

Sharing Stories:
Counter-Storytelling and Counter-Methods in a Dialogic Setting

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Why Stories?

Humans are storytelling animals (Gottschall, 2012). Whether for evolutionary purposes, practical preservation, or emotional desires, stories have been a fundamental part of our species' history, and our present way of communicating. We could stick with the facts, or refrain from sharing at all, but instead, we manifest memories, beliefs, and imagination through our consistent impulse to tell stories. We contextualize and make meaning through stories as well, whether passed through generations of a family, or on a grander scale of societal storytelling: lessons perpetuated in history classrooms, or internalized through representations of groups of people in the media. Recognizing storytelling as a fundamental framework of learning expands the notion of education beyond the classroom, and finds dominant stories pervasively and parasitically eroding the diversity of stories that could be celebrated and shared.

Dominant stories not only uphold the dominant social identities across race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, faith, and socioeconomic status; they also serve to maintain hierarchy, sustain stereotypes, and limit critical consciousness. This can even happen through initially contradictory stories. Our society is mostly dominated by white currently-able heterosexual Christian men from a middle/upper-middle class background. However, we have mainstream examples such as a black president, and a number of financially successful black men in the entertainment and athletic industries, that seemingly thwart at least the racial aspect of dominant stories of success. Barack Obama and LeBron James then offer fodder for the story of meritocracy, or the stories that come from tokenizing such success, or the stories that say we live in a post-racial society. These are contrasted with other dominant stories in which black men, as a powerful example of a stereotyped population in the bank of national stories, are seen as aggressive, criminal, and a slew of other destructive messages. Other populations are subject to

similarly harmful stories, or may be left out of national stories entirely, which is just as damaging in different ways. Lack of representation of diverse stories, silencing of voices, and stereotyping of groups of people is particularly harmful in the way it can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Internalized oppression, stereotype threat (Steele 2003), and “minority majoritarian storytelling” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) are all detrimental reflections of dominant stories’ impact on non-dominant identities.

As every action must have a reaction, the path towards a more just, equitable, and critical society demands counter-narratives to the dominant stories. Critical Race Theory embraces this notion as one of its fundamental principles towards understanding racism and combating oppression, using “personal histories, parables, chronicles, dreams, stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to convey our message” (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 5). As we gain knowledge through the story-sharing venues of society, we must consider the places from which those stories develop, an intersection of our national history and mythology, and our individual identities. Honoring a perspective advocated by Paula Moya, “identities should be considered important epistemic resources.” This expands the very notion of where knowledge comes from, and solidifies the foundation that personal stories carry value. Moya goes on to suggest that our knowledge-creating identities, if embraced in the classroom and the sharing of stories, “provide new ways of looking at a society that complicate and challenge dominant conceptions of what is ‘right,’ ‘true,’ and ‘beautiful’” (Moya, 2006, p. 103). It is important to note, however, that counter-narratives should not simply be responses to dominant stories, for that perpetuates their position of dominance; storytelling for the sake of storytelling, preserving cultures, and offering lessons and ideas inherent to the stories themselves are fundamentally important (Ikemoto, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Counter-narratives are necessary within oppressed groups, and within dominant groups, as part of resistance and empowerment for the oppressed and the oppressor (Friere, 1971). This paper explores the settings and methods in which to share these stories, first through the foundations and practices of intergroup spaces. Upon considering potential limitations of dialogue settings, we will move to looking at alternative methods of expression, particularly various art forms, and the unique benefits they may offer to the sharing of counter-narratives. This paper concludes with a proposal for an arts-based dialogue program that aims to join the purpose of intergroup dialogue with the power of artistic methods.

Where To Share Stories?

Storytelling happens on an institutional and societal level, but counter-storytelling happens primarily between individuals. In some ways, this is as it should be: the benefits of face-to-face interaction reach back to Allport's contact theory of the 1950s (Pettigrew, 1998). Structured contact between members of different racial groups was proven to reduce prejudice under certain conditions. A modern meta-analysis shows that the theory's effectiveness varies with identity groups, but nonetheless remains "statistically significant" (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, p. 268). Though Allport's original conditions for reducing prejudice in an intergroup setting revolved around common goals and equal status, emotional connection and empathy with members of another group is increasingly an explicit outcome of positive intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 71). Generating empathy across differences depends on the power of story. An intergroup setting that focuses exclusively on facts regarding lack of equity based on race in the education system, for example, is subject to individuals being "critical and skeptical" as with nonfiction. Storytelling creates a personal level of understanding and connection, allowing us to

“drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and that seems to leave us defenseless” to the dominant or previously held judgments we may carry (Gottschall, 2012, p. 152).

More recently, intergroup dialogue has emerged as a structured space for intergroup contact amongst college students, and increasingly amongst younger students and within non-academic communities. Intergroup dialogue has a three-part pedagogical foundation of “sustained communication, consciousness-raising, and the bridging of differences” which strives to go beyond the reduction of prejudice and into a thoroughly educational, enlightening, and engaging space for participants (Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002, p. 8). It is important to note that dialogue facilitators are part of the process as well, and encouraged to share their own stories and perspectives as part of the productive dialogic environment. The dialogic setting itself represents an active understanding of sharing and listening, in the vein of Bakhtin’s dialogics in regards to art, where “the goal of dialogue is ‘responsive understanding’” (Romney, 2005, p. 5). Intergroup dialogue diverges from the academic structure of the “banking model” of education and embraces the interactive, participatory framework advocated by Freire (1971). The intentional process of sharing stories, collaborating in knowledge creation and analysis, and connecting across differences “provides participants with the opportunity for education of the heart” (Beale & Schoem, 2001). As such, intergroup dialogue is deliberately and elegantly positioned to engage students emotionally and intellectually around understanding different cultural identities as well as issues of systemic structures of power, privilege, and oppression. Studies have demonstrated the positive potential of intergroup dialogue to improve intergroup relations as well as knowledge and consciousness of the identities focused on in the program (Aldana, Rowley, Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2012; Zirkel, 2008).

While intergroup dialogue programs often include curricula with written reflections, readings, video clips, and other forms of learning, the primary method of communicating is usually through speaking (Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). Dialogue in a general sense most often refers to at least two people speaking to one another. From a process perspective, this method of communication may risk excluding some participants or limiting the range of perspectives that could be shared. Spoken dialogue demands a certain grasp of the dominant language and a certain level of ability to speak clearly. The time constraints of a given session and a facilitator's agenda also favor individuals who quickly process information and can articulate responses confidently in a group. These concerns could be applied to most learning environments. As intergroup dialogue is intended to be an inclusive space to shed light on privilege and inequity, it may also be beneficial to offer an environment that may equally serve different kinds of learners and people who express themselves in a myriad of ways. This line of thinking is fundamental to Universal Design for Learning, which advocates for multiple methods of learning and expression so as to provide equitable access to knowledge and participation (CAST, 2011). Speaking and verbal discussion are still an essential part of dialogue, but expanding the methods of communication could create a more productive learning environment, particularly for sharing stories. Artistic methods offer this expanded notion of sharing in a dialogue setting, as well as a number of other potential benefits, explored in the following section.

How To Share Stories?

Art includes a range of expressive forms, including painting, film and video, music, poetry, sculpture, theater, dance, and textile design such as quilting. While some art forms use

words as their primary tools, others use images, colors, and movement. Art inherently offers a wide variety of tools for expression, storytelling, and posing questions, inviting dynamic and inclusive opportunities for participation. Artistic methods also often call upon imagination, “the matrix of both thinking and freedom because it conjures up images of what might be” (Broudy, 1976). From this perspective, the imagination is an essential resource for social change.

Imagination and its representative forms, when honored in the educational setting, elevate the potential for learning and expression in a manner that parallels Moya’s advocacy for identities to be embraced in the classroom. Imagination is innate to each student and reflective of their identities, though certainly salient for each student to different degrees. For some students, it may be a resource they do not get to use elsewhere in their education. Art may offer space for a student to experience affirmation, belonging, and understanding in the midst of an environment that seems to be working against them (Spina, 2005). Art is to process as counter-narratives are to content: shifting the values of learning from the dominant to the needs and resources of the students.

Art is also inherently a dialogic process and venue for communication and learning. While a piece can be made for the personal benefit of the artist, once it is shared with anyone else it becomes a piece for interaction (Buber, 1971). The viewer or participant brings their identities and imagination with them to experience and interpret the artwork, allowing different meanings to develop from different viewers. Discussion of a piece, or responsive artwork, furthers the dialogue. This natural function of art additionally sets the tone for art to be a vital method towards social change, both educationally and actively. Art may take familiar images or words or ideas and juxtapose them to offer new perspectives. For example, the deceptively simple *Migration is Beautiful* image by artist Favianna Rodriguez offers a clear perspective on a

dynamic social issue (Figure 1). At the same time, an interview with Rodriguez expands the story of the artwork, and reveals the immediate room for dialogue represented by the abundant user comments online (Brooks, 2013).

The ways in which stories have been shared over time and as cultural practices are also representations of the value of artistic methods. Ancient sequential art on cave walls shows us that pictorial art can transcend the barriers of time and language and offer perspectives that may not have been preserved in any other form. The sense of legacy and ongoing impact that various art forms offer can carry meaningful weight. A physical or performable story validates the storyteller through its existence, its ability to be referenced or reproduced or shared without the revisions of memory or a secondhand storyteller's perspectives. This aspect of preservation may in itself be both content and process, as the very method can have important ties to cultural traditions. Whether referred to as folk arts, or part of the field of ethnography, or simply the way stories and symbols and lessons were shared within a student's family, the style and work of creating art in a certain medium can be part of identity exploration and representation (Peterson, 2011). Such framework for considering artistic methods is closely connected to the culturally relevant pedagogy advocated for by Gloria Ladson-Billings wherein both academic settings and the critical dialogue setting can be more valuable, productive, and hospitable to students when they embrace the unique culture that comes to the classroom with students every day. In a research study of "exemplary" teachers of African-American students, Ladson-Billings shares an example of a poetry lesson that invited the lyrics of rap songs to serve as examples, and the practice of rap to



Fig. 1: *Migration is Beautiful* by Favianna Rodriguez.

fit into the poetry lesson plan (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Connecting with the culture that students carry with them, the popular or traditional culture that may be most comfortable or applicable to their story, is a pedagogical consideration for any intergroup dialogue program.

These methods also open doors to expanded notions of the dialogue setting and its outreach and impact within the greater community. Many art forms have the potential to be presented in multiple venues, at multiple times, allowing stories created and shared in the structured dialogue setting to also invite dialogue in the future or with a new group of conscious or subconscious participants. Even within the dialogue program setting however, the performative, repeatable, presentational nature of art may broaden the conversation around the story and the issues at hand, or invite collaborative expressive opportunities where personal connections arise and ongoing development of artwork is possible. The legacy of art in cultural traditions is dynamically paralleled by the legacy of art in social movements, which offers resources to consider in creating dialogue, but also adds to the value and ownership a participant may feel as they embrace their social identity as an artist or a storyteller. Randy Martin praises this legacy and highlights the potential for counter-narratives that art is so naturally host to:

“This art helped engaged people as part of a civic operation of mobilization for purposes of dissent, it gave voice and comment to a crowd, it captured media attention so that the protest could affect other lives, and it introduced a range of voices – ironic, humorous, outraged, parodic, utopian – in a political gathering usually measured in exclusively strident tones.” (Martin, 2006, p. 4)

Martin’s “range of voices” echoes the essential value of imagination in the intersection of art and social change, a value additionally brought to simple life by a great social justice author and activist: “Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads”

(Anzaldua, 1987). Artistic methods can literally bring those images, dreams, questions, and stories to the eyes and ears of dialogue participants, community members, and other collaborators in social justice and identity development.

Proposing Arts-Based Dialogue

Community art programs are increasingly serving as a meaningful space for intragroup and intergroup experiences, often built upon the collaborative nature of the art form. The People's Theater Project in Washington Heights, for example, includes in their Vision statement that "existing cultural, generational and economic gaps in our community are bridged by the telling of stories [...] the entire community is empowered to speak, act and be heard" (People's Theater Project, 2013). Programs like this thrive on the participatory nature of theater and other forms of public art, both in the process of group creation and the public presentation that reaches more members of the community. Such artistic opportunities have numerous positive benefits for individuals and the community as a whole, in terms of both psychological wellbeing and cultural saliency (Lewis, 2013).

While such programs have the potential to offer some of the same outcomes for participants that intergroup dialogue settings offer, there are key differences to consider. Intergroup dialogue generally includes a structured and sequential curriculum, developed intentionally from the pedagogical principles referenced earlier (Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). There is a linear narrative approach to working consistently with the same group of participants through the program, and moving from a beginning point to a temporary end point on a collective level and an individual developmental level. The intergroup dialogue setting exists somewhere between the academic classroom and the ostensibly social, collaborative, and

creative setting of community art programs. Facilitators provide a learning component that cannot exclusively come from the students' lived experiences, by providing historical framework, introducing the language of privilege and oppression, and generally mirroring some of the principles and purposes of social justice education in the classroom (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007). Intergroup dialogue also allows for intentional focus on individual participant development within the collective setting. In some ways, community art programs may focus more on achieving a common goal, such as writing and performing a theater piece. While intergroup dialogue has some common goals for the group, it also creates a space for participants to explore their individual identities and stories.

I propose an intergroup dialogue program that uses artistic methods as a foundational principle for communication and participation. This program would match a rich and complex educational setting with complex and individualized methods of expression. The intersection of art and dialogue would also bring storytelling to the fore in a powerful way. One could argue that counter-narratives are the fundamental building block of any critical, cultural, conscious, and social-justice-oriented program, and this framework could powerfully embrace that and engage participants emotionally and intellectually.

The use of art raises questions of participants' and facilitators' level of skill in regards to various art forms. It is important to distinguish that this arts-based dialogue program would not be an art education program or an art history program, though elements of art in the context of civil rights history and cultural backgrounds could arise. The question of skill is diminished through comparison to speaking, the dominant form of expression. The dialogue setting invites responses to ideas and stories shared by participants, but not in regards to their skill as a public speaker or their storytelling prowess. Similarly, the artwork shared by participants ought not be

subject to critique, just as a participant's lived experience should not be critiqued for accuracy or skill. The artwork should be ideally viewed in the same way a verbal story is viewed. If the program must include a grading component, it should be based on participation and effort, rather than the so-called quality of the artwork. This could become an important point for participants to consider, not just the facilitators. With this in mind, the program may be most successful with middle school students, before the tracking of skill sets in class selection as well as personal time designates the "artists" in the classroom. Furthermore, middle school students are hopefully at least open to the idea of creating art without too much of the skills-based self-criticism that develops over time, such as college students and adults lamenting their ability to draw when given a creative task.

Facilitators do not need a background as an artist either. While adults are often susceptible to the perceived division between skilled artists and the unskilled general populace, this is just another dominant story that does not represent the breadth of truth and potential that can come from an open mind. The facilitators' role is only subtly shifted or expanded; all of the framework from a facilitation guide such as Griffin & Ouellett (2007) is still applicable. The facilitator's primary role is to engage participants with the knowledge and exploration of the identities and social justice issues at hand, and to guide and maintain a safe space for expression. The facilitator should participate in the activities just as the students do, and be cognizant of the leveling out of the power dynamic between facilitator and participants by spending time creating artwork in the self-selected medium. Given the range of artistic methods that may be represented in the program, facilitators may consider expanding their preparatory research to include culturally-specific art forms and examples of art to include throughout the curriculum.

In the mindset of Universal Design for Learning, artistic methods would not replace spoken dialogue, but rather offer multiple ways to share, reflect, and raise questions. Discussing pieces created by participants is essential, and allowing that discussion to lead to collaboration on an artistic project could be a great benefit offered by the ongoing creative nature of some art forms. At the same time, artistic methods create a heightened individual experience for participants as they have more choice and ownership in the manner in which they engage. Though facilitators could choose to guide the timeline for projects more concretely, an arts-based dialogue could allow some students to share a new piece of art during each session, while another student may work on a singular, large project throughout the course of the program. Both approaches invite discussion and reflection about the learning process, the creation process, and the needs of the student in their development within the program.

Moving Forward

Such a program deserves a thoughtful, purposeful curriculum and outline that interweaves the stages of intergroup dialogue with session-specific and overarching artistic opportunities. Further consideration of how to embrace artistic methods as part of the foundation of the program rather than a practice-based addition is necessary as well. As a program that reflects the potential for arts-based social justice education, *Echoes of Brown* may offer inspiration to facilitators and students. High school participants were engaged in dialogue with one another to explore the history and modern implications of desegregation, and created poetry and dance, represented in live form, book form, and video form, to share part of their story. Artistic Director Rosemarie A. Roberts speaks to the purpose and power of the project:

“The work was to guide the youth to rely on their bodies and souls in the telling of this complicated story that was exhumed from poems, research, academic studies and history. And all the time we were asking ourselves *what history, whose history – whose story* is being told? [...] We knew that we had to create a sacred space for all of these experiences to be revealed. [...] We created a performance of revelation, celebration and protest.”
(Roberts, 2004).

Embracing stories, much like embracing identities, is an essential part of developing and expressing a critical consciousness in regards to social justice. Intergroup dialogue, together with the power, flexibility, and freedom of artistic methods of expression, offer the space and the tools to engage with the stories that need to be shared.

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