

We are more than one story. Embracing creativity and compassion through Learning Together

Abstract

People's experience of the criminal justice system, and indeed, higher education are dominated by stories. We encourage service user input across the criminal justice system, and endeavour to understand the student experience in higher education, but we rarely think about how politically driven agendas reduce everything, and indeed everyone, to one experience, one identity and ultimately, one story. Drawing upon our experience of *Learning Together*, we utilise the concept of storytelling to illustrate how pedagogical creativity and compassion can recast longstanding narratives about 'service users' and students so that new, informed stories can emerge.

Key words

Learning Together, students, criminal convictions, higher education, compassion, creativity.

Introduction

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity

(Ngozi Adichie, 2009)

Learning Together was originally co-produced by Drs Amy Ludlow and Ruth Armstrong from the University of Cambridge who aimed to provide an opportunity for university students to learn alongside people serving a custodial sentence (Gosling, 2019). Through the co-creation of learning spaces within custodial environments, the initiative promotes learning between people who, ordinarily, would not meet or have the opportunity to learn from one another (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). Although *Learning Together* is delivered primarily throughout the custodial estate, it has also become a springboard for promoting inclusive learning environments beyond the prison gates (Gosling, 2017). In 2016, Professor Burke and the second author designed the first university-based *Learning Together* for males and females who have personal and/or professional experience of the criminal justice system to learn alongside postgraduate students. In partnership with criminal justice services it creates a community of practice populated by local people with academic, professional and/or lived experience of criminal justice. *Learning Together* consists of 15 two-hour sessions taught across the academic year. Each session explores a contemporary penological issue through a series of accessible questions such as 'How do we explain crime and criminality?' If you would like more

information about *Learning Together* further details can be found in the second authors monograph entitled '*What can we learn from Learning Together? Exploring, embracing and enhancing criminal justice-higher education learning partnerships*' (published by the Probation Journal in the Issues in Community and Criminal Justice monograph series. Open access and free to download).

In parallel, students have the opportunity to attend a weekly creative response session, directed by the first author. These sessions were introduced in 2018 to enable students to share personal stories based upon guided creative writing exercises that encourage reflective narration and the development of critical consciousness. The curriculum explores topics such as: observation and discovery; constructing the self; places of (un)belonging; a day in the life/a past life; stereotypes and archetypes. This creates a pedagogically informed space for students to explore personal stories, emotional reactions to (and from) people, places and events to enhance creative capital (MacLennan et al., *under review*). This is not writing as therapy. Rather, in sharing stories, participants regularly visit challenging places and negotiate points of tension and strain. Students and staff celebrate the role of kindness, acceptance and empathy in the classroom. '*I didn't realise how much emotion was in my poem. I read it to myself and started crying.*' Condensed extracts from students work (including reflective writing, memoir and polemic) are included throughout the forthcoming discussion.

Stories matter

Storytelling is not about making allowances or 'dumbing down' for participants. Rather, it is a creative pedagogical activity that facilitates a pedagogy of compassion amongst and between students, enhancing understanding of people and their experiences beyond the classroom. Stories convey values and emotion and can reveal the difference and similarities between people's experiences (East et al., 2010). They are vital forms of communication through which people relay experiences and knowledge to others (Ibid). Storytelling can help validate our experience as it holds the ability to connect us with our inner selves, others and society (Atkinson, 2002). According to Reichert (1998), it has the potential to make hidden experiences visible. Gibbs (2017) suggests that compassionate pedagogy is founded on the dignity and limitations of humanity. Similarly, storytelling recognises that when stories are related, individuals position themselves to emphasise or diminish parts of the story, or indeed themselves from being perceived negatively (Kitzinger, 2004). During creative response sessions, students often share hidden experiences and stories that undermine/enhance/explain the labels our students have been given or that they themselves have adopted.

Through *Learning Together* we are not trying to narrate one story about people's experience of the criminal justice system and/or higher education, or even one single story about the transformative potential of such experiences. Instead, we are acknowledging that human beings are complex, contradictory and confusing and, all too often, misrepresented because society finds efficiency and comfort in reducing individuals to one all-encompassing story. This is particularly important amongst students who are consistently (re)directed to one moment (or sometimes multiple moments) where they have made a mistake or judgement error. Few of these stories are positive and rarely have a happy ending; they encourage judgement rather than empathy and understanding. Although reductive and one-dimensional, the single story is typed in bold font and large type, it erases all other stories. But a single story is not - *cannot be* - the whole story. The forthcoming quotations are extracts from students work produced during creative response classes.

*I come from nuns and priests and made up confessions, travel sickness
and sand between my toes, sunburn and sun-cream and the sound
of rain and seagulls on a caravan roof.
From the high-diving board at New Ferry baths, bunking in over
the wall and the salty taste of the River Mersey.
I come from slide rules, log books and trig tables and the bottom
Of a rugby scrum with mud in my mouth.
I come from homelessness and hope,
hope and despair,
cold floors and wet clothes.
I come from a puddle's reflection, from poteen
From being alone but not being lonely, indulgence and excess,
Confusion and an empty glass.*

(Participant 1, reflective writing, 2020)

We walk in a staggered formation the crunching of the worn out gravelly road we have just stepped on, the hills left behind us (...) The hand signals get passed down the line (...) Fuck me I shout in my head, not this again. The halt signal, down on one knee, covering your arks (...) I wouldn't mind but it is the 120lb Bergen I have on my back, carrying this fucking gympy and the tripod as well because Cocky is a bit done in and can't breathe very well (...) Fucking snow, it is the highlands I suppose. Just don't need snow when me and my buddy have got water still dripping from the inside squelch of our boots (...) One hour has gone by now, still lying here (...) You can hear other lads getting an arse-whooping off the sergeant for falling asleep while we are still covering (...) 'Scouse, Scouse, Scouse (...) You and Wiley are on stag.' (...) 'John, let's get our wet kit back on.' Relieving the lads they can't wait to get back to their basher and in their doss bags, fuckers. Check the time. 'John, are you sure we are meant to be on no?' 'We are,' the whisper comes back. Eyelids are so heavy (...) John fucking wake up, you know what happens if the boss finds you asleep on stag. This sleep deprivation does something to us, WHOSE THAT (...) where there in the tree line (...) coking weapons (...) is that pink elephants (...) are you fucking joking me. Sorry Bro I need a brew (...) never mind that you are on stag.

(Participant 2, memoir, 2020)

Every human being is a sprawling mass of stories. Think about the stories we tell about ourselves; stories that make us appear kind, funny or adventurous. The time we did a sixty hour week, met the impossible deadline, let someone else take the credit, because we are - and want others to see - hard-working, determined and (of course) selfless. We tend not to tell the story of last Tuesday when we ignored the homeless woman sitting in the doorway of Tesco's, or the time we committed a crime but did not get caught. Every day we discard stories that we are ashamed of because we do not want those events to dominate our identity and frame our interactions with the world. Now think of those whose acts cannot be kept secret, or those who are labelled in some other way. When one's story is subsumed by a label it reduces the book of stories that make up a human being into one word. Whilst this may be easier for some sections of society to deal with, it does little for the rest of us.

*When I heard **the J word**, it puts my back up. I get annoyed and think 'who is he to say that?' Most times they don't know anything about it, just saying it, playing with words they don't really know. So when it's said by someone who doesn't really know the true meaning of the word, they are just describing someone with a drug problem. It makes the people they are talking about sound not a nice person, people they don't want to be a round when, in fact, they are some of the kindest caring and loving people you will meet. When I hear the J word I feel discriminated against, judged, put down, looked at badly, the lowest of the low, will do anything, stick dirty needles, use dirty water, live in shit, not a good person. When in fact they are a person who just had things go wrong.*

(Participant 3, polemic, 2018)

Single stories create labels which create stereotypes. We have seen a rise in politicians using the impact of a single story to create discord and mistrust. When nuance, complexity and contradistinction is expunged by the dominance of the single story, our individual lives and society as a whole are measurably poorer. We, regrettably, witnessed this in some of the reporting of the recent tragedy on London Bridge. On the 29th November 2019, five people were stabbed, two fatally (Saskia Jones and Jack Merritt), at Fishmongers' Hall on London Bridge, by Usman Khan. The attack took place during a *Learning Together* event that was held to celebrate the fifth year of the initiative. The men who, initially celebrated as heroes were defined by that event and story until their past involvement with the criminal justice system was revealed. Although not representative of all media outlets, some coverage of the event would suggest that a number of mainstream and social media channels, could not deal with the complexities of human existence. Demonstrating (whether intentionally or unintentionally) an inability to acknowledge that someone who had committed a crime could also be capable of an act of courage and selflessness. In effect, what this implies is that no matter how far you come, you will always and forever ONLY be that crime, that one story.

Conclusion

Saskia Jones and Jack Merritt, who worked for *Learning Together* before their tragic death, knew that we are not ONLY one story. Just days after Jack's death, David Merritt (Jack's father) recognised how his son's story was becoming politicised and spoke out to disrupt the emerging narrative. Political figures attempted to drown out David's reclamation of his son, and his story: renewing the dominance of the single story. Why? Because there is danger in allowing more than one story to be told. It is subversive because stories have power. They create empathy – we feel what other human beings feel, live another's pain, loneliness or joy. Stories educate, create understanding, challenge bigotry and inspire social change.

The news when you read it tends to consist of a compendium of facts or else some of the time a compendium of outspoken opinions that get wedged in between the facts. But I don't think that actually human experience unfolds in facts, I think it unfolds in narratives, and that the loss of the narrative element in our experience of our own lives, in our experiences of what's happening in the world, even in our experience of history is very distorting.

(Solomon, 2015)

Disrupting traditional forms of teaching and learning through compassionate pedagogy is important for students who have so often felt, and been told, that they are 'wrong.' For students who may have had a negative or fractured experience of education, creating a space where the most important thing is the hunger to express, where their voice, life experience and story has value, and where language – their language, their voice, their unique way of looking at and negotiating the world – has currency, builds confidence. Pullman (2013) suggests that the most important thing of all is the sense that language belongs to us, and we belong in it. When you do not see language that you are familiar with, or language that makes sense to you, represents who you are, or captures your story, how are you supposed to engage with higher education or, indeed, society and feel that it is a place for you? Through *Learning Together* we work with people who are, to varying degrees, negotiating two sectors of society that claim to be fundamentally transformative but in reality, homogenise individual experience. Although attempts are made to engage with peoples narratives, the criminal justice and higher education sector seldom ask people to tell their story or provide a platform to tell stories that may not, at least at first, be connected to the identity of the 'service user' or 'student'.

We would take this further and ask why are they ignored or missing? Creative and compassionate pedagogy provides an opportunity to draw out people's connected stories. Through the creative response programme participants are engaging, perhaps for the first time, with their story and learning to take risks and be innovative – creating verbs such as '*grandnationaling*' to describe a childhood game of leaping over the neighbours' privet hedges; moving like a camera through memorable moments in their lives '*I chipped the mortar off the brick, spinning it like a Rubik's Cube*'; or simply writing a memory from another's point of view '*I've just realised how hard it must have been*

for my mum to send me back to that boarding school on Sunday nights.’ We are working with culturally and linguistically diverse people and in order to strengthen our academic and professional knowledge, we need to create a space where multiple stories are heard, capture and understood; the very definition of compassionate pedagogy. Roxå and Mårtensson (2016) distinguish between negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to). Freedom and liberty are emotionally-laden words both in criminal justice and higher education. The single story is restrictive, it cannot possibly describe a human being, whereas the positive freedom provided by an accepting, compassionate and creative space (regardless of where that space may be) that facilitates more than one story allows us to express ourselves, to do things and to become something in the world, to be noticed (Ibid).

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