

PERSONAL STORY SHARING AS AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO PROMOTE STUDENT LEARNING

Dr. Richard Jeffrey Rhodes

Abstract:

Relationships matter. In urban education, the positive relationships between students and teachers are vitally important. Stories can be powerful tools that, when utilized effectively, help forge and enhance relationships. Story sharing is an effective strategy to promote and expose the common connections that lead to positive relationships. This reflective commentary suggests that students and staff within our urban schools often have more in common than they realize. Taking the time to share personal stories is an effective approach to exposing our common experiences and perspectives in order to develop and enhance the relationships necessary to ensure student learning and promote positive student engagement.

Keywords: Student-Teacher Relationships, Story Telling, Student Voice, Student Engagement, Building Community

I love stories. Since as far back as I can remember, I have always enjoyed reading, listening to, and sharing a good story or two. In fact, I believe that life itself is just a series of interactive multisensory experiences that can be woven together or parceled apart to form a personal story. So when I think about our amazing students who attend our nation's urban public schools, I am often reminded that they too have stories personal, real stories that are far too infrequently shared, recognized and valued. Why is that? How can we incorporate story-sharing into our urban public schools, and what would be the benefits for students?

When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s many households held the common belief that "children should be seen and not heard." This adage adequately captures the cultural mindset of the majority of my school days. Now, this does not mean that as students, the youth of my generation were categorically neglected or ignored. It does mean, however, that we were often positioned as passive learners and our contributions to the learning process were only valuable if the teacher deemed them so. Many of us were taught and expected to sit quietly in our seats, ready to be called upon regardless of whether or not we had our hands raised in response. It is my perspective that this cultural mindset contributed to the development of regressive educational policies and practices that viewed students as numbers to gain or goals to meet as opposed to people to value and appreciate. Over the last 25 plus years, I regret to say that I still see evidence of this outdated mindset as the norm in some classrooms in urban schools.

Far too often in urban schools, I have witnessed some teachers who act as if they already know their students' stories because of the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood from where the students come or the casual slang that some students speak. As a result, they often do not make the time to ask or listen to their student's experiences and/or perspectives. Similarly, some teachers do not share much about themselves beyond the orientation speech. Unfortunately, this is an example of the type of commonly missed opportunities for teachers and school leaders alike to share and connect with students via story sharing in order to forge relationships that promote student engagement and learning.

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) argue that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Following this perspective, I postulate that all humans have personal stories to share that develop from efforts to make sense of their life experiences. This means that our students who are growing up in varied and complex cultures (e.g., home, neighborhood and/or schools) have stories that need to be heard. They have unique and often powerful personal stories of how they are making meaning of their world and teachers should provide the forum for allowing students to express themselves in a positive and safe environment where students can learn from each other through sharing their personal stories. I have seen and also participated in such approaches that utilize student circles as a classroom structure to facilitate story sharing which often leads to conversations that help build peer to peer and teacher to student relationships.

Research on instructional rounds in education (City 2009) informs us that student engagement is vital to ensuring student learning and achievement. The process of story sharing within a classroom environment can help to create connections between the story sharer and his/her audience. We have examples from other social sectors like the business world where personal stories are often quite useful in this regard. In fact, some Fortune 500 CEOs utilize personal narration as a leadership strategy to develop and enhance organizational culture by inspiring and motivating increased work productivity (Fleming, 2001). Teachers, too, can utilize narration to build connection and rapport in order to strategically improve student effort, engagement, and ultimately, learning. This may be a viable approach for teachers who have strong pedagogical knowledge but cannot seem to

connect with their students and as a result have classroom climate issues that stymie the learning process.

As a former high school English teacher trained in Lucy Calkins' method of reader response journal writing, I was able to directly experience the power of story sharing and its ability to deepen classroom relationships (i.e. teacher to student and student to student) and improve overall student engagement. My students would get excited when I agreed to voluntarily share an excerpt from my personal journal in response to the classroom text we were reading. Students became even more enthralled when they listened to a peer share their response to the text. My students' responses would often be stories of how they were able to make meaning of the text by associating it with someone, something, some experience that they had or knew of in their life. Over time, with intentional practice and adherence to mutually agreeable class rules, we developed and sustained a learning culture wherein all students' shared journal responses, including their stories, had value. Students were "into" class because they were able to create a space where their voices were heard and respected. I witnessed students who previously had not been fully engaged in the learning process sit up, open up and take full part in the interaction of sharing and listening to their peers personal stories and insights. Perhaps there is no greater way to engage an adolescent than to make learning about them and to make their stories the center of the learning process.

Schools of education need to better prepare teachers and school leaders with the mindset, knowledge and skills to facilitate dialogue with and between students by allowing them the opportunity to share what they know, believe and experience – to share their personal stories. Over the last twenty years, I have been humbled to have met many students and teachers with powerful, positive stories of determination and perseverance, stories that reflect who they are as people and as learners. This insight into who our students are might help contribute to efforts to meet students where they are as learners in order to ensure their progress and success. I propose a couple of the key questions that need to be addressed in order to effect the change that we seek: What do we, as urban educators, need to do differently to ensure that all our students have a voice that is expressed and heard? What does story capture and what does it leave out (Carter, 1993)? Since narrative inquiry and story sharing can be effective tools to help improve student engagement and learning what are urban schools/school systems doing to help our students and teachers share their stories of challenge and success in order to find the narratives that bond and unite rather than separate and isolate? In urban education, as it should be in all of our nation's schools, it is vitally important that we, as educators, help our students to mold their narratives into the actualized non-fiction of an abundant life.

Richard Jeffrey "Jeff" Rhodes has served for over 20 years managing, leading, coaching, and mentoring educational leaders from teachers to assistant principals to principals in the traditional public, independent, charter and private school settings. As an educational consultant, leadership coach and story sharer, his research interests are focused on equity in education, the utilization of story-sharing to engage stakeholders and form community, the importance of student voice in the learning process and what really inspires leaders. In addition to his passion for the power of story telling, he has also presented at the National Association of Licensed Social Workers and has co-published an article on father involvement and child well being.

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