The Power of Story in Demonstrating the Story of Power

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Abstract : Many students are returning to school after years of rich, lived experiences as parents, employees, volunteers, and in various other roles outside the university. While in the workforce or at home raising a family, they have gained authentic, personal observations of the power dynamics referred to as racism, classism, sexism, heteronormativity, and ableism. Encouraging your students to apply their own realities to course material that interrogates power structures and privilege not only facilitates student learning and understanding but also reveals that you, as a teacher, respect the experiences of your students as valuable and valid teaching tools. Though there is general recognition of the pedagogical value of having students share their experiences, facilitating such discussion can be a harrowing challenge for faculty. Additionally, for some students, the classroom can be very strange and too intimidating to share personal stories of injustice or inequality. In larger classroom settings, an attempt to integrate story-telling can turn into a cacophony of emotional testimonials. Not wanting to lose control of the class and feeling unqualified to respond to students' emotional confessions from their past, educators are often tempted to minimize the personal comments of students and avoid altogether an impromptu free-for-all. Knowing how and when to draw on the personal experience of your students involves a systematic plan for eliciting the most useful information at the right time. The trick is to design methods that induce student self-reflection in a way that is relevant to the course material and to then effectively incorporate these methods into lesson plans.

Keywords : pedagogy, story-telling, power and inequality, hierarchies of power
Conference Title : ICSES 2022 : International Conference on Sociology of Education and Socialization
Conference Location : Toronto, Canada
Conference Dates : September 20-21, 2022