Engaging Family Studies Students: Using a Self-Narrative to Improve One's Teaching

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ABSTRACT. The process of teaching students in family studies courses presents unique challenges. With a conceptual framework that utilized a s*elf-narrative* process of collecting and analyzing student engagement during a family management theory course, I was able to construct particularizing questions to explore problematic experiences with teaching. Insights into student needs were documented using research found in a scholarly search of literature that later became the basis of critical reflection of personally held beliefs. Insights from research on characteristics of millennial students, meta programme, and Baumrind's parenting styles are presented.

Introduction

Whenever I have participated in a Lilly Conference on Teaching, it is common to hear faculty from other disciplines comment on how easy it must be to teach students in family studies. Those of us in the family sciences believe that this is not true. Though students tell us they are drawn to our classes and find them to be interesting and applicable to real life, they also complain about theory within these courses as being difficult, dull, and different from real world experiences. As such, though family studies faculty may appear to have an advantage with engaging students in class, they experience the same challenges as faculty across all disciplines. In particular, millennial students in today's classroom are insisting that teaching be shaped to their expectations — a move increasingly supported by administrations in most universities. Progressively more universities are shifting from traditional models of hierarchal knowledge to that of business models focusing on delivery of consumer service with knowledge as a commodity (McGlynn, 2007).

With this paradigmatic shift to student-centered education comes pressure to enhance one's teaching. There are many supports to assist faculty with developing a scholarship of teaching and learning, yet faculty often struggle with finding the time and confidence to risk the emotional turbulence of self-evaluation with the critical reflection necessary to change how one teaches (Palmer, 1998; Villar & Alegre, 2006). This article is about a process that I implemented to assess my teaching abilities while pursuing a scholarship of teaching and learning using the question, *How well am I able to engage students in the classroom*?

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I constructed a qualitative study that builds a process of inquiry using data collected from my observation of student engagement in a family management theory class. Then, using a self-narrative as the theoretical framework for data collection and analysis, I explored the findings using emerging research on teaching and learning and with my application using parenting style theory.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Why is it important to evaluate our teaching? Aside from the obvious demands of excellence in teaching for tenure and promotion, reflective teaching is essential if we are to instill interest and enthusiasm in our next generation of family service workers and scholars. There is a great deal of research by cognitive psychologists on what constitutes good teaching telling us that most students prefer constructivist approaches utilizing experiential activities, collaborative assignments and structured lectures with creative application processes (Major & Palmer, 2006; Mann, 1994). Much of this information is supported by student opinion surveys (SOS) that are conducted at the end of each semester. Student opinion surveys are preferred instruments for quick data collection by universities. Though there is ample research that supports these as being accurate measures of student opinions, there is considerable skepticism as to their effectiveness of measuring anything beyond a faculty member's level of student likeability (Brown, 2004; Malikow, 2007). Wildman, et. al. (2000), found that faculty have difficulty using student opinion surveys as a tool to improve teaching, making the likelihood of their intended use, improving teaching, low. In contrast, most faculty report a desire to improve their teaching, but only those who engaged in reflective practice on their teaching report being able to make adjustments in style and process (Wildman, et. al., 2000).

In the design of this study, I utilized a constructivist framework that uses reflective practice as the means of documenting student interests as a process of learning. For the purpose of this study, student engagement was used as an indicator of effective teaching strategy and student learning. The general question guiding the research was, *How well am I able to engage students in the classroom*? Since the process of critical reflection requires a source of data from my teaching, I chose to use a self-narrative as the process for data collection.

Self-narrative as a Three-Step Story Model

The participants in this study were enrolled in a third-year family studies course in family resource management. Based on the principles of narrative inquiry, I used a self-narrative as the process of collecting data from each class meeting for reflecting on the experiences of student engagement. The self-narrative process uses a three-step story model to capture impressions of student activity that are recorded as narrative stories. Rosiek & Atkinson (2005) explain the three-step story model as containing *cover stories*, *secret stories*, and *sacred stories* as reflective steps in the self-narrative. Cover stories capture the intent by outlining the design of the course and how it will be taught. In the construction of the cover story, preparation began with clear intention of monitoring the activities and experiences that would occur throughout the semester. Objectives, activities, and teaching strategies were organized and tracked through the use of the course syllabus and lesson outlines.

Throughout the term, notes were recorded from experiences in the classroom and later used to develop secret stories. Secret stories are the reflective exploration of my perceptions of what happened in the classroom. Secret stories documented the experiences by recording anecdotes

perceptions, and understandings while noting questions and concerns. This information later became the data for analysis from which I developed two particularizing questions: *What personal student factors might contribute to student non-engagement?* And *What specific teaching behaviors encourage student engagement or contribute to students not engaging?* Though there could have been many additional questions for the literature search, I viewed these questions as offering the most insight into my experiences and concerns. These questions guided the literature search of scholarly publications, conference proceedings, and discussions within academic learning communities.

The evaluation of teaching strategies and critical reflection of the classroom experience using outside knowledge became *sacred stories*, in that they explored the deeper meanings and experiences from the classroom that led to new insights into student behavior and the congruence or incongruence with my teaching strategies. The current article is the creation of the sacred story in that it represents the story of the experience illuminated by the research scholarship of others.

Procedure

With the conceptual framework clarified, the first step in the self-narrative was creating the *cover story.* The cover story is the syllabus that contains an outline of the course activities, lectures, readings, and assessments. Since I wanted to evaluate my current teaching, I decided to design this syllabus using lectures, activities, and assessments similar to those from the previous semester with the addition of one set of materials that I had worked on during the past two years. This enabled me to focus on current processes of teaching and not spend time creating new activities. With an expanded course content matrix to accommodate the weekly collections of experiences and perceptions, I identified and outlined content, objectives, and assessments. I later expanded notes made following class throughout the semester in secret stories through a self-reflection journal. The course content notes took several minutes following each class meeting, while the self-reflection journal took 15 to 20 minutes each week.

At the conclusion of the semester, I stepped away from the notes and the reflection journal for several weeks as a means of bracketing the experience. When I returned to the material, I read through all of it several times and then worked through it making notes using the qualitative technique of constant comparative to identify recurring themes, patterns, and exceptions of behaviors, concerns, and insights.

Following analysis of the notes and reflection journal, I began a scholarly search of peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings on student learning and academic teaching to expand on what the classroom experience had revealed. The particularizing questions guided the research with the findings assimilated with the secret story experiences to create the informed sacred story that would be used to inform future practice. I assembled a comprehensive self-narrative with all three levels of the constructed self-narrative and presented it to peers for review, who held similar positions at other universities. I later presented and discussed at the National Conference of Teaching Family Science (Bailey, 2007). The final self-narrative document encompassed 75 pages of data that includes documentation of preparation, process, and analysis.

Results

In response to the research question that guided the research: *How well am I able to engage students in the classroom?*, my observations and secret stories suggest that students are well-engaged in most of the classes. As one secret story suggests, the more novel the activity, the more likely students are engaged. For example:

> *Secret Story:* Each semester I try to come up with a novel way to help students meet other people in class. With 40+ students in class, we are neither a "big" or a "small" class but that awkward in-between. I have learned that they may go through the entire semester and never know another person. This semester I did *speed dating* to find partners for small groups. Before beginning they reflected on what they like in people with whom they have had positive small group experiences and what they disliked. Then they had to write three questions that would help them identify these qualities [in others]. The process worked well and the spirit in the class was high. Comments were great and the activity seemed to really mix the students up. This upbeat way to start the course is energizing. I think it encourages the students to come and gives them a sense of ownership for who they will be working with this semester.

Though there was substantial evidence of student engagement, in some classes there were indications of students being apathetic in specific class meetings, large group discussions, lectures and small group activities. Predominant factors associated with non-engagement appeared to center on reading the textbook. In many instances, it was easy to identify who had read the textbook. In one secret story reflection, I noted:

> *Secret Story:* Students seemed to enjoy the movie and easily made connection when asked to describe incidents from their family that illustrate the different concepts and ideas from the lecture. It was very apparent as I walked around the small groups that a few students didn't really engage in the process because they had not read the book. I asked the class in general what they thought of the text and a couple of them said it was hard to read. . . I have heard students in the past state that the book was boring but no one has ever said it was too hard. I have to think that the students who said that have not even opened the book yet!

This same theme reappeared a few weeks later:

> *Secret Story:* It always surprises me how the students like playing with the different decision models. [But] this has become another class where reading the textbook, or lack thereof, stands out. Though I briefly go over the models in a mini-lecture, they really have to have read the book to do the activity. Those who have read are able to quickly get on-task and complete the assignment of applying complain, struggle with getting on-task and inaccurately complete the assignment. Here it [would be] easy to feel encouraged by those who enjoy working with the models but the negative rumbling is annoying.

Knowing that the negative rumblings of a few students can quickly spread and create dissent in students who are on-task and engaged makes it important to understand what factors may be contributing to non-engagement. According to McGlynn (2005), millennials may be best viewed as nontraditional students. Though they may fall within the typical age range of college students,

19 to 25 year olds, they have lifestyles that align more with what was once considered more typical of older students. Many are working full-time, are financially independent, are in debt, and have dependents such as a partner or child. These students have experienced a life of success, where they have received recognition for multiple achievements and may never have received critical assessment of their work. They expect to do well and believe that just showing up is enough for success. These students want to be engaged and look to the professor to invite them into a learning process built on interesting and collaborative activities.

The pedagogical process of teaching through experiential activities has been recognized as essential in today's classroom. However, class activities must be grounded in pedagogical content knowledge or the students get lost in the experience (Margolinas, Coulange & Bessot, 2005). Learning theories reinforce the scaffolding process by which new information is processed in relationship to previous knowledge. When students fail to complete assigned reading prior to class, they struggle with understanding the purpose or the process of in-class activities. They often are uninvolved, confused, unable to follow direction, and at worst complain and erode the learning experience for others.

Comments regarding the textbook being too hard are troublesome in that it could indicate significant reading deficiencies. However, it may more accurately reflect a preferred learning style or meta programme. Brown (2004) found that there is a direct link to students' positive evaluation of teachers who teach in ways that align with their own learning style preference. Brown referred to this as a *meta programme* as it reflects the programmed way in which students learn as developed from the ways that they think. Teaching strategies such as assigned reading, lecture, small group discussions, and such reflect the teacher's own meta programme. Students who read assignments may experience higher congruence between their meta programme and that of their professor. Not reading, as a reflection of their own meta programmes, may be a rejection of a learning style they personally do not like. Knowing there is variety across campus with some professors lecturing from the textbooks, some not using textbooks, and others who prefer students to read the text before class with no lecture material coming from assigned readings, allows for students to find some professors who match their meta programmes. However, when they encounter someone who does not, they may experience anxiety and resentment (Brown, 2004) that is later acted out in the classroom through disruptive behaviors.

I noted concern with student disruptions in one secret story reflection following what I had considered to be a very strong lecture and in-class activity.

> *Secret Story:* This [Disordered Communication] lecture has been 2 years in the making. [It is a topic in which] I have a lot of interest and have worked on during semester breaks for the past two years. It is a combination of family communication theories that have video clips from several TV shows to illustrate the concepts. I was really excited about the material but it feels like it just flopped. Though there were some students who really engaged, there were too many who seemed to just not care. This is the first semester where students are bringing laptops to class and emailing or instant messaging. Also, this is the first semester I have students text messaging in class. I hate that I might have to go over and ask them to stop doing things like this. I think I will have to say something in the syllabus about this being rude. But, it amazes me that they can't see how this is rude.

This experience led to a second particularizing question, *What specific behaviors encourage student engagement or contribute to students not engaging*? Insight into this question came

through reflection on the inattentive behaviors of students attending to private communications rather than joining in with the class. While teaching students using Bloom's taxonomy of *Affective Domains,* Malikow (2006) found that students often resisted engaging with processes that generated emotional feelings or contradict their personal experiences. Since the content of the disordered communication lecture was experiential, it may have triggered emotional reactions that led to a need for connecting with someone as a means of disbursing discomfort.

The ability to have instant connections may play an important role with emotionally stabilizing college students, but the distraction of cell-phone instant messaging causes problems in establishing a collaborative working relationship with students in the large class as well as in their small groups. My typical response would be to address it in the course syllabus as unacceptable behavior and call attention to it during the first class meeting. Like many of my peers, this section of my course syllabus grows longer with new concerns and prohibitions tacked on each semester based on a previous semester's experiences.

An unexpected insight into teaching came in relation to classroom management and course syllabi. Research on the scholarship of teaching and learning appears to dismiss using a syllabus for providing classroom rules and consequences. Using syllabi in combination with teaching practices, Walker (2008) found correlations between Baumrind's parenting models and teaching styles. She found that the most academically and socially competent students had teachers who operated in authoritative styles that emphasized consistency in classroom management and practice, along with autonomy and personal interest in students. In contrast, students with authoritarian teachers those who present rules, regulations and penalties in their syllabi, often felt antagonistic in the classroom. Permissive teachers had students who were creative-self-starters but also frustrated students struggling with grade insecurity. Students who react to authoritarian teaching styles engage in power struggles, similar to children acting in passive aggressive mannerisms while those students with permissive professors may be subjected to anxiety, not evidenced in the classroom, but evidenced in student opinion surveys.

Further examination of my teaching and student engagement led to additional insights. What messages was I giving in the syllabus and in the opening session of the course? This thinking appears counterintuitive to the conventional wisdom that encourages teachers to outline the rules and start tough. Though my syllabus presents behavior expectations early on, I do not see myself as authoritarian. There were no overt confrontational power struggles in class; however, the text and instant messenger activity could be viewed as noncompliance or passive aggressive power struggle. It is also possible that a more insidious form of power struggle might be student displays of boredom, apathy, or burnout. At times there were moments when it felt like one or two students were personally challenging me to get them involved. They were showing up to class because of the promise of in-class activity points, but they were hell-bent on not becoming involved. This became more challenging at the end of the semester, as seen in the secret stories from the closing weeks.

> *Secret Story:* How do we motivate students as we reach the last part of the semester? The case studies are beginning to show some wear on the students. I can tell that they are getting tired or overburdened and they are not applying themselves as much to this class. Since they had started so strong some must think they can afford to slack a bit. . . .I can understand how the students feel, I am tired too. If we could front-load the course this might make things easier but so much of what we do in this class is cumulative knowledge and they do not have this in the first half of the semester. I keep thinking there

> has to be a way to work with students that can keep them engaged throughout the semester but I remember from experience that this is tough. Even with my best professors I found myself fading at the end of the semester.

I also noted evidence of this in small group activities.

> *Secret Story:* This semester small group facilitation was a graded activity rather than have large group or whole class presentations. I did this because class presentations are usually awful. Most of them are [poorly done] and painful to watch. They have not been a good use of class time and likely do not further most students in their learning. Though there were strong guidelines and an outlined rubric for grading, students seem to do just enough to check off the boxes but they do not apply their spirit. I decided that half-hearted work is not a good use of class time and I do not want to sit through those presentations again. Unfortunately, even in these small groups I am seeing the same thing- half-hearted and poorly presented. Not everyone, but enough to make it questionable as to its worthiness.

Walker (2008) found that those teachers, who were high on *demandingness*, meaning they hold high expectations and clearly outline these to their students, achieve the best results from their students. I understood that this might have implications for how information in the syllabus and assignments are received. Both the syllabus and assignment instructions contain sections describing behavior with a focus on negative or unacceptable behavior and work. According to Walker, this would be interpreted as authoritarian, with an emphasis on demandingness and a disregard for students' personal needs. In addition, the detailed scope of grading rubrics reinforce the experience of authoritarian parenting. Such perceptions would contribute to an atmosphere of noncompliance even in the presence of the most engaging in-class activity.

Discussion

The process of collecting data on one's teaching and the activity observed in the classroom created a pool of data to study and led to critical reflection. More organized and objective than "thinking back and trying to remember," collecting data allowed a more systematic way of assessing my teaching. Scholarship of teaching, learning, student reading, and classroom apathy provided insights into factors that may be influencing classroom behavior. The creation of the three-story process in the self-narrative provided insights into my teaching and the overall goal of engaging students in the learning process. By documenting my experiences over the course of one semester, I was able to identify specific instances of good engagement and contrast these with instances where students seemed unable to engage in the classroom learning process. As a result, there are balances in the critical reflection for both the good and the not so good. Further, though limited, the process appropriately fits a grounded research model aimed to explain the past, understand the present, and predict the future.

In this study, the question that guided the process of the self-narrative was *How well am I able to engage students in the classroom?* What I learned is that overall, student engagement with in-class activities has several levels of consideration. Primary is the level of planning and creativity that I put into class activities. Those activities that are most novel and applicable to students' life experiences are most engaging. The speed dating and values clarification activity

along with two other activities not identified in this article were very successful. Each of these activities had either no anticipatory assignments or only a few anticipatory assignments, making the classroom experience similar to a "come as you are" approach to learning. In contrast, those in-class activities that had assigned reading as a preparation were more demanding and more likely to have students not engage in the learning or application activities. In-class activities such as the decision making models and the disordered communication lecture and video evaluation, though they had good student involvement, also had more notable non-involvement activity, such as text messaging.

In planning for future classes, the implications of this study suggests that today's typical college student would prefer an elimination of homework and outside reading in favor of more experiential exercises with a self-absorption/reflection factor. However, such an approach is contradictory to the goals of higher education and runs the risk of class being mistaken for youth group rather than an academic course.

Therefore, this study challenged me to rethink my approach to teaching. This elevates the overall research to a paradigm change, not in the construction of course assignments and in-class activities but in the perception of who I am as a teacher. Should I tailor my teaching to fit a consumer commodity perspective? Or do I hold to the hallowed traditions of higher education and teach only to those who are interested and are able to match my own meta programme and teaching style? If I am to teach only to those who are most aligned with my own styles and preferences, I may better serve the next generation working as a tutor rather than an academic classroom scholar. Nevertheless, by choosing to teach in a "student-centered" university, I am agreeing to be responsive to the needs of my students. To this purpose, my next step in this self-narrative reflective process will be to work toward assimilating these new insights into my teaching style.

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