

Using Story-Telling in Diversity Training

Writer's name: Ajit Gopalakrishnan
Address: 3 Bartkiewicz Road, Chester, CT 06412
Phone: (W) 860-524-4036 (H) 860-526-3102
Email: agopalakrishnan@yahoo.com
Position: Trainer
Word Count: 1,682
Recent Publication: Book Review: Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen *OD Practitioner, Summer 2000*

Author's Biography:

Ajit has worked as a Trainer with the Capitol Region Education Council in Hartford for over five years. He provides organizational development, training, and technical assistance to adult literacy education programs throughout Connecticut. He specializes in the areas of workplace literacy, multicultural education, and instructional technology. He has an MBA in Organizational Behavior from the University of Bridgeport, CT.

A well-told story engages me and captivates my imagination. It makes me wonder and question. I feel like a kid again; excited, interested and open to learning. The characters in a story offer a window into what it must have been like for a fellow human being to experience the circumstances of that story. A story is always pregnant with multiple perspectives and provides fodder for diverse interpretations.

What images does story-telling evoke in your mind? Take a few minutes to think about a story you heard or a movie you saw recently that had an impact on you. Can you remember the characters? What were they going through? What choices were they faced with?

I have used a story-telling activity as an opening exercise in three diversity training sessions for adult literacy educators. Each session lasted about four hours, of which the story-telling activity and the ensuing discussion took roughly the first two hours. The activity was based on the compelling story of the WW II Holocaust.

Story-Telling Activity Methodology

This activity begins with a narrative reading of the key chronological events surrounding the WW II Holocaust . The reading is integrated with select video clips and a PowerPoint presentation for added impact. After the approximately 25-minute presentation, participants are provided with questions for discussion in small groups, that make them think about the following:

- The social, political and economic factors that caused the holocaust,
- Whether it could happen again, and
- If any intervention could have prevented this tragedy.

This article discusses the impact of this story-telling activity on the workshop participants. It highlights how story-telling can help participants not only gain greater awareness and sensitivity with regard to diversity, but also assume personal leadership for incorporating multicultural concepts into their curricula. It also raises issues to consider before you use story-telling activities in your own situations.

Data to support my inferences was obtained from evaluations done immediately after the sessions and from a survey of one training group done three months after the session.

Quality of the Story

The WW II Holocaust tragedy has several qualities that make it well suited for such a story-telling activity. First, it is a true story. There is no disputing the historical truth that several human beings took prejudice to its extreme and brutally dehumanized and killed millions of other human beings. Furthermore, it is a story about *intentional*, *systematic* and *institutionalized* discrimination and violence by not just a government in power. There was support from individuals and groups in implementing the massive systems required by the brutal killing machines of the Nazis. Additionally, there were "ordinary" people just like you and me, the world over, who, during World War II, subscribed to the anti-Semitic theories espoused by Hitler and other racial theorists of prior centuries.

This *social* quality to the violence of the WW II Holocaust demonstrates the extent of horror, lying dormant in each of our so-called "harmless" prejudices, whether they are manifest or unmanifest.

An Event to Remember

The story-telling activity set the tone for the rest of the session. Several participants were struck by the extent of impact the training had on them. People have approached me, sometimes as long as 18 months after the workshop, to tell me that they thoroughly enjoyed the workshop and the story-telling activity, and to talk with me about some diversity issue.

Self-Inquiry

The story-telling activity turns the quest for learning inward. As one participant said, *"It took me a while to slow my mind down to.... think about diversity, culture, values and beliefs. I wanted Ajit to move on but in the end I did need the time to assimilate the information."* The people in a story such as those in the WW II Holocaust make participants wonder how they might have acted given the same circumstances. Such contemplation engages participants completely, from both their *heads* and their *hearts*, and leads to stimulating, thoughtful group discussion.

Inside-out

The process of self-inquiry leads participants to see that change is an inside-out process. To rid the world of prejudice, we must first become un-biased ourselves. Participants become increasingly sensitive to their own prejudices and realize the danger inherent in not managing them, especially during tough socioeconomic times, as it happened during the WW II Holocaust.

In some participants, this increased sensitivity made a deep impression. One of them writes in an evaluation, three months after the workshop, *"... I can hear myself saying I need to be more understanding, patient and explain myself better when I get into situations that tend to upset me. I realize people have legitimate reasons for what they believe and I should respect, if not agree, with their ideas. I need to have more information before making decisions about people and not to judge people too harshly."*

One participant said that the first thing she remembers about the workshop is the discussion following the narration. *"The frightening part is how all the contributing factors that led to Hitler getting into power are present on some level everywhere. It could happen again."* Another participant expressed a similar sentiment. *"... that if we do not stay sensitive to everyone else's feelings, we will have another Holocaust."*

Applications Emerge

Overall, participants start to see the topic of diversity, not just as an unchanging and solely external body of knowledge to be mastered, but also as a dynamic, interpersonal and social construct in which they play a part. This shift in perspective is a critical one. By making this shift, participants assume part responsibility for learning about diversity during the workshop, and do not expect the presenter to provide all the answers. Subsequently, the strategies for application in the classroom often emerge for each participant.

Educators see the value of incorporating diversity concepts into all their classes. As one adult educator put it, *"It (Your workshop) made me realize how important it is for students to work together in pairs and in small groups. It is an important step in learning how to work together and be sensitive to each others' ideas."* Others envisioned a range of applications including sharing the learning with co-workers, adapting the materials into gender awareness workshops, and using the materials for training new ESL tutors.

One educator said, *"The awareness and consideration of differences are important and I will try to present and encourage this awareness (in my class)."*

Another educator reflected on her learning, three months after the workshop; *"I have started to teach ESL students and am making every effort to be sensitive to their cultural traditions and beliefs."*

Fairness and Equity

The first time I presented this workshop, a couple of African Americans left the room after the Holocaust discussion. One of their evaluations read, *"The Jewish people were not the only ones to suffer"* and *"We thought this (workshop) was about different groups and not just about one group."* This reaction took me completely by surprise. In my opinion, I, an Asian, was being un-ethnocentric in choosing the WW II Holocaust for this activity, a historical event of oppression against people of a race different from my own. To me, this very act signified that the workshop was not about comparing one group to another. In direct contrast, another participant mentioned that the first thing that comes to her mind when she thinks about the workshop is *".... how even-sided it was presented and how sensitively it was handled."* However, since that incident, I have begun the story-telling activity by acknowledging the suffering of all groups of people. I clarify that the activity could have been constructed around another historical event such as slavery in the USA, India's struggle for independence, or the atrocities in Bosnia.

The Emotional Side

The Holocaust is a very tragic event that can overwhelm many people. One participant mentioned that seeing a moving, talking and walking Hitler in a video clip made her choke. I am careful to present information primarily around *why* the Holocaust happened without elaborating on the gory details of that tragedy. This helps participants to be objective about the event, think critically about its causes and learn from it.

Additionally, I help participants maintain objectivity by posing questions that center on the causes of the WW II Holocaust. After the narration, participants discuss in pairs, their responses to those questions. I learned (after the first time) that once participants have discussed these sensitive questions with another person, they might feel less intimidated to express their opinions in the large group. It also gives them much needed time to sort out some of these complex issues before having to express their ideas.

Conclusion

A story-telling activity can be an intensely stimulating and highly emotional experience that may bring out people's deepest passions. Handle with care! Good luck.