

## **Storytelling and Identity: The Developmental Role of Stories in Communication Centers**

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Storytelling as we know it is an integral aspect of communication and a powerful tool utilized in both work and academic environments. However, storytelling is a more intuitive and still largely undefined aspect of education despite its pervasive presence in society, a fact that should prompt educators to ask, “What place does storytelling have in the academic realm?” and “How, in fact, does storytelling influence individuals in these settings?” These questions elicit exploration from such diverse schools of thought as psychology, communication, and philosophy that continue to wrestle with the larger picture of identity and understanding what we think we already know.

This article features an atomistic sweep of communication centers in educational institutions (i.e., colleges and universities, where they are more regulated and common) and the analogously employed. It will focus on the role storytelling plays in the development of communication consultants’ personal identities. Specifically, the questions to be answered include how communication centers utilize storytelling, and how the act (rather than the subject) of storytelling transforms the character of its operators.

To begin such a conversation would first require a clear understanding of terms, subjects, and relationships between those objects of scrutiny— that is, what communication center environments entail, the effects storytelling places upon students and consultants (since consultants are only a microscopic sample of a much larger transformation), and how they integrate with one another in peer education. Communication centers are specialized facilities within educational institutions dedicated to augmenting and refining students’ communication skills. These centers, and the staff within, serve as supplemental academic resources wherein students receive guidance from trained peer educators on various communication-oriented services, ranging from public speaking preparation and delivery to interpersonal and group communication skills (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Such services promote identity by nurturing a diverse and inclusive learning environment, and thus encouraging students to recognize their unique perspectives and experiences, as well as foster authentic engagement with their education. Likewise, the identity of consultants (and their student

counterparts, with which they also share a collective identity being “peer educators”), becomes the object of transformation under the agency of storytelling, and said identity is defined as “being recognized as ‘a certain kind of person’ in a given context” (Gee, 2000, p. 99).

Terry T. Williams argues that “storytelling is the oldest form of education,” and communication centers are one of many educational settings to continuously utilize this medium of engagement (Williams, 1984, p. 4). Storytelling, therefore, is both academically and individually systemic in consultations wherein recognition is achieved, stories and experiences are acknowledged and valued by students, and consultants can see themselves as integral parts of the learning process. This validation fosters and strengthens a sense of self, belonging, and self-worth, which is described as one of four primary processes (i.e., “ways”) to view identity as a contextual construction endemic to effective peer tutoring (namely, through nature, institution, discourse, and affinity) (Gee, 2000). This constant process of exchanging stories, and becoming continually transformed by each experience, reinforces a pattern of constructing and reconstructing identities in relation to others and contextualizes consultants’ sense of individuality within their specific academic community.

The NACC *Communication Center Journal* provides further insight into benefits of consultant storytelling in the article, “Centering Well-Being: Focusing on Authentic Experiences and Stories,” which highlights the role communication centers play in “prioritizing wellness and wellbeing” for students in all schools (Prentiss, 2022, p.18). Namely, “[c]ommunication [c]enters are uniquely positioned to serve their campus in impactful and meaningful ways” by “crafting safe and empowering spaces that see the authenticity of each... individual” (Prentiss, 2022, p.18) and taking the lead in a collaborative promotion of these efforts across school and college campuses. Storytelling aids in this collaborative experience by allowing consultants to tell authentic stories to clientele in a way that speaks to their everyday academic and communication experiences and supplements the guidance they provide to their peers.

In fact, “it is [the] duty and responsibility [of communication consultants] to promote authentic storytelling” and work to “expand the ‘comfort zone’ for... students” to “empower them to share their [own] stories” (Prentiss, 2022, p. 22). Consultants, therefore, do not simply utilize stories in work practices, but become what they share with others. This perpetual promotion facilitates identity formation as peer educators and clients create, exchange, and work together to refine and produce stories of their own, and in turn, are transformed by these experiences and

inculcate them into their perceived identities (The University of Pennsylvania, 2020). Namely, when creating a story, both parties “have [the] opportunity to select, represent, and highlight features that matter to them and to build personal connections” (Nelson, 2006, as cited by Kim and Li, 2021, p. 36).

A fall 2024 experience illustrates the beginnings of such connections, as a senior UNCG communication consultant named Winter aided a freshman consultee, Leah, with reviews for multiple speeches regarding personal identity within the same session (note: all student names are pseudonyms). As they reviewed each one, Winter discovered they shared strikingly similar experiences, including educational experiences, family backgrounds, and in managing chronic health conditions (namely, diabetes and other related stomach disorders). Learning of these commonalities in a healthy conversational space not only deepened Winter’s understanding of Leah’s speeches, which directly referred to some of her past experiences and struggles, but also created a comfortable space for Leah to share her personal narratives and receive more personalized feedback for each presentation. Winter was also able to share her circumstances, some of which were emphasized directly by Leah’s presentation, and provide comfort and validation to Leah regarding her own struggles. Despite being new to the university and the communication center, Leah felt understood by Winter—a contrast to both of their troubling high school experiences—and expressed feeling more comfortable about reaching out to the center for future help. The two have since become friends, continuing to support each other academically and swap narratives for encouragement on difficult days.

The act of sculpting and sharing narratives further contributes to the professional and personal maturation of peer educators as they reflect on their experiences and present them in a coherent narrative to others (Ward & Schwartzman, 2016). It also aids in the refinement of their public speaking and interpersonal skills; as they mentor and steer their peers, they hone their leadership acumen and amass confidence in their roles, solidifying these qualities into their character. Winter had another session that semester with a student named Juel, an international student who needed help pronouncing English words and mastering subject-verb tenses. Despite multiple visits to the communication center, Juel still struggled with longer words that broke typical grammatical and sound rules. Since Winter had never led a session like this and was not fluent in another language, she let Juel guide the conversation to provide more useful feedback and direct the session in a way that would be most applicable and useful to her. Despite being

nervous about not being able to help Juel to the best of her ability, this approach to the session instead of turning the author to someone else helped Winter better support non-native English speakers like Juel with specific presentation needs, as both she and the consultee were able to co-coordinate the session with their limited knowledge and reduce language barriers between themselves. Juel returned later for another session showing marked improvement on her English pronunciations, and Winter, having taken on additional training to prepare further for the session, helped her practice both English and delivering a separate presentation. Empowered by these experiences, Winter felt more confident and adaptable as a consultant, and later applied for a cross-training opportunity in her department. Experiences like these not only elevate consultant competencies as peer educators but also prepare them for future professional challenges that require strong collaboration, adaptability, and mentorship. Such narrative-sharing practices in consultations further enable peer educators to position themselves as leaders in any field that values interpersonal connections, versatility, and empathy between staff and clientele. Winter exemplified this as she expressed her increase in self-assurance and confidence in her abilities to make positive choices that would best benefit herself and her peers.

In essence, peer educators can effectively shape and refine their personal identities through storytelling in peer interactions and experiential learning. Communication centers inherently provide a fertile environment for developing personal narratives, moral values, and adaptability to change, which are integral to the roles of communication consultants. These narratives not only facilitate individual growth but also foster a supportive and dynamic community, enhancing the environment's overall effectiveness. As peer educators continue to navigate their specialized roles, storytelling remains an instrumental tool for their ongoing personal and professional development.

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