

Transgender Storytelling as Pedagogy: A Mixed-Methods Study of Empathy and Language Change in Student Reflections

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Abstract:

This study examines how a Transgender Storytelling (TGST) workshop fosters students' empathy toward transgender individuals by analyzing their written reflections before and after the session. Grounded in Contact Theory (Batson et al., 2002; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), the project emphasizes how direct engagement with transgender individuals can reduce prejudice and promote prosocial attitudes. In this context, storytelling functions as a pedagogical bridge between emotional and cognitive learning (Plummer, 1983, 2021; Nussbaum, 1997), encouraging students to critically reflect on gender norms and connect with lived experiences that challenge dominant narratives (Hooks, 2010). Narrative-based approaches such as TGST respond to the discomfort and "conundrums" often experienced by both teachers and students in sexuality education (Quinlivan, 2013), offering a powerful means of addressing topics that are frequently underexplored in formal curricula.

To evaluate changes in students' empathetic stance and discourse, this study adopts a mixed-methods discourse analytical approach. Approximately 200 English-language reflections, focusing on students' perceptions of transgender individuals, were collected from Hong Kong university students before and after a 5-hour TGST workshop. A corpus linguistic analysis using LIWC-22 (Boyd & Seraj, 2022) identifies shifts in linguistic indicators of empathy, such as decreased use of self-referential pronouns ("I") and increased use of prosocial verbs like "admire" and "support." These findings are complemented by a qualitative discourse analysis using the Appraisal framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin & White, 2005), which examines students' evaluative language in relation to Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation.

Preliminary results show a post-workshop increase in empathetic and inclusive expressions, with students moving from individualistic language to more collectivist and affirming discourse. This suggests that TGST, as a storytelling-based intervention grounded in interpersonal dialogue, can support students in reconceptualizing gender diversity and practicing what Plummer (1983) describes as intimate citizenship—the moral and emotional capacity to understand oneself and others as gendered subjects.

Importantly, this research contributes not only to theories of empathy, discourse, and intergroup dialogue (Herzig & Chasin, 2006; Nagda et al., 2009), but also to gender-inclusive pedagogy. It offers practical insights for educators and teacher-training programs on how to integrate lived narratives into classroom practice, especially in cultural contexts where transgender topics remain sensitive or marginalized. By highlighting how language both reflects and shapes attitudes, this study supports more relational, reflective, and socially responsive teaching practices.