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Storytelling: A Unique Approach to Developing Partnerships with Students

Deryka C. Nairne & Jimmy Thren

“Everyone has their own story, their own demons, and their perspective on what it is to be human. The best we can do is to always try to understand these differences, and know that while they are different, they are what brings us together.”

-Anonymous Student

Introduction

Stories are invisible yet vital threads which continually connect humankind. From elders to younger community members in indigenous cultures, parents to children, teachers to students, it is evident that people have connected and learned through the telling and retelling of stories. Stories are how a person knows who they were, who they are, and potentially, who they will be. Some college students arrive with their stories untested and many have never had them questioned. Some have risked telling their stories only to be shut down. Others have told their stories in an authentic way which allows them to understand what their stories may mean to both themselves and others.

From the start of a college student’s experience, the idea of storytelling permeates multiple avenues and experiences on campus. Tour guides and student ambassadors share their university stories during college tours and student visit days. During orientation, some students may share stories to break the tension of an uncomfortable first interaction with new classmates. Throughout the student’s first year, student affairs professionals across functional areas promote the idea of storytelling when interacting with students, even if indirectly. There is the

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notion that if students share, they will grow and develop. Though the onus of practicing storytelling and vulnerability should not just fall on the student, it often does due to the stigma surrounding professionals sharing their personal stories. The stigma is that sharing too much could cross a professional boundary and students might not view a practitioner with respect, potentially even perceiving them as unprofessional. Therefore, storytelling is no easy task. It requires vulnerability, self-awareness, and a true desire to connect with students. Professionals who utilize storytelling when working with students can create stronger partnerships which lead to deeper learning.

Framing Partnership Learning

In order to delve into partnership learning within the context of storytelling, one must grasp the notions of a study focused on the partnership between student and educator. Healy, Flint, and Harrington (2014) proposed a conceptual model that explored ways students act as partners in learning and teaching. Additionally, this model sought to identify possible tensions and challenges inherent to partnership learning and teaching. The authors suggest that when students and staff engage as equal stakeholders in learning, there is deeper engagement for all. The values which drove their study hold significance in the context of this article: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility. It is evident that each value is key in order for partnership learning to exist between practitioners and students. The relationships which exist as a result of these partnerships could breathe life into student affairs, reinvigorating and revitalizing the field.

A partnership simply implies that there is an exchange-based relationship. This exchange could be evenly distributed or one-sided, intentional or unintentional, a one-time transaction or a continued process. However, for the context of this article, the idea of a partnership between a student affairs professional and student is based on the principles of intentionality and an openness to being vulnerable. Without this foundation, it minimizes the opportunity for an authentic exchange where learning can occur on both sides. If an openness to vulnerability and intentionality exists, the space for reflection and transformation is possible.

Vulnerability is a key construct in a partnership because it allows for the different hierarchies of power to be recognized and reconceptualized. Acknowledging differentials of power creates “a shared process of reciprocal learning and working” (Healy et al., 2014, p. 9), allowing students and staff to recognize their differences of power while simultaneously valuing individual contributions. The reconceptualizing of power leads to the opportunity to engage and share freely without consequence. Although many assume the professional is the only one who can provide an educational experience, Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) argue:

Students are neither disciplinary nor pedagogical experts. Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student – something many faculty have not been for many years. They understand where they and their peers are coming from and, often, where they think they are going (p. 15).

If we are looking to promote learning in a holistic manner, shouldn't learning be expected from everyone participating in the process? A partnership learning model is adopted, the hierarchical idea of teacher and student is eliminated because one person is not learning from the expert, and the relationship rather becomes an engagement that is ongoing and mutual. The two individuals meet in the same place for the same purpose: to share and learn. The partnership allows there to be an openness to relate to “the other and to oneself which is both deeply challenging and enables challenge, is both risky and enables taking risks” (Healy et al., 2014, p. 20).

Storytelling with students is the manifestation of intentional vulnerability. Stories are a gift, and when we entrust our students with even the smallest of stories, we begin to create beneficial partnerships. For example, a student who has been unable to share their experiences then finds a professional in which to confide. When the professional is comfortable sharing their own experiences and does so, they are both able to be vulnerable and this can have a high impact. The practitioner learns about their student while the student still feels seen, heard, and understood. Storytelling absolutely can and should be utilized to enhance deeper learning.

Our Experiences with Storytelling

Before explaining how storytelling can be used in professional practice, we must first explain its impact on our lives. Our experiences before becoming professionals and the partnerships we create with mentors inspire us to use storytelling as a part of our practice. Our passion for storytelling is shaped by how the act continually shapes us. The following two narratives are easily identifiable instances where storytelling impacted us greatly.

Jimmy

The practice of storytelling or, as I see it, the art of being vulnerable, is still relatively new in my personal and professional life. I was bullied throughout my childhood years and never found a true connection to the people I grew up with, which led me down a path of being closed off and not sharing my true self. As a first generation student, I was not informed that college would be a place where professionals would ask me personal questions to understand my lived experiences and to help me learn about my future. I met with practitioners from Residence Life, Admissions, the Multicultural Affairs Center, and Orientation who pushed me to

tell my story through questioning. They wanted to know where I came from, who I was, and who I wanted to be. Since I often came off as such a happy person, many people saw me as disingenuous, and wanted to know if my story was valid.

College was the first time in my life that I found a space to share who I was and not fear the consequences of telling my story. The professionals I learned from most were the ones who shared parts of their story, which provided space and confidence for me to share mine. Transitioning from undergraduate to graduate school is when I began to take on the role of my mentors, creating a space where stories were shared and judgment was withheld. The often painful and terrifying act of practicing vulnerability is what opened me up to other people and is the foundation of my development as a person and professional.

Deryka

By the time I attended college, I realized there were more stories and ways of knowing than I dreamed possible. I began to talk to people I did not know more frequently. I learned different pieces of others and felt myself growing as a result.

During my second year of graduate school, one of my black students came to talk to me about a roommate issue and it was our first, real interaction. She began with typical roommate issues and as she continued, she became visibly upset. She then revealed that she was uncomfortable in the room as her roommate's boyfriend made racist comments to her. However, she thought she was reading into the situation and perceived his comments incorrectly. As she spoke, my own experiences at a predominantly white institution came to mind. I shared my own experiences and the times I felt as if I was reading into my peers' behavior. I candidly opened up about the confusion, pain, and strength those interactions gave me. At the end of the conversation, the student said I was the first person of color she was able to connect with. This sparked a conversation about resources and I was able to guide her towards our ALANA (African, Latinx, Asian, and Native American) Student Center. Through our storytelling, she gained new resources. Simultaneously, my passion for truly listening was reinforced.

In 2015, I published a scholarly personal narrative. In this publication, I discussed the turmoil of my coming out process. Writing it was cathartic and what I needed to survive at the time. Publishing my story made me believe in the importance of my voice. It showed me that my story mattered. Storytelling, in many of its forms, has shaped who I am today.

Storytelling in Professional Practice

Storytelling occurs in every functional area. Storytelling can occur in informal

conversations, sharing personal experiences to deepen the relationship between the student and the professional, goal and expectation setting, internship or job searching, just to name a few. Vulnerability through storytelling can provide takeaways which lead to critical thinking, reflection, and decision making. At the University of New Hampshire, two professionals utilize storytelling as a means for practice to enhance educational experiences in their residential communities.

Jimmy's Storytelling through Individualized Student Contact

As a professional, I seem to naturally gravitate towards establishing relationships with students through one on one contact. I have used different avenues to ensure I get to know at least 70% of my students by the end of the year. Since I oversee a hall of 200 students, building relationships with a high percentage of students is more than manageable. I have found I learn most about students in a one-on-one setting versus at programs or around the hall. This is mainly because of how much effort I put into one-on-one conversations with students. My main goal when meeting with a student throughout the first semester is hearing their story through intentional questioning. I often start asking questions about student's experiences as a child. I want to know where they grew up, what type of relationships they had with other people, and how their experiences led them to college. The key to my questioning is that I never give students a lot of time to answer. Once they answer, I move on to the next question. I want them to answer first and then process later.

With this intense questioning, I learn a great deal about the students. The questions give the students the opportunity to choose how vulnerable they want to be and also shows I am intrigued by their life. The students are not the only ones being vulnerable in this space. Throughout the course of the conversation, when appropriate, I share parts of my story with students to practice the vulnerability I am requesting and to highlight commonalities in our lives. Typically, after sharing a piece of my life with a student for the first time, I share my thoughts about the power of storytelling. The questions I ask combined with my vulnerability is what helps me deepen my relationship with students and provides students with an idea of the type of resource I can be for them. This lends to a new understanding which benefits us both. This individualized method of storytelling is but one way in which we can share with our students.

Deryka's Storytelling Retreat

In February 2016, I hosted a storytelling retreat for seven residents in my hall. That experience solidified my resolve to incorporate storytelling within my professional practice. After I extended the invitation to participate in a storytelling retreat to the residence hall, seven people volunteered. I advertised it through a building

wide e-mail and also individually invited people to come together. The students came to the retreat knowing there would be vulnerability involved and that it was their own choice to engage.

At the beginning of the retreat, I told them about the power storytelling gave me, how I viewed it as a gift, and how it helps me connect with my students. They witnessed me open up and delve deeper as I shared my hope for the evening. We laid foundational rules in order to frame how we would interact with each other. These foundations ranged from speaking their own truth as well to the need to observe confidentiality. We decided we would not try to give advice and simply listen. They were able to modify the foundations I already provided as well as collectively decide on more. We were then primed with an activity which gave each participant the opportunity to answer questions about themselves. They ranged from, “What is your favorite color?” to “Who inspires you?” to “What is a moment you wish you could go back and change?” There were simple to more complex questions which challenged the individual to go below the surface and dig deeper as the activity progressed. It allowed them the opportunity to share with each other before doing the main storytelling activity.

For the next activity, the participants received handouts with six boxes and were instructed to think of a combination of six words and/or drawings which summarized important life experiences until that point. They were prompted to think about proud moments, obstacles, victories, relationships, etc. The group had the ability to ask questions, but it was up to the storyteller if they wanted to answer. In the spirit of vulnerability, I chose to go first. As they learned about my struggles with self-worth and coming out to my family, I believe their walls came down. I wanted to demonstrate to them that it was okay to fully show up and share. In that space, I was just Deryka and not their Residence Hall Director. The participants then took turns telling their own stories while everyone else listened. For the next hour, we gently proceeded into unfamiliar territory. I listened to my residents recount stories of triumph, heartache, and challenge. As the last person finished sharing, there was a beautiful moment of silence, and a tangible energy we all felt. We heard stories that those close to us did not know yet. I held back tears as I watched my residents hug and affirm one another. I was speechless. To this day I still cannot describe the feeling the space gave me. I do know it changed my life and professional practice forever.

In the following weeks, I was intentional about watching the ways the students interacted with each other. I also assessed their reactions two weeks later with in-person follow-up interviews. I initially posed the question: how, if at all, has the retreat influenced your outlook? The responses were overwhelmingly positive and there was a general theme of learning to truly get to know the people in their circles beyond the surface. One student mentioned,

“It felt good to share this story with my friends and peers. This exercise really helped me see the true character of others and let me share my true character with them. I gained a lot of respect and feelings of closeness with the group” (Anonymous student, interview, 2015).

They wanted to learn what drove them. The changes were not monumental, however; there was a small shift in how they viewed their world, how they viewed me and vice versa. These small but impactful shifts promote discovery, empathy, and growth. They are the reason I view storytelling as a vital means of connection.

Conclusion

Throughout time, storytelling has been used as a way to share, pass down, teach, and learn. Stories connect and bring people together, but are also used as a mechanism to inform and educate. In practice, educators can use storytelling as a tool to empower and help students learn about themselves and the world around them. Storytelling in practice can occur in a number of different ways, both in individual and group settings. Learning can occur in different ways, whether through intentional questioning and sharing or utilizing a storytelling retreat. The passion deriving from telling stories connects professionals with students and enhances the overall educational experience.

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