

## **Story, the arts and wellbeing**

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*Delivered by Daniel Carpenter at the Amateo Conference, Stockholm, 8 May 2014*

At last year's AMATEO conference in Nachod, Hamish opened up a discussion about the value of everyday creativity, ranging from making handmade physical objects, to creative experiences like singing and performing. He talked, as well, about the recent explosion of online creativity.

The talk Hamish has prepared for today's conference attempts to link the idea of everyday creativity with that of wellbeing, through the lens of a specific developing creative practice – that of digital story-making. It looks at the notion of the 'arts and wellbeing' in the context of the commonplace practice of storytelling.

Digital stories are usually two-minute long films. In this sense they are like a technological haiku. They are made by the people to whom the stories belong. They record their own voice, select a small number of (usually still) images, and use computer technology to combine these as films. This can be done increasingly easily and cheaply, as the technology (which is integral to the practice) develops, although this simplicity belies the hugely sensitive and nuanced involvement of the storyteller.

This is all a bit philosophical and theoretical, but we can find examples of everyday creativity in action from amongst our own organisations and our own day-to-day interaction with amateur artists, choirs, craftspeople, artisans, bloggers and YouTube makers.

However, defining terms like wellbeing and, of course, a definition of what constitute the 'arts', presents challenges for researchers – this is apparent in a paper by three colleagues from Canterbury Christ Church University, entitled 'Researching participatory arts, wellbeing and health: some methodological issues', recently published in the *Journal for Arts and Communities*, which Hamish edits. Whilst literature in the UK on the contribution of the arts to health and wellbeing has expanded to 385 works published between 1990 and 2004, the authors referred to the lack of rigorous research in what is, in research terms, still an emerging field.

This discussion, about the wellbeing benefits of participating in the arts, is going on all over Europe. This paper focuses on the way in which the everyday practice of storytelling can provide a degree of social connectedness that leads to social health and wellbeing, When

we share stories we 'root' our own lives and experience with that of others, and, in doing so, reflect on what it means to be human.

If Hamish was here, he would now tell you a true story – a story that is more than an anecdote, and which says something about the efficiency of a story to convey complex meaning succinctly.

The story concerns a conference of European Community Artists that Hamish attended in 1990, where he met a man who was not happy. The poor man was bereft, and Hamish had a strong feeling he was about to hear all about it. His upset, Hamish was relieved to discover, was professional and not personal. Moving to the corner of the room in a confessional moment, he pointed towards a group of portfolio cases that looked too heavy for one person to carry. Held within these, he told Hamish with bated breath, were his drawings, plans and paintings for the Berlin Wall Mural project. This turned out to be work he had spent many years planning and for which he had been awarded permission only a few days before the wall started to come down. He must have been the only person in Europe who was deeply unhappy that the wall had come down. As a fellow artist, Hamish felt prompted to show his support by asserting that no possible good could come from the fall of totalitarianism if the feelings of community artists were going to be trampled on like this!

Perhaps the process of reunification would have worked better if the reconciling effects of this work had ever been seen.

Stories can illuminate a range of understandings that are difficult to engage with empirically. They talk about things that are more easily grasped through the sharing of an experiential narrative.

In stories, events seem to yield their own meaning. The point of the story is not asserted by an authoritative narrator, nor is it authorised by the presentation of theory and evidence in conformity with an accepted logic of enquiry. Rather, the way in which events unfold reveals insights that seem lodged in the events the story itself describes.

It is interesting that when the responses of politicians, journalists, theologians, philosophers, scientists and others simply aren't enough to explain things, we call on storytellers and artists to illuminate the crisis. This is in no sense new, however. It goes back at least as far as Aristophanes, in the *Frogs*, which was written about 405 BC. The plot suggests that Athens was in such a crisis that Dionysus, god of drama, needed to

retrieve the greatest dead poet from the Underworld. 'What do you want a poet for?' enquires the chorus. 'To save the City of course – replies Dinoyesus'.

Stories illustrate and provide a way of knowing about many things.

As you might expect, our most respected storytellers argue unequivocally for the importance of story as a way of knowing. The introduction to Salman Rushdie's recently published memoir *Joseph Anton*, about his period of being subject to a fatwah, says that when he was a child, Rushdie's father read to him 'the great wonder tales of the East', from the Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian tales of the 'Thousand and One Nights'. He learnt 'two unforgettable lessons' from these tales. First, that "stories were not true ... but by being untrue they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him". And second, that all stories "belonged to him, and to everyone else". Rushdie learned that "Man was a storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was. The story was his birthright, and nobody could take it away."

The need to represent and understand the world symbolically is in all of us, it would appear. Some writers even go as far as Philip Pullman in his introduction to the trilogy 'His Dark Materials', in which he asserts "Stories are the most important thing in the world. Without stories we wouldn't be human beings at all". In a slightly less breathless way, the revolutionary and philosopher Paulo Friere notes that "To exist humanly, is to name the world, and to name the world is to change it..."

In recent years, storytelling has been promoted in surprising places. Managers are now urged to tell stories to motivate workers, and doctors are trained to listen to the stories their patients tell rather than just take a 'history'. Journalists have rallied around a movement for narrative journalism, and psychologists around a movement for narrative therapy. A quick scan of any bookshop reveals scores of popular books on the art of storytelling as a route to spirituality, a strategy for grant-seekers, a mode of conflict resolution, and, probably, a weight loss plan.

Sometimes we are invited to create and share stories within an explicit context, such as teaching and learning, or for the benefit of institutions like Universities who think they may gain '360-degree' understandings of how services are received, and what kind of experiences people are having in the institution, with a view to tailoring the experience to the greater satisfaction of the customer... a kind of market analysis with an emotional component to it.

In fact the 'discovery' of narrative journalism reminded Hamish of a conference of educators he attended in Athens a while ago. The subject of the conference was drama, and the difficulty Greek educators were having getting theatre and drama into any curricula there. They felt they were introducing drama to Greece. Hamish responded, 'you should get into drama early – it could catch on.'

The power of the discursive form is clearly established in storytelling. However, in the modern era, anything that cannot be understood in writing tends to carry less force and be considered less seriously, than something which is spoken. This suspicion extends to storytelling in all its forms. If we are to base change on the stories people tell, how can we trust them to be telling the truth? Stories are not seen as reliable ways of knowing, unless you live in an oral culture.

Getting the story 'right' can have serious implications in almost all aspects of contemporary life, especially perhaps the law, politics and the academy. We worry that stories are easy to manipulate and often dismiss something by saying "it was only a story". Despite this, though, the 'currency' of personal story in understanding medicine, health, management, policing, economics, the study of history, the curation of museums, and other human endeavour, continues to grow.

Hamish's team at the University of South Wales has recently completed a project with families who are engaging with live kidney transplant from one relative to another. The digital stories they tell use their own photographic archive of the family, and the voice of the storyteller. The medics with whom they have worked assert that the stories allow for a level of communication between patients that would not be possible if they were involved. They say this makes a direct contribution to the wellbeing of whole families, who are part of the process.

Personal phenomenological stories make explicit the cultural schemas that underpin institutional practices. The story of someone's unhappy visit to hospital contains a set of suggestions about the culture of the institution... the visit's unhappy outcome suggests how it might have been made happier.

Alongside testimonials to the power of stories, however, run deep anxieties. The line between art and artifice may be blurred in stories. We worry that the emotional identification that stories can produce may compel moral action but undermine rational action. Perhaps stories are just too variable to act as the basis for institutional or social change. After all, if

everyone has her own story whose story, is to be privileged when it comes to making policy for everyone?

At this point, Hamish wanted to show you a film from Capture Wales, which is the BBC's award-winning Digital Storytelling project that came out of a partnership formed between BBC Wales and Cardiff University. Capture Wales ran monthly workshops from 2001 to 2008, facilitating people in the making of their digital stories. The project draws attention to the seldom heard voices of the people of Wales and the website now contains more than five hundred stories.

This one's by a young lady called Samiya, and is entitled 'My picture':

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/samiya\\_s\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/samiya_s_01.shtml)

The academy often shares the suspicion of story as, at best, ambiguous, and, at worst, an insufficient vehicle to transport the kind of objective truths that have been valorised since the Enlightenment era. The story carries the hallmark of folklore rather than of science, and of custom rather than rules.

Hamish's team at the University of South Wales are interested in interrogating the idea of story through questions like:

What makes a story a story? When is a story appropriate? How should we respond to stories? What effects do they have? Does a carefully crafted story become inauthentic? Do stories capture particularity better than universality? Do we have a single and consistent view of story or is it riven with contradictions?

Many of these questions are contextualised by the fact that stories are often associated with emotion rather than logic.

Hamish has been working with the Transition Movement recently, which is grappling with the change from fossil fuels to more sustainable energy sources. They recognise that personal stories can chip away at the wall of public indifference. They are aware that stories can elicit sympathy on the part of the powerful, and sometimes mobilise official action against social and environmental wrongs. Where authority is unyielding, storytelling sustains groups when they fight for reform, helping them build new collective identities, link current actions to heroic past events and glorious futures, and restyle setbacks as way-stations to victory.

So, despite our often ambivalent approach to story we currently celebrate the story of almost everything. It is not surprising that one of the most frequently quoted notions of the French theorist Roland Barthes, is one that claims the centrality of narrative in social life. According to Barthes, “The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”

Part of the current emphasis on story seems linked to its association with forms of storytelling that are mediated through new technology. A series of assumptions about the internet as holding out the potential to create new ways, new forms of storytelling, new kinds of narrative structures, has emerged. What is not being asked, however, is whether in fact the internet can support really new ways of storytelling, and what is the result of the individualisation and emotionalisation of people and their lives, that seems to form the ideological core of the ‘new’ practices of storytelling?

This is the new kind of realism that the documentary maker Adam Curtis calls ‘emotional realism’, and the internet has become the showcase for that realism.

If the grand narratives, the big stories, no longer do it for us, the ‘ordinary’ experiences of life can feel more real. What I **feel** about something has become the most important thing. This is the way we make sense of experience now. The only thing we can trust is the raw data of our own lives and those we know well. It’s the worm’s eye view, with the texture of experience, that has become important. The fact that it makes no grander sense actually makes it feel more real.

Perhaps the reason people are interested in the fragments of experience that are contained in people’s personal stories is because we no longer trust the official substantial story. We have a feeling that, just with fragments of ‘stuff’, we might be able to construct a different kind of narrative. We want to get our news from an eclectic mixture of sources.

In all this, one thing is becoming clear, and that is that the internet is much more complicated than we realise. The digital utopians of the 1990s led us to believe that the web was an innocent world. Innocent in the sense that it was removed from the old elite structures and hierarchies of power.

The suggestion was that the web is somehow a fresh world where we are all connected, like equal nodes in a network, and that, together, we will create a new democracy. That was naive. The internet is literally plugged into the architecture of power in this world and the doctrine of individualism that it frequently represents suits those who wield that power. It is not evil, but neither is it a value-free playground. It is the biggest monopolising agent in history. If, however, you can link that extraordinary theatre of feeling and emotions with an **understanding** of modern power, and how it flows through those same wires and tubes, then real innovation in storytelling might appear. Linking an understanding of how the internet shapes your feelings and understandings, with the drive to share emotion and individual insights, may be the area in which the new stories will grow.

The history of the web tends to suggest that technology is developed through the creative engagement of people. The practice identifies technology as being driven by the creative and communicative desire of people, rather than the other way around. The desire to tell a story leads to ingenious and engaging ways of telling it. As such, it reveals itself to be a vernacular and everyday creative practice, like that of the 'oral storytelling' traditions of pre-literate cultures.

If we consider digital story as, primarily, storytelling (the continuation of an ancient human practice rather than something essentially new), then new forms of technological storytelling can be seen to occupy the same space in the creative digital economy as the pre-literate oral traditions have throughout history. Here digital story can be seen as a function of orality, more than as a technological phenomenon. The literal and figurative centrality of the human voice in the process suggest this.

Here's another film from Capture Wales, by a lady called Doris Cole:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/doris\\_cole\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/doris_cole_01.shtml)

The sharing of stories from our everyday lives is not a remaindered and dying tradition, but is as vital a part of human discourse as it has ever been.. so vital in fact that it has grasped the new technology from the clutches of the apparently disinterested and objective project of science, and transformed it into another, human, mediated, storytelling tool.