially for those holding multiple intersecting social identities that are underrepresented. In a 2019 report examining uncivil hate and bias incidents on college campuses, 67.65% of respondents reported experiencing occurrences that were racially motivated (e.g., finding nooses and Nazi symbols on campus and bias-based bullying) (Jones & Baker, 2019). Additionally, 54.41% of respondents reported experiencing hate speech that offended them based on race, sexual identity, religion, disability, and other traits (Jones & Baker, 2019). These unsafe and troublesome environments have impacted the psychological and physiological well-being of students of color, along with their ability to persist toward graduation (Gorski, 2019; Hurtado, 1992).



This brief discusses the critical need for leaders within higher education to adopt “storytelling” as a culturally responsive pedagogical practice to promote student success. Classrooms have become places where students holding multiple minoritized social identities feel invisible, excluded, and lack trust toward faculty (Parmegiani, 2014; Combs, Penn, Cassisi, Michael, Wood, Wanner, & Adams, 2006). Research has shown that storytelling is a useful practice to promote learning, relationships with faculty, a sense of belonging, independence, and a space for self-reflection (Cleverley-Thompson, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Parmegiani, 2014; Camainotti & Gray, 2012; Anderson, 2004). Introduced in this brief are various studies that validate these claims, which conclude with recommended strategies for best practices.

What is “Storytelling?”

Storytelling has become an integral part of society and has spread widely in the 1990s, particularly in the social sciences (Chautard & Collin-Lachaud, 2019; Czamiawska, 2010). This method of communication is common practice in organizations that are looking to disseminate knowledge transfer and the exercise of power or identity affirmation (Gabriel 1995, 2000; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Chautard & Collin-Lachaud, 2019). Throughout the years, storytelling methodology has been adopted by educators across various fields beyond the social sciences. In a study conducted at a southwestern community college, researchers explored the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical practice in a science course using a post-test and quasi-experimental design (Csikar & Stekanik, 2018). This study was conducted because

educators wanted to identify effective ways of conveying new scientific information to students that is often complex and difficult for them to conceptualize. Researchers found this methodology to be useful because it improved students' critical-thinking skills, helped them link new information with pre-existing knowledge, and connected their lived experiences to the subject matter in a meaningful way (Csikar & Stekanik, 2018). Evidence from additional studies suggests that storytelling helps students improve their communication skills, confidence, and trust for peers and faculty (Parmegiani, 2014; Clark & Rossiter, 2006).

Equitable Outcomes: Creating Trusted and Safe Learning Environments

Storytelling promotes learning in the classroom because it allows students to reflect on their lived experiences and connects them to the curricula, which increases their ability to understand new information. However, it is essential for faculty members to be able to create safe and open environments where the unique and diverse backgrounds of all

students are recognized, valued, and appreciated. This equitable approach is critical when working with students who face language barriers or are from other countries of origin.

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In a study conducted on an English as a second language (ESL) course at Bronx Community College, one faculty member found that using storytelling as a pedagogical practice helped her students achieve academic success (Parmegiani, 2014). This course included students who recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic and had limited abilities in speaking English. At the start of the course, students' abilities to read and write English were subpar. By the end, however, there was a complete transformation in which all students passed the required exit exam. The author noted that she bettered her students' English vocabulary and comprehension by allowing them to use their native Spanish language to fill in lexical gaps. When students were able to speak and even think in Spanish, they were able to better understand the new English words they had learned based on experiences from their native land.

The author asserts that language plays a central role in students' identity (Parmegiani, 2014). There have been instances in which postsecondary institutions reprimanded international students for using their native language. This practice has harmful effects on students' ability to integrate into American higher education. When students are entering postsecondary education, especially those holding multiple minoritized identities, they need to feel connected to the institution in order to persist academically and socially. Along with international students, there is another group of underrepresented students that benefit significantly from storytelling—students living with disabilities.

Storytelling as a Form of Assessment

As mentioned earlier, storytelling has several benefits that promote student learning, and it is also an approach that can be a form of assessment for educators. To evaluate the effectiveness of a program along with student experience, Ankeny and Lehmann (2011) interviewed four students living with disabilities who were enrolled in a secondary transition program at a community college in the Midwest. The program equipped student with meaningful life skills and strategies to succeed in the workplace. The researchers used narrative methodology to capture students' voices to learn about their experiences within the program. Creswell (2002) asserts that, like storytelling, narrative methods allow researchers to understand others'

past experiences within the program. Creswell (2002) asserts that, like storytelling, narrative methods allow researchers to understand others' past experiences and how they affect their present and future ones. By capturing student voices through their stories, researchers were able to determine the program's effectiveness. Students said the program fostered a healthy environment, which allowed them to develop self-determination and independence. In addition,

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several students noted before participating in the program that they feared the "real world" and not living with their parents. As a result of participating in this program, though, these students no longer had those fears and felt comfortable doing things on their own and standing up for themselves. Storytelling allowed students' voices to be captured, reflecting the positive impact of this program on their development as learners.

The Multiplicity of Marginalization and Identity-Based Activism

Students from diverse backgrounds are enrolling in higher education at higher rates (Smith, 2016). These backgrounds vary based on race, gender, social class, sexual identity, family, and individual history (Choudhari & Curley, 2019). There are instances where individual students hold multiple minoritized social identities such as being Black, being a transgendered female, and living with a disability. This example refers to the multiplicity of marginalization. Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2016) note that higher education professionals must recognize and understand that the multiplicity of one's self is driven by social forces of oppression and representation. For educators to support the holistic needs and development of students, they must embrace the multiple facets of their students' identities and be ready to respond in ways that demonstrate acceptance while cultivating a sense of belonging for all students. If this does not occur, students will not feel welcomed and the campus environment becomes a dangerous place that negatively impacts their success.

Research has shown that when students have opportunities to bring their full selves into the classroom by providing narratives about their lived experiences, they can use their voices to challenge dominant social and cultural norms. This enhances their ability to learn the curricular content and allows them to take greater ownership of their entire collegiate experience, both inside and outside of the classroom (Clark & Rossiter, 2006; Parmegiani, 2014). This is particularly true for student activists.

Students engage in various forms of activism due to the multiple minoritized identities they hold (Linder, Quaye, Stewart, Okello, & Roberts, 2019). This is referred to as identity-based activism. There may be instances where student activists hold privilege in one area of their social identities (e.g., being cisgender) but feel voiceless in others (e.g., being a woman and Black). Faculty members need to be mindful of their own positionality and the power they may hold, especially if their positionality and power belong to dominant groups (white, heterosexual, and male). Clark and Rossiter (2006) state that faculty members should be mindful of assumptions and biases, specifically with the way they present to students. Students are always observing the actions of faculty members even when they are not in the classroom. If instructors make an offensive comment or facial expression as related to people holding minoritized social identities, then this will have harmful effects on the learning environment. This behavior results in students not feeling comfortable sharing their narratives whether it is a

requirement for a course assignment or not. Faculty members inevitably hold positional power as a result of the teacher and student dynamic. Therefore, they have a responsibility to ensure that all students feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to the classroom environment to feel seen and heard.

The Power of Storytelling via Dominance, Oppression, and Liberation

Numerous faculty members have embraced storytelling as a way to teach complex topics related to social justice. In a study examining the history of police oppression and the killing of Black males, Adedoyin, Moore, Robinson, Clayton, Boamah, and Harmon (2019) provided practical classroom narratives, that



detailed the assignments and strategies given to a majority-white class of social-work students enrolled at a PWI to address this societal problem. The faculty in this study used storytelling by way of group discussion to teach their students these strategies. Students were assigned to read articles by the African American Policy Forum, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, and by Kimberlé Crenshaw before class (Adedoyin et

al., 2019). Once students came to class, they were divided into groups and were asked to discuss how "intersectionality" could be used as a basis for discussing sensitive topics of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality among a group of high school students (Adedoyin et al., 2019).

Intersectionality is a term coined by Crenshaw that is rooted in Black feminism and critical race theory. It points to the fact that human beings are complex and there is no way for them to separate their identities (e.g., race and gender). Instead, identities intersect and overlap with one other. This concept mainly addresses the power dynamic, marginalization, and oppression of Black women (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013).

As students engaged in dialogue, several topics emerged related to racial profiling and how intersectionality could be a way to prevent the killing of Black males. Specifically, students mentioned police officers could take into consideration other factors that influence a person's makeup. Storytelling allowed these students to question their own preconceived biases and beliefs about people from minoritized social backgrounds. In an effort to establish trust and credibility among students, one faculty member vulnerably shared his own experience as an African American male who was stopped by the police for no reason. His liberating story allowed students to visualize the experience in their minds and made them think about what they would do in a similar situation. This exercise allowed students to challenge and interrogate beliefs and dated practices performed by dominant groups.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

The studies and claims in this brief demonstrate that storytelling is a useful practice to promote learning, relationships with faculty, a sense of belonging, independence, and a space for self-reflection for students. Provided below are several key takeaways that higher education professionals can utilize when establishing culturally responsive pedagogical practices via storytelling:

- Higher education administrators should be intentional with the questions they ask when engaging students in storytelling. The questions asked by the instructors need to allow students opportunities to self-reflect and be a part of an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences free of judgement and retaliation from others.
- Faculty and staff need to be mindful of their privilege, positionality, and biases. They should allow students to have the opportunity to share their stories without being interrupted. Attempts by others to discredit or reinvent students' narratives based on dominant beliefs and assumptions should not be tolerated. This will build trust with students who have multiple minoritized identities.
- When engaging in storytelling as part of the curricular and cocurricular experiences, instructors should develop questions in a way that allows students to think critically.
- Cleverly-Thompson (2018) provides a few examples of reflection prompts when educating students using this practice:
 1. What hardships have you faced and overcome? How can others learn from these experiences?
 2. What do you know about life now that you wish you had known in high school?
 3. Is there a story someone else shared with you that made a difference in your life and stuck with you over time?
 4. What is the best advice you could give to a person in your profession?
- When utilizing storytelling as a way to engage student activists, educators are encouraged to ask them to share issues they are passionate about with someone who may not have similar interests. Also, student activists should discuss how this particular issue affected them and why it is essential for others to know (Ives-Ruble, personal communication, 2019). When student activists practice this in the classroom, they will be more prepared when creating demands and addressing those in positions of power, especially at institutions of higher education.



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