

TELLING TALES IN SCHOOL

Knowing our students, and our institutions, through their stories

By Lee Burdette Williams

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I had the privilege of sitting in on a discussion of evaluation and assessment as they pertain to student leadership development. The participants had been charged with the task of developing assessment mechanisms for the expected outcomes of leadership education. This was 1990, when the term "assessment" was relatively new to student affairs. As we wrestled with this concept, the group struggled to make sense of the notion of "assessing" the kind of results we had always taken for granted.

Then a curious thing happened. The struggle was temporarily abandoned for a much greater cause: the search for answers to the questions, "How do we understand our students? How do we make sense of these institutions of which we're part?"

It would be nice to report a concise answer to these questions. But I'm perfectly content to report that in the process, what we learned from each other was a new way of thinking about students and institutions and the world we live in, a way that enables us to appreciate the complexity of humanity and to stand in awe of the gorgeous mosaic of life that awaits us every day in our work with students.

When I find myself in discussions such as these, discussions about assessment and measurement, this tiny, but annoying, alarm goes off in my head. Despite my best efforts to shake it off and concentrate on the task at hand, the alarm sounds for me a reminder of what I call the "romance" of our work. I'm speaking of romance in the sense of a "prose narrative dealing with heroic or mysterious events," as one dictionary defines it, rather than "a love story" (though I guess love has something to do with it, but that's yet another story). There is something about our work, I believe, that is more art than science, more abstract than concrete, more sublime than mundane. Efforts to measure it have therefore always struck me as somewhat ignoble.

I could tell from the initial comments in the discussion I've mentioned that I was not the only one worrying about the deconstruction of our professional

poetry. More significantly, perhaps, is that the pattern of this discussion has been repeated in discussions I've heard since. First, we examine the use of common instruments of assessment: Myers-Briggs, the CUES, the SDTLI. And as quickly as we cite them, we shoot them down as unreliable, "culture-bound," or "gender-biased," fair enough criticism for most. We then turn to worrying about our dependence on quantitative inquiry, and from there, we begin to wonder if our pursuit of data is a response to our insecurity as a profession, our need to be "taken seriously" as an arm of the academy.

Granted, there is much information to be gleaned from a good solid research study that winds its way down to an F ratio, as any traditionally educated student affairs professional would admit. So what is the problem?

It was obvious that this particular group could not find satisfaction in these more commonly accepted methods. Discussions of these and other instruments left people frowning, thinking, it seemed, about their students, but thinking about them in ways not so easily captured. It was as though we were facing the task of standing in front of a masterpiece—a Monet, an O'Keeffe. Yes, such a work can be examined, even evaluated by certain standards. But can it be measured? Or does such an effort undermine the work's almost-irrational beauty?

One term that peppered our discussion was "stories," a simple enough word, it would seem. But I realized that it was this word that turned the frowns to knowing smiles, that brought some comfort to my frustrated colleagues. Our group realized that as we caught a glimpse of the power hidden in the notion of "stories," we began to get a hint of both a new way to know our students and a new way to think about our work.

In his book *The Call of Stories*, author Robert Coles tells of his lifelong pursuit of the more literary aspects of living. He describes a patient he saw in the early days of his psychiatric residency, one who daily challenged his developing psychiatric sensibilities. Even more challenging, though, was the dichotomous supervision he

was receiving from two psychiatrists. One, with whom Coles was quite taken at first, encouraged him to “formulate a diagnosis” for the patient, and pushed Coles to consider the various psychiatric angles in his treatment of her. The other psychiatrist frustrated Coles by taking a less “psychiatric” approach. One day, this psychiatrist captivated Coles by telling him a story that turned out to be a patient’s history. Coles was stunned, not as much by the approach of his supervisor, but by his own rapt attention to the “story” of this patient.

“The people who come to see us bring us their stories,” his supervisor told him. “They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives.” These words altered Coles’ entire view of psychiatric treatment.

Our students bring us their stories, written in the language of their families and cultures. There are many chapters completed even before we make that first contact. While they are with us, they continue to write, perhaps altering or refining the language, finding new ways to tell us about them, to tell themselves about the world.

Our students usually tell their stories in less conventional forms through their opinions, their actions, their decisions. We must be receptive to each of these, and constantly on the lookout for other tales they tell. Such opportunities are all around us, as Coles discovered in his clinical work. His epiphany came when his perspective shifted from “getting a patient’s history” to hearing a patient’s story. Perhaps ours comes when we shift our perspective from “gathering data” by more traditional methods to letting these stories be told in whatever ways suit them best. Our task then is not to categorize, theorize, extemporize, or judge, but to simply listen, occasionally seek clarification, and let these stories alter our views and our work as deeply and inexorably as a river alters its landscape. While more traditional methods have their place, providing us with useful information in a more accessible format (and, some would argue, are equally valid forms of “listening”), such methods can, and should, co-exist with the fine arts of both telling and hearing stories.

There are ways to give our students the chance to be storytellers in our classrooms, residence halls, activities programs, in their lives beyond the institution, and finding those ways must be our agenda for assessment. But will our institutions support this effort to know our students in ways not easily quantifiable?

Not quickly, not easily. But perhaps we need first to back up even further and listen to the stories being told by our institutions, long and meandering epics with casts of thousands. From these stories, we can learn of the values that undergird each assertion and action made by the institution.

It is a great moment when the stories of our students and our institutions intersect and, because of each other, create their own new plot developments. And we who work in higher education are in the best possible place to watch this develop—indeed, we have front row seats. But first we must hear the call of stories, even if it means harkening back to our favorite children’s tales to truly appreciate the power of a storyteller to weave new ideas into our lives.

Can we know our students through their stories? Absolutely. In W. S. Merwin’s poem, “Noah’s Raven,” the raven entangles the reader with the line, “The future splits the present with the echo of my voice.” If we listen, we can hear not only their past, but their futures (and, inevitably, our own) in the echoes of their voices. And in similar echoes can we hear the world in which we live and work. All that is required is a patient and discerning ear and a mind open to the intricate tales that unfold around us every day.

NOTES

Coles, R. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and Moral Imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Merwin, W. S. “Noah’s Raven” from *The Moving Target* (Copyright © 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963 by W. S. Merwin. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc. for the author.)

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