

The Impact of Community Engaged Learning and Narrative Persuasion on Student Attitudes Towards the Death Penalty

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Public opinion on the death penalty in the United States has greatly fluctuated over the past century. The lowest point for death penalty support was in 1966, where Gallup recorded public support for the death penalty at 42%. After reaching a high of 80% in 1994, support for the death penalty stabilized in the past two decades (Newport, 2010). Pew Research Center (2021) recently reported 60% of Americans support the death penalty for those convicted of murder. This is despite 56% of those polled believing the death penalty is applied disproportionately to African Americans, 63% believing the death penalty does not deter serious crimes, and 78% believing we lack adequate safeguards to prevent an innocent person from being executed. One explanation states that 90% of those polled who supported the death penalty stated that the death penalty is morally justified, (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Attitude Strength

Attitude strength is a primary feature of attitudes and, consequently, some attitudes are more durable over time (Krosnick, 1988), more resistant to change during a persuasive appeal, and wield more influence on individuals' thinking and behavior. Attitude strength consists of various independent yet interconnected constructs such as attitude importance, accessibility, and certainty. Visser et al. (2003) examined the relationship between participants' attitude certainty and attitude importance on political and social issues, considering cognitive-behavioral consequences. The results of three

ABSTRACT

Attitude change on the death penalty is a highly relevant issue to both legal and public policy actors. The current study adopted a novel approach to student attitude change with exposure to first-person narratives through community engaged learning. Senior capstone students ($n = 28$) completed projects on the death penalty. Students submitted four journal reflection entries in three-week intervals, which captured attitude change and learning experiences over time. Coders examined 119,522 words and conducted thematic analysis. Participants who connected with a narrative experienced a significant reduction in death penalty support and increased advocacy intentions, attitude strength, and subject knowledge.

studies found attitude importance and attitude certainty both impacted individuals' attitude-expressive behaviors.

Theories of Attitude Change on the Death Penalty

The Marshall hypothesis, explicated by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in his 1972 opinion in *Furman v. Georgia*, states that the more the public learns about the facts and statistics related to outcomes from the death penalty the less they will support it. Specifically, three key tenets make up his hypothesis are:

- (1) support for capital punishment is inversely associated with knowledge about it
- (2) exposure to information about capital punishment produces sentiments in opposition to capital punishment
- (3) exposure to information about capital punishment will have no impact on those who support it for retributive reasons (Cochran & Chamlin, 2005, p. 573).

In a series of studies testing the Marshall Hypothesis through quasi-experimental methods in a classroom (Bohm, 1989; Bohm, 1990; Bohm et al., 1991; Bohm & Vogel, 1994), modest support was found for Justice Marshall's contention that people are uninformed about the death penalty and attitude change occurs as a result of becoming informed. Attitude change was best explained by students' learning of the risk of executing the innocent and racial bias in the death penalty's application. Studies supported Marshall's theory that those who favor the death penalty for retributive reasons will not be swayed by learned information. Bohm and Vogel (2004), in a follow up study more than ten years after their original set of studies, found students' attitude change towards the death penalty rebounded back to pre-test levels of support. In the follow-up questionnaires, participants erroneously remembered facts about the death penalty, such as the cost of execution compared to life imprisonment. This indicated either a loss in classroom-learned information or exposure to erroneous information on the topic in the years since the initial studies. More recent studies (Cochran & Chamlin 2005; Cox, 2013; Lee et al., 2014) added to the Marshall Hypothesis discussion, finding no significant change in attitude between students taught factual information about the death penalty compared to those not exposed to any educational material on the death penalty. The findings from the aforementioned Marshall Hypothesis research suggest mixed support, for the second tenet of the Marshall Hypothesis specifically: increased knowledge about the death penalty results in greater opposition to the death penalty. Strong support, however, was found for the first and third tenets.

According to the 2021 Pew Research Center polling, 27% of Americans today strongly favor the death penalty and 15% strongly oppose the death penalty. Consequently, the majority (58%) do not have strongly-held attitudes towards the issue, (Pew Research Center, 2021). Unnever et al. (2005b) systematically reviewed national opinion polls on the death penalty to assess weakly-held attitudes towards the death penalty. The authors proposed that these attitudes can result from a conflict of values within the individuals that hold them, such as the conflict between belief in retribution as justice and belief in the sanctity of human life. This dissonance, they suggest, and the lack of true reconciliation between the conflicting values could lead a person to adopt a binary position, one held more weakly than attitudes fully aligned with the individual's values.

Narrative Persuasion

The use of fact-based narrative as a persuasive tool can influence attitudes and beliefs on a variety of issues (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1994). First person narratives are often most effective at influencing change in attitudes and behavior (Kauman & Libby, 2012). Fisher (1984, 1994) explicated the process of narrative persuasion, which posits that attitude change occurs by being psychologically “transported” into a narrative and reflecting on that narrative. Murrar and Brauer (2019) reviewed current empirical evidence supporting narrative as a persuasive tool to promote more positive attitudes towards people in diverse social groups. Murrar and Brauer concluded that there is sufficient evidence to warrant further research on the role of narrative in attitude change and examination of theoretical applications of narrative persuasion. Nabi and Green (2015) examined the role of narrative flow on narrative persuasion. They argued, “the desire for and the experience of emotional shifts influence key factors that underlie persuasive influence—message exposure, message processing (which includes transportation and identification), and post-message engagement and discussion,” (Nabi & Green, 2015, p. 153).

Narrative Persuasion and the Death Penalty

A handful of studies examined the role of fictional and nonfictional portrayals of executions changing opinions on support and opposition to the death penalty. Participants viewing a televised execution displayed lower support for the death penalty after watching the execution compared to their pre-test levels of support, (Howells et al., 1995). Holbert et al. (2004) found that viewing news stories, police reality, and crime dramas increased participants’ fears, subsequently increasing support for the death penalty. Studies exploring fictional media have found similar results. A pro-death penalty fictional drama increased support for the death penalty (Slater et al., 2006) and anti-death penalty fictional dramas and films decreased support for the death penalty, (Mutz & Nir, 2010; Till & Vitouch, 2012).

Rodriguez, (2017) reported that, after presented with the first-person narrative of a death row inmate, participants experienced a significant reduction in their support for the death penalty. This contrasts with those who were presented with a third-person narrative of the same story about the same inmate, narrated by the inmate’s brother, did not significantly reduce support for the death penalty, (Rodriguez, 2017). In short, third-person accounts are less persuasive than first-person narratives. However, this study was limited to fictional narratives.

Impact of Community-Engaged Learning on Attitudes

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) is a pedagogical practice that incorporates direct or indirect engagement with social issues. Three key components of CEL include preparation, action, and reflection (Cornell University, 2021). These components are enacted as follows: students do background research on the community partner’s mission and initiatives; they apply background knowledge on projects in collaboration with the partner; and they reflect on experiences through journaling, discussions, and other guided exercises. The goals of CEL include making connections between one’s field of study and pertinent social issues, developing connections to those impacted by the issues, and becoming more informed citizens.

Student engagement in service learning can be a catalyst for attitude change (Seider et al., 2010). Over time, students working with a community partner develop greater self-insight and recognition of the importance and need of engaging in service work (Furze et al., 2011). When a sample of pre-service education students reflected in writing on community service, most perceptions were positive, including an increase in empathy, resilience, initiative, individual growth, and practitioner competency (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Results from a multiyear comparison between CEL courses and traditional classroom lectures found “that students engaged in Community Service Learning, coupled with Team-Based Learning, learned and retained subject matter content more effectively, valued their CSL experience, and felt better prepared for real-world work,” (Alexander, et al., 2020, p. 15). The reflection component of CEL serves as a critical component of attitude change (Ceo-DiFrancesco et al., 2019). Buxton and Ellison (2015) found that journaling has a significant impact on the depth and quality of student learning. Applied studies reported significant attitude change on poverty as a result of CEL and reflection (Caswell, 2018; Terry & Lockwood, 2020).

Current Study

Rodriguez (2017) is the only study that explored the use of a nonfictional first-hand narrative in changing attitudes on the death penalty, albeit indirectly by comparing third-person narratives to first-person narratives. In the current study, we directly examined how connection to a narrative impacts death penalty attitudes, strength, knowledge, and advocacy intentions. Building upon previous research with a classroom methodology (e.g., Bohm, 1989; Bohm, 1990; Bohm et al., 1991; Bohm & Vogel, 1994; Bohm & Vogel, 2004, Cochran & Chamlin, 2005; Cox, 2013; Lee et al., 2014) to examine attitude change on the death penalty, the current study explored the impact of exposure to narrative through CEL on death penalty attitudes. CEL is an effective approach to intertwine learning with direct experiences and, therefore, expose participants to first-person narratives from people involved with experiences impacted by the death penalty, including supporters, abolition advocates, death row inmates, and victims’ families. The course also involved journal reflections, which served as the qualitative data later coded and analyzed in the study. Journals were collected at four stages of a semester enabling observers to learn the process of CEL on attitude change. This approach was intended to have high external validity, as attitude change was processed over four months and in real-life contexts. This created an effective methodology to examine the impact of narrative on attitudes towards the death penalty.

Based on the connection between narrative persuasion and their impact on attitudes, and in the context of CEL, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What is the impact of narrative on attitude position?

RQ2: What is the impact of narrative on attitude strength?

RQ3: What is the impact of narrative on knowledge?

RQ4: What is the impact of narrative on advocacy intentions?

Method

Participants

Senior Communication majors ($n = 28$) enrolled in a capstone course at a medium sized mid-western university worked on a CEL project, with the goal assisting a local organization to improve its advocacy efforts. Half of the participants identified as female ($n = 14$) and the other half identified as male ($n = 14$). Ages ranged from 21-23 ($M = 21.82$). A majority of participants identified as Caucasian/White ($n = 23$), while the remainder identified as Black/African American ($n = 5$).

The community partner for the course was a local advocacy organization whose mission includes promoting anti-death penalty messaging and action. Participants worked in six project groups, to improve the community partner's public communication effectiveness. Two groups worked on improving anti-death messaging to legislatures. Two groups developed effective message transmission via website and social media platforms. Two groups helped develop presentational speaking training for student advocates. All participants were exposed to death penalty statistics, first-person stories, and arguments. Additional course learning activities included meeting virtually with nonprofit advocacy volunteers and employees, discussing issues with classmates, and reading related scholarly research.

Students submitted a reflection journal, every three weeks, totaling four times during the semester. Students wrote a cumulative average of 4,268 words across the four journal entries. Journals focused on attitudes toward social issues and learning experiences. IRB requirements included all participants signing a consent form to allow anonymous analysis of their reflections following the conclusion of the course. Participants' reflection journal responses described their attitudes and experiences towards the issues. Specifically, participants were asked to respond to the following prompt, "Explain how the work you are doing relates to an ethical challenge and/or how your attitude about an issue related to the community partner has been impacted by this work."

Coding

Coding followed Thomas' (2006) methodology. This method requires three student coders to independently read all journals twice. After the first reading, coders developed coding criteria employing an open coding method to jointly establish categories. Based on these categories, a coding form was developed and used by coders in their second, in-depth reading. The total word count of all journals was 119,522 and coders created 56 items to analyze on the second reading. Coding themes that emerged included attitude position, attitude strength, attitude knowledge, and advocacy intentions. Coding included: nominal (yes or no) primary categorizations; Likert scaling for items such as attitude strength and position; and continuous values for items such as the number of learned facts provided by the participants. Overall, interrater reliability was high ($\alpha = .91$).

Journals were first separated into two categories: narrative connection and no narrative connection. Journals with an explicit connection to a first-person story throughout the three-month period fell into the former category. Journals without any explicit connection to a story were classified as "no narrative connection."

The primary categories coded included: students' *initial attitude position* was scored on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (the position stated prior to taking the class) and for a students' final attitude position (the last position stated at the end of the semester; after students' community engaged experiences). Coders assigned a score of 1 to participants who expressed their position as strongly in favor of the death penalty, with a score of 5 for students articulating a position strongly opposed to the death penalty. For example, coders unanimously assigned a 1 to a student who expressed their initial attitude position in the following manner:

My attitudes towards the death penalty have always been very strong and standard in one direction. I have always considered the idea 'an eye for an eye' is right and fair. Meaning, those who kill others should not be able to live themselves. (Journal 9)

A student scored a 5 unanimously for their final attitude position expressed the following beliefs:

After much reflection and communication with [nonprofit partner], along with reading personal stories of victims on death row, I now believe that executing an individual is never the answer even if some believe it is "easier" if that individual was no longer living. (Journal 2)

Change in attitude strength was coded on a Likert scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* to the statement: "the journal author experienced a substantial change in attitude strength." Journals scored as a 1 demonstrated little to no change in the students' passion about the death penalty. Journals scored as a 5 demonstrated a substantial increase or decrease in their passion toward the subject.

For *gain in knowledge*, coders responded to the statement, "the journal author demonstrated a significant amount of new knowledge/learning" by coding on a Likert scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Journals scored as a 1 demonstrated little or no new knowledge (0-1 distinct facts/details/stories provided). Journals scored as a 5 demonstrated a substantial amount of new knowledge (7 or more distinct facts/details/stories provided).

Advocacy intentions were assessed by coders using multiple scales. Coders responded to the question "did the journal author mention a change in behavior or planned change in behavior" with 1 = *yes* and 2 = *no*. For students who shared planned advocacy, coders rated the specificity of the students' planned advocacy, responding to the prompt "planned action/advocacy was specific" on a Likert scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Finally, coders responded to the question "the journal author demonstrated a connection between social responsibility to society" on a Likert scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Results

Impact of Narrative on Attitude Position

Students who identified with a story throughout their experience with the project had a significantly greater attitude change compared to those who did not connect with

a story. Specifically, by the fourth journal entry, the impact of story was significant, $t(26) = -3.31, p = .003, d = .5$. Notably, there was no initial difference between these same participants' initial attitude positions, $t(26) = -1.44, p = .163, d = .56$, (see Table 1 for mean differences). All attitude change was in one direction: increased opposition to the death penalty and reduced support for the death penalty. As exhibited with this quote, students explicitly connected their attitude change to the personal stories they were exposed to:

It was in large part my interview with [death penalty abolition advocate] that fully convinced me to forever be against the death penalty. When I heard his personal story with [death row inmate] and got to read his transcript of the events that he presents as speeches at universities I was blown away by the mistreatment of this human being and a system that is inherently corrupt. It was very beneficial to hear about the racism within the court and prison system. (Participant 2)

Additionally, one student explained their dramatic shift in attitude as a consequence of their learning about personal stories of death row exonerees:

If you had asked me senior year, or even freshman or sophomore year of college what my opinion of the death penalty was, I probably would have said that it's good and it gives the worst criminals exactly what they deserve. However, seeing [nonprofit partner's] work and being able to work on this myself, has led me to a pretty major realization...When I learned of the few men who have been placed on death row, and then after their execution they were somehow found innocent, it made my stomach turn. If they had just been holding those men in prison then they would have had the opportunity to see the sky and their families again, but instead we chose to take justice into our own hands and take everything they ever had away from them. (Participant 8)

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Coded Attitude Positions for Narrative Connection

	Initial Attitude Position (1st Round Journals)	Final Attitude Position (4th Round Journals)
Narrative Absent	3.13 (.56)a	3.93 (.53)a
Narrative Present	3.36 (.50)a	4.55 (.47)b

Note: Attitude position was coded on a 1-5 scale; 5 = *strongly opposed* to the death penalty.

Means with common subscripts do not differ significantly.

Impact of Narrative on Attitude Strength

The coded data indicated a significant effect of narrative on participants' attitude strength, $t(25) = 3.51$, $p = .002$, $d = .72$. Several students connected the narratives with increased passion towards the subject:

I am also finding out that I am much more passionate about this issue than I ever could have believed several weeks ago. It only took the kindness of the people I have talked to along the way and their poignant stories to reach my breakthrough. (Participant 3)

Impact of Narrative on Knowledge

Coders' assessments of the extent to which participants provided new knowledge throughout the four journals was significantly different for participants who identified with story ($M = 2.70$) compared to those who did not ($M = 1.96$), $t(26) = -2.25$, $p = .033$, $d = .92$) highlighted the importance of connecting to people affected by the issue stating "researching people is just as important as researching topics." Students explained their connection with a narrative spurred their desire to gather further information on the topic:

I am still against the death penalty but for different reasons. I had never considered specific scenarios, such as a mentally ill person being put to death. Attributing my attitude on the death penalty to facts and stories yields much stronger feelings. In other words, simply aligning my viewpoints with those of my religion does not require me to listen or do further research on the issue. (Participant 12)

Impact of Narrative on Advocacy Intentions

A significant difference in planned behavior change was found when comparing participants who connected with a story against those who did not, $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 4.04$, $p = .044$. Students explained their plans to advocate for death penalty reform, "I have looked at the hard work those at [non-profit partner] do and in myself, a fire has been ignited. I knew that the death penalty was wrong but now, I actually want to do something about it!" (Participant 2)

Most students ($n = 24$) provided a plan of action for advocacy. The specificity of planned advocacy of students who connected with a story was significantly greater compared to those who did not, $t(22) = -2.47$, $p = .022$, $d = .85$.

By searching through pages of statistics and listening to numerous stories of the lives of death row inmates and their loved ones, I have also formed the emotional, empathetic connection that leads to changed behavior and taking real action. After college, I hope to get involved in local organizations advocating for the end of the death penalty wherever I end up living. Even if I move to a state in which capital punishment has already been abolished, I want to stay involved in some way. (Participant 4)

Students also expressed a desire to engage in related nonprofit work after graduation: After this course, I would still like to be connected to this organization and get involved with them even if I am living back in [student's home state]. In addition to becoming involved in this organization after college, maybe I could even find an organization similar to [nonprofit partner] in [home state]. (Participant 1)

There was also a significant difference with explication of social responsibility to society between participants who connected with a story and those who did not, $t(26) = -2.25, p = .033$.

It has sparked self-reflection relating to the death-penalty personally, I just found this issue to hit home the most for me. The current system of killing people regardless of crime I find to be cruel and inhuman. When learning about certain cases [nonprofit partner] published on their website, it seems that many instances are against those most vulnerable in society, many of the minority in our country. So instead of not being involved it has made me realize that change is needed and I need to get out and advocate for change instead of relying on change to occur through the actions of others. (Participant 18)

Discussion

The student journal data provide support for the use of narrative as an effective persuasive tool on the topic of the death penalty. Connection with a narrative was linked both quantitatively and qualitatively to significant attitude change, increased advocacy intentions, increased attitude strength, and increased subject knowledge. Furthermore, narratives yielded higher attitude strength and planned advocacy intentions, mirroring a relationship found between one's attitude importance and attitude certainty with one's attitude-expressive behavior (Visser et al., 2003). The effectiveness of narrative could be attributed to the narratives' impact on multiple components of participants' attitudes.

This study contributes to a greater understanding of attitudes and communication on the death penalty, supporting previous research on the value of emotional connection to influence death penalty attitudes, (Unnever et al., 2005a; Unnever et al., 2005b). Unnever suggested raising empathy with those on death row reduces support for the death penalty. Narrative appeals may have increased empathy which led to the observed reduction in support for the death penalty. The Marshall Hypothesis is consistent with our finding, with participants connecting to narrative experiencing both attitude change and increased subject knowledge through participation in the capstone course. Participants gained knowledge about the death penalty through the lens of a narrative. This could explain why we found support for the Marshall Hypothesis while other studies found mixed support.

Directions for Future Research

Narrative's impact in this study may have been partly due to students first-hand exposure to people affected by death penalty and policy advocates. Future research should examine how the persuasiveness of a narrative determined by participants' predispositions towards affective or cognitive. Potentially, the participants who attached more to a narrative did so because of a predisposition towards that type of appeal, resulting in the significant changes noted. Future research can use survey research to pretest participants' predispositions towards types of appeals to investigate narrative's impact on attitudes. Future research can also further examine the unique impact of narrative appeals in a CEL context and investigate potential differences in attitude change based on how narrative appeals are presented.

Conclusion

Given the criminal justice field's roots in interpersonal relationships and conflict, the effectiveness of narrative appeal may apply to other debates that have direct consequences for people. Past social psychological and criminal justice research, along with our findings, support the impact of narrative on death penalty attitudes. Specifically, hearing first-person narratives from people affected by the issue can yield changes in attitude position, attitude strength, subject knowledge, and advocacy intentions.

CEL courses aim to engage students directly with various social issues. Participants' attitude change could be attributed to the structure of the course, which provided connections to persuasive narratives. The findings provide support for CEL's goal of promoting attitude change. Support was also found for the use of CEL by death penalty abolition advocates as an effective means to reduce support and increase opposition of the death penalty, via the lens of narrative. The reflection component of CEL, completed through journal reflections in this study, may be another critical component that better allows attitude change to manifest. Our study also supports CEL as an effective pedagogical model of engaging students' attitudes.

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Maria Vassanelli (BA, Communication Studies, 2023 Xavier University) Special Event Fundraising Manager Crohn's & Colitis Foundation - Southern Ohio Chapter.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Xavier University Communication Studies graduating class of 2021 for their voluntary participation in this research project. Also, we are grateful for the student research support of Xavier University through the College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship and the Eigel Center's Community-Engaged Scholars Program.