

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Using Storytelling and Histories to Create Inclusive Spaces

by Marlee Bunch



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Given the challenges of 21st century education and as a Black, female educator, I have been reflecting a lot about the best ways educators can grapple with everything we are tasked with, and still find reasonable and intentional ways to ensure that we are creating inclusive classrooms that offer students the chance to celebrate and learn from the perspectives of others. I imagine that for white educators, this task feels especially daunting, given the complexities of historical struggles for marginalized communities and people. If we hope to bring out equity in classrooms, we must find ways to work together and support one another through the difficult task of creating classrooms that embody windows and mirrors—allowing for students to both see themselves represented and see the perspectives of others.

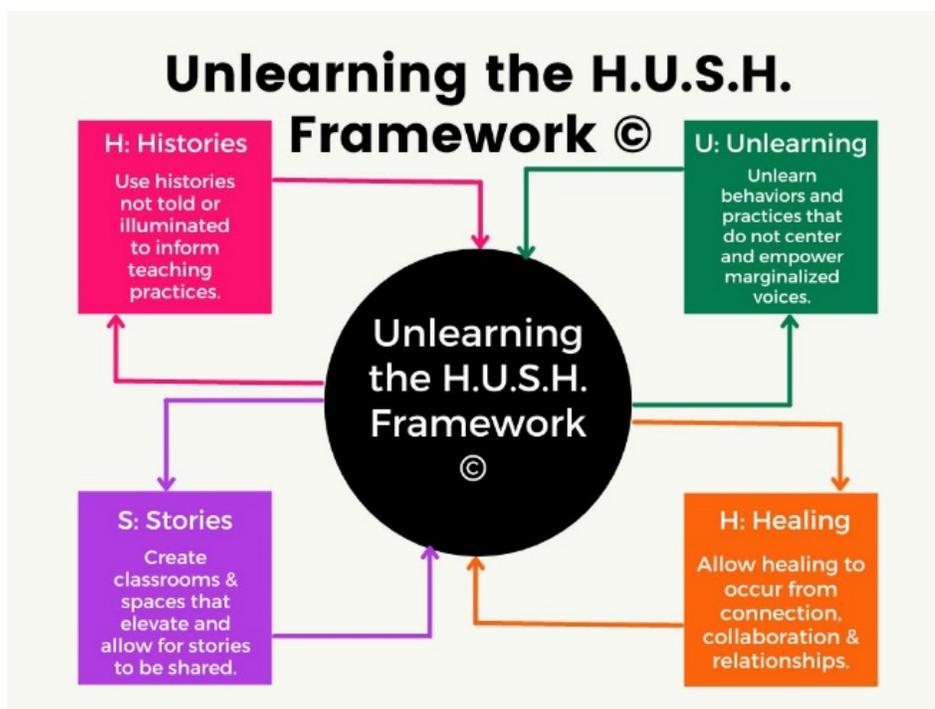
One of the best ways I have found to teach complex lessons or content is through the use of storytelling. When I reflect on successful teaching moments I have had throughout my career, they were the moments that helped validate student identities, exposed them to varied perspectives, and created opportunities to forge connections. Those moments involved stories, creative content, analysis, discussion, and a bridge for moments of self-analysis and engaged learning.¹ Ushering in diverse voices and content helped our space and learning endeavors excel. It not only opened a door for access but allowed students to consider academic content from multiple perspectives.² A poem that comes to mind and that I gravitate towards is Lucille Clifton’s “lost women.” This poem asks us to consider the voices and stories of the women and ancestors who walked before us. At closer glance, the poem also asks us to celebrate women and center their voices—it is a longing for knowing these women sooner and discovering their identities.

My recent research titled *Unlearning the Hush* examines how integration impacted the lives of Black, female educators in Mississippi between 1954 and 1971. This study taught me about all the lost voices and experiences that I could have learned from earlier—the classroom practices, the lived experiences, the wisdom, and the sacrifices made. I wondered what my own learning and identity development might have looked like, if I would have known these stories sooner? Could I enhance the experiences and classrooms of another teacher and/or student by helping others understand this rich history?³ I again thought of Lucille Clifton’s “the lost women” poem, as I was struck by the power of learning perspectives that I had never known. Consider for example, how many histories and stories we learned as an adult and wished we would have known sooner. How can we build

lessons and spaces that use those unearthed stories as a foundation to build inclusive and brave spaces where we can explore, discuss, and learn from the stories that are not often centered? My own doctoral experience had allowed me to learn about greats like Bob Moses, Yuri Kochiyama, Dr. Joyce Ladner, Mary McCleod Bethune, and others whose stories reminded me of the greatness we can sometimes overlook. These histories made me feel a sense of empowerment and hope, and I realized that this was precisely what educators and students need today—a sense of hope and a way to empower and connect with one other.

Using Stories of the Past to Illuminate the Future

These histories and teaching practices are an important component to creating better classrooms for current day students and educators because they connect our pasts and future and allow us to learn and celebrate all backgrounds and perspectives. My goal is to help other educators include histories and stories such as these to allow culturally relevant pedagogy to be simplified and allow marginalized students to feel celebrated and affirmed. I created a framework to help pre-service and current educators find applicable ways to bring these relevant people and stories into classrooms for the benefit of all students. The framework is interdisciplinary, allows for flexibility, and can



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be utilized for any K-12 classroom. The framework asks educators to consider four key components to create rich and inclusive learning experiences: Histories, Unlearning, Stories, and Healing.

Classroom Use Example:

Imagine that as a teacher you plan to implement a lesson called Lost Women inspired by Clifton's powerful poem. Objectives might include:

- Students will better understand Black history and/or diverse histories.
- Students will be able to create, synthesize and analyze.
- Students will present and speak about the content they have engaged with.
- Students will self-assess and reflect.
- Students will write a culminating original poem that illustrates the histories examined.

This lesson will illuminate three women who are formative in Black history, but not widely known: bell hooks, Ida B. Wells, Dr. Joyce Ladner. Choosing three individuals for this lesson is ideal because it allows student choice, offers opportunities for comparison and contrasting to occur, and highlights icons both living and gone. Another variation might be choosing three people from different diverse backgrounds (i.e. Yuri Kochiyama, Angela Davis, and Dolores Huerta). The lesson would use the poem "the lost women" as the anchor and ask students to research the three women named above -- thus applying the "H-histories" component of the framework by exposing students to new histories and figures.

Next, students and the educator would engage in the "U-unlearning" component of the framework, which might include discussing and/or journaling what "unlearning" needs to occur related to the lesson example. Are there any misperceptions related to these women or this history? A reflection question for this component of the framework might look like this: In what ways do you think history/society/systems have silenced these "lost women?" Do you think some voices and stories are not shared as much as others? If so, why? What might these women's stories challenge us to rethink or consider? Depending upon the classroom, these questions could be examined via writing, through discussion, or in groups.

Then, students would work on the heart of the assignment, which involves researching all of the women, taking notes, and then working in pairs post-research to compare notes and discuss the content that was discovered. This step allows students to analyze, compare/contrast, evaluate, and reflect. After researching, students will create a free verse poem using "the lost women" poem as a source of inspiration. Students will craft poems about the histories they discovered through their research. Students might craft a poem based on one of the women, two of the women, or all three. Students can use direct quotes in their poem from their research notes, or all creative and original verse. Poems do not need to rhyme/or they can, and the length of the poem can vary depending on teacher/student needs and preference. You might even ask students to create a cento poem that patchworks together lines already in existence. The possibilities are endless.

The "S- stories" component of the framework involves the sharing out of stories. This assignment offers the ideal opportunity to allow students to share their poems and offer a short connection to the poem/histories and their own lives and experiences. Again, how this is done, can be varied and fluid. The presentation (storytelling) aspect can be done with each student individually presenting, or in small groups with one group member sharing out a synopsis of the group's overall themes and poems.

Lastly, the "H- healing" component can occur through post-lesson reflection. This might consist of a classroom discussion, journaling, human continuum, the completion of the K-W-L chart, or a writing prompt for an exit ticket. A lesson such as this, though flexible and easily modified for the teacher, offers a tapestry of stories rich in history and legacies, that has the potential to benefit both educator and learners. Using a framework and content that unites, celebrates, and helps us consistently grow and connect is one that aligns with best pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

Perspective sharing, histories, stories, and relationships all create empathy and expands our knowledge about others. Creating inclusive spaces and centering marginalized voices works to ensure that students feel comfortable, safe, and successful in their learning spaces. We know that as educators, we must continue to make known the histories of people, moments, traditions, cultures, and stories not typically visible. This framework combines the best of multiple practices and approaches to usher in the inclusive classrooms that we hope to create for both current and future generations and learners.⁴

Notes

1. Diane Ketelle, "Introduction to the Special Issue: What Is Storytelling in the Higher Education Classroom?," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 13, no. 2 (2017): 144.
2. Marshall, Julia. "Visible Thinking: Using Contemporary Art to Teach Conceptual Skills." *Art Education* 61, no. 2 (2008): 38–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27696275>.
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4. Howson, Alexandra. "Visual Matters in Learning and Teaching." *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 1, no. 3 (2008): 43–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23744912>.

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Dr. Marlee Bunch is an educator with over 16 years teaching experience. She holds a doctoral degree from the University of Illinois and two graduate degrees. She holds a teaching certificate, gifted education certification, Diversity and Equity certificate, and an ESL (English Second Language) certification. Her experiences teaching at the secondary and post-secondary level have allowed her to write curriculum, mentor teachers, create workshops, tutor, advocate for inclusion, and most importantly mentor students. Her research, teaching, and educational advocacy work seeks to disrupt inequities, advocate for educational reform, and illuminate the power of storytelling and history. Her research focuses on the oral histories of Black female educators. You can learn more at drmarleebunch.com or unlearningthehush.com



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