

# Stories and Education: A Study of Healing Through the Arts

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**Abstract:** *Trauma is one of the most pervasive issues students face globally on a day-to-day basis. Whether it be divorce, abuse, or violence in or outside of the home, children bear more than they ought to and are often ill-equipped to cope with the devastating situations they face. With the rise of the technological era there is an alarming sparsity of authenticity and community in today’s world. Educators everywhere are fulfilling the role of counselors, parents, and first-responders. Time and time again, studies have shown that true, authentic community is imperative to healing from trauma. There are many tools educators can use to build this kind of community in their classrooms, however none as potent or effective as the skill set of authentic storytelling.*

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## 1. Introduction

FOR the purpose of this essay, I will borrow the definition of community from the article “Key Roles of Community Connectedness in Healing from Trauma” by Katie Schultz, Chiara Sabina, Lauren Cattaneo, and Josephine Serrata: “any group with which one feels connected” (Cattaneo, Sabina, Schultz & Serrata, 2016). I define trauma as: any dysfunction that directly disrupts a person’s status of well-being. This essay explores the reasons authentic storytelling should be used in any and all classrooms, practical and safe steps to maintain healthy boundaries with students while being authentic, and an observational study conducted by the author in her own classrooms while using the authentic storytelling method.

## 2. Defining Authentic Storytelling And Its Function

### 2.1. What is Authentic Storytelling?

For the purpose of this essay, authentic storytelling is defined as educators sharing personal experiences to build community within their classrooms and to raise engagement in classroom material. Educators can use both their own experience, and the experience of other authentic storytellers to successfully engage students in community building. I define authentic as speaking honestly and openly (with regards to appropriate boundaries) when discussing personal experiences within the classroom.

### 2.2. The Function of Authentic Storytelling

The function of authentic storytelling is twofold within an educational setting. Authentic storytelling increases student engagement and builds classroom community. These two functions, at their roots, are deeply connected. Storytelling builds community. Positive, appropriate relationships with one’s students increases classroom engagement. However, it can be argued that an increase in classroom engagement from authentic storytelling is not simply an effect of building community. It is an effect of being inspired by real-life stories of how the course material impacts and engages with the world outside of the classroom.

Numerous studies have shown that motivation is a key factor in student learning. If students are not intrinsically motivated to learn the material, students have a much lower rate of success (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). One of the most effective actions to increase intrinsic motivation in students is to discuss how their coursework connects to the real-world. In his article, “How Do I Motivate My Students” Mekiva Callahan, an educator of education at the University of Houston states,

“By connecting the material to real-world experiences or their educational goals, either through examples or in class activities, you will deepen their understanding of the material and allow the students to see the value of what they are learning” (Callahan, 2010).

Authentic stories about how the course material has influenced the educator’s life, and how it might impact the students’ lives, is a powerful tool. Authentic stories don’t simply build community in the classroom but also build engagement with the coursework.

Authentic storytelling does not only build engagement, but builds a safe, vulnerable environment for students to connect in community. Paul Thomas, an author for the National Library of Medicine, conducted a research study about vulnerability and mental health in healthcare professionals. He concludes:

“Creating ‘safe spaces’ where health workers can share poetry, images and personal stories with other good and equally imperfect human beings helps to unlock the defenses we use to guard or deny our vulnerability” (Thomas 2016).

Essentially, vulnerability in literature, leadership, and peers helps individuals to be vulnerable themselves, face their hardships, and build the essential, authentic community they need to heal and flourish. Whether it be healthcare or education, vulnerability has been shown in multiple studies to help individuals face shame, find and utilize the help they need to heal, and promote mental health and overall well-being (Brown 2007). By sharing authentic stories, teachers set the important precedent that speaking about difficult situations is not only allowed, but a healthy way to cope with devastating circumstances.

### **3. Authenticity and Healthy Student Teacher Boundaries**

One of the challenges teachers may face while discussing their authentic experiences with their classroom is crossing or blurring important boundary lines to maintain healthy, safe, and productive relationships with their students. There are several avenues to avoid this fatal mistake.

For example, a teacher would be wise not to discuss their authentic and vulnerable stories with students one on one. Doing so would create a dangerous situation and precedent for that student. Even if that teacher was not a predator, students should not be in the habit of having their teachers discuss personal stories with them one on one. Educators should share their experiences with their entire classroom, not individual students. Otherwise, teachers may create inappropriate bonds with individual students. (After all, “one in ten children experience sexual misconduct by a school official before graduating high school” [Innocent Lives Foundation].) No student should be treated with anything less than professional behavior. Teachers should not share anything with an individual student that they would be uncomfortable sharing with their entire class.

Educators should never share their experiences with their students in order to fulfill their own emotional needs. Teachers need community outside of their classroom to find solace and healing. The only purpose of an educator sharing personal stories with their students should be to guide their students to share their own burdens. The student teacher relationship should always go one way. Students can come to teachers with their trauma, heartache, and difficult circumstances to find healing and solace. Educators should never go to their students to

find this kind of community. The needs of the educator must always be addressed outside of the classroom. Any other action is immoral and violates the educator's professional relationship with his or her student.

The only circumstance a teacher should discuss their story with students one on one is if a student asks to hear more details, and even then, educators should not share anything with that individual student that they would not share with an entire classroom. If a student tells a teacher about their parents' divorce, a professional educator would never burden that student with stories of their own divorce. Teachers ought to strive to serve and help students with all circumstances of life. Teachers should never expect or seek out students to serve and help them.

## 4. Observational Study

### 4.1. The Context

I observed the effects of authentic storytelling in an educational setting during my student teaching placement with four classes of freshman students. I was not a popular student teacher. I student taught with one of the most talented educators I had ever interacted with, and soon discovered that replacing a talented educator, even for a nine-week term, can be a difficult endeavor. I also noted that I had more difficulty in building relationships with freshman high schoolers than I had with middle schoolers. Freshmen were aloof, and, unlike seventh graders, not excited at all to speak with me. I found the placement both daunting and challenging in ways I did not foresee. The unit was a three-week study of research, where students identified a problem, and investigated how that problem could be addressed in their own communities. Students were not enthusiastic to tackle this research paper. When, on the launch day of the unit, I asked them to give words that came to mind when they heard the term research, the responses included: *boring*, *snooze fest*, *the worst*, and, my personal favorite, *depression*.

### 4.2. The Story

The story that I shared with my classes on the launch day of our research project was one of the most painful experiences of my life. I asked my supervisor and my co-teacher for permission to share it with my students before I included it in my unit. With their blessing, I told them about my younger brother, who I'll refer to as David throughout this essay. Several years ago, when I was about fifteen years old, I had a conversation with Dave. At the time, he would have been eleven years old. I told him that if there was ever a terrible car accident, and one of us had to be paralyzed, I hoped it would be me, because I could sit and read but David couldn't sit down to do anything. I can't remember what prompted this discussion with David, but I do remember his response.

"Thank you, Fritz. I would never want you to be paralyzed, but I'm glad you say that, because I think if I ever became paralyzed, I would just commit suicide."

Five years later, David and his friend (pseudonym Luke) drove through the night so they could make it to Nebraska before the interstates closed due to an impending storm. They wanted to be in the state for the opening of deer season. Around two in the morning on December 25th, Luke's mother called my parents in a panic. There had been a terrible car accident. It seemed likely that David would not make it. My parents rushed to the hospital. If David survived, he would be paralyzed from the waist down with a complete spinal cord severance. It was later discovered that Luke had overcorrected while driving, rolling the car four times, and David was ejected out of the front windshield at eighty miles an hour. It was a true miracle that David survived.

As distraught as I was about my younger brother's paralysis, I was also distraught for Luke. I could not imagine what it was like to be in his position. I decided to visit him along with one of our family friends. When we approached his room in the emergency department, his mother came out of the door. She had clearly been crying. She informed us that she had just told Luke about David's paralysis and asked if we would be willing to wait a few minutes before we spoke with him. While we waited, I prayed and pondered about what I should tell

Luke. I had researched trauma and resilience extensively in my undergraduate career and discovered that situations do not define success. Your response to the situation does. We waited for about an hour, and then Luke's mother approached us in the waiting room and said that he wanted to talk to me alone.

I walked into his room, sat down, and waited a moment to see if he wanted to say anything.

Eventually, I said, "This is not the end of David's life."

"Fritz, we talked about it. And he told me that if he was ever paralyzed it would be the end of his life."

At this moment, I would normally pause and ask my students, "Isn't that weird? That he told two separate people on separate occasions that he would commit suicide if he was ever paralyzed?"

My students, of course, would silently nod, in respectful shock, and I would continue.

"I know he told you that. He told me the same thing. But he's wrong. It won't be the end of his life. I took a class in college about trauma and disabilities, and every research study conducted about suffering and disabilities concluded that it's not about what happens to you. It's how you deal with it. And David is not the kind of kid to let this define him. It'll be hard for a really long time, but he'll get through this. It's who he is. And I don't know if you believe in God or not, but I do, and I know that God loves me enough to do what's absolutely best for my family. Always." And then we prayed.

I told my students that Luke's father later informed me that that conversation was imperative to Luke in his early stages of grief, and it's because I knew the research that I was able to have that conversation.

### **4.3. Results and Conclusion**

There were several positive responses from my students because of this story, both short and long term. Suddenly, students were staying after class to tell me their stories: bus accidents, deaths in their families, divorce. Students were asking if they could write two research papers instead of one because they had so many subjects they wanted to investigate. I had to come up with an extra credit assignment so students could write a paper about one subject and present a PowerPoint to their peers about the other subject that interested them.

Not only were students more motivated to research and write, but my authentic storytelling also gave them the safety to share their difficult circumstances with me. Some students wrote about sexual assault. Others wrote about drug use and suicide. I had one student pull me aside at the end of class, apologize for missing a week, lift his sleeves up to show me the cuts on his wrist, and told me he had tried to commit suicide and was hospitalized.

"I used to be free," he said, "and now I need drugs to make me free. I just wanted out." He wrote his paper on the dangers of drug use.

My authentic storytelling changed the tone of the assignment. I had students write passionately about dance, school policy, the dark internet, basketball, and the Vietnam war.

These students were not particularly thrilled to have me as their teacher. My co-teacher was an institution at her school and missing nine weeks of instruction from her was an excruciating experience for many of my students. However, I was still able to build meaningful community because I decided to share honestly about my own experiences. Doing so let my students share their experiences with me and their classmates. This is the kind of healing community that I believe every educator should strive to build in their classroom. One of the most effective tools I have found in this endeavor is authentic storytelling.

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