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Voices from the Field:

## Getting Past Our Inner Censor: Collective Storytelling as Pedagogy in a Polarized Media Environment

Yen Yen Jocelyn Woo

*Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Long Island University, Brookville, NY, USA*

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### Introduction

Interrogating the ideological content of media is an important dimension of media literacy. Yet, telling students they have to “think critically” is often ineffective. This is ineffective firstly because demanding critical thinking is itself a didactic approach antithetical to the critical thinking process, and secondly because in today’s public sphere, where ideological untruths get affirmed on multiple platforms, we are just as likely to encounter resistance, which can emerge in the form of immediate censoring if the approach is framed in a language that is perceived as coming from an opposing camp, or worse, cynicism.

In this article, I use my experience as both a teacher-educator and a filmmaker to discuss how collective storytelling can serve as a pedagogical tool for creating dialogue in an ideologically polarized media environment. By focusing on experience and resonance, collective storytelling may help to circumvent our inner censors and ideological biases, in order to build common ground for more reasoned discussion. Collective storytelling also helps to distill texts that may engage wider audiences, providing opportunities for teachers and students to shape public images and narratives of our reality.

### The Challenges of Teaching to be Critical

I have been teaching graduate level courses in curriculum development and the social foundations of education for several years. Like others in the media literacy education community, I am concerned with getting my students to be critical of ideological biases in the media.

I have found, however, that my intended curriculum is in constant negotiation with students’ immersion in broader political discourses of their cultural worlds (such as their choice of television stations). Often, I also get the impression that for some students, the raising of critical discourses on race and social justice fuels the stereotyped perception of liberal dominance in higher education. My students also tell me how they often skew their writing and class comments to accord with what they think their teachers’ own ideological biases might prefer, cynically choosing to suppress their own resistances in order to get a better grade.

There is also the assumption that by making our students and ourselves more aware of ideological biases in the media, we will somehow be less in their thrall. This is illusory. Donna Alvermann, Jennifer Moon, and Margaret Hagood (1999) remind us how students continue to take pleasure in popular cultural experiences, despite teachers’ desires for them to be critical of their ideological content, while Žižek (1999) reminds us of how ideology works in our world – we might “know” the truth, that we are following an “illusion”, but we continue to do so anyway (33). Distancing ourselves through a performance of critical thought may ironically aid even greater ideological control, because then we are able to assure ourselves that “We are not like that”. We also often embrace and consume ideas when they appeal to our dreams and desires, even when they are not fact-based, or worse, blatantly false (Duncombe 2007).

We can also see this behavior playing out in today’s highly polarized political landscape, for example, in the heated behavior during the town hall meetings on healthcare reform, where despite all evidence to the contrary, a Pew Research Center poll (2009) found that

47% of Republicans believe that the proposed health care legislation would introduce “death panels” that decide whether a critically ill patient should receive health services.

Ironically, thanks to the 24-hour news cycle and the Internet, we can access much more information than ever before, but not necessarily more thoughtful or truthful analyses. The constant demand for the most current updates explains why the news is often dominated by trivial matters, and why the most malicious commentators tend to garner the biggest audiences (Wasik 2009). The blogosphere, despite its democratic promise to expose us to diverse ideas, also entrenches us in our own prejudices as we flock to sites aligned with our own leanings (Sunstein 2009).

This state of affairs, where we choose to learn only things that are congruent with our pre-existing beliefs, constructs many barriers for teaching and learning – a process which Dewey (1938/1997) describes as encouraging an openness to new experiences and thoughts.

### **Teachers’ Anxieties About Technology**

I teach pre-service teachers in a university located in an affluent suburb that draws its student population from two counties, with school and residential districts distinctly separated by race, class and socioeconomic status. The majority of my students are White, with a few international, Latino, Black and Asian students. The students in my class range widely in age, experience, and motivation for teaching: there are students who are fresh out of college exploring if they like teaching; accountants, lawyers, and Wall Street brokers attempting a career change; stay-at-home moms with several kids who are finally finding time to go back to school; and single moms working full-time while trying to go to school part-time. Most of my students do not see themselves as “political”, or as the “agents of change” that progressive educators valorize.

In my classes, I encourage my students to develop an identity as a professional educator with the knowledge of the various forces at work in the field of education, and the ability to create counter-narratives in publicly accessible forms (eg. blogs and podcasts), so that they can participate in shaping the public sphere themselves.

In the course of my experience, however, I have noticed the consistent emergence of certain anxieties about technology.

First, some students experience anxiety over keeping up with rapidly changing technologies, an unending chain of “things” to be learned that are not only external to their lives, but probably obsolete as soon as they have been mastered. Just as some of my students have figured out PowerPoint and how to use the Smart Board, I am asking them to blog and make podcasts. Second, there are anxieties over how new technologies are displacing what is cherished about traditional literacies. My students bemoan the demise of good grammar, penmanship, accurate spelling, and the rampant use of acronyms. Third, there are panics over violence and sex in the media, online predators, pornography, and cyberbullying.

Compounding my students’ unease is the media’s increasing tilt towards the sensational, compelling audiences to take up simplistic positions, usually of partisan outrage (Wasik 2009). For example, every semester, several students will invariably enter my classroom harboring problematic assumptions about public education that they have learned from the public sphere, assumptions which often contradict what they actually see when we go on school visits, and which break down upon deeper interrogation. These impressions include the dangers and dinginess of inner city public schools, of bilingual education as pandering to “those people” who “refuse” to learn English, and why public schools should be closed because they are allegedly failing children.

Amidst such a milieu of division, distraction, and disquiet, the challenge for media literacy educators goes beyond the teaching of a critical stance towards the ideological content of media. It is also about creating opportunities to experience what we all share in common, in order to foster reasoned, reasonable and substantial dialogue, and therefore facilitate actual learning.

### **Collective Storytelling: An Introduction**

I have found collective storytelling to be a process that can (1) disrupt our compulsion for quick-but-simplistic data; (2) generate resonance between storyteller and listener; and (3) amongst storytellers, disable the labels that too often blinker our vision.

I first came across collective storytelling through Frigga Haug’s work (1999) on collective memory. Haug gathered groups of individuals who shared their stories of female socialization with each other, with each person’s story serving as a trigger for the next person’s story. As the individuals found points of com-

monality and difference, the collective stories began to take on a larger aspect: they revealed the broader conditions of the group's lives. Their collective stories then formed texts which resonated beyond the group, as they evoked responses from readers of the study who might say, "Yes, my life was like that too", or "No, my life was not like that." This pedagogical process is very similar to what Freire (1970) describes as critical pedagogy, where individuals and groups engage in a dialogue about the conditions and limitations of their own lives when presented with concrete images reflecting their lived realities.

An important facet of collective storytelling is its implicit consideration of ambiguities, which undercuts our tendency to reach for easy but often shallow characterizations. I discovered this quality in a class I took during my doctoral studies, titled "Writing and Subjectification", led by Bronwyn Davies. Like Haug's work, the class got us to explore writing collective stories and poems in groups, using personal stories and data that we collected from our research. It became apparent during analysis of our class work, that unconsciously or consciously, we omit or censor certain perspectives merely through our choice of language or selection of data during the presentation of our research. Professor Davies then made us look deliberately for ambiguities in the data. So, for example, if I found a narrative to be creating a singular impression, I would re-examine the interview transcripts to look for contradictions that I might have missed. In employing these methods in the writing of my doctoral dissertation, I was struck by how much more nuanced and less judgmental my analyses became, compared to earlier drafts.

### **Collective Storytelling:**

#### **Inspiration and Experimentation**

My dissertation was largely about the discourses that shape young people's hopes and dreams in my home country of Singapore and in New York City, where I currently live. Through in-depth interviews and examining participants' photographs of their own lives, an overarching narrative emerged about the Singaporean participants: the way they evaluate their life paths and those of others is very much dominated by the notion of material success – specifically, a person is successful only if they acquire the so-called '5C's' that constitute success in Singapore: cash, car, condominium, country club, and credit card. It was, however, not an explicit ideology, but one that insinuated itself into people's minds through the complex interaction of guilt

and achievement, inclusion and exclusion, discourses in the family and the education system, and the broader system of rewards and punishment.

I was struck by how pervasive and insidious this orientation was, and felt it was important to generate a dialogue with a wider audience – wider than the scant few who might read the journal articles and book chapters I had written. How might I be able to communicate not just with academics but also with the people whom my study was about? Could I do it in a way that could also represent the complex interplay of emotions, images, sounds, and relationships that emerged in the research?

I decided to try a feature film. By the time I completed the dissertation, I had already been experimenting with different platforms of mass communication (print, web, and video). The experimentation convinced me that as teachers, our understanding of pedagogy has a lot to offer in the creation of various media texts. We can be "engaged public intellectuals" (Giroux 2004) by shaping the images, discourses and narratives that the public accesses. The challenge was to use the pedagogical process I had found so transformative in my research – using collective stories based on lived realities to move from familiar ways of thinking and judging to new perspectives – and channel it into a mass medium.

Collective storytelling informed key aspects of the process. In terms of screenwriting, my writing partner and I re-read the dissertation data, and shared with each other any stories that they triggered, whether to do with ourselves or with people we knew or had heard of. We wrote each story down on index cards, and then sorted, selected and conflated them to form the basic material for the plot, characters, and dialogue in the film. When it came to plot and character, we consciously looked for ambiguities or disconfirming character traits and motivations so that there were no good or bad characters, but rather, people who make understandable, if flawed decisions.

More collective storytelling took place in the revisions of the screenplay as readers were asked not just for feedback, but also to share their own stories that the screenplay triggered for them. Rehearsals with the actors also involved further rounds of collective storytelling, as we would discuss any personal stories that the screenplay made them recall. We felt the actors, too, needed to "see" the characters they were playing as nuanced individuals, so that they are not mere caricatures or mouthpieces for a particular opinion, but have real

world analogues that audiences would be able to recognize. The screenplay was therefore a living text as it went through multiple rounds of storytelling with each revision.

The resulting film was *Singapore Dreaming*, a 105-minute narrative feature film tracing an ordinary Singaporean family's life during a period of transition in the country, inspired by films such as Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) and Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland* (1999). Telling the story in the medium of film allowed me to design the details of the context so that audiences would immediately be located in the quotidian aspects of this family's life, from the sounds of markets and traffic, to the theme song. These textures were aimed at helping audiences connect with the film not only at the intellectual level, but also the levels of emotion, sight and sound. The goal was to immerse the audience in the story and allow them to recognize themselves in the characters, rather than preach any themes to them.



The film premiered in Singapore and has traveled to many film festivals, TV screens and video-pirate web sites in the world. To my immense surprise, the film won the Montblanc New Screenwriters Award at one of Europe's most prestigious film festivals, the San Sebastian International Film Festival, as well as the Audience Award for Narrative Feature at the Asian-American International Film Festival in New York, and also, the Best Asian Film Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival in Japan.

More gratifying for my teacher-self, however, is that the collective storytelling process seems to have generated resonance with the audience and opportunities for dialogue, which was my original intention. For example, in the blogosphere, audiences specifically mentioned how the movie helped them reflect on their own lives. A sampling of the comments scattered through disparate websites include: "This movie has left me with many thoughts and questions about life in Singapore" (Lim 2006), and "The movie was a very accurate and honest depiction of life in Singapore. It was so honest that it is painful and disturbing... there was a scene... that shook me up" (Paladin 2006). Meanwhile, when I have had the opportunity of discussing the film with audiences, they invariably compared their own lives to those of the film's characters, thus creating further rounds of storytelling. For instance, at a post-screening discussion at a university, a Singaporean undergraduate asked if audiences had responded to the film differently, based on their class (personal communication, May 8, 2007), because his girlfriend (who came from a wealthy family) thought it was depressing, while he (who had grown up in public housing) thought it simply reflected his life. We then discussed why these divergent views existed, and how a society that presumes meritocracy and mobility of the classes might now have these big divisions in income and life worlds. As the discussion invariably bumped up against personal and individual experiences, it was very difficult to adhere to partisan positions. Context always complicates dogma. As a progressive teacher, these conversations – where the participants pause and question rather than jump to judgment – were precisely the types I had hoped for.

### Collective Storytelling in the Classroom

I believe that collective storytelling can be useful for teachers in at least two significant ways. First, collective storytelling defuses the simplistic characterizations imposed by our political context and the media, regardless of their meanings. I have learned, for instance, not to preach from within the seemingly irreconcilable categories of liberal/conservative, etc., but to draw out individual stories – whether of education, of childhood, of coping with grief – and to dare each other to listen to the nuances in the stories, and the moments when our narratives do not fall neatly into our espoused camps. By doing so, I find that most students are will-

ing to disarm their inner censor, and look at issues and each other in a much more open way. It has also helped me rethink my first impressions of my students.

For example, in a recent curriculum development class that I taught with pre-service teachers, we had read Jonathan Silin's work on teaching young children about topics such as death and HIV/AIDS (see Silin 1995). Several students objected to discussing death in their classrooms, citing sensitivity, religion, protecting the innocence of children, that these things do not happen to "our" children, and that "values" should be the purview of parents, not teachers. Just as the discussion was going only in one direction, a student started recounting how he had been working in the World Trade Center until September 10th, but relocated to new offices on September 11th. He spoke about how he and his colleagues just could not talk about their close call, choosing to suppress their emotions when they returned to work. His story triggered others in the classroom. The student sitting next to him recounted how his father had died in the Towers on 9/11, while another student said her brother had just been killed while serving in the military in Iraq. With these stories, our relationship with each other was transformed, and when we returned to talking about death in the curriculum, the discussion became much more nuanced. There was a greater acceptance of death as a reality that affects everyone, including the children in our classrooms. Telling our stories helped us re-read our initial judgments more critically, and relate to each other's humanity rather than respond simply to each other's positions.

Second, my experience with collective storytelling in film tells me that ultimately, all media is about telling human stories, and if teachers and students can tell their own stories, they can also participate in and influence the media. If teachers and students feel compelled to share their stories, then the fear of learning a new technology to achieve that is significantly ameliorated.

### Conclusion

In today's overwrought and polarized media and political climate, it is crucial to revive the mindset that prizes openness to new ideas and perspectives. To overcome the barriers we construct in our heads, we need to value people as multifaceted beings, and one of the best ways of doing that is to listen and give voice to their stories. Collective storytelling in the classroom and in media-making is one way to build rapport and

resonance with each other. Hopefully, it will lead to the kind of critical thinking we know is important for democracy.

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