

Narrative interventions: Power sharing and boundary crossing in action

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Abstract

This article reflects on the assumptions we make in the design of faculty and graduate student orientations and on the implementation of redesigned orientations that foreground participant narrative. When educational developers purposefully make space for participant stories at their orientations, it is a way not only to share power with graduate students and faculty but also to create a more inclusive environment and sense of belonging. We offer a reflection on educational developer and participant experiences of small narrative interventions in graduate student and faculty orientations at our university in 2021. We find that through foregrounding story sharing we were able to shift from assimilation to acculturation by including, cultivating, and honoring diverse views, creating community, and promoting agency.

Keywords: narrative pedagogy, belonging, stories, orientation

Narrative is powerful—even in small doses. For the past several years, educators at our center have been exploring and experimenting with narrative pedagogies and practices in academic environments. We designed narrative opportunities for our courses, retreats, workshops, webinars, and annual orientations. This approach has taught us that intentionally designing activities to encourage structured storytelling

among faculty and graduate student teachers is a way to cultivate and honor diverse views, create community, and promote agency in educational development activities. This article reflects on our implementation of narrative activities in faculty and graduate student orientations. We describe the theoretical underpinnings informing our work, participant descriptions of the impact of these brief interventions, and our reflections on the experience.

The use of story and narrative in educational development has gained increasing attention in recent years. It was a prominent theme at the 2020 POD Network Annual Conference, with six sessions focused explicitly on it in response to its centrality in the call for proposals. It was discussed in several sessions in the 2021 conference as well, primarily in the context of educational developers' work in the areas of well-being and resilience during the multiple pandemics of 2020–2021. There is a widely accepted belief in the power of narrative in educational development, yet little research has been conducted on it.

Research on “story” and “narrative” in educational development scholarship yields only a handful of results. These include, for example, articles on writing to learn (Barry, 1984), writing faculty memoirs (O'Donovan & Simmons, 2017), and conversation and reflection for community building (Hoffman-Longtin et al., 2017; Lesser et al., 2016) and for meaning-making in times of crisis (Little et al., 2021). However, Alterio and McDrury (2003) examined the transformational power of story in professional development and provided a framework for using story in that context. Moon (2010) additionally provided an excellent overview of the literature on the use of story in higher education and professional development. We seek to build on that work to examine the impact of integrating narrative into educational development programs, specifically orientations for graduate students and faculty.

Miller's (2021) study of new faculty orientations found these events are rarely outcomes based, learner centered, or community building. Instead, orientations typically include administrative welcomes,

information about resources, and notifications about upcoming campus workshops. Our review of teaching centers at a range of colleges and universities found that graduate student teaching orientations, which have a somewhat different purpose, vary from asynchronous online modules or resources to the University of Michigan's comprehensive sessions on a range of topics, including sessions that build community. While the temporary and novice status of graduate student teachers affects the purpose and design of their orientations, both new faculty orientations and graduate student teaching orientations would benefit from interpersonal interactions and community-building activities.

Thus, instead of expecting orientation attendees to listen passively to administrative institutional grand narratives, our approach aligns with Ibram X. Kendi's (2020) view. After his 2020 keynote, "Toward Becoming Antiracist Educators," at the 2020 virtual conference *Beyond Imagination: The Fierce Urgency to Claim the Heart of Education*, Kendi was asked how he would improve higher education. He responded that it would call for a shift from assimilation to acculturation. Rather than expecting new faculty or graduate students to be absorbed into the existing institutional culture and adopt existing values and norms, we contend that a focus on acculturation could initiate a genuine exchange of cultural values, beliefs, and norms among diverse faculty during orientation events. We have found that one way to initiate this "shift" from assimilation to acculturation is through narrative.

We reimagined opening sessions for New Faculty Orientation (NFO) as a new "Our Stories, Our Community" workshop and for Graduate Student Orientation (GSTO) as a focus within the "Creating an Inclusive Classroom Climate" workshop, using narrative interventions to amplify individual voices rather than existing institutional narratives. Instead of expecting new faculty and graduate students to become assimilated into our institutional culture, we sought to create opportunities for acculturation by foregrounding the diverse stories of new faculty and graduate students (Kendi, 2020). When new faculty and

graduate students share their stories with one another, it creates the potential for advancing agency, honoring diverse ways of storytelling, and promoting solidarity (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017). This approach also foregrounds individual “counter-stories” that challenge existing institutional grand narratives or “majoritarian” stories that privilege existing norms and peoples (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Our shared purpose for redesigning our orientations and foregrounding faculty and graduate student voices is an attempt to transform ourselves, our academic communities, and our institutional culture through narrative.

To that end, this article is a reflection on the impact that the integration of storytelling into our orientations had on graduate student and faculty participants. We will reflect on the brief narrative interventions we implemented in our face-to-face NFO and our online GSTO at Kennesaw State University. Although each intervention was adapted for its unique audience and modality, we found common patterns of response across both audiences. These patterns revealed a significant and meaningful impact of storytelling in orientations. Through it, participants co-created community; a sense of belonging; cross-disciplinary connections; and, particularly for graduate students, a sense of confidence in using narrative in their own classrooms. Perhaps less obvious to the participants at the time, they were also creating cross-cultural communications rather than listening to institutional grand narratives, the process of acculturation over assimilation.

Theoretical Rationale

Meaningfully engaging and building community among our colleagues in our educational development programs is even more pressing given the current context of the great faculty and student disengagement (McClure & Fryar, 2022). Furthermore, by giving equal weight to the art and science of narrative, we are working across disciplinary borders in the “uneasy comingling of approaches” that combines perspectives from the humanities and social sciences to improve

educational development at our institution (Cruz et al., 2018, p. 7). Through storytelling, faculty and graduate students co-construct knowledge, beliefs, and values during our orientations as a means of acculturation (Kendi, 2020).

As Polkinghorne (1988) contended, narrative and story connect us together in a manner that derives collective understanding. It also serves to organize and attribute meaning to our actions in the context of a greater whole (Binks et al., 2009). Ironside (2006) argued that narrative pedagogy is transformative insofar as it disrupts traditional teaching practices and facilitates co-constructed knowledge. When educational developers intentionally and purposefully make space for stories at their orientations, it is not only a way to share power with graduate students and faculty but also a means of border crossing. It challenges assumptions and generates collective interpretations, which builds community among teachers and faculty. This approach is power sharing in action, à la Weimer (2013), which we know from research on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) not only increases motivation to learn but also has implications for motivation to work.

The use of narrative in educational development is powerful on several levels. It is an effective transdisciplinary approach, one that is “not borrowed from one discipline and applied to another, but rather transcends disciplines and is therefore applicable in many fields” (Lattuca, 2001, p. 83). Narrative is ubiquitous. As the literary theorist Roland Barthes (1975) stated, “[Narrative] is present at all times, in all places, in all societies, indeed narrative starts with the very history of [hu]mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories” (p. 237). And narrative has the capacity to create social cohesion. Recent neuroscientific studies demonstrate that narrative affects both the storyteller and the listeners. It has the power to create shared memories that create a collective, social memory (Chen et al., 2017).

Decentering the educational developer’s role to make space for faculty or graduate student teacher stories is also a means to effect

acculturation over assimilation. Centering faculty or graduate student teacher stories ensures diverse voices and ways of storytelling are heard and valued. As Manathunga (2006) stated, we need to avoid the “certainty” of our positionality as educational developers, acknowledge the fluidity of our identities, and “find useful ways of unearthing the unspoken and unspeakable emotional, unconscious, embodied pleasures and tensions inherent in teaching and learning, not just rely on the usual forays into the cognitive” (p. 26). Conversely, because narrative is so powerful, we recognize that sharing stories can also be threatening to marginalized or minoritized faculty and graduate students. Care should be taken in designing narrative activities that provide safe opportunities and options for interactions that are relevant to each context, such as providing prompts, opportunities, and options that are mindful of the range of participants’ backgrounds and experiences.

Different Narrative Interventions in Faculty and Graduate Student Orientations

While we sought to engage participants in co-creating community, an inclusive and welcoming climate, and a sense of belonging in faculty and graduate student orientations within our institutional context by asking them to share their stories, our purposes for implementing narrative strategies in each orientation was somewhat unique.

Institutional Context

Kennesaw State University is a public, suburban university and Carnegie-designated doctoral research institution (R2). It has approximately 38,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students across 10 colleges. It employs approximately 50 graduate students and 1,880 faculty, among whom 1,130 are full time and 750 are part time. Of the full-time faculty, approximately 560 are tenured, 210 are on the tenure track, and 360 are not on the tenure track.

Graduate Student Teaching Orientation Design

Graduate students are some of the busiest students on campus, and they are sometimes the most likely to drop out without completing their degrees. Doctoral attrition hovers around 50% for traditional face-to-face programs (Cassuto, 2013). In addition, particularly in doctoral programs, graduate students may feel isolated. A study of graduate students in four different institutions in Maryland specifically focused on women and underrepresented minority graduate students found that “sense of belonging influences graduate student retention and success” (O’Meara et al., 2017, p. 251). This sense of connectedness and support from peers, faculty, and administrators must be intentionally cultivated to create community among graduate students. Our intervention follows O’Meara et al.’s (2017) recommendation to encourage faculty and administrators to “think strategically about enhancing sense of belonging in ways appropriate to the distinct culture and nature of graduate education” (p. 269).

With all the above factors in mind, the design of our graduate student teaching orientation focuses on honoring graduate students’ unique backgrounds and experiences. At its most basic level, the event is designed to teach scholarly and inclusive teaching pedagogies and practices. But beyond that, the orientation provides opportunities for graduate students to learn about themselves and one another as they begin to develop their unique teaching identities. Developmental theories suggest GTAs gain confidence as teachers through conversational means (Nyquist & Sprague, 1998). Thus, we model and practice narrative approaches so that graduate students gain confidence in applying similar strategies in their current and future classrooms.

The GSTO was delivered fully online in August 2021, featuring four 50-minute, content-based sessions in addition to the welcome, overview, and graduate student teaching essentials. Approximately 111 students attended throughout the day with no observable drop in attendance in any one session. The 50-minute session “Creating an Inclusive Classroom Climate” was redesigned to invite students’

stories. Students were prompted to tell a brief story about their path to their discipline. The story prompt read, "Tell a brief story about a moment, an event, a person, or a struggle that influenced your path to your discipline. Something you would share with your future students." Participants were asked to share their stories anonymously on Padlet after the facilitator modeled a brief story about imposter phenomenon and sense of belonging during a teaching assistantship, which was posted earlier on Padlet, along with a representative image and title.

New Faculty Orientation Design

We know from the literature that connection and affirmation are important for retention and faculty success (Dunham-Taylor et al., 2008), that perception of teaching self-efficacy is an important predictor of job-satisfaction (Ismayilova & Klassen, 2019), and that a sense of community and belonging is an essential component of faculty well-being and productivity (Conway, 2012). Therefore, in recent years we have redesigned NFO with this in mind. In particular, we have built into our orientation sessions activities that help increase teaching self-efficacy and provide structured opportunities for building community, experiencing validation, planning goals, and connecting to others for support. One of the most significant changes we made was devoting a significant amount of time during orientation sessions to developing and sharing stories about prior experiences and the experiences participants want to have in their first year at our institution. In essence, we model and provide space for them to experience narrative pedagogy in action.

The NFO was delivered over the course of three days in August 2021. All faculty who had been hired since the August 2020 orientation were asked to attend a face-to-face program on Day 1 and an online program on Day 2. The face-to-face program on the first day included a welcome from the president, provost, and representatives of our teaching and learning center, followed by a story-sharing workshop (the narrative intervention described below). The day concluded with a workshop on teaching policies; a presentation from our chief

diversity officer; concurrent sessions on evidence-based practices in teaching and learning; and a workshop on planning for a successful first semester. The online program offered on the second day featured concurrent sessions pertaining primarily to logistics, such as processing HR paperwork; connecting to library resources; and getting set up with the learning management system, email, parking, and so forth. We also offered an online resource fair with representatives from the university who provide support services to faculty and online concurrent workshops on supporting students through adversity, legal issues, and resources for part-time faculty. On the third day of the orientation, we offered an online program for full-time faculty who were not limited term. It focused on topics pertaining to promotion, tenure, research, and grants. Approximately 185 faculty attended on the first day, and 68 attended on the third day. We did not track attendance for the second day's online concurrent sessions, but they were relatively well attended, except for some of the resource fair sessions.

The face-to-face narrative intervention, which is the focus of this article, was situated in the first workshop on Day 1 and titled "Our Stories, Our Community." The intervention began with an explanation of the research on the relationship between story sharing and connection. A representative of our teaching and learning center shared their 10-minute personal story about overcoming challenges to find meaning and direction as an LGBTQ early-career faculty member at a top-ranked R1 university. Participants were then asked to "reflect quietly, take notes on a handout, and then share with a small group of three to four faculty at their table about their own stories from the past year of overcoming, discovering, gratitude, and/or creating." This reflection prompt was intentionally simple in order to make as much space as possible for them to fill without making it too contrived. They were then asked to "share the headline of their individual stories with their small group." As a group, they concluded the dialogue by identifying a headline that represented a theme that emerged from the small group and wrote it on a sticky note that they posted on a nearby wall. The facilitator debriefed the activity by reading, commenting on,

and asking questions about each group's headlines that were posted on the wall so that the whole room could get a sense of what their colleagues were sharing with one another.

Participant Reflection on the Narrative Interventions

We invited participants in both orientations to volunteer to participate in the same IRB-approved survey about their perceptions of the narrative intervention they experienced. At the end of each of the narrative interventions described above, faculty and graduate students were invited to complete an optional and anonymous 5-minute survey, using their mobile devices. The first question of the survey described the research study and asked participants if they wanted to opt in; 157 faculty chose to participate in the study. We share here the themes that emerged from their responses to the open-ended question, "Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in the exchange of stories in this session?"

We identified themes from the open-ended responses using in vivo coding (Baudier, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Of the 157 orientation participants who completed the survey (28 graduate students and 129 faculty), 30% were graduate orientation participants, 85% were faculty orientation participants, and 66% were total orientation participants.

Patterns Across Both Orientations

The responses from the survey indicated that both graduate students and faculty experienced a meaningful impact on their connectedness and sense of belonging as a result of the narrative intervention. Participants also reported an increase in perceived self-efficacy in the use of narrative pedagogy in teaching. This was the case across roles and disciplines.

Fourteen themes emerged from the responses to the open-ended question we asked in the survey, "Is there anything else that you

would like to share about your experience in the exchange of stories in this session?" The most common themes were the social benefits of the narrative intervention: increasing connection (seven mentions), increasing comfort (six mentions), increasing a sense of belonging (two mentions), and giving participants an opportunity to find their voice in the group.

Examples of the responses include:

- "[It] surprised me the connections I saw with people across departments including the person I happened to sit beside just by chance. We have common research goals and interests and work in completely different areas/educational departments."
- "Helps to unify the group and create a comfortable environment."
- "Very comforting and inspiring to read stories that resonate with me, especially with common experiences."
- "It was comforting to find out that I'm not the only one anxious about teaching for the first time, even though we all have different stories on how we came to teaching this upcoming semester."
- "Truly brought our table together as a cohesive group. We were all reserved at the beginning of the exercise and by the end, we're exchanging ideas, jokes and laughing as a group. Wonderful experience."
- "I think exchange of stories is important because it allows for those who feel like they couldn't speak up before to do so in that group setting."

Additional themes that emerged included the universal value of stories (five mentions) and the value of storytelling with students (four mentions). Three respondents commented on the value of storytelling with students:

- "It gives students a voice and a sense of belonging that can help foster relationships, enhancing the learning experiences."
- "My story is unique to me and sharing it has connected me and my students."
- "Having students participate, feel they belong, adds to success."

Three of the comments about the experience reflected increased perception of agency in the use of narrative pedagogy, one of which indicated that the narrative intervention gave them ideas about engaging online students. One was more indirect, noting that the activity served as an encouragement and reminder to incorporate story sharing among students. The third one demonstrated uncertainty about incorporating it into teaching the curriculum of the class, but indicated that they would still use stories for introducing themselves—without referring to providing space for students to share stories. In their words,

- “It has given me a fresh perspective on how to engage with online students to foster [a] greater level of dialogue through stories.”
- “I love this! My dissertation was on taking the perspective of others in Entrepreneurship and storytelling is a first step to getting students to learn from others’ perspectives. Thank you for the reminder and encouragement to incorporate these exercises into class.”
- “I didn’t know how to do it in a Stats class, but I can see using a story to introduce myself to the class.”

Two respondents indicated that they experienced discomfort from the story-sharing activity. Of those, one explained that the activity felt contrived and the other explained that it took too long. While that number may seem negligible, when designing narrative interventions and providing prompts it is crucial to anticipate the diversity of participant identities and experiences and to honor any reluctance to participate and offer alternatives. For example, a storytelling prompt could include a range of response options: sharing a story about a classroom scenario, student interaction, research discovery, or disciplinary approach.

Author Reflections

As we reflect on how we made space for participant narrative to improve our orientations, we begin with the experiences in teaching

our own classes that influenced the decision to redesign these events. For example, we observed significant changes in our own face-to-face and online classrooms when implementing small narrative interventions. We then turn to an analysis of the markedly consistent outcomes of the narrative interventions across our distinct faculty and graduate student orientation designs and audiences.

In Esther Jordan's undergraduate political science course, students were asked to share their democracy stories. This led to markedly improved student engagement in learning activities and consistency of student communication when life adversities interfered with attendance and assignment completion. This effect manifested before the COVID-19 pandemic and continued well into the onset of the great student disengagement (McClure & Fryar, 2022), both in online and face-to-face classes, from Spring 2019 through Spring 2022. This effect was especially notable among non-binary, neurodiverse, Latinx, and BIPOC students. For example, students took the initiative to include in their democracy stories how their experiences with marginalization motivated them to learn in that particular course. They also referred to one another's stories and demonstrated great respect for one another as differences such as neurodiverse outbursts and tears of fear related to racial violence manifested throughout the term.

In Linda Stewart's online graduate class, *College and University Teaching*, a small shift in the prompt for student introductions from "Tell us a little bit about yourself" to "Everyone has a story to tell. Tell us a story about your path to graduate school. It could be about a moment, an event, a place, a person." Stewart first shared a story about the impact of a professor that affected the decision to change majors. The change in prompt and the shared story increased the student-to-student introductions from an average of 124 words to 499 words and student-to-student exchanges and interactions on the introductory discussion board tripled from previous years. The patterns of response have continued semester after semester. These student anecdotes, along with our individual and collaborative research and presentations on narrative pedagogy and practices, were the

impetus for this continued inquiry into the role of narrative in educational development, and specifically orientations.

As we sought to incorporate similar narrative activities into the orientations we led as educational developers, we did so in keeping with Lang's (2016) small teaching approach; our narrative interventions in each orientation were a small segment of each orientation. However, the enthusiasm during the events, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback in the event feedback, were unexpected. They seemed out of proportion to the size of the intervention, which confirmed our initial views about the power of narrative and its effects on faculty and graduate students.

In both the NFO and the GSTO, the willingness to participate and the enthusiasm for this narrative approach were similar. During the NFO, the immediate energy and activity in the room as participants began to share their stories with small groups at their tables were obvious. Rather than quietly listening to one administrator after another outline expectations, provide lists of resources, or issue warnings, new faculty were eagerly talking to one another, sharing their stories of overcoming, gratitude, discovery, and/or creating. This learning-centered approach allowed them to reflect on where they have been, and the next part of the session invited them to identify their future goals and what they want their stories to be at their new institution. Thinking of entering an institution in a narrative way, as a means of creating your own story within the story of the larger institution, is empowering and illustrates what Kendi (2020) called acculturation. Hearing the euphony of faculty discussions brought excitement and energy to the orientations that bode well for future teaching at a new institution. The enthusiasm was infectious.

While the graduate student teaching orientation was a full day from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. online, a similar enthusiasm was observable when students wrote their brief stories and "hearted" or commented on one another's postings. During the debriefing of the activity, student feedback was consistently positive. The new faculty members' and graduate students' willingness to participate, genuine enthusiasm

for the storytelling sessions, and overwhelmingly positive feedback supported our survey findings.

The process of our mutual, yet uniquely designed, narrative interventions for the NFO and GSTO revealed the strengths of this approach. Open-ended survey responses from participants validated our belief that a narrative approach has value not only in taking a learning-centered, humanities-based approach to orientations but also in initiating community ties among the participants. Many voices, many experiences became the session content, and common themes became apparent to the participants as well as the orientation organizers during the debriefing.

While our center's faculty and staff participated and observed these interventions, administrators did not attend these sessions. However, upon reflection, we think including administrators during these sessions as participants or observers would be helpful in exposing them to the stories, experiences, cultures, and power of their new faculty and graduate student teachers.

As we consider what was learned from this experience that we would like to see incorporated into future practice and research, there is a need to further interrogate the educational developer's role and identity as the facilitator of the story sharing. This makes us reconsider how we should approach new faculty and graduate student orientations. Integrating narrative more fully into educational development is a means to minimize the "certainty" of our positionality (Manathunga, 2006, p. 26) and carefully consider how we might decenter our roles while centering our faculty and graduate student experiences and stories. Perhaps we need to flip the frame from us orienting them to a reciprocal orientation to one another. Making space for story sharing among all who are present at orientations might hold promise as one step toward reimagining better orientations in which participants share power with the facilitators and administrators.

Beyond the orientation, these stories need wider campus audiences. We wonder what the educational developer's role should be in reaching these audiences? Perhaps it is also to facilitate getting

those stories heard by the administration. How might educational developers reach an administrative audience with faculty stories to transform the institutional culture? In the spirit of reforming higher education through acculturation over assimilation (Kendi, 2020), if we are co-constructing the university narrative during our orientations, what does that imply for the design of upper administrative approaches to events? What if administrators more often invited faculty or graduate student stories and made space for people to talk and be heard, not only at an annual orientation but throughout the year?

Finally, the connections between narrative and sense of belonging for faculty and graduate students should be interrogated further. Intentionally designing and studying how educational development opportunities promote a sense of belonging through narrative can impact and improve graduate student “pathways to the professoriate for groups that are typically underrepresented in academia such as women and racial or ethnic minorities” (O’Meara et al., 2017, p. 252).

To encourage faculty and graduate student success, further study is required in educational development circles about how valuing individual and collective narratives might not only serve but also advance underrepresented populations in higher education. From the limited evidence of our own experience, we suggest that narrative—in small doses—changes not only what we do in educational development but also the framing of what we do. It can be a part of the incremental process of change and movement toward a truly inclusive university (Lang, 2016).

Biographies

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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