

# Storytelling as an Approach to Leadership Research at UC Berkeley: Reflections on a Graduate Course

Özge Hacifazlıoğlu and Lihi Rosenthal, University of California, Berkeley; Joy Rushing, Learning Policy Institute

## About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation by supporting learning and sharing research and practices among programs, school districts, and policymakers. EdPrepLab supports programs and informs policies that incorporate the science of learning and development to enable deeper learning and equity, working to expand these approaches nationally and internationally.

## About This Brief

This brief highlights how the Leaders for Equity and Democracy (LEAD) program at the University of California, Berkeley redesigned a research course to equip doctoral education students with tools for meaningful inquiry and leadership. The course employs narrative methodology to help students deeply explore their lived experiences through autobiographical research that they share with their school communities. This brief presents a model for faculty to guide students toward becoming self-aware leaders who advance equity-informed practices in their work.

## Introduction

Scholars of education have called for education doctorate (EdD) programs to focus on training stewards of practice. As researchers have explained, “[A] steward is entrusted with the care of the discipline and thinks about the discipline’s continuing health and how to preserve the best of the past for those who will follow. Stewards direct a critical eye toward the future.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have underlined the importance of reflection as a fundamental element of stewardship of practice based on the belief that “stewardship situates itself between the world of practice and the world of scholarship ‘... in an effort to prepare students for the complex demands of the professional world.’”<sup>2</sup> This understanding of stewardship is foundational to a newly designed educational leadership research course in the Leaders for Equity and Democracy (LEAD) program at UC Berkeley.

The LEAD program at UC Berkeley expects its burgeoning scholars to complete a dissertation that investigates a key dimension of system leadership for equity as the culmination of the rigorous 3-year program. Students participate in a cohort model and take all foundational courses together, including their introductory research courses, while also having the option to enroll in specialized electives and field experiences related to their specific areas of inquiry and interest.

Students in the EdD program are practicing leaders—principals, assistant superintendents, directors of leadership, and university leaders—who have proven track records of success and intend to spend their careers in senior leadership roles in public education

systems. Since the program's launch in 2021, admitted students have had an average of 20.5 years of professional experience prior to their enrollment. Of those enrolled, 86% identify as people of color, 57% identify as women, and 62% are parents.

With this context as a guide and in line with the principles of stewardship, faculty introduced a newly designed EdD Year 1 introductory research course, Methods in Educational and Psychological Research, for the UC Berkeley LEAD program. This brief describes how the faculty redesigned the course to guide EdD students in a deep investigation of their own lived experiences using narrative methodology. The course's storytelling approach enables school leaders to craft their research as autobiographical narratives that they can share with others. The goal is to empower doctoral students in their school leadership roles, fostering change in the lives of teachers, students, and families through research- and equity-informed practices.

## The Storytelling Approach

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UC Berkeley faculty begin by introducing the methodology of narrative inquiry and storytelling to frame the experiences of doctoral students in their research journeys:<sup>3</sup>

One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories.<sup>4</sup>

The storytelling approach informs the course structure and activities, creating a platform in which leaders' stories serve as illustrations for different research ideas that align with the content components of the course syllabus. Not all education leaders have advanced scholarly writing and research skills when they begin the introductory research course, yet, as practicing leaders, EdD students do have experience with sharing stories about their schools and systems.

The faculty's experience with mentoring in EdD programs across the United States has shown them the ways in which leaders struggle when it comes to writing. The program's faculty members, who use the science of learning and development (SoLD) to inform their instruction, are mindful about the academic support they need to provide while the educational leaders develop their identities as emerging scholars. Working from a deep understanding of the SoLD principles and an asset-based foundation throughout the course,<sup>5</sup> instructors gradually guide students to develop ways of shaping their leadership experiences into a research narrative in which they describe their professional context (setting), characters (participants), intent (research question), methodological process (plot), and findings (the moral of the story).

The personal nature of this approach requires an environment where leaders feel safe sharing and practicing—where they know that their early draft, a story in progress, will not be rejected. In the safe zones of their graduate school classrooms, students are encouraged by faculty and peers to craft their narratives through sessions of guided self-reflection, peer reflection, and group reflection activities. As they move toward a structured research draft, students share segments of their research stories each week, displaying their problem context and their roles as leaders and researchers.

This introductory research course encourages doctoral students to be flexible in focusing on their research stories as they negotiate difficult experiences in their professional leadership. Throughout this inquiry-informed leadership journey, faculty guide students as they investigate unexplored territory in their lives. As students engage in inquiries based on puzzles of practice or challenges, they learn how to use storytelling to make sense of their contexts, as well as how to be positive when responding to the situations they encounter in the ever-changing landscape of educational leadership.

The course is designed to meet students where they are in their identities as emerging leader-scholars while developing their research skills. Students participate in weekly activities that enable them to cultivate their research methodology skills, and faculty observe how students' conceptualization of research evolves.

Most students find a storytelling frame intuitive and make connections with their familial backgrounds and cultural contexts. Through the voices of the leaders, instructors learn that the students have been listening to stories since childhood. This experience may be the reason why many students feel comfortable making the transition between the two spheres of their lives, moving between known and unknown spaces. Storytelling appears to be a familiar space that gives students comfort and the courage to tell their stories of research. One leader explained:

The storytelling frame has made a significant difference in helping me understand the critical connection between research and practice. I feel less intimidated by research; I now approach reading the research of others with curiosity and joy.

The metaphor of research-as-storytelling makes use of both multiple ways of knowing and existing funds of knowledge, including familial and cultural patterns of oral storytelling that are common in collectivist cultures. The course begins by tapping into storytelling through art, as shown in the sample class activities in Table 1.

**Table 1. Class Activities**

Activity	Activity description
Connecting equity through art and constructing a short story	<p>Students view art and respond to questions and writing prompts to make connections.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What resonates with you in this artwork about equity, context, and leadership?</li><li>• How do you make connections as a school leader?</li></ul> <p>Prompt: Working in your groups, please construct a short story based on this artwork. Focus on a problem context that leads to a research question.</p>
Article analysis based on equity and democracy	<p>Students analyze articles through the lenses of a researcher and storyteller.</p> <p>Prompt: Working in your groups, try to embody the author or researcher who wrote the article.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discuss the possible context and background stories that shaped the purpose and design of the article.</li><li>• Share your reflections on the methods and approach used.</li></ul>
Storytelling: Voices of equity and democracy	<p>Students consider their leadership role and describe a puzzle of practice as an anecdote.</p> <p>Prompt: Please share a short story (anecdote) from your own experience that illustrates how the particular (problem) context or culture of your school, classroom, or community shaped how your teachers or principal tried to promote equity and inclusion. Consider the impact of this experience on you individually, on teachers, or on students.</p>

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Most leaders embrace the storytelling approach from the start of the course; others, however, particularly those trained in the quantitative tradition, are hesitant to use narrative research in the initial weeks of the course. One leader explained how storytelling became part of their research design over time:

The storytelling process initially felt like an awkward approach to research, but over the last 2 years, I have come to embrace the way that it allows me to be more authentic in my research-practitioner self. It also helps me connect the path from where I wanted to go when I started this process and where I am going now. In my own leadership, I have been more flexible in terms of what I consider valuable data to tell the story and how I go about humanizing data and research in order to lead others, make changes, and continue forward in my work.

As this leader explained, this learning experience imparts a mindset shift that aligns with equity-centered school leadership. The humanizing approach of using storied experiences as data can be a culturally sustaining and responsive practice that brings traditionally marginalized perspectives to the forefront of education.

## Cycles of Reflection in Storytelling

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Research writing can be challenging for students, particularly graduates who have been historically excluded from the academy, including those with limited exposure to academic writing instruction or who lack a current practice of scholarly writing. One leader said:

Storytelling [in this course] helped me to convey my purpose and the reasons why I was interested in my research topic, thus making research more accessible. It helped to demystify the research process for me as a new scholar.

Reflective practices are incorporated into the course to scaffold students' research writing and help them chart paths to the course research project. Students share their weekly stories at the beginning of each class, and storytelling is gradually used to document their research papers throughout the semester.

Reflections include the following activities:

- Self-reflection: Students write a letter to themselves.
- Peer reflections: Students write a letter to a friend.
- Self, peer, and group reflections: Students draw storylines (e.g., setting, characters, plot).
- Group reflections: Students participate in a guided consultation.
- Group reflections: Students learn from guest speakers who share their research stories.

As the course progresses, students begin to share their research story drafts in small groups and receive feedback from group members. This leads to a guided consultation in which the group asks each member probing questions based on their research questions, artwork, and story. By the eighth class session, leaders make connections between their stories and the literature, discuss references, and receive feedback from their groups (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Sample Course Activities**

<b>Extend the discussion from the last class session regarding the storytelling perspective and research. In your home groups, please continue sharing your stories.</b>	
Session 6 Group work: Storytelling approach in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell your research story so far in conjunction with your problem context. (4 min.)</li><li>• Listen as group members offer feedback. (4 min.)</li><li>• Have the next group member share their story.</li></ul>
Session 7 Guided consultation: From storytelling to research design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Upload your drawing to the discussion board. (2 min.)</li><li>• Share your research story through your illustration and share your research questions. (8 min.)</li><li>• Listen as group members offer feedback and respond to their probing questions based on the research questions. (5 min.)</li><li>• Have the next group member share their story.</li></ul>
Session 8 Weaving it together: Research questions and literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share your research story by making specific connections to your research questions. (You can also show your illustration.)</li><li>• Share two or three references from the literature that inform your research.</li><li>• Listen as group members offer feedback and respond to their probing questions based on the research questions.</li><li>• Have the next group member share their story.</li></ul>

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The course instructors, who are action researchers in higher education, adopt this approach as their own unstructured research journey while encouraging leaders to chart their paths of personal discovery through narrative research. Instructors invite other UC Berkeley professors to class to share their stories of research, which gives doctoral students new insights and the courage to follow their stories of research, no matter what challenges they might encounter.

## **Interdisciplinary Communities of Practice and Thought Partnership**

Edd students take the research methodology class alongside 3rd-year PhD students in school psychology, which proves to be a symbiotic approach. Each group complements the other through telling, retelling, and reflecting on their weekly research stories. Intentionally pairing school psychology students with Edd leadership students provides opportunities for reciprocal

learning in which students serve as thought partners and mentors to one another. School psychology students have more experience with theory and research methodologies, while leadership students have more experience with contextualized education practice. Therefore, each group channels its own strengths and serves as a counterpart for completing the stories.

Students have shared that they find the thought partnership in the course to be one of the most effective means of reflection. In addition to receiving and offering peer feedback, students have individual feedback and mentoring sessions with faculty members, which students say is a valuable resource for clarifying and refining their stories. At least two individual sessions with faculty, lasting approximately 1 hour each, occur each semester so students can receive tailored support.

Along with the individual sessions with course instructors, students are asked to stay connected with their cohort members during and outside of class. They are encouraged to write together as thought partners in writing retreats. While faculty facilitate one structured writing retreat, the value students find in their professional communities of practice inspires some of them to organize additional writing retreats themselves. The power of collaborative thought partnership was noted by one EdD student:

Completion of [the first] milestone was a very heavy lift for me, and I would not have made it without the individualized support tailored to my specific needs as a leader and individual.

All of the EdD students emphasized the value of the thought partnerships created in these sessions. Faculty have observed that, in time, students begin to know their peers' stories as much as their own. What is unique in these interactions is that students—despite the challenging responsibilities they have in their own leadership contexts—start to become deeply invested as peer mentors for their thought partners. Over time, students begin to provide alternative pathways for their thought partners, both to help them proceed in their research journey and to overcome the challenges they encounter in their leadership work. They also seem to encourage each other to balance their professional and personal lives. The cohort spirit established during the process strengthens personal relationships, enabling students to support one another in their leadership efforts.

## Storytelling as a Tool for Leaders

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Faculty have observed that the shift from being an outsider to taking on the main character role is evident in all of the leaders' stories. In other words, students begin to play the protagonist role and lead the implementation of the scenario in progress. When students are asked to revisit their roadmaps—that is, their planned path toward their EdD milestones—most

of them write a letter to themselves, combining the program milestone with their workplace requirements. It is worth mentioning that despite the professional demands and pressures students feel during these challenging times, they value maintaining a balance between their academic roles and their leadership and personal goals.

The self-reflections shared by the leaders show that they all believe the storytelling approach will help them meet their program milestones. They seem to have experience with using this approach as insightful leaders and teachers in their own lives. The introduction of storytelling shows them a way that practice can be incorporated as a powerful tool for documenting their research, a tool that is both rigorous and academically grounded. The following excerpt from a leader's reflection illustrates how storytelling can be used to establish the link between one's familiar spaces and unknown lands:

I also used storytelling during my orals. ... In my introduction, I shared the story of the two sides of me, an emerging scholar and school leader. I used storytelling to describe the difference in how I appear as a school leader vs. how I appear as an emerging scholar, as suggested by [my instructor]. ... I found it extremely helpful to calm my nerves, set the stage, and demonstrate the importance of communication through storytelling.

How storytelling is embraced by leaders and implemented in research stories varies. Some leaders love the idea from the beginning, while it takes others some time to make sense of the approach. These leaders are open to innovation, so none of them are completely reluctant to try the method. Notably, the more the leaders share their research stories, the more they embrace how well storytelling aligns with the research. This fact enables students to use storytelling to construct research stories by putting together the problem context, characters, and methodology to reveal the experiences in a written narrative. One leader who claimed to be cautious toward this approach explained how he started to use this method in advancing his research draft:

The storytelling approach was helpful in framing my perspective about how to organize my writing in a manner that could tell a compelling narrative while also drawing attention to the central players in the story, the plot of my research, and its potential implications.

Finally, at the end of the semester, students have the opportunity to tell their stories publicly at Research Day, an event organized by the School of Education. Leaders are encouraged to share parts of their stories with their school communities, and several students have spoken of their experience with storytelling as research with a national audience at the University Council for Educational Administration annual conference.



## Conclusion

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Storytelling is embedded in a school leader's experience, and introducing doctoral students to narrative research is a way for faculty to tap into students' professional knowledge and enable leaders to become more aware of themselves as they serve as changemakers on the path toward equity and democracy. The experiences of the emerging scholar-leaders in this course show that "stewardship does not consist of following hard and fast rules, or traditional teaching methods, but demands flexibility and an imperative to creation and compromise."<sup>6</sup> This brief provides a snapshot of doctoral students' experiences with learning and implementing a storytelling approach in an EdD program focused on developing leaders for equity and democracy.

## About the Authors

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**Özge Hacifazlıoğlu** is an Adjunct Professor in the leadership programs at the UC Berkeley School of Education. She serves as a leader-scholar for the Principal Leadership Institute and LEAD programs, as well as for the PhD program in School Psychology, and contributes as a member of communities of practice at the UC Berkeley School of Education. She has recently served as a Visiting Professor at the UC Berkeley School of Education. She previously worked in various academic leadership and faculty positions for 20 years. She holds a doctorate in Educational Administration and pursued her postdoctoral education at Arizona State University. Hacifazlıoğlu has promoted school-faculty collaboration throughout her career and has been involved in projects focused on improving the lives of migrant children and their families in marginalized contexts in different parts of the world. Her research is focused on higher education leadership; teacher education, principal preparation, and communities of practice; marginalized and underrepresented populations; and doctoral education.

**Lihi Rosenthal** serves as Program Director of the UC Berkeley LEAD program. She also has served as adjunct faculty and a field supervisor at Loyola Marymount University, where she prepared new general and special education teachers to design rigorous and joyful classroom environments that could meet the complex needs of all learners. Rosenthal began her career in the public schools of Oakland and Chicago, where she served as a college and career counselor, general education teacher, special educator, and department chair. In 2004, Rosenthal made the transition to school leadership, serving as Assistant Principal and Principal for 5 years before taking on her first systems-level role at Seneca Family of Agencies, a nonprofit organization that creates bridges between the education, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice sectors to identify holistic approaches to serving vulnerable youth and families.

**Joy Rushing** is a Researcher with the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) who contributes to the Educator Quality and EdPrepLab teams. She supports a variety of research and policy initiatives, concentrating on advancing EdPrepLab's objectives and impact. Her focus is on utilizing research to inform policy and practice, particularly as it pertains to teacher and leadership preparation and development within higher education. Prior to joining LPI, she worked as an education research and policy consultant, specializing in school leadership research and project management. Rushing holds a PhD in Educational Leadership from Auburn University, an MAT in Middle School Education from Clemson University, and a BA in English Literature from the University of South Florida.

## Endnotes

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