Chapter 12
Opening the Learning Space:
Giving Primacy to Students' Stories of Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter suggests that there is value in placing a primacy on the stories of student experience in higher education classrooms. Student storytelling and listening holds potential to deepen students' understandings of the course content and foster new connections. Ways to hold the learning space that will foster student storytelling, listening, and exploration are considered. Instructional issues of directionality of instruction and control are considered. Also discussed are some foundational practices for liberating psychosocial spaces and the notion of formlessness. The chapter attempts to balance conceptual thoughts with some practical ideas that readers can begin to customize and apply in the context of their practice. Suggestions for future research are also included.

OPENING THE LEARNING SPACE: GIVING PRIMACY TO STUDENTS' STORIES OF EXPERIENCE

When colleagues in higher education learn that I am a storyteller, they often ask me how they can tell "better" stories in their classes. This is an excellent goal, and I appreciate their interest in developing storytelling skills. After all, stories help to convey material in ways that may engage even the sleepiest and most recalcitrant students. By providing rich contextual details and vivid images, stories can help render difficult material more accessible, make abstract concepts more

concrete, and in general make course content more palatable and memorable.

In addition to happily providing some coaching, I also point these colleagues to some favorite books that can support the development of good storytelling skills (see for example: Niemi & Ellis, 2001; Lipman, 1999; Maguire, J. 1998; Mooney & Holt, 1996; Mellon, 1992; Baker & Green, 1977). Ultimately, in my view, the very best way to become a strong storyteller comes from two actions that anyone can easily take. The first is to listen to stories. Listen intently, noticing both what strikes you, and what distracts you, taking you "out" of the story. Make distinctions between the story and the way the teller told it.

The second important action to build your storytelling "muscle" is to tell your own stories. When you tell them, make an effort to notice your listeners, connect to them, get a sense of when they are "with you" and when they have dropped back, when they have become distracted and disconnected from the story. At the end of the story, ask for feedback from your listeners about what struck them, what in your story resonated for them, and painted a salient image in their mind's eye. Learn what they found particularly appealing and engaging. Storytelling is important and helpful, and I encourage you to engage in this practice.

Here, however, I want to turn our gaze to facilitative processes that are at least as potent, perhaps more so, as conveying our stories to our students. Here we will consider conditions and processes that will ease the elicitation of student stories in classroom settings. Undertaking this process shifts emphasis from the authoritative air of stories offered by the professor to the exploratory air of students working to investigate how their own individual and collective experiences are connected to, and disconnected from, the theoretical and practical aspects of course content.

Of course many of you are likely already interpreting your educative role as story elicitors and story listeners. I hope this chapter will give you new ideas to integrate into your practice. For others, giving primacy to student storytelling in the classroom space may feel at first like a sort of abdication of your responsibility to "teach." It may require a shift in the directionality of your instructional design and a new willingness to surrender control over the trajectory of the classroom discourse. I hope this chapter will act as an invitation to experiment, and that it will be both constructive and instructive in helping you to draw deeply on the experiences of your students to expand the learning space in your courses.

The first task before us is to level the playing field with a few operational definitions of stories, storytelling, and story listening as I intend the terms in the context of this chapter. With these definitions in place, we will consider why placing a primacy on the stories of student experience has value. This will be followed by some thoughts on ways to open the learning space so that student stories can be usefully elicited and collaboratively explored to deepen understanding of the course content and foster new connections. We will look at instructional issues of shifting directionality, ceding control, some foundational practices for liberating psychosocial spaces, and formlessness. The effort here will be to balance conceptual thoughts with some practical ideas ready for you to customize and apply. The chapter will close with some thoughts on going-forward implications. Let's go.

SHIFTING THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE: SOME OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Here the classic rhetorical triangle (sender/ethos; message/logos; receiver/pathos) grounded in the work of Aristotle is modified to reflect the dynamic social phenomenon of storytelling and listening, becoming what we can think of as a Story-torical Triangle. For our purposes, we can assume that the rhetorical triangle retains its equilateral constitution, but the points are labeled anew (teller; story; listener). This shift may seem academic, and even unnecessary, until we consider more closely the characteristics of these three elements, which we will do now.

Stories

In the social dynamic of interactive learning spaces we are considering, a story is an authentic experience that a student may choose to convey to (or to withhold from) one or more listeners in real time. (While there are important implications for asynchronous storytelling in the digital or virtual realm, constraints on this chapter will limit our consideration to synchronous, face-to-face interac-

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