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Ilene Dawn Alexander

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OUT OF THE BOX

Learning and Teaching in Other Ways

Ilene Dawn Alexander

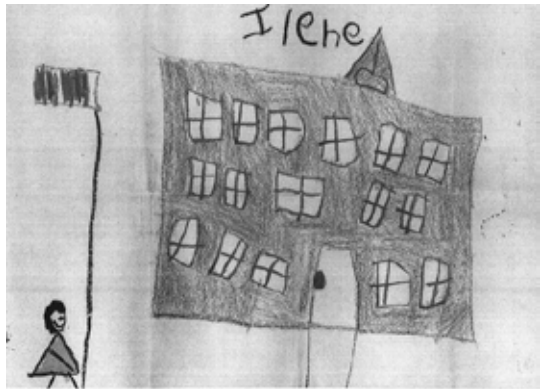
Stories

"Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there is a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions...on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone. He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense.' But they had been wrong."

—Leslie Marmon Silko

The earliest complex story I know and can tell about myself being a learner is this one:

The 4th-grade history curriculum at Jefferson Elementary School in Mankato, Minnesota, required each pupil to write a researched paper on some aspect of state history. Mankato's particular history includes being the site of the 26 December 1862 hanging of 38 Dakota men following trials that "guaranteed an unjust outcome" at the close of the Dakota-US War (Chomsky 15). In my growing up years, a granite marker—since taken down and hidden, lost, or destroyed—memorialized the site at the main river-crossing. I wanted to write about the history that marker had witnessed.



The 4th-grade Minnesota history folder I have kept houses a researched paper—with note cards I clearly didn't compose while researching. Topic: the state flag. Ask me about our state flag, and I'd have to dig out that paper to read to you my *schooled* answer.

Ask me about the paper I didn't write, and I will tell you the story I have shaped with my family about our multicultural Minnesota—curiosities and contempts, contraries and complexities, conflicts and compassions. I will tell you *learning stories* I have shaped across scores of courses and teachers, stories that come from navigating power, exposing privilege, and building my own learning communities in order to survive hidden curriculums, test-driven student obedience, and coerced teacher complicity.

Ask me how I became a faculty developer at the flagship university of my home state, and I will also tell you about building learning-teaching communities because of my family and those rare mentors and peers who value learning in other ways. Many of

them having been students like me: working class, ethnically- and community-rooted, alive with learning in stultifying contexts, and actively engaged with difference as richness.

I will tell you what I learned in practice at age 10, and now have confirmed in contemporary research rooted in people's lives: telling of real and complex stories—family, community, historical—engages children in sense-making endeavors. *New York Times* reporter Bruce Feiler explains the research behind “Stories that Bind Us” in this way: “The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.” Children need three sorts of narratives addressing family as a group and family from the vantage points of individuals:

- (1) ascending narratives—progression, challenge, new opportunities;
- (2) descending narratives—stumbling, re-grouping, lost opportunities;
and most of all,
- (3) oscillating narratives—ups and downs, variations in life, decisions made about sticking together – or not

Oscillating narratives provoke sense-making—the development of a way to tell a life with meaning. Oscillating narratives unfold over time, through interaction in social gatherings and in small conversations. Each oscillating narrative involves reflection and action; prompts children to notice alternatives and possibilities; practices the basics of constructivist, transformative, and connectivist learning.

That paper I didn’t write has everything to do with my being the teacher I have become 45 years later. In researching that paper, I learned about then-contemporary race-, gender- and sexuality-based civil rights movements going on in the world—and on the college campus just blocks away. From my older cousins on campus, I learned that learning in other ways was possible—in fact had a body of scholarship and was practiced in diverse communities and classrooms.

It’s that lovely mashup of teaching and learning histories, theories, narratives that I want future faculty to engage—in words, in teaching practice, in being learners. It’s the learning-teaching sense making with regard to their own histories and those of students they’ve yet to meet that guides our weeks together.

Learning Stories

“Learning refers only to significant changes in capability, understanding, knowledge, practices, attitudes or values by individuals, groups, organisations or society.”

—Frank Coffield

The part of that 4th-grade story that initially angered me was the teacher’s decision that we were “too young to understand” that particular history, coupled with her assumptions that my parents would certainly agree with her decision. She was half right: my parents suggested that my teacher meant well so I should write the paper assigned, and I could go to the public library to learn more about Minnesota history. In effect, their idea was that I should double my learning.

My paternal grandmother was the one to actually take me to her local library to look through reference books to learn something more than Mankato as the site of the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. I honestly remember little about what we learned that day. More vivid is her face puckering up just before she closed a book with a slap, and then again her face as we returned home where she read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Indian Hunter" to me. In reading, Gram's brow scrunched tight as she read the line of "the white man's...love unkind," then relaxed as she turned her face to mine and asked, "What do you make of that?"

We talked that afternoon of Gram's few years in northern South Dakota, of starting school in a sod building and of leaving school after Grade 8—with perfect attendance—to help her grandmother set up the family home in Minnesota as a boarding house. She brought to voice that afternoon her still-deep despair as she remembered the township of her 1910s South Dakota growing up years—peopled with white settlers proud to speak hostile words and teach inaccuracies about Native Americans generally, and about state-based tribes specifically.

Across the years, as we continued to talk about the news we watched and novels we read, she linked America's removals of Native American children from the reservations to boarding schools (where home languages and visits were banned) to England's annexation of Wales and the 1840s imposition of English-only schools and Anglicized Bibles that left her Welsh great-grandparents "illiterate" and "unschooled." Suppressed home languages, imposed versions of Christianity, and commodifiable trades for boys and girls—these were indeed the shared, descending narratives she set out from the perspective of non-dominant cultural peoples. Still listening now to that storytelling allows me to glimpse the compassion Gram built from seeing parallels—still listening allows me to appreciate her keen awareness that the two narratives were not the same. Yet taken together, she knew they could be transformative for her young listener.

Yes, my grandmother was engaging in sense-making by sharing and speculating about two non-canonical life narratives she saw as threads in her life. Two non-conforming cultural groups—one in mid-Wales and one in middle-America—both informing her life, once she returned to Minnesota to aid her grandmother in running that boarding house. Stories—in novels from the library, in the monthly *Farmer* magazine passed through the family, in the weekly newspaper picked up as early as possible, and in the words of people who sat at the table when that boarding house again became our family house—these narratives staved off erasure for the tellers and established how I came to see learning: as something we do through interactions, rather than as something we receive with a set of directions for future use.

I understand my grandmother now as a first teaching mentor. She recognized the many ways I was an unsuccessful learner in 1960s schooling structures, and then she talked with me through other ways of learning – which included questioning of conventional assumptions about people and history and all sorts of social structures. I understand, too, that her mentorship sustained my critical thinking in PhD school while eschewing what Brookfield notes (9-10) in adult learners as "cultural suicide."

Learning Stories for Resilience

“Resilience is the ability to weather the inevitable storms of life, and to come out all right.”

—Marshall Duke (in Kurylo)

In 1967, the summer following 4th grade, my parents and I packed our cobalt-blue, four-door Dodge Cornet 440 V8 with suitcases, books, and snacks enough to drive from Minnesota to Washington, DC. We drove through the southern border-states, then on to Long Island, before returning home via northern tollways that dropped off lanes to become Midwestern highways.

Words from radio stations, books I’d packed, and stories my parents told inside the car wove with local accents and tales at roadstops to shape our traveling words. Sing-alongs to blues-and-country radio stations pervasive throughout the drive. Speculation about family responses to my uncle’s upcoming visit with his male partner. Serious discussions when I asked why one horse was “riding atop another.”

Talking about my mother’s anticipation of standing at the Lincoln Memorial, where Marion Anderson sang in 1939 and where the 1963 March-on-Washington musicians and speakers stood, brought my father to talk about race for the first time in my memory. With his distinctly Welsh dark skin and wavy black hair, my father recounted people’s wary glances his way in the 1950s while on short Navy leaves in the South. In Alabama, he was “taken to be a Negro” when he ventured out alone—sent to segregated seating areas at the movies.

Standing at Lincoln’s feet, I held tightly to my parents’ hands and imagined a future built on the stories my grandparents and parents told. Moving back into that memory, I can now tell the story that my parents were taken to be an interracial couple by white Washington D.C. police officers who responded to a traffic accident that we were part of during that visit. As I write myself back into that afternoon, I see my parents trying to contain their anger at the demeaning and harassment, and their efforts to re-direct my eyes and ears as that story unfolded. From my files now, I can look back to my college constitutional law notes outlining the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Loving v. Virginia* ruling that dismantled state miscegenation laws just weeks after we drove away from our visit to the U.S. south.

Moving back in memory to re-enter Minnesota that summer, I see that my parents had peopled our home with diversity: with first-generation college-student boarders who were women from nearby towns or international men claiming educations not available at home; with activist cousins who as students helped create ethnic and women’s studies departments. I recall people and books opening my eyes to our community: Mexican-American blue collar workers; African-American professionals; Asian-American families whose Midwest location kept them from internment camps but not from local prejudice; Arab-American merchants; Jewish professors; gay and lesbian teachers; first-wave southeast Asian immigrants; biracial family members.

Pivotaly, the narrative I built from that summer onward let me join with others in and beyond classrooms to navigate schooling with our own questions and with our own learning practices, which required consciously jettisoning scripts that schools created for students from non-dominant cultural groups, who also learned in ways that didn’t align

with the dominant, industrialized, passive, banking-model learning ways.

In college, as in junior and senior high school, I came to look for teachers who required creative thinking from students – in the Sir Ken Robinson sense of having, pursuing, testing, and sharing original ideas of value. We created own scripts for learning, sharing them in peer learning communities, where:

students can be encouraged to share their private feelings of impostorship in an attempt to help them realize that their private misgivings can coalesce into publicly recognized truth. Knowing that one is not alone in thinking or feeling something that seems divergent is an important step in coming to take one's own experience seriously, especially when that experience is of a critical nature and therefore likely to be devalued by mainstream theory and practice. (Brookfield 13)

Why and how do these stories matter to the learning lives of the diverse graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who enroll as learners and future faculty in the course I teach?

Quite basically, these stories matter in a big-picture way because the students who elect to enroll in my Preparing Future Faculty course know at tacit, gut levels that mastering traditional ways of teaching and learning allowed them to succeed in higher education. They worry, too, about cultural suicide in turning away from the teaching they've seen around them; simultaneously they might well be standing in front of those future classrooms as imposters, playacting at teaching if they don't risk figuring out something now. These future faculty come into our classroom energized by research involving complex problem-solving and high-functioning collaboration with amazingly diverse colleagues. This has excited and sustained them. This makes them wonder about the teaching stories they've glimpsed—in headlines, in past experiences, in conversations with departmental alumni now teaching out in the world.

If I am dead honest, the stories matter because when I stand in the classroom alongside my own learning stories, I am both teacher-mentor *and* the sort of student they most fear—the student who is different, dissenting, and difficult to figure out, yet who is a dedicated learner who could persist in higher education if a teacher could imagine learning and offer teaching in other ways. I personalize for a moment that at-risk, high-potential, achievement-gap student they very much do not want to fail. The oscillating narratives we draw from theory, experiences, observations and what we create in the classroom unleash a realization that active learning principles and practices are centuries deep, and praxis is rich rather than new and faddish, or newly invented by STEM disciplines and technology tools.

If I am lucky, my students will allow the stories they collect to reverberate in the teaching and learning practices they build to support the next generations of learners. And, in making that possible, I honor my first mentor – my grandmother.

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