Engaging Students as Critical Storytellers: Classroom Observations from a Boricua Anthropologist

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Abstract
Public and private higher education’s need to recruit “the brightest and most accomplished students” has created social and economic barriers to college admissions and student retention. In contrast, community colleges, due to their open door policies, provide an academic home for students who might otherwise be unable to attend college. However, the community college classroom is a continuum of academic potential and problems requiring innovative teaching to bridge these divides. Storytelling is a teaching tool that I use to unmask social inequalities while helping students with different educational backgrounds understand and personalize the lessons that different anthropological writings strive to teach them. In this commentary, I share some of my own racialized and privileged experiences, the complexities of teaching and learning at a community college, and the experiences and voices of students engaging in their own knowledge building and storytelling.

Keywords: community colleges, storytelling, privilege

Every day I teach, my goal is to engage all of my students as critical thinkers that interrogate the role of education in their lives, but I often wonder whether my students understand the value of a good education. Do they simply hope to get a job, or are they hoping that their education will enrich their lives in other ways? In my classroom I ask students to evaluate why they are in college, why they are taking anthropology, and what they want to take away from the course. By integrating the writings of Paolo Freire (1970) and others into my teaching philosophy, I came to embrace a different model from the “traditional” lecture classroom I experienced as an undergraduate student. This model emphasizes the classroom as a place of dialogue, collaboration, and liberation through the use of innovative teaching tools, including storytelling.

Social reproduction theory suggests that education does not guarantee equal opportunity but instead schools are social structures that reproduce social inequalities (Street 2003; Collins 2009). Traditional classroom settings seem to alienate students of color and lower class students (Street 2003; Collins 2009). The contemporary multicultural classroom requires understanding the complex needs of the local student population. At Holyoke Community College, in Holyoke Massachusetts, I teach classrooms that are mixed both racially, mainly Puerto Rican and white, and economically, between students on government assistance and middle class students. Reaching across the economic and racial divide is both challenging and rewarding.

Over the years, I have found that innovative teaching is necessary to bridge these divides and must include self-reflection and multimedia resources that are both academic and popular to assist students in succeeding in the rapidly changing college classroom. Storytelling is a teaching tool that can meet these needs and help students engage the course material. I use storytelling to unmask social inequalities and help students with different educational backgrounds understand and personalize the lessons that different anthropological writings strive to teach them. Storytelling can reveal hierarchy that may otherwise seem invisible or hidden to some students.
In this commentary, I will share some of my own racialized and privileged experiences, the complexities of teaching and learning at a community college, and the experiences and voices of students engaging in their own knowledge building and storytelling.

From the very beginning of the semester, I use storytelling as a tool for student engagement by first telling my story—the story of my social identity, my dedication to learning and my desire for students to find their passion. I use my identity as a Latina, and more specifically a Puerto Rican, to connect with the students of my community college. Here I share my story, which is part poetry and part prose, in order to bring you into my multicultural classroom:

I am a Boricua, a light skinned, Spanglish speaking Latina from the island of Puerto Rico. My island of enchantment is more home to me than anywhere else; a place, a small house in San Sebastian de Pepino where my great grandmother once lived, the place she died. The house I visited, the constant in my life besides my parents and brother. This place is gone now, a building sold for little money because my parents could no longer keep it.

With this loss, who am I really?

Loss of family and loss of history equals a loss of self. How can I quantify for you the feeling of happiness in learning my cultural roots are mixed: indigenous, African and European? How can I explain the trauma I feel in knowing that our past injustices are replicated in our current social order? That what people see (in my white skin), what people hear (in my perfect English), and what people feel (about the Other) continues today. And yet, I continue to search for the truth of my story.

Tell me my history of the Borikén, Borinquen!

Speak through the silence, so that I may unearth my story. I know my history only through my own inquiries - through the political sounds of the Welfare Poets, whose music has connected me to a living part of my historical memory. Music that has moved me to connect to the truth about Puerto Rico’s fight for colonial independence, Filipberto y El Grito de Lares, a town so close to my own.

Siempre estaré contigo, mi bella isla.

Exposing my personal connections shows students that my classroom is a safe space for them to learn about who they are and engage in a serious educational journey. Students have told me that they feel more comfortable sharing their own stories after hearing their professor use personal examples from their own life. In fact, I tell them on the first day that learning is an active process and that you cannot wait for knowledge to be given. You must participate, inquire, dream, question. Education is not staring out a window hoping for class to end. It is not eased with less work and extra time to do it. Education is about inspiration, about challenging yourself, and about exceeding your limitations. This is why I teach. This is my passion.

This method of storytelling is critical to engaging community college students in the learning process because it allows students to create their own personal connection to the social inequities that they will study. In fact, storytelling allows students to frame their own

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1 “I will always be with you, my beautiful island.”
histories as part of a classroom narrative and recognize their college classroom as both a place of social advancement and a space where social hierarchies are reproduced.

The current push for public and private higher education to only accept “the brightest and most accomplished students” has created more exclusive institutions of higher learning. This race for “excellence” has created both social and economic barriers to college admissions and student retention (Roman 2007). In contrast, community colleges, due to their open door policies, provide an academic home for students who might otherwise be unable to attend college. My community college classroom is a continuum of academic potential and problems, including students with serious deficiencies in reading comprehension and writing ability, students with complex learning disabilities that are ill-managed, as well as students whose critical thinking skills surpass the college level material they are studying.

It is a challenge to teach a college-level course that meets the differing needs of students with such diverse educational backgrounds. Storytelling again is one way to address this challenge. I encourage students to read themselves into the material early on by creating a space for them to share their personal identity stories, whether verbally, through written prose or poetry, or even visually through film or photography. For example, in my experience marginalized students usually choose to highlight both how other people see them and how they see themselves with physical social identity markers like “black”, “female”, “young” as well as words that reflect unseen pieces of their personality like “creative”, “hard working” and “conflicted.” Interestingly enough, students from more privileged backgrounds tend to focus on their personalities, rarely acknowledging privilege or physical characteristics as markers for their identity. It is in conversation with their fellow students and myself that the more privileged students gain a level of self-awareness and the ability to see their social advantages. These stories, early on, provide students with a foundation from which to discuss the global world and social inequity.

Students often ask me how anthropology can make a difference in the world. I respond by explaining that anthropology allows one to see both the cultural similarities among geographically diverse groups, and the cultural diversity within demographically similar spaces. An anthropology course is, in fact, the perfect place to discuss difference and hierarchy. While anthropology suffers from its own disciplinary assumptions and norms, it can also provide students with access to a global perspective on the world, and allows students to reflect on what is deemed normal or deviant in their own time and place.

I find that students struggle to place me in comfortable racial, gender, class, and sexuality categories based upon my physical characteristics, even after hearing my heritage story that encompasses indigenous, black, and European roots. One student, after reading “White Privilege” by Peggy McIntosh (1988), asked me why I cared so much about privilege. My response was that as a woman of color who had experienced both racism and white privilege, these issues touch me deeply and inform all of my research and teaching. The student admitted she had been confused by my light skin, my “perfect” English and my seemingly contradictory claim to have had racialized experiences. These incidents of student confusion, frustration and mis-education about oppression and privilege are quite frequent, and require a degree of patience, creativity, and guidance from a professor. I ask students to question the status quo of social inequity and challenge them to become active participants in their communities because I believe that education can help to create a more socially just world.

When introducing students to concepts like oppression and privilege, it becomes critical to use multimedia resources, personal stories, current events and workshop activities in order to connect these larger concepts to the students’ own stories. I have found that students are better able to understand and grapple with the often controversial material when it is connected to their lives in innovative ways. One exercise I do in my Diversity course is an economic
privilege walk (Adams & Griffin 1997) that requires students to physically move forward (upward, hierarchically) or backward (downward) based on their social class and other identity markers. Students react to this exercise in a variety of ways – frustration, anger, disbelief, surprise. It is critical to debrief students about the exercise and to ask them to reflect on their feelings and then connect their experience to the local, national and global contexts discussed in the course readings. I have also found that this activity can engage students in a powerful discussion of education as a system of oppression or a place to gain social mobility.

Knowledge building is only the first step. I encourage my students to take what they have learned in the classroom and apply it to their everyday lives and careers. Students are often surprised that I regard them as conveyors of important and valuable knowledge as well as necessary contributors to dialogues on social issues. For example, one student, Eilianie Marie Alvelo, created a poem to describe herself to the class – performed for the class and in public spoken word venues across Western Massachusetts – here is a portion of the poem she has allowed me to share in this commentary:

I am a woman and I am in love
With every single cell of my self.
I am a proud "Borikua" and I don't fit
In the "cafre-mal hablá" label you/society/media call ghetto...

I am a dreamer and I am willing to work to the limits
Of my powers to make my dreams, my reality.
I am who I am wherever I go,
But, it is through my art that you'll get to know my soul.

I am...
Eilianie Marie Alvelo

As you can see, Eilianie, a young woman of Puerto Rican descent, chose to emphasize both her social markers and her personality traits. Her story highlights not only how she sees herself, but it also shows what she understands about how people impose social labels based on her physical markers. By telling her story, she shares her understanding of how American hierarchy and social pressures impact the individual and it serves as an entryway into a critical engagement with more theoretical course materials for both Eilianie and the classmates she shared her story with. Student stories, like Eilianie’s, show that knowledge production and critical thinking in the classroom is multi-dimensional.

Storytelling is a useful tool which creates opportunities for students to connect to course material in a personal and experiential way. I believe teaching and learning to be about “the practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire 1970). This teaching technique, along with others, allows me to practice a cyclical, non-hierarchical pedagogy in which information and critical thinking flows in multiple directions, whether it is teacher to student, student to teacher, or student to student.

Author Biography: Vanessa Martinez-Renuncio is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at UMASS Amherst and an Assistant Professor at Holyoke Community College. She completed her Master’s in Applied (Medical) Anthropology from Georgia State University in May 2002. Her research interests include medical anthropology, grassroots activism, and health care policies/politics in the United States.
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