

Narrative quid pro quo – telling stories in the classroom and beyond

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As a Polish teacher of English to Arab students I use stories to build trust and mutual understanding in the classroom. They concern my being a non-native speaker of English with a long English-learning record as well as my Eastern European origins with no colonial baggage, but with a distinct history that can be related to Arab experiences more equitably than British or American one.

Students reciprocate with their own stories – sometimes told in the classroom, but, more often, outside it, in the privacy of my office. In many cases, also the timeframe of their story telling goes beyond the confines of the course/s I teach them, extending into months and years after they finish studying with me. Their stories become voluntary, unsolicited and more personal as they tell me about their future plans, families, friends, religious doubts, emotional issues, and even sexual orientation.

This presents a challenge as our professional, teacher-student, relationship is transformed into a personal one, based on friendship rather than classroom methodology. I become their story keeper rather than a mere user of narratives as a teaching/learning tool. Having built trust in the classroom, I am now entrusted with maintaining it outside.

In this paper, drawing on literature (e.g. Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Bell, 2011; Josselson, 2007) and my own experiences, I want to focus on one such friendship resulting from the initial story-trading in the classroom, and discuss various ethical and emotional issues involved.

References

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