

# STORIES IN ACTION: MAKING THE TELLING COUNT

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Storytelling is a central experience to many cultures and defines much of how individuals inform their values, beliefs, and identities. Stories are told and retold to further systematic beliefs and instill a sense of tradition and history within a society. Individual narratives, then, act as tributaries to the river of stories running through a society. Thus, stories are central to how we teach and learn within our communities. TED.com exploits this phenomenon by inviting speakers from all over the globe to share their stories on the broad scale of the Internet. Speakers use TED's storytelling format to teach others about everything from design and technology to education, ecology, emotion, and many other big-idea topics that cross boundaries between disciplines, cultures, and ages. Using honesty, authenticity, and inspiration as guiding points, TED organizers assert that "there is no one way to give a great talk" (Anderson, 2016, p. x) and, thus, understand that the power of a story must begin with the creative, unique, and thoughtful storyteller. It was this core idea that focused the Stories in Action workshop and provided a grounding for a cross-disciplinary approach to teaching courage and social justice. As one participant said, "Storytelling is taking an important piece of you that you are passionate about and using that as your power-tool to tell someone your story that can affect them in a certain way" (post-workshop interview, 2017). The following narrative describes the first iteration of Stories in Action that took place during Fall 2016.

Last November, I led a group of 13 students and 5 faculty in the first iteration of the Stories in Action workshop series. I had met with some success using a TED.com-inspired curriculum in my *Professional Dispositions in Art Education* course and was approached by Miami's Urban Cohort (UC) to collaborate on a two-day workshop using similar ideas with their students. They wanted to empower the members of the UC to share their unique and inspirational stories with others, spread the idea of social justice across campus, and, hopefully, recruit others to join their program. The cohort works to highlight social justice, educate students about teaching and learning within an urban setting, and encourage its members to purposefully seek out their individual passion and purpose for that important work. While the call for workshop participation began with the UC, eventually, it was broadened to include members of EDT 190, *Introduction to Education*, where students are introduced to teaching and encouraged to create their own narratives about deciding on teaching as a profession. Leaders of the UC believed strongly in the power of stories to engage listeners and motivate greater participation in social justice in and outside of the classroom. All faculty participants talked about the importance of students understanding and having the opportunity to clarify their own journeys *through* and *to* education as a profession.

## PREPARING FOR THE WORKSHOP

Within my own course, the ARTed Talk series encompasses a TED.com-inspired curriculum, where students are led to develop their own refined messages about their passion within the field of art education. The goal is for students to develop a professional presence, an individual conviction for teaching, to become more aware of the issues within their field, and to encourage confidence in themselves and in their ideas. Similar to TED.com's "ideas worth sharing" (Anderson, 2016), this process encourages participants to carefully examine their rationale for teaching and purposefully craft their

ideas into succinct and digestible messages that can be accessed by a wider audience.

While it was difficult to hone a semester-long experience into two days, it allowed me the opportunity to work on what my own ideas-worth-sharing were. I knew the general goals of the UC, and they were not all that different from my course goals. They both sought to honor and empower individuals to tell their stories in a professional, informed, and eloquent manner. The key emphasis I had to remember for the Stories in Action workshop was the emphasis on how that sharing can and should lead to greater social justice—not a bad idea for my own class as well!

The invitation that went out to potential participants highlighted this opportunity. Below is the general description, followed by each workshop description.

*There is power your truth, in the story that brought you to the work that you do with us in the Urban Cohort. Please join us in finding, sharing, and uplifting our journeys within the Urban Cohort. Learn how the power within your story can act as a catalyst to inspire and empower others to find their own paths toward social justice. “There are two ways to share knowledge; you can push information out, or pull people in with a great story” –Unknown*

#### *Stories in Action: Finding Your Story—Part 1*

*Why is social justice important to you? What incited your interest in working with the Urban Cohort? How do you share about the work that you do? There is power in each of our stories, in the passions that we hold, and in what we share with others. You are invited to join the Urban Cohort Leadership Board and Dr. Stephanie Baer in uncovering your story and learning how it can inspire the hearts and minds of others.*

#### *Stories In Action: Community Connection—Part 2*

*You are invited to reconnect with the Leadership Board, Dr. Baer, and your fellow cohort members after spending time with your story. Come into community to share, practice, develop, listen, and celebrate one another’s passions, stories, and truths!*

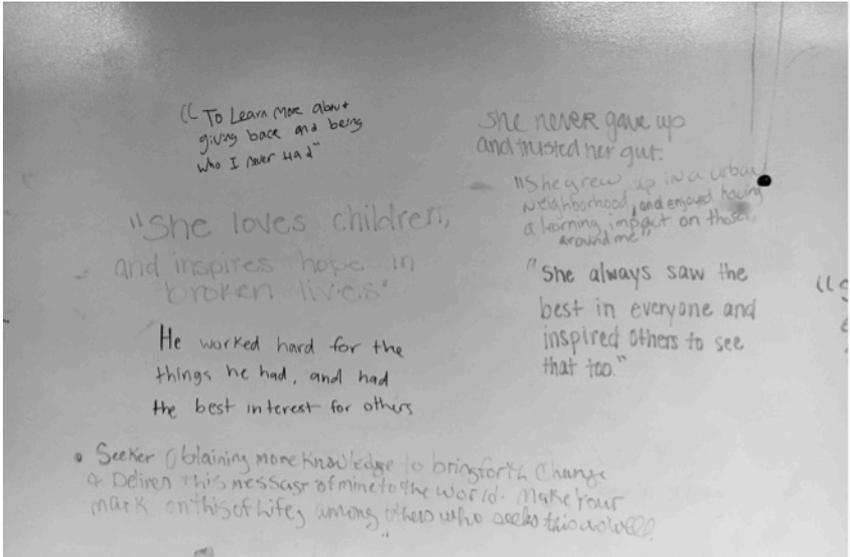
#### *Stories In Action: Campus Change Catalyst—Part 3*

*This is an opportunity to share the power of your story with a campus-wide audience. This event will be open to all and aims to uplift your voices and powerful journeys. This will be not only an opportunity for you to share your passion for the work that you do, but to spread the spark of inspiration that provides a wider platform to move others toward finding their own.*

Participants were led to consider what power their own stories had in inspiring and motivating others. They were given a potential opportunity to not only get help in finding and developing their stories, but in connecting with one another, to *tell* and *retell* those stories. They were told their stories were *truth*. As the workshop leader, this reminded me that I was helping them *tell* their stories—not *create* them. The stories were theirs, and in order to honor them, I had a lot of listening to do first.

*PART 1: “As the past becomes, the present is revealed” (Pinar, 1994, p. 22)*

The first workshop was centered on guiding participants to identify and uncover just what their story was. They were introduced to Dan Pink’s (2011) idea of “What’s Your Sentence” and created a one-liner for their own lives. It is not easy to boil down your educational experience, hopes, and dreams to one sentence, but it led them to think about succinctness and getting to the point quickly as they considered their journeys to and through education.



**Figure 1: Close-up of collected participants’ sentences**

This short, regressive jaunt was followed by a more substantial reflection on their experiences. After sharing with one another (which was a vital step throughout both workshops), they each created a visual map that began with the sentence. They searched for “bits” of experience, stories, and insights that led them to and from their sentences (Poetter & Googins, 2017). In a way, they were already moving within the analytical step of Pinar’s (1994) *currere* method, working to visually conceptualize the “parts of the organic whole” (Pinar, 1994, p. 26).



**Figure 2: Participants in story pods, sharing their visual maps**

I walked around the room assuring individuals that “yes, that looks great!” and assuring many that “No, there’s no wrong way to do this.” The participants interpreted the visual maps differently with results ranging from an intricate web of sentences and symbols to a drawing of a tree. While work on the visual maps ebbed and flowed, participants chose what they considered to be an empowering image and had their photograph taken in front of a green screen using the chosen image as the background. These became their power portraits—handy, laminated, 2”x3” amulets to carry around, ready to restore waning confidence.



**Figure 3: Kiara’s (student participant) power portrait**

The purposeful engagement of the *visual* invited participants to detach from their present and yet stay connected through the weaving together of their sentences and their journeys to them. Pinar (1994) asks in the synthetical step of the *currere* method, “What conceptual gestalt is finally visible?” (p. 27). That question manifests itself concretely through the idea map process, where participants created holistic visual journeys using text, pictures, and symbols to represent their evolving understandings of self and narrative. This representation illuminated a weaving timeline as they tracked from the present to the past and back again. The power portraits provided a glimpse into “what is not yet present” (Pinar, 1994, p. 24); an image that *could be*. Playing with Amy Cuddy’s (2012) assertion that one can actually “fake it ‘til you make it,” the participants explored the visual concept of courage through criticism (choosing a personally powerful background image), performance (taking on a power pose), and photography (the final power portrait). There was a process involved as the final portrait was created and considered. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) described the need to trust such a collaborative, visual process. These writers/artists sought to weave their stories together with *métissage* and braiding in search of a more coherent telling of *Lebenswelt*, or, lifeworld—a word familiar to how Pinar (1994) explains the search for a felt/lived coherence where “the point of coherence is the biography as it is lived” (p. 20). The narratives created by the Stories in Action participants became as much visual as they were textual, with their bodies serving as equals to their intellectual meanderings of experience.

At the end of the first workshop, we discussed the confidence required to tell a story well. We talked about story structure and the elements that Karia (2015) said make a story engaging. Akash Karia, a speaker and consultant, formed his approach on the merits of

telling stories like successful (widely-seen) TED speakers. Participants then watched Dananjaya Hettiarachchi's 2014 Toastmasters International World Championship speech. After agreeing that it was, in fact, a winner, we talked about why he was a good storyteller. What did he do? How did he talk? Why was it so engaging? I then asked them to keep that in the back of their minds as they developed their stories over the next two weeks. I gave them a bit of homework: watch a few TED Talks, write up a script, find a few images if they're needed to help tell your story, and practice telling your story to anyone who will listen.

I felt good after the first workshop. I thought the participants enjoyed it, and I observed a variety of emotions throughout the night: Interest and intrigue as we talked about Pink's (2011) sentence idea; nervousness and excitement with sharing ideas out loud; hesitancy and laughter as they moved throughout the classroom interacting with one another; and appreciation and wonder for accomplished storytellers; all of which communicated a journey through this first workshop. They had engaged in several *currere* steps allowing them to identify and begin to "bracket" or "loosen" themselves enough to observe, record, and re-record their educational experiences (Pinar, 1994). Because it was the first time I'd done a workshop like this, I was panicked and exhausted. As an experienced teacher, I knew that was a sign we were all working hard and that important ideas had surfaced that night. In fact, as I was saying goodbye to participants, a few faculty hung at the door, commenting on how groups of faculty should participate—not just students. We wondered together what it could do for morale, confidence, and agency. I quickly went home, reflected on the evening's events and participants, and then set to work adjusting the next workshop to better fit what I'd learned that night. I had arrived at a new place, considering the journey we had just been on and how those new understandings needed to feed and relocate the next steps we'd take together.

*PART 2: "Underlining the biological concreteness of being" (Pinar, 1994, p. 26)*

The second workshop focused on the *telling* of stories. I had given the participants two weeks to craft their stories. Expecting great hesitancy and the need for pleading, I opened with asking if there was anyone who wanted to share their story with the group. To my amazement, a student participant, Tracy (pseudonym) volunteered to read her story aloud. Because we were looking at the best structure for our stories, I asked if we could give her feedback aloud when she was done and use her story as an example to discuss structure. Tracy agreed, stood up, and began.

What started as a tentative beginning rose to a dynamic and assertive story about a young woman looking for belonging. Tracy told poignant and deeply personal stories, guiding the audience to consider the loneliness that can happen within a classroom full of people, the frustration that comes when the adults you should be able to trust do not follow through. What could have been a generic report about the troubles of bullying became a moving narration of a young life navigating different educational and personal contexts. She highlighted the past, argued with the present, and asked difficult questions for us to live among. Her story was a call to action.

When I asked Tracy later to reflect on what it was like telling her story in the workshop, she described the endless "what if's" she could have considered:

My thought process was *don't think about it* and just go in and say it. Say what you want to say because if you have time to think about it, you're going break apart when you're trying to say this out loud. That's actually the first time I've ever shared anything like that. I don't usually like to talk about myself,...which is hard

as a teacher. You have to be able to show your vulnerability to your students. It's something I really need to work on. (post-workshop interview, 2017)

Tracy went on to describe an experience with a school counselor that contributed to her believing she shouldn't share personal issues with others. "I don't ever want anyone else to feel like that." She continued to reiterate how difficult it was to share her story but what a good opportunity it was for her "to show her vulnerability." We had also worked to set up a community, in the short amount of time we were together, where these stories could be told. Tracy described the benefits of that work when she said of her post-talk experience, "No one was judgey....I don't want pity. I want options....For people to actually give me feedback and not that look of pity—it was fantastic."

She then described how another student approached her afterward for advice on her own story. "I was already a teacher." Tracy was rewarded for her sharing and found a connection to her teaching identity through her vulnerability.

When Tracy finished the telling of her story, we all clapped and dove into a discussion not only about how her story used some conventions of story-telling we'd discussed, but how her story *telling* was so completely authentic, honest, and raw. Each of us found connections within her story and, in fewer than five minutes, had learned how and why she wanted to be a teacher. We knew intimate details about her journey—not just from the content, but from the emotion she embodied within it. It was as if she were reflecting, re-living, and wishing for the future all at once. I later found out that writing her story aligned with a class assignment she had. I wondered if other students in her class had approached the task with such passion and power behind their words. I wondered if other audiences would be as receptive to her story and if her *telling* could perhaps inspire future educators.

With that powerful beginning, we set to work. Using well-known stories (fairy tales), participants dissected them, accounting for what Karia (2011) identified as the critical elements of a good story: character, conflict, spark, change in character, and take away. During that exercise, we came to an interesting finding regarding traditional fairy tales (Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, etc.): There is a serious void when it comes to a change in character in these stories! Their situations change and people around them may change, but the heroine simply stayed beautiful and morally good. This prompted an interesting discussion concerning gender politics, Disney princesses, Broadway musical re-inventions, and what young students (grades K-12) are learning inadvertently from these foundational stories in our culture. While some may argue about whether or not fairy tales are foundational, it cannot be argued that they hold a mystical place in the fabric of many cultures—often used to teach basic morals and values to young people. This foray into social justice issues provided an opening for participants to consider what Baszile (2015) describes as finding an absence within the *currere* process. As this group was entirely made up of women, we questioned together what our collective learning had been surrounding tales like this; tales that didn't highlight the humanity of a heroine, but rather sat her atop a pedestal and left her untouched.

As participants then advanced into their own stories, they were more attuned to the need to share absent stories and the importance of individual voices. As Baszile (2015) asked, "What has not been said?" These participants began unfurling the "us" and "we" in search of the "me" and "I," recognizing that each individual story and voice needed to be shared. The challenge to tell a coherent story continued as participants worked within reflections of their own experiences to choose what pieces and parts were the most significant, the most powerful, and the most central to deciphering the origins of their teaching journeys. Kiara (pictured above) mentioned in a post-workshop interview

that she was still looking for those pieces and described how, as a student teacher, she was helping her own students to do that as well:

Now, as a teacher, I want to make sure I give my students the power of their voice to be able to speak up and be able to understand that they are beautiful; they are someone; they can be someone. They don't just have to be a basketball player. They can be whatever they want to be. They just have to work hard...children go through a lot and taking that into consideration while I'm teaching in the classroom.  
(post-workshop interview, 2017)

Kiara goes on to describe a comparing/contrasting lesson where she worked with students to look at themselves alongside characters in a book or presidents to “help them feel that connection” and help them “feel they were part of the lesson.” She wanted a place where all students felt they could learn and feel empowered to be who they were. Her understanding of social justice carried directly from her own story into her classroom.

### LOOKING FORWARD: THE MOVEMENT BETWEEN STEPS

The combination of Urban Cohort members, EDT 190 students, and faculty created a broad spectrum of participation that highlighted a diversity of how individuals decided to pursue teaching. This ended up being a strength of the workshop series, allowing individual participants to engage in conversation with others at different points in their personal narratives. The practice they engaged in illustrated the steps of the *currere* method, highlighting the centrality of the narrative. The autobiography became the medium through which social justice could be explored and, hopefully, acted upon.

Constructing my own narrative as the leader of the Stories in Action workshop, I am called to consider the next movement forward. How can these stories become catalysts for more and deeper biographic movement and social justice? What kind of format can enhance the conceptual and visual journeys in which these students have engaged? How can this practice be incorporated into more educational settings? When participants were asked via post-workshop surveys and interviews what their overall response was to the workshops, all mentioned their beliefs about the importance of telling their stories and hearing others' stories. One participant noted that she was, “learning more about defining myself...awareness of others...that I am not alone” (post-workshop survey). A few participants also commented on their continued need to practice the telling of their stories, understanding that there were skills and structure needed for effective storytelling. When asked for what suggestions they had for the workshops, one participant noted in her post-workshop survey, “This was awesome! I wish I had more time to prepare.” Another talked about the need for “more time, more workshops... then eventually we could all tell our story to the class...getting feedback once we tell our story.” She went on to highlight the time she and I spent individually talking about her story and how that individualized attention could help everyone. Others agreed in the post-workshop surveys naming the “story pods” as an activity that stood out where participants would gather in small groups to share ideas, brainstorm, and listen to one another's stories.

The third part of the series has yet to materialize, but important work is being done. More individuals are seeing the power of stories and the influence of a storyteller who has honed her practice. In leading the workshop, I have been given a gift—a moment for “loosening oneself from it”—to step back and consider the impact this process could have within my own course. I am called to remember that, “Unconsciousness

perpetuates itself” (Pinar, 1994, p. 22). I cannot take my own narrative, nor my students’, for granted. Each is a moving and evolving understanding of what it means to teach and learn. As one participant said,

Everybody has a story. Everybody. Being able to break down your story to someone...it’s a reason for everything. It’s a reason why you think in this way or act this way. It’s the story behind it. So it’s important that everyone be able to express that to someone which could have a positive effect on other people.  
(post-workshop interview)

If we only grab hold of our narratives, seek to understand their power and influence, and then take the time to hone their telling, we may have the chance to make important changes in our world.

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