




Storytelling for the defense of a thesis: The art of telling stories from experience

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Abstract

Introduction: This article presents storytelling as a didactic narrative in the defense of the doctoral thesis "Discovering different capacities in the world of life: from the empathic depths of experience". **Methodology:** Through reflection, a lived experience is shared from the phenomenological approach to understanding the phenomenon of disability in the world of school life. **Results:** The thesis challenges the traditional perception of disability by examining capacities revealed through the descriptions of experiences of individuals labeled as disabled in the school environment. **Conclusion:** In coherence with the written document and the method used, it was considered to carry out the thesis defense through storytelling as a pedagogical modality that facilitates empathy with the work written by the researcher.

Keywords

Storytelling; Narrative; Doctoral thesis; Empathy; Skills.

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Storytelling para la defensa de una tesis: El arte de contar historias desde la experiencia

Resumen

Introducción: Este artículo presenta el storytelling como narrativa didáctica en la defensa de la tesis doctoral "Descubriendo Diferentes Capacidades en el Mundo de la Vida: Desde las Profundidades Empáticas de la Experiencia". **Metodología:** A través de la reflexión, se comparten experiencias vividas desde el enfoque fenomenológico para la comprensión del fenómeno de la discapacidad en el mundo de la vida escolar. **Resultados:** La tesis desafía la percepción tradicional de la discapacidad cuando se descubren capacidades a partir de la descripción de experiencias en aquellos sujetos etiquetados como discapacitados en el mundo de la vida escolar. **Conclusión:** En coherencia con el documento escrito y el método utilizado, se consideró realizar la defensa de tesis a través del storytelling como modalidad pedagógica que facilite empatizar con la obra escrita por el investigador.

Palabras clave

Storytelling; narrativa; tesis doctoral; empatía; capacidades.

License



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1. Introduction

A defence of a doctoral dissertation traditionally has a discursive structure that would comprise the following: Introduction, Theoretical/conceptual framework, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusions, Acknowledgments, and References. In other words, it has become a ritual steeped in historical tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, albeit with slight variations in the academic norms and styles specific to different institutions ([Savio, 2013](#)). The defining of a discursive genre for a doctoral dissertation defence ought to be related to the argumentative purpose of the dissertation ([Swales, 2012](#)), consistent with the research method used. However, since the dissertation defence is first and foremost an act of evaluation ([Chen, 2018](#)), students often deliver informative presentations of the established ritual, aiming merely to survive the academic process and thereby obtain a doctoral degree, neglecting the importance of arguing a thesis that emerges from the lived experience - the journey. In light of this, using a narrative genre such as storytelling outside of academic and institutional rituals allows the doctoral candidate to find meaning in their experience, turning the thesis into a memorable story able to connect with the tribunal and with the audience. The student, however, who dares to use this type of narrative will also be aware that they are recreating new forms of oral expression, and such an experience may run counter to that which was anticipated by the tribunal, to the detriment of the final grade.

The doctoral thesis, "Discovering different abilities in the lifeworld: From the empathic depths of experience," is a qualitative research project ([Denzin and Lincoln, 2012](#)) employing a phenomenological approach ([Ayala-Carabajo, 2017](#); [Van Manen, 2003](#); [2016](#)). The research work allowed, in individuals labelled as disabled in the school lifeworld, discovering abilities based on describing their experience. The ontological bedrock of the thesis focused on the reality of the experience surrounding disability as an evidently human phenomenon, recognizing the differences in the uniqueness of individuals in the school lifeworld and incorporating the concept of abilities ([Gardner, 2015](#)) in a regular educational institution that receives children and young people diagnosed with disabilities who are then included in the select group of people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) ([Garcia-Barrera, 2017](#); [ONU, 2004](#)). The thesis represented a voyage into the human interior in which subjectivities and intersubjectivities were interconnected in a network, giving meaning to general principles for - via encountering them - people who coexist along with all of us in the school lifeworld, but possessing different abilities.

With this thesis, charged with emotions ([Goleman, 2018](#)), feelings, and thoughts ([De la Torre, 2005](#)), I asked myself: **How should my doctoral thesis defence be, following the methodological coherence of a phenomenological research approach that, in the words of [Husserl \(2017, p. 18\)](#), "describes our experiences as they occur from the first-person perspective"?**

The answer was through storytelling: the art of relating stories with a communicative, persuasive, or connecting purpose ([Viscaino Alcantud, 2016](#)), since this thesis, lived and embodied empathetically, required to be felt via the opening of consciousness to understanding and reflecting upon the phenomena of the world, in relation to what we experience in the present moment ([Vernaza-Pinzón, 2025](#)).

As part of the reflection below, I present a storytelling narrative used in the defence of my doctoral thesis as an opening towards new horizons for finding ourselves in understanding as a fundamental part of life: being, doing, feeling, and acting.

2. Reflection

What would happen if, instead of viewing disability as a limitation, we viewed it as a unique ability?

Five Spanish teenagers decided to participate in the 2025 edition of the CanSat project ([ESERO, 2024-2025](#)), a European Space Agency satellite launch program for school students. The teenagers were students at Our Lady of Lourdes Private Special Education Centre (CEEPR) in La Coruña. They are all also members of the Galicia association for people with intellectual disabilities (ASPRONAGA). This year,

then, presented these students and their teacher with a challenge: to solve problems and thereby develop products that incorporate within a small space the main elements of a real satellite, such as power supply, sensors, and communications system. The CanSat project involved launching the rocket, achieving a damage-free landing, and analyzing the data. However, while developing the satellite, the team concluded that it lacked internal weight and that to improve it, it was an important opportunity by which to send to other planets some gifts that formed part of their own experiences: a soccer ball, a toothbrush, and a blanket. Because if the rocket managed to reach another planet, it was important that children living in other universes learn about these elements and be encouraged to visit Earth. The mission was quite the adventure during the launch and landing. Moreover, there was the teamwork that demonstrated the abilities of this group of teenagers in various different areas of life: numbers, science, language, movement, and social development.

What if, instead of focusing on what they cannot do, we instead value the contribution they can make?

In southwest Colombia, in the Don Bosco Educational Institution in Popayán, an under-pressure teacher reports that five-year-old Juan is failing to meet curricular indicators set out for the school year. Don Bosco is a regular institution that routinely accepts individuals like Juan who have been diagnosed with disabilities and includes them in their group of Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Juan listens. He communicates with others through gestures and signs. He doesn't like noise or shouting and doesn't like drawing whatever the teacher has asked everyone in the class to draw. Juan is constantly on the move. He loves to tidy the classroom, to share his lunchbox with others, play soccer, and to be outside in quiet contemplation of the plants that decorate the school playground. Juan smells the flowers, touches them, gives them water. He feels so content with his deeds that on finishing, he will go spinning around singing to himself songs that only he understands.

His teacher feels cornered and I listen to her attentively while empathetically observing Juan. Just as I contemplate his being, he likewise comes over occasionally to touch my hand. Juan develops skills that are important to his way of life. He displays bodily and kinaesthetic intelligence, is able to express his emotions through his body, and communicates through signs and gestures. By strengthening these skills, he will be able to solve problems and create products. However, to truly appreciate what Juan is capable of, the contradictions between the curriculum content and the skills needed in the child's life must be overcome.

The present thesis challenges the traditional perception of disability ([Ferreira, 2009](#); [Padilla-Muñoz, 2010](#); [Zuñiga, 2004](#)). When abilities are discovered from the description of experiences in those subjects labelled as disabled in the school lifeworld, the needs of others are explored in empathic encounters, recognizing difference as a possibility for human growth. Through an understanding of feelings and thoughts, emotions emerge from human actions like the energy of a moving sun expressed in a colourful horizon. It explores the relationship between the self and everyday experience to give meaning to human abilities - those abilities we carry within us and that only become evident when we reflect on the conditions of a self who is not like me; when we live empathetically the experiences of others ([Stein, 2004](#); [Villaescusa, 2019](#)).

The problem of not seeing the abilities in the other, and in the others, arises because we live surrounded by enemies of life, enemies that smuggle in with them a historical transfer, or handing on, of rigid and normative educational systems that threaten the very meaning of life, heightening the desire for isolation, exclusion, confinement, stigmatization for what the other lacks. In that confinement we all include ourselves, disqualifying ourselves if the social and cognitive ideals are not achieved, leaving by the wayside an education centred on the individual of which Pestalozzi ([Meylan, 2005](#)), Itard ([Lane H, 1984](#)), [Decroly \(1915\)](#) and [Montessori \(1913\)](#) spoke. Their claims haunt us to this day [Skliar \(2019\)](#), [Calderón \(Calderón Almendros and Verde Francisco, 2018\)](#), [Elizondo \(2017\)](#), [Van Manen \(2016\)](#) and [De la Torre \(2005\)](#). The abilities of others are not recognized based on their needs, and recognizing others implies challenging prejudices, stereotypes, diagnoses, intelligence tests, and so on. As such, we ought to focus on the abilities to solve problems and develop high-value products to live in this world of natural, human, and non-human challenges.

Truth, beauty, and goodness are what can be observed in those diagnosed with disabilities and stigmatized by society ([Valencia, 2014](#)). The lack of human longanimity prevents us from seeing in them linguistic, musical, bodily, kinaesthetic, logical-mathematical, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal abilities ([Gardner, 2020](#)). However, despite the hostilities of the world, they will always find a sensitive educator along the way, able to see what they see, listen to what they hear, understand their needs, and empathize with them as they fulfil their dreams and aspirations.

What can we call these people with so many abilities?

There was much iterative journeying back and forth between the questions right from the very outset of my voyage as a seafarer, before I was ever able to arrive at my thesis.

This was a voyage in which the ineluctable moonlit waves conveyed me from the safe harbour to the very marine depths, for me then to immerse myself deep in conversations about lived and relived experiences ([Stern, 2017](#)). Imperative, it was, to suspend the judgments of a diagnosis that prevented me from evoking what I had experienced intersubjectively and it was at that moment that the first variations of the experience appeared: the lotus burst open its seven petals with emotions that filter through the body, becoming present in our consciousness ([Petitmengin, 2006](#)), and manage the abilities that dwell within each being and which, when these are recognized, we need call the other by their name only.

Educating in abilities implies educating in the acceptance of self and of the other in their legitimate otherness ([Maturana, 2001](#)). It is by means of empathy that I accept that there is a self who is not like me, who has experiences distinct from mine and in the differences we meet up to live human experiences that allow us to coexist in different horizons with an endless array of multiple intelligences, those human abilities to which referred [Gardner \(2015\)](#).

By recognizing the abilities of the other, of others, and my own abilities, we are able to open a path towards true inclusion, in which abilities interconnect like a network, lending meaning to our way of experiencing our life in the world. Weaving abilities around educational inclusion takes time, just as does life itself. There will be meetings of mind as well as a lack of understanding as we learn about differences and how to coexist with them.

Now then, let us imagine a regular school in which differences are seen as strengths - and yes, a regular school, because the situation is very different in educational institutions geared towards disability. Let us dream of a school world overflowing with abilities: along the way are found future poets, engineers, surgeons, sculptors, painters, bakers, gardeners, soldiers, musicians, dancers, athletes, artisans, scientists, writers, teachers and anything able to be dreamt up. In that school, in order to solve different types of problems that are to be found in the world of daily existence, emotions of varied shapes, tastes and colours are shared. Such sharing enables the natural evolution of each ability, recreated through the sensitivity of the teacher and his or her creative capacity to bring enchantment once again to education, within a horizon in which children are inspired to constantly enquire about what they see, what they hear, what they feel, what they dream of, their fears, their frustrations. And the teacher doesn't forget to smile and respond with empathy, realizing that each child or adolescent is unique. These experiences mould, shape and form the abilities for tackling the lifeworld, because in the sphere of school life we learn to live in alternate horizons ([Herrera, 2010](#)).

And so, what if schools focused on what people are able to do, on their unique abilities, and on their interests, instead of focusing on weaknesses, and standardizing groups of "good" and "bad" students? True inclusion begins with valuing and enhancing human abilities. Inclusion is not simply a concept, a form of language, an index, a political discourse, or a regulation: inclusion is a relationship between the individual and life. Schools therefore require pedagogical tools that help students to strengthen their abilities according to their interests. Disability resides not in a diagnosis, but in a lack of opportunities, and the question now is: **Are we ready to see ability where others see disability?**

Because before arriving at my thesis, disability was what I saw, was what I knew, was what I had experienced, and was what I worked on. I had trained to rehabilitate people with disabilities. My doctoral topic of study revolved around disability, and based on an evidently human phenomenon present in the lifeworld, I set out on the unknown horizon of disability in the schoolworld.

Although my teaching experience had been in the setting of the university, the tiny spark my children ignited in me in the course of a lived experience led me to delve deeper into the school to discover what I would find there, and to observe without judgment how disability was experienced in the schoolworld as an educational reality.

I began navigating, as [Edgar Morin \(s.f\)](#) would write, an ocean of uncertainty, in an anonymously unknown horizon, in the words of [Husserl \(2008\)](#). It was attentive ocean-going, observing the school lifeworld without judging, letting what was there but did not appear, now appear, because I previously had the feeling that the books described what was desired to know about disability in school. The international and national regulations on inclusive education ([UNESCO, 2008](#)), seemed to have the formulas to care for subjects with disabilities in the schoolworld. The program *Inclúyete Popayán* ("Include Yourself!") provided guidelines to care for those who came to regular school with a disability diagnosis, but, I realized just like [Abrams \(2020\)](#), in so many historical and literature reviews, that the phenomenon of disability had not been addressed in school from phenomenology; and if some authors had worked on it, they had limited themselves only to finding out the lived experiences of teachers or children, leaving aside the subjects who live the phenomenon one step removed. I then began to fall in love with qualitative research with a phenomenological approach - and in a doctoral seminar, phenomenology was presented as a method in itself ([Aguirre-Garcia and Jaramillo-Echeverry, 2012](#)), a method that also contributes to the knowledge of realities in school. As a non-philosopher, it was wonderful to find a method that gives meaning to the structures of experience that occur in consciousness ([Husserl, 2005](#)), so I was able to understand that it was imperative to interview subjects close to disabilities to talk about their experiences around an evidently human phenomenon.

From these conversations the first thematic units emerged that allowed me to discover how they experienced disability in the lifeworld and in the school lifeworld, and from these subjectivities the "lack of empathy" emerged as a claim and the question: What do we call people with so many abilities? I was thus filling the luggage trunks that accompanied my ocean navigation with concepts of disability, inclusion and empathy, which led me to delve even deeper into the historicity of each of them by reading inclusive pedagogues. But what about empathy? I was obliged to trace the origin of the *einfühlung* concept, which in art revealed the depth of the emotions and feelings captured in a work ([Isaacson, 2018](#)). Edmund Husserl in 1905 introduced into his thinking the concept of empathy ([Husserl, 1982](#)), understood as a mode of intentionality that enables the apprehension of another person's subjective experience while maintaining the awareness that this experience is distinct from one's own. It is a form of immediate understanding or direct perception of the other's mental states, as expressed through their body and bodily behaviour. The first extensive phenomenological study on this topic, however, was the doctoral thesis of Husserl's disciple [Edith Stein \(2004\)](#), a work that I studied under Dr Luz Gloria Cárdenas, with whom I learned to enjoy contemplating the world, both those individual things and their totality, and to understand that there is a self that is not like me and that in my experiences I am given other experiences. Through eidetic reduction, Stein retrospectively recognized the structure of subjects who enter into empathic relationships, a structure defined by the fact that they are psychophysical individuals and spiritual persons.

Documents, stories, feelings, and thoughts surrounding the disabled body, inclusion, and empathy led me to formulate the phenomenological question: How is the lived experience of the disabled body understood from the perspective of empathy in the schoolworld when it becomes present and evident as an educational reality? And with the apparent clarity of what I wanted to know, I immersed myself in the mysteries of the school lifeworld, creating a phenomenological *epoche* (from the Greek, *ἐποχή*) of judgments, theories, concepts, and methods to clearly observe the lived experience of disability.

That was an empathetic observation, in which I plunged into the marine depths, holding my breath for several seconds, amazed by what I saw, heard, felt, and thought, only to rise to the surface and take notes in my field journal, notes that would help me structure the micro-phenomenological interview, understanding that emotions are embodied in the body and transferred to consciousness. In surfacing and returning to the beginning of my navigation, emotions appeared in the close dialogue with the other, while I learned how the moment of a lived or relived experience was a succession of diachronies, forming micro moments. In those micro moments, units of meaning appeared that led me to reduce them even further in a diachrony that was analysed all the way to describing the structure of the phenomenon of disability in school ([Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vasquez-Rosati, 2014](#)). It was then the phenomenological analysis, a mathematical fantasy of eidetic reduction, that led me to discover the variants of the experience and to be able to arrive at the constitution of meaning of the understanding of the phenomenon of disability at school, where the structure of the subjects who empathetically experience the disability is defined by ignorance, stigmatization, abandonment, emotions, empathy, barriers and concern and the geometry of what was lived was represented in a flower that opens its petals to the world to let appear the experiential structure of the subjects who enter into an empathic relationship. I had then answered the phenomenological question of understanding the lived experience of the body with a disability from empathy in the world of school whenever this becomes present and evident as an educational reality.

But my voyage wasn't over. Whither lay the thesis? In order to find out, I began writing what now constitutes part of the appendices to the thesis document ([Vernaza-Pinzón, 2025](#)), behind them being a study of concepts, a background documentary review, interviews, field diaries, workshops, and readings, but in rereading Crisis, Ideas I, II, and Cartesian meditations ([Husserl, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2018](#)), I wasn't going to discover the thesis, because to arrive at the thesis one must empathetically experience what has been lived. One must feel what has been felt. And thus be able to reflect and move on to a creative phase in which the experience appears in the reflective consciousness of the one who experiences it, in the form of empathy.

So I started up the engine of my boat. I made my steady way across the Atlantic, and sailed through storms of lived experiences, my heart pounding with anguish when the thick fog obscured my vision. My old friend my consciousness was tormenting me. I had to go back to the things themselves, and the things themselves were re-readings of the qualitative method, readings of various theses, re-reading of what was written, and I remembered [Gusdorf \(1991\)](#). Just when everything was thought lost, it was time to observe myself and listen to myself empathically in the depths of my being. Phenomenology continued to hover in my mind and in that thick Atlantic fog the prefix dis- was diluted and the word Ability was intermittently illuminated by a lighthouse 55 metres high. At that moment the question that made sense for understanding the experience of what is lived in the schoolworld was: What would happen if in school the prefix "dis-" were diluted to enhance abilities from the different human singularities? And with it, the historical question from an ontological perspective: Why, based on my experience and the experience of others and with others, do I recognize the differences in the singularities of the schoolworld, strengthening human abilities in others, with others, and among ourselves? And why incorporate the concept of abilities in the subjects of an educational institution who have been diagnosed with disability? The construction of these new questions allowed me to formulate the purposes of the thesis around an ability-oriented education and to discover the structure of the phenomenon of disability.

That involved returning to the things themselves, when the empathic donating of the experience of others within me revealed in consciousness the structures that would give meaning to the studied phenomenon: stigmatization, emotions. And when the Atlantic fog and the prefix dis- cleared away, a rainbow of human abilities emerged rising from the briny deep.

Thus, the thesis is revealed as a possibility for being, doing, feeling, acting, and creating. From having my feet solidly on land, to now traversing the swell of an Atlantic ocean was a quantum leap; an Atlantic ocean where the northern winds brought intuitions that became evident to consciousness in the form of empathy. Understanding describes the universal essence of the phenomenon studied in the form of a

narratively written reflection and concludes with five artistic creations that reflect what was experienced and empathically perceived in intersubjective consciousness, calmly giving thanks for life after the storm of sea-bound emotions. These abilities emerge like the beautiful movements of "Quasi una fantasia", that Beethoven sonata written when he was losing his hearing and which accompanies the conclusion of the thesis document.

I will now conclude this defence with the reading of a 1911 poem by Constantine P. Cavafy, as a tribute to all those to whom others have empathetically given everything and thus been able to appreciate their abilities.

Ithaka

**As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon - you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.**

**Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind -
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.**

**Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.**

**Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.**

**And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.**

3. Conclusions

Storytelling is defined as a method that seeks to bring the audience to a place of understanding ([Viscaino Alcantud, 2016](#)), where emotions and sensations interconnect in a single place, and a story is set in motion to educate, move, seduce, and empathize.

As such, a defence of a doctoral thesis that works from the qualitative paradigm ought to be consistent with the proposed methodology and the narrative writing of the document. It is a rethinking of the historical moment of humanity by recounting the experience of what is lived during doctoral training until the point where the thesis is completed. For this reason, thesis defences, and specifically those for doctorates in Educational Sciences, ought to find a pedagogical outlet distinct from conventional academic structures to implement educational experiences that allow for alternative forms of storytelling, ones that speak of dreams and possibilities beyond the transmission of content in the written document previously evaluated by the juries and approved for defence.

If doctoral research is a creation, this implies using teaching strategies from a variety of pedagogical modalities that facilitate persuading the listeners by generating empathy with the written work of the researcher.

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Data availability

El documento de tesis doctoral que hace parte complementario del artículo se encuentra disponible en: <http://repositorio.unicauca.edu.co:8080/handle/123456789/10862>

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