

Sharing My Journey With My Students:
Applied Assignments That *First* Changed *MY* Relationships

G. Kevin Randall, Ph.D., CFLE
Bradley University

ABSTRACT. Parker Palmer (1998) said it well: “We did not merely find a subject to teach – the subject also found us” (p. 25). In this brief article, I want to share with others what my subject has taught my students and me. Over the past 20 years, three particular assignments or practicums, as I call them in class, have consistently earned high commendations from my undergraduate students, students whose academic majors vary across the campus from engineering and technology to liberal arts and sciences. These three assignments, focusing primarily on the family of origin, interpersonal communication, and forgiveness, are the applied backbone of the course, Family Relations, an upper-level undergraduate course.

Parker Palmer (1998), in his chapter on “The Heart of a Teacher,” reflected on the *subjects that chose us* and commented:

We did not merely find a *subject* to teach – the *subject* also found us. We may recover the heart to teach by remembering how that subject evoked a sense of self that was only dormant in us before we encountered the subject’s way of naming and framing life. (p. 25)

I grew up as an only child of older parents, experienced the death of my father three days after my fifteenth birthday, cared for my aging grandmother and mother (both of whom lived with my wife and me prior to their deaths) and together with my wife, raised/launched four children. Thus, it’s *not* a wonder to me that in my mid-life, I did not just *decide* to earn a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies with an emphasis on aging. Rather, as Palmer quipped, my subject certainly *found* me and I was privileged to respond. My first encounter with the naming and framing as Palmer calls it - the theorizing and conceptualizing of patterns and constructs in adult and relationship development across the life span - generated a renewed self; I immediately found very helpful and practical application for my own life experiences and that of my students. Now, years later, I continue to find renewal in reading, researching, and guiding others in the discovery of such applied science to their own lives and relationships.

As the recipient of such positive influence in my own relationships - personal, familial, and professional - I am committed to raising the academic challenge for my students; my discipline is not trivial, it is foundational to their well-being. In fact, my own program of etiological and applied research, investigating the mechanisms that enhance life’s quality (and ultimately positive mental and physical health outcomes) across the life span, provides

Direct correspondence to G. Kevin Randall, CFLE, Ph.D. at krandall@bradley.edu.

for my students (Bain, 2004; Light, 2001). As a result of captivation by my discipline, my natural response is to share the wealth with others, my *students* of course, and for the purpose of this paper, my colleagues and perhaps – hopefully – their students as well. Over the past 20 years, continuing refreshment, “fuel” for my teaching “fire,” and an academically challenging model three particular assignments or practicums, as I call them in class, have consistently earned high commendations from my undergraduate students, students whose academic majors vary across the campus from engineering and technology to liberal arts and sciences. These three assignments are the applied backbone of the course, Family Relations, an upper-level undergraduate elective for most students.

The course focuses on personal, familial, and professional relationships across the life span, and provides opportunities for students to discover and interact with classical and current literature related to such concepts as the numerous theories regarding mate selection and relationship formation (White & Klein, 2002), the definition and development of love (Holman, 2001; Reiss, 1960), and the life-long influence of the family of origin (Conger, Lorenz, & Wickrama, 2004; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000). However, the three practicums focus primarily on the family of origin, communication, and forgiveness and are designed to engage students for maximum learning. Fink’s (2003, p. 30) *Taxonomy of Significant Learning* includes six interactive dimensions: (a) foundational knowledge – understanding and remembering information and ideas; (b) application – skills, creative and critical thinking skills and the ability to manage projects; (c) integration – connecting ideas, people, and realms of life; (d) human dimension – learning about oneself and others; (e) caring – developing new feelings, interests, and values; and (f) learning how to learn – becoming a better student by inquiring about a subject and becoming a self-directed learner (p. 30). These applied assignments are designed to incorporate components from Fink’s dimensions furthering student engagement and ultimately, learning. Fink writes, “. . . achieving any one kind of learning simultaneously enhances the possibility of achieving the other kinds of learning as well” (p. 32).

The first practical or applied project titled, “Family Ties,” introduces the students to stories or narratives as powerful tools for creating personal and familial identity accomplishing a number of purposes by addressing particular functions (e.g., answering questions such as “How did this family come to be?” or “How does this family support its members?”); my colleague Peter Martin and I wrote about this previously and included the “Family Ties” assignment as an appendix (see Randall & Martin, 2003). Students are encouraged to connect with a family member by explaining the assignment using Appendix A¹ and to develop their own unique family story addressing one or more of the functions of stories or narratives. This assignment encourages interaction with parents, grandparents, and other family members that often are either unstated or misunderstood. One student told me she “found her home” for the first time in over 20 years.

Over the years, as a certified PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program; see www.prepinc.com) instructor, I’ve required students to read Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg’s (2010) work, *Fighting for Your Marriage*. In addition to their emphasis on use of the speaker-listener technique when couples encounter conflict-laden topics, the authors introduce other helpful tools such as the X-Y-Z statement (pp. 175-176). This tool forces the speaker to address the specific behavior of the other person (X), the specific situation (Y) in which the behavior occurred, and how the speaker feels as a result (Z). After working through examples with the class and having them develop statements of their own, I then introduce the second

assignment as an extension of the X-Y-Z statement (see Appendix B). It is based on the very practical communication book by Gary Smalley and John Trent (1992), *The Language of Love*, and in addition to teaching students about the value of emotional word pictures for interpersonal communication, the assignment has them construct one for their own use. In addition to the assignment itself, I provide examples from my own life and previous student examples. My students have used these to begin repair of broken relationships with significant others, parents, roommates, professors, and many other close relationships at home and at work. Often, once exposed to the concept in class through this assignment, students then choose to purchase the work by Smalley and Trent for deeper understanding and further application.

Research on the highly salient and relational topic of forgiveness (Enright, 2001; Enright & North, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000) has grown in the past two decades to include family science topics such as relationships after divorce (Rye, Pargament, Pan, Yingling, Shogren, & Masako, 2005), health and well-being (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; McCullough, 2000), marriage (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Olmstead, Blick, & Mills, 2009), and close relationships (Eckstein, Sperber, & McRae, 2009; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). While some textbooks include sections on this important field of study (Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Knox & Schacht, 2010), few applied tools exist for use in the college classroom (see O’Neil, Davison, Mutchler, & Trachetenberg, 2005).

After brief classroom orientation to the forgiveness research base and an overview of the process model (Enright, 2001), students are required to follow the steps in Appendix C. Over the years, students have found this assignment to be perplexing at first, but once engaged, extremely helpful. I do make a caveat when explaining the assignment that I’m not asking students to address anything that may require professional help and if there is a concern, the student should check with their counseling professional at home or at the university. However, quite a few times, students under a counselor’s direction have received permission to use the assignment as part of their interaction with the counselor. I find that not requiring a certain number of pages opens the doors for those students who wish to “open up” and reflect deeply – a 20 page paper is not unusual! Others, if they wish, may create a “fictitious” scenario and work through the model accordingly; it is the student’s choice. Regardless, they do engage with the process model and many report it is a truly liberating exercise. Father Martin Jenco (1995), a former hostage in Lebanon, now deceased, wrote:

I don’t believe that forgetting is one of the signs of forgiveness. I forgive, but I remember. I do not forget the pain, the loneliness, the ache, the terrible injustice. But I do not remember it to inflict guilt or some future retribution. Having forgiven, I am liberated. I need no longer be determined by the past. I move into the future free to imagine new possibilities. (p. 135)

Thus, these three assignments have *found* me in a similar fashion to my discipline. Each of the assignments, on numerous occasions in my life thus far, have impacted for the better my relationships at home and at work; as appropriate, I share some of these change moments with my students. I enjoy the fact that very often students will want to meet and have me review their work to date (before they hand it in for grading) to be sure they are on the right track; they see the assignment as more than a grade! After the practicums are completed and returned, I provide opportunity for students to voluntarily share their thoughts and experiences with others in the class. These spirited discussions tend to be transparent and candid, and I see significant learning

take place as a result of the practicums (Fink, 2003). Upon further reflection, I smile, as the assignments help me say, “I teach with my mouth shut” (Finkel, 2000).

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¹From “Developing and using stories or narratives to transmit values and legacy,” by G. K. Randall and P. Martin, 2003, *Organization Development Journal*, 21 , 44-49. Reprinted with permission.

G. Kevin Randall Bio

G. Kevin Randall holds a bachelor’s degree in education, a master’s in theology, in human development and family studies (HDFS), and Ph. D. in HDFS. He enjoys learning and teaching about family relations with students in higher education and individuals in the community serving as a professional clergy member, adjunct and now full-time, tenure-track faculty member.

Appendix A: Family Ties¹

PURPOSE: Introduce students to the use of stories or narratives to transmit values and legacy in their personal and professional lives. First, read Randall & Martin (2003). I suggest you read the Appendix first to get an idea of what you need to learn from the article. Basically, you will be interviewing someone in your family, focusing on and writing around at least one functional question (see p. 48).

PLAN: You will find information in the article that will help you explain your assignment to your family members. The last page (p. 48) may be very helpful to you. Also, the article’s Appendix on page 49 is designed as a “stand alone” tool to aid you in the assignment. I suggest you provide a copy of that page for them (or read through it with them). I’ve added it below:

Stories or Narratives: Linking One Generation to Another

1. Definition/Descriptions: Stories or narratives reflect a family's or organization's collective experience. Some are too painful to recall; others are the centerpiece of any family gathering. Storying is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning. When given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others (Wells, 1986).
2. Functions of Stories/Narratives:
 - A. To remember a person or event
 - B. To create belonging and reaffirm family/organizational identity
 - C. To educate current members and socialize new ones
 - D. To aid changes

E. To provide stability by connecting generations or cohorts

F. To answer specific identity questions concerning the relationship (s):

- *How did this family/organization come to be?
- *Are (mom and dad, the founder, the boss) really human?
- *How does a child become an adult in this family?
- *Will the family stand behind its members?
- *How does the family handle adversity?
- *What does it mean to be a “FAMILY MEMBER”?

3. Choose one of the functions or identity questions and create a story from your family's or organization's experience. You may find multiple interviews with diverse members (children or grandparents, new employee or retired supervisor) helpful in your search.

Appendix B: The Process of Forgiving Another

*Based on Enright, R. D. (2001). *Forgiveness is a choice: A step-by-step process for resolving anger and restoring hope*. Washington, D. C.: APA LifeTools.

***Remember, as discussed in class, if you have any concerns about completing this assignment, please inform your instructor and/or discuss it with a counselor at Student Health Services. You may create a fictitious scenario and work it through if you wish.*

- I. Using lecture material and any other sources you wish, define interpersonal forgiveness in your own words (please cite sources).
- II. Choose an individual you wish to focus upon as you work through the process of forgiveness (you may choose to create a fictitious example) and identify the wrong that needs forgiving.
- III. Work through the Four Phases and 20 steps or guideposts of the Forgiveness Process Model (Enright, 2001; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998) as outlined and discussed in class, defining each in your own terms.
- IV. After defining each phase and subsequent steps, journal your thoughts as to “where I am in the process.”
- V. Finally, identify which steps in the process you have worked on and which steps you yet need to work through. Explain whether or not you will choose to continue the process, how you plan to do so, and who will be your accountability partner to help you fulfill your goal.
- VI. Remember as always, proofread your work for clarity, grammar, spelling, and sentence structure.

*All responses will be kept strictly confidential
and read only by your instructor.*

Appendix C: Communicating Clearly

*From Smalley, G., & Trent, J. (1992). *The language of love: A powerful way to maximize insight, intimacy, and understanding*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

1. Establish a clear purpose: What do you want your words to do . . .
 - A. Clarify thoughts and feelings?
 - B. Move one to a deeper level of intimacy?
 - C. Praise or encourage someone?
 - D. Lovingly correct someone's behavior or attitude?

2. Study the other person's world (what are their interests, hobbies, professional likes, Sunday afternoon avocational pursuits . . .). "When I think of _____, I think of _____."

3. Draw your communication tool from four arenas:
 - A. *Nature* (outdoors, animal kingdom,)
 - B. *Everyday objects and activities*
 - C. *Imaginary stories* (you create them based on your knowledge of the other person and their particular interest in this special topic)
 - D. *Remember when . . .* (draw upon your shared experiences)

GRADING RUBRIC:

Your score will be based on completeness (did you follow the directions?), content (is it a word picture?), clarity (grammar, complete sentences, etc.) and spelling.