

RE-IMAGINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN A TIME OF SOCIAL ISOLATION: STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR HEALING AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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Abstract:

This article highlights the power of storytelling as a tool for professional learning for educators and educational leaders, particularly during this time of intense social isolation. Storytelling not only offers opportunities for healing, growth and community building, but also guides and supports educators in creating more equitable spaces for teaching and learning, in the midst of this pandemic and beyond. This article is connected to a virtual storytelling space through the Center for Research on Storytelling in Education, where readers are invited to share their stories of teaching, learning and leading throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: storytelling, teaching, learning, equity, COVID-19, professional growth, professional learning

"It is difficult to imagine storytelling as a force capable of toppling walls, but I believe this is possible." - Enciso

We are in the midst of a pandemic. The entire world has been impacted and the field of education has been turned on its head. For some, this has been a time of deep introspection and profound discovery and innovation; for others it has led to feelings of intense isolation, anxiety, and depression. For many, it has been a confusing combination of both. We all have experienced some form of trauma and we all have stories to tell.

At times, it has been hard to find the head space to talk or think about anything other than COVID-19 and its impact on our lives. Learners and teachers across the globe have had to dive into online education; many felt like they were being pushed. And at the same time, parents have had to navigate trying to work from home while also taking on the role of teacher to their children. Many parents have not been able to work from home and have still had to "figure out something" to support their children's educational, psychological, physical, and social needs as they are longer in a brick and mortar school.

Schools and school districts are changing their plans on what seems like a weekly basis, making it hard to even know what to plan for or how to care for the most vulnerable people through all of this. Many people lost their jobs. Many people lost loved ones. And in addition to the pandemic, our cities and towns have been filled with urgent and influential protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Our president has instigated and perpetuated abusive and hateful words and actions and extreme mixed messages about controlling the pandemic and about people protesting for their rights. People are angry, confused, and scared. But some are also hopeful—even though right now, nothing feels normal. And it is in this context that people are coming to the realization that this was not a momentary disruption, that we must continue to navigate what it means to learn and teach in more equitable ways through this pandemic and the intense social upheaval.

While we have no magical pill to fix this enormous political, medical, and psychological disaster, we do have the magic of stories. In times like this, it is important to be reminded how powerful storytelling can be—both telling our own stories and listening to the stories of others. Stories help to humanize our decisions and reactions; they help us to build connections where we thought there were none. Stories also help us to heal from trauma and build confidence and resilience (Beltran & Begun, 2014; East, Jackson, O'Brien, Peters, 2010; Edwards, 2009; Rosenthal, 2003). And, specifically for educators and educational leaders, stories can help us re-imagine professional learning (Colket, Garrett & Shaw, 2020), especially during this intense time of social isolation. As Paulo Freire (1974/2008) states, we have "the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia" (p. 22). And he reminds us that "The capacity to go beyond the factors of conditioning is one of the obvious advantages of the human person" (p. 32). If we allow them, stories can help us to break free from the chains of years of harmful social conditioning. And as the quote at the beginning of this article states: stories are powerful enough to topple walls. And, they are.

Professional learning becomes humanized when storytelling is at the core (Colket, Garrett & Shaw, 2020). When we authentically and deeply listen to another human being's story, we are compelled to learn from their experience, to connect with difference, to heal through connection, to acknowledge troubling realities, and to imagine alternate, more liberatory possibilities for teaching and learning. Storytelling creates avenues and motivation for educators to develop more culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2007) that support the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1974/2008) and lead toward more liberatory approaches to

education (Hooks, 1994) that are guided by possibility-oriented beliefs and practices (Greene, 1997).

Deep, authentic and meaningful storytelling requires the creation and maintenance of brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and helps to surface counter-stories that exist on the margins, or were hidden or concealed entirely, to come to the center (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ultimately, when storytelling is positioned as a tool for ongoing learning and growth for educators and educational leaders, it necessarily becomes “not as a place at which to arrive, but as a place to begin inquiry” (Gallagher, 2011, p. 52). As a starting place for inquiry, educators and educational leaders can embrace storytelling as a process for re-imagining practices and policies with the goal of creating more equitable spaces for teaching and learning (Colket, Garrett & Shaw, 2020), in the midst of this pandemic and beyond.

This article is an extension of a broader book project coming out of the [Center for Research on Storytelling in Education](#) (CRSE) in Grenada, West Indies, in which educators and educational leaders share their stories of learning and reflect on them in relation to their stories of teaching. The edited volume, *Becoming: Transformative Storytelling for Education's Future* (Colket, Penny Light & Carswell, forthcoming), was imagined before the pandemic began. Its importance has been felt even more deeply since, deep sharing has happened online through an intensive and relational process of reading and commenting on each other's stories as written texts and dialogic engagement through online gatherings of authors. Each of the authors shared that they felt the healing and growth that resulted from both sharing their personal stories in a professional space and also reading the stories of others. The book, including the process of coming together as storytellers and co-authors, elucidates the ways in which storytelling is a profound sense-making tool, particularly for educators and educational leaders working to create more equitable educational practices and policies.

Eventually, this pandemic will end. It will. And once it has passed, our learning will remain. We have an amazing opportunity to share, listen, build community, and re-humanize learning. Even before the pandemic, many spaces of learning had become overly standardized, constraining, and psychologically damaging. We can change that.

What we learn now we can carry with us into the future to build more authentic, meaningful, creative, psychologically safe, and culturally sustaining models of education. Through storytelling, we can capture this moment as an opportunity for intense and profound professional, personal, and collective growth. Educators and educational leaders can (and should) begin to create spaces for the people around us (including colleagues, students, parents, community members) to share their stories. But know this: When you share this invitation, you must be willing to deeply, authentically listen, to truly take in other people's realities and how they land into what you think you know.

You have to allow yourself to be transformed through the stories. The sharing of stories of teaching and learning in this time of the pandemic can happen in departments, in K-12 schools, in districts, in universities, in professional learning communities. It can also happen at broader levels, nationally and internationally, through social media and through large professional organizations. Whatever your context and spheres of influence, you can create space for people to share what their experience has been like so far.

Ask them what has worked well and what has not. Ask them if they have any ideas for making things better.

In order to illustrate the power of sharing and listening to stories, I (in collaboration with several colleagues) have created [a virtual storytelling space](#) connected to this article.

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting grid with several participants. The participants' names and their content are as follows:

- balancing kids, balancing work, finding sanity**: 3 word story: constantly assessing options
- Just one word: empathy.**: 3-word story: Time is elastic.
- Haiku**: High expectations, high empathy for yourself, not just for students.
- 3 word story:**: expect the unexpected
- Student becomes the Master**: We are finding that students are a lot more tech savvy than we sometimes give them credit. They know how to fix technical difficulties before we do and if not, they learn very quickly! We are grateful that students have been so patient with us!
- 6 word story**: between here and there, digital connectivity.
- 6-word story: remembering we need to humanize education**
- AAEEL Annual Meeting**: In response to the pandemic, the AAEEL (aaeel.org) Leadership
- 3-word story: humbled by uncertainty**
- Silent Teachers**: We spend hours together; Weeks, months and sometimes even years. Colourful lines on white paper, Forever sharing them with my peers.

The Zoom logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the grid.

Now that you have read about the power of storytelling as a tool for professional learning, especially during this time of intense social isolation and stress, I invite you to share your story, and also to listen to and learn from the stories of others. Whether you have a story of *teaching during the time of corona, learning during the time of corona, or leading during the time of corona, we invite you to share. And whether you are an educator, educational leader, or student, we invite you to listen.*

Your submitted stories could take a variety of forms. You might choose to submit a 3-word or 6-word story, a short video or audio file (less than 5 minutes), a haiku, a song, a drawing, a photograph, or you might have another method for sharing your story. Creativity is welcome. Simplicity is welcome. Creative simplicity is welcome. Find a way that suits you to tell your story of teaching or learning during this pandemic, then share your story for others to listen to and learn from. And importantly, listen to the stories of others. From there, you can begin to reimagine your educational practice.

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