

Master's in Public Administration Storytelling for Nonprofits

Instructor – M. Elaine Vradenburgh | vradenbm@evergreen.edu

Spring 2020 – 2 Credits

Apr 24, 5-9pm | Apr 25, 9am-5pm | Apr 26, 9am-5pm

SEM 2 D2109

Course Description

“Rather than being the magical elixir we imagine, might curated stories inhibit social change?”

- Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories*

The strength of our sector depends largely on our ability to tell compelling stories – about the need in the community, about the impact of our work, about the future we are striving to create. Yet the trend toward curated storytelling often oversimplifies the issues or focuses too heavily on raising one-time gifts often at the expense of deep, long-term engagement and transformative change. Worse still, such storytelling can reproduce the very power dynamics we’re trying to transform.

In this course, we will discuss storytelling conventions and consider how to create a storytelling culture within your organization that moves beyond the pitfalls of curated stories. Creating a truly transformative storytelling community often requires us to reprioritize and reimagine our workplans, cultivate new partnerships, and to retool our staff. We will draw from the fields of oral history and folklore to understand what it takes to build an ethical storytelling practice and look at tactical examples from the sector to consider what it takes to make this shift within our organizations.

Class time will consist of a combination of seminar discussion, group work, films, and guest speakers. Students will engage in a variety of skill building exercises, and explore case studies of effective storytelling models. At the end of class, students will walk away with both practical skills, as well as a critical lens through which to consider the role and practice of storytelling in the sector.

Learning Objectives:

1. Analyze and understand storytelling conventions, their power and pitfalls, in movement-building and change-making
2. Explore alternatives models to cultivate more long-term engagement and dynamic problem-solving
3. Learn and practice listening skills to improve our storytelling
4. Explore the components of an ethical storytelling practice, including the concept of ongoing consent and reciprocity
5. Understand what is needed to build and sustain a culture of storytelling within an organization

Required Reading/Listening

Please complete the following reading by our first class – 5:00 p.m. on Friday, April 24:

- Fernandes, Sujatha. 2017. *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lawless, Elaine. "'I Was Afraid Someone like You... an Outsider...Would Misunderstand:' Negotiating Interpretative Differences between Ethnographers and Subjects." *The Journal of American Folklore* (Summer 1992): 302-314.
- Toelken, Barre. "The Yellowman Tapes." *The Journal of American Folklore* (Autumn 1998): 381-391.
- Kerr, Daniel. "'We Know What the Problem Is:' Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up." *The Oral History Review* (Winter – Spring 2003): 27-45.

Credit Requirements (2 credits)

This is an intensive class which will meet for one weekend block only. Please read the entire syllabus and plan accordingly to be sure you can accomplish the pre-readings and assignments and attend each day. To receive full credit for this course, students must do the following:

- Complete all the assigned readings.
- Attend all classes (entire weekend intensive).
- Actively participate in class discussions, exercises and group work.
- Complete all written assignments, including in-class assignments.
- Consistent with MPA program requirements, students will prepare a self-evaluation and an evaluation of their instructor. Students should include in their self-evaluation at least one important lesson or idea that has influenced their thinking relative to the courses learning objectives.

Assignments

Students are expected to complete the following assignments by the due dates listed below:

YOUR ENGAGEMENT STORY | approx. 2 pages | Due Friday, Apr 24 at 5pm

Nonprofits use story as a tool to engage – their time, talents, and resources – toward a cause. Read "Fundraising is Not About Money, Parts 1&2" on Canvas. Write a two-page (approx.) paper sharing your story around engagement in the sector. Consider what motivates you to give – your time, talents, or resources to an organization or cause. What values underpin those motivations? Where do those values come from – your family of origin, your community, your cultural heritage? What role has storytelling played in your own story around engagement? Be specific and use examples.

STORYTELLING ADVISOR REPORT | approx. 5 pages | Due Sunday, May 31 at 5pm (via Canvas)

Your assignment is to serve as an organization's Storytelling Advisor. (There is such a role!)

Select a current issue of interest to you where people in your community are gathering together to make change. What is the "story landscape" around the issue? What questions are being asked and how are they being answered and by whom?

Your assignment is to analyze how a specific nonprofit within the organizing effort is supporting the goals of that effort and contributing to the story landscape. Your analysis should include:

- a review of the nonprofit's communications materials (web, print, social media, etc.)
- an interview(s) with a key staff member(s) at the organization, ideally the communications staff, and
- additional source material you need to understand and describe the story landscape

Explore a specific concept or idea put forth in one (or more) of our readings and make recommendations for how they may refine, deepen and/or change their storytelling practice.

About the Instructor

Elaine Vradenburgh is a multimedia storyteller, educator, and community engagement strategist with over fifteen years of experience working in the public sector. She has managed organizational communications, outreach, marketing and fundraising for arts and human service agencies in Washington and Oregon, and has coordinated community-based and service learning programs at high schools in Oregon and New Mexico. Elaine is skilled at collaborating with communities and organizations to gather and share stories in a variety of formats to amplify underrepresented voices. Her work has been presented through exhibits, video and audio productions, and academic papers. In 2016, Elaine founded Window Seat Media, an Olympia-based nonprofit that uses the arts, and story in particular, as a catalyst for social change. Elaine holds a Master's degree in Folklore from the University of Oregon and a BA in Cultural and Community Studies from The Evergreen State College. She has been an adjunct at Evergreen since 2017.