

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN TROUBLED TIMES: STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

By Cynthia S. Nicholson

“...for the first time, I perceived myself as part of something”—Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Knowing how to engage with students during difficult times may seem overwhelming, especially when teachers are dealing with their own uncertainties. Learning how to navigate the multiple viewpoints and changing landscapes from pandemic to protest can add meaning to the way we teach.

As teachers who understand that our students engage in lives beyond the classroom, we must responsibly consider how they view the world and their place in it. Learning from our students’ lived experiences helps teachers design our classrooms and develop relevant, inclusive practices. Students need teachers who will meaningfully humanize their experiences and engage with them to construct narratives of hope and resilience.

Storytelling has a rich history of allowing readers to be a part of ideas and expressions that are different and enlightening. “Story is our best hope for flying over the chasms that separate individuals, races, genders, ages (and ages), cultures, classes, and the myriad other differences that render us unique (and potentially lonely)” (Taylor, D., *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories*). Storytelling permits the writer to move beyond silence. Students often withdraw from writing or sharing with peers and teachers due to lack of trust. Creating a safe class-

room space helps students believe that teachers want to hear their stories.

- 1. Getting started:** Encouraging responses to artifacts and events can captivate student interest. A distressed brick might spark stories about a home that was affected by natural disaster. A worn baseball may bring out feelings of how watching professional sports is a missed family activity. Shifting the responsibility onto students to share artifacts, quotes, or events gives them a way to share what is meaningful for them.
- 2. Creating the text:** Storytelling can happen with words in neatly woven sentences or doodles aligned vertically on the page. Offering variety permits students to choose a medium of expression that feels right for them. From spoken-word poetry to pencil sketches, teachers and students can share meaningful, original stories.
- 3. Sharing and reflection:** Creating a space for students to share their work requires establishing guidelines on how to respect one another’s voices. Storytelling flourishes when teacher and student commit to accepting each other’s creation. Whether it be in small groups or the whole classroom, a supportive and reflective audience is necessary to deliver the story. A willingness to listen and reflect creates understanding of one another’s humanity.

Students and teachers alike need methods to adjust to their new normal. If we meet students where they are and commit to building relationships with them, storytelling permits us to understand more about each other. Together, the storyteller and listener can enter a space of healing and acceptance. Our stories, unpolished and authentic, have the power to positively impact our classroom community. 🍎



Dr. Nicholson is an Assistant Professor of English Education at Norfolk State University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate students in the School of Education. Her research interests include preservice teacher preparation, along with literacy instruction and its impact on cultural identity and student agency.