



## “Tender Narrations”: Humanities Education in Times of Crisis

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**Abstract.** In her 2018 Nobel Prize lecture, Olga Tokarczuk emphasizes the “massive significance” of storytelling as a means to “perceive the similarities and sameness” among people. “It is a way of looking,” she says, “that shows the world as [...] interconnected.” This principle of connection defines for us the value of Humanities education, especially now with social isolation and political fracture so prevalent. The past two years have seen undergraduates experience disruption or witness one catastrophe after another. Even in calmer times, incoming students often lack the means to describe their feelings while negotiating new academic and social experiences. COVID-enforced isolation has exacerbated this problem as social media often offers only superficial forms of expression. Students’ vocabularies—the words, images, and ideas they use—are shrinking. The polemic extremes of our political discourse has narrowed conversation even further. As part of the discussion of the role Humanities education, especially core curricula, has in university studies, this paper focuses on how storytelling (and attentive, compassionate listening) can help students find their own voice while also acknowledging the perspectives and experiences of others. We discuss our efforts in engaging our students, in helping them express themselves and participate in important post-COVID societal conversations.

**Keywords:** Humanities education, Teaching pedagogy, post-COVID.

### 1 Introduction

In her 2018 Nobel Prize lecture, the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk emphasizes the “massive significance” of storytelling as a means to “perceive the similarities and sameness” among people. Seeking “metaphors that transcend cultural differences,” Tokarczuk looks to build “tender” relationships between herself and her subjects and herself and her readers. “It is a way of looking,” she says, “that shows the world as [...] interconnected” (Tokarczuk 2019). In “Why Literature?” Maria Vargas Llosa expresses a similar bonding role for literature in “compelling [people] to enter into dialogue” and “[feel] membership in the collective human experience across time and space” (Llosa 2001). This principle of connection defines for us the role and value of Humanities education, especially in these times of crisis where social isolation and political fracture have been so prevalent. The concern for many—parents, teachers, psychologists—is that the world has stopped being a promising place for our students, but instead one where something negative seems always around the next corner. If you are 18, 20, or 22 years old, the past two-plus years have seen you experience disruption to your education or witness one catastrophe after another. Even in calmer times, undergraduates often come to university lacking the language to describe their

feelings as they negotiate new experiences and increasing responsibilities. COVID-enforced isolation has exacerbated this problem as social media, despite its ubiquity, often offers only brief or superficial forms of expression. Many students' vocabularies—words, images, and ideas—are shrinking and the polemic extremes of our political discourse has narrowed conversation even further. We share Tokarczuk's worry that society has become increasingly less able to tell and less willing to hear complex and contentious stories: "Today our problem lies," Tokarczuk says, "in the fact that we do not have ready narratives for the future or even for a concrete now [...] we lack the points of view, the metaphors, the myths, and the new fables [...] In a word, we lack new ways of telling the story of the world" (Tokarczuk 2019).

We do, of course, also encounter many students who are not deaf to or silent about what is happening in the world. Seemingly having acquired the language of activism, some students do know how to label certain types of oppression and are comfortable with treating people in the way those people prefer to be identified. Yet, they, too, do not appear to be fully able to insert their voices into the fabric of larger social and political discourses because the world as they have experienced it in these last years—at a most transformative time in their lives—has been defined by physical isolation and echo-chambers of self-referentiality. They hear their own voices and the voices of people like TikTok/Instagram influencers and activists, but they are less aware that there are broader narratives—be they real-world or fictional—in which they can participate. They either don't know about or already distrust those voices (because of age, for example, or ingrained stereotypes). So, even if they have words, they still lack fuller narrative ability and storytelling spaces. Ultimately, our goal is to provide students the means to participate in these larger conversations, to be comfortable speaking and writing in a variety of venues and forms.

## **2 The Role(s) of Humanities Education**

The idea of understanding and promoting respect for cultural difference, a central tenet of most every university's mission and learning objectives, has taken on added immediacy as political discord has the idea of the University itself—a crucial place where arguments, values, and experiences are expressed safely—under attack. In the U.S., for example, contentions over curricular censorship have educators worried about what materials they can teach. Rather than protecting the democratic idea of providing space for everyone's experiences and stories to be told, attempting to silence the voices of people different from a perceived "us" has become the norm. Teachers and librarians throughout the U.S. and the world are facing threats from politicians and politically-motivated school boards and parents to ban materials they deem offensive. For many educators, the vitriol behind this increasingly widespread desire to suppress voices with whom they disagree has reached disturbing and dangerous levels: "What has taken us aback this year is the intensity with which school libraries are under attack," said Nora Pelizzari, a spokeswoman at the National Coalition Against Censorship. She added that the apparent coordination of the effort sets it apart: "Particularly when taken in concert with the legislative attempts to control school curricula, this feels like a more overarching attempt to purge schools of materials that people disagree with. It feels different than what we've seen in recent years" (Blake 2021).

The war in Ukraine has raised even higher the stakes regarding the need for "tender" consideration, as Tokarczuk calls it, of other people's voices and artistic expression. For these voices are often speaking in ethical and moral terms: speaking of life and death. As Jason Farago recently asked in an article for *The New York Times* entitled "The Role of the Art in Time of War":

WHY LISTEN TO MUSIC, why look at art, why go to the theater when war is raging? Twenty years ago, in these pages, as the pile at Ground Zero still smoldered and the long war in Afghanistan had just begun, the critic Margo Jefferson gave an answer that’s always stuck with me.

The reason you need art in wartime, wrote Jefferson, is because “history cannot exist without the discipline of imagination.” Through art we establish similarities between past and future, near and far, abstract and concrete, that cast received certainties into doubt. We look and listen in a way that lets thinking and feeling run parallel to each other. And in extreme times, this sort of cultural appreciation can rise from an analytical to a moral plane. If we pay close attention — a task made harder with every meme-burst and iPhone rollout — art and literature and music can endow us with improved faculties to see our new present as something more than a stream of words and images. They can “provide ways of seeing and ordering the world,” as Jefferson wrote then: “not just our world, but those worlds elsewhere that we know so little of.” (Farago 2022)

In offering our anecdotal and provisional answers to the question of the role Humanities education should play in these contentious and, for many, dangerous times, our focus is on how storytelling (defined in the broadest sense from literature and languages, to the performing and fine arts) helps students develop their own voice while also engaging and respecting the perspectives and experiences of others, in finding what Tokarczuk sees as that elusive metaphor that surpasses “cultural differences” and what Llosa calls the “most primary and necessary undertaking of the mind [...] to see in ethnic and cultural differences the richness of [humankind].” We believe the Humanities should stand front-and-center as a leading activity of core and gen ed curricula for the very reason Jefferson expresses: the Humanities help us learn about the “elsewhere” and the “other”—the places and people we do not know, but with whom we might share an affinity or belief. That’s why we foreground storytelling and engaged, respectful listening in our courses.

Our work at LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania (Paul having taught there numerous times; Daria and Oleksandra both earning B.A. degrees from LCC and Oleksandra also earning an M.A. and now serving on the faculty in the English department) has demonstrated for us the necessity of creating welcoming environments—story and life spaces, if you will—for our students, many of whom come from areas of the world facing great difficulties and stereotypical characterizations that often leave them feeling ostracized. A North American educational-style university on the Baltic coast, LCC includes large student cohorts from post-Soviet bloc and Middle Eastern countries including Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as students from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Expanding the scope of its general education program has been a crucial focus, as has assessing its impact on student learning.

Part of LCC’s general education core curriculum, ART 100: Arts and Culture, which both Paul and Sasha helped develop, is assigned to all first-year students. The course serves as an introduction to the arts, in which students explore various artistic media from a global perspective. As we have begun expressing, an intention and challenge for humanities courses such as ART 100 is to help students participate in the creation and nurturing of complex and open dialogue. LCC’s program goals speak to this, emphasizing (as many such goals statements do) the ability to “demonstrate multidisciplinary knowledge” and engagement with “multicultural perspectives” by

“recognizing and articulating how artists, authors, and forms of art and literature from around the world represent the human condition.” First introduced in 2019, ART 100 was only taught “normally” (in-person) for one semester. From Spring 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic began and courses went online, to now, when most of the student population at LCC remains affected by the current war in Ukraine and the tensions it has caused within numerous surrounding countries, ART 100 became a place where students could find temporary refuge from their harsh realities and where they could share their thoughts on the rapidly changing world and their place in it. While reflecting on and foregrounding such immediate global crises was not originally planned, it only makes sense that this happened: since we are looking at art through the prism of our own experiences, our background, and the greater cultural and political context of which are a part, COVID and the war became the stories of our students’ lives—and ours.

In times of crisis, people often find themselves doubting the importance and/or necessity of many things they have previously seen as crucial to their well-being. For students, school, especially studying something that is not directly related to their major or professional plans may seem pointless when there are more immediately real matters at hand. This was evident from some LCC students’ dropping academic performance and through the many discussions Sasha and Paul have had with students over the past several years on how they valued (or did not value) education in these times of crisis. Strained by the Covid-19 pandemic and then by the war almost immediately following, students found themselves wondering whether pursuing higher education was something truly worth their time and effort.

Despite this worry about the value of education at this moment in their lives, many students did find significance in the discussions prompted by the themes and content within our ART 100 sections. There are many topics in this class (from nature and the environment, to tensions between art’s political and aesthetic purposes, and considerations of race and gender), and, naturally, the reactions to them are quite diverse, too; after all, not everyone attending this mandatory class is interested in the arts, and, as we have described, this was particularly apparent under the pressure of the various crises students have lived through over these past three years. We did notice, however, that the topics of identity, family heritage, and technology’s role in our cultural world caught the attention of even the most disinterested students and led to many unexpected conversations and realizations. Out of all the discussions and assignments listed in her syllabus, Oleksandra’s students always highlighted the one having them to reflect on their own identity and past/current experiences: the Identity Board and Reflection paper. Serving as an opportunity for the students to explore different aspects of their identity and to illustrate them with various images of their choice, the students connected with the assignment because they had the opportunity to learn more about how they choose to represent themselves to the world and how others see them. This assignment deepened their understanding of themselves, their culture, and their classmates; it allowed them, as Llosa has suggested, to learn to respect the differences and find similarities amongst themselves (as when students from very different backgrounds chose similar images, words, or songs to define their present sense of self). With the assignment positioned early in the semester, these interactions helped build genuine community among the students in the classroom. For Oleksandra, too, the discussions on art and technology—where her classes focused on contemporary art created with the assistance of digital technologies, and how museums around the world made their exhibitions available online during the pandemic—were also crucial in showing her students that physical isolation was not a dead end for creativity, but an opportunity to embrace new tools and a chance to explore the world of art online.

In a similar vein, one especially evocative assignment for Paul involved students curating their own virtual museum: to organize and tell their own story of a place or an idea that moved them or which they wanted other people to experience, by explaining the purpose(s) and message(s) behind the types of artifacts they would collect. This particular project came out of ideas raised in an article students read by Adam Popescu, entitled “How Will We Remember the Pandemic: Museums Are Already Deciding,” which focused on the issue of who should be able to define this complex time for future generations: “some scholars and historians point to today’s challenges of depicting an event authentically and from many angles when there is still no end in sight to the pandemic. And, they ask, when everything is an artifact, what is truly historically important — and just whose COVID stories are being told in these archives, and whose are not?” (Popescu 2021).

### 3 Our Positions and Stake

Such discussions of one’s identity and culture are even more meaningful now with so many students are affected by the war. Many LCC students from Ukraine feel that what is most important to them—their cultural identity and physical autonomy—is actively being attacked and violated by an invading *enemy* intent on assimilating them; they thus feel the need to protect who they are at all costs, to preserve their cultural and spiritual heritage by sharing it with the world. According to a number of students, ART 100 has provided them with the greatest opportunity they have had to share their culture with their classmates from all over the world; architecture, customs and traditions, language, art, and literature were among the topics that especially resonated with the students and inspired the most compelling discussions. Most importantly, this has allowed them to explore the differences among their cultures and others, and find similarities where they hadn’t expected any to be. In our classes, we have witnessed people divided by conflict come together and bond over the things that are closest to their hearts. From a pedagogical vantage, most all the students appreciated being able to share their opinions and postings in a discussion-based format, as this representative student evaluation comment reflects: “I liked the class structure the most—an open conversation in which anyone can offer their opinion.”

For Daria, the war has been a direct awakening for her and her U.S.-based students (who are coming to recognize that the war in Ukraine is “affecting everyone”). Focusing on the language and literature courses she is teaching, Dasha sees the war as fundamentally structured around the notion of the Other. Russian aggression against Ukraine has exacerbated the position of both Ukrainians who are fleeing the country to save their lives, and Russians who oppose the war and thus are forced to escape the country to get away from Putin’s regime. Abroad, these two groups of people are perceived as the Other: Ukrainians as victims, Russians as perpetrators. Meanwhile, both groups are aliens to the locals of the countries in which they are arriving due to the war.

As an instructor from Russia, Daria is often viewed as the Other in the deep South of the United States where she resides. Her accent marks her as “foreign” and she does not always understand cultural references through which her students communicate. Teaching in the department of *foreign* languages, only highlights her otherness. Ironically, she is also the person who is always asked by her students about the war in Ukraine as if she were an expert (which she is most decidedly not). This is not surprising. After all, for most of Daria’s students here, she is the only real-life connection with the mysterious and dangerous culture in the East that is once again threatening world peace. Amid all this, she teaches comparative literature courses that deal with ethics and morality. For example, the University of South Carolina offers CPLT 150 – a first-year level course entitled Values and Ethics in Literature. Each week, students approach a broad

theme—such as Community, Righteousness, Compassion, Courage, Dignity, Tolerance, Hope, Justice—through the reading of a literary piece. The texts are intentionally diverse in historical epochs, genre, and geography. The students then, write a blog post and engage in a discussion on the week's prompt. These prompts, along with the midterm and final exams, often involve questions on the most recent world events. In the Spring of 2022, a question on the Russian invasion of Ukraine was included, and this current semester, questions about the protests in Iran have been a particular focus.

Daria's position as a person who hurts daily for what is happening in her native part of the world has been an unusual one. She teaches this course on ethics, trying to engage with her students with literary narratives that should not only encourage them to think about certain ideas but to ideally also talk about how their experiences align with or differ from what they have read. This invokes discussions in which they share their own definitions of the virtues being analyzed, and which requires them to muster their intellectual, moral, and linguistic abilities. It is always fascinating for her to see a student coming up with their own gloss on something as abstract as honor or happiness and she very much appreciates the courage students are showing in expressing their opinions in these trying times.

This year, however, it is not only the students who are discovering this language within themselves but she, as an instructor, is learning to push the limits of the language we normally use to express and establish our own narratives. Her current position as "alien" forces Daria not only to search for new words to describe her experiences be it in her scholarly work, her interactions with friends and family from back home, or her conversations with Ukrainian friends, but makes her eager to hear others who are experiencing and examining similar issues right now. Her own inability to convey new meanings in the world—losing her voice as a storyteller—where so many of the old meanings and connections have been instantly destroyed, has made her more sympathetic toward her students for whom the world has not been a place of optimistic continuity, and who might be struggling to express their feelings and perspectives.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Having moved to a university in the U.A.E., Paul has been reading with his students an article by Arthur C. Brooks, entitled "A Gentler, Better Way to Change Minds: Stop Wielding Your Values as a Weapon and Start Offering Them as a Gift," that asks them to consider how people can better participate in healthy dialogue regarding contentious topics. Brooks' focus on getting people to think beyond polarizing, either/or methods of communication helps students conceive of their own thinking, writing, and research more broadly, as explorations of multiple positions (rather than immediately settling on a single vantage point) and encourages them to listen to the stories and perspectives of others. "When people feel excluded from a community," Brooks reminds us, "they can become hostile to that community." "Go out of your way," he suggests, "to welcome those who disagree with you as valued voices, worthy of respect and attention. There is no "them," only "us." Bring them into your circle to hear your views [...]" (Brooks 2022). That is ultimately what the three of us have been trying to do: to help students widen their circles, extend the reach of their voices, and to help one another make sense of the barrage of images, ideas, and arguments to which we are incessantly exposed in these trying and, for many, dangerous times. Humanities' response to and use of the creative, storytelling arts—especially when those stories depict violence and tragedy—is essential. Helping students see from different perspectives—whether through the lens of an historian or art historian, professor of comparative literature or philosophy, or composition

instructor—is not simply the passing on of an academic skill, but also a crucial aspect of teaching students to become engaged, empathetic citizens; interpreters and makers of meaning:

Somewhere in the interstices between form and meaning, between picture and plotline, between thinking and feeling, art gives us a view of human suffering and human capability that testimonials, or even our own eyes, are not always able to. These war works are not important because they are “topical” — or, to use the vacuous catchphrase of our day, “necessary.” They are important because they reaffirm the place of form and imagination in times that would deny their potentialities. They narrate history at scales and depths that push notifications simply cannot deliver, and propaganda does not bother with. They are what allow us to discern, in the daily tide of images and insanities, any meaning at all. (Fargo)

The following words from the social critic Jamelle Bouie reaffirm for us the importance of empathetic listening and providing spaces and means for many voices to speak with one another. In letting others express themselves, we come to see our own selves reflected and respected: “To understand the experiences of a person in a fundamentally different time and place is to practice the skills you need to see your fellow citizens as equal people even when their lives are profoundly different and distant from your own. This is why it’s vital that students learn as much as possible about the many varieties of people [...] and their experiences, and the stories they tell” (Bouie 2021).

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