

Tell Me a Story: The Power of Narrative in the Practice of Teaching Art

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Narrative is a form of discourse that “encode[s] and encrypt[s] the norms, values, and ideologies of the social order” (Friedman, 1998, p. 8). These values may be represented in many ways, including culturally learned codes, myths, and stories which reveal popular attitudes about gender, race, ethnicity, or education. As a mirror of culture, narrative appears in visual images and reflects the attitudes of society as well as the personal opinions and interests of artists and of those who use images to teach. Within the literature of art education there are many references to narrative that focus on how the stories of both teachers and students affect teaching and the making of art (Kellman, 1995, 1998; Smith-Shank, 1993; Stokrocki, 1994; Zimmerman & Stankiewicz, 1982, 1985). However, very few discuss the role of narrative in the *practice* of teaching. This article focuses on narrative as discourse and suggests how it might be used by teachers to encourage students to think more critically and to understand the role of art in their own lives and culture.

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In Maxine Greene’s words:

We take classroom discourse to be at the very heart of the teaching-learning process, as it represents the meaning systems mutually constructed by teachers and their students.... The power of narrative and dialogue as contributors to reflective awareness in teacher and students is that they provide opportunities for deepened relations with others and serve as spring boards of ethical actions.... Understanding the narrative and contextual dimensions of human actors can lead to new insight, compassionate judgment and the creation of shared knowledge and meanings that can inform professional practice. (Greene, 1991, p. 8)

In this passage, Greene alerts us to the importance of narrative in the classroom. She tells us that narrative contributes to learning by fostering deeper awareness and by assisting students in their search for personal meaning and social ethics. However, in the classroom, narrative is a powerful but possibly under-utilized component of discourse.

The Study of Discourse, Narrative, and Story

Metaphorically, discourse is a philosophical umbrella that encompasses narrative and other forms of communication such as dialogue or conversation. The study of narrative is only a part of the much larger field of discourse, so one of the problems in describing how narrative works in the classroom is to understand the many interpretations of

discourse. Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2001) write that current discourse research encompasses a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and cognitive and social psychology, and that definitions of terms, analytical models, and approaches to the study of discourse are both emerging and extending as those disciplines adapt the study of discourse to their own particular needs. Although discourse has multiple definitions, according to Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton (2001), those definitions fall into three main categories: "(1) anything beyond the sentence; (2) language use; and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language" (p. 1).

While the literature of art education has addressed the study of discourse through each of these perspectives (see Zander, 2002), in this study, I will describe narrative through this third category of discursive research in which meaning is thought to be negotiated within a social context and through social interaction. This sociolinguistic point of view takes into account the multiple levels of understanding when people communicate (Fiske, 1996; Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1974, 1986; McEwan & Egan, 1995; Tannen, 1984, 1993). Within these philosophical underpinnings, narrative is understood as a discursive strategy in which speakers create their own histories about the past (including the immediate past) and the audience interprets them based on individual experience (Norrick, 1997; Ochs, Smith & Taylor, 1989; Schiffrin, 1984). From this perspective, narrative can be understood as an expression of social activity and identity and includes a variety of storytelling formats. These would include stories we tell others and ourselves, myths and stories which transmit information about events or cultural values, and the stories within a culture that affect the relationships and beliefs of individuals, groups, and cultures.

In their broadest sense, narratives are a loosely organized series of verbal, symbolic, or social behaviors that are sequenced in order to tell someone else something that has happened, while story is a form of narrative with a beginning, middle, and end (McEwan & Egan, 1995). Scholes (1981) offers an even broader explanation of *narrative*, describing it as a communication that refers to some set of events outside of itself, while *stories* are explanations of what has, what is going to, or what might have happened. In this article, I use the terms similarly, however, "story" refers to a particular event or set of events and "narrative" includes groupings of multiple stories.

Why People Tell Stories

Narrating our experiences about what has happened or what might happen is obviously something that all people do. Humans have what Rosen (1988) calls the "autobiographical impulse," or the need to tell

our personal stories in order to make sense of our own lives. We do this by telling stories about our own experiences and, through them, defining our personal beliefs or group membership. "Shared stories as well as shared ways for telling stories and shared uses for stories also make groups coherent" (Johnstone, 2001, p. 641) and help to build community in small groups (Bauman, 1986; Coates, 1996; Johnstone, 1990).

Similarly, narratives are often used to establish shared understandings to convey culturally significant messages (Bruner, 1986; Donald, 1991; Nelson, 1996) and moral values (Jackson, 1995; Noddings & Witherell, 1991). As teachers, we share our life stories with our students to build rapport and community as well as to convey our beliefs and perspectives. However, students also discover their own stories through the narratives they tell us and how they are affected by other stories or narratives. As both teachers and students, whether it is a story we tell ourselves or others about what we think or the social narratives that form our perspectives towards society and culture, these narratives play an important role in making sense of human experience and in forming self-awareness.

Communication in the Classroom

Ginott (1972) was among the first to draw attention to the importance of listening to students and their personal stories. He wrote:

The beginning of wisdom is silence, and then comes listening.
 Authority calls for brevity. Learn to talk less and listen more.
 When things go wrong, it's not a good time to teach lessons....
 Don't blame, look for solutions. Try to respond to complaints without being defensive or counter complaining. Avoid embarrassing questions. Talk to the heart, not the mind.... Don't be a teacher; be a human being who is a teacher. (p. 13)

Sadly, Ginott's recommendations for communication are seldom encountered in a classroom setting. Historically, researchers have reported that classroom talk is generally dominated by teachers and consists primarily of lecture, giving instruction, and questioning that is known as initiation, response, evaluation (I.R.E.) or initiation, response, feedback (I.R.F.). This questioning conforms to a triadic pattern in which the teacher asks a question (I., initiates), the student responds with an expected answer (R., responds), and the teacher replies with either a correction or approval (F., gives feedback) or continues (E., extends) the questioning (Cazden, 1988; Cazden, Johns, & Hymes, 1972; Flanders, 1970; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; 1992). The result: students become concerned with coming up with the "right" answer, as opposed to exploring other possibilities or understanding the relevance of the question (Cazden, 1988). Opportunities

for students to reflect or think critically about how this information relates to their own lives are often limited.

Other educators see storytelling as a possible strategy for meaningful and indirect learning. Egan (1986) found fault with an “objectives, content, evaluation” (p. 1) model of curriculum because it minimized the role of imagination and emotion in favor of cognitive learning by focusing on facts as opposed to feeling. He was not alone in recommending that teachers use narrative as a teaching strategy through which students learn from their own “stories” and the “stories” of others (Egan, 1986; Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997; McEwan & Egan, 1995). Narratives are thought to set up problems or contexts that help students understand different perspectives and complexities involved in problem-solving and social relationships, because “telling a story is a way of establishing meaning” (Egan, 1986, p. 37). It was Egan’s contention that teachers underestimate children’s abilities to deal with the abstract. He claimed that stories provide a larger and more familiar context in which children are quite adept at surmising, interpreting, or coming to their own conclusions.

Narrative and Art

Narrative opportunities in art include the stories that students have about their own art, the stories that teachers have about their own experiences with art, the stories of artists, and interpretations of the artwork itself. When a child describes his drawing to his teacher saying, “It’s a dinosaur. He is fighting this other dinosaur and the people are afraid so they are running away,” the child clearly understands that drawing is a form of narrative. When a parent or teacher responds, “That sounds exciting! Tell me more about your drawing,” they reinforce the work as a valuable experience.

Student stories

Julia Kellman (1995) explained that, for young children, “Art making and its narrative description of the here and now allows children to share the day-to-day details of their lives with others” (p. 19). When children draw, they are using images to tell about themselves, their interests, their perspectives on the world as well as to confront or re-interpret events which may have left them feeling out of control. In the example above, the child had just seen a scary movie about dinosaurs (*Jurassic Park II*), and although the child was happy about his drawing, the work and the act of sharing it may very likely have been an attempt to gain power over a disturbing portion of the movie. The act of drawing and sharing that drawing with an adult helped him separate fantasy from reality and put him back in control.

Older students also need this kind of reinforcement and understanding. A teacher can underscore the power of stories inherent in works of

art when she acts as a guide and mentor to help students understand their work from a new perspective. The teacher who does what Peter London (1989) calls “bearing witness” (p. 84) helps students connect with the embedded meaning and stories in their own work.

Bearing witness is a particular way of responding to student work in which the teacher takes a step back and, instead of grading or assessing a student’s work based on a comparison to some abstract absolute of “beauty” or “goodness”, helps the students connect with the potential for meaning within their work. In the following example, an art teacher connects his student with the stories inherent in the imagery or the work itself. While looking at a drawing of a book, a confederate flag, and flowers, he says,

Remember what drives the image. When I see this image of the azalea, you know what crossed my mind? Plantations and slavery and all that time when azaleas were the flower of the South ... Just that one mark generates a whole vista. So, using symbols and color like that identifies who you are visually. (S. Willis, personal communication, 1997)

The teacher uses communication skills not to discuss craftsmanship or composition, but to help the student understand the power of the visual image to do more than imitate. The teacher clarifies how art reflects ideas and, by doing so, the teacher becomes a partner in helping the student discover his or her own personal story and the symbol system related to it.

Teacher Stories

For many art students, artistic thinking and behaviors are modeled by the art educator. Students learn the content, skills, and vocabulary of art and design, as well as the expectations and perceptions of their teacher. In the following example, a teacher warns his students that not all teachers think the same way, but his own story gives them a sense of artistic authenticity.

So, if you were to go to another program where they were focused on these photographic renderings of still life and stuff, you might just feel a little uncomfortable in that position. Frankly, you might not draw all that well—not in a global sense—but I think that the trade off is that you think very well and you feel very well and that inside stuff is going to work its way outside and get into your hand, and get into your pencil, and get into the paint brush, and you will make these incredible images. (Zander, 1997, pp. 52-53)

In this instance, the teacher models the relationship between emotion and craftsmanship. He uses his own experience as an artist to teach his

students about the sometimes unsettling process of making art and to reflect on the reasons for making it.

Teacher stories also help students understand the nature of art and the aesthetic experience. Deniston-Trochta (2003) stated, “The aesthetic experience of those we teach must be a major resource for our teaching of aesthetics, and we discover that aesthetic experience through stories about it” (p. 103). She described how her mentor, Marilyn Zurmuehlen, “used storytelling to engage us in thinking about aesthetic experience” (p. 103). For Deniston-Trochta, Zurmuehlen’s stories became “modern day parables” (p. 103) that taught her how to use her own and her students’ experiences as the foundation for artistic instruction. She asserted that “aesthetic experience may occur during our students’ studio experience” (p. 105), but what she sees as critical to their development as artists are the stories that have to do with students’ own aesthetic experiences. As an example, Deniston-Trochta described a teacher who introduced a hat-making project by dramatizing, as a story, events from her own life, and the roles that hats played. The teacher wore the hats and told how each represented a story and important transitions in her life.

By using her “visuals” in this way, she respected the emotional depth of her students and invited them to find and express their own meaning.... She modeled and demonstrated how to identify aesthetic experience (and art process) with personal meaning and experience. (p. 106)

The presentation was important and immediate. It showed students how commonplace objects and artifacts can have profound meaning and how our own stories can serve as a jumping-off point for new interpretation. It also provided students with an insight into the teacher’s life and helped them understand that she was sharing with them a deeper and more personal level of communication.

Stories of the Art Room

Narratives also serve to convey social expectations and culturally significant messages of the groups to which they belong (Bruner, 1986; Pauly, 2003). The personal stories of individuals, as well as the myths or stories embedded in the rituals and social organizations of groups, set the tone for practice and outline what is and is not accepted within that particular community.

Applebee (1996) stated that,

Education in general (and formal schooling in particular) is fundamentally a process of mastering new traditions of discourse. These traditions begin with elaboration of the discourses of everyday life—storytelling, sharing of information, understanding the roles and relationships of home, school and

community. Such discourses become increasingly specialized and formal as a student moves through the educational system—evolving in most cases into the discourses characteristic of the academic discipline. Each constitutes a set of cultural tools for analyzing experiences within a particular domain of interest and identity—and situating oneself in relationship to it. (p. 9)

For art education, the traditions of discourse include the stories surrounding the making of art, as well as the stories of artists and the contexts in which art is created. The arts are traditionally a discipline in which learning to “do” the discipline comes from being immersed in a social context that is focused on artmaking. Today, educational institutions such as colleges and universities prepare students for careers in the arts, but, historically, the fine arts were trades that informed their practitioners through apprenticeship. While apprentices learned the technicalities of preparing media by watching and doing, they acquired important understandings through immersing themselves in the community of other artists and by hearing the conversations and stories of the “master artist.” To some degree, that is true in art classes today.

Much of the learning in art is still accomplished through induction as opposed to instruction. Some time ago, a teacher told me, “I refer to myself as the Art Department, because I want my students to know that, even though there is only one art teacher in this school, I represent a train of thought that they don’t encounter in other disciplines” (A. Martin, personal communication, 1997). In other words, narratives function to define individual perspectives, and to reflect the beliefs of the social groups from which they come. Art teachers often tell their students stories about the persistence and perseverance that it takes to be an artist. The teacher who described himself as the “art department” used narratives about artists to demonstrate how an artist such as Michelangelo was a hero because he had the same desire for perfection in his craft as sports heroes or other contemporary role models for perseverance.

Other teachers teach through stories of their own lives.

Today, as I came over the hill towards Magnolia Avenue—you know where I mean—there’s this little lake and some trees. Well, the sun was just barely coming up over the horizon and the sky was kind of purplish with heavy clouds... and there was this mist coming up from the pond that made everything look all mysterious and spooky. I just had to stop. I grabbed my camera from the back of the car to take a picture. What do I need to do to get that perfect shot? A student answered “Take the lens cap off” and everyone laughed. (S. Willis, personal communication, 1997)

This story set up the kind of image that would be exciting to photograph and re-created an aesthetic experience that is common to everyone and which inspires some of us to make art. Students learn that, for a photograph to be art, it is not just about representation, but about seeing the world differently (from every other person coming over that hill) and then responding to it.

Narratives of Art History

Artists' stories also serve as models of how to respond to the world as an artist. Sydney Walker (2001) suggested that the study of the lives and practices of artists serve as the basis for deeper understandings about art. She maintained that works of art do not have to be studied chronologically, but can be understood thematically. She suggested that teachers frame curriculum around the study of "big ideas" and encouraged a curriculum that builds an "extensive knowledge base around a theme" (p. 44). Suggested themes include broad concepts such as "identity, power, fantasy and reality, meaning and objects, alienation and loneliness" (p. 140). While Walker did not specifically suggest that teachers introduce ideas through narrative, it is clear that many of the themes she suggested lend themselves easily to story. The stories of how artists lived, developed ideas, and interacted within their cultural spheres provide rich subject matter for both story and curriculum.

In my own life, art became important when I read the stories and the decisions that artists made about their careers and about the important issues of their times. I remember being shocked by the fact that Botticelli had burned many of his mythological paintings because they offended the religious zealot Savonarola. I love *Birth of Venus*, and it was upsetting to realize that other paintings, probably just as beautiful, had been burned. Stories such as these helped me to appreciate the passion of artists and to understand that art is about ideas and human struggle.

Stories Within Works of Art

It is also human to search for narratives when viewing works of art. Abigail Housen, in her research on aesthetic development, reported that, in their initial encounters with art, both children and adults make concrete observations about works of art that contribute to a narrative. They tend to look for stories even if storytelling is not a part of the artist's intention (Housen & Yenawine, 2000). Young viewers can use artworks with narrative content as a "point of entry" to art appreciation. Looking at art with narrative potential "allows children [sic] to experience a variety of points of view as they and their classmates mine the images for stories" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 25).

Elkins (2002) asks us to look at the history of art as a multi-layered series of stories. As in discourse, understandings about art are influenced

by one's personal history and experience. He explained that our knowledge of art history helps us develop personal meaning from the universal stories of artists and their work and that the larger histories of art and culture intersect in time, practices, and beliefs. Elkins argued that textbooks try to claim objectivity in categorizing histories by culture, time-frame or style, but true objectivity is elusive. Art history involves multiple points of view: the historical period, the issues related to that period, the context in which the work was created, and the audience for whom the work was created, as well as how those perspectives are interpreted in light of contemporary points of view or the personal experience of the audience.

Visual Culture

Pauly (2003) took Elkins' perspective one step further by recommending that teachers use the study of visual culture to invite students to learn the "what" of visual images and to probe "when, how, and with whom they learned to construct this knowledge ... [and the] memories intertwined with the people, places, and feelings ... associated with that learning" (p. 265). She explained:

The study of visual culture is not about the objects studied, but the questions asked about visual images, objects, environments, and the phenomena of seeing and being seen. In other words, the shift to visual culture art education (Duncum, 2002) is not about including shopping mall environments and excluding Manet paintings, but rather asking new questions about both.
(p. 276)

Pauly seems to be inviting us to critically re-examine art within the context of its culture's narratives, including those of our own time. Questions can come from the stories and narratives embedded in understandings which have been previously negotiated by the dominant culture and are almost unconsciously accepted even by marginalized social groups. For example, the paintings of Jaune Quick-to-see-Smith bring us face-to-face with how Native Americans have been cast as "the other" in American society by depicting "Indians" in cultural narratives that include stereotype, misconception, and alienation. Similarly, Michael Ray Charles asks us to re-interpret the cultural narrative of "Little Black Sambo" by painting the words "BEWARE" on this childhood stereotype.

Even the most commonplace images are a rich source for re-examining the stories behind our everyday visual culture. Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) suggest that,

Teachers and students should learn to look at their own cultural traditions, as well as the cultural construction of others, from a critical perspective with the understanding that what has been

socially learned can also be unlearned or changed by individuals within the group, if it is deemed necessary to do so. (p. 6)

These authors believe that both schools and art education should help students “deal with cultural complexity and issues of power as associated with social affiliations and aspects of personal, national, and global cultural identity(ies)” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, p. 6). For example, in popular American media, ideals of beauty, success, and power are often represented unrealistically. The “ideal” American is invariably portrayed by a certain body type, dress, or appearance of success—even if that image does not come close to representing the average American. The contexts associated with visual imagery create visual narratives that imply certain cultural values and beliefs. Comparing contemporary visual media against the study of art from different historical times and places shows us that issues related to body image or other abstract concepts change considerably over time and context. It is important that students realize that the cultural nature of visual imagery is complex and driven by the narratives of mass culture, economics, politics, and popular fashion and they do this through the stories of the past and the present.

In today’s popular culture, assimilation and acceptance of the popular perspective happens almost unconsciously because images are imbedded along with a variety of cultural messages.

From Pauly:

The meanings of most images today are commonly *learned* in multi-modal ‘televisual’ environments in which interpretations are linked to dramatic stories and music.... I use the metaphor *cultural narratives*, or social stories, to imply that humans interpret visual culture through broad intertextual links that influence them to construct meanings as modes of representation that tell social stories (Friedman, 1998). These narratives refer to how history is told, what is considered beautiful, and what is more possible to think or imagine in the future. (2003, p. 264)

Contemporary artists draw on previous artistic or cultural histories to create new narratives which invite viewers to re-examine the stories of other times and cultures. Through these new narratives, we find that the cultural histories of art include a wide variety of perspectives, as well as stories that have been omitted.

In contemporary art, often the stories of the displaced and the disenfranchised are being re-examined. Works by artists like Fred Wilson, Charlene Teters, Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles, and others invite us to examine the visual culture of our own time and of the past through the perspective of those who have been omitted. They ask us to use these new perspectives to re-examine our own personal and cultural stories

to re-consider the missing chapters. Therefore, the stories of art history become narratives of our own time and they also become the impetus for re-examining images imbedded in the visual narratives of today.

Narratives as Transforming

Hall (1996) suggested that identity is “a narrative of the self... the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are” (p. 16). Linde (1993) wrote, “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story” (p. 3). Because we are constantly telling and revising stories, the stories we tell ourselves also reveal what we think of others, including our misconceptions and our prejudices. Because stories involve personal experience, meaning-making, and emotion, they are instrumental in synthesizing knowledge and human experience (Egan, 1986; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Stories do not merely communicate shared understandings; they can potentially transform our view of the world. As stories touch us emotionally, they assist us in remembering and making sense of our own experiences and the lives around us (Egan, 1986; McEwan & Egan, 1995; Noddings & Witherell, 1991; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Poet Primus St. John said,

Through both written and oral narrative we can feel profoundly with another, imagining a larger world than the one we inhabit. Such leaps of empathy and imagination can bind us in deeper and wider relationships, provide bridges across cultures, and enable us to “look into the heart of wisdom”.... The telling, receiving, and shaping of stories can be ... redemptive, healing, and transformative. (in Witherell, Tan Tran, & Othus, 1995, p. 39)

The story becomes not just the experience of someone else, but our own experiences reflected through others. Robert Coles (1989) claimed that it is only through stories that one can fully enter another's life. They transform us by giving us new understandings about the experiences of others and by helping us think about how we might feel in the same situation.

Stories also have the potential to assist in decision making and moral development. Tappan and Brown (1989) explained that, because stories can “capture the ‘lived experience’ of an individual faced with a situation, conflict, or dilemma that requires a moral decision and a moral action” (p. 175), the story offers a tripartite structure of “cognition, emotion and action” (p. 176) that allows one to step back and analyze or make decisions about moral behavior. By doing so, we encounter not just answers, but

questions that are important to personal development and we encounter them in a format that is conducive to reflection and change.

Discussion

Teachers may find that contemporary approaches to teaching require different ways of interacting with students. Drawing them out as opposed to correcting them and helping students see the relevance of what they are learning based on the students' needs, opposes the practice of "teaching to the test" or using more didactic forms of instruction. Forms of communication that are restricted to didacticism can impose and intimidate. Learning may occur, but it may be disappointing because it is shallow or lacks relevance. Ideally, most teachers like to challenge students to be active participants in developing their own understandings.

When we ask students to tell their own stories about the art they make, or how the lives and works of others affect them, or help them find meaning in the aesthetics of their own lives, we change the nature of classroom talk. When we help students recognize the communicative value of their own art or use narratives from artists' lives or works to discover how to deal with concepts such as heroism and fear or dreams and reality, we teach students more than skills and facts about making art. We connect them with the reasons artists make art. When we examine the stories of artists and the role of cultural narratives, we help students understand multiple perspectives. When we teach about art through stories with themes such as love and hate or fear and courage, we connect our students to different aspects of culture and invite them to reflect on their own experience in light of different points of view.

Teachers teach about persistence, planning, working, and appreciating art through their own lives and art making, as well as through what they say about artists and their work. Just as artists make art that tells the story of their relationship with the world, students tell their own stories through their work. Each of these histories is a story that has the potential to help our students become more involved in inquiry and to ask questions that will help them make sense of their lives.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do is to suggest that questioning strategies such as I.R.E. and I.R.F. that predominate in the classroom are inadequate for meaningful instruction. I have highlighted different ways that teachers can employ narrative and reflect on its role in teaching the affective value of art. All teachers may not be able to teach this way because the stories of art are many and often require considerable research and experience to effectively embed them in instruction. It is also difficult for teachers familiar with using I.R.E. to balance the inequities of power inherent in the classroom. However, I think that

teachers who use stories and narratives in their teaching can bridge the gap between control and content. My hope is that all teachers recognize the importance of sharing stories, listening to students' stories, and reflecting upon the stories and narratives of art and human experience.

There are numerous types of discourses that have potential for the classroom; such discourses require teachers to step back from traditional questioning strategies and embrace discourses that require personal involvement and the creation of shared knowledge. This is not to suggest that traditional models have no place in the classroom, but to ask that teachers make a concentrated effort to create a classroom community in which other forms of discourse are actively cultivated.

As researchers become more aware of the discursive structures used in the classroom, it will become even more important to study how teachers and students negotiate communication and common understandings (or misunderstandings) inherent in the art classroom. It is not only the narratives of art and stories of students that deserve study, but also the cultural perspectives of teachers and how students perceive those perspectives. It is also important that classroom communities are situated so that students feel safe and encouraged to explore. Ultimately, it is my hope that all art classrooms become places where students can transform their own stories and reflect on the stories that are important to them—with and through art.

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TITLE: Tell Me a Story: The Power of Narrative in the Practice of Teaching Art

SOURCE: Stud Art Educ 48 no2 Wint 2007

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