

Building Bridges: Storytelling and Empathy

Transcending Boundaries:

These days, I spend a lot of my time in prison. I have been involved in prison education for just over a year. Each Friday, I teach Shakespeare to minimum-security inmates at the Arizona State Prison Complex. When I am physically outside of its walls, I find my mind wandering in, slipping beneath the razor wire and through the impenetrable barricades, reaching for something I have yet to find.

More than anything else, this experience has refined my sense of empathy, my ability to connect to other people and imagine their perspectives. Before this experience, I suffered from severe tunnel vision. When I considered the people with whom I had interaction, about 90% were middle class, college-educated or college-bound, either White or Asian, and had never been in prison. This was not by accident; I had been kindly guided into symphony orchestras, honors programs, and respectable scholarships, and I had been firmly warned to stay away from the public bus system and southern Phoenix. Listening to my students and trying to understand something about the conditions of their lives have expanded the boundaries of my world.

In a similar way, literature has enlarged the world of my students. Though normally confined behind bars, my students read stories that transport them to another time and place. As we discuss *Othello* and *Hamlet*, as we read the famous soliloquies of Iago and the Prince of Denmark, we become those characters. We try to see the world as they do, to question the world as they do, and to find meaning in the world as they do (or do not). We analyze stories from multiple perspectives, and just as we transport ourselves into their world, we bring the characters into our own lives. Students respond powerfully to these empathy-enabling activities. I have heard students say that Shakespeare writes the language of their souls.

In class discussions, I emphasize that there are an infinite number of ways to experience and respond to a text – there is no one “meaning” to be found, just as there is no fixed “truth” that governs our lives. Reading is not a passive inflow of information; it is an act of creation that involves both the author and the reader. Therefore, every single reader in the room offers different interpretations of the texts we discuss, each equally valid and valuable. In class, reading is both solitary and communal; it is our goal to expand the possibilities of the text by incorporating the insights of others. Thus, the classroom must be a safe place to share ideas, take risks, and make discoveries. Only then can we speak honestly and learn to value the perspectives of others and our selves. By listening to the responses of their peers, students learn to approach the text through multiple lenses. They come to understand that objectivity is unattainable, that our observations and analyses always contain traces of our selves, and that our visions and truths are never whole.

So far, I have outlined three ways in which my experience in prison education has fostered empathy. As a young person, I have been able to empathize with individuals whose life experiences have been profoundly different than my own. As a class, we have been able to empathize with the lives of Shakespeare’s immortal characters, fictional or real as they may

be, through the power of their stories. And as members of a diverse and respectful learning community, my students and I have learned to empathize with one another, to listen to and learn about who and what we are.

Living Narratives:

We share a basic human need to express our deepest selves and share our stories – through music, writing, dance, paint, or any act of creativity. Our creations are the products of our individual minds, that sole combination of experiences, ideas, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and fears that create one human consciousness. The most important things we can do are those things that are unique to ourselves. Every voice has a place in the world, and every one of us has a different story to tell.

The stories of others expand our consciousness; they give us another take on what it means to be human. In this way, stories build bridges of empathy between opposing and distant shores, paving the way for interpersonal understanding and respect. At the same time, stories remind us that our vision is limited and our truths are partial. Though it is a metaphysical impossibility to inhabit a mind other than our own, listening to the narratives of other lives can allow us to forge connections with our fellow human beings in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

PJ Manney explains, “But what is it in a story that makes us empathize? I believe is it the imaginative act of the reader translating the words on the page into thoughts and feelings, enabling them to see the world through the characters’ eyes and feel their feelings. It is also the recognition that humans share common needs, goals and aspirations and that these are either met or unmet in the story of every life, be it real or fictional.”

I agree with Manney, though I would expand his conception of storytelling to include all forms of art: music, paint, dance, drama, poetry, sculpture, architecture, etc. Speaking from my own experience as a pianist, flautist, ballerina, and writer, art is inherently empathy-enabling. As the language of human experience and the vehicle for human expression, art is the primary way in which we tell and share our stories.

The increasing interconnectedness and integration of societies and economies worldwide makes all of us more and more interdependent. Empathy and storytelling allows us to navigate this complex and changing world with open minds and open hearts. Indeed, it is clear that a lack of empathy breeds conflict, war, crime, inequality, discrimination and hatred. We have seen that fear of the “other” leads to insularism and paranoia, and belief in the superiority of one vision over all others leads to imperialism and oppression. Our only hope lies in engaging with one another’s similarities and differences, in recognizing the multitude of ways that each of us experiences the world by listening to each other’s stories.

Empathy is the most effective tool we have to forge meaningful relationships across the cultures and ideologies; it is a powerful antidote to the narcissism and arrogance that has unfortunately characterized much of human history. Empathy is a way to understand the world before we try to change it.

Chinese Voices:

Based on my experience in prison education, I propose to design and teach a curriculum that embraces and encourages empathy through storytelling. While it may be impossible for individuals to traverse certain geographical, cultural, political, and social barriers, we can always connect with others through our stories, no matter who or where we are. Each story is a part of the human narrative, and all are equally important.

The class will be reading intensive, though other forms of creative expression will certainly be included. Stories, both true and imaginary, teach us about one another. They act as portals to different times, places, cultures, universes. Hopefully, the narratives chosen for the class will begin to suggest the complexity and diversity of the world in which we live, forcing students out of their immediate milieu and into unknown territory.

The class will also be writing intensive, with multiple opportunities for creative self-expression. From my class at the prison, I have often found that students are surprised and encouraged at the sounds of their own voices, which have too often been excluded from public discourse. Chinese students deserve the opportunity to make their voices heard, for they are the future generation of the country.

Finally, the class will be a cooperative effort. I hope to establish an ethos of teamwork that fosters collaborative learning among students. Classroom learning should never be one-directional, originating from the teacher and ending with the student. I can attest that my students at the prison have taught me more than I have taught them, and they have learned more from one another than they have learned from me. One of the most valuable lessons I can offer my students is that they can always gain from the insights of their peers. By encouraging class discussion and debate, I hope that students will continue to exchange ideas outside of the classroom and to seek out perspectives that challenge their worldviews. Most importantly, this dialogue must occur within a matrix of empathy and respect. With practice in the classroom, students can learn to broaden their minds, accommodate the ideas of others, and live in a complex and changing world.

Presentation Outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Teaching in prison: A practice in empathy
 - A. Stories of inmates offer new perspectives on the human experience
 1. In this world, it is easy to surround ourselves with what we know.
Before teaching in the prison, I knew:
 - a) The secluded, isolated bubble of middle-class suburbia
 - b) Symphony orchestras, honors programs, scholarships
 - c) A perpetual and reinforcing cycle of privilege
 2. New experiences, different stories expand our limited boundaries.
After teaching in the prison, I have:
 - a) A better understanding of poverty, racism, educational inequality, mass incarceration, social justice
 - b) Forged human connections with a marginalized population

that is often dehumanized in the public mindset

- B. Literature acts as a portal to different worlds, both real and imaginary
 - 1. Shakespeare's writing allows us to compare and contrast modern-day America with Elizabethan England
 - 2. Students find themselves within Shakespeare's characters
 - a) They recognize fundamental human attributes
 - b) Students say: "Shakespeare writes the language of my soul"
 - C. Class discussions allow insights into the minds of others
 - 1. Students learn from one another by:
 - a) Sharing their own opinions and valuing those of others
 - b) Approaching the text through multiple lenses
 - 2. Discussions prepare students to understand and negotiate the immense complexity and diversity of the world. They learn that:
 - a) Objectivity is unattainable
 - b) Observations and analyses are always biased
 - c) Our visions and truths are never whole
- III. Living narratives: Storytelling and empathy
- A. The stories of others give us another take on what it means to be human
 - 1. Storytelling includes all forms of art
 - a) Art is the language of human experience and the vehicle for human expression; it is inherently empathy-enabling
 - b) My own experiences as a pianist, flautist, ballerina, and writer attests to the transformative power of art
 - 2. Stories foster empathetic behavior and attitudes because they:
 - a) Enable us to see the world through characters' eyes
 - b) Build bridges between opposing and distant shores
 - B. In an increasingly interconnected world, the need for empathy grows
 - 1. Integration of societies and economics worldwide requires communication across culture and ideology
 - a) Lack of empathy leads to conflict, war, crime, inequality, discrimination, hatred
 - b) Fear of the "other" leads to insularism and paranoia, imperialism and oppression
 - 2. Empathy is an attempt to understand the world as it is before we attempt to change it. We must learn to:
 - a) Engage with both our similarities *and* our differences
 - b) Recognize the diverse ways in which we experience the world
- IV. Chinese voices: A teaching proposal
- A. Curriculum embracing empathy through storytelling
 - B. Reading diverse stories allows students to transcend boundaries
 - 1. Educators should choose narratives that force students out of their immediate milieu and into unknown territory
 - 2. Students must learn to:
 - a) Incorporate alternative views and opposing perspectives
 - b) Understand and respect other cultures and ideologies
 - C. Writing their own stories encourages students to value their own voice

1. Students are often surprised and encouraged at the sound of their own voices, which are too often excluded from meaningful debate
 2. Valuing our stories is the first step toward valuing ourselves as individuals who have something to contribute to the world
 3. By expressing their own ideas and thoughts, students are prepared to actively participate in public discourse
- D. A collaborative learning environment allows student to exchange ideas
1. Learning should never be one-directional
 2. Students must learn how to learn from their peers
 3. Teachers must establish an ethos of teamwork that will follow students throughout their lives
- V. Conclusion