Facilitating Transitions in the Classroom and in Life: The Role of Narrative

Abstract

This paper takes a postmodern narrative approach to teaching and learning about cultural diversity which can be applied at all stages of the undergraduate university curriculum. In an effort to avoid linear methodologies based on “stages of learning,” two instructors from different disciplines (anthropology and social work) illustrate how they work with their own narratives, as well as the narratives of their students, to construct curriculum that celebrates diversity. Attention is given to how narrative can be liberating for students as they develop their critical consciousness about diversity, each in their own way.

Within the past two decades there has been considerable discussion in the humanities and social sciences about the nature of research, representation, reflexivity, location, agency, and the construction of the other (cf. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1997). Various critiques of the positivist discourse have increased the awareness and sensitivity of feminist and qualitative researchers to issues of essentialism, relativity, ethnocentricity, authority, identity, gender, and the subject and subject matter of our inquiries (Said, 1978). One response to these critiques has been the increasing use of narrative in presenting and analyzing data (Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). In this paper, we explore how we have used a narrative approach in teaching and learning about cultural diversity, in developing a critical consciousness among our students, and/or preparing students for social work practice (cf. Freire, 1981; hooks, 1994).

Anthropologist and Social Worker as Object and Subject

Using narrative connects social science and professional human service theories to literature in some new and experimental ways. For example, in exploring the link between her academic interests in sociology and her personal life, Carolyn Ellis (1997) used authoethnographic stories. For Ellis, personal stories viewed from her professional perspective as a sociologist enabled her to connect personal and socio-cultural experience. By observing the world around them and examining their perceptions and feelings to those observations, authoethnographers become both the object and the subject of their inquiry. Similarly, a social worker reflected on the story of her “doctoral
journey” to explore her own need to determine whether her voice had been silenced during her experiences of researching and writing her dissertation (Hyde, 1994, pp. 169-189). Her reflections were published so that other doctoral candidates could learn from them. Feminist researchers Janice Ristock (Women’s Studies) and Joan Pennell (Social Work) showed how their personal and professional experiences shaped the epistemology and ontology that rooted their research. This enabled their readers to view the work through their own subjectivities and their perceived subjectivity of the writers (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). As Jackson observes, “our understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experience, and this experience involves our personalities and histories as much as our field research” (1989, p. 17).

Rather than being an exercise in self-absorption, autoethnography can assist readers in moving back and forth between their own story and that of the storyteller. To feel what the narrator feels, to be “in the moment” and to then extrapolate from this cumulative experience to the wider social and cultural world, is one of the goals of this method of inquiry and analysis. This method allows an active engagement of researcher, participant, and reader who co-create and co-share their stories. As Clandinin and Connelly state, the reader ceases to be observer and instead becomes part of the “intertwined experience of researcher and participant” (1998, p. 151).

So, how does this work in the classroom? Over the years, many students in our anthropology and social work classes have asked us how a particular example, case study, or incident applied to their lives. We realized that often the problem was their attributing only their own cultural meanings to events and/or not knowing how to move from the specific to the general. Many of our students come from what appears to them to be relatively homogeneous communities. They have not encountered a lot of diversity in their lives, or think they haven’t (Clews & Powers, 2004), but as they begin to tell their own stories and listen to others, they realize that difference and diversity have been a part of their life experience. We have created assignments to draw on their life experiences through the use of narrative.

The Anthropology Assignment (Ann Marie)

Following Berger and Ellis (2002), I decided to use a narrative approach to raise the consciousness of students in my introductory classes and/or teach them how diversity can make sense in their own lives. My purpose was to demonstrate how narrative reflects and contributes to our understanding of self and others by making cultures, societies, and life experiences a bit more comprehensible (Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Students are asked to read each of two stories I have written. One is an excerpt from a narrative of personal loss, which I wrote after the deaths of my father and brother. The other is an excerpt from a personal diary based on experiences I had while doing ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand. The two stories are very different, yet both share a quest for “narrative truth.” That is, each story tries to draw the reader in and evoke in them a feeling as if they were “really there” (Geertz, 1988). Afterwards, students are asked to answer questions about the narratives, as well as to write one of their own. I find
that to understand how emotions are experienced, they need to be expressed. One such way to express them is through narrative because the meaning of one’s own experiences is as important as interpreting meaning in the experiences of others (Ellis, 1991).

Narrative I: Telling a Story of Deep Personal Loss by Ann Marie Powers

As we sat in the living room of my parents’ home, I looked over at my mom. She had tears in her eyes. I knew it was a difficult day for her, as it was for us all. My father, her husband and life partner of 57 years, had just passed away early that morning.

One sister was there with us. My other sister and my brothers were not. They were two hours away at a city hospital, visiting my terminally ill brother, Eddie, the one so like my father—the one I knew my father kept looking for, up until the time he fell into a coma.

The phone started to ring and I ran to answer it. When I picked it up and heard my brother’s voice, my heart sank. At that moment, the world stood still. I really couldn’t comprehend what my brother was saying: “Honey, I have some sad news.”

I thought, “No, I don’t want to know this . . . it can’t be . . . this can’t be happening.”

“Honey,” Kenny said, “Eddie just passed away. We let him know that pop had gone before him.”

What was he saying? What? No . . . he can’t be dead. Dad just died today; how could Eddie, the son most like him, be dead, too?

“Don’t tell mom yet . . . wait until we are all together in the morning.”

I hung up the phone. Don’t tell mom? How, I wondered, would I get through this day? This can’t be real. This can’t be happening. No, Eddie can’t be dead. He can’t be. He has six small children who still need him . . . and I need him, too. He is my rock, the one I can always count on.

I was numb. When my mother asked who had been on the phone, I told her it was a friend of mine calling to offer her condolences. My mother seemed to accept that explanation.
Why wouldn’t she? People had been calling the house all day, ever since word had gotten out that my dear father had passed away . . .

The last time I had visited my brother in the hospital, Mom was with me. She sat by his side, looking at his two big beautiful blue eyes, and held his hand. They spoke very softly and although I tried not to listen, I couldn’t help but hear him tell her that he had wanted to see his children grow up. I knew that was the hardest separation of all for him. Like my father, he loved children, and he loved each one of his six children with the same unconditional love that my parents showed to us. As I watched them sitting there, I remember thinking how much bluer my brother’s eyes looked, now that he was so pale. And how sad my mother’s eyes were, knowing she couldn’t do anything to save her son.

Before we left, my brother started tapping his finger on his wrist. At first, I didn’t know what he was doing. I knew he was in pain, but what I didn’t realize is that he wanted more morphine. “Eddie, is it time for your medication?” He nodded. I left the room and went to find the nurse. When I reached her, she told me she was unable to give my brother anymore morphine for another hour. “I’m just following the doctor’s orders.”

“Well, then, phone the doctor and tell him my brother is in pain.” The nurse looked at me as if to say, “who are you?” But I persisted. I stood there until she picked up the phone and dialed the doctor’s number. “There is a woman here who insists on speaking to you,” she said.

“Hello Dr. ____, this is Dr. Powers, Eddie Powers’ sister.” Silence . . .

“Yes, how can I help you?”

“My brother is in a lot of pain and needs his medication increased.”

“Well, I hesitate to do that because he is already on a high dose of morphine, and he could become addicted.”

Was this man really saying what I thought I heard? That my brother could become addicted? He was dying . . . not
in withdrawal. I could hardly contain myself. What kind of asshole is this man, I wondered? “Please . . . he needs some pain killers now”.

I gave the phone back to the nurse, who spoke some more to the physician and then hung up. She GLARED at me and said, “You got your wish…”

That was the last time I saw my brother alive.

This excerpt reveals some of the events leading up to and including the day that my father and brother died, as well as my feelings and responses during this time. My feelings of personal loss are co-mingled with those around me. As the narrative proceeds, we see the role of social institutions and how they respond to loss, as well as a bureaucratic structure heavily influenced by society’s moral codes.

Narrative II: Safe in the Belly of the Buddha by Ann Marie Powers

When I walked into the shrine, I saw only the top of the Buddha’s head. Here was a Buddha statue, about 30 feet high, set upon an altar which made the Buddha look even larger. But all I could see from where I stood below was the middle of the Buddha’s nose, to the top of his head. The rest of the Buddha was covered by layers upon layers of white gauze bags . . . and the odor—it was like nothing I had ever smelled before.

The old monk looked at me, for no doubt my expression was one of surprise and inquisitiveness. He approached the Buddha, lifted one of the bags from the pile, and beckoned me closer. On each of the bags I saw writing, and I saw numbers that looked liked dates. He explained that each one was the remains of someone at the hospice who had died with AIDS and whose ashes were never claimed—names, dates of death . . . by the hundreds . . . no, by the thousands . . . and the odor . . .

All these ashes—unclaimed victims of a disease that not only ravages their bodies, but for many, denies them dignity in death—and the odor . . .

It is not for us to judge. In a Buddhist country, AIDS is a stigma—the consequence of bad karma. I think to myself, “this is the Thai version of a Potter’s field” . . . Those who
roam the streets and cities in our own society—victims of poverty, disease, mental health disorders, who are left to die—unclaimed, unknown. No, Potter’s field is worse. Those with AIDS, who seek refuge in the monastery, are treated with some compassion, at least for a little while. For those on our streets, there is little compassion and few places where they can seek refuge. It’s as if by denying their death, we are denying their life.

In this ethnographic narrative I present a description and analysis of an AIDS hospice in Thailand, but also reveal my own thoughts, feelings and emotions. In examining the impact of the hospice, I try to relate what I found and the experience of all the unclaimed dead to what I already know about in my own life. How the situation in Thailand compares to a Potter’s field is the focus for exploring various social issues surrounding death, religion, social stigmas and attitudes towards poverty and towards behaviour considered to be outside the norm.

Assignment: Choose one of the Above Stories and Answer the Following:

1. What were your thoughts and feelings upon reading this story?

2. Were you able to identify with any of the events or emotions in this story? Which ones? Why do you think you shared these with the author?

3. What are some of the socio-cultural influences that are implicit or explicit?

4. What other social issues do these stories raise?

5. Do either of these stories reveal anything about cultural difference/similarities?

After responding to these questions, you are asked to write either (a) your own autoethnography of an event that had an emotional impact in your life. Keep in mind that this story is based on your recollections, observations, and re-thinking of events. If there are others around who experienced the events, compare your version with theirs. Ask them if you can share their thoughts in your story. Or, (b) write your own narrative of a ritual or celebration that you observed and/or participated in. Keep an account of your observations, your reactions, and your feelings. Indicate how you compare this ritual to another you may have attended. What were the similarities or differences? Did you feel you knew what was going on, or did you feel like an outsider? In both cases, after writing your story, analyze what can be learned from the story, as well as what meaning the experience had for you.
Comments About the Assignment

Students are often a bit apprehensive to discuss their emotional responses to these stories and to share their personal reflections. It therefore falls on the instructor to create a safe environment where students feel comfortable to share and learn how to empathize and identify with others. One way to achieve this atmosphere is by waiting at least until mid-term so that students have had a chance to get to know each other and share a rapport with one another and with me. I find this assignment does help them to learn how to put themselves in another’s shoes and make the transition from their personal lives to the lives of others in the larger society/culture. Some of the other strategies which can be used in the classroom are given in more detail below.

The Social Work Assignment (Rosemary)

Background

On occasion there is insufficient experience within the classroom to narrate personal stories, so I work from the narratives of others.

In the late 1990s, I was hired to develop anti-racist, multicultural, and rural social work curriculum at St. Thomas University. I had grown up in Britain, and (after three years in Saskatchewan) moved to Fredericton to take up my new position. I had no knowledge about the ethnic mix in New Brunswick, relationships between different ethnic groups, or differences between the most urban and rural regions of this province. Many of the social work students had lived in the province for their entire lives. They told me that the province was ethnically homogeneous and claimed that they had no experience of ethnic diversity. Knowledge and experiences needed to be brought into the classroom or students needed to go out into the community to learn.

As one method of increasing knowledge about multiculturalism and racism in rural New Brunswick for students, I decided to interview people from diverse ethnic groups. I asked the storyteller/participants to narrate their own experiences of being an ethnic minority and also provide a collective narrative about experiences of people from their particular ethnic group. Several narratives were collected for different populations including, Jewish people, First Nations people, Black people and immigrant groups. This classroom assignment requires students to work in groups with excerpts from one of the narratives from a particular population. Generally, I use about three to four narratives. Two excerpts from narratives of First Nations people in New Brunswick follow as examples.

A long time ago they used to have the talking circles . . . the sweat lodges . . . then along came the European society and they said no, none of that . . . destroyed the whole structure of the Native way of life . . . we ended up in little plots here and there . . . some of us in swamps. Because of the dominant race saying, “no, you’re no good,” lording it over the unsuspecting people of the land . . . they begin to
lose sight of who they are . . . why they’re there . . . if you tell a person for long enough that they’re no good they begin to believe it . . . Back in the sixties it started coming back . . . you have to remember that in the fifties a person could be jailed for practicing their culture . . . the sweat lodges, the talking circles . . . people were kind of weary . . . then something happened . . . maybe the phoenix rose and rejuvenated those ones that were selected to go out and teach and give them the spirit to do so . . . in the sixties and seventies people met in small groups after 500 years of not doing this . . . they had to begin to trust themselves . . . they didn’t know what an eagle feather meant, they probably didn’t know what this meant . . . (pointing at a smudge stick) . . . anything that you’re born with, that’s inside you, your spirit somehow knows . . . and maybe within that group, could have been two or three people there who had knowing spirits, and those people connected . . . and there began the resurgence of Native spirituality. (Originally included in Clews, Rosemary, 1999, p. 255).

What makes me mad is whenever we think we’re on to something good and start to make a living for ourselves . . . then they try to put a stop to it. They’re saying all along “oh Natives, all they want to do is stay on reserves, collect welfare and they don’t want to work” . . . but then you have something that comes in good for them; they say “hey, what’s going on here?” Then right off, they’re trying to put a stop to it . . . you’d be surprised how many Native women, Native men, went out to work . . . actually the women went out into the woods and did some cutting, and they were able to buy new clothes, new toys, cars, TV’s for their homes . . . before they were on welfare . . . all this is now down the drain and it took the fight out of us. Everything is changing, some prescriptions they will fill and some they won’t . . . some drug stores will not accept our cards . . . the dental is a charge for us, only some dentists will take our cards . . . one by one we are losing our services, and first thing you know I guess we won’t exist as Natives . . . it looks like we won’t be considered a Reservation, we’re all going to be a municipality . . . it’s not going to matter to us because we are going to be old and die off but what about the young kids that are coming up? (Originally included in Clews, Rosemary, 1999, p.264).
The Following Instructions are Provided for the Students:

Individual and Small Group Work

1. Read the narrative.
2. Make personal notes about the following five “what” questions. Note: You will not need to talk about everything you write.
   - What were your reactions when you read the narrative?
   - What are your reactions on finishing it?
   - What else do you want to know about the storyteller or the ethnic group to understand the narrative?
   - What does this narrative tell us about racism and anti-racism in New Brunswick?
   - What are the implications of your reading and reflections for anti-racist social work?
3. Discuss with your small group anything you want to share.
4. Decide as a group what you want to share with the class and how you will share it.

Class Discussion

We will discuss the 5 “what” questions. I will read each vignette before we do so.

Comments About the Assignment

1. Often students are reluctant to share their responses with their small group, and even more reluctant to share with the entire class. I have been told that reassurance that they will not be required to share everything can provide the safety needed to explore their thoughts and feelings.
2. Frequently, students want to skip to the fifth “what.” It is easier to discuss implications for social work practice
than personal reactions. I ask them to work through each question in turn.

3. The first two “whats” require the students to relate to the material emotionally. Intelligent students sometimes retreat into their heads. Social workers need to develop empathic understanding. I have found that questions that focus on emotion allow them to do so. The third and fourth “whats” bring cognition as well as emotion into the analysis of the story. Students are encouraged to theorize and relate their previous learning and experiences to this new material. The final two “whats” also provide an opportunity for me to reinforce aspects of theory that relate to the narratives. Last, they are asked to consider the applications of their narratives for their professional practice.

4. I provide several narratives so that we do not stereotype a particular group by implying that the experience of one person is typical of all. The vignettes above show very different reactions. We discuss these differences.

**Closing Thoughts**

All of our lives are storied. It is these stories that often make learning meaningful to our students. The way we approach them, the telling of them, the reflections, the sharing, are all ways in which students can learn to make transitions in their lives, whether it be from the personal to the public, the applied to the conceptual, or the theoretical to the practical. The anthropologist or social worker, who begins with the self, dissolves the distinctions between subject and object. What makes narrative unique is that many of the same historical and cultural forces influence both the authors and the readers (Bruner, 1986). The story that unfolds is an expression of some shared social and cultural institutions and values which help students learn to make the transitions from the particular to the general, as well as make comparisons to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves.

**References**


Clews & Powers—Facilitating Transitions in the Classroom and in Life


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