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Adventures in Storyhacking – Facilitating Indirect Inter-Community Dialogue Through Story

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Abstract

The need for dialogue between diverse groups within society is pressing, but the shrinking of shared public space makes it difficult for storytelling to cross social divides. Through an evolving practice of multi-artform 'storyhacking', I and various collaborators have attempted to facilitate creative inter-community dialogue by indirect means.

Keywords: Storytelling; dialogical art; dialogical aesthetics; participatory art; community art.

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If the UK's Brexit referendum taught us anything, it is that society is riven by faultlines that are increasingly hard to jump over.

Echo chambers are nothing new. At a public meeting to discuss the case for York's first public library in 1881, the Dean of York pointed out that one of the main missions of a free library was to enable people to break their habit of reading only one newspaper, and engaging only with viewpoints that resembled their own – and that only in this way could there be peace and enlightenment. He gave his opinion

> that it was a very good thing for him, as a Tory, to read Radical newspapers, and a very good thing for him as a churchman to read Nonconformist newspapers. The more they examined each other's views, the more reasons they had to find for their differences, and the less reason they had to suspect one another on account of those differences [...] (York City Archives, 1881)

Yet it seems that not just the arenas for dialogue, but the very terms of discussion, are no longer held in common. Both in the UK where I live and worldwide, different communities (defined by class, income, generation, ethnicity, and politics) no longer simply read different newspapers or watch different television channels. They ascribe different meanings to the same words – 'benefits', 'democracy', 'freedom', 'refugee', 'community'. They have different truths, and different narrative frameworks to interpret information. As Joseph Sobol said at the 2018 George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling symposium in Cardiff, Wales, "we are in the midst of a narrative combat from which we can hardly escape."

Despite playing its part in combat, storytelling has also always fulfilled the role of providing arenas for dialogue: folktales and myths have often acted as proxies enabling people to express opposing views on controversial topics. A storyteller at a village gathering could tell a folktale of an overweening king, and in their responses to it the humblest listeners could subtly check the excesses

of their village leaders; in a much larger public forum, Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* in 415 BC enabled collective exploration and debate, at one remove, of the consequences of Athens' recent colonial adventures.

Yet this requires a shared space, whether physical or virtual, where different groups gather to hear the same stories and respond to them. In a context where the 'public sphere' is shrinking, we need to find new forms that enable storytelling to fulfil this role of 'forum' for a generation of people who rarely find themselves in the same room as those different from them.

Grant Kester (2004) has argued that perhaps the most important role for the arts in this time is to lay out (even temporarily) neutral territories for people to meet, negotiate values and changing identities – to genuinely *hear* each other through the cacophony of the story-gunfire. He coined the term 'dialogical art' to describe work which attempts to do this, such as Suzanne Lacy's *The Roof Is On Fire* which brought together police officers and inner city teenagers in cars in a rooftop car park, to enable them to see the world through each other's eyes.

However, it may often be impossible, or at least unproductive, to bring together diverse groups in face-to-face dialogue in this way. I was intrigued by a recent BBC Radio 4 initiative, *Two Rooms* (2016), which aimed to cut through the noise and facilitate dialogue between Brexit 'Leavers' from Boston and 'Remainers' from Brighton. Rather than putting them all in a room together to watch the sparks fly, it hosted calm exploratory discussions in two separate rooms, before gently facilitating communication between them through messengers and optional meetings. (In fact, some of the participants went on to set up 'twinning' arrangements between community organisations in their respective cities). Likewise in arts projects, it may be better to meet 'around corners', holding dialogue indirectly, at least initially.

The ICAN approach

Colleagues and I have been experimenting with a multi-artform approach to storytelling which aims to provide such common ground, using raw story material which, vitally, belongs to no

one. The first iteration of this was in 2014-15 at the International Centre for Arts and Narrative (ICAN), a partnership between York St John University and York Theatre Royal. We ran community workshops for 41 groups - among them primary school classes, older people's forums, mental health support groups, university students, teenagers from an adolescent psychiatric unit. Groups would come for a whole day. They would first hear (from me) a folktale or legend, which would remain constant across several months and many groups. In our article about ICAN's work, Matthew Reason and I discuss how we selected and crafted these initial stories, avoiding predictable narrative arcs, morals or clear conclusions. Rather, 'we sought to hold the various forces in balance and withhold interpretation, leaving many 'gaps' for participants to inhabit imaginatively' (Reason and Heinemeyer 2016:561).

Participants would then spend the day guided by professional artists, first exploring the story in one artform, for example drama, then 'retelling' it in another, such as animation or visual art. This term 'retelling' needs some unpicking. Over the two-year period, our 700 participants adopted very diverse approaches to the work they collaboratively made in response to our initial stories. Some would transpose it to their own life experience or political views, using it to make sense of a real dilemma within their group; others would engage in what we called 'creative copying', retelling the story apparently faithfully, although always adding layers of their own interpretation and imagery; others would subvert it, inserting pop culture references or surreal fantasies (Reason and Heinemeyer 2016). And crucially, we were equally open to all of these possibilities. In choosing The Tiddy Mun, a legend of how a Lincolnshire village reacted to the draining of the fens, we were not trying to steer groups towards particular conclusions about contemporary environmental conflicts, but to give them something really substantial to chew on. Thus one group used this story as a framework to discuss a local controversy about whether a playing field should be built on, while another became absorbed in the eerie cosmology of the legend and the spirits that dwelt in the fens.

To borrow a zeitgeisty word from the 'hacker' movement, what we were doing might be called 'storyhacking'. On one level, any listener to any story creates their own version or interpretation of it in their mind's eye. Yet our workshop structure made an unusually explicit invitation to make use of a story as one might the carcass of an animal: to carve it up, share it out, turn it into other things.
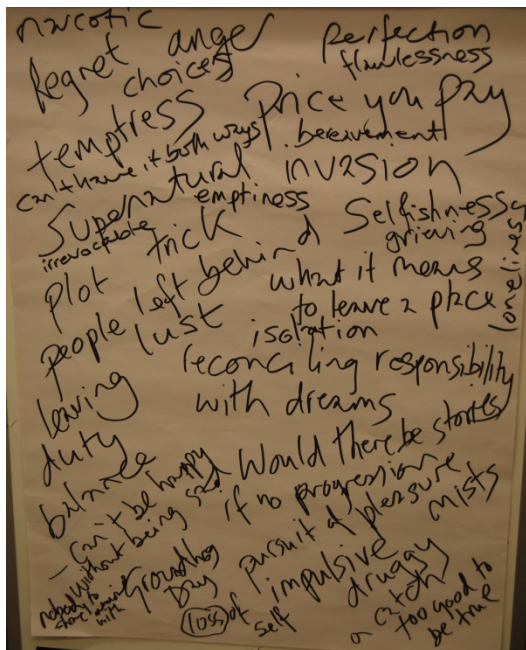
Materials from ICAN workshops: reflections on story of Tir na nOg (left); group of young adults printmaking their own retelling of it (right).

The ICAN workshops were, on one level, 'purposeless' – but a project like this makes an unspoken statement: that diverse groups, who may not come into contact with each other, can nonetheless all feel welcome on the neutral playground of an unfamilar folk story. We initially aimed to enable a dialogue or sharing between diverse groups who had worked on the same story, but this was hard because of the ephemeral structure of the project. It was already challenging for groups to carve out a single full day in their busy schedules to join us, and they would rarely have been able to engage in any follow-up. Many community arts projects now have to get to grips with the

fragmented, individualized and highly scheduled nature of people's lives, and the increasingly loose or 'liquid' nature of ties binding communities (Bauman 2003), making it difficult to develop a long-term, evolving practice.

The approach evolves

Subsequent projects with different collaborators have developed (or in fact, 'hacked') this approach, so as to specifically enable an indirect dialogue between groups who did not meet until late in the process. The stories of two of these projects are worth telling.

Layers Upon Layers **(2017):** The leadership of a large city library were acutely conscious that their building was one of the only local public places where groups ranging from unemployed young people, to middle-class parents, lonely elderly, foreign students, and homeless people, co-exist in relative harmony, although in practice these groups interacted with each other only minimally. On this basis, the library was awarded significant Arts Council England funding to enrich people's participation and opportunities for real creative interchange. Yet many of the library's staff, let alone its customers, did not see the relevance of the arts programme to their core business at the bookshelves, information desk, café or computer area. Thus we held a four-week project involving all the staff. I researched the starting story in the library's own archive - the life story of the first Chief Librarian, Arthur Furnish, early in the previous century – and set up three successive artist workshops in creative writing, music, and visual art. Each member of staff chose which of these to join, and our work built up in layers. Thus Workshop 1 participants wrote poetry inspired by Arthur's life and challenges – creating metaphors such as the librarian as spider in the centre of a web, or gardener of a diverse and unpredictable garden. Workshop 2 participants heard all this poetry and used it to collectively compose a piece of music. Workshop 3 participants, using both the poetry and the music as their stimuli, created a large-scale artwork.
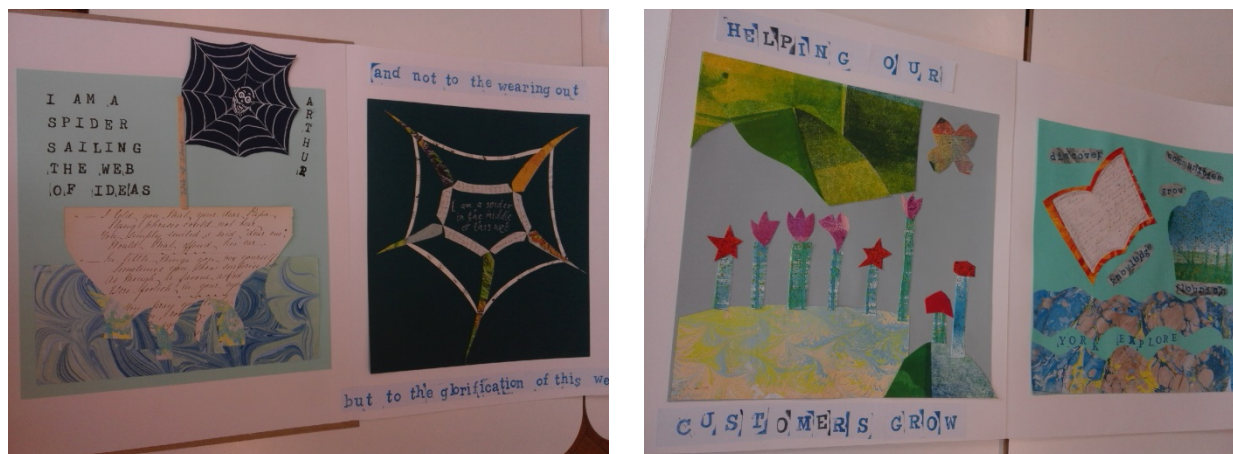
Two sections of the artwork made by Workshop 3 participants in Layers Upon Layers*.*

Throughout the process, the staff were agog to see what subsequent groups would make of their creations, and were frequently struck by their own sense of common purpose, shared across all teams. The work they made, and the stories they shared during workshops of their interactions with customers, articulated and gave form to this shared resolve.

***The Tale Exchange* (2018):** A network of artists I coordinate, Things As They Are, works with diverse groups of young people with experience of mental ill health. While they share a commonwealth, an expert perspective on the youth mental health crisis, the very nature of their situation makes it difficult for them to come together, collaborate or create common cause. We thus devised a layering project which could facilitate an indirect dialogue between different groups through a story. Meeting in their familiar gathering places (a youth club, a mental health unit, a university classroom and a support group), four groups worked in four different artforms to make work in response to the Siberian story of 'Belye and Naundyaka'. Despite its remoteness from contemporary UK realities, this story was rich in relevant themes of isolation, distress, fragility, strength and maturation, without resolving them. As with the ICAN project, it was vital that the story was sparse and 'weird' enough to require interpretation – in Roland Barthes' words, that it 'desired' the participants (1975:6). Some of the groups then swapped what they had made, and made a second round of work in response to each other's work. When all the participants finally came together for

the project's concluding sharing event at York St John University, they met as already-initiates, already-collaborators, with overlapping but different knowledges of our starting story. They were curious and confident enough to continue in person the dialogue they had already begun through their artwork.

'Blow Winds Blow'
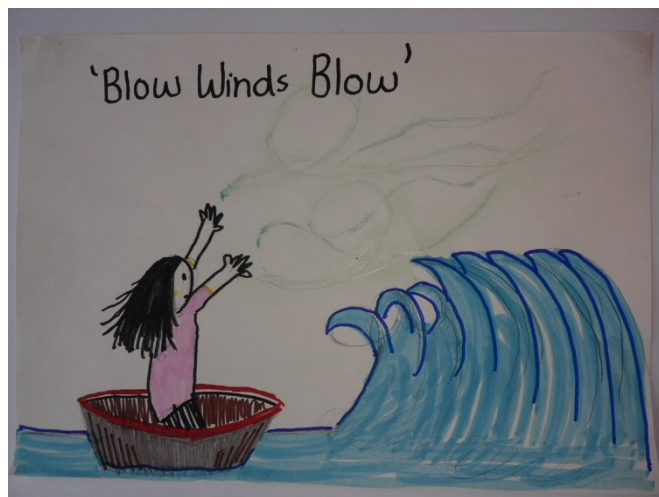
Artefacts made during The Tale Exchange

Crossing divides

Both of the above projects worked, crucially, through 'layering' of versions of stories (a process as old as the hills). Neither of them crossed major social divides – the groups involved being broadly sympathetic to each other, though not necessarily comfortable with each other – but they did experiment with approaches which could achieve genuine dialogue, feedback loops of communication and attentive listening. Indeed, the minor social faultlines which they did cross (between different groups of library staff, and between young people from different 'tribes') were sufficiently tangible to enable us to sense the potential and the boundaries of 'storyhacking'. My current collaboration with Leeds Beckett University and two Leeds secondary schools, *Journeys We Make*, will tackle more sensitive territory: migration and identity. Through shared exploration (through poetry and animation) of Homer's *Odyssey*, pupils newly arrived from conflict-ridden countries, and UK-born pupils from

diverse ethnic backgrounds, may be able to communicate their knowledge and anxieties about the

impact of migration on young people's lives.

The practice I have described here certainly resonates strongly with Kester's (2004)

'dialogical aesthetics'. Perhaps my colleagues and I are feeling our way to cross-fertilising this

aesthetic with longer-established traditions of community storytelling - reinventing a form of dialogue

that is part of our inheritance, for a generation that often needs to meet around corners.

Links to projects discussed

International Centre for Arts and Narrative: https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/international-centre-for-arts-and-narrative/ and https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/2077/, accessed June 2018.

Layers Upon Layers: https://www.exploreyork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ExpLabs-Layers-Upon-LayersCase-Study-V2.pdf, accessed June 2018.

The Tale Exchange: http://www.thingsastheyare.co.uk/the-tale-exchange.html, accessed June 2018.

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