

Storytelling to Cultivate Growth Mindset and Social Belonging

Nirmal Trivedi

Kennesaw State University, ntrived2@kennesaw.edu

Author Biography

Nirmal Trivedi, PhD, is Director of First-Year Seminars and Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University. His research integrates the disciplines of English and American Studies with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. He was awarded the 2019 Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars Award from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Under his direction, Kennesaw State University's First-Year Seminar Program was awarded the inaugural USG Regents' Momentum Award for Excellence in Teaching and Curricular Innovation.

At our large (35,000 students), 4-year public university in a metro urban area, most students take a First-Year Seminar in their first semester. For the first unit of the course entitled “Academic and Social Belonging,” I developed a new assignment that could help students address some of the social and emotional challenges that come with the transition to college. As a literary scholar myself, I understand the power of stories and storytelling to transform lives.

In order to ease students into the assignment, I introduce students to the concept of storytelling in a very simple way. Borrowing [guidelines developed by education specialists](#) with the storytelling organization “The Moth,” I tell my students that every good story has three components: a transformation, high stakes, and authenticity. I tell them that even though they have only recently met each other, and that each of them is new to college, they all have personal stories of transformative change when they were faced with a challenge that seemed unsurmountable. By telling these stories of facing challenges to each other, whether or not the challenges were “overcome,” each of us will gain an appreciation for our collective resilience and that this well of inner strength can be summoned throughout the very challenging (and exhilarating) first year of college.

The assignment is informed by social psychology research on growth mindset (Dweck 2008) and on the impact of cultivating “belonging” in improving educational outcomes (Walton & Cohen 2011). Research on mindset tells us that human capacities and intelligence are not fixed but can be developed over time and research on “belonging” has shown how modest interventions that normalize the experience of struggle in school can build resilience in students, especially those who harbor a contingent sense of belonging. The title of the assignment, the “Not Yet Story,” is inspired by Carol Dweck’s [experiment in a Chicago school](#) where students were given a grade of “not yet” instead of a failing grade.

The “Not Yet Story”

I introduce the “Not Yet Story” during the second week of the semester when students have developed some initial inchoate impressions of each other. It is a time when they have not developed their own sense of belonging in the class and are eager to know more about each other. To give students an understanding of overall goal of the assignment, I provide them with the assignment sheet and rubric before introducing the key psychological concepts and techniques of storytelling. Below is the description they receive.

The **“Not Yet Story”** is a personal story you will tell to your fellow students about a **moment in your life when you had a learn something difficult**. To prep for this assignment, follow these steps:

1. What was it that you were trying to learn? What made it so difficult? What was “at stake?” for you or for others?
2. Review Carol Dweck’s TED Talk, [“The Power of Believing You Can Improve”](#) and ask yourself how it might relate to your “not yet” moment.
3. Listen to stories from “The Moth.” In class, we listened to two stories and you listened to two more stories on your own. Ask yourself how these stories established the following:
 - a. The stakes (the importance). Why did a particular important moment matter to the storyteller?
 - b. The transformation. What changed from beginning to end for the world around the storyteller?
 - c. The authenticity. How did the storyteller convey the authenticity of the experience?
4. Develop your own story to present. You can choose how to tell the story. For stories told orally or as an audio recording, you will have the option to share the story in class.

You may be wondering what this project has to do with what we are learning in class about how to succeed as a college student. As you now know, it’s critical to develop a sense of belonging in college, both socially and academically. You’ve also learned how learning itself takes:

- A **growth mindset** of “I’m not there yet, but I will be,”
- A “toolkit” of **learning strategies** that you can use depending on the situation, and
- The ability to be “**metacognitive**,” or, reflective about your learning before you learn, while you learn, and after you learn so that you know how to improve.

This project asks you to integrate these two concepts (*Belonging and Learning*) and tell a personal story to an audience of your peers.

The rubric only has a two-point scale from exemplary to “not yet” the four criteria are Mindset, Learning, Reflectiveness, and Presentation. If any presentation receives two or more “not yet” marks, the student has the option to revise their work for a better grade.

Storytelling Sessions

The stories told in class are stunning. They reveal the personal challenges and triumphs that each student carries with them before entering our classrooms. The class is transformed from a place in which a student and teacher have an adversarial relationship where the student needs to “game” the class for the best grade possible, to one in which each recognize in each other our diversity, resilience, and value. Decades of educational research has shown that once students feel respected and valued by their teachers and fellow students, their potential for academic success increases dramatically.

Some representative stories include:

- *The loss of a parent at a very young age and the self-education that followed;*
- *The fears of how one’s body is developing and overcoming an eating disorder;*
- *The pressures of being an athlete, working full time, keeping up a decent GPA, all while being the first in their family to get into college.*

We are careful in these storytelling sessions to listen without computers and mobiles. We listen and we acknowledge our deep histories. As the instructor, I direct us to the themes of personal resilience and the college experience. By the end of this first unit, the students trust me and each other so deeply that the next assignments and group projects are more focused on educational learning outcomes as fears of not belonging subside.

References

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House. Chicago.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, 331(6023), 1447-1451.