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The Power of Stories to Build Partnerships and Shape Change

Deborah Romero

Abstract

This essay reflects on the power of storytelling and narrative in a collaborative partnership that engaged undergraduate pre-service English as Second Language (ESL) candidates and their professor with local ESL high school teachers, immigrant and refugee students, and their families. It describes how undergraduate students worked with teachers and students to collect stories and publish a multilingual book about their journeys, memories of home, and transitions into their new life in the United States. This project and the resulting self-published book, which was shared at several community and public events, exemplify the fundamentals of reciprocal and transformative partnerships. The nature and importance of such partnerships are examined, including recommendations for similar undertakings, and a discussion about how the book students and families were empowered by sharing their voices. It closes by examining how the book became a tangible means to transcend the initial partnership and to promoting new understandings and relationships through sustained community engagement.

Introduction

When we narrate, we place lives in the balance in that our renderings of experience shape actions, beliefs and emotions. (Ochs & Capps, 1999, p. 1)

As I walked into the cluttered high-school classroom, tucked away in the most remote corner of the building, with no windows and too many desks in not enough space, Ms. Cooney sat sifting through a stack of tattered student papers and artwork. Despite the long days and challenging schedule, Jessica always had a smile and something positive to share about her immigrant and refugee students.

“Look at their stories! They’re just so powerful...And, they so want to share what they’ve been through,” she said, showing me the pile of papers. She went on to tell me that she was thinking of photocopying the stories written by students and their families as part of a Family Literacy Program and binding them together somehow so others could read and learn from them. It was then that the idea dawned upon me.

“Why not make a more formal book?” I asked and she looked at me as if I was crazy. How could she? How could this overworked, under resourced teacher make a book?

“We can do it!” I confidently began, and hastily went on to propose a plan for how the undergraduate students, who would soon be placed in her classroom that semester as part of their coursework with me, could support the

book project. Although Jessica was skeptical at first, by the end of our conversation we were both inspired. We had conceptualized a reciprocal plan to collaborate, to partner and publish a book showcasing the students’ work and supporting the undergrads’ learning. Never could we have imagined back then just how powerful an experience it would turn out to be. This essay reflects on key parts of this transformative relationship and the process of making the book by considering the lessons learned and invites others interested to consider exploring these partnerships. I conclude with reflections on what kinds of change are possible when institutions and, more importantly, individuals come together to share stories.

Storytelling as a Vehicle for Transformative Partnerships

As increasingly more universities and faculty seek to develop meaningful ways to engage their students with local or global communities, the need to continually rethink the “what” and “how” we engage has also become ever more pressing. There is increasing demand not only to juggle the competing interests, needs and resources of campuses, faculty, and students with those of community partners (Ramaley, 2000), but also to develop meaningful pedagogies of engagement that can result in transformative, as opposed to transactional, relationships (Enos & Morton, 2003). Mindful of these considerations, and committed to nourishing participants’ aspirations, this story book project was able to bring about lasting changes by building on existing work and

partnerships around a shared vision, sustained interpersonal collaborations and engaged praxis (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012).

As an educational researcher, inspired by the theories and work of Freire (1970) and Dewey (1942) to promote engaged learning with my students interested in issues of language, literacy and identity development, I was convinced that making a book should be something more than a transactional project with stories, personal narratives and illustrations from immigrant and refugee high school students and their families. Rather, and through our ongoing planning and collegial discussions, Jessica and I began to envision how the book could become a living testimony to the lives, cultures and tremendous challenges that many of the immigrant students had overcome en route to their current situation. Furthermore, and as I shared with Jessica, this conviction was founded on the principle that much of how we learn and shape our experience is through narrative and storytelling, from everyday stories that children and adults include in daily conversations (Heath, 1983; Sacks, 1974) to great works of literature that embody a nation or culture. Stories are narrative acts of meaning making (Bruner, 1986), which allow both the teller and the audience to engage in a shared experience of lived and imagined worlds, or as Morrison (1994) states, “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment that it is being created.”

The power of storytelling, along with oral histories, is recognized in a growing body of work that explores these as legitimate vehicles for both community engagement and for raising awareness about cultural diversity and social justice issues (Fraizer, 1997; Meyers, 2010; Rosaldo, 1986; Solinger, Fox, & Irani, 2008). Oral histories have a rich tradition, especially in anthropological work and folklore studies, where through in-depth interviews participants share powerful testimonies comprised mainly of “memories and personal commentaries” (Ritchie, 2007), which although they may carry historical significance, do not necessarily depict the “facts.” Rather, oral histories and storytelling seek to engage the listener or reader in a shared experience, the narration of past events that connect to the author’s present existence. The stories gathered for this project are very much in this vein; they are personal, subjective recollections of individuals’ lived experiences and their relationship to history. These narratives “tell us less about *events* and more about their *meaning* (...), not just what people did, but what they wanted

to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did,” (Portelli, 2003, p. 67). By printing these stories, told by traditionally marginalized adolescents and their families, in an illustrated book that was subsequently shared by them as authors with community audiences, this project is both unique and transformative in nature. In effect, publishing and disseminating the stories in a book transcended the self-interests of any one individual or group involved and helped to create larger meanings, not only about individuals but also about group and community identities (Enos & Marten, 2003).

Cultivating Transformative Collaborations in Changing Times

Through my instructional work in teacher preparation at the local university, I had been placing my undergraduate pre-service English as Second Language (ESL) undergraduates in Ms. Cooney’s classroom to conduct their practicum teaching experiences for several years. A former high school teacher myself, I understood all too well the challenges she faced, and I valued her practical and professional experience. Consequently, I made deliberate efforts to ensure our partnership was reciprocal; I would often invite Ms. Cooney and her high-school students to visit campus and attend my classes, where they would engage with the college students. This provided the high-school students with meaningful opportunities to practice their emergent English language skills, while briefly experiencing college life. I also co-presented with Ms. Cooney at local and state education forums and conferences, and I made sure that she received the best pre-service teachers to support her students in class and with any extra curricular activities. In return, Ms. Cooney always welcomed the college students into her classes, modeled for them excellence in teaching and appreciated the extra support she received for the growing numbers of ESL students.

In the five years I had been working with Ms. Cooney, I watched her classroom demographics change from predominantly Latinos, often of Mexican descent, to a majority of refugee students, mainly from Somalia, Kenya and Burma. U.S. Census data from 2010 show that in our mid-western community the fastest growth has been for the minority population. The local school district experienced a 47% increase in Hispanics (total of 33,440) and an astounding 129% increase in East African refugees (total 1,543). In addition, Hispanics now comprise almost 36%

of the local K–12 school population. As teachers, students, educators and a community at large, how we adapt to this change and difference defines who we are, both as individuals and as society.

These demographic shifts brought with them linguistic and sociocultural changes that in turn made extra demands on Jessica and other English as Second Language teachers, altering the instructional context and dynamics in many classrooms. In order to address these changes, Jessica and some of her colleagues began seeking out ways to help the newcomer students better integrate into the schools and classrooms. To this end, a few years ago they initiated a theater group, *El Teatro* that engaged students in a stage production, where they told their stories and shared their experiences as recent immigrants in this country.

Each year many of my undergraduate pre service teachers participated and helped with *El Teatro*, and I personally coordinated and worked to bring *El Teatro* group to perform on our college campus on several occasions. Inspired by the power and impact that sharing stories through theater had on students and the community audiences, the teachers went on to develop a series of Family Literacy events for English language learners, new comers, immigrant students, and their families. This was how Jessica came about that first pile of stories.

For Jessica and the teachers, it was important to involve the families since they observed how quickly the students became Americanized, empowered by their knowledge of English and their ability to navigate the American society. As students did so, they tended to pull away from their families and parents who may not have acculturated to the same degree. By engaging families in the storytelling process the teachers sought to reconnect the students with their families and allow them to share who they are and where they came from.

The story book project, as it soon came to be known by those of us working together, and the process of gathering the stories with the immigrant and refugee high school students and their families to make the book, brought together a range of participants in what might be considered a form of participatory or collaborative action research project (Valenzuela & Foley, 2005). The organic and emergent nature of the project and its undertaking was founded on the “unwritten” principles of a transformative partnership, whereby as participants we were “able to combine (their) resources to address

mutually defined problems in more dynamic and comprehensive ways” (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012, p. 47). The project involved the present author as a faculty member in Hispanic Studies; a department committed to diversity and equal education for Latino and other minority students. My role was mainly coordinator, overseeing the logistics, serving as editor and working with teachers on the compilation of texts and images, and of course, cheerleader at times of frustration and desperation. In addition to Jessica, two additional English as Second Language teachers from a nearby school collaborated to design and implement the family literacy events. Approximately ten pre-service ESL undergraduate students, many of whom were in class with me at the time, supported the teachers and about thirty students and families from the local community who participated. All families and students participated on a volunteer basis and informed consent was obtained to use their stories, artwork or images in the publication.

In order to ensure a variety of voices and stories for the book we decided to gather additional stories, texts and illustrations to expand upon those in the first pile, during subsequent small group family literacy sessions. The meetings, which often dovetailed with other educational or social support events such as preventive health care talks, community resource sessions or teacher presentations, were frequently held in the local high schools and in the community at convenient locations, often a community center or a family’s home or apartment. The collaborative storytelling sessions served also to build community and shared understanding through the narration and composition of the stories. In order not to impose a given or expected account, the stories were elicited through the use of verbal requests in English such as “Tell us about your journey to the United States” and other written prompts, including an “I am...” poem stem, used to help scaffold the structure of sentences for those students who needed more support with their English. The prompts sought to spark memories about the home country, reasons for leaving and feelings about being in the United States. The composition process was supported by the undergraduate pre-service ESL teachers, who assisted as scribes by writing down what students and families desired to share and by serving as an authentic audience for families’ oral narrations and reflections.

The collaborative and reciprocal nature of the story project not only strengthened university-community links but also solidified a visible

commitment to increase diversity outreach between the institution, the local schools and the district. It provided an excellent service learning opportunity for the pre-service teachers and undergraduate students who were involved and supported our university wide vision of preparing students in the liberal arts tradition and helping them “to think and act responsibly in a dynamic, diverse and global society,” (www.unco.edu/pres/mission.html). Through their engagement with multicultural content and other forms of interdisciplinary inquiry (educational, linguistic, political, and socioeconomic, to name just a few), entailed in this collaborative book project, undergraduate students benefited from significantly enriched academic experiences.

More specifically, these community based learning experiences exposed the undergraduate students to exemplar high quality teachers in the field of ESL who modeled professional practice and collaboration, which in turn provided invaluable interactions and insights into working with ESL students and their families, both in and out of school. This participation enabled the undergraduate students to further develop their linguistic and professional knowledge to understand and support language learners, to increase their instructional and teaching skills, and to enhance their dispositions toward culturally and linguistically diverse populations by working in collaboration with others. This learning also included an appreciation of how to build and develop home-school partnerships and a practical understanding of advocacy for and with students, all aspects that are related to national teacher standards concerning culture and educational professionalism. Jenny, a junior elementary education major with an emphasis in ESL when asked about this experience, informed the campus newspaper, “I now have a heart for people I knew very little about. I learned more about their lives from being welcomed into their homes. I was shocked at how many people live in one home, how little they have, how welcoming they are and how much they love each other” (Allison, 2012).

The Nature of Telling Tales: Stories of Transition, Resilience, and Hope

Once the stories had been hand written, an electronic archive of all the participants’ work was created, again with the collaboration of the undergraduate students, who brought technological and linguistic expertise. I met regularly and worked with the teachers to review the electronic archive.

First independently and then collectively, we sorted and selected representative stories, narratives and artwork for inclusion in the final book. We grouped the texts by major themes that emerged in the stories and writing: *Culture and Family*, *Life Histories and Memories*, *War Refugee Stories*, and *Transition and Resilience*. Each of these themes forms a chapter in the book, punctuated with “I am” poems written by students from all cultural groups. With the additional support of an undergraduate student in journalism, and another recent graduate from educational technology, the texts and artwork were then compiled into a master file using InDesign®. The result: a multilingual multimodal manuscript, complete with photographs and illustrations that depict families, students and others writing, sharing and learning together. This file was then uploaded to the online publishing resource, www.blurb.com® for publication.

The final published book, entitled *Telling Tales*, contains a comprehensive selection of stories, tales and artwork produced by students and families, and was self-published in less than a year with support from donations, a small grant and monies raised through El Teatro. In many ways the book can be considered phenomenological in nature (Greene, 1997) because it seeks to understand the lived experiences of others and to value these as important and real phenomena, represented through participants’ conscious and very personal narrations about events and circumstances that led them to their current place. Accordingly, the book was conceptualized to promote and enhance the immigrant and refugee English language learners’ use of English for authentic and meaningful communication. Therefore, only minimal edits were made to the language used and even then only in order to ensure clarity or avoid ambiguities. Stories and texts were published in English, Spanish, Somali, Arabic, Thai and Karen, thus promoting multilingual literacies in our community. The texts, although written in beginner English, are indeed complex and telling; they reflect the voices and language learning acquisition stages of all authors. The texts illustrate the diversity of English and other languages that exist in today’s world, and while they range considerably in content, grammatical correctness and style, their messages are nonetheless comprehensible and captivating. By providing students and families with real audiences and the opportunity to envision themselves and their stories in a published volume, each of the authors was ultimately able to make-meaning not only

of their past history but also to transform their academic identities and sense of social success.

Reflections on the Power of Story

Storytelling and narrative are widely acknowledged as powerful vehicles in education (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Martínez-Roldán, 2003) both for the expression of ideas and as sites for future learning. In fact story genres, narrative and personal histories are all recognized in the Colorado State K-12 state content standards. In reading and writing students are required to “write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences” including for example, “generating topics and developing ideas for a variety of writing and speaking purposes.” In the content standards for History, students are also required to “understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time.” This includes the ability to create “a brief historical narrative that chronologically organizes people and events in the history of their family heritage, school, neighborhood, local community, or State Name,” (State Content Standards). Students are also expected to be able to describe “the interactions and contributions of the various peoples and cultures that have lived in or migrated, immigrated, or were brought to the area that is now the United States, including African, Asian, European, Latino, and Native American” and to explain “the reasons for major periods of immigration to the United States and describing how different segments of U.S. society reacted and changed” (Colorado State Content Standards for History).

In practice, however, there are very few, if any, opportunities or resources in place in most schools to support the publication or dissemination of students’ stories or written work beyond the classroom, let alone opportunities for outside audiences to hear or learn from the stories. Cognizant of this situation, the story book project sought to make a difference and, in so doing, it accomplished much more. Specifically, this project illustrates how strong collaborative partnerships foster and promote integrated learning experiences. These include “rich and meaningful” multilingual language development and students’ increased motivation to participate. In addition the book experience built authentic connections to national learning standards and raised awareness of sociocultural diversity and global issues (Barreneche & Ramos-Flores, 2013).

Indeed, the story book project developed from a collaborative and community building partnership

into a genuinely transformative experience not only for those directly involved but also for the greater community. By gathering stories from a diverse range of immigrants, individuals from more familiar backgrounds such as Latinos from Mexico and South America, as well as students and families from other groups about whom we are less knowledgeable, for example refugees from Somalia, Kenya and East Africa and also those from Burma and South East Asia, the community was able to hear a diversity of peoples whose voices are often unheard. Another significant outcome, supporting the power of stories to help individuals heal and overcome difficulties (Herman, 1997), concerns how the participants from traditionally disenfranchised groups were empowered as they made meaning of their experiences through the almost cathartic-like process of telling and (re) producing their personal narratives. Through the story book process their voices and perspectives, which are frequently not heard or seen, became available to a broader community of teachers, students, scholars and interested readers. One student, Amina, later reflected in an interview that the experience gave her a greater sense of control and self-assertion (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). She described how, “Telling someone our stories kind of helps you. When walking around, I don’t feel different any more, they know who I am now.”

When other students were asked what it meant to see their stories in print in the published book they too were motivated and empowered. For Faisal, publishing his story allowed him to think about his past but also to imagine a future. He explained: “I just learned a little better, which gave me ideas that I can actually write more by myself or in my future I can be a writer or something like that, publish my own book.” Asha, a senior in high school described how: “It was awesome being in a book because I have never been in a book before. Seeing people tell others about our stories and how the book talks about who we really are and where we came from and what we have been through. Sharing that with them and teaching them who [*sic*] our model is and not judging us. It’s really great and awesome!”

As these students attested, the compilation of these multilingual and multicultural stories was a beneficial and authentic endeavor. The stories helped students “to develop a sense of shared humanity, to understand themselves and how they resemble and how they differ from other people, over time and space; to question stereotypes of others, and of themselves; to discern the difference

between fact and conjecture...” (Colorado State Content Standards for History).

The story book project described here is testimony to what can be accomplished in a strong reciprocal partnership, which occasioned authentic and constructive community built learning opportunities and exemplified the potential benefits inherent in university-community partnerships (Roehlkepartain & Bailis, 2007). These benefits can be summarized as follows: 1) Participants were able to increase their social capital; students, teachers and community strengthened the existing social networks and developed new ones, especially on campus at the university, 2) Teachers and students were able to accomplish a task that was difficult to address alone; bringing the stories to publication and sharing them with public audiences would not have been possible without this collaborative partnership, 3) Community partners’ voices were respected; the publication and the nature of how the texts were reproduced in a multilingual format and with regards to the emergent English honored participants’ academic and sociocultural identities, 4) Resources, skills, and knowledge were shared; as a genuinely collaborative and mutually beneficial project, all participants learned with and from each other, and 5) Our institution of higher education was grounded and connected to community realities on varying levels; through the faculty-teacher relationship, through undergraduates’ participation and learning experience with high-school students, families and communities and subsequently, through the campus book tour, described below, and the university news coverage following the event. In addition to these gains, this project invites consideration about the impact generated by the book, a durable product that extended beyond those who told their stories and into the audiences and readers of other students, teachers, and general public.

As local communities and classroom demographics continue to change dramatically, we need to seek out meaningful ways to engage not only pre-service and in-service teachers with K-12 students, but also society at large. As faculty in the field of undergraduate ESL, we embrace a multicultural approach and have traditionally put particular emphasis on understanding our Latino population. However, if future educators are to develop the social and cultural capital, along with the linguistic and pedagogical principles required to teach diverse and underrepresented students, they need to be able to empathize and understand students’ backgrounds and lived experiences.

Engagement in collaborative community based learning, like the project described here, is one way to promote teacher and student development. In this regard, the book project through the storytelling, book readings, and subsequent coverage both in the local paper and university publications, as well as a conference presentation, all helped to transcend the immediate interests of the participants and extended an increased understanding and meaning into far broader communities. We all benefit from these undertakings and when we engage in and develop mechanisms that foster multilingual and multicultural dialogue and raise awareness, we shape new understandings of our community members and of ourselves. This reciprocal partnership and community based learning produced not only a book, a tangible product, but also a “material symbol for the new relationships” (Crabtree, 2008), that is relevant and insightful for current and future teachers, as well as community audiences.

For academics and others interested in developing similar community partnerships, be it a book project or other product, local schools and teachers are excellent starting points. Most are anxious for extra support and are looking for creative ways to engage and promote literacies and learning. For teachers and educators looking to partner with institutions of higher education and faculty, approach the colleges or units where you feel comfortable, ask for volunteers to visit your classroom or read with your students. Arrange a visit to the campus, get your students connected to college students. For all participants, try to begin where you have contacts, where you are most at ease and have some sense of the context. Visit frequently; get involved with the college, the school, the teachers, and their students. Build trust and respect. Ask questions. Identify individual and collective strengths and assets, as well as potential needs and concerns. Collaborate to determine the nature and form of the product: a book, a mural, a pamphlet, maybe even a performance. Where possible, connect new proposals to ongoing initiatives and projects. Collaboratively establish a goal and a plan with reciprocal benefits for all parties. But most of all, be prepared for the unexpected, for the new and inspiring stories that will inevitably re shape the experience for you and others.

The Story Beyond the Book

Although initially it seemed that the ultimate goal in this partnership was to produce the book,

this work and its impact does not end there. Soon after students received their copies of the book I met with Jessica. Moved with emotion, she explained how two refugee sisters had told her that their mother was brought to tears of joy when she saw their pictures and story in the book. Inspired by these powerful reactions, I began working with our campus library and others to coordinate an on site book reading with the teachers and students. A few weeks later, we hosted an evening reception and book launch in our majestic library.

The teachers arrived early with the students, who were excited yet nervous to be around the growing crowd of academics and college students. After a few introductory words, I turned the microphone over to Jessica, who with much pride and enthusiasm called on the students to come forward and read their stories. Shy at first, but with their confidence increasing after each applause, the fifteen students read excerpts from their texts and stories. Eventually, a young woman dressed in her colorful Hijab, a junior and recent refugee stepped forward, and in her best English read her poem that graces the back cover of the book.

I am Amina
 I wonder if I could help anyone who needs help?
 I hear people screaming for help
 I see sometime terrible things that I can't do anything about it
 I am dreamer
 I pretend that I'm a doctor or a helper
 I feel safe and happy
 I worry about my relatives
 I cry when I remember some of my parent happened to them
 I am student
 I understand bounds of troubles
 I say I can make it
 I dream about my future
 I try to help other
 I hope I'll reach my goals
 I am Amina as I always was
 I wonder why some people like to harm others
 I am Amina

The event was well attended and subsequently reported in the university campus newsletter, where Amina was quoted as saying that writing the book was therapeutic for herself, her classmates and their families, "We hope that once people read our stories, they will finally know and understand who we are."

Shortly after this event, the teachers, students and I were invited to make a special presentation at the local school district's Board of Education meeting. So impressed was the board that they guaranteed to put a copy of the book in every school library in the district. In the fall of the same year, the teachers and I presented our work at a state level education conference. Not long after the conference, I returned on one of my regular visits to Jessica's classroom. She greeted me with her usual warm smile and raised a pile of papers that she held in her hand.

"Students are asking, 'When can we publish another book?' They too want to see their stories in print!" I smiled and knew what we had to do. But that's a whole other story.

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