



# Relational Storytelling and Critical Reflections on Difference

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**Abstract:** This essay explores unique practices for teaching relational ethics through storytelling. Drawing from my experiences teaching an advanced undergraduate Narrative Ethics seminar, I explain how my students responded to a storytelling unit through which they examined their values and storytelling ethics. I interweave observations from my teaching with insights gathered from my students' in-class discussions and written reflections to demonstrate the pedagogical aims, outcomes, and challenges encountered when engaging this material. I focus particularly on offering suggestions for encouraging students to (a) embrace limits to their understandings of others and (b) recognize how listening for, and expressing, difference plays a fundamental role in their personal, relational, and ethical growth.

*Storytelling mediates relations with experiences and identities that extend beyond us as individuals. In our installation, as storytellers we cross, breach, and blur boundaries that demarcate crucial political and ethical spaces in our everyday lives as we work with student listeners to create a world to which we all belong.* (Adair, Brown, Clark, Perez-Cotrich, & Stanfield, p. 140)

The Communication Studies discipline offers a rich foundation for educating learners about the complexities of storytelling. A process co-constructed through social interaction, storytelling provides a powerful means for building human relationships (Lannamann & McNamee, 2011). Over the past five years, I have taught a Narrative Ethics seminar, which is an upper-level undergraduate course centered on the ethical practices and dilemmas encountered when communicating stories with others. I designed this course with expectations of challenging students to reflect critically on their daily, ethical engagements, particularly when communicating about their own and others' values in conversation. In this reflection essay, I explain further why I recognized a need for students to dig deeply into their dispositions as communicators, especially when communicating with others about their beliefs through

storytelling. After describing how my students respond to an interpersonal storytelling unit, I outline specific approaches to class discussion that challenge them to recognize how narrative can strengthen their capacity to communicate ethically about their own and others' personal values. Such approaches may be applied to a broad range of courses focusing on relational communication.

## Context and Rationale

My interest in developing this course stemmed from my observations of various social problems affecting my campus community. At Denison University (a fully residential liberal arts institution), students are tight-knit, interacting with one another frequently both in and outside of the classroom. Through serving a number of campus initiatives, such as the "Committee for Residential Life" and the "Restorative Justice Program," I learn firsthand about students' concerns over a "fragmented" and "judgmental" social culture. Some students report that parties are "screened" by door monitors who admit select individuals and reject others; in other instances, verbal attacks are expressed against student groups and organizations, especially those that are particular to minorities. And, given the frequency with which students encounter one another, they report having heightened anxieties over how their identities are perceived. As a result, they censor what they say and do to protect their image, even if it requires withholding their beliefs.

These instances, among several others, certainly affect how students enact and embody their daily interactions in ways not immediately observable in the classroom setting. As a professor of relational communication, I recognized a need to develop academic courses that respond to issues affecting my students' immediate social context. Therefore, drawing from my observations of the campus culture, I use my Narrative Ethics course as an opportunity to engage students in communication practices necessary for speaking authentically about their experiences and values. In this course, I situate narrative ethics as a dynamic, relational process, one through which persons strive for genuine dialogue. My definition draws from Frank's (2013) theoretical framework, in which:

Storytelling is for an other just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as [a] guide to the other's self-formation. The other's receipt of that guidance not only recognizes but values the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story for the other. (p. 18)

The ethics at play in dialogue concern matters of listening openly, seeking understanding, and recognizing individuals' abilities and limitations to apprehending others' experiences. As Ellis (2007) noted, these behind-the-scenes ethics play a pivotal role in how people co-construct meanings of themselves and others through conversation. Moreover, these ethical practices are essential when discussing values and beliefs tied to any lived experience. Storytelling provides a vernacular for conveying underlying reasons for why persons believe what they do (Frank, 2013). Hence, it is through narrative that individuals acquire a deeper glimpse into the persons with whom they speak, thus enabling them to recognize the uniqueness of their own and others' dispositions.

Drawing from this literature, I shape my courses to compel students to acknowledge their often unspoken values tied to intimate stories inscribing their belief systems. Specifically, I construct assignments intended for my students to anticipate and listen for implicit meanings ensuing from their own *and* others' storytelling. Throughout a six-week storytelling unit, my students (a) write self-reflections on personal experiences that impact their value systems, (b) discuss the anticipated challenges of sharing

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such personal stories with others, (c) engage in paired storytelling with a classmate, and (d) reflect critically on their storytelling experiences to identify and explain the ethical practices they enact when communicating with their partners. Upon receiving IRB approval from my respective institution, I examined my students' experiences of, and responses, to these implementations.

## Students' Responses to the Storytelling Unit

Having concrete storytelling experiences to reflect on helps my students focus more intentionally on their speaking and listening practices. Many students draw attention to their vulnerability, realizing that storytelling about personal values occurs only when both teller and listener gesture openness. Meanwhile, my students capitalize on the value of sharing their similarities, suggesting that their commonalities allow them to feel connected and trusted. For instance, in their written reflections students explained that “even though I went into this conversation assuming that [my partner] and I would not connect and would hide aspects of our stories, I was proven wrong by how much we had in common and our ability to fully interpret each other's experiences” and “In my experience with [my partner] we found common ground. We had both had the same very significant life experience. And while these looked very different for each of us, the fundamental basis of sharing past adventures in common helped us to feel as though we knew each other in a way that we certainly did not before.”

At first glance, I grow excited when witnessing my students building bridges to connect with one another. These comments suggest that they perceive themselves capable of *fully* understanding others by way of identifying their commonalities. There is nothing wrong with recognizing the similarities they share with others. For my students, being reminded of their own experiences while simultaneously hearing similar accounts revealed through the stories shared by their peers makes their conversations feel mutually affirming. Frank (2013) validated these experiences when stating that testimony rests on a demand for stories that create possibilities for others to imagine more fully their own realities. Furthermore, to dissolve discomforts associated with newly forming relationships, storytellers often seek common ground values as a means to identify with their listeners. Yet, such inclinations to ease tension and settle discomfort may limit students from questioning further their meaningful differences.

These tendencies—to avoid conflict—are not limited to my classroom experiences. They occur in everyday conversations when people strive to maintain harmony and avoid asking tough questions or expressing differences. For instance, when observing the social climate on campus, I witness students gravitating towards others similar to their selves. And in classroom discussions, they often avoid expressing values that would potentially incite disagreement. Thus, through this storytelling unit, I want my students to recognize their differences while realizing their limits to understanding others' unique dispositions. When this outcome does not manifest, I question my teaching. Because I often encourage students to respond to one another's vulnerability by creating open, receptive speaking situations, my emphasis on comfort likely steers them away from questioning one another further about how their value systems differ in ways that might provoke discomfort. Therefore, I propose a debriefing session during which I raise critical questions for my students to discuss in lieu of their findings from the storytelling unit.

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## Debriefing the Storytelling Unit

I approach this debriefing session with the goal of getting my students to consider how acknowledging both similarities and differences is necessary when relating ethically with others. I first ask them to compare and contrast how similarities and differences play significant roles in the relationships they develop. When responding to this question, my students express the tensions they experience with relating to others' personal meanings when storytelling. We discuss how sharing commonalities with others strengthens our senses of belonging. Meanwhile, we also acknowledge our need for others to question the particularities of our experiences to reveal uniqueness and points yet to be considered. Through this process, my students consider how their relationships, forged through sharing similarities, may sometimes inhibit them from experiencing differences necessary for expanding their personal development and relational depths. Furthermore, when relating these observations to their campus culture, my students recognize more vividly how the fragmented nature of their social climate is due largely to their peers' reluctance to encounter difference. Drawing this connection makes the learning in the classroom "real," such that my students recognize the need to learn narrative practices vital for broaching social differences.

Encouraging students to apprehend the importance of listening to others' points of view about their beliefs gives rise to deeper issues underlying the ways they communicate with others about their differences. Thus, I then ask my students to consider (a) what transpires when relationships are deprived of space for acknowledging and discussing unsettling differences (such as those differences encountered when realizing that each other's moral beliefs conflict) and (b) how stories may assist in communicating ethically about such differences? These questions often perplex my students, such that it can be hard to gain traction for discussing these ideas in class. In response, I assign Todd's (2004) essay, which provides a vocabulary for articulating the value of explicitly acknowledging their differences. Todd underscored that:

Commonality, equality, and shared responsibility can only ever be derived from the presence of difference within community, a difference that constantly threatens to break in upon and dissolve the communal bond. Yet, equally paradoxically, it is precisely in attending to their difference, to others as others, that enables formations of community, formations that take seriously the burden of justice, that is, the burden of making decisions, evaluations, comparisons, and judgments. (p. 342)

Storytelling provides a means of communication for apprehending others' experiences and seeing how differences in persons' values arise. Through discussing this essay, my students learn that communicating ethically is not merely about creating understanding, but also about recognizing the limits to understanding.

In response to Todd's essay, I ask my students how they could put "thinking with ignorance" into practice. Encouraging my students to embrace this frame of mind proves challenging. It helps to be reminded that for years students are taught to be knowers. Teaching them to inhabit a place of *not*

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*knowing* may seem antithetical. Therefore, it is necessary for me to discuss with my students the need for *unlearning* habits ensuing from their needs to know and be certain. I do so by probing their connotative understandings of the concept “ignorance.” While often conceived in negative terms, ignorance plays a vital role in enriching our understandings. Pagano (1991) explained that ignorance is not an absence of understanding, but rather a powerful realization that opens doors for further inquiry and exploration: “An investigation of ignorance creates a new condition for knowledge” (p. 201).

Discussing ignorance openly as a class and reframing it in positive terms empowers my students to more readily embrace the limits of their understandings while also encouraging them to develop further questions for viewing their knowledge from different angles. They begin questioning how their assumed similarities with other individuals are always laden with experiential and situational differences, many of which are overlooked. Concluding from our class discussions, my students express that it is better to become aware of what we do not know rather than assume we are capable of fully understanding others. With this value in mind, we must always question others and ourselves when exchanging stories to avoid making counterproductive assumptions.

At the conclusion of our discussion, I ask my students to write a synthesis reflection, taking into account what we discussed in relationship to their peer-to-peer storytelling experience. To guide this reflection, I urge them to consider what they could do differently: What questions might they ask of their peer that they did not initially? What assumptions might they have made about their perceived understandings? In what ways might they be limited in understanding their partner? I also have them consider how teachings from the storytelling unit and class discussion can be used to address problems they observe of their campus social culture. This step encourages my students to think seriously about the applied implications of their learning. Such awareness primes them to contemplate new approaches for reflecting critically on their social environments in ways that enable them to challenge dominant narratives promoting routine communication habits. That is, my students apply their inquiries about difference to broader contexts warranting critical interrogation.

## Conclusion

Involving students in active storytelling invites them to embody and enact ethical practices for discovering value in their personal lives and peer relationships. Meanwhile, instructors must attend to the ways students form connections through such communication. The approaches condoned throughout this reflection encourage students to examine their personal values while also taking into consideration their relationships with others. Thus, these observations are suited well for relational communication courses wherein listening carefully to others and engaging in democratic practices are necessary. By recognizing storytelling as a powerful means for elevating human connection, instructors too should reflect on their pedagogical practices: How might we develop more innovative practices for involving students in discussing their differences? How might we explore creative techniques for helping students recognize limits to their understandings that summon further questions—leaving stories with and about others open-ended for future discovery? These questions mark beginnings for journeys ahead as we continue developing personal, relational, and/or pedagogical practices for cultivating an ethical awareness through storytelling.

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