

EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research

Research Bulletin

Volume 2009, Issue 11

June 2, 2009

Exploring Diversity and Creating IT Community through Storytelling

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Overview

This ECAR research bulletin focuses on a methodology for exploring diversity and building community for information technology (IT) staff and other university employees. It is based on a program developed for Princeton University's Office of Information Technology (OIT). The methodology, which can be adapted for many uses throughout higher education, uses storytelling and other creative approaches to engage co-workers in dialogue about diversity in order to promote community, collegueship, and understanding in the workplace.

A program of OIT workshops grew out of a campus-wide initiative introduced by Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman. According to Tilghman, "Diversifying our community continues to be of critical importance to the university. If we are to remain a preeminent institution, we must call upon the talents of gifted individuals from all backgrounds in our staff and faculty, as well as in our student body." In 2004, Tilghman appointed a Diversity Working Group to recommend initiatives for strengthening and broadening Princeton's efforts to recruit, hire, and retain a diverse workforce. Betty Leydon, Princeton's vice president of information technology and chief information officer, was a member of the Diversity Working Group, along with others who represented major constituent groups on campus. The set of recommendations they delivered in 2005 focused on developing a campus-wide commitment to diversity and fostering institutional culture change.

In 2006, as manager of the Project Office of OIT, I was asked by Leydon to be a member of a cross-functional team to develop a diversity initiative specifically for OIT. According to Leydon, "The OIT Diversity Initiative has helped to create a more welcoming environment where our staff can experience how diverse perspectives and cultural experiences enrich our work place and our community. This also reflects Princeton's broader mission to engage the entire campus community in its commitment to an affirming vision of diversity."

I proposed to OIT that I would work with professional storyteller Susan Danoff to create day-long workshops using storytelling and other creative approaches to enable staff to explore diversity in a way that is comfortable and personal rather than dogmatic or pedantic. Similar to management techniques championed by Peter Senge, Tom Peters, and Larry Prusak, we contended that through brainstorming, discussion, and the sharing of stories, staff would gain an understanding about their co-workers and, by extension, the world at large, thus building community. The value of these workshops would extend far beyond facilitating a cultural exchange; they would build a foundation of trust to help people adapt to institutional change and to build community during times of transition. These skills would be put to the test as the OIT staff adapted to some major transitions that were being planned, and they would also have long-term value in broadening perspectives and strengthening ties in general.

Workshops began in the spring of 2007 and continue today, some two years later. The diversity workshop was so well received that we were asked to develop others, including "Building Community in Times of Transition," "Team Building," and "Creative Thinking." To date, we have presented 12 day-long workshops with groups of 10–15 participants in each. Approximately 140 staff members have attended.

Highlights of Using Storytelling to Explore Diversity and Build Community

We all have stories. These stories compose the bulk of our social discourse. They describe our personal and cultural histories and experiences, and they are also the basis for many of our beliefs. We make choices based on our stories, and we are often defined by them. People quickly move from stranger to acquaintance to friend status based on the stories they exchange.

The rationale behind the Princeton University workshop “Storytelling: Exploring Diversity/Building Community” is simply that hearing tales helps us recall our own; sharing stories helps us connect more deeply to one another. In her keynote address at the Global Connections Seminar, Tilghman emphasized that at Princeton—where almost 40% of graduate students come from outside the United States, 11% of the entering undergraduate freshman class are international students, and 39% of the faculty (including Tilghman herself) are foreign-born—it is imperative to find ways to understand diversity and connect and collaborate across cultures.

Danoff, a professional storyteller and experienced teacher and facilitator, tells traditional folktales throughout the workshop. She sometimes begins the workshop with this Jewish parable:

A long time ago Truth was a skinny old man. He was also naked. One day Parable saw Truth coming down the road. “Truth,” said Parable, “you look terrible. What’s happened to you?”

“I’m starving, I’m cold, and no one ever invites me in for a meal.”

“I know just how that is,” said Parable, “for it used to be that way with me too. One day I put on the clothing of Parable, and people started inviting me everywhere. Life has been easy ever since. I suggest you get yourself some clothes. No one wants to look at the naked truth.”

Truth took this to heart. He went home and began to fill his wardrobe with clothes. He had the elaborate ritual clothing of myth, the fanciful clothing of fairytale, the sturdy clothing of folktale. And as he began wearing his story clothes, he was invited everywhere, and he grew plump and healthy. To this day, Story is welcome everywhere, but people often forget that beneath the clothing of Story lives the naked Truth.

We tell stories because they are such beautiful containers for our truths. Folktales that are told all over the world contain all the human stories of conflict, desire, and hope; they are shorthand for our personal stories, and we can easily see ourselves in them. For this reason, by telling stories in a workshop that asks us, fundamentally, to think about who we are and what we bring from our own cultures, the folktales that Danoff tells help participants relax, enjoy the deeply human connection that stories allow us, and rediscover stories important to them by finding pieces of their own stories reflected in the folktales they hear.

The Stories We Carry With Us

Danoff sometimes asks participants to introduce themselves by telling a story about their names—the very first story about who we are. Although some of us don't have narratives attached to our names, all of us have associations with our names, an attitude toward them, experiences of living with them. Danoff begins by telling her own name stories to model what she is asking:

I always thought I had the most boring name in the world: Susan. When I was a little girl it seemed that every other girl my age was Susan. In the 7th grade there were four Susans in my class. In 8th grade I decided I would be "Beth," my middle name. I called my best friend Barbara to ask her to call me Beth. The next day, although Barbara called me Beth all day, I never looked around once to answer. And so I was still Susan.

I never thought I would have much of a name story, so it is surprising that my name story came to me when I was 33 years old. I was sitting with my grandmother, who was then about 90 years old, and my great Aunt Sarah who was nearly 100. Aunt Sarah had been born in the same town in Russia where my father's father had come from, a grandfather who had passed away long before I was born. I knew nothing specific about my family's origins and asked, "Aunt Sarah, where did the Danoffs come from?"

"Tulachin," she said, in a heavy Yiddish accent.

It didn't register immediately, but about five minutes later I realized that she had said the name of my husband's family—Tolchin—a family who took the name of the village they'd come from on the Russian-Polish border when they came to Ellis Island. In this way I learned that my husband's family and my family had come from the same village.

As participants tell about their names, it is as if the group enters a more personal dimension of their lives and culture. Some tell about the person they were named for; others tell about the difficulty they've had living with a particular name. Some talk about how they've changed their names, and some talk about how they have taken American names once they come to the United States. It is always enlightening when co-workers learn that they didn't actually know the real names of people with whom they work closely. There is laughter when we hear about five siblings who all have names starting with the same letter, or how having the same name as another child in the same school caused confusion. The stories are sometimes funny, sometimes startling, sometimes touching, but by the time we have shared our name stories, we not only know each other's names, but we have also heard their voices telling us something much deeper than answers to the usual questions we ask when we meet someone for the first time: What do you do? Where do you live? How long have you worked here?

Many names also carry meanings within their cultures. In a recent workshop, two Indian women spoke about how their names reveal the region of India where they were born, while several Chinese men talked about their choice to take English names. Anthropologist Victor Turner said that culture is the story we tell about ourselves. Culture

reveals itself in a deeply human and gentle way as we talk about something as simple as our names.

When asking a group of individuals to tell their own stories, it is important to ask the question in a way that is both inviting and nonthreatening. Be sure that what you ask for is something about which everyone will have an experience. Provide a model response, and allow for a wide range of contributions.

Another exercise that works well is to invite people to tell the story about how they wound up at your institution: How did you get here? I created an activity in which I place a large map of the world on the wall, overlaying it with a piece of clear acetate. Participants each choose a colored marker and draw their route to Princeton, beginning with their country of origin or that of their ancestors. In each workshop, when I pull the acetate off the wall and lay it on a white sheet of paper, we see lines extending abstractly across the whole sheet. Even the small groups of Princeton employees seem to come from everywhere.

And yet, that is just the geography. The stories of how we got here have many twists and turns, particularly for staff members who have had a long work history. Although some are from families that have been in America for generations, many participants are immigrants. We have had participants from India, Russia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, France, England, and Canada. An unforgettable story was told by a woman who came from subtropical Taiwan, dressed in stockings, high heels, and a light jacket, stepping off the plane in Buffalo, New York...in the winter. Or the woman from Russia who told about driving a car for the first time to her interview at Princeton and getting into an accident on the way. After arriving late for the interview, she was very relieved to be hired anyway!

In some groups, we have been surprised to learn that many of OIT's more seasoned employees did not begin in technology but came from fields as diverse as archaeology, art history, and English. The stories often evoke laughter and recognition, and each time we share our stories, we feel more connected. We are reminded of our own stories, our commonalities, and our differences. Culture is no longer a world map; it begins to have a personal face.

Uncovering the Personal and Collective Meaning of Diversity

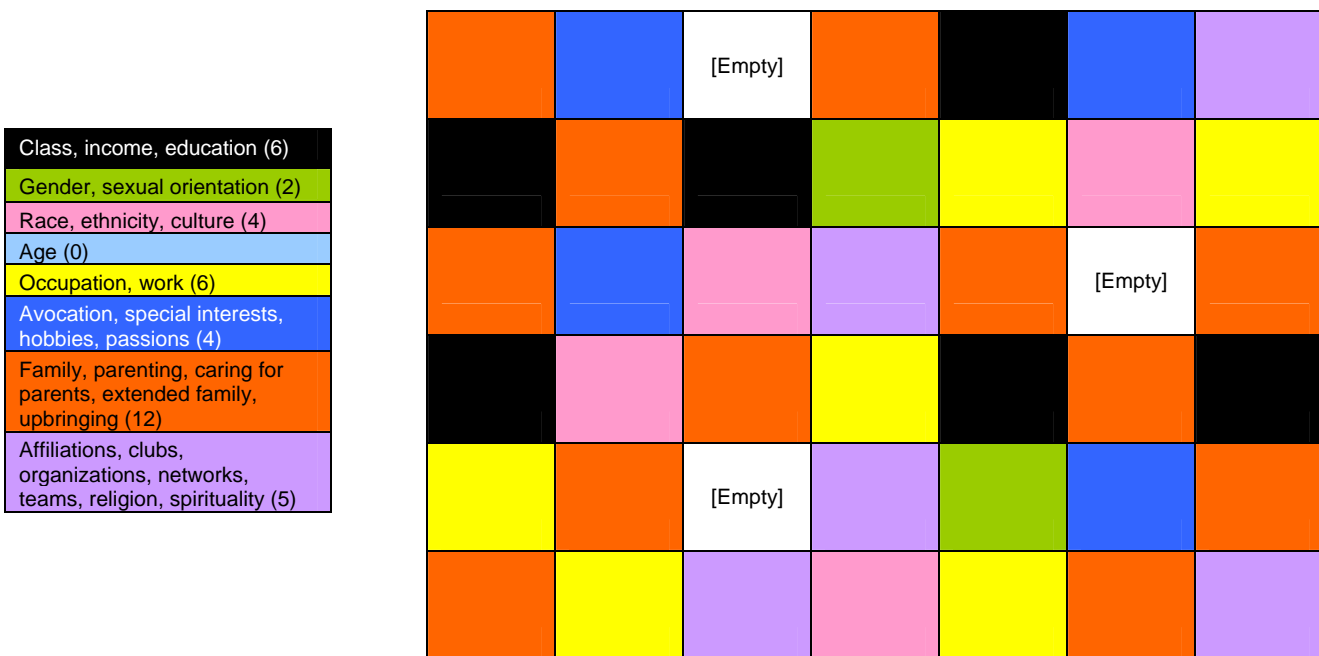
After using the stories to get to know each other, we ask the group to brainstorm what diversity means to them. The list often looks something like this:

- Race
- Culture
- Gender
- Sexual preference
- Avocation
- Values
- Language
- Dress
- Disabilities
- Regional difference
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Socio-economics
- Work
- Religion
- Life experience
- Family
- Illness
- Affiliations (clubs/political parties)

Once we brainstorm possible categories of diversity, we try to discover how we see ourselves—what is most important to us? In order to do this, I designed a visual activity that combines items in the bullet list above into eight categories. A color is assigned to each category. The goal is to build a “diversity quilt” (see Figure 1).

Prior to the activity, I prepare an empty quilt grid. Then I instruct participants to select the three colors that most strongly represent how they see themselves—the categories most important to them in their own lives—and participants randomly paste their colored squares on the grid. When we step back and examine the quilt-grid, we see not just colored squares but data, an information graphic that tells a visual story about each of us individually and the group collectively. I ask the group, “What does this say about us?”

Figure 1. Sample Diversity Quilt from Storytelling Workshop



Although groups have varied, the results have been surprising. In the first group with whom we worked, avocation had the most squares and race had the fewest. In our most recent group, family had the most squares, culture the fewest. Those who chose culture were recent immigrants to the United States. This prompted a discussion of what it is like to make the transition to a new culture.

In some groups we have also asked a second question: When others look at you, which categories do you think are important to them; in other words, how do you think others define you? When we examine this quilt-grid, it generally looks quite different from the first. Race, ethnicity, age, and gender appear more often.

By looking at this story that the graphic tells about us as a group, participants are sometimes able to bring up more sensitive aspects of diversity. In one group, a man from Puerto Rico said that culture and race were extremely important to him. He described attending Princeton as an undergraduate and asking his roommate on the first

day of school whether it mattered that he was Puerto Rican. The roommate said no, it made no difference, to which he replied, "But it makes a big difference to me." He continued to describe how he spent his undergraduate years primarily with other students of his own culture and then said that he had never discussed race and culture in a mixed group before. A woman from India described feeling set apart from others. She recalled an instance at the supermarket where she was told by someone to go back where she came from.

As a result of the gentle storytelling in the first part of the workshop, we build trust within the group, and some of the more painful truths of living in America can be shared. Though this does not always happen, part of building community is sharing what is important to us and recognizing that within our community the differences can be significant.

Using Stories with "Techies"

Telling our stories breaks down stereotypes, and it is significant to mention that one of those stereotypes is "the techie." Recently we did a presentation on our "Building Community in Times of Transition" workshop at the EDUCAUSE Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference in Philadelphia. One participant said that she would be hesitant to use stories with "techies." The stereotype she presented is that of the highly technical left-brained employee who is more or less wired like a computer.

To this, we'd like to say that we have worked with more than 140 staff members in these story workshops. The participants may be highly technical, but they are also people from particular cultures who have family lives outside of work. Not only do we all love to hear stories (why else do we go to the movies and watch TV?), but we all have stories to tell. We might be technical in our work, but that is only a small dimension of who we are. And it might also be why this workshop has been so universally appreciated among employees at Princeton.

As one workshop participant commented, "Is it going to lead you to write better code? I don't know—it may or may not. But one of the things that it will do is to make people feel happier about where they're working and the kind of the community they're in. And that's going to lead to greater inner satisfaction."

Staff Responses

Our workshops generally run from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. When participants arrive in the morning, we observe the typical awkwardness and strained conversations between people who don't know each other well. But by the time we break for lunch, because we have found commonalities in the morning session, groups sit together and conversation is easy. By the end of the day, people feel that they have seen their colleagues in a new light, and they appreciate the depth of diversity that each brings to the work environment.

We wondered whether staff members felt that it would have been more profitable to spend the day at their desks, but the workshop evaluations indicate that overall, participants have found the day to be enriching and satisfying. Some have said that the

workshop will help them when they need to call across campus for help from a colleague they didn't know very well before. Others feel that it is beneficial to know one's colleagues in order to feel more comfortable and fulfilled at work. One person wrote, "I always come away from these group experiences feeling more kindred to the other participants, but this workshop exceeded others I've been to by far. I feel connected to others in a way that will enhance work in the future."

Another wrote, "I think the workshop is a good community-builder, as it forges ties and breaks barriers between people. It would be very helpful for team building." Indeed, we were asked to do a full day of team building through storytelling when a new project team was assembled with staff from technical and functional areas across the university. Few of the participants had met before, but by the end of the day they had all connected through story.

Perhaps best of all, the staff members developed an appreciation for their co-workers that they did not have prior to the workshop. One wrote, "I learned many new things about my fellow employees. Surprising and delightful. It gave me more respect for them going forward." Another said, "I learned things about fellow employees in one afternoon that might have taken years of a personal relationship with them to find out." Yet another commented, "I felt I understood people in the group much more by the end of the day. I learned things that perhaps will alter the way in which I interact with them.... I will continue to examine and embrace the differences I see in other people, and I will not allow those differences to be a barrier to me."

What It Means to Higher Education

What we have presented here is the importance of community in the workplace, a suggestion that diversity can build invisible barriers that might prohibit performance, and the recognition that more sophisticated technology, however helpful it might be, can also diminish our face-to-face relationships. Universities are large communities made up of micro communities, like small towns. Their smooth functioning is built upon relationships, and we have assumed in developing these workshops that positive relationships can ultimately improve the quality of life for employees and the quality of work for the employer. Princeton's OIT recognizes the importance of the stories that their staff bring to work and seeks to honor them, thereby realizing the initial goal: to make OIT a more welcoming place to work and to recognize and respect the diversity within our community.

Key Questions to Ask

- What opportunities does our institution make available to employees, students, and faculty that help them appreciate and understand the diversity within our community?
- In what significant ways can our institution be strengthened if we help our community take advantage of their diverse backgrounds and give them the opportunity to build community?

- When staff members are given the tools to communicate with one another, how will it alter their working relationships?
- At a time when technology makes it easy to avoid personal encounters, how can we facilitate opportunities for employees to interact face-to-face? Do we provide such opportunities? Why does it matter?

Where to Learn More

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Citation for This Work

Baiz, Hetty, and Susan Danoff. "Exploring Diversity and Creating IT Community through Storytelling" (Research Bulletin, Issue 11). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, 2009, available from <http://www.educause.edu/ecar>.