

Unification Theological Seminary: Truth-telling through stories in the classroom

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With the emergence of digital technology, truth-telling through digital stories in the classroom has become an effective method of learning and teaching Religious Education. It has also become a teacher's way to spark the waning interest of students on religion as a course or subject.

Dr. Charles Chesnavage shared his experience of digital storytelling as narratives of faith among his students at the Mercy College and Unification Theological Seminary in New York City where he teaches World Religions.

Chesnavage was a presenter at the panel 'Catholic Community of Practice' titled 'Digital Stories as a Creative Assignment for Studying World Religions' for the Religious Education Association (REA) National Meeting on July 5-9, 2021.

REA is more than a hundred years old, founded in 1903 by William Rainey Harper, the first President of the University of Chicago. It has a diverse membership from the Baha'i, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant and other traditions involved in all aspects of religious education.

It is the biggest organization of religious educators worldwide, leading in research into moral and religious development through conferences, workshops, and in-depth studies.

In his classes last semester, Chesnavage asked his undergraduate and advanced studies students to produce a personal and experiential video of their stories of faith. Like a film festival of sorts, he awarded

those works that excelled in clarity of message and technological artistry.

"As life happens around us, the students definitely capture (reflection and learning) aspects into their lives. Religious themes are expressed implicitly more than explicitly. They choose their role models mainly from their families and not really world leaders," said Chesnavage.

The value of digital stories as a method of teaching and as a way to invoke and stir the interest of students toward Religious Education could not be underestimated.

"What is personal and experiential is universal, and what is universal is personal. The digital stories provide a multicultural, interreligious worldview dimension and a personal dimension," said Chesnavage.

Citing the scholarly work of Bloom and Lambert, Chesnavage said that "artistic assignments are the highest level of learning and the relationship of the art and the brain promotes mental health, healing and activities that de-stress the mind, body and soul."

Chesnavage provided themes for his students to choose in developing their digital stories such as birth, experiences in life and death, sickness and suffering, and holidays.

For his next year's presentation, Chesnavage said that artistic creations such as poetry and visual arts would be featured. "Artistic creations are very popular among students," he enthused.

Dr. Mary Hess, professor of Educational Leadership at the Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN and a key facilitator at the REA conferences, uses digital storytelling to give "voice" to her women students on intersectional and personal issues on women's rights, gender, and racism.

In her published study on 'Digital Storytelling: Empowering Feminist and Womanist Faith Formation among Women,' Hess noted that digital storytelling gives students the opportunity "to learn how to use technology to make their own voice heard and the potential to use knowledge and experience, a potential way to foster agency."