

A REFLECTIVE REVIEW OF INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER STORYTELLING IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

Abstract

Storytelling is one of many instructional strategies used in leadership education with the promise of providing transformative learning through individual and communal meaning-making. In this application manuscript, we offer examples and discussion of how learners identify storytelling in course design and approach, and their perception of its impact in classroom experiences. We present two undergraduate leadership courses at our former respective institutions and reflect on how learner insights about storytelling can inform future course design and delivery. Framing teaching and learning as a relational enterprise, storytelling can facilitate purposeful, inclusive, ethical, and process-oriented learning when used as an instructional strategy. Additionally, our reflection provides leadership educators with a broader view of the responsibilities incurred when using storytelling and offers strategies to build trust and community in classroom spaces.

Introduction

The growth and formalization of curricular leadership education present an opportunity for innovative instructional strategies that promote deep learning, teaching and learning as communal acts, and integration of multiple perspectives and experiences. Noting this growth and expansion, Jenkins (2012) cited a need for expanding “studies investigating the profile of instructional strategies used across the discipline” (p. 3). There is room and need to query the utility of instructional methods and their impact on learning as leadership educators continually seek and assess impactful (best) practices. Leadership

educators must determine how to engage their classroom (learners and the environment) through various methodology and practices (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Billsberry (2009) presented leadership as a social construct and the approach to teaching its content may be considered more of an art form than a scientific approach. The artful approach to leadership education is defined as learning activities and environments created to foster leadership knowledge and competencies (Brungardt, 1996). Such an approach is of importance when considering how instructors lead learning activities with the aim of reaching diverse populations to highlight different perspectives (Warner & Grint, 2006).

As the field of leadership education continues to expand, educators and learners are exposed to and implement varying types of instructional methods. Our work is a response to the call to expand instructional strategies, with the intention of helping learners engage in deep and sustained “knowledge acquisition, attitude and belief formation, and skill and ability development” (Dugan, 2017, p. 239). McCain and Matkin (2019) presented narrative storytelling as a means of exploring experiences and sense-making in leadership education, and we discuss storytelling as an instructional strategy to create meaningful learning experiences. Our work began with a post-conference discussion on impactful practices employed to engage learners and encourage participation in the leadership classroom. Our conversations revealed a mutual appreciation and use of storytelling to help learners access different ways of meaning-making and examine the concept and practice of leadership through a reflective lens.

We define storytelling as an instructional strategy that invites members of a learning community (both learners and instructors) to use their personal experiences and varied identities to make meaning of and interrogate concepts and theories. As such, storytelling is a conduit for applying individual and communal meaning and value to the leadership process, relationships, and identities. Our initial conversations led to three questions that frame our work:

1. How does storytelling occur in the classroom?
2. What do instructors do to help with this process?
3. How does storytelling impact students?

Authors' Positioning: Perspectives on Storytelling

We assert that leadership education is enriched by the personal narratives educators and learners bring to shared learning spaces. As Moenandar and Woods (2017) noted: “storytelling is a useful tool for communication and inquiries into human interaction” (p. ix). In applying this sentiment to leadership education, storytelling is a unique instructional

method that allows learners to engage in intellectual labor that connects (and sometimes challenges) course content and lived experiences. A preliminary review of scholarship showed that the term or concept of storytelling or stories also appear as narratives. For the purpose of our work, we use storytelling, stories, and narratives interchangeably. As collaborators, we each come with a particular understanding of storytelling as a teaching tool. It is important to name this because our standpoints influence the pedagogical and instructional choices we make before, during, and after classroom interactions. Our views as leadership educators are expressed below:

Nyasha. Teaching theory-based leadership courses requires a lot of intellectual and relational labor (Williams & McClure, 2010). I use storytelling as a way to make theories more recognizable and applicable. Storytelling is agentic in that it gives learners a language to personalize theories and concepts in a way that speaks to their experiences and movement in different social environments. Making space for storytelling is an act of invitation for students to engage with theories by making connections to their own lives. This approach is embedded within a constructivist approach, inviting students to “construct and make meaning of [] experiences and create [] realities with respect to cognitive, emotional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal pathways of development” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 37). This invitation aligns with Freire’s (2000) ideas of learners as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information in that the ability and opportunity to share their story is an important meaning-making process that demonstrates learning in varied ways. I believe that leadership education is a shared space that is neither neutral nor apolitical, and storytelling allows for both learners and educators to bear witness to each other’s worldviews, lived experiences, and epistemology. Leadership education does not happen in a vacuum. It is influenced by the social, cultural, and political zeitgeist. It is in these contexts that individual and collective stories about leadership emerge. I see teaching and learning as relational. Informed by my favorite scholar, the late bell hooks (1994), if I ask

learners to share their stories, or use storytelling as a prominent instructional strategy, I must also be willing to be transparent and vulnerable (as appropriate) with my own storytelling. As an educator and instructor, I am not an interloper. I am part of the classroom environment, and my own learning, unlearning, and relearning take place as I interact with students. In engaging in storytelling and sharing my own experience, my role shifts back and forth from instructor to learner.

Jason. Storytelling evokes connection and allows me to become more vulnerable and approachable to learners. One of my core values in the classroom is fairness and an atmosphere of equity. By sharing my stories and truths, I am able to serve as an example to learners while also being transparent about my expectations. I want learners to participate and develop their mindset and identity as leaders and leadership practitioners. Helping learners establish their voice helps them become part of the educational process (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Sharing my professional and life experiences allows me to challenge my vulnerability as an instructor and build my relationship with learners. By setting this tone, they are more likely to develop trust in our classroom community and in their application of theory to our course content. Trust develops from the principles of sincerity, reliability, competence, and care (Flaherty & Pappas, 2000). These ideas apply directly to the approaches I bring into the classroom and beyond in my work with colleagues and learners alike. When I develop trust within the classroom, this adds to the level of vulnerability learners can have with me as the instructor and among their peers. I appreciate it when learners share stories and experiences from their own lives, particularly centered around student organizations, internships, or service experiences. These stories present themselves most often during class discussion, but also in reflective journals, public speaking assignments, and varied forms. The stories contribute to the intersectionality between the human experience and leadership education as they allow for cognitive processing beyond theories and models. I want to be present for the learners I work with as they navigate the intricacies of leadership and leadership development.

Storytelling as an Instructional Strategy

Our work follows Boyer's (1990) scholarship of teaching and learning, emphasizing the search for innovative and impactful practices that can be disseminated to a community of inquiry and practice. Shulman (1987) extends this thought by stating that effective teaching is "the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by students" (p.5). We write to our fellow leadership educators with the knowledge that teaching and learning begin and continue in community. Because leadership education takes place beyond the classroom, our work will be of interest to leadership educators who facilitate teaching and learning relationships as student affairs professionals, faculty, executive coaches, corporate trainers, community developers, and many other spaces.

As critical inquiry that interrogates time and place through lived experiences and identities becomes an essential part of leadership education, the urgency of examining leadership from multiple perspectives and experiences becomes hard to sidestep. This calls for leadership educators to enact teaching and learning practices that prioritize longevity, interdisciplinary collaborations, and interpersonal skill development (Williams & McClure, 2010; Jenkins, 2012). Steeped in many cultural traditions and different ways of knowing and being, storytelling is a powerful way to produce knowledge and make sense of a shared and complex world. Sartre (as cited in Bruner, 2004) noted:

A man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him *in terms* of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it (p. 699).

Storytelling, or narrative communication, is used "in a broad variety of forms in different fields such as communication, journalism, therapy, social work,

medical practice, education, advertising, policy making” (Moenandar & Woods, 2017, p. vii). In a comprehensive study examining the use of instructional strategies in leadership education, Jenkins (2012) found that “class discussion whether in the form of true class discussion or interactive lecture and discussion are used most frequently” (p. 18). Interestingly, the use of stories or storytelling did not emerge as a frequently used instructional strategy. For example, only 3% of the study sample (N=303) identified storytelling as one of their “Top 3 Most Used Instructional Strategies.”

The draw of leadership education is that it brings together “people who have diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals” (Aidman & Long, 2017 p.108). This appreciation of difference provides a productive environment in which storytelling can be used to connect self, other, and context (Shankman et al., 2015) in the enterprise of conceptualizing and practicing leadership. While storytelling may not have been an instructional strategy of choice for surveyed leadership educators (Jenkins, 2012), it appears across disciplines as a way to examine underlying insights and assumptions within an individual’s personal and social milieu (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Echoing our own operational definition of storytelling, Chase (2011, p. 421) presents narratives as “a distinct form of discourse,” that allows individuals to attach meaning and value to life experiences in different ways.

The use of narratives or storytelling (in varying disciplines and contexts) equips one with the tools to deconstruct myths and legends that surround communities and are created through social interactions (Webster & Mertova, 2007; Dugan, 2017). Reframing this to our work, storytelling in leadership education allows learners (and educators) to examine leadership narratives, theories, and approaches with a critical lens that seeks to understand where self, other, and context meet (and are sometimes in tension). When used as an instructional strategy, storytelling seeks to establish “multiple perspectives of the world” by observing, analyzing, and critiquing “human actions, understandings, and events” (Gough, 1997, p. 9). Indeed, storytelling reveals “our attitudes, choices, and values [that] can be invisible to us. . . interests and biases that are often hidden in the normal

course of living stand revealed for inspection” (Gough, 1997, p. 9). When viewed in the context of leadership education, storytelling becomes a powerful instrument in supporting teaching and learning. Storytelling allows learners to “share their work with their peers. . . gain valuable experience in critiquing their own and other students’ work, which can promote gains in emotional intelligence, collaboration, and social learning” (Robin, 2016, p. 19). In the quest to help learners recognize, understand, and critique leadership paradigms, narratives presented through storytelling are a legitimate source of meaning-making and knowledge production (Kelly & Bhargal, 2018).

Storytelling as Relational Leadership Learning

Our initial questions that led us to this work presuppose that there is a relationship in which stories can exist and be shared. If leadership is a relationship, as defined by Daft (2018), then relational leadership is a core aspect of leadership education. In this context, teacher and learner are positioned in alternating leader (owner of the story) and follower (audience hearing the story) positions wherein stories help to make meaning and facilitate learning (influencing). This particular framing challenges the idea that “only instructors can be producers of credible knowledge” (Kelly & Bhargal, 2018, p. 46). In describing leadership relationships, the relational leadership model by Komives et al. (2013) offers a way to situate and contextualize storytelling in leadership education. Approaching leadership as a relationship offers us a way to position storytelling as an instructional tool that “[leverages] relationships within group experiences” that can “lead to healthy impact and positive constructions of what leadership means and how it is enacted” (Dugan, 2017, p. 237). Central to the relational leadership model are five elements: purposeful (shared commitment to goals and action), inclusive (engaging multiple perspectives, experiences and identities), empowering (awareness of power dynamics and commitment to lessening barriers to access of power), ethical (moral values that guide decision making and behavior), and process-oriented (intent in creation, cohesion, and

collaboration). Influenced by constructivist thought, the relational leadership model can be adapted to leadership education to underscore our earlier framing of teaching and learning as a leadership relationship wherein teacher and learner alternate leader and followership positions as stories are used to explore, question, highlight, or apply leadership course concepts. Our work uses the five elements of the relational leadership model to explore how learners identify storytelling and its impact on the learning environment and course design.

Context

Our work focuses on two undergraduate leadership courses at two public institutions in the United States (59 learners total). Storytelling was used in both courses as an instructional strategy to teach concepts related to leadership. However, learners were not explicitly told that storytelling was part of the course design. At the end of the Fall 2019 academic term, learners in both courses were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. How did storytelling happen in our course?
2. How was I (your instructor) involved in this practice?
3. How did storytelling impact your learning?

Course A represents an undergraduate course at Kennesaw State University: a large public four-year university in the metro-Atlanta area located in the Southeastern region of the United States. This upper-level course is part of a leadership minor and explores the connection between leadership and events, trends, and problems that make up and/or impact global issues. Learners worked towards becoming educated citizens with capacity for developing sound leadership approaches to effectively and responsibly tackle global issues. Designed as a seminar, discussions were a central part of the course structure. Additionally, assignments such as a positionality reflection paper, learner-leader facilitated small group discussions, and a collaborative presentation provided pathways to achieving learning outcomes. After completing formal university mandated course evaluations, learners were asked the three open-ended questions

presented previously on the last day of the course to demonstrate their understanding of storytelling and the ways in which it manifested during the course. Learners submitted their anonymous written responses and an instructor-guided discussion followed. Because this discussion was done during class time, it was important to emphasize that participation would not impact any assignment or course grade. All 25 learners opted to participate and gave written and oral responses to the questions.

Course B represents an undergraduate course at University of Nebraska-Lincoln: a large public four-year university in the Midwest region of the United States. The course is a leadership theory course and explores the practical application of leadership theory in society. The course is part of both a leadership minor and major degree program offered at the university. In this course, learners explore the history and development of leadership theory and models in a team-based learning environment. The objectives of the course are to support learners through providing foundational knowledge, application, an opportunity to explore human dimensions, and identifying key strategies to learn the concepts of leadership. Discussions are a central part of the course through team-based cohorts, classroom activities, and discussion. In addition to case studies and self-reflection journals, the course structure provides an opportunity for learners to identify campus organizations or small community businesses to form their own case study, including learning more about their history and the relational processes that exist within the organizations. Learners used a technology-assisted (Mentimeter) questionnaire to record responses to the three open-ended questions informing our work. All 34 learners were asked to use their smartphones or laptop computers to log into an anonymous link. Their identities were not shared through the screen.

Sources of Storytelling

As previously noted, learners from both courses were not given directives to engage in storytelling throughout the semester. Instead, they were able to recognize when and how it occurred in the

classroom. This connects to our first two questions: How did storytelling happen in our course? How was I (your instructor) involved in this practice? As shown in Table 1, students identified many classroom strategies where storytelling was utilized and were able to distinguish between instructor-centered storytelling and learner-centered storytelling. It is important to note that because our work is premised on our reflection of storytelling as an instructional tool, we utilize a qualitative approach by focusing on

quotes from in-class activities that represent learner perceptions. For the purposes of this article, we focus on identifying perceptions of storytelling as opposed to findings as we did not conduct a full-scale study.

Table 1
Sources of Storytelling

Initial Source	Sources of Storytelling
Instructor-centered	<i>Lectures</i> <i>Asking Questions</i> <i>Personal Examples</i> <i>Videos</i> <i>Professor-to-Student Process</i> <i>Instructional Strategies (ex., Think-Pair-Share, Case Studies)</i> <i>Attendance Questions</i>
Learner-centered	<i>Class Discussions</i> <i>Listening</i> <i>Poems</i> <i>Assignments</i>
	<i>Discussions</i> <i>Group Work</i> <i>Case Studies</i> <i>Reflective journals</i> <i>Positionality Papers</i> <i>Presentations</i> <i>Personal testimonies and stories</i>
	<i>In-Classroom Groups</i> <i>Projects</i> <i>Writing</i> <i>Weekly reflections</i> <i>Videos</i> <i>Leadership as Art</i>

Storytelling to Learning Outcomes Perceptions

The impact of storytelling is presented in Table 2. The table includes select examples of how learners

in both courses perceived learning outcomes through the use of storytelling, addressing the following question: How did storytelling impact your learning?

Table 2
Storytelling Connection to Learning

Learner Connections	Learner Perceptions of Learning Outcomes
<i>"Storytelling creates personal relevance, which enhances motivation and improves my learning exponentially. If I can relate to the stories and apply them to leadership, it'll stick with me."</i>	Increase interest in the topic Connects me to instructor Increases relevance to me Connect content to real life experiences
<i>"Your stories....and doors opened based on different viewpoints was eye opening for me."</i>	Builds connections to others Deepening my connections with fellow students Learned more about global issues
<i>"You asked appropriate questions and provided examples via your experience."</i>	Share personal stories and examples Encouraged freedom in expression
<i>"Your stories made leadership theory more memorable. It's easier to remember with a good story."</i>	Attaches personal values to the subject Sharing encourages me to relate and share
<i>"Stories help show that class material can actually be translated to real life events."</i> <i>"Storytelling impacted my learning by anchoring the knowledge to personal experiences and deepening my connection with my fellow students."</i>	Connect content to real life experiences Helps with cognition of the content/ Retention of information Increase engagement Experiences lead to conversation and action

Storytelling as Relational Teaching and Learning

The responses from learners in both courses highlight that storytelling is an impactful instructional strategy. The responses to perceived instructor contribution help demonstrate the presence of the dyadic relationship present between an instructor and learner. By viewing teaching and learning as a relationship, the relational leadership model (Komives et al. (2013) provides a way for us as leadership educators to understand how storytelling was presented, facilitated, and the impact it made on the process of learning and the learning environment itself. We reflect on the utility and impact of storytelling as an instructional strategy through the five elements of the relational leadership model.

Storytelling as Purposeful. To work as an instructional strategy, storytelling must be intentional through design and execution. Though learners were not told at the beginning of the course that

storytelling would be used as an instructional strategy, they were able to identify when it was used and how it impacted their learning. Within the context of a credit-bearing course, the purpose is to help learners work towards and achieve learning outcomes (whether designed by the program or instructor). Through the use of class discussions, lectures, and course assignments, storytelling served a learning function. Purpose also manifested as a learner driven outcome: to make sense of the content and to learn about each other.

Storytelling as Inclusive. Learners noted that storytelling helped them to build or deepen connections with peers and the instructor. This is crucial because it frames the course as a learning community and the learning process as a collective enterprise. Each member of the community comes with experiences and perspectives that can illuminate course concepts in ways that promote deep and sustained learning. To be inclusive in

storytelling means to be intentional about making a space for stories to emerge, be heard, and be honored as part of the knowledge production process.

Storytelling as Empowering. Through our previous framing of the classroom as a learning community, we acknowledge that power dynamics exist and impact the teaching and learning relationship. Reid and Kawash (2017) noted that instructors' use of power in learning environments can affect learner experiences by using prosocial forms of power (referent, reward, and expert power bases). By introducing our own personal stories (and revealing biases) in class, we were able to model storytelling, and more importantly, demonstrate transparency that is required to develop a relationship within the classroom. As show in Table 1, our learners recognized the presence and impact of our instructor stories and this served as an invitation for them to share their stories as well.

Storytelling as Ethical. Discussion of empowerment must include considerations of ethics. In using storytelling as an instructional strategy, the space for agency (for the learners) exists as they claim ownership of the learning environment through their stories, however, it is critical to ensure that stories are not coerced or used to inflict harm in any way. When learners are empowered and invited to share, vulnerability becomes part of the learning process and brings an opportunity for better learner dialogue (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009).

Storytelling as Process-Oriented. Storytelling is neither haphazard nor just for the sake of telling stories. When viewed as an instructional strategy, storytelling is an impactful tool to demonstrate, identify, define, and apply course concepts. Our learners perceived storytelling as a way to increase relevance, connection and interest to topics, and knowledge acquisition. Process orientation focuses on creation, cohesion, and collaboration (Komives et al., 2013). Learners in both courses noted the idea of learning more about their peers through their stories and learning more about the course content and the social environment around them. In this way, process orientation is really about creating a learning community that is purposeful, empowering, inclusive, and ethical.

Reflections from the Instructors

The promise of creativity and impact offered by storytelling as an instructional strategy can be alluring. However, we caution leadership educators (ourselves included) to consider the ethics of witnessing others stories, particularly when stories can affirm, challenge, or complicate ways of knowing and being. Stories (as presented in our work) hinge on the premise of one's memory, interpretation, and application. Given their personal nature and the existence of multiple stories within a classroom setting, leadership educators must consider how to create a space where both complementary and competing stories can co-exist in support of learning (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Part of this work requires leadership educators to engage in and model deep and active listening with the aim of understanding (and honoring) the worldviews that anchor individual stories. Our reflections and discussion while writing brought us to the idea of cultivating an ethos and practice of sacred vulnerability, fellowship, and accountability in using storytelling. Below, we offer our individual reflections on the educator's responsibility in using storytelling as an instructional strategy.

Instructor Reflection: Nyasha. Because stories are based on time and place, lived experiences related to the same phenomenon can yield different perspectives and reactions. When engaging the stories of learners within the classroom, it is important to recognize how positionality (McLaren, 2013): people, places, things, and events, influences the learning environment and process. For example, in the case of Course A (a course on global leadership), a unit on food security led to a deep and stretching discussion on the complexity of poverty in the United States, juxtaposed to its perceived status as a rich and powerful country on the world stage. While the discussion was robust, I could see that some learners were challenged by seeing how the concepts we discussed were not abstract, but were part of their classmates' lived experiences. As the instructor of record, I had to be aware of this productive discomfort, and most importantly, create a space for those who did share their experiences to ensure they were not left exposed by revealing their experiences. In practice, this looked like pausing the discussion for a few minutes to go back to the

learning agreements we had set collectively at the beginning of the semester about what it means to talk about and listen to a personal experience. Without this pause, the risk of a learner sharing a vulnerable story and feeling exposed would have been too great and caused harm.

Additionally, it is imperative to consider whose stories are told, why they are told, and how they are told. The co-created environment of the classroom will determine how individual and collective stories emerge. Power and privilege are inescapable elements of shared spaces, particularly classrooms. Kelly and Bhargal (2018) remind leadership educators to be diligent about recognizing “how knowledge is constructed, how power is wielded, and how social identities impact leadership development” (p. 42). This statement compels me to think about how I tend to my own use and embodiment of power and privilege when using storytelling in my teaching practice. In telling my stories in class as the instructor, I have the benefit of curating stories that align with or underscore a course concept. While there is a risk of vulnerability, it is a calculated risk in that I get to tell the stories I want to tell, whereas the learners tell their stories in the unpredictable learning moments that occur or are created within the confines (and possibilities) of a lesson plan. I also embody another kind of privilege in that I have already developed the skill of putting language to my stories. The learners (undergraduate and graduate) might still be grappling with naming their experiences. For example, they may have gone through certain experiences, as presented in their stories, but did not have the leadership education language to frame what was happening or why it happened. Hopefully, that language is developed in the duration of the course, and it is important for me to recognize the privilege I have in the learning space. Even in trying to enact the value of empowerment in relational leadership, I must be mindful of how my own power and privilege operate and may impede empowerment.

In Fink’s (2013) model for course design, instructors must be aware of the characteristics of the learners. Characteristics include “the diversity of students, their previous knowledge or experiences, their attitudes about their subject as well as their personal

and professional lives” (University of Buffalo, 2021). These characteristics inform the leadership stories that learners bring to the classroom. When used as an instructional strategy, storytelling can act as a conduit to reveal these characteristics to the learning community. As one of the caretakers of the storytelling space in the classroom (it is a shared duty with learners), I see the diverse characteristics of learners as different positionalities that influence how knowledge about leadership is produced and shaped. I am keenly aware that different lived experiences and identities may mean that students take risks in voicing their stories. While a story shared may create moments of connections with peers and to the course content, learners may be taking a risk to share parts of their experiences and the consequences of those risks may remain long after a class has ended after a semester.

Instructor Reflection: Jason. Storytelling allows learners and instructors to give voice and provide mental imagery that shows deeper connection to leadership content based on lived experiences and relationships with others. The use of stories in the classroom can validate the experiences and interactions learners have known and faced while experiencing leadership content. Stories can challenge the perceptions that a classroom community might have toward one another and also help to bridge gaps that exist in a diverse classroom environment. An ill-timed story can also complicate the environment as listeners must break fact from fiction or take them off pace toward content building discussion or interaction. Additionally, it is imperative for me as a leadership educator to actively listen to learners for verbal or written cues of mental health challenges or reports of behaviors at their home or workplace that may be questionable. It is my duty to point them to the right institutional resources when appropriate.

I am aware that learners who do not feel comfortable or equally represented in a classroom space may not verbalize their stories. It can be difficult for students to voice unpopular opinions and to bring up topics that might be controversial. While I believe it is the duty of the educator (and in collaboration with learners as appropriate) to create a common space for learners to feel comfortable and welcome, the opportunity to voice lived private experiences that

connect deeper to content can be hard for learners without establishing the right conditions. Being part of a learning community does not immediately engender a reciprocal relationship for sharing private experiences or identities. Reflective journals and related instructional strategies that allow learners to be anonymous may sometimes bring forth the best examples of classroom storytelling artifacts. Power and privilege often exist because the classroom community and environment allow it to occur. As leadership educators, we must be willing to take stewardship of the environment and ensure all learners have a voice and equitable practices are in place to allow them to share their experiences. I realize that my own power and privilege afford me a position of authority of and within the environment as the instructor, but I must also commit to being an engaged participant in the stories and content being shared within the classroom space.

My evolving understanding of learner success has taught me to be flexible with assignments, schedules, and my personal ways of doing things as an instructor. This lesson came with the realization that each leadership class is different. One of the hardest lessons to learn is that what worked splendidly for one class might not work at all for another, even if the learners share similar characteristics. Storytelling can empower the learner and challenge the instructor in a space/place setting. It is my duty as an instructor to help learners see the importance of critical thinking and connection that has occurred through their examples and content. When this is done correctly, learners are engaged and feel a part of the learning process as much as the classroom community itself.

Conclusion

Storytelling lends itself to advanced exploration into self-reflective critical approaches and how leadership educators might help learners develop their sense of self and connection to others in and around leadership (Day, 2011; Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2017). As the field of leadership education continues to expand, there is a call to prioritize a critical approach to leadership that centers questioning of identity, power, inclusivity/exclusivity, global positioning, justice, and equity. Storytelling presents an accessible way for both educators and learners to see how lived experiences can help to create connections to these leadership concepts.

The goal of our work is to inspire our colleagues in leadership education and “offer possibilities for integrating narrative communication and storytelling into their own professional or academic practice” (Moenandar & Woods, 2017, p.vii). While interdisciplinary studies show the efficacy of storytelling in teaching and learning, it plays a more salient role in leadership education given its ability to help with meaning-making and influence in the development of learner leadership identity (Polkinghorne, 1996). Contemplating new frontiers in terms of storytelling in leadership education, we invite colleagues to consider how they can intentionally design curriculum and programming that allows for both instructors and learners to use their stories to learn about themselves and how they conceptualize and practice leadership in face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses (Challinor et al., 2017; Mages, 2020).

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