Storytelling: A transgressive pedagogy to enable decolonizing in the classroom

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Critical Race Theory (CRT) is considered one of the most important and controversial perspectives on racism in education, its roots emerging from US legal studies. CRT argues that race is socially constructed and is a useful framework to understand how systemic racism operates within society.

CRT is defined as:

> *a body of scholarship steeped in radical activism that seeks to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality in society. It is based on the understanding that race and racism are the product of social thought and power relations; CRT theorists endeavour to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable*
>
> (**Rollock and Gillborn** 2011, p1)

A cornerstone of CRT is "naming one's own reality" facilitating the use of narrative to shine a light on the individual's lived experience. By opening up the classroom to this kind of storytelling different lived experiences are shared, acknowledged and valued. This gives space and hearing to previously hidden voices whilst simultaneously increasing the empathy and awareness of other lives, truths and perspectives. Acknowledgement and value that generates a feeling of belonging conducive to improved learning. Consequently, the act of storytelling offers a powerful tool towards building an anti-racist classroom.

Storytelling as the practice of freedom

Storytelling, one of the oldest forms of teaching, is a key theme in CRT literature, particularly as a vehicle enabling conversations around race; to speak back and make insightful contributions about racism and act as a persuasive and transformative tool to challenge liberal racist ideology (Rollock 2012). Storytelling facilitates exploration of cultural diversity, framing an opportunity for whiteness to be interrogated and placing the tutor in a listening role. Storytelling lends value to experience, recognises the uniqueness of an individual's lived experience and creates new knowledge from marginalised voices.

Housed within decolonizing, storytelling disrupts traditional canons of thought and knowledge by enabling counter-narratives to be told and considered which liberates learning and contributes to a platform of globally produced knowledge. The goal of storytelling is not to make accessible or convey experiences or arguments of discrimination to the majority but to resist and deconstruct the dominant racial narratives through the powerful telling of counter narratives (Delgado 1989). Counter-stories are a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are often unheard; a tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. (Solorzano and Yosso 2002) Majoritarian stories predominate and these contribute to social construction of reality and generates power for certain groups whilst leading to a deficit framing, favouring one group over another (Koessler 2018).

The power of classroom favoured narratives

- Storytelling and counter narratives can be powerful tools for learning and liberation; acknowledging value, voice, identity and belonging.

- Can elicit interest, excitement and engagement by nurturing imagination, ambition and aspiration.

- Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse around race and further the struggle for racial reform.

DDMU Library workstream "Kimberlin Sessions" and "Read to Debate"

Concepts of storytelling and counter-narratives are a key element within the DDMU library workstream, which seeks to equip tutors and practitioners with the knowledge and insight gained by listening to diverse voices. Through "Kimberlin sessions" and "Read to Debate" the library workstream of Decolonising DMU (DDMU) offers a safe space for uncomfortable conversations. Sessions look beyond extended reading lists to the transformation of learning and teaching. These sessions offer tutors the opportunity to engage in storytelling which through the lenses of Freire and bell-hooks transform pedagogy, afford reflection, challenge thinking and immerse tutors in the works of people of colour.

The speaker sessions also present the opportunity for staff to consider reflective questions from Stevenson (2019) based on Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model (2005), a CRT response to traditional interpretations of cultural capital and deficit models in which various forms of capital are unrecognized amongst students of colour. The following examples are used to stimulate discussion and encourage tutors to evaluate on their own practice:

- What opportunities do we give to students to tell their stories?

- How do we include narrative and storytelling in our practices?

- How do we help our students narrate their stories of success, as well as their struggles and challenges?

- How can we decolonise our teaching and learning practices so that we recognise and respect other voices?

The read to debate sessions are structured with pre-reading materials, questions, and a place for discussion. They provide tutors with materials for meaningful discourse and a chance to listen to stories of marginalised voices. This may spark a process of 'self-actualisation' (bell-hooks 1994) in which awareness and recognition of one's own role and privilege is acknowledged. A process captured by Freire's concept of 'conscientizacao', and the urgency to resist the banking concept of education (1970). The speaker led Kimberlin sessions provide tutors with the opportunity to listen to the lived experiences of diverse voices and their insights across fields like education, health and sports. See https://library.dmu.ac.uk/decolonisingDMU/home for details of the latest Kimberlin sessions and read to debate.

Storytelling in Practice: Politics of Nationalism Module led by Dr Alison Statham

Dr. Alison Statham, Associate Professor Quality shares her observations on using storytelling in the classroom on her third year undergraduate module Politics of Nationalism.

> *The study of nationalism and national identity is very much grounded in and driven by European behaviour and values. Nationhood itself is a European phenomenon, exported to the rest of the world via Imperialism and Colonialism, and adopted as the "norm" by European dominated international organisations. Decolonising the study of nationalism and national identity has required me to emphasise this reality to students whilst looking for ways to emphasise that identity exists on multiple levels (religious, regional, gender identity etc). Consequently, the intersectional narratives of identity have become a stronger element of our*

discussions, and we discuss the problem with national identity and citizenship being allegedly inclusive, whilst still based primarily on the values of the dominant demographic group.

Story telling is an important part of this narrative, as it enables students to place themselves in another's shoes, and see the complexity of national identity through a different lens. I have used the live online sessions for this, and students have discussed short extracts from texts such as, "Don't Touch My Hair" (Emma Dabiri), and poetry by Benjamin Zephaniah. We have also looked at photographs and images (e.g. Peckham at Oxford) to discuss the occupation of colonised spaces, and the challenge of integration versus assimilation.

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By using the technique of storytelling within the classroom tutors can embrace education as the practice of freedom. Listening to marginalized voices can educate tutors and other students by immersing them in the lived experience of others, thereby seeing and understanding other perspectives to move towards self actualisation (bell hooks 1994).

Further reading

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