My life in a bag and other stories: On the road to resiliency

Kristine M. Meyer[1], Barbara L. Licklider[2] and Janice A. Wiersema[3]

Abstract: Post-secondary education students will experience transitions, successes, challenges, and adversities during their college years. Although they will continue their growth and development in many aspects of their lives during this time, perhaps a most critical, but often ignored, attribute for them to develop is resiliency, the ability to bounce back from difficulties. This article examines the findings from a phenomenological study of eleven students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) as first semester post secondary students. The data confirmed that, when taught through the pedagogy of storytelling, students are able to use stories of their experiences and those of others to shape not only their perceptions and choices, but also behaviors and characteristics reflected in resilient individuals.

Keywords: storytelling, metaphor, pedagogy, resiliency, protective factors

> "With weeping and with laughter,
> Still is the story told,
> How well Horatius kept the bridge
> In the brave days of old.

> Lord Macaulay, Lays of Ancient Rome, Horatius LXX

The heart of the human experience is often captured in story. The way in which students use the stories of their life experiences to understand themselves and their personal ways of addressing with difficult issues can often affect how they respond to challenges and adversity.

Each fall college campuses experience the influx of students ready to embrace college life. However, many of these students are leaving their parental homes for the first time, often unequipped mentally and emotionally to independently address difficulties of student life, expectations of academic rigor, and the insecurities of being away from their parents, thus, negatively influencing their academic success. Students who display resilient behaviors possess the ability to "bounce back" from challenges or adversity and are able to cope with the stressors inevitable to college students (Benard 1993, p. 44). Therefore, exposing post-secondary students to resiliency development education (RDE) may be an effective way in which to positively affect students' experiences.

Research has provided sound evidence that resiliency can be taught (Werner & Smith, 1982; Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Characteristics that are

[1] Department of Student Services, North Iowa Area Community College, 500 College Drive, Mason City, IA 50401, meyerkri@nicacc.edu, 641-422-4419.

[2] Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Iowa State University, N247C Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, IA 50011, blicklid@iastate.edu, 515-294-1276.

[3] Information Assurance Center in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Iowa State University, N002 Lagomarcino, Ames, IA 50011, janw@iastate.edu, 515-294-4030.

significant of resiliency have often been labeled as "protective factors" (Benard, 1993). In her study, Benard (1993, 2004) identified four personal protective factors that could be found in varying degrees in people who seem resilient in the face of major life challenges. These protective factors are: social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose.

The protective factors found in resilient people emerge in a variety of ways. For example, those with social competence often possess the qualities that exude responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor. Socially competent people are able to develop relationships with family and friends in a variety of settings. People displaying skills in problem solving seem more able to think abstractly and reflectively while identifying possible solutions to problems – both cognitively and socially. Planning, creativity, and resourcefulness come easily to a problem-solver. Autonomous people have a strong sense of identity. They are independent in thought and action; they enjoy a sense of control over their environment, and are often able to separate themselves from dysfunctional family circumstances. Finally, those with a sense of purpose have goals, aspirations, hopefulness, perseverance, and a sense of a bright future.

Resiliency education involves exploring the interpersonal as well as the contextual. Teaching the concepts of resiliency requires a method or pedagogy that can span the affect in addition to the cognitive. A tool with the capacity to do both can be found in one of the oldest forms of communicating ideas and images, the art of telling stories (Mello, 2001). The teller becomes a "bridge builder, a person who broadens the discourse by describing images and messages" (p. 8) bringing meaning and understanding to the subject matter. Using storytelling as pedagogy enables students to examine their own self-story, find meaning in relating concepts to metaphors and folklore, and experience new understandings in mental images before applying them to life situations.

Supporting teaching strategies with stories enhances the process of educating students in the area of resiliency. According to Mello (2001), students begin examining their own biases and conceptions when presented with stories of diverse cultural texts (p. 8). Mello also posits that students create transactional experiences that allow growth in interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge. Egan (1997) determined that students derived meaning by actively engaging in the content of stories using both their emotional intelligence and cognitive ability. As pedagogy in RDE, storytelling has the potential to enrich the acquisition of resilient behaviors and characteristics in students. The format and presentation, which make stories unique and innovative as strategies, are vital pedagogical tools for teaching and learning (Egan, 1997). The question for this study, then, was: How do first semester freshmen involved in RDE make meaning of resiliency in their lives through the pedagogy of storytelling?

I. Background of the Study.

It was during a meeting of the Academic Standards Committee, at a midsized midwestern research university, that discussion began focusing on concerns raised when reviewing written requests by students to be reinstated after a period of dismissal from the university for lack of satisfactory academic progress. As committee members discussed the requests, they began observing a repeated pattern among students who had been dismissed. More often than not, they found that students' responses to adverse situations in their lives were devastation and an inability to grasp perspective. The issues seemed to raise barriers and would result in poor class

attendance, missed assignments, poor workmanship, and often dropping out of the class. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the students had not developed any productive strategies to address life challenges. The insight into this perplexing trend prompted one of the committee members to suggest resiliency education for beginning post secondary students.

As stated earlier, research is adamant that resiliency can be taught (Werner and Smith, 1982; Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Therefore, a learning component about resiliency development for post-secondary students would contain opportunities to understand, internalize, and "try on" resiliency. The ultimate goal of RDE would be to allow students to internalize the nature of resilient behaviors and characteristics as well as increase the choices of response in the face of difficult life challenges.

Understanding the student experiences and perceptions after exposure to resiliency development education could lead to tactical undertakings in resiliency education at the college level that have the potential to greatly impact retention. Therefore, this RDE project explored how to encourage students to rise above those adverse situations and work through them in a healthy, productive manner. In essence, we were curious as to how we could help students to grow into resilient young adults through intentional instruction. The project then, would encompass a curriculum that would be actualized in a classroom setting.

Part of the curriculum was implemented in a freshman class through a leadership and learning academy at a Midwestern university. The academy offers two semester-long courses. The first course, which included the sessions on resiliency, is designed with an emphasis on: (a) learning about learning, (b) learning about self, (c) purposefully developing community, (d) deliberately practicing and refining skills to support and encourage the growth of self and others, (e) practicing metacognition, and (f) engaging in intentional mental processing. In addition to affording plenty of individual talk time, weekly two and one half-hour meetings provide opportunities for students to participate in frequent team learning. Consistent with the goal of helping students manage and control their own growth and development while supporting the learning of their colleagues, the team learning opportunities centered around the science of learning and the deliberate development of community.

Four sessions of RDE were taught to forty-seven first semester freshmen in the Academy for Leadership and Learning, facilitated by a lead professor and four supporting faculty. The curriculum was designed as a tool to engage students in the awareness and development of resiliency. Each session involved a variety of activities and learning components focused on internalizing an understanding of resiliency as well as an opportunity for a self-discovery of protective factors. There were continual checks for understanding and opportunities to reflect and share about the learning experience.

While conducting the sessions, the co-facilitators and participating faculty began to notice significant changes in many of the students. It was as if they were practicing new behaviors, deeply reflecting upon what they had learned about in the sessions on resiliency, connecting past and present situations, and applying their new understandings in their lives with new awareness. For example, some of the students began sharing moments they handled differently using various tools learned in class, such as reframing and self-talk. They became more confident in expressing the protective factors they had identified in themselves and how they could use them to address challenges or adversity. As the co-facilitators and faculty listened to and observed the students in class, it became evident that there were a number of students who really had made their own meaning of resiliency and were beginning to make important connections to their lives as college students. We believed it was important to find out from the

students what meaning they made of the phenomenon of becoming more resilient. An email was sent to 20 of these so identified students, describing the study and requesting their participation. Instead of selecting a pre-determined number of participants, the 11 students who responded with a desire to be a part of the study were chosen.

Making meaning of resiliency in their lives is ultimately up to the students. Our goal with this study was to identify reasons for changes in students' behaviors and to reveal important factors affecting the development of individual resiliency.

II. Methodology.

In light of the various factors affecting transition and adjustment of the freshman student to the college experience, it was prudent to explore how these young adults made meaning of resiliency, the ability to deal effectively with challenges, in their lives. This chapter describes the methodological framework used to conduct this phenomenological study. We begin with the theoretical framework.

A. Epistemology.

Exploring epistemology gives researchers an opportunity to probe the philosophical underpinnings that explain how we know what we know. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), epistemology refers to the assumptions one makes about the process of gathering knowledge. Constructionism, which informs this study, is an epistemological lens which views knowledge and "all meaningful reality as such, as contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). Meaning is constructed in relationship to something; it is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 2003).

B. Theoretical Perspective.

The theoretical perspective that supports the methodology for this study can be found in the interpretivist philosophy. The ontology of the constructionist-interpretivist is that there are multiple valid and socially constructed realities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Therefore, the multiple realities of the lived experience can be interpreted for meaning through the lens of perception. We can only construct meaning to what we perceive in the present, our current reality, with the knowledge we have embodied and gathered in the past.

The curriculum for the resiliency development component was designed with the intent to introduce the protective factors of resiliency to the students. Through the teaching process, the intent was to help students identify and enhance their existing protective factors as well as learn how to bring new strengths into being. For this to become a reality, it was necessary for the students to take the new knowledge and combine it with what they knew of themselves as they began the process of constructing new meaning in terms of resiliency.

C. Methodology.

The methodological approach of phenomenology was appropriate for this study as we discerned the "essence" of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of our theoretical

activities not only in describing the essences, but also through grasping concepts rooted in the ordinary lived experience. The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, believed that the phenomenological philosophy is essentially the description of the "perception" of the perceived world (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). Merleau-Ponty reiterates in *Primacy of Perception* (1964), "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" (p. 13). Merleau-Ponty believed that describing the perception was primary for phenomenology. By looking at our ordinary engagement with the world from a bit of distance, we gain clearer insight and understanding, just as we might by holding a book a little way from our eyes in order to read better (Matthews, 2002, p. 35). As the students described their experience with RDE, the very act of putting their perceptions into language simulated the "stepping back" which elucidated, for them, the essence of the experience.

The heart of phenomenology, which informed this study, is the lived experience (Merriam, 2002). It brings into relationship the conscious subject and the object (Crotty, 2003), in this case it was the student and the notion of resiliency. As researchers, it is important that our focus is not on the humans nor on the human world, but rather on "the essence of the meaning of the interaction" (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). Merleau-Ponty, conceived phenomenological philosophy as "re-learning to look at the world" (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). The goal of this study was to understand the phenomenon of the students' experiences of "re-learning to look at the world" after the encounter with RDE. Phenomenology was appropriate for this study as we discerned the "essence" of the experiences as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

D. Methods.

Epoche process. The phenomenological approach to the process known as epoche is that of bracketing, or setting aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories concerning the present study in order to eliminate as much bias as possible (Moustakas, 1995). This enables the researcher to come to the data with an open mind.

At the onset of the study, it was necessary to highlight the biases that were evident in our previous experiences studying resiliency. It was, therefore, essential that we bracket our viewpoints in order to prevent the assimilation of our thoughts into that of the participants. The isolation of our previous beliefs, assumptions, and biases was pertinent to the study:

- It is possible for one to learn to be resilient.
- There are certain characteristics that can be found in resilient people such as intrapersonal skills, optimism, social competence, the skill of problem solving, and the ability to set goals and look forward to something in the future.
- People who are not resilient are not always suicidal or otherwise maladjusted.
- Resiliency is essential for fulfillment in life.
- Resiliency is seen in response to a plethora of challenges – large and small.
- Resiliency is an attitude that is reflected in behaviors, feelings, and beliefs.
- Resiliency brings responsibility to the forefront: that of choice, action, and thought.
- We can affect another's resiliency by providing a caring environment, and having healthy expectations and opportunities to be a part of and contribute to an organization or relationship.
- Knowing one's strengths contributes to one's resiliency.

Throughout the process of data collection, we reviewed this list in order to maintain our focus on the lived experiences of the students.

Participants. Four sessions of resiliency education were taught in a leadership and learning academy in the Midwestern university. The class was comprised of 47 freshmen students from a variety of majors: animal ecology, business, diet and exercise, elementary education, exercise science, horticulture, physical therapy, and veterinary science. Qualitative research, steeped in a search for meaning necessitates selecting participants who can bring rich and meaningful data to the table. Since the "idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants…that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (Creswell, 2003, p. 185), the participants for this study were purposefully selected. The participants selected were those students who engaged in the observed phenomenon of making meaning of resiliency in their lives after participating in RDE. Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Of the 11 participants in the study there were nine females and two males; all were freshmen students between 18 and 19 years of age. Four of the participants were first generation college students and all were Caucasian, 10 heralding from the state of Iowa and one from Wisconsin. There were a variety of academic undergraduate majors: three in animal ecology; two in horticulture; two in elementary education; one in exercise science and physical therapy; one in diet and exercise; one in business; and one in the pre-veterinary program.

Data collection. In order to gather rich and meaningful data, important to a phenomenological study, one of the principal methods used by researchers is the interview (Merriam, 2002), the "heart of social research" according to Esterberg (2002, p. 83). To realize the most effective interviews, the data were collected from focus groups and individual interviews that were in-depth, semi-structured, and guided with non-scripted, open-ended questions evoking authentic insight and perspective from the participants (Esterberg, 2002). Data collection began with two focus group interviews; one group consisted of seven participants and the other had four. Two different sessions were held to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Each 45-minute session was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Face-to-face and telephone individual interviews were then conducted with each of the 11 participants. In addition, data were collected from the students' journals, other assignments, and end-of-semester written summaries of their learning.

Data analysis and interpretation. At the start of the analysis, using the steps described by Colaizzi (1978), all transcripts and journal entries were carefully read in order to understand the essence of the students' written and oral reflections as well as to be mindful of reoccurring topics. After a coding procedure was developed, the transcripts and journal entries were read and reread using a color-coded system to highlight significant statements, and to sort and identify potential meanings of the data. Themes were then constructed and integrated to produce an exhaustive description (Colaizzi, 1978) of the students' experiences identifying and articulating the phenomenon's fundamental structure. Finally, the data were checked for validity by returning them to the participants for confirmation of thematic interpretation.

III. Findings.

The themes ubiquitous within this study were: (1) the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling; (2) the value of learning in community; (3) and the transformative resiliency development of the post-secondary student. The fundamental structure

of becoming more resilient, then, as perceived by the participants, was a self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners, and then intentionally applying the learning to one's own life. This complex statement is potent with possible options to explore for students and educators alike. However, this article addresses the meaning post-secondary students derived from the exposure to storytelling as pedagogy in resiliency development education.

A. Storytelling as pedagogy.

Innovation in teaching methods is welcomed by many institutions in a day when students are increasingly conversant with highly creative methods of dispersing information via internet access (Braxton, 2004; Gerdes and Mallinckrodt, 1994). During this study, storytelling, a technique that is as old as the world itself, was used as an innovative method of enhancing student learning.

Storytelling is one of the most basic ways of sharing what we know, making sense of our experiences, and gaining insight into ourselves and our relationships with others in our world (Adams, Allendoerfer, Smith, Socha, Williams, and Yasuhara, 2005, 2007; Mello, 2001; McAdams, 1993; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). The RDE curriculum incorporated storytelling as part of the pedagogy in a variety of ways throughout the sessions. In order for the students to gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relationship to resiliency, it was necessary for them to explore their own stories. The activities that enhanced this understanding included:

1. "Know Thyself" – students made a conglomerate of words describing their attributes of character and strengths.
2. "Life in a Bag" – students put five things in a bag that represented something important to them or about them.
3. "Self-story" – using the "Know Thyself," "Life in a Bag," and a story-starter (a list of memory joggers), students were to write a self-story describing five major experiences in their lives which affected who they had become.
4. Insight Learning Personality Instrument™ - to identify their personality spectrum.
5. "My Four Protective Factor Analysis" – activity to allow opportunity to identify and analyze the presence of their personal protective factors.
6. "Reframing and Self-talk Practice Schedule" – allowed the students to monitor how they reframed situations for a better solution or used self-talk to adjust their attitude toward an issue or challenge.

Stories based on folklore, personal illustrations, and reference to the self-story, were used throughout these sessions to enhance the curriculum by making connections and analogies to correspond with the concepts being taught. This study examined the experiences the students had with the curriculum for development of resiliency within the pedagogical framework of storytelling.

As pedagogy, using a story invites inquiry. It is fairly easy to use story within teaching lessons, information, or mental processing (Collins and Cooper, 1997). According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), the story often stimulates questions allowing for increased clarity and insight. Stories are a vehicle to transfer meaning and understanding in a safe and unthreatening environment. Research conducted by Livo and Rietz (1986) indicated that material presented through the means of story rather than lecture held the interest of the students and made a far greater impact. By using stories in this study, we were able to present an abstract concept, such

as resiliency, in a concrete form. Sharing stories at strategic points in the curriculum enabled us to enhance and deepen the understanding of resiliency. The data attested to the importance of using stories to augment comprehension of what resiliency is and how it can be applied and lived out in our everyday lives. This finding was initially revealed as the students experienced meaning through the writing of their *self-stories.*

B. The Self-story.

Using narrative to support pedagogy is a main claim in educational research for the simple reason that, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). The introductory sessions for this study focused on building an awareness of self. In order to facilitate the exploration of who they are, we first wanted students to understand the stories of their lives that brought them to this point. Given paper bags, each student was to return to class with "My Life in a Bag." The students were given the opportunity to think about their past experiences and then to represent them using five objects or representations which they put in a paper bag (Livo and Rietz, 1987; Pellowski, 1987). The stories around those artifacts were to tell something about themselves. The meaning that the students discovered through this experience highlighted the sessions and often propelled them to see who they were in a new light.

The self-story informs as well as forms our lives (Widdershoven, 1993). In this study, the self-story seemed to evoke a deeper understanding for students of not only who they are today, but also who they had been before as they reflected on the persons of their younger years. Andrea found the "My Life in a Bag" activity to be a defining moment. She described its impact:

> *[The activity "My Life in a Bag"] is so cool because it gives people the chance to really look in the mirror and see what is important to them and to some extent can help people reprioritize.*

Allison enthusiastically relayed her experience:

> *My favorite assignment was "My Life in a Bag." I realized that there are tons of things I really enjoy, but they don't necessarily describe me or say who I am. This assignment really made me think hard about who I am and <u>what</u> makes me who I am.*

When teaching concepts that encourage reflection, past experiences, positive and negative often resurface. For many in the class, revisiting unpleasant memories was not always easy, but often worthwhile as Mary revealed in her journal:

> *Most of my stories that I wrote and didn't write had the feeling of anger and sadness tied to them. I was put in the middle of a lot of my parents' fights and was let down a lot. I know what it feels like and know that I <u>will not</u> put my own children through the same thing. Situations that have gone on between my parents will always stay with me. I will never ever forget them. They have changed who I am today.*

A sense of appreciation for the learning or growth often replaced the resentment and tamed the anger for having to endure emotional pain. Mary continued to put a positive frame around her past:

> *In a way, I'm kind of glad they occurred because I feel they made me more mature and able to handle a lot more for my age. A person who is resilient has buoyancy and adaptation in their lifestyle. I feel that I have some of these characteristics in my life. Resiliency has truly taken on a new meaning for me.*

Moving away from a painful experience involves making a reactionary choice. Resiliency is often exhibited in persons who know how their emotions affect their thinking and their reactions to events in their lives (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Laura discovered that understanding the concepts of resiliency could shape her thinking in several ways:

> *It was a rough semester for me, so learning about it [RDE] really helped me get through everything. There was a lot, a lot of emotional that I was dealing with, and stuff, and I mean, I'm still dealing with it, but it's [knowledge of resiliency] helped in everything.*

Post-secondary students interact more independently with personal and academic issues than when they were in high school and living in their parental homes. Using stories as a teaching strategy, the ability to understand the manner in which the brain links emotion and memory gives insight and appreciation for memories that are difficult or painful in our lives (Goleman, 1995). Resiliency occurs when one is able to view those experiences as fertile ground for personal growth. In her journal, Andrea described how she had come to understand her strength or resiliency by looking at the hardships faced in her past:

> *In almost every case I can trace my "strength" or "resiliency" to my past experiences. It's unfortunate, but true, that the majority of my past experiences that have helped to develop my resiliency were bad or sad experiences. As much as my experiences stunk, it's cool to look back on them and see that they've helped me grow into a better person...they've repeatedly taught me and shown me that life continues even during hard times, and after these hard times, it's so important to gather yourself and essentially bounce back despite the hardship.*

C. Illustrating through folklore.

Throughout the remaining sessions, storytelling was used as a way to define, identify characteristics, explain the components, and introduce tools of resiliency. A menu of stories, used to illustrate the concepts of resiliency, was presented in the form of metaphors, folklore, or personal experiences. Using the oral tradition, without using visual aids, but only the listener's imagination, the participant could visualize an actual mental scene in which behaviors could be rehearsed or "tried on."

Teaching reframing and self-talk, two essential tools of resilient reactions to challenges, can effectively be tendered through stories. One story particularly meaningful to the students and an example of the power of reframing and self-talk was *The Spyglass* written by Richard Paul Evans (Evans, 2000). The repeating phrase found in the story, 'You have seen what might be, now go and make it so,' seemed to resonate with the students long after the story ended, as Adam wrote:

> *Today I was thinking about the "Spyglass" story that was told a couple of weeks ago. It was a really inspirational story. If you look at something from a different perspective, it becomes 10 times better than it was. The quote that was repeated, "You*

have seen what may be, now go and make it so" made me rethink different things in my life. That story meant a lot to me in how it influenced me personally because it has happened to me. I will do my best to go and make it so.

Thinking deepens the awareness and begins the process of change. Carla found this to be true:

I think the stories were crucial because it got me thinking. When I'm listening to a story I put myself in that story and it causes me to care, and it gives you a picture to associate with things. What comes to mind...for me is the bridge story, and how the two brothers were not willing to make amends. Like my best friend and me...there are times where I need to be a better brother than in that story...[that] is the very clear message in those stories.

As the students made meaning of resiliency through the stories shared in class, it causes one to wonder what impact storytelling could have in other disciplines such as math and science. Even in hard science disciplines, such as engineering, when pedagogy of storytelling is utilized to disseminate information, feelings and attitudes can be affected to promote thinking and innovation by "shift(ing) people's stories" (Adams et al, 2005, 2007, p. 10). Allison recalls a story and the impact it had on her:

The stories were huge! They helped connect to real life situations. You know the Toll Booth one? [It taught the message], you know you just can't let stuff like that get you down. You gotta keep moving forward. You gotta do what you want. I mean the stories had a real life connection versus, "Ok, read your textbook, this is what it says." It doesn't make a connection, where all the stories, well, they could be real people, and they connect with other people, so... I can read my chemistry book 30 times, and I'm not gonna connect to it, but the stories are what makes the connection for me.

The retention of information is a constant motivation to adjust and sharpen teaching strategies. Since the nature of stories affect emotion, they garner potential to greatly affect retention of material taught in any academic discipline. Students make 'hooks,' so to speak, because they put themselves in the content. Reflecting upon the nature of the brain to retain emotional memories, when a burst of insight is gained after seeing a connection, the chances of remembering it for a long time increase dramatically (Sprenger, 1999) which Andrea attested to in her journal:

The stories are just something that always sticks in your mind, kind of like an "aha" thing...like a role model almost, even though it's fictional. It's just like something that...affects people for a day, maybe for a week, maybe it affects people forever, but I think a story is something people can really hang on to.

Stories need to be chosen carefully, with intentional purpose when incorporating them into a curriculum. It was not happenstance that particular stories were used to teach resiliency. They were each chosen with purposeful intent, pertinent to the subject matter. Students are keenly aware when course content is filler and when it is dynamically intentional according to Mary:

...it made us visualize the story and connect it to what we were learning. It wasn't like, just thrown in there, 'here's a good story,' or 'story time,' but I mean, it made me connect the things. I remember the story about the dog...and then the builder

of the bridge and it was when we were remembering, or trying to learn the autonomy and sense of purpose, problem solving, stuff like that, but it really made things connect, and I enjoyed the story a lot more because then I connect them, and I'd actually think about the words...and be like, 'Oh, this is the definitions of this.'

Using stories as an instructional tool allows the students to not only check for their understanding, but also to measure their growth. By mere repetition from an instructor or through the mental rehearsal of the listener, the story can act as a gauge to show the students' progress from one point in life to another. Adam brought this meaning to light during the individual interview:

There was one story that stuck out in particular. It was the one about the king and he had you look through the glass and then said, "You've seen what can be, so go and make it so..." Being able to see, like, how much better I've become from this semester, being able to see how much better I could be, like I've seen how much I've grown this far, like how much further can I grow? I remember like, they were looking at some old garden that didn't have anything and they looked through it and they could see green vegetables and tomatoes, and all that stuff, when I hit that it was like, it's just like me, looking at myself in the mirror, it's sort of the same thing. If I could be a lot better than this, I look at it and it's like, oh yeah, I could be a lot better, and so then I'd go and do it.

D. Illustrating through metaphors.

Metaphors are figurative descriptions of a concept. When one is able to express a concept in the rhetoric of a metaphor, then true understanding has transpired. Metaphors encourage one to think outside the proverbial box (Adams et al, 2005, 2007). During the focus group, Adam explained how it [the concept of resiliency] suddenly made sense to him:

I had an "aha" moment when we first started talking about resiliency. I didn't really, understand the meaning of resiliency, until the day when we brought out the rubber bands. It's like, you can be stretched to your limit and be stretched there for a really long time, but you'll come back to normal, like just the small little circle of your rubber band. But if you keep being stretched and come back, you keep stretching it out and there's a possibility that it will break the next time that you pull it back out again, so you don't wanna be pulled out to the max every time, about halfway maybe, and then back down.

Resiliency has often been defined as the ability to "bounce back," successfully adapt to the effects of adversity, and develop a social competence even in the face of severe stress resulting from personal or environmental challenges or trauma (Benard, 1991). Karen summarized the basics of seeing resiliency at work in her life with this analogy:

I learned what resiliency was. That was huge, just learning that it was an option for your life, to be like, 'you don't have to carry all that, you can learn to bounce back from stuff.'

Storytelling as a pedagogical strategy promotes critical thinking and reflection (Adams et al, 2005, 2007). In this way, self-stories, folklore and metaphors paved the way to introduce the concept of personal protective factors, reframing and self-talk, all tools pivotal to resiliency.

Metaphorical thinking enabled the students to relate how strengths and protective factors impact their actions and ways of dealing with their life issues. The mind's eye or in other words, the imagination allowed the students to envision (reframe) an alternative way of looking at a challenge or adverse situation by creating a new "story" to live by. In the same manner, using self-talk simply involved generating a dialogue that encouraged a new behavior or way of facing an issue. Mary was affirmed that there could be some good found in her unhappy past by incorporating the skill of reframing to see past wrongs as ground for future growth:

> *I guess, just looking at the situation and knowing again, that it could be a lot worse, cause in my life, like, I had a terrible childhood, so then that makes me look at my future and how I want to shape my future and what kind of job I wanna have, so I know my kids don't have to go through the stress that I had to go through, cause of my parents and because of their mess-ups.*

The strategies found in teaching reframing as a tool of resilient reaction showed Donna how to stop and review the situation, then adjust her course of action.

> *Reframing has taught me the importance of stopping and examining a situation. This exercise of reframing situations is making me apply this method of thinking. I tend to be negative or look at the negative in situations. Reframing has been teaching me to slow down and think things through along with re-examining a situation. Reframing this situation doesn't make the problem go away but it helps me to think clearly and remain calm during this situation.*

Metaphorically speaking, perhaps the students in essence learned to "re-story" their lives in order to successfully navigate the challenges faced in their everyday.

Using story as a pedagogical tool to present the various concepts embedded in RDE, the students made meaning by allowing the stories (be it their self-stories or illustrative stories) to make deep and lasting connections to the information. They used the stories as a place to practice what they learned about resiliency and then apply it to their everyday lives. Using stories to connect abstract concepts to students' lives allowed the curriculum to become more meaningful to the students, and, thus, they were able to perceive resiliency in their lives by connecting the past, present, and future experiences. Merleau-Ponty (1948, trans. 2004), the French phenomenologist, claimed that our perceptual experience should be deducted with a reasoning or knowledge structure:

> It is our 'bodily' intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations (p. 10).

IV. Discussion.

In reflecting upon the reaction of the students to their personal growth and enhanced understanding of self through RDE it is without question that using story as a teaching strategy was paramount to their ability to learn the concepts of resiliency. Students' enthusiastic identification with the messages of the stories attested to its importance and value of this pedagogy. They supported the research that stories are vehicles that bring us to a better understanding of our lives (Kilpatrick, 1993).

What would happen if major concepts from all disciplines could be paired with stories or metaphors that could illuminate meaning and understanding for students in the classroom? What would happen if educators focused on 're-storying' lectures to include illustrations borrowed from folklore or personal encounters? How much more information could effectively be retained by students if we adjust our teaching strategies to include the art of storytelling? Stories encapsulate clues by which educators, listening to the stories of the students, can use to know what is real and important to them and thus know what questions to ask that will enhance their learning (Collins & Cooper, 1997).

Karen gave voice to the importance of the story as a tool of instruction:

The stories told really made an impact on how we learned the protective factors. It made the lesson more engaging and interesting. It made me realize that everything, story or situation, has a way of turning out for the best. I just have to look for it. By looking for the key factor in situations, I'll be able to find the underlying meaning in almost everything. I hope to continue using the tools I have learned while in this class. I hope to continue to be resilient.

The story is invaluable as a tool be it used as a metaphor, which connects abstract concepts to concrete understanding, folklore that allows one to immerse in mental practice, or the self-story which encourages exploration and analysis of one's identity. This evidence suggests that educators should seek ways to incorporate stories as a method to enhance student learning. Andrea framed it well from the perspective of a learner:

I can almost 100% guarantee myself that five, ten years from now I won't remember many details or concepts from my classes such as biology or chemistry, but there is no doubt in my mind that I will regularly use the concepts and ideas discussed throughout this course.

The implications of this notion suggest that when applied in the field across a variety of disciplines, retention of information increases. What then would happen if instructors in the fields of math, science, or English, for example, offered a story, as a teaching tool, illustrating the desired concept to be taught? According the data from this study, students would construct meaning with the concept by way of putting themselves into the content of the story, thus creating a hook to which they can then connect knowledge with understanding.

Directed to the concept of resiliency, it would appear there is a way to prevent students from being devastated by crisis, challenges, or setbacks as was often observed by Academic Standards Committee members who initiated the original project. The potential exists within RDE that through the thoughtful use of stories, students may learn to address the adversity they experience with resilient behaviors and attitudes. The students in this study were able to make personal meaning and apply it to their lives through their understanding of the protective factors, as well as their abilities to use the tools of reframing and self-talk to confront and address the issues they faced. Critical to this understanding was the story, whether it was metaphor, folklore, or self-story, that provided the insight and virtual practice to face future obstacles.

V. Conclusion.

The stories of experience hold power in the process of shaping not only our perception, but also our character and values. With a keen understanding of that power, White (1982)

related, "what is imprinted deeply on our minds in our youth shapes who we are and what we shall become. The stories, the dreams we live by, are vital for our growth" (p. 22). If the use of story encompasses such a magnitude of possibilities to affect the connections students make with resiliency development, why would we, as educators, not enthusiastically embrace this pedagogical concept with which to help our students learn more deeply?

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