Integrating Metacognitive Practice as a Strategy for More Equitable Storytelling in Community-Based Learning

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Abstract

Storytelling is a practice that is critical for the communication of lived experience, the development of empathy, and for the creation of a rich sense of collective being. While essential, it is also deeply complex and fragile—fraught with potential for marginalizing and stereotype-confirming rhetoric. In community-based learning, and throughout the field of Poverty and Human Capability Studies, storytelling is often employed in the context of reflective practice. Understanding student reflection as a pivotal opportunity for the exploration of more equitable storytelling resulted in the development of an assignment which employs a metacognitive approach to student learning. This prompts students to call to the center their more difficult experiences and assumptions, as well as the social and political structures impacting the ways they understand these encounters. Expanding on foundational literature on reflective practice in service and community-based learning, this assignment points to a need for the addition of metacognitive practice as a widely implemented tool for exploring inequality and bias in narrative reflections. The assignment resulting from integrating metacognitive reflective work produced student writing that was increasingly rich, complex, and appropriately self-critical of their narrative approaches.

Academic Context

The stated mission of the Shepherd Program for The Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability at Washington and Lee University is to "understand and address the causes and consequences of poverty in ways that respect the dignity of every person" (Shepherd Program, n.d.). In addition to the service-learning course for which this particular assignment was developed, coursework in the program includes a gateway course (POV101: Introduction to Poverty Studies), a credit-bearing internship experience (POV453: Shepherd Internship), and a capstone project. Students combine these foundational courses with those offering different disciplinary approaches across campus that encourage them to create their own academic and vocational pathways, often resulting in the completion of a Poverty Studies minor.

The practice of living our mission through teaching and learning has taught us that it is impossible to achieve this mission within the confines of the traditional classroom alone. Rather, we must be continuously seeking strategies for addressing issues of inequality and marginalization in ways that do, indeed, "respect the dignity of every person." This compels us to regularly facilitate student experiences that include dialog-across-difference, and to unceasingly challenge our sense of where expertise may lie. Particularly in courses that focus on this part of our mission as a student learning objective, a more radical approach can be taken with regard to discussion and practice around who holds knowledge, and in turn power, as the educator. The nature of this coursework requires students to explore the value of lived experience, professional practice, and other sources of intellect that are not considered traditionally academic, including

storytelling. One such course is POV102: Introduction to Community-Based Learning for Poverty Studies, a course that facilitates learning that includes respectful and responsible engagement in the larger community as a means of understanding and dismantling systems and structures of power and privilege.

Past strategies including community partner co-teaching, community partner office hours, and regular engagement with clients from vulnerable populations, have all proven valuable in expanding the scope of respectful student learning in the broader community. Still, student learning through traditional assignments seemed to produce work that was incomplete in terms of exploration of implicit bias, power, and privilege in the context of students' own thinking. Even as they employed the strategy utilized in many service-learning theory texts, considering "What? So what? Now what?" (Eyler et al., 1996) as it relates to their community-based experiences, students were infrequently participating in the larger analysis of the impact that their own identities, experiences, and upbringings had on their response to each of these foundational questions. Inevitably, students' ability to employ more equitable narrative strategies that reflect appropriately critical self-analysis in their recounting of their experiences and the stories shared with them was significantly impacted by this shortcoming.

Critical Reflection and Storytelling

In the 1990s, as service-learning gained momentum at institutions of higher education nation-wide, Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles, and Angela Schmiede (1996) published *A Practitioners Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning: Student Voices and Reflections.* In addition to compelling testimonies about the powerful nature of reflective practice as the deepest point of connection between student experience in the broader community and the learning goals of a course, the text outlines "Four C's" of reflection in service-learning, include assuring that reflective practice is continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized (Eyler et al., 1996). In my own experience implementing this model in the classroom, students indeed achieved the objective of weaving connections between their community and service-based experiences and the overall goals of the course. Still, my interest in rooting this student learning more deeply in the mission of the Shepherd Program with a focus on facilitating learning that promotes "respecting the dignity of every person," left me with a desire to explore the shortcomings of this model in relation to the ability of our students to self-reflect on the elements of their identity and lived experience that informed the ways they recounted and analyzed their experiences.

Student recollection, articulation, and analysis of their experiences in the broader community are inextricably tied to the notion of storytelling. One such iteration of this emerges as students share narratives of their own experiences with community partners and clients. While they consider the ways in which what they have learned could improve the impact of their respective agencies on targeted populations, students often failed to acknowledge the role that their identities and experiences played in their conceptions of this "improved" impact and what strategies might help to achieve it. A second iteration of storytelling emerges during student reflections in the classroom and in written work, during which students share recollections of powerful stories that were shared with them. Subtle and largely unintended judgements snuck pervasively into student work as they once again overlooked what informed their perception of the world. Indeed, storytelling is inherent in reflective work—regardless of how it is included or whom it is about—when students do the important work of lifting up the experiences and narratives of themselves and others for deeper analysis and more explicit connection to their own learning goals.

Careful attention to not just storytelling, but what informs the way stories are told, is required to address the perennial issues around power and privilege in this work. In light of

this, I suggest that we as practitioners consider adding something of a fifth "C" to the work of Eyler et al. (1996): (meta)Cognition. Metacognitive analysis has the potential to elevate reflective work by not only repeatedly calling students to evaluate and reevaluate their thoughts and experiences, but to go further in requiring students to explore the very process of this evaluation as deeply informed by experiences and identities. In turn, I believe this practice holds the potential for generating more respectful, informed, and authentic work.

In order for students to value this essential and inherently difficult work, it has been critical for me to make explicit the connections between storytelling and power. As Chimamanda Adichie (2009) shares in her now viral TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story,"

> It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Sharing this talk with them each term helps to offer a particular focus on the questions of respectful and responsible engagement with vulnerable populations, and encouraging students to analyze both their experiences, and the very process of their own meaning-making.

As storytelling is central to reflection, and reflection is central to student learning in service and community-based learning, I became deeply interested in the ways it might be possible to address elements of power in the storytelling inherent in reflection-based assignments in POV102. Rooting assignment design in the desire to facilitate this work led me to explore the use of metacognitive practices, which promote the ability of our students to employ strategies for giving dimension to the lives of individuals whose narratives can be flattened by systemic inequality and social injustice. Further, insofar as employing these strategies may promote more equitable and thoughtful articulations, students have begun to understand reflection and writing as subversive and important tools, understanding their work as possessing the potential to incite movement towards a more dynamic and respectful community-based learning experience in higher education.

Assignment Design

In POV102, a one-credit service-learning course, students are asked to complete a final paper that guides them through communicating their learning around poverty, marginality, and human capability. In an effort to walk with students through their own reflective practice in such a way that metacognitive analysis can be thoughtfully supported, the assignment is broken up into three main elements: a pre-writing tool, a completed draft, and additional post-draft considerations intended to encourage analysis of the role stereotypes, identity, and privilege play their thinking. These post-draft considerations were significant in encouraging a metacognitive approach more generally, but the specific guiding questions were also developed through my own exploration of their repetitive use in my own commentary on past student work.

Having taught this course for several years, I found myself regularly having to prompt students to center their own assumptions and biases, as well as their role in further perpetuating particularly damaging rhetoric. It was my hope that encouraging this would sharpen students' ability to engage in both charitable and critical reflection on the development of systems of oppression in and beyond our institution. Lastly, as an interdisciplinary program, encouraging and facilitating repeated self-analysis seems to possess the potential to embolden students to

synthesize learning from across multiple academic disciplines in such a way that they might highlight, for themselves and their audience, the importance of inter-and-transdisciplinary learning.

Assignment Implementation

This assignment was used twice during the 2019-2020 academic year, with minor adjustments between uses that were reflective of my own learning around how to best encourage and support metacognitive work. I initially offered the assignment to students for independent work, but student feedback made it apparent that more active instructor engagement, and potential peer influence, could improve outcomes. Upon my second offering of this assignment, students were required to complete the pre-writing activity in class, their initial draft outside of class, and the post-draft considerations once again in class. This approach seemed to first impact students' confidence in their own ability to produce thoughtful and high-quality written reflections by providing them with a high level of support as they developed thematic choices and initial rhetorical strategies. Secondly, it offered students an opportunity to attempt the more targeted metacognitive work independently, to then be employed and explored in the substantive classroom-based discussion of the experiences and strategies of their peers.

The impact of this second outcome was considerable, in that it resulted in explicit discussions of the privilege and power that are inherent in how we share stories, particularly those related to vulnerable populations. Students grappled with questions about their own analysis and writing, as well as what shaped it, largely in response to the vulnerability that was cultivated by students sharing their responses to the post-draft considerations. As soon as one student bravely acknowledged the ways their own identity and privilege impacted their analysis and articulation of an experience, others followed.

These discussions led to profound evolution of student thinking. One such example was in the movement from one student's desire to provide nutritious food to those experiencing food insecurity, to their exploration of the deeply intimate and complex cultural relationships that people have with food and how that might impact services. A second student articulated that their previous understanding of the behaviors of youth as related directly to the upbringing provided by parents and guardians had been challenged, pushing them to consider the ways public educational systems promote opportunity for some and not others. Overall, students were able to deepen and complicate their own understanding of their experiences in the broader community in concert with their own identities, upbringings, and relationships with others and the world. As a result, they provided more dynamic, nuanced reflections that acknowledged elements of power and privilege in substantial ways.

Successes, Limitations, and Future Use

While no doubt having a significant positive impact on student learning, writing, and discussion, there are elements of this approach that demand further consideration. First, in an effort to deepen students' ability to connect individual experiences and behaviors with larger stories and structures of oppression and power, I plan to return to the work of Chimamanda Adichie (2009), who shared later in her talk on "The Danger of a Single Story," the following:

> The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you

have an entirely different story.

As students begin to see themselves as storytellers in their reflective work, and deepen their understanding of the implicit power therein, I hope to encourage students to explore where in the larger narrative of lived experience throughout history they are beginning. Including questions that prompt students to explore what story is being told in their work, to whom this story belongs, and how even unintentional dismissal of its prior chapters can cause harm. Students will be called not only to consider the larger narratives belonging to vulnerable and/or historically oppressed populations, but also how their understanding of the beginning of their own stories impacts their own process of making meaning.

Despite the many apparent benefits of this assignment design, one shortcoming of the practice of metacognition in student reflection which requires further consideration is the tendency of metacognition to still ultimately affirm one's own understanding of their thinking. While the structure of moving the post-draft work to a classroom-based experience couched in purposeful discussion proved fruitful for students who felt otherwise unable to access this level of analysis, it was nonetheless limited in its ability to provide students with the more critical perspective that is offered through external analysis and feedback. Future use of the integration of metacognitive work in this and other assignments necessitates continued exploration around how to fully understand implications of this shortcoming, as well as potential strategies for mitigating its impact in student learning, which could include structured peer review, one-on-one discussion between the draft and post-draft elements, or the use of in-class time to address post-draft concerns.

ASSIGNMENT

Central Question(s): Develop and share a narrative on your experiences with your agency and the population it serves— what do you want people to know?

Assignment: Introduce your agency, the issue area it addresses, the population it serves, etc. Recall our discussions in class around storytelling, voice, and advocacy. Use both critical and charitable lenses on your own experiences and writing to develop a narrative-employing reflective piece about your engagement in the [region] this term.

Pre-Writing Tool: Consider using the questions below as a pre-writing tool to help you examine more deeply your own thoughts before you begin composing your response. One method for doing this is to set a timer (10-20 minutes) and focus on exploring these questions for the duration of the time.

- Who is your target audience? Why? What strategies might you use to communicate with them on complex issues of inclusion, equity, and justice?
- Why is this story important? What do you want others to take away?
- How is the way you tell this story important with respect to the particular individuals with whom you have interacted?

Post-Draft Considerations: Once you have completed your initial draft of this paper, return to your pre-writing method to consider the following:

- What are the things that are *not* being said in your draft? In what assumptions might they be tied up?
- How are you addressing "the danger of the single story"?
- Does your draft clearly demonstrate your considerations around how to respectfully and responsibly share your story of engagement?

- How can you call to the center of your narrative some of your liminal experiences?

Organization: Students should integrate anecdotes from your own work and your studies (including relevant statistics and quotations from 101 and 102 readings or other research).

Citation: Use parenthetical citations for any POV101 or POV102 course readings or other research.

Title: Include a title that is both interesting & relevant to the paper topic/thesis.

Format: 4-6 pages, typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman word document

Research: POV101 & POV102 readings & community-based anecdotes.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.89.

References

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