

TELL IT LIKE IT IS: EMPOWERING BOYS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES
THROUGH YARNS

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Abstract

This action research, undertaken with a group of 19 boys in a Year 10 English classroom, tested the power of sharing yarns to help counteract a developing culture of reticence and restraint regarding the voicing of ideas and opinions. Initially, we suspected our students' inhibitions reflected their competitiveness, cultivated by a culture in both the school and the broader community that privileges results and final marks, rather than focusing on the learning process. During the research, however, it became apparent that the fragmented nature of the classroom was a product of the boys' feelings of trepidation, insecurity, and low self-esteem. We needed to empower the boys to embrace their vulnerabilities and build mutual trust—to cultivate a belief that their peers would accept their thoughts, personal insights, and stories as genuine and worthy. Ultimately, we found that the boys' capacity to share yarns was indicative of their ability to be vulnerable, honest, and respectful. This led to an emergent culture of community in the Year 10 classroom.

Introduction

Yarns (*/jɑːn/*) *plural, noun*

- *informal*: a long and rambling story; to have a conversation

Our action research investigated the hypothesis that boys sharing stories would create a more cohesive, respectful, and thriving learning environment. Our research question: How do shared yarns encourage a culture of community in Year 10 boys? emphasised the incipient nature of cultural change and positioned the narrative-of-the-self at the centre of the project. To provide an authentic learning opportunity, we felt it was imperative to remove the hierarchical structures and power imbalances that naturally exist in teacher-student relationships. Trust was a crucial starting point; rather than emphasising an “us-

and-them” discourse, we needed to create an environment in which the perception of each person towards the others in the class was based on likeness rather than difference. Gilligan (2005) emphasises the interdependence of voice and relationships in the classroom: “Having a voice, speaking for oneself, representing oneself, saying what one knows, speaking from experience— these human capacities flourish or wither depending on the relational climate” (p. 49).

We began the project by sharing a teacher-modelled yarn that was personal, topical, and revealed vulnerabilities that were drawn from the teenage experience of coming out and the unpleasant responses from family and peers at the time: "If we are going to ask you to share your stories, we feel it is important to be honest about ourselves with you." The genuine nature of this modelled yarn was subsequently echoed through the boys' poignant and personal stories. It was crucial to set the tone of emotional vulnerability as a key to empowering new possibilities of classroom community. In their 2008 large-scale international survey of effective teaching practices with boys, Reichert and Hawley (2011) noted the importance of teachers' openness with boys to develop vital relational bonds:

The boys made warm and appreciative references to the impact of their teachers' willingness to disclose personal experiences in the course of their instruction. Often, these disclosures facilitated the topic under consideration by modelling some value or lesson; in any case, they invited boys into a more personal and thus more powerful bond with their teachers. (p. 48)

Consequently, each yarn delivered by the boys narrated either an intense personal experience, that of a family member, or a yarn about a close family friend.

The structured observations that we coded through filming each student's yarn allowed us to pay particular attention to the emotional response each story received—body language, voice, tone and fluency, and the overall climate of the classroom, both during and after each yarn. The sense of the boys' respect for each other was demonstrated in the spontaneous applause for each student. First-hand evidence gathered during the research project, as well as watching the filmed yarns again months later, re-enforced the emotionally uplifting impact the yarns garnered within the classroom environment.

The student yarns all included an aspect of change. This was conveyed in either a serious or humorous manner. Generally, the stories fell into three categories: identity and self-esteem, familial conflicts, and loss. The material that was delivered by the boys ranged from the realisation of the brevity of life, guilt for past behaviour, confusion about trusting adults, fear of social failure and rejection, and the expression of the importance of good relationships with family and friends.

Sitting in a circle during the yarns project was designed to put the story-teller at ease, foster community and egalitarianism, and allow opportunities for direct eye-contact with multiple listeners. Davenport (2018) argues for the primacy of this spatial formation in the classroom: "Circle discussions foster community and intimacy in a classroom, and can serve academic and social and emotional purposes" (para. 1). This classroom layout also differentiated the purpose of yarns from regular academic work; there were no books on tables and no distractions from the story being told.

Ultimately, we found that the boys' capacity to share stories was indicative of their ability to be vulnerable, honest, and respectful. This led to an emergent culture of community.

Literature Review

The ingrained power of stories and, in particular, storytelling, provides humans with a sense of kinship; we connect and understand others, only when we know their stories. McAdams and McLean (2013) indicate that:

Research into the relation between life stories and adaptation shows that narrators who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity. (p. 233)

We may note differences, but there remains a bond, an agreement between responder and composer that consolidates relationships and fosters community.

The educational research conducted by Slee (1995) into the importance of developing a culture of community suggests that:

There are three identifiable ways children relate to their peers. Students frequently interact with each other in either a bullying or in a submissive manner. Equally, many students do develop and practice a more equitable style of peer relating identifiable by a high degree of cooperativeness and sharing. (p. 216)

Through identifying a strong relationship between the modes of interpersonal relating and psychological well-being, students are equipped with an awareness of the role they play in each other's learning.

Students engage in more positive and productive ways within environments that include materials and points of focus that have been designed with specific student interests in mind. As Darling-Hammond (2008) suggests, "Motivating students requires an understanding of what individual students believe about themselves, what they care about, and what tasks are likely to give them enough success to encourage them to work hard to learn" (p. 92). Allowing time for students to reflect on their own learning, attitudes, and beliefs is essential for the formation of the identity of each student within the classroom. As Foster (1997) notes, "Because student subjectivities are complex, divided and open to reformulation in group settings, classroom structures should provide ample spaces for students to develop critical self-awareness. This can best develop in self reflexive discourse" (p. 336).

Offering students scenarios that allow them the opportunity to express their emotional intelligence is paramount in fostering their confidence to reveal inner truths, feelings, and fears. Cox (2018) suggests, the importance of authenticity is essential for helping boys develop into men of character:

What if there were an accelerator that helped boys mature and become men? Specifically, what if there were a counterpoint to distraction, misbehaviour, self-absorption and poor motivation? There is an answer to these growing pains, lodged deep inside a boy's psychology. The answer is a grasp of one's authentic self. (p. 69)

When each member of the classroom community has had a chance to publicly and privately grapple with the expression of their authentic self, the community as a whole evolves into a more liberating – and liberated – space.

Research Context

Shore is an independent, Anglican, day and boarding school for boys, located in North Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Nineteen students in Year 10 were chosen for this project; Year 10 being the essential moment in the formation of the students as senior leaders of the School. As the pressure of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) manifests through limitless means, the race to be the best and outperform classmates, is, sadly, often to the detriment of any genuine love of learning, risk-taking or collaboration, and partnership in achievement. Yet, as Hattie (2012) states, “a positive, caring, respectful climate in the classroom is a prior condition to learning” (p. 70). The purpose of the yarns project was not simply to make our Year 10 boys better public speakers or more adept story-tellers. We wanted them to engage with one another in an environment of abundance rather than scarcity; engendering community-focused outlooks, as opposed to combative mindsets.

The Action

Our action process began with the teacher sharing a yarn that was personal, topical, and revealed vulnerabilities. The classroom furniture was set in a circle to encourage eye contact and equality. Boys reflected on the teacher’s yarn, first in silent journaling followed by open discussion. This project launch mobilised students to consider yarns they wanted to share. Over the course of the next week, the boys took turns volunteering their personal yarns. The process for the teacher’s yarn was mirrored in each boy’s case – silent journaling followed by verbal responses.

It was incumbent on us to encourage our boys to be vulnerable and to share, by first role-modelling and revealing a little bit of ourselves—not just as teachers, or story-tellers, but as human beings. Yarns proved to be a practical way for students to develop a sense of community through a greater understanding of each other’s lives. The process of voicing, listening to, reflecting upon, and responding to yarns was a binding experience whereby individual perspectives were shared to form part of a communal discourse. Foster (1997) encourages this kind of process stating, “We teachers need not only to theorise but to think

practically about how students can be motivated to seek cohesion within a framework of competing differences" (p. 336). When our boys told their classmates a yarn, they harnessed the power to unravel prejudices, liberate identities, and release the innate human need for emotional affinity within a community that had developed along competitive lines.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data collection consisted of a range of processes to ensure we were able to identify trends in the experience of our boys throughout the yarns project. Initially, we administered a classroom questionnaire that was designed to gather baseline data prior to implementing our intervention and to gauge the boys' understanding of what community looks like in practice and what kind of community they would ideally like to see as they move into Senior English. As well, insight was sought from responses to questions regarding the boys' emotional vulnerability and trust between peers and within teacher-peer relationships.

Direct observation and field notes were essential in collecting student voice as the yarns were in motion. These observations included a behavioural log of body language, facial expressions, verbal and written responses—to the yarns, and from the yarner—both during and after each session. Teacher and student reflective writing contributed to our analysis of emotional vulnerability, particularly for the student who gave the yarn each lesson. Video recordings and photos allowed us to return to the classroom after the event and observe with greater clarity the effect of yarns on the mood of the classroom.

Focus group conversations—structured, semi-structured and unstructured—and feedback from the boys were important in shaping the direction of the yarns project, allowing the boys to take ownership over the direction of the storytelling and of the outcomes. A final review questionnaire assessed boys' overall responses to the project, allowing them to express aspects that they felt had positively contributed to their classroom community and to be critical of aspects that they felt were unhelpful during the process.

Mertler (2017) states that polyangulation of data allows for “rigour [to] be enhanced during the action research process” and empowers the researcher to “clarify meanings or misconceptions” (p. 53-4). Following this procedure, we polyangulated data from our interviews, questionnaires and observations of our boys, which resulted in a set of

dependable qualitative data from which we were able to draw conclusions about the success of the yarns project in contributing to a culture of community for our Year 10 boys.

As a research team, we have had an opportunity to reflect together on our insights and test the validity of the project. Our communication with both students and professional colleagues helped us to maintain an authentic response to our findings.

Action research is by nature specific and was directly applicable to our class context. The central use of student voice in our data collection and the direct recording of student responses to the yarns, and the action research process in general ensured our findings were a clear reflection of the ways in which this project impacted the culture of community for our boys.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The following themes emerged from our analysis of the data in the Yarns action research project:

1. Boys were open to being vulnerable and sharing personal experiences.
2. The stories that were told were characterised by honesty and sincerity.
3. Boys were respectful in their responses to the stories shared by their peers.

Boys were open to being vulnerable and sharing personal experiences

Both the qualitative and quantitative data collected during the pre-action phase suggested that the atmosphere and social cohesiveness of the classroom was in a general state of health with 14 of the 19 respondents considering it “supportive and inclusive.” However, many of the comments revealed an undercurrent of vulnerability when it came to the social and intellectual hierarchy of the classroom, and this manifested in a reluctance to voice opinions and share ideas with confidence. One boy expressed this trepidation succinctly: “I feel very undermined by everyone else who is so smart.” Another boy expressed more personal vulnerabilities: “I’m worried I’m going to speak too fast or stammer.”

While there was a substantial amount of positive feedback about the classroom culture, the students’ insights provided us with a clear gap between our sense of the ideal classroom environment and the lived reality of the boys. The sense of community was based mostly

upon the concept of sharing academic resources, but the missing ingredient was the sense of shared personal experience. A central trend in the pre-survey was trepidation in relation to sharing ideas in class and an unwillingness to make themselves vulnerable in this public forum.

As a result of the Yarns project, we found that sharing stories allowed boys to be more comfortable with voicing their feelings. Our belief that competition for rank and marks was the main driving factor in the fracturing of the classroom community turned out to be a misreading of the dynamics at play. In fact, the data revealed that these boys were limiting their sharing because of a fear of being judged or not living up to others' expectations. Most of them were simply scared that what they had to say would "come out wrong." This is why we needed to continue to facilitate the building of trust between them, and why this intervention mattered.

The stories that were told were characterised by honesty and sincerity

The candour of the boys' yarns was the most important ingredient in the facilitation of authentic vulnerable experiences and in fostering a classroom community built on respect. Early in the research process, the data captured the boys' sense of self and authenticity along with their willingness to take risks and their perception of their own value within the class. The results indicated that only ten out of 19 boys felt confident sharing their opinions in class and there was a wide range of insights into each boy's personal experience of classroom culture. While some boys were simply averse to risk-taking: "If there's a risk involved, I usually won't do it," others revealed that voicing opinions was part of a school-wide cultural issue: "I like our classroom and although I personally don't love sharing stuff in class that is the same in all classes for me."

By beginning the intervention with a teacher's yarn that modelled sincerity, vulnerability, and authenticity, the boys were challenged to re-evaluate their preconceptions of others and to share facets of their personal experiences and emotions that they would normally have kept hidden. One boy appreciated the honesty of his peer's yarn: "His story of childhood was pure and unfeigned." The freedom to choose a yarn that suited each individual resulted in an experience that was characterised by variety: "It was a really good mix of laughter (funny stories) and deep, honest stories." The level of sincerity and willingness of the boys

to share their personal narratives was unexpected and highly encouraging. The tone of authenticity was set early and the boys embraced the opportunity to be open.

Boys were respectful in their responses to the stories shared by their peers

Early in our research process, it became evident that there was a conservative approach from many of the boys to acknowledge and value the contributions of others. One boy's questionnaire response noted the lack of engagement with peer feedback: "Yeah I feel like most people respect my ideas and opinions but I prefer getting feedback from my teacher," another response was more direct: "I don't like peer-marking."

Each yarn allowed the boys an immediate opportunity to respond to the story they had heard. We found that an overwhelming trend was the concept of boys becoming more respectful and understanding others through identifying similar fears and triumphs within their own lives. The post-yarn journal entries exemplified this developing culture of respect:

- "I empathised with this yarn because as a child I also moved away from Sydney and came back. I empathised with how hard it can be moving to a new place and seeing a whole bunch of unfamiliar faces."
- "Made me feel grateful that I grew up in an environment that was supportive and didn't discriminate against me."
- "This made me feel good as he has so many friends now."
- "I have learnt about the speaker's struggles with the ups and downs of life. It makes me feel sad knowing that a good friend of mine could have stuff going on like that."

Prior to this action research, nine out of 19 boys felt that they were "always myself in class." However, only four out of 19 indicated that they were "always interested in what my peers had to say in class." Comparatively, all 19 boys ranked the level of social cohesion during the yarns project as "united." More interesting, was the change in attitude identified through the data, whereby during the process, all 19 boys "felt listened to by my peers." Some of the data reflected this sentiment: "Everyone seemed interested and engaged," "there was really rewarding feedback that we gave to one another which made us closer," "I think we all enjoyed listening to each other's stories. Some were really easy to relate to."

Establishing a culture of community in the classroom required, firstly, a willingness from all members to be open and vulnerable, and secondly, honesty and sincerity in what was shared. Listening to one another and valuing what is being heard has been acknowledged by Couldry (2009) in his consideration of the politics of voice:

The reason we need to listen – and the reason why... we have an ‘obligation’ to listen – is that all human beings have the capacity for voice, to give an account of their lives. This is an irreducible part of their human agency. (p. 580)

Once these elements of trust were in play, respect naturally followed. This respect then authenticated the entire process, which became self-perpetuating.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Five months after the conclusion of the action research, we filmed interviews with the participants about their perception of the yarns project in hindsight and their feelings about the present sense of community in the classroom. All the interviewees expressed the desire to replicate the project this year and spoke about the positive impact it had made on the class – “unity,” “bond,” “collaboration,” “supportive,” and “empathy” were trends in the language of the boys.

Teacher: What did the yarns project mean to you?

Boy A: Yeah, I guess it was about creating that bond, getting to know each other more, and putting ourselves in each other’s shoes.

Teacher: Describe the culture of the classroom post-yarns.

Boy B: Yeah, everyone’s become a lot more supportive of each other and definitely more confident to share what they think.

Teacher: Has the yarn project changed our class in any way?

Boy C: Yeah, I think there’s a different dynamic now in the class. People used to be kind of scared to voice their opinions and stuff, but now people are a lot more open and feel more free to discuss and give answers.

Teacher: How would you describe the yarns experience?

Boy D: Um, I'd say it was pretty confronting because not often, especially in an all-male environment, are we sort of welcome to open up about, like, those emotions, and traumatic memories. And so it was really interesting to see how everyone reacted when that happened. And yeah, I actually really enjoyed it, because I feel like it brought everyone together, which is good especially seeing as we are going into one of the toughest and most stressful times in our lives as a class together.

Reflection Statement

The IBSC Action Research program has challenged us to think about our practice and look for ways to improve our pedagogy. Connecting with other teachers on a global scale has been an invaluable opportunity to learn about teaching boys across the world and make life-long connections with inspiring, professional and dedicated colleagues.

Our action research has had a positive and ongoing impact on the sense of community in our classroom. Joining with the boys in this project has been a teaching highlight, and one we intend to recreate and promote as a process throughout the school community. As Reichert and Hawley (2011) note:

There is every indication that committed teachers recognise the affective, empathic nature of the teaching mission and attune themselves to boys' relational frequencies. There are, obviously, a variety of ways teachers can forge and reciprocate relationship— beginning perhaps with awareness that it is their presence, as much as the subject matter, that determines their formative impact. (p. 49)

As a means of alleviating fears of acceptance and vulnerability in whole class discussions, we found our action to be highly successful. Unshackling students who were unwilling to speak up or offer ideas was not only beneficial to the climate of the classroom in producing a more advanced level of discourse; the impact on previously passive or shy individual boys was also very pleasing. Sharing personal yarns proved to be a successful approach to giving young people a voice and helping them feel like they belong and are worthy; one of the most crucial aspects of our jobs as teachers.

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