

# The Case for Narrative: Five Reflections

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1. "Stories are the most basic way we have of organizing our experience and claiming meaning for it." (White) Isn't this one of the primary functions of university education, to set learners on a path toward making meaning, in their own lives and in their communities?
2. Stories are specific, focused, personal. "Not car, but Cadillac. Not bird, but wren. Not fruit, but apple. Not a co-dependent, neurotic man, but Harry, who runs to open the refrigerator for his wife, thinking she wants an apple, when she is headed for the gas stove to light her cigarette." (Goldberg) Stories encourage us as learners (readers *and* writers) to bring ourselves and what we care about to what we're learning. We know from psychologists (Pennebaker) and physicians (Charon) that encouraging traumatized or sick people to write their stories can hasten their healing. We know that reading and writing stories are effective in helping students in professional school reflect deeply on what it means to lead an ethical life in their professions. (Weisberg and Duffin) They help us integrate. And we know that if students cannot connect themselves to what they're learning, they may not learn it deeply. As Mary Rose O'Reilley reminds us, "Students do not listen well to the answers to questions they have not learned to ask." (O'Reilley)
3. Reading stories encourages writers to risk writing in a "lively, experienced, human language" (Elbow), encourages them to find their voice. Too much of academic language is voiceless, opaque; writers hide behind it, and as we know from reading student essays, most students do not master it. Writing about academic discourse, Mary Rose O'Reilley puts it best: "If Jesus had talked like that, he wouldn't have made it out of Nazareth." Not mastering academic discourse leaves our students intimidated and convinced of their inadequacy, the opposite of what we want for them. We want them to leave university confident, realistically confident, but confident.
4. Stories are detailed. Without detail, arguments are empty, unpersuasive. With detail, they persuade. Here's Natalie Goldberg again.

*Mies van der Rohe, a twentieth century architect, said God hides in the details. It's important to a writer to stay in the trenches with details and not jump out because it's too scary to be there. Denial, repression, all those psychological adaptations we developed in childhood, were ways of not being there. Writing demands that we cut through and be where we are and, like a cat gripping a cement wall at the top of a ten story building, stay there and not blank out because it is too hard to be there. . . Think about it. Life is not abstract. It is not good or bad. A girl is not pretty. Our mind makes that judgment. The girl has red lips, white teeth, freckles brushed across her nose, eyes that hint at lilacs, and she just lifted her right eyebrow. The reader steps away and says she is pretty. The writer just stays with the eyes, the lips, the chin, and makes no judgments.*

Rather than tell, good arguments show. Despite what our parents admonished, we learned more from what they did than what they said.

5. Universities are primarily a doubting culture. We learn to challenge every word, every proposition, every argument. We push away, keep our distance.

*"We tend to assume that the ability to criticize a claim we disagree with counts as more serious intellectual work than the ability to enter into it and temporarily assent. . . This emphasis on learning to be critical helps explain the tendency toward critical warfare in the intellectual and academic world-the fact that intellectuals often find it surprisingly difficult to hear and understand positions they disagree with." (Elbow)*

Yet, as Elbow argues, doubting isn't enough. We also need what he calls "methodological believing, the disciplined procedure of not just listening but trying to believe any view or hypothesis that a participant wants to advance." To doubt is to push away, to distance oneself. And as Elbow suggests, doubting is curiously connected to our need for certainty in a world in which certainty is increasingly impossible.

Stories encourage believing. They invite us to enter into, to experience, an argument, a world, to entertain it before we push it away. They encourage what Elbow calls "first-order thinking," the generative, imaginative dimension of our thinking, in which we lock up the editor who's constantly looking over our shoulders and telling us no, don't risk saying that. (for an extended discussion of believing, see Weisberg and Peters) Without this capacity to imagine, our world would be a much sorer place than it already is. Without it, we would be seriously limited as individuals, as citizens, and as communities.

## Sources

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