

## **Dietetics Students' Experiences and Perspectives of Storytelling to Enhance Food and Nutrition Practice**

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### **Abstract:**

*Within the formal setting of professional dietetic practice, storytelling may be used to communicate factual nutrition information in a way that acknowledges the socio-cultural and emotional experience of food, eating, and the body. Previous research has suggested that storytelling enriches undergraduate nutrition students' understanding of information, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, uncovers prejudice and diversity, fosters emotional connections that lead to increased mutual respect, and brings the social and cultural context of professional dietetic practice to life. Dietetic educators, however, seldom incorporate narrative as a learning tool in the undergraduate nutrition classroom. To explore the possibilities of doing so, this study asked undergraduate dietetic students about their experiences with and perspectives on storytelling via a qualitative survey and focus group interview. The results indicate that storytelling can help students connect the academic and hands-on aspects of dietetic training and practice, can help bring about shifts in power among students and educators, and may allow students to develop their dietitian persona as they find their professional voice.*

### **Key Words:**

dietetic practice; storytelling; nutrition students; dietitian education.

### **Introduction**

In a health care setting, storytelling can be a powerful medium for conveying relevant information while at the same time fostering a deeper connection with and a greater knowledge of self and others, as well as fellowship and empathy between health care providers and those seeking their services (McAllister et al., 2009; Razack, 1993). McAllister et al. (2009) found that, for nursing and midwifery students, narrative brought to light the complexities of providing contextual care in community settings, awoke their

political consciousness, raised their cultural awareness and sensitivity, prompted self-reflection on their professional growth, demonstrated the transformative potential of stories, and developed students' appreciation of the development of their professions. McAllister (2009) and colleagues assert that "[t]hrough narrative, one can appreciate embodied knowing: what an experience feels like in a subjective and close way, rather than what it looks like in an objective and dispassionate way; one can learn facts as well as social impacts; one can be moved towards action rather than simply understanding" (p. 157). From her study of storytelling in undergraduate social work programs, Harrison (2009) concluded that narrative methods orient students towards ethical practice by prompting them to reflect critically on their personal selves in relation to their developing professional selves as well as on their training experiences. Moreover, storytelling may foster professional and personal growth by offering "opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their experience, gain insight into its significance, and assimilate subsequent learning into practice" (McDrury and Alterio, 2001, p. 64), professional skills that form the essence of the art of dietetic practice.

Within the formal setting of professional dietetic practice, storytelling may be used to communicate factual nutrition information in a way that acknowledges the socio-cultural and emotional experience of food, eating, and the body. Using personal narrative in undergraduate nutrition programs has the similar potential to attune the dietitian-in-training – the food and nutrition student – to the relational, political, and contextual aspects of her or his future professional work roles. Lordly (2007) found that storytelling enriches undergraduate dietetic students' understanding of information, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, uncovers prejudice and diversity, fosters emotional connections that lead to increased mutual respect, and brings the social and cultural context of professional dietetic practice to life. Dietetic educators, however, seldom incorporate narrative as a learning tool in the undergraduate nutrition classroom. Rather, dietetic training and practice modalities have been critiqued as being over-invested in science, objectivity, and empiricism which some say may negate the experiential, emotional, relational, and contextual aspects of eating and health, and limit the possibilities for connection and empathy between practitioners and those for whom dietitians provide nutrition support (Aphramor, 2005; Austin, 1999, p. 246; Buchanan, 2004; Gingras & Brady, 2009; Liquori, 2001). Storytelling is one means of drawing students' attention to the socio-cultural and emotional experience of food, eating, and the body within empirical epistemological traditions of dietetic practice (Charon, 2006; Lordly, 2007). To explore the possibility of incorporating narrative methods into the dietetic classroom, this study sought students' perspectives on the use of stories in pedagogy, curriculum, and inquiry in an undergraduate nutrition course.

## Method

A qualitative survey and focus group interview were used to gather data about students' experiences and perspectives of storytelling as a pedagogical, curricular, and research approach. Participants were recruited from an upper-year, undergraduate nutrition class of 19 students at a small, urban Canadian university. The course, titled FNP 500: Advances in Professional Practice – The Art of Storytelling, is one of four options for a semester-long, senior-level course that is required for students intending to apply for dietetic internship programs but is not required for graduation. The required

readings for the course included an auto-ethnography written by the course instructor about her experiences in dietetic education and practice, as well as other narrative and traditional academic articles (see Appendix A and B for further details about the course).

On the first day of class, the Research Assistant introduced details of the study including the purpose, design, and time commitment and invited students to participate. The survey took 15 to 20 minutes to complete and was conducted in-class at the start (n=10), mid-point (n=9), and end of the course (n=10). The instructor for the class was absent from the informed consent and data collection process to avoid a dual relationship with the students. Of the 10 participants that completed the survey, four were available to attend the focus group. A structured, qualitative question guide was developed by the researcher to guide the focus group interview. This guide, along with the survey was adapted from previous similar work done by Lordly (2007) in order for the two projects to be comparable. The focus group explored the students' reflections on structural and technical aspects of the course, perspectives of storytelling as a pedagogical practice, and the impact that they felt storytelling had on their learning experience. The focus group was facilitated by a trained research assistant who later transcribed verbatim the taped session. The training consisted of a simulated focus group session with student volunteers from the principal investigator's research team. The PI was an observer of the abbreviated focus group process and provided feedback to the research assistant following the completion of the simulated focus group. Focus group attendees also provided feedback to the research assistant regarding the flow of the facilitation, the order of questions, and the effectiveness of probing questions used. This study was carried out following ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University.

## **Results**

A total of 10 of the 19 students chose to participate in the research; eight of the students were female, two students were male. Their ages ranged from 22 to 27 years, with the average being 23.6. All students were in the final year of the Nutrition program. Overall, the results reveal that storytelling enriches classroom learning, advances professional practice skills, and fosters personal growth. Respondents were enthusiastic about the course. Only one student felt that course material over-emphasized storytelling and did not reflect the attention to patient counselling promised in the course description. While the perception that storytelling lacks the pedagogical validity and rigor for use in natural science or professional programs, our study shows that students believe storytelling to be a rewarding and creative part of learning. The following results are presented in two parts according to the two means of data collection: qualitative surveys and the focus group interview.

## **Qualitative Surveys**

Students' reasons for taking the course were varied. Despite their "uncertainty," many students were interested in the course because it was "something new" and it "seemed interesting and creative." Others were interested in opportunities for "personal reflection through writing and not just learning facts" that the course might offer. Students also noted that the chance to enhance their professional skills such as

“learning to listen,” “learning how to be more creative,” “writing,” and “counselling” throughout the course appealed to them. One student expressed her interest in storytelling as a professional practice tool in writing that storytelling “is an essential way to learn more about people. Learning to listen to stories is also very important to the health professional.” Students’ main expectation of the course instructor was that she create a “respectful environment” and “professional tone,” or what one student called “a culture of acceptance and support.” Students felt that by creating a supportive classroom environment and linking discussions to nutrition practice were essential to their willingness to share their writing and learn from others’ stories as well as their preparation for future dietetic practice. Overall, students felt that storytelling positively impacted learning by “grab[ing] the students’ attention and mak[ing] facts ‘real’.” One student also explained, “I think it is really helpful when teachers (professors) incorporate stories from their professional practice into lectures because it gives me a sense of what it is like to be in the food and nutrition field.” In contrast, one student thought that the course lacked “useful information,” which may reflect discrepancies between her/his expectation of the course and the intention to provide students opportunities to reflect on what they have already learned.

## **Focus Group**

The focus group provided context for the experiences and perspectives of storytelling that students shared via the qualitative surveys. Two key themes were drawn from the focus group transcript: finding a professional voice and new ways of knowing.

### **Finding a Professional Voice**

All focus group participants described feeling a disconnection between their experiences of learning as students and the hands-on experiences they expected would be important to their future practice as dietitians. Students attributed this disconnect to the structure of dietitian training by which academic and applied learning is separated into a four-year, academic-oriented undergraduate degree and a post-graduate, one year internship. Students expressed their desire for what one participant called the “real picture” and agreed that hearing others’ stories of dietetic practice gratified their desire for “something to stand on.” Storytelling provided a bridge between the academic setting of the classroom and the hands-on setting of the clinic. One student anticipated the role that storytelling might play in her future dietetic practice: “A person comes to visit you, they have a story to tell you and you’re trying to guide them along that path through your critical thinking and in a sense you are guiding them through their own story.”

Storytelling also facilitated students’ development of their dietetic personas. This involved students finding their voice in the classroom and imagining who they might become as dietitians in writing their stories. The incorporation of narrative in an otherwise traditionally structured syllabus featuring academic readings also had an impact on how students envisioned their role as practitioners. As one student explained,

R2 (f) – I haven’t counselled any patients, but for my practice I think...take the time to listen to the story...because somebody took the time to read my story. I

think I feel I've been listened to and my ideas are important so I think taking the time to listen to stories is important.

These students are in the midst of establishing their dietitian identity. For students, it seems writing and listening to their own and others' stories is an important facet of their socialization into the profession and culture of dietetics.

Moreover, students noted that storytelling facilitated their learning throughout the course and allowed them to develop other professional competencies such as creativity, peer-editing, and building collegial working relationships. This suggests that when used alongside orthodox forms of academic writing, auto-ethnography can encourage students to draw on a wider variety of disciplinary and professional writing modalities and perspectives to problem solve and better communicate with colleagues and those who seek their services.

### **New ways of knowing.**

For the students, one outcome of approaching learning differently was uncovering new ways of knowing in relation to their nutrition education and future dietetic practice. For one student, coming to know in new ways raised questions about the accepted practices and definitions of knowledge she had previously encountered in university classrooms:

R2 (m) – I like the fact that this class really questions the status quo; why we do what we do. [Have we been] doing it for so long that it becomes routine and accepted, accepted uncritically? I really appreciated every day that we do it. Is it because it's what we want? Or is it because this is the way we've been?

Students specifically addressed the benefit of storytelling to facilitating different ways of understanding the production of knowledge:

R3 (m) – One thing [the instructor] wrote on one of my papers, one of my stories, she underlined something and she wrote 'embodied learning', which is I guess knowing something by feeling it and I think that the experience of embodied learning would occur more often in this class. It certainly did. If you feel something it means that you probably learned something too and in regard to embodied learning, where that occurred more often for me was, rather than in the writing of the story, it was in the reading of the story; it was the reading of the story where I would feel that embodied learning.

Despite their positive remarks, students were also unsure about the how storytelling would "fit elsewhere in the curriculum" and in various practice settings given structural constraints. Students specifically questioned if storytelling is appropriate for courses that focus on technical or scientific nutrition knowledge. One student commented, "in a hospital there is no way you have time to do this storytelling given the current structure."

## **Discussion**

The possibilities for storytelling to enhance dietitian education, training, and practice have been given little attention in the dietetic literature. For dietitians-in-training (nutrition students) in Ontario, however, undergraduate programs offer few formal

opportunities for practical training experiences during which students might craft a more holistic dietetic persona by grounding their technical and theoretical knowledge in a context of care. The discord between students' experiences of the initial phases of professional socialization (undergraduate education) and their inexperience of practice creates the conditions for what Boychuk Duchscher (2008) calls "transition shock" as students move into the internship phase of their training and then on to practice as licensed dietitians. Boychuk Duchscher (2008) describes transition shock as the "confusing nowhere of in-betweenness that serves as the channel between what was and what is" (p. 1). Transition shock is the result of "the apparent contrast between the relationships, roles, responsibilities, knowledge and performance expectations required within the more familiar academic environment to those required in the professional practice setting" and affects the emotional, physical, sociocultural, developmental, and intellectual selves of those in transition (Boychuk Duchscher, 2008, p. 3).

The findings reported here suggest that stories are a rewarding means of sharing knowledge, exploring the self and learning more about others, as well as demystifying the complexities of dietetic practice for the dietitian-in-training that may contribute to 'transition shock'. Our results support Lordly's (2007) finding that stories invite educators and students to explore terrain such as the emotional risks and vulnerabilities involved in becoming and being a professional that might not otherwise be considered matters for classroom learning. Students' comments suggest that the learning gleaned from writing and reading stories complements the more didactic courses that focus on the technical, science-based knowledge that is highly valued in dietetic education and practice. Traditional pedagogical methods in science-based programs of study, such as human nutrition, typically treat the transmission of information and the building of relationships as well as learning and the emotional responses elicited in the process as separate processes. 'Facts' are extracted from the contextual whereabouts from which they came. In contrast, storytelling is a means by which instructors and students may exchange knowledge in a relational context.

Storytelling can also trouble the traditional hierarchical positioning of educators and practitioners as sources of knowledge with power-over students and patients who are positioned as otherwise uninformed. Our results support this assertion and suggest that beyond preparing students for the realities of practice, narrative methods shift power within educator-student and practitioner-patient relationships and can bring the political frame shaping their learning experiences to light. This is evident in students' comments about how having the chance to share their narratives made them feel heard and that their experiences were appreciated and valued as knowledge by others in the classroom.

Some, however, have questioned if personal narrative is indeed an emancipatory learning tool and if its use in the undergraduate classroom will actually result in social change elsewhere, such as in practice (Thorne, 2009). Webber (2006) writes, "In [feminist] writings, experience is often treated unproblematically, without discussion about how the very telling of 'experience' is saturated with social relations" (p. 454). When the politics of representation are left unexplored, storytelling, in itself, is argued to have little potential to disrupt the imbalanced localities of power in social relations, such as those between educators and students or dietitians and their clients. Lordly (2007)

cautions against “naive valorization” of personal experience (p. 30). However, narrative can help to bring to the surface relations of power that the traditional academic readings included in the course could illuminate. Students’ comments about questioning the status quo suggest that narrative can assist student in gaining insight in to relations of power, at least in their future professional roles as dietitians.

By carrying storytelling into their future practice, students may also disrupt the power over relationship that characterizes the practitioner-patient dyad. Consequently, storytelling in the classroom potentiates change for social justice elsewhere. Charon (2006) holds that bearing witness to others’ ills as told in their personal narratives engenders ethicality and intersubjectivity in the therapeutic relationship and that this can “enable us to not just feel on a patient’s behalf but to commit acts of particularized and efficacious recognition that lead beyond empathy to the chance to restore power or control to those who have suffered” (p. 181). The comment by one participant that she felt “listened to” suggests that students may have come to better appreciate how bearing witness to others’ stories may strengthen the relationship they form with others who seek their support as dietitians in the future.

An important facilitating factor in increasing nutrition professionals’ use of narrative approaches in practice requires that opportunities to write, listen, and act on narratives be integrated throughout dietitians’ undergraduate education. Charon (2006) writes “Reorienting our clinical practice toward the possibility of bearing witness to our patients’ suffering requires training and skill in listening to patients self-narratives and in caring for the self-who-listens” (Charon, 2006, p. 181, emphasis in original). Moreover, to care for the “self-who-listens,” requires that a deep self-knowledge be cultivated through a reflexive storying of the listener’s experiences, vulnerabilities, successes, and challenges. Preparing students to do so before they enter practice would potentially benefit students in their undergraduate learning experiences and new practitioners in coping with exigencies of practice as well as those who seek out dietitian’s professional support.

## Limitations

This study is one of few that explores storytelling in the undergraduate nutrition classroom and is not without limitations. The main limitation of this study is the small pool of participants, particularly with respect to the focus group which included only four individuals. Moreover, only half of the students in the course completed the qualitative surveys conducted throughout the year. An additional limitation is that the analysis did not include the stories that students composed during the course. Including their narratives in the analysis may have provided deeper insights into how stories actually enabled students to explore their fears, hopes, and expectations of practice, their experiences of professional socialization, and their perceived connections between their personal experiences of food and eating and their developing identities as dietitians. Researchers could consider reproducing this study with a larger group of participants and extending analysis to the personal narratives composed by students to expand on the findings reported here. Future studies planned for this topic include an analysis of how social media, specifically blogging and digital storytelling, might inform the

narratives being constituted and shared. In this work, the actual narratives will be the focus of the inquiry thus lending added dimension to the work offered here.

### Future Research Directions

Storytelling as a pedagogical, curricular, and research approach in dietetic education and practice settings also warrants further research. One important area for future study includes the use of narrative in inter-professional classrooms. Narrative may prove useful in developing positive relationships and empathy among practitioners from across different practice modalities by providing a means of sharing perspectives and experiences of practice in a way that bridges diverse scopes of practice and differing professional values, priorities, language, and traditions. The opportunity to share interprofessional narratives with other students and practitioners from other disciplines might better prepare dietetic students to meet the challenges of working in an interprofessional team. A study is currently underway that examines the creation of an interprofessional narratives course borrowing from nursing, nutrition, and disability studies as well as the evaluation of the delivery of such a course. Findings are expected by summer 2013.

A second important application of narrative in pedagogical and research approaches is exploring some of the complexities of practice, particularly questions of ethics. Hunter (2008) conducted a narrative analysis of personal stories composed by nursing students as part of an undergraduate course. Hunter (2008) found that the creative possibilities introduced by storytelling allowed students to explore the *art* of nursing, which included ethical knowing and complemented the conventional focus on students' competency in the *science* of nursing practice. Finally, the possibilities for narrative in different stages of dietitian training and practice as well as different practice settings beyond the undergraduate classroom should be explored. Additional settings should include internship programs – the final, hands-on phase required for licensure – and professional development initiatives for registered dietitians, as well as in diverse practice situations such as clinical- and community-based facilities and with diverse patient populations like pediatric, long-term care, urban and rural populations.

Given the benefits of storytelling identified in the literatures of other health professions, it is critical that dietitian researchers continue to explore the possibilities for narrative in dietitian education, training, professional development, and practice. The insights shared by the participants in our study indicate that, for undergraduate nutrition students, storytelling complements conventional didactic courses and enriches classroom learning by providing additional avenues for students to explore their developing dietitian identities as well as demystifies the complexities of practice. Perhaps most promising is the potential for storytelling to foster greater empathy and connection between educators and students, practitioners and those who seek their services. It is with this vision that we encourage educators, researchers, and practitioners to look to storytelling as a means of enhancing their respective practice.



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**Appendix A:  
Articles Used for FNP 500:  
Advances in Professional Practice – The Art of Storytelling**

Week 1: Introduction (no additional articles provided)

Week 2: Travers, K. D. (1995). "Do you teach them how to budget?" Professional discourse in the construction of nutritional inequities. In D. Maurer & J. Sobal (Eds.), *Eating agendas: food and nutrition as social problems*. (pp. 213-240). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Week 3: Austin, S. B. (1999). Commodity knowledge in consumer culture: the role of nutritional health promotion in the making of the diet industry. In J. Sobal & D. Maurer (Eds.), *Weighty issues: fatness and thinness as social problems*. (pp. 159-181). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Week 4: Liquori, T. (2001). Food matters: changing dimensions of science and practice in the nutrition profession. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 33(4), 234-246.

Week 5: DeVault, M. (1999). Whose science of food and health? Narratives of profession and activism from public health nutrition. In *Liberating method: feminism and social research*. (pp. 139-155). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Week 6: Buchanan, D. (2004). Two models for defining the relationship between theory and practice in nutrition education: is the scientific method meeting our needs? *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 36(3), 146-154.

Week 7: Martinez, R. (2000). Professional role in health care institutions: toward an ethic of authenticity. In D. Wear & J. Bickel (Eds.), *Educating for professionalism: creating a culture of humanism in medical education*. (pp. 35-48). Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Week 8: Gingras, J. (2005). Evoking trust in the nutrition counsellor: why should we be trusted? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 18, 57-74.

Week 9: Gussow, J. D. (1999). Dietary guidelines for sustainability: twelve years later. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 31(4), 194-200.

Week 10: Gingras, J. (2010). The passion and melancholy of performing dietitian. *Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 437-453.

Week 11: Thomas, J., & Smith, G. (1994). Toward an ideal of the person educated in home economics: an invitation to dialogue. *Canadian Home Economics Journal*, 44(1), 20-25.  
Freshwater, D. (2000). Crosscurrents: against cultural narration in nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32(2), 481-484.

Chapters read throughout the course: Gingras, J. R. (2009). *Longing for recognition: The joys, complexities, and contradictions of practicing dietetics*. York, UK: Raw Nerve Books.

## **Appendix B: Brief Description of Writing Assignments**

### **Assignment #1: Character Sketch**

The characters of your story are just as important as theme and plot. Think of them as the actors in your narrative. In Chapter One of *Longing for Recognition*, you were introduced to several characters (Dani, Tess, Meg, and Jacqui). Pay attention to which details about these people are important to you as the reader. If you are writing your "self" as a character, you will have to decide which traits you would like to share with readers and which are crucial for your story's development. If you are writing about how your education has shaped your current perspectives on practice, you would likely choose to develop your "character" in a way that explores her/his relationship to food, to her/his body, to science, to other characters in your narrative. Include attributes that you "see" when you look at this person, that you "hear" when s/he speaks, and that you "sense" if you know this person well. In addition to her or his appearance, share dreams, aspirations, favourite things, and anything else you can think of that clarifies this character for you as the writer. You may decide you want to include a visual sketch as well as a textual description. Not everything about this character will make it to the final narrative, but you need to know the character intimately to write her or his story. Provide a hardcopy to your instructor.

### **Assignment #2: Narrative Structuring**

In a way to elaborate on your character sketch, begin to make decisions about your story's theme, setting, point of view, description and time frame. By considering these elements, you will begin to give your story a structure. Although you will want to think through and write in as detailed a way as possible your narrative structure, you are not beholden to this structure for your final story. You can change your mind about these five elements of your narrative between writing assignment two and four, although it is easier on you as a busy writer if you do not make too many changes. In deciding why this story is important to tell, look for themes in your timed writings that continue to emerge without much conscious thought. Be vivid and detailed in determining the setting of your story. Give careful consideration to the point of view so your narrator's voice is consistent and appropriate to your theme. As with describing the setting in which your story takes place, give careful thought to what words you use to bring descriptions to life. And finally, be realistic as to the time frame your story takes. You only have a few weeks to write your narrative, so it cannot be told in real time. Think about how your story will transition between different time periods. How will you ease those transitions for your reader? Provide a hardcopy to your instructor.

### **Assignment #3: Growing Connections & Tensions**

Every "good" story has some element of building tension among the connections established through the characters. In Chapter Seven, we read about Tess' experience leaving her position in the Intensive Care Unit as a Critical Care dietitian, about Jacqui's frustration with the national association of dietitians around weight and health issues, about Dani's disillusion with the Nutr 430 class, and about Meg's dissatisfaction with her life. Kate Green says, "If you want to write, you have to be willing to be disturbed" (Green as quoted in Goldberg, 1990, p. 71). Decide what disturbs your character(s),

what s/he fears, what s/he has not been willing to speak about. Decide what issues are becoming untenable in your character's life and how that tension is emerging in her/his day-to-day activities. Have your character "be willing to be split open" (Goldberg, 1990, p. 71). This assignment will be handed in as the first draft of your story. Provide a hardcopy to your instructor.

#### **Assignment #4: Final Story**

This is your story. You will have to decide how much you would like to resolve from the tensions explored earlier and what to leave open. Ask for feedback from classmates, friends, family, and colleagues. Incorporate the feedback that strengthens your writing. As Berenbaum (2005) says, autobiography relies on imagination, which nourishes dietetic practice. In this final stage of your writing, you will want to consider the implications for your counselling practice and how your story threads the personal and professional together. Finally, you will need to attend to the ethical dimension of your story. Armstrong (2005) talks of the triangulated responsibility she experiences to her "created artifact," to her family and all others with whom she is in relation, and finally to her reader "who trusts the writer's integrity to both tell, as closely as possible, what the writer believes is 'true' or 'real'" (p. 1-2). Consider how your telling opens spaces of ethical dilemma, what practical actions you will take depending on your interpretive judgment. This assignment will be handed in as embedded in your complete/finished story. Your story will include all necessary references, attention to grammar, sentence structure, flow, plot, etc. At this point, your story will be entitled to stand on its own.