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## Social Justice Storytelling: Giving our Students More than Just an Education in Speech

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### Abstract

In an effort to highlight the practical and relevant applications of public speaking, this activity was designed to give students a safe space to discuss current social justice issues. Beginning with an open-ended narrative prompt, this activity requires students to take turns building upon a social justice narrative, giving them an opportunity to practice confident delivery and healthy dissent while also further enhancing public speaking skills and fostering a social-justice orientation.

### Courses

Public Speaking; Small Group Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Intercultural Communication

### Objectives

- Give students an opportunity to practice communication skills
- Provide a platform for students to engage in critical dialogue about social justice issues

### Introduction and Rationale

So often in our public speaking courses, we focus on giving our students the skills they need to succeed as speakers; yet we often forgo discussions of deeper themes of what they can do with those speaking skills. Be honest—have you ever heard a “*how to bake brownies*” speech? How about a “*why we should get out of school a week earlier in the semester*” speech? While these topics allow students the opportunity to practice principles of effective public speaking, they run the risk of trivializing the power of our discipline. If our courses and discipline matter as much as we say they do, shouldn’t our students be tackling much bigger issues than “*why we all deserve A’s on this speech*”?

I think so and would guess that many others do as well. Therefore, I have made it a commitment to offer students a space where they can practice public speaking skills while simultaneously learning how to use those skills to be an effectively engaged citizen speaker. Given that the basic course (and other lower-level communication courses) are often required in many general education curricula, a focus on social justice situates the discipline as one with both practical and social merit. But beyond justifying our discipline and padding our assessment efforts, the public speaking course is a space rife with the potential for reflexive thinking and critical dialogue.

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Social justice storytelling—or the practice of reflexive and collaborative narrative building—is one activity that further promotes ethical speaking by fostering an other-oriented view of the communication situation. As Frey and associates (1996) contend, fostering a social justice sensibility is a fourfold process that “(1) foregrounds ethical concerns; (2) commits to structural analyses of ethical problems; (3) adopts an activist orientation; and (4) seeks identification with others” (p. 111). Of course, all of these behaviors undergird ethical public speaking practices as well. Further still, social justice storytelling provides a safe space for students to closely analyze their assumptions, feelings, and understandings of complex social justice issues in collaboration with other students who may have divergent or aligning views on the same topic, thus situating this activity and the classroom as a collaborative learning space (Breunig, 2009). As an anti-oppressive pedagogical practice, this activity encourages students to formulate bold and honest claims as a method of critical resistance to pervasive (and often unchecked) dominant ideologies and sets the stage for well-reasoned critical action in response to social injustice (Breunig, 2009; Freire, 2006; Giroux, 2004; Jones, 2009).

Below, I present social justice storytelling as a rich pedagogical technique, birthed out of a pivotal pedagogical moment that helped inspire the idea that the skills we are teaching our students have more power than many of us realize.

### Social Justice Storytelling

*“You’ll never believe what happened yesterday. I walked into the grocery store, turned to the left, and there, right in front of me, I saw...”*

This is how I have always started the second day of class in my courses. I then give each student leeway to take the story where they want; one student talks for a few seconds then receives a signal from me to stop and yield the floor to another. Together, we weave a grand, illustrious, and often ridiculous, narrative. You would be shocked where they take it. My mother would be embarrassed. Still, we have fun and together we create a safe climate that sets the foundation for their future public speaking endeavors. This usually works quite well for us. By the time speeches roll around, students have already gotten comfortable, shall we say, “pushing the boundaries,” and this translates into them pushing boundaries in their speeches. This activity allows students a safe space to practice impromptu speaking, quick recovery, creativity, audience analysis, and adaptation—all elements that enhance public speaking. In short, I love the activity and it has worked wonders.

But last semester was different. I couldn’t bring myself to use this activity on the second day of class. I don’t think my students would have been ready for it anyway. Literally, just a few days before, on August 9, 2014, a short distance away from our beloved university, Michael Brown was shot dead in Ferguson, Missouri. I recognize that this issue is political for some, but for those of us here, it wasn’t political—it was personal. As students trickled back onto campus, we could still feel the sting of what had happened just a few days before. There were demonstrations, sit-ins, public forums—we were all trying to deal and heal.

And yet, in the midst of a horrendous tragedy that rocked our nation and our community, the semester had to move forward. Even on the first day of class, you could feel the tension, the anger, and the confusion. As best as I could, I tried to connect the content of my course to social justice and civic engagement like I do in every course I teach, but the script I used semester after semester seemed like just that to me—a simple stump speech on why what I did mattered. In the

wake of one of the biggest social justice issues of my students' lives, the script felt stale and cold. My students did not care; they were too consumed with Ferguson, and rightfully so. I was too. We all were. So I could not do it, not this semester. I could not expect them to engage with me in some ridiculous group narrative about the grocery store. How could we be laughing about oranges falling off the shelf or a lady tripping over a wet floor sign when one of our own had just been gunned down in our streets?

I tried my hardest to think about how I could use Ferguson as a theme throughout the semester. Students clearly wanted to talk about it and it seemed like it might be a way to engage them. Then the guilt set in: was I using a national tragedy to bring legitimacy to my course and my teaching? Conflicted, I decided to move the semester forward like any other semester. I walked into the second day of class just like I had many semesters before, expecting to use an activity that I loved. But instead of *"You'll never guess what happened at the grocery store yesterday..."* another set of words fell out of my mouth: *"So....this Ferguson thing..."*

I'll never forget that moment. What followed took triple the time I had ever allowed for the activity, but I did not stop it. We followed the same format. I started the prompt and students took turns weaving together a story. We followed the same set of instructions. I let students speak for about 20–30 seconds, paused at an appropriate time, and then directed another student to pick up where the last had left off. It worked the same way, but the story was much different this time. There were no oranges falling off of shelves or people tripping over wet floor signs—there were emotions, there was an indictment, there was sense-making, there was healthy dissent. It was powerful. Perhaps it was not a "story" in terms of a linear narrative, but there certainly was a story going on—one where students could feel safe and supported in using communication skills to help solve, or at least better understand, a social problem that was rocking our world.

*"They just shot him. He's dead and he didn't even do nothing."*

*"I can't believe it happened so close to home. Why here? It's embarrassing."*

*"My brother told me that the city is a mess. Trash everywhere. People stealin' stuff."*

This impromptu activity emerged as a way for students to vent their frustrations and to dialogue about a highly controversial topic. There were tears. Emotions. Not everyone agreed. The activity spawned more critical and engaging dialogue than I had ever observed in an undergraduate course. Therefore, I believe that social justice storytelling has the potential to be a liberating, engaging, and effective activity for students to gain both impromptu speaking skills and an understanding that public speaking is an important practice for advancing social justice.

### **Setting the Stage**

Of course, social justice issues can be controversial. Although Ferguson hit our institution hard, I have to acknowledge that not everyone agreed on the problems or solutions. This is much less of a problem than an opportunity to get undergraduate students engaged in healthy dissent. For instructors with a desire to use social justice storytelling, there are many different ways to start the process. First, it involves being engaged with current issues on a local, national, or global level. While the selection of the social justice issue to explore is certainly instructor-led, pulling on highly publicized or emotive events is a great way to ensure that students engage

meaningfully with the issue. Ultimately, there should be an emotional connection; students (at least a small percentage of them)—should *have an opinion* or, at the very least, be informed about the issue.

This simultaneously models to our students that good public speaking endeavors are *emotional*—they stem from or inspire passion—and that these endeavors are relevant, revealing to students the importance of connecting topics to their audience and reaching consensus. While there is no “right way” to begin the process of social justice storytelling, instructors should always keep in mind the multi-dimensional goals of effective public speaking when selecting a prompt.

### Facilitating Dialogue

The best public speaking endeavors are inherently conversational. I stress to students that good public speaking is not about an endless flow of knowledge; it is dialogue, not merely dissemination. Social justice storytelling helps them realize that a conversational speaking style does not mean that public speaking is dialogic; rather, it is a starting point for the interrogation of the audience’s passions, emotions, and beliefs. It is a foundation upon which consensus is built. As such, instructors using this activity should start by offering a simple, open-ended sentence:

*“So...this Ferguson thing...”*

*“Last night I saw the television promo for Caitlin Jenner’s new show...”*

*“There seems to be a lot of crazy stuff going on in the Middle East right now...”*

*“How about Tom Brady and the deflated footballs?”*

Facilitating dialogue begins with a prompt about a social justice issue. Again, I recognize that these issues are often controversial and loaded, and present potentially tricky situations. To me, that is a good thing. I want my students to know how to communicate confidently even when their beliefs are challenged. I want them to understand how to communicate ethically with people from different backgrounds. I welcome the messy. If you are more conservative in your teaching technique, simply chose social justice issues that are not as controversial. Start the conversation and let students take it where they want.

After you begin the open-ended sentence prompt, point to one student to take it over. At first, students may appear timid or unwilling. Encourage those students to say whatever comes to mind. After students speak for a few seconds (this ranges: I allow some to speak one sentence; others are so consumed, they speak for longer). While there is no formula, remember that this activity is designed for *all* students to engage, so each should participate a healthy amount. However, because *all* students need to engage, be careful not to allow one or two students to dominate the discussion. Whenever there is a natural break in thought or sentence structure, quietly hold up a hand, signaling the student to “stop” and point to another student (or have the speaking student point to another), who will then pick up the conversation where it left off. The goal is not to highlight one person’s beliefs, but rather to use those beliefs as a stepping-off point for others. Guide the conversation; if it gets too emotional, redirect. If it falls apart, re-insert yourself and restart the conversation.

## Debriefing

Debriefing is a crucial part of any activity. However, with social justice storytelling, the debriefing is a bit more of a meta-cognitive endeavor. Since the goal of the activity is collaborative sense-making, students reflect *on* that sense-making as it manifests. I do not often debrief on the social justice issues themselves. I have to understand that the learning outcomes that guide my course are mostly focused on public speaking skills, not an actual comprehension of social justice advocacy. Thus, the goal is to provide them with a space to feel out what public speaking in front of an audience is like. However, I have been amazed to see how deeply students engage with social justice issues in their speeches and assignments. This activity prompts their thinking that social justice advocacy and public speaking are closely related; it inspires a social justice sensibility (Frey, Barnette-Pearce, Polluck, Artz, & Murphy, 1996).

## Appraisal

Students may at first be uncomfortable with social justice storytelling. I found that they were ready to engage about Ferguson, but when it came to talking about marriage equality, illegal immigration, or other things, the results ranged. Accordingly, instructors should exercise a healthy level of caution when using this activity. However, as communication faculty, we are well-primed to deal with conflict, dissent, and argumentation. I have found that students are highly engaged once they recognize that the classroom is a safe space for their opinions. Their commitment to tackling social justice issues in subsequent speeches also demonstrates to me the development of a social justice orientation. Of course, some students are ready to engage more quickly or deeply than others. This process can also help students recognize where their true passions lie, helping them identify relevant themes for future speeches and assignments.

As a whole, social justice storytelling is a powerful and empowering endeavor, especially for faculty who want to encourage their students to use public speaking as more than a “how-to” platform. It helps students see the connection between our discipline and real-world problems. It helps solve the “*why do I need to take this class?*” question, and ultimately inspires them to use the public speaking skills they are gaining to go out and make a difference in the world. The term “social justice” resonates differently among people. As Boulding (1988) notes, “our inability to recognize, agree about, or measure [social] justice is perhaps the greatest difficulty we encounter in trying to direct social policy toward it” (p. 49). Whether you talk about Ferguson, global terror, rape culture, or any other social justice issue, simply talking about timely and challenging issues has great potential to stretch the basic course—and your students—in new directions.

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