COUNTERSTORY PEDAGOGY

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Counterstory Pedagogy

Student Letters of Resilience, Healing, and Resistance

Adriana Aldana
with student contributors

ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

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To my students, whose questions, dreams, and unwavering spirit inspired this book and make the classroom a place of endless possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Letter of Gratitude

Dear students,

I am writing this letter to express my heartfelt gratitude for the transformative learning journey we have embarked upon together. Your active participation and valuable contributions have driven the success of counterstory pedagogy in my courses. Your willingness to share your personal stories and engage in open dialogues about oppression, privilege, and social justice has enriched our discussions and deepened our collective understanding. I am delighted to be able to share some of your letters with other students and educators.

From the beginning, I sought to create a teaching-learning environment that centers on your lived experiences and knowledge, and you have truly embraced this approach. Being your instructor has taught me many valuable lessons. Firstly, I learned that teaching about critical race theory was not enough. Rather, I had to examine how I teach this content to influence the transformative elements of your learning experience more effectively. I have to praxis what I teach! I recognize how counter-narratives instigate us to move away from dominant cultural narratives to legitimize the knowledge

and experiences of communities of color. Therefore, deliberately I crafted activities, class discussions, and assignments that framed your personal stories as valuable contributions to our collective knowledge and learning journey.

Bearing witness to your lived experiences has been a profound experience. I am embarrassed to say that even with the best intentions and commitment to inclusive teaching, I have fallen short of comprehending the myriad of life circumstances and structural barriers that you contend with while trying to learn and grow. Reading your narratives and letters allows me to recenter your and my humanity. I can better contextualize your individual and collective needs as students who are learning and living within a racialized society. Your letters have moved me to tears as I have witnessed your courage in navigating the complexities of societal inequalities and your determination to create a more equitable world.

I get to witness your stories of resilience as you confronted barriers along your academic and personal journeys. I am humbled to hold space for such powerfully vulnerable stories in my classroom. Using counter-narratives and letter writing has proven to be a powerful tool for fostering critical self-reflection and empowering you to connect theoretical concepts to your own lives. Your thoughtful and insightful reflections have demonstrated a level of introspection that inspires me as an educator. I want to acknowledge the strength and tenacity each of you has shown in overcoming various obstacles throughout your professional development. Your resilience is a testament to your dedication to social change and commitment to challenging oppressive systems.

I hope I effectively prepared you to write letters that serve as counter-narratives to the dominant stories depicting students like you as "less than" or "not enough." To this end, I tried to scaffold your ability to critically analyze intersecting systems of oppression and reflect on your positionality. As we explored counter-narratives and engaged in open discussions about power dynamics, your willingness to critically interrogate your complicity in systems of oppression or privilege was commendable. It is not easy for people

to engage in radical honesty. Your vulnerability has created a brave space and trusting learning environment where we can all learn and grow together. Our collective inquiry into shared hardships and strengths has built a supportive community that encourages us to express our thoughts and emotions openly. Your willingness to listen, learn from each other, and uplift your peers has exemplified the power of collaboration and solidarity.

For future students embarking on a similar transformative learning journey, I want to offer you some words of encouragement. Writing, especially writing in academic settings, can stir up old schooling wounds, stress, and anxiety. Often, these feelings stem from internalized oppression in the form of imposter syndrome. Know that imposter syndrome is a familiar feeling. While your feelings of inadequacy may be unfounded (You are capable!), you are astute in sensing that institutions of higher learning were not traditionally built to be inclusive spaces for first-generation and non-traditional students. Your value as a person is not dependent on how you perform on an assignment. YOU ARE WORTH MORE THAN A GRADE.

I invite you to reframe the writing process. Move away from thinking of writing as a measure of your intelligence/capacity and shift your attention to how writing can be a liberatory practice in asserting your voice. There is so much power in writing! The power to heal through reflective writing. The power to advocate for oneself and others through persuasive writing. The power to step back and re-envision new possibilities through revising our work. Remember that your experiences and perspectives are valuable, and your voice deserves to be heard. Writer's block is a natural part of the writing process. If you ever find yourself stuck, take a step back, go for a walk, or engage in an activity that brings you joy before drafting your narrative or letter. Often, inspiration comes when we least expect it. Embrace your uniqueness and the richness your experiences bring to our discussions. Here are a pair of quotes that inspire me when I am feeling insecure about writing and help me push past the fear or writer's block:

> "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you… . To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but more I'm scared of not writing." —Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*

> "We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I have come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words that tell new ones." —Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Thank you, dear students, for being the driving force behind our transformative learning environment. I want you to know that you are a catalyst for change and a powerful advocate for social justice in our profession. The insights and critical awareness you have developed will undoubtedly shape your future endeavors. I do not doubt that you will continue challenging dominant narratives and advocating for a more equitable world. Your presence has significantly impacted me, and I am honored to have been your instructor on this journey. I look forward to seeing the positive change you will bring to our communities and the world.

With utmost gratitude and warm regards,

Adriana Aldana, PhD, MSW

Lessons Learned from Counterstory Epistolary Pedagogy

In the evolving landscape of higher education, cultivating inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive teaching methodologies is paramount. As we navigate an era marked by increasing diversity and globalization, the traditional paradigms of instruction demand the integration of liberatory, anti-racist, and decolonial pedagogical practices (AdvanceHE, n.d.; Azzahrawi 2020; Jennings and Lynn 2015). Counter-narrative methodology and epistolary writing emerge as a transformative approach to teaching and learning that may disrupt conventional narratives to amplify marginalized voices and foster critical consciousness. The need for inclusive teaching methods is not merely a pedagogical innovation but an ethical imperative for institutions committed to the civic mission of higher education (Hurtado 2019). Accordingly, our classrooms should be generative spaces where students, regardless of background, engage in dialogues that challenge hegemonic structures and promote equity.

I have woven epistolary pedagogy and counterstory methodology to forge a dynamic and inclusive approach to education in pursuing anti-racist and anti-oppressive teaching. Counterstory, as a pedagogical tool, serves as a powerful conduit for students to scrutinize the impact of dominant narratives on their sense of self and social positioning (Avila, Aldana, and Zaragoza 2020). Employing letter writing, as a counterstory method, empowers students to share perspectives authentically, fostering belonging and motivation for active participation. As I discussed in previous chapters, I have found that combining the power of personal narratives with the transformative nature of letter writing yielded profound insights and enriched the learning experience for students.

In this conclusion, I reflect on the lessons learned from this integration, emphasizing the potential of epistolary pedagogy to enhance higher education. I hope the lessons learned encourage fellow educators to adapt and incorporate letter writing into their counterstory pedagogy to create dynamic and engaging learning environments.

LESSON 1

Amplify Student Voices

I discovered a remarkable shift in classroom dynamics by incorporating letter writing into counterstory methodology. Students, especially first-generation students and those from marginalized backgrounds, felt empowered to share their experiences and perspectives. The epistolary format offered a safe and intimate space for self-expression, encouraging students to engage with challenging topics and critique dominant narratives. I witnessed a greater sense of belonging and agency within the classroom by elevating student voices through letter writing. To prepare students for counterstory letter writing, I incorporated various opportunities throughout the semester for students to practice self-disclosure through pair-share and small group discussions.

LESSON 2

Attend to Empathy and Intercultural Understanding

Epistolary pedagogy proved invaluable in fostering empathy and intercultural understanding among students. Engaging in a dialogical exchange of letters with peers from diverse backgrounds, students developed a heightened appreciation for different perspectives and experiences. As students delved into the stories of their counterparts, a profound sense of interconnectedness and compassion emerged. However, as an instructor, I had to be proactively attentive to group dynamics during class discussions and activities to ensure inclusive and equitable participation across differences. My previous training in facilitating intergroup dialogues was invaluable (for more on this pedagogical approach, see Maxwell, Nagda, and Thompson 2012; Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig 2002).

LESSON 3

Feedback Cultivates Reflective Learning

Letter writing in counterstory pedagogy facilitated critical thinking and reflective learning. Students were encouraged to analyze and synthesize information from the required course content, leading to deeper insights into complex social issues. As they composed their letters, they honed their ability to articulate thoughts coherently, building essential communication skills. Providing written feedback on letter outlines or in-class freewriting activities helped students prepare for the final letter assignment. I focused my feedback on the content of the letters rather than grammar or writing style. In my written feedback, I often posed questions that enabled students to (re)consider a deeper understanding of their identities and experiences, analysis of dominant narratives, and intellectual development.

LESSON 4

Offer Multiple Opportunities for Intersectional Inquiry

Epistolary pedagogy complemented other discussions and activities that facilitated the exploration of intersectionality. The success of the letter-writing assignment hinged on enabling students to analyze the multidimensional nature of systems of oppression throughout the semester. It was also essential to underscore that intersectional self-reflection meant moving beyond counting one's multiple social identities.

Through letter writing, students uncovered the interconnectedness of various social constructs, such as race, gender, and class, and examined how these intersections shape their experiences and position them closer or further from power in any given context. This holistic understanding of intersectionality promoted a more nuanced approach to counter-storytelling, broadening their perspectives beyond singular narratives.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

While the lessons learned from integrating epistolary pedagogy into counterstory methodology are grounded in my teaching experience, they extend beyond the field of social work. This approach can be adapted and applied to various subjects within higher education. In introductory literature courses, for example, students can write letters as characters from a novel, exploring their emotions and motivations. In history classes, students can imagine themselves writing to historical figures or ancestors who lived through that period to explore how the past impacts their current livelihood. In sociology or psychology courses, similarly to the case example offered in this book, letter writing can be utilized to explore individual experiences and societal implications of mental health or social structures.

The adaptability of epistolary essays, and counterstory pedagogy, reverberates widely, extending its impact even to student affairs or academic programs welcoming first-year students. Imagine introducing a letter writing assignment at the commencement of a student's academic journey. Such an endeavor could prompt them to articulate college expectations, apprehensions, and aspirations, fostering a profound self-awareness that can serve as a navigational guide through their college experience. This epistolary exchange provides invaluable insights for newcomers, bridging the gap between the present moment and the envisioned future. Years later, as seniors, through their own letter, students might reflect on their transformative journey, elucidating how academic pursuits intertwine with systemic barriers, personal growth, and professional development. This practice, beyond fostering a growth mindset, sets the stage for a supportive, interconnected learning environment where every student is encouraged to see themselves within the larger tapestry of their academic pursuits.

Integrating epistolary pedagogy into counterstory methodology has been a transformative journey, revealing the immense potential of letter writing in higher education. These key lessons learned from this endeavor are: amplifying student voices, fostering empathy, cultivating critical thinking, and promoting intersectional approaches. I encourage fellow educators to embrace the adaptability of letter writing and explore its incorporation into their pedagogy. By doing so, we can create vibrant and inclusive learning environments that celebrate the diversity of our students' experiences and perspectives, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation for knowledge and social change.

APPENDICES