

Creating Symbols: The Power of Personal Stories

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Abstract: *Stories have power. They shape belief and identity. They are carriers of meaning. Stories make people care. Stories are what people leave behind. During an Erasmus+ training, twenty-four participants from six countries learned how to turn their own personal stories into mini-movies using modern technology. While creating the short movies, they have also learned about differences, tolerance, inclusion.*

Through a community of practice (CoP) lens and using a mise-en-abime technique, this article will deconstruct the process of converting six personal stories into three minutes movies.

Methods: The researcher used her own observations, the course archive, and the participant's reflections to follow and analyse the process of creation and sharing that lead to each of the six end-products.

Conclusions: The participants used their imagination and personal experience to create stories which they subsequently refined into images and symbols. The final works created a new experience of team work, empowerment, and inclusion

Keywords: *CoP, stories, deconstruction, inclusion*

1. Introduction

Stories shape belief and identity. They have power. Stories make people care as they are carriers of meaning. People live through stories, whether their own or fabricated. They are essential for growth and development, for layering the different strata of ego and belief. They are part of every learning act, starting with oral history through written history and coming to the virtual age. A Romanian NGO has submitted to the European Union a program based on leveraging the power of personal stories and won an Erasmus+ funding for the training called "Let's Digital Storytell". It hosted twenty-four participants from six countries (Romania, UK, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and Bulgaria) who learned how to turn their own personal stories into mini-movies using modern technology.

The program was held in Bucharest, Romania for two weeks in July 2018. Its purpose was two-fold: gather and transform personal stories into messages with powerful impact and develop digital literacy by showing how to use everyday technology for artistic purposes. The participants' ages varied from eighteen to thirty-nine and their backgrounds were equally different: actor, teacher, librarian, student, trainer. Furthermore, because one of the Erasmus+ values is inclusion, the training included two participants from Spain who were hearing impaired and they came accompanied by a sign language translator. The official language was English..

2. Literature Review

Since the dawn of time, humans gathered and shared stories around campfires, later at crossroads, in inns or market places. Stories play a major role in learning and decision making; they are "packages of situated learning" (Jordan, 1989, cited in [1]), allowing the newcomers to begin tapping into the collective knowledge of the community. Wenger develops this idea, arguing that imagination, together with engagement and alignment, are how people negotiate belonging and identity [2]. Listening to and sharing stories enhances empathy and makes individuals reflect back on their own practice [3], jumpstarts collaboration [4], is a strategic business tool [5], and opens people for new things, for self-awareness and learning [6].

Shared experience and knowledge become reified into stories, articles, concepts, tools that are part of the shared repertoire CoP mutually engage in [2]. Within a CoP, members exchange and integrate stories born from

and of each other's preferences, expertise, and cultural background. This allows them to learn and to better negotiate the boundaries of the different communities they are part of, whether they be physical or virtual.

3. Methodology

Deconstruction is an approach used to understand how things are created, used mainly on literary theory (Derrida & Bass, 1978). It takes a look at the finished work and analyses the steps that lead to its creation and the meaning behind it. The author took part in the course and assisted in chronological order at the creation of the final movies.

However, a different understanding of the power of personal stories and the change of context throughout the whole process can be achieved by considering the end-result in view of the reflective feedback of the participants. The article will also frame a mis-en-abime technique as it is a story about personal stories converted into different meaning stories.

4. Findings And Discussion



Fig. 1 – The six stories

Six short movies were presented at the end of the course: *The Mirror*, *Changes*, *Never Settle*, *Focus on Your Dream*, *Anxiety*, and *Rediscovery*.

The participants' feedback at the end were somewhat similar. The term "difficult" was used four times, "struggle" three times, "hard" three times. The same happened with "together" (three times), "all" (four times), and "learn" (six times).

As R from Portugal confessed – "communication was not the best at the beginning, but we tried...we separated the roles.... I haven't worked with any of them in the activities before...we all learned something new". L from Lithuania enjoyed the process "we had many ideas but we didn't settle with them, we changed, upgraded them...for me it was an enjoyable process". For V from Romania "[...] it was more about the team than editing because I start things and I give up on them and I admire them for being so persistent and encouraging me". This evidences how they supported and encouraged each other throughout the process to achieve the desired results.

More than the final results, the process was important. It changed the participants, made them reach for resources of creativity previously untapped. D from Portugal said that "the most admirable for me is that actually I'm not that good at technology, but none of us imagined the movie that came out...we started brainstorming, decided we wanted a metaphor...we were really amazed at the creativity that came with not knowing what to do". Letting imagination free and not setting boundaries allowed individuals to reach to new metaphors, combining different thoughts and ideas into powerful symbols. In doing so, they learned about themselves and about the others: "I really want to thank with C, the first time in my life I worked with mute people, but then watching her, it was special, a discovery, she has no voice, but she can tell so much" (D from Lithuania).

The comment above points to a meta-story within the group which brought forth the principle of inclusion, as two of the participants were hearing impaired. They required the use of a sign-language interpreter, which

made all the conversation slower to adapt to their rhythm. Tolerance and understanding were tested as well, as the group faced a double challenge: communicate in English and communicate using sign language. It focused the conversations and compelled the speakers to refine the message, with extra time to think about what to say so it did not get lost in translation.

The participants were the creators of the stories and the protagonists in the movies. It presented them as multifaceted, complex, negotiating identities (Wenger, 1999) in the different environments and different groups they formed. Role assignment within the groups was done according to expertise and each individual contributed with ideas and learned new things. This is concordant with CoP maturing stage (Wenger, 2002), where the joined repertoire is shared to advance knowledge and precipitate learning (Pausan, unpublished). Together, they created six artefacts, thus reifying their work (Wenger, 1999).

The reflective feedback shows that they have struggled, overcame the obstacles, and learned about themselves and each other. This was translated into their work, as each of the six stories presented a struggle and a symbol: they are about tolerance, inclusion, climate change, dreams, loneliness, anxiety, overcoming defeat, not giving up.

During the creation act, they have also created a safe space for each other to learn and to grow: “I was very comfortable, my colleagues were very patient” I from Romania said, while A from Romania added “ we didn’t argue, we were capable of making sacrifices [...]” This shows the mutual engagement and shared enterprise between the members of a CoP, underlined by Li from UK who shared that they “[...]communicated democratically, we were supportive, we were always there to decide”

Editing was one of the hardest parts was, as confessed by everybody. Eighty percent of the material was cut to leave only three minutes of message behind. This was meant to capture the essence of the entire story and the end-result was very different than the original one they started with. As an example, “Anxiety” started out as a gay coming out story and it ended being about stereotypes about anxiety and how to overcome them.

La from UK confessed it had been “ very challenging when it came to editing”, same as I from Romania who added that “The editing was tough”, while J from Portugal brought a new perspective “for me, different to film with a phone[...]for editing, I’m used to do it alone, but having a team , sometimes is good, sometimes is bad.” Paring down footage to distill the message and compress it into a symbol seems the opposite of imagination and it’s a meticulous time-consuming process with one end-goal: refine and clarify the general message, while keeping the heart of the story. It also made the participants aware first hand of the time and effort invested into creating the shortest of adverts, not to mention videoclips and movies.

“[...] it was beautiful, the result” said E from Romania, while G from Lithuania added “we are happy with the end-result”. Hard team-work brought the participants the satisfaction of having created stories with powerful messages: their personal stories turned into symbol messages ready for larger audiences. It also demonstrated the ability of the community to create impactful artefacts to be shared online using sites such as Facebook or Youtube.

5. Conclusion

For two weeks, twenty-four strangers from six countries formed a tight community who learned about each other, their passion, their dreams, their stories. Using digital technology (mainly smart phones and editing software), they used their imagination and personal experience to transpose their personal stories into moving images and symbols. They learned about the power of stories, and how their own could be transformed into powerful messages to be shared with the world using online technology.

The results created a new experience of team work, empowerment, and inclusion. The lesson learned were about tolerance, patience, different cultures, transformation – it helped them grow as individuals and as a community. They keep in touch using social media and some have used the course experience to create more videos of their own.

Recommendations for further research:

In the short period spent together, the groups exhibited features of a CoP. Further research can investigate and assess whether it has become a CoP and what are the difference to a traditional CoP.

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