



# Practitioner's note: Life Stories

**This piece elaborates on the term motivation in the special educational setting of an international folk high school and how a method evolved and developed through many years called 'Life stories' seeks to engage students in creating a caring community.**

*By Felicity Markdal*

'Togetherness' is not a term that fully covers the Danish terms of 'samvær' (fellowship) and 'fællesskab' (community), but it captures the essence of what these concepts are seeking to achieve. Within the walls of a folk high school we seek to create *caring* communities that not only function on a practical level, but also on a social and emotional level. Communities where individuals are seen holistically, and not only in terms of educational capacity. Being an educator at a folk high school

involves treading beyond one's usual teaching remit in class, and beyond curriculum standards. It is arguably this ability to teach the whole person, to have time and space to know the whole person, that gives the folk high school some of its greatest strengths. Folk high schools are privileged to be exempted from a set curriculum and exams and therefore have the time and flexibility needed to meet the needs of individual students more easily.

## **An international folk high school**

Firstly, to explain the premise of our school: At International People's College (IPC) students come from a multitude of different ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds. Usually anything ranging from 20-35 different nation states are represented, and the different languages spoken can be as many as 90. In summary, because of this

exception, we are privileged to encounter and work with a large amount of cultural diversity on a regular basis.

This diversity could naturally entail a fracturing of the community, especially where language barriers and previous cultural understandings of one another come into play. To take one example, students from Korea and Japan are often cultured to have a particular view of the other nation, while Western students may have a particular view of people from the so-called Third World. These encultured views could evidently stand as barriers to 'togetherness'. However, most times we are able to turn this immense diversity into a great asset of the school.

## **Sharing stories**

One of the ways we do this is through a concept we call 'Life Stories'. It is a concept that is as

simple as it sounds - we sit and we share our life stories with one another. We meet on three separate occasions, for three different sessions simply named Life Stories I, II and III, to tell stories from three separate eras or chapters of our lives. Due to the number of students that attend the school and the more intimate nature of what is being shared we do not meet as a whole school to undertake this task. From almost the outset of the school term (generally in the first week of arrival) our student body is divided into smaller groups (we like to call them in colloquial terms 'families', although the more official title is 'contact groups'). These groups are designed by trying to mix the students according to nationality, age, and gender, so each group will try to be a small mirror of the student body as a whole, containing around 10-11 individuals. Each group is then anchored by a teacher. All three sessions are supported by a list of questions that the students are given prior to the event so that they can prepare by bringing pictures, asking their family questions and so forth.

### **The past generation**

'Life Stories I', usually taking place very early in our term (within the first month) is focused on the generations that have come directly before, i.e. we share the stories of our grandparents and parents. It is usually incredible to sit and listen to the ancestry of a group of 10 people from around the world. The stories are rich and varied, but they have the power of more than just good bedtime stories. Hearing where each of us has come from gives us a deeper understanding of one another. Knowing that a student's grandmother was a prisoner in a Nazi extermination camp, or that a

student descends from a tribal king, makes us understand their worldview better. We are not only enlightened as to that individual's own experiences and history - something that cannot help but influence their current understanding and perspective. We are also given the opportunity to meet incarnations of history that we may otherwise only know of from history books and teachers. Genocides, imperialism, class struggle, all sorts of societal phenomena that might seem at great distance to us personally are humanized. They are given faces and voices.

To return to what effect this can have on motivation; arguably a great deal. The antithesis to motivation is apathy. Apathy comes from a lack of care or understanding, an overload of impersonal information. We become apathetic to the newspaper headlines for example, or the atrocities and achievements of chronological history, because they are impersonal and at distance. We cannot comprehend how they relate to us. Yet when you can hear, see and put names and faces to individuals that lived and breathed these things, apathy dissipates. We are called to action by love and compassion, and compassion is difficult without people. Stories bring us people that we can feel for and fight for. Life stories work on these two levels, giving us a greater understanding of each person and of the world. It brings people close together, they feel bonded in their vulnerability and openness, a trust is built. Additionally, this session is great motivation for bridging the generational divide. We become curious and inquisitive about our own heritage and the stories of our families and their sacrifices, hard work and contributions to bring us

to where we are. Knowing that we are not alone in bringing ourselves to success can be incredibly motivating - it makes us want to give back to those that gave to us.

### **Childhood**

'Life Stories II' is concerned with the student's own childhood, up to the age of 16. (Students at Højskoler must be a minimum of 17.5, but there is no upper age limit). We share the stories of where we grew up, what a typical day at school was like, what our hobbies and loves were, and what our family looked like amongst other things. This session allows us to get to really know one another, to understand the experiences that we have been through and how they have shaped us. As a teacher, it is a great teaching tool to understand the behavior and motivation of the students in my class. Knowing that a student really did not like traditional education allows me as a teacher to think of more unconventional ways to pass on information, or knowing that a student loves a particular sport, movie or literature genre gives you other avenues to engage them in conversation, both in and outside class. It allows for a more personalised and personal approach. In instances of misbehavior or misunderstandings the intimacy and information that comes through storytelling allows you to approach each student in a very different way. Discipline is not needed to the same extent, because you can empathise with their behavior and appeal to them not as an authority figure but as a human to a human.

### **Present and future**

The final installment, 'Life Stories III', is concerned with the students' lives from 16 years old to their

current age, but also their dreams and hopes for the future. We ask them to imagine their future employment, future family configuration, even a geographical location. This is often the most difficult storytelling session, because it is not merely about recounting, but also reflecting and imagining. Traditionally assessed education means we can use our knowledge in a clear path from GCSEs to A-levels to university for example. A six month stay at a Højskole qualifies you for nothing, and everything. This last session of teaching assists the teaching of individual classes and the school experience as a whole by inviting students to reflect on how they want to use their new perspective or knowledge, and to reflect back on who they were and who they could imagine themselves to be.

### Stories become part of classes

From a teaching perspective, you are able to find experiences and knowledge to give students ownership over their learning. After the sharing of stories has been done in the 'family' groups, the teaching team meets and discusses if anything pedagogically relevant came up during the sessions. Respecting confidentiality we are then able to share if our student body contains expertise that can be used in the teaching of classes, meaning that the students become a part of teaching and designing the curriculum. To take an example, a student revealed that at the age of five she was sent across the Himalayas from Tibet to India in order to have better opportunities in life and has not been able to return home or see her family since then. This personal story was integrated into the class on 'People, movement and migration' to put a human face,

voice and emotion onto a global phenomenon, but it was also used as a focal point of a morning assembly as an example of our core value of respect and openness to others. Her story gave the whole school a chance to understand how lives can vary across the planet, thereby teaching us all to delay our prejudice and think about empathy when we discuss global issues. Often discussing on a global scale dehumanizes phenomena like migration, globalization, war and so on, hence integrating personal stories allows us to dig into greater depth and understand.

Another example of using students' personal experiences is from a class called 'Human Experience' that focuses on the big questions in life like understanding what love is, the issue of death and much more, where depression and loneliness have become topics of interest.

Integrating the personal stories of students, whether their own or the ones of family members, allows the class to really understand the reality of these conditions. One student shared her journey through life with anxiety to make a film (within moviemaking class) to be distributed to a wider audience. Another student used the story of a sister's bi-polarity to help a small group of students in a class on innovation to design an app and communication system to make life easier for people with that diagnosis. Stories can thus be used as themes for activities, material for projects, to illustrate teaching points or as community activities to bring us closer together. In development management, we use the life experiences of students to design new social action projects, like preventing bullying in schools in Japan, or improving language learning in Brazil. In movie making we integrate their stories into

scripts, and in environmental studies we use it to find out how our world is changing.

IPC was founded on the idea that war and conflict arises through the conception of the 'other' as something we are taught to fear. 'Life stories' a tangible proof that when we meet that other, both in person and through their stories across generations, we come to realize that we are different and the same. Stories touch our hearts and connect us in a way that matters. As the American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou said: *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

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### ABOUT THE TEXT

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This practitioner's note is written by Felicity Markdal for The Association of Folk High Schools in Denmark in 2017. Felicity Markdal teaches *Peace and Conflict Studies, Gender and Sexuality, Yoga, Storytelling, Innovation, The Human Experience* and *Speak Out* at International Peoples College (IPC), the international folk high school in Elsinore, Denmark.

She elaborates on the term motivation in the special educational setting of an international folk high school, and on how a method evolved and developed through many years called 'Life stories' seeks to engage students in creating a caring community.

