



Reflection: A Tale of Two Service-Learning Experiences (Apologies to Dickens)

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Setting the Scene

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of supreme accomplishment, it was the age of looming failure. Thus begins “the tale” of two students’ experiences in an honors English composition course with an ongoing service-learning project. One student appeared headed for disaster. By mid-semester, her community partner requested that she not come back. In contrast, the other student became the toast of the community. Her project was written up in the local newspaper, and the board of the organization asked her to attend their monthly meeting to “tell [them] what [they were] doing wrong.” The powerful constant in both students’ experiences was reflection.

We engage in stories, both fiction and nonfiction, to make meaning. By framing experiences in story form, by sharing and discussing them as “case stories” we can create an enlightening “communal construct.” Not only students, but community partners and practitioners of service-learning can tap the potential of storytelling to enhance reflection using a model inspired by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski’s (1997) “case story model.”

Three related questions unfold as a natural outgrowth of the students’ case stories. Which student’s experience ended in success? (How do we define success?) Which student learned the most? (What kind of learning? How do we define and measure it?) What role can reflection, particularly storytelling, play in connecting experience to learning? (What does research say about storytelling and narrative in transformational learning?)

Redefining Success

Voegele and Lieberman (2005) ask, “When we characterize a situation or event as having been a ‘success’ or ‘failure,’ what do we mean? Unless we answer this important question, we may equate our framing of events as ‘failures’ or ‘successes,’ closing off the possibility for alternative interpretations of events” (p. 102). Guided storytelling can help students use the power of narrative to reframe a difficult situation into an opportunity for learning, creativity, and redirection (p. 101). A “critical incident” (Stanton, 1995) narrative can provide the focus for this creative redirection. Rossiter (2002) affirms, “The transformative dynamic of the self story lies in the profoundly empowering recognition that one is not only the main character but also the author of that story” (p. 4).

Experiential Learning and Reflection

Working from Dewey's (1916) foundation, Bringle and Hatcher (2003) view reflection as the "bridge between experience and theory" (p. 84). Yet often when students reflect on their service-learning experiences, they generalize too quickly, couching their reflections in vague or abstract language and missing the opportunity to articulate and clarify for themselves all they have learned. We can help by guiding them into reflective activities that refocus their attention on specific experience.

Storytelling and Transformational Learning

One way to harness the power of a specific experience in reflection is to include storytelling in our repertoire of structured reflective activities. Rossiter (2002) notes the importance of storytelling in transformative learning and calls for recognition of "the autobiographical dimension of learning," in which narrative "functions as a powerful medium of learning, development, and transformation" (p. 5). What distinguishes storytelling from some other reflective activities is its focus on single events that are firmly rooted in space and time. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1997) use the "case story" approach, which "invites people to learn by writing and telling about their own personal experiences. . ." (p. 3). Their case story model describes a process strikingly similar to what happens in many process-oriented composition classrooms.

Their findings "affirm that human activity and experience are laden with meaning and that stories are a fundamental medium by which that meaning is communicated" (p. 9). Storytelling gives students a means to relate to each other. Storytelling can also help community partners and students to relate to each other, resulting in "just like me" moments of recognition, i.e., "the sense that the people they met through community service were 'just like me'" (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 143). When this happens, the story becomes a "communal construct," the object of an "individual and collective quest to make sense of complex realities" that is "critical for learning" (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 1997, p. 9).

Storytelling alone is not sufficient to accomplish all the goals of reflection, but reflection that begins with storytelling may enable students to re-create, even re-live an experience for closer examination. Then they are prepared to connect it to other cases and examples, to follow a thread of thought that leads logically from grounded experience to analysis and theory, increasing the quality of the critical thinking that occurs.

Storytelling in Practice

Memering and Palmer's (2006) composition textbook, *Discovering Arguments*, is a good fit for a service-learning composition course because it approaches the rhetoric of argument as a tool for reflective critical thinking. After Dewey (1933), it follows the "thread of an idea" (Cooper, 2003, p. 94) to direct experience.

Borrowing an example from Stephen Covey's (1990) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Memering and Palmer focus on the importance of Covey's "paradigm shift" in the thinking process (Covey, 1990, p. 23; Memering and Palmer, 2006, p. 3). At the beginning of the semester, after students read and discuss Covey's narrative of his own paradigm shift, they write a narrative about a paradigm shift they have experienced. Sharing their narratives with

each other leads naturally to an ongoing class conversation, where they are encouraged to connect their past experiences with their developing worldviews. Keeping in mind Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede's "4 C's of reflection," (1996), the goals are to establish a model for "continuing" reflection with a shared "context" that will foster the forming of future "connections." Because sharing personal experience with peers often involves courage, we also establish from the beginning that reflection "challenges" us to deep examination. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1997) find that storytelling actually facilitates courageous conversation: "The narrative structure opens people up to one another and new possibilities for interaction. It sanctions collaboration, the sharing of perspectives, and values forms of expression often accorded marginal status" (p. 11).

Students keep a double-entry electronic log/journal throughout the semester. They are introduced to the concept of ethnography and are asked to fill the observations they write in their journals with "thick description." Students submit their journals online periodically for instructor response. Also ongoing throughout the semester are periodic class discussions in which students share their service experiences. When necessary, students schedule individual conferences to discuss special issues.

At the end of the semester, students write a final reflective essay in which they are again encouraged to use narrative as a way of framing their experiences. Within the context of the narrative, or outside it, they are required to include a self-assessment of their learning.

Conclusion

The advantage of storytelling as a tool for reflection is that it is simple to use. It relies on a natural human activity, one that almost everyone perceives as pleasant, familiar, and easy. Rare is the person who is not engaged by a well-told story. The power of storytelling as a tool for reflection is that it can lead to deeper reflection. By challenging students to practice using a tool with which they already feel competent, to develop that competence, and to trace the thread from situated experience to theory, we can encourage them to engage in increasingly higher levels of critical thinking.

Note: While it seems contradictory in a paper promoting the powers of storytelling to exclude actual stories, in editing this paper for length, examples drawn from student narratives were omitted. An electronic copy of the storytelling model and the full-length version of this paper with the examples shared in the session can be requested from the author.

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