

CRITICAL  
**STORYTELLING**  
in UNCRITICAL  
TIMES

**EDITED BY**

Nicholas D. Hartlep

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and

Michael E. Jennings

*SensePublishers*

## **Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times**

## CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: CURRICULUM STUDIES IN ACTION

Volume 16

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### *Scope*

“Curriculum” is an expansive term; it encompasses vast aspects of teaching and learning. Curriculum can be defined as broadly as “the content of schooling in all its forms” (English, Fenwick W., *Deciding What to Teach & Test: Developing, Aligning, and Leading the Curriculum*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010, p. 4), and as narrowly as a lesson plan. Complicating matters is the fact that curricula are often organized to fit particular time frames. The incompatible and overlapping notions that curriculum involves everything that is taught and learned in a particular setting *and* that this learning occurs in a limited time frame reveal the nuanced complexities of curriculum studies.

*Constructing Knowledge* provides a forum for systematic reflection on the substance (subject matter, courses, programs of study), purposes, and practices used for bringing about learning in educational settings. Of concern are such fundamental issues as: What should be studied? Why? By whom? In what ways? And in what settings? Reflection upon such issues involves an inter-play among the major components of education: subject matter, learning, teaching, and the larger social, political, and economic contexts, as well as the immediate instructional situation. Historical and autobiographical analyses are central in understanding the contemporary realities of schooling and envisioning how to (re)shape schools to meet the intellectual and social needs of all societal members. Curriculum is a social construction that results from a set of decisions; it is written and enacted and both facets undergo constant change as contexts evolve.

This series aims to extend the professional conversation about curriculum in contemporary educational settings. Curriculum is a designed experience intended to promote learning. Because it is socially constructed, curriculum is subject to all the pressures and complications of the diverse communities that comprise schools and other social contexts in which citizens gain self-understanding.

# **Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times**

*Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education*

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**ADVANCE PRAISE FOR  
*CRITICAL STORYTELLING IN UNCRITICAL TIMES***

“In the cacophony of opinion fostered by an age of constant communication, it has become ironically difficult for one’s voice to be heard. Often, attempts at self expression feel akin to casting notes in bottles, the search for truth becoming less a journey and more a slog. In defense of one’s own agency, the importance of the individual story is paramount now more than ever. Offering students a platform to propose questions few think to ask, and answers none wish to consider, *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* defends the unheard, affording its contributors the breadth necessary to unfurl their experiences. Lovingly curated and holding an expansive palette of topics, ranging from bullying to modern Paganism, the stories contained within provoke and stimulate, elucidating the nuances by which we live, breathe, bleed.”

– **Victor Shaw, Student and Winner of the 2017 Global Crossroads Scholarship Competition, Wayne State University**

“Too often in academia, we get bogged down in precision and stripping the humanity out of what we do. We break things down into numbers, into codes, and into false profundity. *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* breaks down these walls between the academy and the humanity behind it. This introspective collection delves into the realities of what it means to step out of the Self and into the Other... to investigate who we are and how we got there. Opening old wounds relating to whiteness, privilege, bullying, sense of self, among a host of others, this collection allows the reader to experience, first-hand, what it means to be human.”

– **Andrew T. Kemp, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, Augusta University**

“Some will find echoes of their own stories here, but many more will discover models of possibility, opportunities for connection, and portals leading to richer understanding and a profound respect for other lives. As universities scramble to stay human in an age of increasing focus on the instrumentality of education, this volume of deeply personal stories lights the way.”

– **Todd Petersen, Ph.D., Professor of English, Director of Project-Based Learning, Southern Utah University**

“At a time when the dominant narratives are far from critical, Nicholas Hartlep, Brandon Hensley, Carmella Braniger, and Michael Jennings with their student authors exemplify the need to tell critical stories as counternarratives. The best teachers often talk about the need to know and care for students. Too often, however,

students—even at the college level—are not tapped for the stories they embody. How can we know and care for students if we do not listen to their stories as a source of their perspectives, ideas, possibilities, and movements? A remarkably insightful way to listen is to provide space for students to publish their stories. *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* does precisely this. It provides a variety of vantage points for seeing concerns, insights, and understandings of undergraduate students as they draw from multiple disciplines and diverse realms of experience. It is an example of inspiring critical storytelling by college students, using critical stories of students as a basis for teaching, and acting on such stories to counter the tidal wave of uncritical domination that besets us. Educators should read, ponder, and emulate this book.”

– **William H. Schubert, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Instruction and University Scholar, University of Illinois at Chicago**

“Just what is ‘critical storytelling’? In *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education*, undergraduate essays on topics ranging from pagan religion to growing up fatherless to ethnic identity to depression and more, the writers address subjects from vantage points traditionally silent, even absent, as the editors note in their introduction.

And yes: the undergraduate students who crafted these immensely interesting essays are writers. Even if, more than 20 years ago, Linda Brodkey argued that undergraduates could not be ‘real’ writers, at least in the eyes of the academy, because they didn’t publish. She also noted that undergrads were sentenced to writing passion-less pieces with little to no application to their lives outside the university.

*Critical Storytelling* disproves the idea that today’s university students can’t write. What the various stories demonstrate is that students not only write, but that given topics that engage them? They can write *well*. And that what they write about is important for us to read, as the editors remind us: ‘... reading the unadulterated stories of undergraduates is important for those in higher education because theirs are often the most neglected and unheard voices in the academy.’

Justin Hayes’ ‘Silent Judgments: How I Came to Terms with Depression,’ for instance, paints a darkly nuanced picture of his battle with depression, as he struggled to overcome his deeply ingrained image of depression as only affecting people ‘with real problems.’ Not a successful college student. Anonymous’s (no name for this still-struggling writer) ‘To Be Continued’ reminds us that not all personal crises resolve neatly, or at all ... While Daniel Searcy’s comic ‘First Day of School’ makes poignant points about race and difference in his visual medium. And in her timely piece on being an immigrant, Zuzana Sukova tackles the complicated tangle of assimilation and respect for home culture.

Because the collection also includes pieces by the faculty editors, what readers see is how secondary extensive writing experience is to the narratives’ power. Does Zuzana write as well as Brandon? Does it matter? Both narratives—all the stories in

the collection—demand that we listen, pay attention. What better way to show new writers just how much their stories and voices matter?”

– **Britton Gildersleeve, Ph.D., Director Emerita, OSU Writing Project, Editorial Board, *Nimrod Journal*, <https://teaandbreath.com>**

“In this inspirational sequel volume of *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Stories Disclosed in a Cultural Foundations of Education Course* (Hartlep & Hensley, 2015), Nicholas D. Hartlep, Brandon O. Hensley, Carmella J. Braniger, and Michael E. Jennings work with a group of courageous undergraduate students across disciplines (i.e., Psychology, Communication Studies, English, Business, Sociology, etc.) to manifest critical storytelling, liberative counternarrative, counteraccounts, personal memoirs, and testimonios of their struggles against oppressive living conditions in schools and societies. Their gripping stories and critical reflections inspire us to understand, ‘to question, to think, [and] to act’ against all forms of oppression and injustice. Their critical storytelling, as theories and methods, expose unjust and dehumanizing ideas, policies, and practices, contextualize silenced and unexamined narratives of their experiences and experiences of underrepresented or disenfranchised individuals and groups, raise challenging questions, protest against the supremacy and normality of meta or official narratives, and transgress orthodoxy and dogma epistemologically and methodologically. This publication advances the field by exemplifying critical storytelling to honor necessary voices which are historically silenced or ignored, and to cultivate ‘critical and political consciousness’ that brings the light to darkness in contested and unjust times.”

– **Ming Fang, Ph.D., Professor of Curriculum Studies, Georgia Southern University**

“*Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* is an exploration of diverse voices that can often times be marginalized in university spaces, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This volume of *Critical Storytelling* confronts the reader with alternative narratives to those typically considered traditional in the academy, thus serving as a megaphone for students who are screaming to have their stories told, considered, and appreciated. *Critical Storytelling* pulls back layers of what it means to contemplate who we are and how we exist and negotiate our very being in the academic spaces we inhabit. In the midst of ever-increasing challenges of our country’s current socio-political climate, *Critical Storytelling* reminds us of what is at the heart of our work in higher education and beyond; and, this story compilation exhorts the reader to think more critically, feel more deeply, and act more compassionately. This is a must-read for any college student who feels their voice(s) have been muted, devalued, or silenced as well as any college or university faculty, staff, and administration who want to better meet the affective needs of the ‘whole student.’”

– **Ngozi Onuora, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Education, Millikin University**



*“Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education* is a timely book that explores the intersection of theory and experience that positions students as the constructors of knowledge, through an analysis of experience with critical frameworks that question race, gender, inequality and our collective stories. This book will be a perfect complement for any undergraduate or graduate course that wants to delve deeper into the common threads that connects us to each other.”

– **Abraham P. DeLeon, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Texas at San Antonio**

*NDH*

*For my wife and children.*



*I love you very much!*

*BOH*

*To my loving wife, my supportive family, and the friends,  
colleagues, and heroes who've inspired me.*



*And to all who hear the call of critical storytelling, let's do this.*

*CJB*

*To my beautiful daughter, Hannah, and my sister, Chesna.*



*Critical storytelling empowers us all to make change.*

*MEJ*

*To my wife Qena, and my children: Ryan, Kaden and Addison.*



*Thanks for all of your love and support!*



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## PREFACE

Good writers craft every element of their work, down to the joints between the words. During this meticulous process it's nearly impossible to step back and experience the text as a new reader would. While writing, one needs that close-up understanding of words, adjacent ideas, characters' motivations, and the nuances of possible scenes. But to edit, one must come to the text fresh, mimic the sensibility of a first-time reader, and make the parts work together.

From *Telling True Stories* edited by Mark Kramer  
and Wendy Call (2007) p. 197

You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.

From *Ceremony* written by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977) p. 2

## INTRODUCTION

The use of personal narrative and reflection in academic and scholarly contexts is a growing trend. Academics everywhere are crafting their critical stories. But why narrative, why now? Pat Schneider (2003) writes in *Writing Alone and With Others* that “[t]he act of writing is a tremendous adventure into the unknown, always fraught with danger. But the deeper you go and the longer you work at your art, the greater will be your treasure” (p. 5). Academics and non-academics alike are turning to writing to reap the rewards inherent in uncovering and unveiling truths about our lived experiences that reach deeper than what is—to recognize the gaps and silences in dominant ways of knowing and seek to illuminate counternarratives.

*Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education* is an anthology of autoethnographies told by undergraduate students across disciplines. As pre-service teachers or majors in Psychology, Communication Studies, English, Business, Sociology (and more), they are our children's future educators. Frequently, the storytellers in academia are not undergraduates. While Hartlep was the professor of a Cultural Foundations of Education course at Illinois State University, he and Hensley edited a graduate student anthology, *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Stories Disclosed in a Cultural Foundations of Education Course*. This landmark volume sought to grapple with issues of white privilege, racial microaggressions, bullying, cultural barriers, immigration, and other forms of struggle in educational settings in personalized ways. In the book's preface Hartlep and Hensley (2015) write,

## PREFACE

The idea for writing a book as a class was born in a doctoral-level Cultural Foundations of Education course I taught during the summer of 2014. Initially, uncertainty permeated the course, especially during the first day when I informed the class that we would collaboratively write the syllabus for the course. The class was composed of doctoral students with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and professional interests. Second-year students shared the space with those who were nearing their comprehensive examinations. We had various disciplines represented as well, such as School Psychology, Communication Studies, and Higher Education. Some students had previously published book chapters and/or articles, while others had not yet published anything. These dynamics caused students to be pulled outside of their comfort zones. However, over time, our uncertainty and anxiety dissipated and transformed individuals into a community of learners. One of the course's many strengths was the collaborative spirit that stitched it, and the book that stands before the reader, together. (p. xvii)

The second volume in the series complements the first, as undergraduates comprise the storytellers and the universities and courses from which the students write their stories are numerous. Braniger and Jennings joined the editorial team in order to participate in the editing of the chapters, but in actuality they have been involved (in)directly for quite some time. Jennings authored a chapter entitled "After the Love Is Gone: A Coda on the Importance of Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times," which appeared in the first book. Acknowledging the work of Bruner (1990), Jennings (2015) writes the following: "Telling stories shapes our existence vis-à-vis the world around us, and helps us sort through all of the complexities that it embodies" (p. 93).

Braniger is an Associate Professor of English and Global Studies Coordinator at Millikin University, where Hensley worked until moving to Wayne State University, where he currently serves as Basic Course Director and Lecturer in the Department of Communication. Braniger and Hensley co-taught a hybrid course at Millikin entitled "Critical Storytelling: Global Consciousness." The course focused on reading and analyzing personal narratives through the lens of global cultural and critical studies. Performance-learning elements were integrated into the writing intensive component of the course, with the goal of writing, revising, editing, and preparing student critical stories for publication. Braniger and Hensley secured an internal grant through Millikin's Performance-Learning based initiative in order to support the work of undergraduate publication. Their project was program- and curricular-based, and extended beyond individual faculty efforts, emphasizing highly collaborative efforts between faculty and students. The course they develop and co-taught focused on reading and analyzing personal narratives through the lens of critical and cultural studies and on developing personal critical narratives in order to deliver on the ethic of autoethnography, which is to write personal, critically reflective stories of cultural involvement to work toward greater understanding and social justice. Teaching for