Chapter 1

The Power of Narrative as a Teaching Tool

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Is Albus Dumbledore gay? In case your first reaction to this question is "Who is Albus Dumbledore?," let me bring you up-to-date. Dumbledore is the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, that storied place that is central to the Harry Potter books. If you have read the books or seen the movies, you are aware that Dumbledore's sexual orientation is never hinted at, let alone discussed. Even so, at a recent reading at Carnegie Hall, J. K. Rowling, the series author, answered a question about the headmaster's love life by noting that, in her mind, Dumbledore is gay and in love with his predecessor, Gellert Grindelwald (see Weingarten & Tyre, 2007).

It is fair to wonder what the life of a fictional character has to do with the teaching of psychology. Let me address that concern by noting that the wonder of this story is in the responses to it. If you have not seen press coverage of this announcement, you might be as surprised as I was about the audience's reaction, described in *Newsweek* as "prolonged clapping and shouting from astonished fans" (Weingarten & Tyre, 2007, p. 1). Leonard Pitts, syndicated columnist for the Miami Herald, explored this response with two Harry Potter fans, one of whom noted "[Dumbledore's] sexuality is an extra detail…Not destiny, not definition, just detail" (quoted in Pitts, 2007). Pitts goes on to describe a similar reaction he personally had to the revelation that one of Marvel Comics' Fantastic Four, Ben Grimm, was Jewish. Pitts writes that, "apparently in the minds of the creators…he was always a Jew, but that was something they felt constrained to keep quiet back in 1961." Like his Harry Potter fan, Pitts (2007) noted "it didn't change my perception, but it was a detail I liked having."

Such stories, when carefully chosen, can be powerful teaching tools. A narrative can be nearly anything: a feature film, a documentary, excerpts from a novel, a personal story, a poem, and even a newspaper column about fictional characters. Some narratives come straight from the psychological literature, but (at least in my classroom) most of them do not. An effective teaching narrative should be chosen deliberately, which is a difficult and time consuming process, but worth the effort. A narrative is not just a "good story," but like any engaging tale, it can pique the students' interest and generate discussion. Most importantly, it can provide a platform for joining psychological research with the students' interests and experiences. I might use the "outings" of Dumbledore and Grimm to illustrate how prejudices can change over time. Data suggest, for example, that attitudes toward gays and lesbians are gradually but consistently becoming more positive (Yang, 1997). Do these documented changes explain people's positive reactions to the idea that Dumbledore is gay? Will he become a model that further changes attitudes? Similarly, I might discuss what historical events and social attitudes have changed so that Grimm's creators felt comfortable revealing that he is Jewish.

Purpose of a Teaching Narrative

The primary purpose of a teaching narrative is to connect students with the psychological literature. Therefore, instructors need to lay out in advance the pedagogical goals of including that narrative, and to decide what aspects of the psychological literature will be addressed through its use before a narrative is chosen. As a guide, it is helpful to think of a narrative as a persuasive communication and, as such, to apply social psychological principles of effective persuasion to the selection process (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, for a review). Specifically, the teacher as communicator should:

Consider the audience's characteristics

What do your students already know? What are their attitudes? Your teaching narrative needs to be crafted with those points in mind. Before beginning a discussion of Dumbledore's sexual orientation, I would think about my students' attitudes toward homosexuality. I also would consider what they know about the anti-gay prejudice literature and what parts of that literature I would address during the class period.

Think about the characteristics of the narrator you have chosen

Is he or she credible? Trustworthy? Is he or she attractive and likeable? If so, the communicator will be more persuasive. The popularity of the Harry Potter books and of J.K. Rowling herself increase the likelihood that students will be interested in the topic and find the narrative credible. Similarly, Leonard Pitts is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and thus a respected source.

Think about the effectiveness of the communication

Messages that the students find personally relevant will be more effective than those that they do not. In addition, messages that arouse strong emotions are often more effective. It is a safe bet that discussions of sexual orientation will elicit emotional reactions and that students will see this topic as personally relevant.

As a cautionary note, the attitude change literature also points to factors that can derail a good narrative (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), including:

1. *Selective avoidance*. This occurs when the students do not want to consider the topic and direct their attention elsewhere. People generally see information that contradicts their beliefs as less valid.

2. *The belief that the instructor has an ulterior motive*. People are more resistant to new ideas in this case, in part because they create counterarguments in advance when they expect the speaker to take a particular perspective.

3. *Reactance*. If students believe they are being pushed, it can result in annoyance, resistance to the message, or even negative attitude change (i.e., adopting beliefs that are opposite to the message).

In response to the Dumbledore narrative, students with strong anti-gay prejudice may tune out, perhaps arguing that the sexual orientation of a fictional character, discussed in a question and answer session, is not particularly relevant. They also may be resistant to the idea of positive portrayals of gays (fictional or nonfictional) and may resent being asked to consider a positive character. Students might conclude the professor is gay and therefore has an ulterior motive for discussing the topic.

Instructors should ponder in advance how they will handle potential student resistance. It is also important to consider the possibility that students will interpret the narrative differently than intended. You should also be prepared to deal with strong emotional reactions that might come from the narrative.

Components of an Effective Teaching Narrative

A good narrative shares many components of qualitative research and, borrowing from this literature, I have adapted the questions Joseph Maxwell (1996) asks qualitative researchers to consider before conducting a study. Here are questions teachers should be able to answer about a chosen narrative: (a) What are the teaching goals for using the narrative?; (b) What theory or research finding does the narrative illuminate?; (c) How does it illustrate the theory or set of research findings you are addressing?; and (d) What, specifically, do you want your students to understand?

In selecting a narrative, there are other questions worth asking as well. These have to do with the way the narrative will be used during instruction. Specifically, how will you actually use the narrative? Will students read or view the material in or out of class? Will you explain directly the purpose of the narrative or will you lead your students to that point through discussion (or both)? Will the students follow up with out-of-class discussion, perhaps on Blackboard? Will you be part of that discussion?

The most important question an instructor faces is simply whether the class time spent on the narrative is justified. Again, adapting Maxwell's (1996) discussion of qualitative research, without adequate preparation, your narrative might suffer from "too many good intentions and too little focused thinking…[you might] painfully discover that [the narrative], though interesting, was not particularly relevant to the core category. [In short,] without a clear sense of the purpose behind your work, you are apt to lose your way or to spend your time and effort doing things that won't contribute to your goals" (p. 14). As with most teaching decisions, there are no easy, one-size-fits-all answers to the questions I have posed and, as with any classroom, the decision is highly personal. Different people approach topics from different vantage points and want their students to gain different things from a class session.

Bringing narratives into the classroom has another advantage: introducing another voice that allows students to discuss the experience "one removed" from the people present in the classroom. They can discuss another's experience (even that of a fictional character), for example, without the added worry of offending the person who wrote it. They can raise questions that they might not ask if talking directly to the author. If the author isn't present, students are freer to raise doubts and to talk freely about some of the things that may have happened in the narrative.

Making Connections Between Science and Personal Experience

There are, of course, good reasons why instructors resist using precious class time on narratives. Consider the experience Gary Olson (2007) recently described in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In response to a lecture on Michel Foucault, a student sneered: "Well, that's *his* opinion. I don't agree." To answer, the professor explained that, as new learners, the task at hand was not to agree or disagree, but to understand Foucault's arguments. As Olson put it, "Agreement or disagreement [is] a privilege earned only after having mastered and reflected on the material." The student replied, "Everyone is entitled to an opinion, and my opinion is that he is wrong."

Who among us hasn't faced this situation? One of the challenges of teaching psychology (as opposed to, say, Chemistry) is that students have first-hand, life-long

experiences with human behavior and they have firmly held beliefs about how the psychological world works. Sometimes dealing with this reality feels like swimming upstream. We are trying to teach students about the *science of psychology*. It is hard to get them to understand, let alone accept, that the scientific research about human behavior is valuable. It is equally hard to convey that we *are* experts who have studied this material. Bringing in the opinions and first-hand experiences of others can thus seem counterproductive. However, students are more likely to accept the results of psychological literature if it resonates with their real world experience. To be effective teachers of psychological science, we need to build a bridge between students' personal experiences and the more dispassionate presentation of research. Under the right conditions, a narrative provides a commanding way to connect the results of empirical research with our students' experiences.

References

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