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The Power of Personal Storytelling in Counselor Education

Charles E. Myers, Toni R. Tollerud, and Mi-Hee Jeon

Myers, Charles E., is an Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University. His research areas include play and filial therapy, trauma, and the use of creative arts in counseling and counselor education and supervision.

Tollerud, Toni. R., is a Presidential Teaching Professor at Northern Illinois University. Her research interests include supervision, developmental school counseling, and specifically social-emotional learning, counseling bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgendered persons, grief, loss, crisis, spirituality issues, and counseling women.

Jeon, Mi-Hee, is doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. Her research interests include play therapy and child and parent interactions.

Picture a classroom filled with graduate students pursuing their dreams of becoming clinical mental health counselors, school counselors, and counselor educators. Their discussion centers on crisis counseling following a tragedy. The students have completed the reading assignments and have a cognitive understanding of them. To engage them affectively, to have them vicariously experience the subject matter, the instructor needs to bring the material to life. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of teaching (Hamilton & Weiss, 2007) and is a vital and central condition of the “human experience” (Davidhizar, 2003), capturing the listener’s interest and attention. Storytelling has the ability to bring course content alive, transporting the learner into the experience of the storyteller. The authors present a look at the use of storytelling as a powerful and valuable tool in counselor education.

History of Storytelling

Storytelling is fundamental to teaching. For countless generations, the human race has used storytelling as a way to share information, to educate, and prepare the next generation. The use of storytelling as a teaching method dates back to at least 4000 B.C. and the ancient Egyptians (Sawyer, 1942). “Great teachers, from Homer and Plato, through Jesus, Li Po, and Gandhi have used stories, myths, parables, and personal history to instruct, to illustrate, and to guide the thinking of their students” (Zabel, 1991, para. 2). Indigenous storytellers use stories to provide cultural and historical contexts that serve as social cohesiveness for the entire tribe (Thunderbird, n.d.). Storytelling has been the medium through which people have learned about their history, settled their arguments,

and made sense of the world around them (National Council of Teachers of English, 1992).

Storytelling continues to play a prominent role in our society today. Movie producers and musicians use storytelling to communicate messages and ideas to their audiences. Marketers use stories to better communicate with and engage the public (Binks, Smith, Smith, & Joshi, 2009). The healthcare field uses storytelling to develop skills in clinical settings and to assist nurses in understanding the patients' "lived" experiences (Garrett, 2006). Politicians use storytelling to influence voters and sway opinions. Social activists use storytelling to communicate the experiences of the oppressed to bring about change and social justice. Teachers use storytelling to enhance learning and engage students.

Storytelling in Counselor Education

Storytelling is an ancient form of education and at the core of what makes us human (Hamilton & Weiss, 2007). We naturally use storytelling in the way we think and organize our experiences (Garrett, 2006; Green 2004). Storytelling in the classroom goes beyond lecture, bringing course content to life and engaging learners cognitively and affectively.

Cognitive Engagement

Storytelling captures the imagination, drawing learners into the storyteller's experience. In sharing their personal stories, counselor educators use far more than just words to communicate facts. They use their whole selves, creating graphic descriptions, augmented by their use of nonverbal gestures and paraverbals, such as vocal tone and pitch, to paint mental pictures, bringing the course material to life. Stories create interest, facilitating the development of intrinsic motivation and learner engagement.

Easier to remember than a list of data, stories provide learners the means to make sense of course content and organize new information, facilitating recall later (Green, 2004; Hamilton & Weiss, 2007). Using personal stories, counselor educators offer learners vicarious learning experiences when direct experiences are not possible. Storytelling fosters learning, sustains momentum, and furthers learner development (Green, 2004; Pfahl, 2007). Counselor educators use storytelling to give meaning to abstract ideas by using concrete examples and experiences, contextualizing meaning, and reinforcing learning (Abrahamson, 1998; Green, 2004; Martin, 2000).

Affective Engagement

Beyond cognitive engagement, the use of storytelling in counselor education further engages learners through the affective domain. The affective domain of feelings and emotions is highly relevant to the world of counselor education, and its role in learning has been receiving increased attention (Abrahamson, 1998; McQuiggan, Robinson, & Lester, 2010). People "experience the world as a whole; words are not separate from life experience" (Koki, 1998, p. 3) and "to involve people at the deepest level, you need stories" (Binks et al., 2009, p. 141). Counseling involves matters of the heart, and empathy is a foundational skill to the counseling relationship. In preparing

future counselors, it is paramount that counselor educators foster the development of empathy in their learners.

“Stories go straight to the heart” (Hamilton & Weiss, 2007, p. 2), engaging both our thoughts and our emotions. Counselor educators use stories to build connections (Abrahamson, 1998), linking human actions and events (Binks et al., 2009). Storytelling can be a moving experience, describing human experiences, evoking an emotional response and a more “lived” experience (Garrett, 2006). These experiences help to connect with others and to develop parallel empathy (McQuiggan et al., 2010).

The use of storytelling in counselor education promotes the development of other crucial counseling elements. Storytelling encourages reflection (Binks et al., 2009), critical thinking (Martin, 2000), affective transitions (McQuiggan et al., 2010), development of listening skills (Hamilton & Weiss, 2007), patterns of thought (Pfahl, 2007), and appreciation of other cultures. Storytelling provides a vehicle for learners to reflect, using self-critique and inner dialogue (Abrahamson, 1998) on the connections between theory, practice, and professional growth (Binks et al., 2009).

Storytelling in the classroom encourages learners to take a deeper look at the topics (Green, 2004), explore issues, and consider new points of view (Binks et al., 2009). Stories engage students in critical thinking and personal reflection (Martin, 2000). Storytelling creates shared experiences that build relationships between learners and instructor (Pfahl, 2007), facilitating the development of a caring and open learning environment and fostering good personal relationships among learners (Sim, 2004).

Examples of Personal Storytelling in Counselor Education

The primary role of counselor educators is to prepare their learners to become effective and skilled professional counselors. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) included crisis counseling in the 2009 standards for the training of clinical mental health and school counselors. These standards require counselors-in-training to obtain knowledge and skills regarding the impact of crises and trauma on individuals and groups, the principles of crisis intervention, and the skills needed to respond to a crisis event as a counselor and as a part of interdisciplinary management emergency response team. A common means of preparing counselors-in-training is experiential learning; however, direct crisis experiences are not always practical, or advisable. Following are two examples of how the authors utilized personal storytelling to engage and prepare future counselors. Dr. Myers shares about his time in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and Dr. Tollerud shares her experiences following a campus shooting.

Crisis and Grief Counseling Following the 2010 Haiti Earthquake

At 4:53 p.m. on Tuesday, January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, the capital of the small Caribbean nation of Haiti, and the surrounding area. The earthquake resulted in more than 316,000 deaths and 300,000 injuries (CBC News, 2011), and displaced over 1.5 million people (Doyle, 2010). I responded to a call for help and made two trips to Haiti, serving as a mental health professional at an internationally-staffed volunteer field hospital in Port-au-Prince.

Upon returning to the United States, I reflected upon my experiences in Haiti and the lessons I learned, and shared both with my classes. As I described the living conditions of Haiti, the immense devastation and abject poverty, and of my personal experiences of working in a field hospital, every student fell silent, fully absorbed in my story. We had connected on an emotional level and I had touched their hearts.

The stories I shared in class included being with an 11-year-old boy and his mother as the doctors told him they needed to amputate his leg; with a 35-year-old father of six as he was told he would never walk again; and with a mother as she was told that her baby would not survive. I talked of witnessing many deaths, of holding the hand of a child as he died, and holding mothers as their babies died in their arms. I told them about the 13-year-old girl whose father had died in the earthquake, who told me she loved me and wanted me to be her father; and of a nurse whose husband had died and who told me she had fallen in love with me. I talked about holding and feeding newborn babies. I shared how, even though the people of Haiti have experienced great tragedy and suffering over hundreds of years, they are a genuinely warm, open, and caring people, quick to smile and to help others.

From my stories, we talked about how counselors communicate with more than words, how they communicate with their hearts, the tone of their voices, and their eyes. We explored how counseling is about the relationship and the power of being fully present and caring. We discussed how counseling is an emotionally intimate relationship, how clients may misinterpret the relationship, and how to talk with clients about this when it happens. We talked about therapeutic touch as a basic human need, and that it is okay to cry with your clients. My personal stories brought the topics of crisis and trauma to life for my students and facilitated engaged discussion on the power of resilience and the importance of self-care in crisis work and in counseling in general.

Crisis Counseling and Management After a Campus Shooting

When something major happens in our world that affects our lives, it generally leaves an indelible imprint upon us in a way that we may never forget its impact on us. For example, most of us remember the morning of September 11, 2001, when we heard of the attacks occurring in New York, Washington, and over Pennsylvania. That same effect occurred for many people connected with Northern Illinois University on February 14, 2008, when a single gunman entered a classroom on our campus in DeKalb, IL, and, without word, opened fire toward the students sitting in the auditorium-like classroom. Most of us, who have been students in numerous classrooms, were suddenly transported to similar settings, where we had also sat in vulnerable, unprotected arenas, knowing that we had little room to roam or escape if such an event would have occurred in front of us. As a university faculty member, I was struck on a second level, knowing that I teach in locations such as this, with doors way in the back of the room, or from a stage where little is known of the area behind the tall curtains or backstage doors. At some level, we are aware of these venues, but generally we do not dwell on the possibilities - that is, until the crisis occurs.

That day, that week, that month, and even that year, are forever branded into my thinking as a professional educator and as a professional counselor. The stories are sad, genuine, gruesome, painful - and rich with opportunities to come to grips with deep emotions. For me, the need to volunteer and be a part of the response was strong. I was

immediately called into action when I went to a large room where several of the students from the class were still present, being interviewed by university police and wondering how they would retrieve their purses, books, or keys. They needed rides to their homes and dorms. Students across campus were notified of the crisis, unsure of how many were dead, and many left immediately to the safety of family or close friends. How surreal it was to watch the television reports knowing that the building was blocks from where you were sitting, that this was your campus, and that these students belonged to you.

Sharing the story of this crisis with students evokes feelings at many different degrees because each student relates on multiple levels. Of course, there is the story and the immense feelings of loss and crisis. Student counselors-in-training also relate to being in their own classes and on campuses, and wonder how they might respond in such a situation. Doctoral students ponder their role as a classroom instructor and the responsibility involved. Because of this complexity, students often feel uncomfortable and uneasy when a crisis that is this close to their reality is discussed. During the conversation, students will jump around to multiple situations, and sometimes they may not be aware of exactly what they are experiencing. Yet this is just what I want them to gain from the storytelling. The power of the feelings is most important. As a counselor educator, I want each student to get beyond the words and to understand their own vulnerability. I want them to feel this experience, not only from another's perspective, but from their own connection to that event and to the people involved in the story. I want them to understand that the words their clients will share evoke strong feelings that move deep. That sometimes there is no "good" response to a crisis, but only the opportunity to "be" with that client. When that discomfort occurs, I want each counselor in training to find their own strength to stay with the story, to be present for their client, and to know that sometimes there isn't an answer to what life gives to us. In these moments, being genuine, caring, and staying with the client, are the skills of good counseling, and that is enough. Students need to learn they can touch their clients with their silence, their vulnerability, and their own tears and heartfelt support.

Summary

The effectiveness of storytelling in education has centuries of support. Storytelling provides counselor educators a way of sharing ideas, perspectives, and personal challenges (Martin, 2000). When counselor educators use storytelling in their classroom, they engage their students' thoughts and emotions (Green, 2004). Storytelling brings course material to life, encourages inner reflection, and facilitates deeper understanding (Binks et al., 2009). Counselor educators can use storytelling to build connections with their students through sharing their personal experiences. Students are more likely to remember information longer when it has touched them personally (Abrahamson, 1998).

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