

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 20

SHARING EVERYDAY LIVED EXPERIENCES

Stories

Stories are everywhere. We hear them, we read them, we write them and we tell them. Perhaps on occasions we feel them. We use them to motivate others, to convey information and to share experience. (McDrury and Alterio 2003, 7)

Stories speak. Stories imagine. Stories bring worlds into being, making up the fabric that is stitched together by the symbolic and the material, coloring possibilities with our desires, and inviting us as participants in the work of co-creating futures. (Dutta 2018, 94)

Stories are a way for people to share their experiences and to pass on history from one generation to the next. They are everywhere, as Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio suggest, and they both capture what already exists and bring worlds into being, as Mohan Dutta argues. In Spanish, the word “history” translates literally to the word “story” in English. Storytelling underpins community in many Indigenous and First Nations cultures as a form of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing that both precedes—as Yahlnaaw points out in Reflection 11.1—and disrupts Western knowledge conventions (Sium and Ritskes 2013). In our daily lives, most of us share stories with our friends, peers, and colleagues as a way of connecting with them. Stories are more than an exchange of facts and events; they convey the complexities of our lives, including emotions and aspirations. Yet, stories in this sense are often thought of as oral. Stories are also written.

For Gerardo Patriotta (2016, 557), written stories “are arguably the most subtle tool of ontological inquiry, insightful meditations on how individuals, faced with questions and enigmas related to human existence, make sense of their ‘being in the world’ (Heidegger 1962).”

In other words, stories capture how we *become* and *are being* in the world. Stories connect people, and communities grow around shared stories and sharing stories together, whether written or oral. While stories are a common way that we share what is happening in our learning and teaching and communicate our lived experiences and realities, stories are not a common genre for publication in academia; they are typically not considered research in the dominant Western tradition of research, even though many scholars would argue that good research “tells a story.” However, a lot of written research is dull and difficult to connect with—the stories do not come to life. So think about the readers of your research and try to capture them, as good stories do, with a compelling narrative flow. Stories create space for imagination and even embellishment.

For these reasons and because we want to draw attention to academia’s often exclusive practice, we include stories as a genre for writing about learning and teaching. In doing so, we acknowledge that stories overlap with other writing genres. For example, it is common to weave stories into reflective essays or refer to essays as stories (Cook-Sather 2019), to draw on stories as data for research articles that might use a narrative inquiry method, to include stories in teaching award or fellowship applications, and to evoke stories to support judgments posed in opinion pieces. This integration of stories across genres provides further evidence of the messy overlaps among the writing genres we explore in this book. However, stories are also distinct as a genre and can stand alone as a genre for writing about learning and teaching.

Unlike presenting and analyzing data (chapter 12), exploring theories and concepts (chapter 13), and formulating new insights from literature (chapter 14), storytelling enables us to speak from lived experiences, our own and others’, while sharing the details of the context and people involved, so that readers can learn with us

and from us. A written story paints a rich picture of practice and experience in a specific place and time and can reveal a process of becoming (Cook-Sather 2019; Dutta 2018; Patriotta 2016).

In this chapter, we offer a flexible guide for organizing and writing stories about learning and teaching. Our focus is on stories that are stand-alone, while we acknowledge that stories can be included in other genres. We begin by discussing what stories, as a genre, offer learning and teaching scholars.

The Work of Storytelling as a Genre for Learning and Teaching

Unlike most of the genres we discuss, the genre of stories needs explanation and a rationale because it is not a commonly published form of writing about learning and teaching. For Elizabeth Quintero (2018, vii), stories have a clear connection to education:

We do learn from each other's experiences. We learn from children. We learn from colleagues we have yet to meet. [Through stories] the webs of connection among academic research, pedagogy and influence open the possibility for new methodologies, new positionality and new theorizing that are inclusive rather than exclusive.

Understanding the human experience of being a learner and a teacher (or both) is an important part of learning and teaching scholarship. Stories offer a productive genre to capture that human experience. Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio (2003) situate storytelling as a pedagogical and professional development tool that prompts reflection in a powerful way because stories touch individual lives. Likewise, Hunter McEwan and Kieran Egan (1995, viii) argue:

A narrative, and that particular form of narrative that we call a story, deals not just in facts or ideas or theories, or even dreams, fears and hopes, but in facts, theories, and dreams from the perspective of someone's life and in the context of someone's emotions.

Increasingly, education scholars are positioning storying as both a method (research tool) and methodology (stance as a researcher shaping your choices in research design), and a genre worthy of recognition and respect. Stories demand that writers engage in learning and teaching conversations in a different way from most other genres. Louise Phillips and Tracey Bunda (2018, 10) argue that: “Across the globe, storytelling enables connection with the other. . . . The relationship with others is at the core of storytelling and storying—there must be tellers and listeners. The fate and creation of the story depends on being with others.”

The genre of stories is a particularly accessible way of contributing to and creating conversations because it is embraced by learners and teachers in every context and at every level of discourse (from informal to highly crafted), and it is equally well suited to carrying meaning in Indigenous and First Nations cultures and Western cultures.

What Stories of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Can Look Like

Elizabeth Mackinlay (2016, 2) tells her story, or what she calls “storys,” of her experience of learning and teaching in higher education in a book that begins:

In one hour I will meet them, the new students who have enrolled in our introductory Women’s and Gender Studies course at my university. I have been awake half the night hunched over my laptop trying to get my lecture just right, knowing how important it is to make a good initial impression with first year undergraduate students. I flip through my lecture notes and can’t explain why but I am terrified. How will students respond to this course? Have I framed Women’s and Gender Studies as a most necessary way of knowing, being and doing in the world? Am I being too theoretical or not intellectual enough, and how sound is my disciplinary knowledge in relation to theory, history and philosophy anyway? Is striving for gender justice important to them and have

I the right kind of pedagogical tools within my reach to convince them it is? Are my definitions of sex and gender too simple? Are they accessible while at the same time giving an understanding of why these two words still matter? Will I stammer over words and phrases as I stumble for clarity and conviction in my place as a feminist educator? I stare down at my coral pink dress and wonder; do I look feminist *enough* to be teaching this course? And what does teaching and learning *like a feminist* mean anyway?

This excerpt demonstrates what a learning and teaching story can look like. Whether you can relate to the particular disciplinary context Elizabeth Mackinlay describes or not, by sharing her experience she is inviting a connection with readers who have questioned themselves as teachers and scholars. The story is left to the reader to interpret. In this way, a story is not imposing a conclusion but rather inviting exploration of a fellow traveler's experience of learning and teaching. "Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (Arendt 1970, 105). There is no single meaning of a learning and teaching story; the writer conveys experiences and invites readers into a kind of conversation to make their own meaning that intersects with each reader's identity, experiences, context, and way of seeing higher education.

We share the above excerpt of Mackinlay's story to signal the qualitative and technical difference of the story genre compared with other genres we have focused on in this book. By writing stories about learning and teaching, authors are "piercing the curtain," according to Gerardo Patriotta (2016, 568), by exposing "the human-made and human-making world to scrutiny, thereby retrospectively revealing all the effort that goes into the social construction of everyday life." Through stories, writers can teach others to examine and communicate what learning and teaching in their context means to them, offering insights "that lie unexplored, overlooked, neglected, or hidden from sight" (Bauman 2013, 27). Peter Felten (2019, 2) argues for storytelling as a potential for scholars interested in engaging in pedagogical

partnership, yet the guidance extends to stories on learning and teaching in general: “By recognizing some of the constraints and limitations of storytelling, we might intentionally seek out stories that explore complex and even contrary experiences and perspectives.” He offers four observations on and about the nature of stories:

1. Stories condense and simplify.
2. Stories tend to portray actions and experiences as coherent and purposeful.
3. Stories tend to be told by those with the most power.
4. Stories obscure some perspectives even as they reveal other ones.

(Felten 2019, 1-2)

How we understand and draw on stories as a writing genre will vary and evolve over time, as signalled in *Our Perspectives 20.1*.

Our Perspectives 20.1

The importance of storytelling as a learning and teaching writing genre

Kelly: Like most people, I love a good story. However, until recently, I assigned stories about learning and teaching to corridor conversations with colleagues or a form of data collection (e.g., narrative inquiry). I did not write my own stories or encourage others to do so because my early career was focused on publishing research that counted at my university. Now, I value sharing written stories about everyday experiences of learning and teaching because they create opportunities to describe the messiness of pedagogical practices, including the failures and unexpected things that can happen that we would rarely include in traditional research formats. Writing a story also enables more people to contribute to the higher education conversation, including students. I now curate a blog at my university that includes everyday stories ([University of Queensland Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation, “News”](#)).

Mick: I often try to enliven workshops by telling the back stories to case studies or practices that I present. However, it was not until we wrote our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* paper (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019) that I started to write some personal stories, a practice we have continued in this book (in each Our Perspectives section). I hope they help to bring the narrative alive and reveal some of the messiness and the challenges of writing as well as some of the highlights.

Alison: While stories of lived experiences have informed all of my research, creating forums within which the stories can be analyzed and engaging in my own analyses of my stories are more recent practices for me. I created the journal *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)* in 2010 to provide a space for students, faculty, and staff to draw on their own stories of pedagogical partnership and to reflect on and analyze their experiences. I have also published my own stories of ongoing learning, such as about my experiences of discussing pedagogical partnership across languages and contexts (Cook-Sather 2018c), to share with readers how this work is never finished and how we can all learn from one another's experiences without having to conduct formal research on them. The stories that inform essays in *TLTHE* and the stories I share in published forums aim to capture the human experience, and to express the feeling, of learning and teaching that, as Zygmunt Bauman, Michael Hviid Jacobsen, and Keith Tester (2013) note, can otherwise remain hidden.

Your perspective: What, to your mind, is the importance of storytelling as a learning and teaching writing genre?

Writing a Story to Share

Traditional peer-reviewed outlets, like journals, do not publish stand-alone stories. However, stories captured as data and then analyzed as part of a research project may be found in learning and teaching journals reported as an empirical study, for example. This makes

sense because capturing people's stories offers rich insight into the complexities of what it means to learn and teach in higher education. As a source of data, stories offer endless interpretive possibilities. Stories are generative. In this book, we are advocating storytelling as a genre in itself in which writers author their own stories, recount the stories of others, or invent stories that are left to readers to interpret. Stories can be shared in blogs (for example, see David Pace's blog, *Decoding the Ivory Tower*, or [University College London's blog](#)), professional society newsletters, books, and even in the mainstream media (e.g., [BBC Stories](#)). We return to a discussion of blogs in [chapter 21](#).

While telling stories about our learning and teaching practices is commonplace to us, many of us will struggle to write them. First, learning to write in many academic disciplines teaches us distance and objectivity as we write up our research, as Kelly highlights in [Our Perspectives 20.1](#) and as David Pace discusses in [Reflection 20.1](#), describing the “extraordinarily liberating” experience of sharing stories. Second, we have to identify a generative story about our learning and teaching that connects to the ongoing conversations of a community. In other words, stories also require us to speak within a designated conversation or community of colleagues—as Phillips and Bunda (2018) indicate—or to find a way to say something new. While we may or may not directly cite other scholars, the story we are writing is being written for an audience and will be shaped by others.

Reflection 20.1

Confessions of a SoTL blogger—Telling stories is liberating

Leaving the world of scholarly writing to begin a blog felt transgressive. Who was I to say that my stories, anecdotes, and observations were worth anyone else's time? What was I doing presenting my own successes and failures, my values and experiences, in such a public arena? We need academic prose to produce a scholarship of teaching and learning that is “public” and “accessible for exchange” as a basis for collective reform of instruction. But it often hides

the personal histories, unique encounters, political context, and values that are always a part of our teaching. The experience has been extraordinarily liberating. I wake at 4:00 in the morning, unable to go back to sleep because ideas for new entries have come bubbling up during the night. My pedagogical observations are no longer separated from the experiences that drove me to write about teaching in the first place. I realize now that scholarly writing always required the self-amputation of a part of myself. I will continue writing traditional articles on teaching and learning because I believe in this work, but I am reveling in having another place where I can share both the thoughts and the stories that have emerged from a half-century in academia.

David Pace is professor emeritus, History Department, Indiana University Bloomington, US. He blogs at [Decoding the Ivory Tower](#).

As an example of the challenges and possibilities of storytelling, Kelly (Matthews 2019b) recently shared a story about observing a colleague teaching in a large, 500-person first-year subject on the first day of the semester. Because the story was being shared in an institutional blog, Kelly avoided naming the subject or going into details about the disciplinary content, although she acknowledged her colleague by name (after seeking permission). The story consisted of Kelly describing her experience of watching a colleague's class and then adapting his practice in an effort to create an inclusive learning space. She did not want readers to get distracted by the discipline (mathematics) because the story was about inclusive pedagogies that can cut across disciplinary boundaries. Kelly also did not cite any literature. Stories might cite literature but do not have to. In this example, her audience was the broad teaching community at her university—mostly comprised of academics who are not scholars of learning and teaching, but are higher education teachers. In the Elizabeth Mackinlay (2016) story discussed above, on the other hand, the author did cite other scholars whose work resonated with hers and shaped her thinking and practices.

Finally, writing an impactful learning and teaching story means sharing our vulnerabilities in ways that we would not in our research but might, for instance, share in reflective essays. Sharing our emotional experiences and even our mistakes reflects the lived experience of learning and teaching—the building blocks of powerful stories, which we attempt to display through the “Our Perspectives” and “Reflection” sections included throughout this book. Yet, in doing so, we are making our vulnerabilities public, which goes against the grain of much academic writing. This is evident in Elizabeth Mackinlay’s excerpt, where she shares all the questions swimming in her thoughts the night before a new teaching semester begins.

The Guiding Questions below can help you write a story that provokes rich insights into the lived experiences of learning and teaching and that is also ripe for other media (there are a number of good teaching podcasts that are story based, and stories can also work well in video, simple animation, and digital storytelling, too—see chapter 21). A copy of the questions is [available in the online resources](#).

Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Learning and Teaching Story*

1. What is your story about?

Let your readers know what your learning and teaching story is about. The example below is the opening lines of a story from a blog post about attempting to teach and assess problem-solving:

We thought we had these great ideas to engage students in problem-solving. We thought students would like the idea of being enterprising, thinking like entrepreneurs. In a course about innovation and leadership at a university that is all about creating change for a better world, solving complex problems as core assessment tasks seemed like a no-brainer. We were wrong. (Smart and Heynen 2019)

2. When and where does your story take place?

Describe the context of your story for readers. The example above signals the context, and here is another showing how context can be shared and used to draw in readers:

It was the first lecture in a first-year course. He introduced the course and the teaching team. He did what you would expect in a first lecture. But then he did this simple yet powerful thing. (Matthews 2019b)

3. Who are the people in your story?

Just as you do with context, identify the people in your story. Drawing from the same story example above, the main character is formally introduced:

I was observing Professor Peter Adams a decade ago—he is now the President of our Academic Board. (Matthews 2019b)

4. What happens first in your story, and then what happens next?

Give readers a sense of the events unfolding so they can visualize what is happening, as Liz Mackinlay does here:

I have been awake half the night hunched over my laptop trying to get my lecture just right, knowing how important it is to make a good initial impression with first year undergraduate students. I flip through my lecture notes and can't explain why but I am terrified. (Mackinlay 2016, 2)

5. How did the people involved, including yourself, react or respond?

Give readers a sense of the emotional lives of the people in your story. In the below example, a student scholar, Dionna Jenkins, reflects on how she first reacted to and then evolved through her experience:

I came into this partnership more fearful than I would like to admit. . . . I subconsciously held onto this fear for some time, but as the semester progressed I grew more comfortable allowing myself to just take a chance and let my ideas flow. In the end, I began to see that differences between partners are nothing to fear. (Wildhagen and Jenkins 2020)

6. Why are you sharing this story? What is the message you would like readers to hear?

Readers will come to their own conclusions based on their read of your story, yet you can signal what the people in your story learned, as demonstrated below:

We learned in the context of teaching entrepreneurship that student ownership of the entrepreneurial idea from its genesis is crucial. In any teaching context, we learned the importance of trusting students by sharing ownership for decisions in the curriculum that academics usually make *for* students instead of *with* students. (Smart and Heynen 2019)

7. How will you end your story?

There are so many ways to end a story. Here is one example:

Do everything in Love, in the broadest sense. Guard hearts, intention, and deeds during the course of the partnership. . . . Do not be discouraged, stand firm on truth, care for others the way we long to be cared for. Have faith in one another, stay hopeful when challenges loom, and after all wrap everything we do in Love. (Chen and Ho 2020)

**As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

Stories are perhaps the most inclusive of the genres we discuss in this book. This is in part because every other genre also tells a story of some sort, whether we use that term or not, and also because stories are part of every other genre. As a stand-alone genre, stories make arguments in the sense that reflective essays do: by presenting experiences and processes of reasoning about those in narrative form. The argument you make in a story, then, is one that speaks from lived experience, by sharing details of that experience, in relation to the context and people involved. Like a reflective essay, a story uses first-person pronouns, and the narrative offered often reveals a process of becoming (Cook-Sather 2019; Dutta 2018; Patriotta 2016).

Over to You

Writing our stories of learning and teaching enables us to communicate in different ways than in the traditional forms of written research and other genres described in this book. More people can be included as authors of this genre, and stories can reach beyond learning and teaching scholars because of their accessible nature. Although crafting a generative story is very different from writing an empirical research article, case study, or opinion piece, it still allows and requires us to contribute to the ongoing learning and teaching conversations, or create new conversations, by asking us to always consider how our story connects with readers. Think about stories you can share that might, as McDrury and Alterio (2003) note, motivate others, convey information, or share experience. Questions to address about writing your learning and teaching story include:

- What learning and teaching stories would you like to tell? Why do you want to tell these particular stories? Which will you write about first?
- Which of our Guiding Questions do you think you need to address and in what order to write your story? What other questions might you address?
- Where will you publish your story? How does it connect to, extend, or change conversations in the learning and teaching community?