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Narratives of Peace and Violence: Storytelling in Education

A simple survey of human history and current events will reveal myriad instances of violent conduct and rhetoric perpetrated by nations and individuals against persons or communities they identify as the enemy. Well-known examples include Nazi propaganda teaching racial superiority; indoctrination of Native children in America by removing them from their cultures to educate them in Western thought; modern day terrorism, including the atrocities committed during 9-11; and Westboro Baptist Church picket signs reading "GOD IS YOUR ENEMY" and "MOURN FOR YOUR SINS" (Phelps-Roper). One might also think of the modern and historical demonization of those with mental health problems or abnormalities, or even recent statements by the United States President calling for a wall on the southern border to keep out alleged rapists and criminals: "When will the U.S. stop sending $'s to our enemies, i.e. Mexico and others" and "The Mexican legal system is corrupt, as is much of Mexico… stop sending criminals over our border" (qtd. in Reilly). All of these instances have one dynamic in common, and that is the formation and dissemination of vicious narratives of group identity. These stories of self and other, us and them, are immensely powerful and widely spread to shape behaviors and attitudes, but through the medium of education it is possible for us as users of language to claim responsibility and power over their role in our lives and society.

Group identities are formed within narratives disseminated through many methods of cultural education, such as the arts, information media, and institutionalized education systems. Each of these involve the transmission of central ideas to individuals who will shape and continue the society they are indoctrinated into. Educational narratives concern understandings of identity, history, basic collective reality, and morals. These topics can be used to further

harmful ways of relating in the world or, alternatively, contribute to more peaceful intercultural and interpersonal understandings.

It is essential to realize that the analysis of cultural storytelling can and should be applied to what goes on within classrooms. The understanding that "those who generate narratives–storytellers broadly conceived—are in a position of relative control in the process of social construction of meaning" can be easily applied to the dynamics within educational institutions (Senehi 43). Those who write historical narratives and create stories of cultural continuity can be said to be the storytellers in an educational context. It is vital to acknowledge the role of storytelling in relating these ideas, as "Narratives operate in the world and get results; they have *narrative potency*" (43). It is through this mode of human expression that we so effectively develop conceptions of races, nations, hierarchies, and other linguistically created and reinforced concepts.

As a means of dispersing ideals and inciting change, storytelling within cultures often deals with the topics of geographic space, memory, morality, emotion, socialization, identity, theories of knowledge, and conflict (Senehi 47-55). In each of these areas, there are both peaceful and violent uses of narrative, so the examination of how storytelling may be used for positive or negative effect is essential, particularly for a rapidly globalizing society. Through gaining this understanding, we as users of language become able to harness the power of education and other forms of human expression to promote an awareness of the workings of narratives, as well as introduce our own peace-promoting stories. In order to gain greater understanding of this subject, we can simply examine historical and contemporary examples of harmful narratives juxtaposed with those which have promoted peace.

The most obvious negative usages of narrative in human history are those which have promoted national identities and formed an enemy. Looked at closely, narratives of national identity are revealed to be flimsy things, created and reinforced by selective conception. There are striking connections between national historical narratives and mythology. The modern understanding of history as grounded in immutable fact is farther from the truth than students of history would often like to imagine. Yet the perception of historical narrative as sacredly factual is often prescribed by the academic community, which has enough ethos to make this claim as close to a dogmatic truth as the Western secularized worldview will allow. Historical narratives are necessarily selective and include only what is considered most significant in hindsight. Stefan Berger's writing on national identity myths within the study of history explains collective memory as a key concept for any understanding of the narratives that drive group identity:

> "Collective memory… includes many elements or events which individuals did not directly experience. Nevertheless, they have internalized a memory which is presented to them through a mixture of public and private narratives as a collective memory with the assumption that individuals should partake in it. Collective memory is thus, like history, always contested, and the result of attempts to give meaning to the past through interpretation." (492)

Such historical narratives are essential for a group conception of the "continuity of the national being," which would otherwise have no objective truth, as groups of individuals move and change over history, languages alter, and borders are defined and redefined (493). Though the study of history is generally thought of as truthful and based in verifiable fact, it is impossible for the stories we tell about the past to completely eschew some element of subjectivity. Despite this, stories of entity continuity motivate so much violence and territorial conflict, so that "The

history of the past 200 years is littered with instances where contested borders and the 'mythistories' connected to them have produced terrible bloodshed and genocidal tendencies" (Berger 498). For example, one might think of Irish nationalism under the rule of the United Kingdom. In this case, historical narratives of victimization under British rule, while sympathetic in many cases, were used to perpetrate violent acts of resistance such as the many bombings by the Irish Republican Army. Of course, this resistance only came about as a result of British imperialism, which can also be said to stem from convictions of national coherence and superiority. Of course, this phenomenon is not contained to Europe, but occurs among peoples worldwide. Ethnic identity narratives also drove the tragic Rwandan genocide of 1994, during which Hutus carried out ethnic cleansing on minority Tutsi people ("Rwanda: How the Genocide Happened").

In these cases of violence caused by strong group identity, the individual's place as part of a larger geographically and/or historically determined entity is always dictated by the assumption of nationhood or ethnicity as a basic fact of reality. This bedrock assumption is introduced in each individual's childhood, and is reinforced and further dogmatized by forms of cultural expression. In the case of the Rwandan genocide, it was said that the Tutsis once originated in Ethiopia. When Tutsi bodies were thrown into rivers during the massacres, it was said that they were being sent back to that ancestral place of origin. What Berger would call the "mythhistory" connected to the Tutsi ethnic identity, namely the claim that they originated in Ethiopia, served to separate the two groups. Eventually it was used to justify vicious actions, such as the throwing of murdered Tutsis into rivers to wash out of the national borders.

It seems the only way to counter the usage of such narratives for violent purposes is to reveal these stories' inherently subjective and creative nature through the very institutions that

traditionally reinforce them. By revealing their inherent flaws, education can weaken the use of narratives in creating violent mindsets. Teaching individuals to think critically about the fallacies contained in these narratives will weaken the dogmatic power of such stories. An examination of the many methods used to build these narratives can be presented in classroom settings, and specific historical and contemporary narratives can be actively analyzed by students. Learners may find empowerment in building their own positive narratives, recognizing that much of the truth of identity is inherently subjective and given meaning only through their own power as participants in language and culture.

This intertextual understanding of narrative, history, and group identity seems particularly important for the American educational system. American history is full of examples of identity narratives contributing to the oppression and harm of various groups seen somehow as the enemy or the other. One thinks immediately of the displacement of Native populations in North America for the ideal of manifest destiny; the use of the concept of race to maintain the institution of slavery; the historical disenfranchisement of the "weaker sex;" or the erasure and demonization of queer individuals, seen as morally corrupt. The negative impacts of these powerful narratives can still be seen today. The continuing destructive representation and lack of study of Native American history in American schools, as well as the manipulation of education in maintaining sexist and racist ideals, both show us that work remains to be done in examining these aggression-producing linguistic productions.

Historical narratives of nationhood impact American conceptions of immigration and borders in general, as well as what being American actually means. Work on these issues can be done in classrooms, if educators simply admit their own power in constructing students' views of how they relate to the world. Implementing peaceful narratives in educational settings would

involve two vital steps: transparency in the use of language to further certain ideals, and active classroom interaction with and analysis of such ideas. Rather than perpetuating traditional understandings of history, nationhood, self, and other, learners can take these stories into their own hands, turn them over, and change them.

The teaching of history in America functions as a continual attempt to create a distinct and legitimate group identity in the face of great diversity and questionable territorial rights as a colonizing force. With that problematic reality, and with the continual influx of new individuals, the "Repetition of the American nation-building story in U.S. history classes in grade school functions" for "attempting to detach outsiders and the naïve from their culturally 'unacceptable' and 'alien' customs and teaching them appropriate 'American ways' to think and behave" (VanSledright 109). The attempts of American education to reinforce a certain group identity can certainly be thought of as a "precarious undertaking," much like the formation of nation-building histories in other countries or groups with questionable historical continuity (VanSledright 109).

However, although American nation stories have been disseminated in many negative ways through institutionalized education, when analyzing the functions and flaws of this educational system, it is essential to acknowledge that storytelling and identity narratives are vital to the continued functioning and advancement of human societies as they are. We cannot dispense with them entirely, but narratives can be used to positive effect through the same system of dissemination. In fact, many of the ideals already present in American educational narratives contribute to positive and inclusive worldviews. These include the concepts of personal inherent rights, dignity, and privacy. Is there objective truth to these concepts? No, but they contribute to a more harmonious society and increase the wellbeing of individuals within the group.

It is vitally necessary that educational institutions admit their power in transmitting values systems and worldviews. They must openly embrace their role in creating positive cultural cohesion through the passing on of certain ideals, as "All forms of education are intrinsically values based, although in many circumstances the values are part of a subtle curriculum" (Kester 6). If this is honestly acknowledged by educational institutions and used openly as an instrument for social wellbeing, the harmful effects of identity narratives can be reduced (Kester 6). This would create opportunities for the bedrock assumptions contained in group identity narratives to be analyzed and questioned for their truth, function, and effects. For example, this might be done with the issue of historical heroes as they are used in nationalist narratives. Societies tend to choose heroes to teach national values, generally in the context of fighting against a foreign force, but instead we might choose our heroes to instill other values. It is true that "Each society has numerous peace heroes of the past to write volumes on and to share with children" (Kester 10). American education already touches on the lives of some of these people, such as Rosa Parks, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. However, others have been idealized in questionable contexts. One immediately thinks of Christopher Columbus, an American national hero being rapidly rewritten by modern understanding.

Institutions of education have the reach and resources to promote intertextual understandings of the many stories that fuel human society and analyze how these can be built with awareness and discarded when harmful. The significance of storytelling in forming group identities and the role of institutionalized forms of education in transmitting these narratives cannot be ignored by human societies if they wish to develop positively in a rapidly globalizing, diversifying world. Recognizing that language has so much power over human understandings of reality may allow us to take conscious control over the narratives we give to our future

generations, and to hand our descendants the key for examining those same narratives. There is a great deal of personal responsibility in recognizing this power, pointing out myths of identity when they arise in a harmful manner, and forming more healthy myths to replace them. Language is a part of our being. We live in it. We see through it. Our society rests on it. Language shapes our minds and moves on each of our tongues. It has power over us, yes. But ultimately we must recognize that we are the ones who speak.

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