

## Chapter 16

# Leading With Life: Using Personal Stories to Promote Social Justice in Pedagogy

**Marjorie Kathleen Ellis**  
West Chester University, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Personal narratives are an important part of promoting social justice in pedagogy. Incorporating social justice using narratives follow several prominent pedagogical concepts. Assimilating each as a component of a larger pedagogical strategy lends to greater overall attainment of both social justice goals and personal involvement in the learning process.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social Justice

*Ideologies separate us, dreams and anguish bring us together. -Eugene Ionesco*

Social justice is broadly described as actions with the intention of creating impartiality, genuine equality, respect, and acceptance among populaces (Applebaum, 2003). Many times, our ideologies regarding social justice issues delineate how we react to situations which embody such matters. The quote by Ionesco represents social justice in a nutshell; individual ideologies which perceive social justice matters as non-issues drive a wedge among those representing diverse groups and beliefs, while the shared and learned experiences and aspirations of those same groups, when promoted as a social justice platform, bonds all involved.

Educational settings lend a prime opportunity for the enhancement of social justice, but also for the occurrence of situations lending to greater ignorance and bias. For example, data from the 2011-2012 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) indicated that 72 percent percent of all public school teachers were

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female and 82 percent were Caucasian (Goldring, Gray & Bitterman, 2013). Because of that significant number, the possibility exists that these predominately White, female educators will not be able to effectively promote social justice in educational settings which are vastly minority represented and may, instead, lead to either teacher or student “shut-down” or disengagement (Trout & Basford, 2016). Such information lends to the critical nature of engaging students in discourse related to how aspects of the curriculum relate to their personal experiences and narratives as a means for enhancing the importance of overall educational opportunities and for promoting social justice.

*I am the longest living pediatric transplant survivor in the United States.* That simple sentence captures the attention of the audience on the speaker and leaves them in anticipation for the remainder of the storyline. Such pedagogical methodology of using one’s own personal narratives has been found to be more effective in enhancing student learning and engagement than discoursing topics in which in which one has no direct, intimate experience (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Smith, 2012). In fact, the more intimate and memorable the experience, the greater likelihood that pedagogical content will be recalled more quickly and accurately, as well as eliciting more collaborative involvement in the learning process (Dettori, 2012).

This is true with respect to the educators who use their own person stories, and who also engage students by inquiring about their experiences when determining the best strategies for presenting topical content on various subject matters. The connections make things more personal for the student, leading to more meaningful learning experiences regardless of their backgrounds. For preservice teachers, one of the most important strategies to become familiar with and proficient in is to incorporate narrative inquiry in their classrooms.

Narrative inquiry in pedagogy has a long history and involves many different strategies. For this focus on personal stories, three specific components will be focused on and the fit of narratives within each constituent will be discussed. The constructivist theory of learning, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy are all addressed. Together, they provide a clear understanding of how personal narratives and experience can be used as a successful pedagogical method.

Teachers who are justice-oriented tend to incorporate a number of major concepts in their classrooms: constructivist learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Szurmak & Thuna, 2013), critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988; Ladegaard, 2011), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and the concepts of *embodied and critical caring* (Hamington, 2001, 2004; Rolón-Dow, 2005). The effective use of narratives takes into account intrinsic constituents of each. Throughout this chapter, examples of personal narratives from either the student or the teacher are provided; these narratives are shared for the purpose of enhancing overall awareness of social justice concepts in the realm of pedagogy.

## Constructivist Learning

Many different philosophies of best educational practices coexist, including culturally responsive pedagogy, visible learning, metacognitive strategies, critical pedagogy, and a multitude of others that have been developed and supported by both teachers and educational groups, some more effective than others. Theories of learning related to student learning are also relevant here as they describe components leading to the ultimate outcome of learning. One such theory revolves around the constructivist approach.

The constructivist theory has defined learning through three components: interactions, dynamic processes, and change (Szurmak & Thuna, 2013). This theory is based on the early works of Piaget and

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