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# RaY

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## **Storytelling, Story-retelling, Storyknowing: Towards a Participatory Practice of Storytelling.**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a practice-led research project that investigates how people from diverse community and school groups understand and respond to oral storytelling. Run in collaboration with York Theatre Royal, the project uses art form workshops (drama, music, fine art) to actively invite participants to make the transition from listeners to storytellers. This paper places these workshops within a theoretical framework that draws upon understandings of storytelling developed by Benjamin, Bruner, Kearney and Wilson. We argue: 1) that through the process of (re)telling participants demonstrate a particular kind of embedded knowledge that we have termed 'storyknowing'; and 2) that inhabiting a story in this open-ended way has intrinsic value. We present a typology of strategies for retelling adopted by the participants and reflect on our development of a participatory practice of storytelling.

### **Key words**

Storytelling, narrative, participatory practice, narrative knowing.

All our workshops began with a story. Whether we were working with a primary school or a community group, whether the participants are six or in their sixties, we explained that we were interested in stories and how people listen and respond to narrative. Then, with everybody sitting in a circle, we shared a story.

The workshops were being run as part of the International Centre for Arts and Narrative (ICAN), a creative partnership between York Theatre Royal and York St John University ([www.artsandnarrative.co.uk](http://www.artsandnarrative.co.uk)). Together we shared a number of broad motivations, including to discover how collaboration between the two institutions might produce a different kind of practice,

one embedded in an arts organisation but shaped by a research enquiry. Our research aim was to explore participants' engagement with stories, the meanings they make of them and how different art forms might facilitate participants in their own retellings of the story.

What was also important, and will be reflected upon in this paper, is that the workshops were focused upon the intrinsic experience itself – engagement with the world of the story – rather than any externally measurable outcome – whether educational, therapeutic or otherwise. For the half or whole day that participants would join us in an ICAN workshop they inhabited and explored the narrative space of the story. We propose that this produced a relational experience (between participants, the artist facilitator and the story world) that aligns with Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of a 'micro-utopia': the value of which consists in the temporary, small-scale instance of connection and exchange it brings into being.

We were also interested in how storytelling – as an oral, 'everyday' and communal activity – might be structured as a participatory practice that challenges hierarchical ideas of art and knowledge that to some extent are maintained by institutions such as theatres, schools and universities. In constructing a space where people were invited to work with stories, our workshops replicated something that may have had equivalents in cultures with an oral storytelling tradition, but which most people have very rare opportunities to experience in contemporary Britain. These were community practices, which enabled people to articulate, share and negotiate social knowledge through the form of story.<sup>1</sup> As in this tradition of storytelling, our workshops engaged participants with stories in and for themselves and made explicit the invitation to add one's own layers of experience or values to the story – something that may be tacitly understood in many oral cultures. In this way they followed a hermeneutic view of knowledge, defined by Richard Kearney as 'the view that the retelling of the past is an interweaving of past events with present readings of those events in the light of our continuing existential story' (2002:46). Our thesis is that such collaborative, creative and communal processes of storytelling and retelling entail a form of

‘storyknowing’, and that recognition of this has implications for how we think about participatory theatre and performance practices across a range of education and community contexts.

This paper will discuss and analyse this project, placing our practice-led research within a body of ideas around storytelling, narrative and reception. It will consider the strategies of story(re)telling employed by participants and reflect on the development of what we have termed a participatory practice of storytelling, that sits outside instrumentalism and within a narrative mode of knowing.

### **Story as Method**

Our approach was one of iterative practice-based research, conducted over a period of two years. Operating through a process of experimentation and reflective adaptation the objective was a participatory practice that, while opening with a storytelling (in other words with a kind of performance), would also contain an inherent and structured imperative to re-interpret and re-tell. The purpose of the *storytelling*, therefore, was always with the goal of initiating a *re-telling*, and never as an end point or polished conclusion in its own right. In addition we would argue that, as practice-based research, the form of the story itself also operated as a method within our research. Story was, therefore, both the beginning and the end of each workshop, and provided the material for analysis. Thus ‘storyknowing’, the kind of knowledge embodied in story, acted for us as what Robin Nelson, in laying out a model of practice as research, calls a ‘clew’ – literally a thread, a ‘metaphor for holding on to the line of the research inquiry as it weaves through the overall process’ (2013: 10). We sought to capture this knowledge within its own frame of reference, and thus attain one of Nelson’s criteria for ‘rigour’ in practice as research: ‘the worked-through-ness of ideas in process’ (75).

This was consistent with our understanding that storytelling was not only the object of our study, but also a way of knowing in its own right. Here we were influenced by Jerome Bruner's suggestion that there exists a particular 'narrative mode of thought', which is not about the facts or information contained within the story, but rather the transmission of tacit knowledge about the meanings of lived experience accessed in and through the form of the narrative itself (1986). Bruner suggests the existence of two modes of thought, which he describes as complementary but irreducible to each other: the narrative and the argument (which he also terms paradigmatic or logico-scientific), the latter being defined by its pursuit of systems, concepts and formal categorisations that seek to transcend the particular and claim a universal truth condition. It is this ability of narrative to enshrine plurality that leads Jean-Francois Lyotard, from a post-structuralist perspective, to celebrate what he calls 'narrative knowledge', describing it as 'the quintessential form of customary knowledge in more ways than one' (1984:19). It is, he says, a 'strange brand of knowledge' (21), not yielding to abstractions, whereby the listener may not be able to consciously articulate what they know outside of the story. This irreducible quality of narrative also finds expression in later thinking within performance studies; Dwight Conquergood finds story to contain 'finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert' (2002: 146). We would like to call this 'storyknowing'.

We were interested in what our participants knew of story, and recognised that the place they would be most articulate about their storyknowing was *within* the form of the story itself. It was therefore this story-form 'data' – participants' 'retellings' through different artforms – that we analysed.<sup>2</sup>

For participants, a typical ICAN experience consisted of three interconnected stages: 1) listening to the oral telling of a traditional folk story or myth; 2) a workshop designed to explore the story world; 3) a workshop designed to facilitate the communal retelling of the story. In most instances the first workshop was in drama, and the second in another artform (such as felt making,

book making, drawing, poetry or animation). We worked with a total of eight different artists to deliver these workshops.<sup>3</sup>

Between January and June of 2014 and 2015, we conducted three to six hour long storytelling workshops with 41 different groups totalling over 700 participants. As one of our objectives was to explore narrative across different ages, participating groups included children from primary schools and a home education network; young people from a mental health setting; and adults, including an interfaith group, an older people's advocacy forum, a mental health art group and a social club for people with learning difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

Early on in the process we decided to use only a small number of stories, often working with the same story over several months. This enabled us to gather an understanding of the range of similar and different responses to the same story. When we changed the story – and to date we have used just three – it was to test our emerging insights within a different narrative. The stories were from the folklore tradition, selected by Heinemeyer in discussion with the project team. We sought out stories that contained a degree of ambiguity and the possibility of choice or multiple perspectives. All of the stories engaged with challenging experiences (loyalty, the environment, community, faith) but not in a manner that offered an answer to them.

In making these choices we had in mind the role of the story and storytelling in light of what has been termed the 'narrative turn', whereby storytelling has found itself at the centre of what Mike Wilson describes as the:

Rediscovery of an age-old way of dealing with contradictions, multiple contradictory truths, and distinguishing between truth and lies, redeployed to help us navigate through our rapidly changing and liquid lives (2014).

The three stories we worked with were: 'Tir na nÓg', from Irish mythology; 'Tiddy Mun', one of the 'Legends of the Lincolnshire Carrs' collected by M.C. Balfour in 1891<sup>5</sup>; and 'The Children's Crusade', a

conflation of factual and mythical accounts of medieval events (and a possible precursor of the Pied Piper story). The versions of the stories that Heinemeyer developed for the project lasted around 10mins. Recordings are available online at <http://artsandnarrative.co.uk/research/storytelling-story-retelling-storyknowing/>, along with the video, audio and image artefacts referred to throughout the paper. As illustration our version of one story, 'Tiddy Mun', is summarised briefly here:

### **Tiddy Mun**

The Tiddy Mun is a spirit of the Lincolnshire Carrs, fenland riddled with ague (malaria) and treacherous to cross. The inhabitants of the Carrs revere the Tiddy Mun, manifested in the call of the peewit, who wards off the dangers of the bogs. As the Carrs are largely empty and unproductive, the King commissions Dutch engineers to drain the water, creating farm land, enabling greater tax returns and ridding the area of disease. The local villagers shun the Dutchmen, many of whom disappear in mysterious circumstances, but eventually the fens are drained. Needing work, some of the villagers start to work for the farmers who move into the fens, but soon find they seem to be cursed, with babies dying and animals falling sick. The curse is only lifted when the villagers gather during a moonless night and together pour water into the new ditches in supplication to the Tiddy Mun.

What we found striking and useful in this story is that while it conforms to Booker's (2004) archetypal form of a 'rebirth' story, in which an individual or community nearly succumbs to dark forces but is reborn with greater understanding or maturity, it is open to interpretation whether the natural environment, the Dutch engineers, the Tiddy Mun, the King or the community itself represents the threat. Initial discussions among the project team showed this to be a contentious point, with each member bringing personal associations or values to the story that pushed towards

different understandings. In the version we developed, we sought to hold the various forces in balance and withhold interpretation, leaving many 'gaps' for participants to inhabit imaginatively.

This methodological approach was situated within the context of thinking around both storytelling and the epistemic status of the story, which we now go on to explore.

### **Storytelling and Story-retelling**

In this project the story told formed the focal point and stimulus that the participants then explored during the workshops. We were working with stories of a particular kind, in terms of origin, content, delivery and resonance; specifically, within an oral tradition of storytelling. Michael Wilson describes this tradition as being centred around a solo performer, working from a repertoire of stories, usually low-tech in props, costume, sound and lighting, centred around a vocal dynamic (2006: 9). In our case the stories were told by a single performer, using her voice alone and with no accompanying theatrical staging.

In *Storytelling and Theatre*, Wilson describes how, for himself and other practitioners, these characteristics of storytelling have not only formal and aesthetic qualities but also political and ethical implications. Crucially Wilson locates storytelling as having strong connections to the community arts movement in its valuation of engagement with audience on a democratic level of social interaction (2006: 62). This is something also identified by Tom Maguire, for whom the 'immediate reciprocity of the relationship between the teller and the audience' is a defining characteristic of the form (2014:15). The objective, for Wilson, is rarely to hold up the storyteller as virtuosic performer, but rather 'to engage the interest of the audience in participating in their own storytelling' (2006: 95). This objective was embedded in our workshops, whereby participants were facilitated in the production of their own artistic responses to the initial story stimulus.



In doing so we were following a strong tenet within oral storytelling that articulates the passing on of story from storyteller to listener as being radically different from the relationship of artist to audience or producer to consumer. Writers such as Jack Zipes (1995) and Wilson (2006) suggest that as a form, storytelling inherently presents the possibility of the audience becoming the artist, with the listener becoming the teller. Arguably there is potential for this invitation to exist in the experience of any art form, with, for example, witnessing a great painting being, obliquely perhaps, an invitation to paint. However, it is possible to argue that with storytelling this invitation is more immediate and more structurally central to the form. Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the art of storytelling (1969) provides a basis for understanding why this should be the case.

In his discussion on storytelling Benjamin locates the particularity of storytelling as located within its orality, particularly in contrast to the novel: 'What distinguishes the novel from the story,' writes Benjamin, 'is its essential dependence on the book' (1969: 87). Whereas, '(t)he storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale' (87). An echo of this can be found in Lyotard's discussion of storytelling and knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he writes that 'the narrator's only claim to competence for telling the story is the fact that he has heard it himself. The current narratee gains potential access to the same authority simply by listening.' (1984: 20). There is an important point here regarding transmission, whether between what Lyotard describes as narrator and narratee or what Benjamin terms teller and listener. This transmission is not only of the narrative itself, but also of both the authority to re-tell the story (as I have heard it told, I tell it to you in my turn) *and* of the knowledge or experience communicated by the narrative (I have heard; you will hear) (Lyotard 1984: 20-22). Within the context of our workshops, we wanted to suggest to participants that in order to become a storyteller you only require yourself and the story, and having been listening you already have both.

According to Benjamin, the oral nature of storytelling leads it to construct a special relationship with narrative that enhances this process of passing on and repetition. In particular he argues that the 'art of storytelling' is to keep a story free from explanation and psychological analysis:

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. (1969: 91)

In the oral folktales that we were working with, this 'compactness' was very much in evidence. All of them were driven by plot rather than 'psychological shading', with characters, for example, a function of the action rather than action being the product of character. For Benjamin such compactness positions stories as more able to imprint themselves on the mind of the listener and – in their bendable fluidity – more open to retelling in different forms, in different contexts, through different voices. In reflecting on what made a good story for this project, one of the artists involved expressed this view of the oral heritage of myth and folktale as inherently malleable or open-ended when she said, 'I think the material needs to have an element of myth – so people can interpret aspects of it for themselves, relating it to their own experience'.

The notion of the open text (Eco 1962), or of listeners making a story heard their own (Benjamin 1969), of the death of the author bringing about the birth of the reader (Barthes 1968) all have a wonderful liberating glow about them. Bruner's spin on this is particularly seductive: 'Like Barthes, I believe that the writer's greatest gift to the reader is to help him become a writer' (1986: 37). Writer and reader here could be replaced with teller and listener – the greatest gift of the storyteller to the listener is to help them become a storyteller in their own right. This seems at once

conceptually coherent and yet also practically naïve. In reflecting on her own practice, often with groups unfamiliar with oral storytelling practices, Heinemeyer observes how difficult it can be for some listeners to get any independence from the storyteller ‘version of the story and its moral arc’ and the need to consciously work to help listeners ‘appropriate it in a way that means something to them’ (Heinemeyer 2014). In a non-oral culture, therefore, storytelling may need to do more than simply hold out the *potential* of participation, and here Wilson’s utilisation of a different Benjamin text is very useful (2014).

In ‘One-Way Street’, Benjamin writes about the difference between copying and reading, equating it to the difference between flying over a territory and walking it by foot:

Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command. (1978: 50)

Wilson suggests we make a similar parallel between listening and retelling. Listening remains free floating, flying above the experience; retelling is a close reading, which requires investment into the experience. To retell, therefore, is to closely engage with the storyworld and it was for this that we aimed. The next section explores the various strategies through which the process of retelling was pursued.

### **Strategies of Story-retelling**

According to Bruner (drawing on Wolfgang Iser), rather than a denotative statement, narrative offers a ‘spectrum of actualizations’: that is a performance of possible meanings, not a determinate meaning (1986: 24-5). What we became interested in, therefore, was not what the participants

would tell us the stories were about – ‘Tiddy Mun’ is about the environment; ‘Tir na nÓg’ is about the impossibility of utopia; ‘The Children’s Crusade’ is about the seduction of faith – as these would require them to exit the storyworld. Nor were we attempting to reach a view on the origin, content or function of myth in the folktale itself, as twentieth-century theorists have done (Segal 1999). Indeed, it is a fundamental condition of working with the oral tradition in the twenty-first century that one is aware of the many roles posited for it by theorists, which have all to some degree been absorbed into our understanding of this material: the psychological accounts of Freud, Jung and theorists after them such as Booker (2004) and Bruno Bettelheim (1976); the anthropological understanding of James Frazer (1922); the critical perspective of Jack Zipes (1995); or the existential function suggested by Hans Blumenberg in his *Work on Myth* (1985). Rather than viewing these as competing perspectives, we sought to keep all these layers of meaning available to participants, and came to focus on *how* they would choose to retell the story. Across the 41 workshops we slowly developed an understanding of the range of strategies of story-retelling that the participants would adopt.

The typology of strategies that we present here developed through practice-based research where, through repetition, knowing-in-action became explicit knowing-in-reflection (Schön 1983). This was complemented by the documentation of workshop artefacts, which were systematically categorised in order to confirm and test our recollections. Through a process of first independent and then collaborative mind mapping by the two authors of this paper, this resulted in an initial ‘messy’ categorisation of approximately 11 strategies of story-retelling, which we have here filtered down into three overarching strategies and one outlying position (Figure 1).

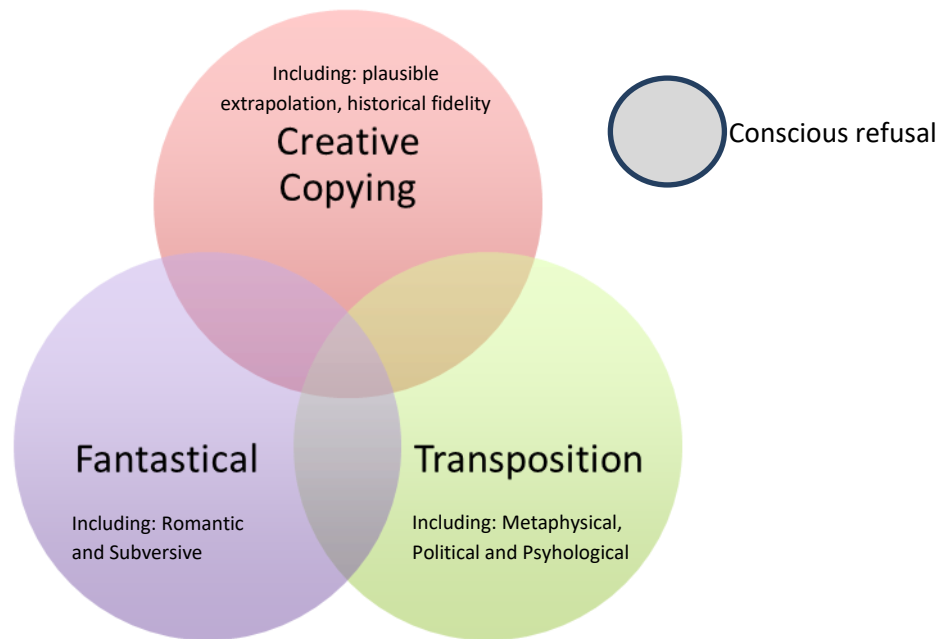


Figure 1. Strategies of Story-retelling

### ***Creative Copying***

In our typology, Creative Copying describes the impulse to retell the story within the style and/or context of its original telling. The participants' retelling is an echo or new edit that is *by necessity* different (it might notice or prioritize different things for example) but is respectful to the tradition and form of the story.

The category takes its label from Benjamin's description of how in retelling a story the participants walked the territory of the story by foot and in doing so 'submitted the story to their command'. It is thereby a copy in two senses: a rendering of something previously existing; and a detailed and close revisiting. However, existing within orality and the storytelling tradition, we use the term 'creative' in order to recognise the work of the reteller, the copy never being purely derivative. Here our experience mirrored that of Betty Rosen (1993), whose practice-based investigation of storytelling with her teenage pupils found that each of their retellings drew on the feelings, attitudes and 'in-built resources' of the reteller .

In some instances the creative copying goes further, through ‘plausible extrapolation’ or expansion. In these instances the re-teller adds to the storyworld with new characters or actions, but remaining always plausible within the world originally presented. For many participants creative copying showed a desire to remain loyal to the story as heard. For some the motivation was a broader sense of authenticity to historical time and context beyond the story. For others there was a clear embrace of the story’s otherworldly, magical or lyrical qualities, a stylistic copying.

### *Some examples*

A group of 7-8-year-olds created ‘postcards’ from one character to another in the ‘Tir na nÓg’ story. Their chosen images allowed them to capture what were for them the defining moments of the story, very much within the mythical vocabulary and range of the story as told to them. In some cases (Figure 2. Top right, showing the path from the Fianna’s castle to the mystical land of Tir na nÓg) they sought to capture the whole trajectory of the story in a single image. In others they focused on a single moment. The messages they added to the back likewise largely confined themselves to what actually occurred in the story, filling in only the likely emotions of the character involved, extrapolated from their own life experience of, for example, separation: *‘Dear Niamh, I’m really missing you, ime nearly at home, my dad will be wondering where I am, ile come back. Love Oisín.’*

### **[Figure 2. Postcards from Tir na nÓg.]**

The process of drawing and collage used on these postcards required the participants to add to and embellish the story, no matter how closely they were sticking to the original. What was the Fianna’s castle like, what does Tir na nÓg look like? Sometimes they responded by inventing detail, which when working within the strategy of creative copying would fit naturally as a plausible extrapolation of the established storyworld (for example, one postcard featured a detailed picture of a farmer digging potatoes).

In another example, an animated film (available as Video 1 on website) of the ending section of the 'Tir na nÓg' story made by a mixed-age home education group shows clear concern for historical and contextual fidelity – the priest with his leather-bound Bible and the peasants' coarse garb remove the scene from modernity, but simultaneously fix it in reality. Their choice to use their historical knowledge to render the setting less fantastical means that the transfixing climactic moment, in which the main character, Oisín, ages by an unimaginable 300 years in one moment, becomes a moment of striking juxtaposition.

Another primary school group (aged 8-9) extended beyond the bounds of the story to a 'plausible extrapolation' of it in their collective 'Letter Home' from a group of children in 'The Children's Crusade' to their family back in France. The ambiguity and magnetism of the Pied Piper-esque leader figure, Stephen, provoked them to use their instincts, rather than general principles of safety, as to whether or not he was trustworthy: *'Yesterday I saw Stephen talking to his friend. His eye twinkled and turned red, I don't trust him. Last night I heard a wolf, Stephen went to catch it, he did but he ate it all to himself...'* Each group resolved Stephen's 'stranger' status differently; their concluding oral retellings featured their invented characters deciding whether to follow him or chart their own onward route, a structure which asked them to 'act' on their instincts and knowledge, and extrapolate the consequences.

### ***Fantastical***

Fantastical describes retellings where participants actively pushed (or ignored) the boundaries of the storyworld. Not concerned with maintaining stylistic unity or being faithful to the original, fantastical retellings would add elements (characters, actions, dialogue) from diverse alternative worlds, genres and forms. Often these fantastical retellings did not seek to break with narrative (they followed the same course of events) but playfully extended its cultural references.

Sometimes the fantastic had an idealized or romantic element, perhaps playing with the possibilities of the story but taking them further or beyond that which was given. Unsurprisingly, young children were particularly inclined to fantastical retellings.

Alternatively for some participants, notably older children and teenagers, the fantastical had a more subversive quality, introducing elements chosen deliberately to provoke a response (from teachers, from facilitators, or from each other) whether because they were rude, overtly gruesome or irreverent. It was noticeable that at times teachers sought to resist the fantastical, perhaps fearing it was a sign of ‘taking the piss’ or that it represented a missed learning opportunity. Our invitation to participants to explore stories in their own way and re-shape them using their own resources needed, however, to be open-ended. In their fantastical retellings participants sometimes seemed to be testing out the limits of what could work within a story – for example, whether the ‘respected’ myth or folktale could incorporate their own contemporary cultural or fantasy references without ‘breaking’, or losing its status.

#### *Some examples*

A group of 8-9-year-olds from a primary school created their own child characters within ‘The Children’s Crusade’ and continued their story in heroic, fantastical vein beyond the shore in Marseilles. The transcription of their retelling cannot transmit the dignity with which it was portrayed<sup>6</sup>:

*When they reached the ocean, it did not part when Stephen raised his arm. Shawn and Harrison looked at each other – this was the proof that Stephen could not be trusted...They ran towards the coast and came upon a golden pad. When they pressed it, a tunnel opened up underground, lit by torches. It went right underneath the sea to the Holy Land, but it was terribly long and dark...they found their way to a village of Golden Samurai – warriors who*



*had set up a community in the Holy Land. They settled down there and eventually Shawn was made their king. It was him who, one day, was to kill Stephen for all he had done.*

There is a sense here of the children investigating the relationship between their own cultural references, personal fantasies and the legend presented, playing with what Kearney calls the 'curious conflation of empathy and detachment' (2002:13) permitted by narrative.

It was interesting how the material process of different art forms encouraged a more or less fantastical approach. For example, before making animated retellings of the stories, participants would generate and construct characters using plasticine. Amongst children this often invited wild elaboration, so 'The Children's Crusade', a story set in medieval France, came to include a cast of snowmen, teenage mutant ninja turtles and aliens, who accompanied the existing structure of the story without any significant difficulties (available as Video 2 on website). It was the ability to maintain narrative coherence, while exploding other conventions of time, place and form, that we found fascinating and valuable in such fantastical responses. It was what lifted them from the destructive, into something that indicated a kind of narrative knowing: an appreciation of the underlying structures that persist through time, while the repertoire of tropes and characters available in popular culture changes. It is possible that this strategy was a mechanism through which these young people claimed ownership of the stories, divesting them of reverence or authority and making them common property.

Alternatively, as a final example, the reason for the fantastical play was more immediately political. A group of adolescents from a mental health setting used 'The Children's Crusade' story, with its motif of untrustworthy adults, more subversively to fulfil their own agenda: to challenge the accompanying staff members regarding unpopular aspects of the setting's regime. Their stop-motion animation (available as Video 3 on website) was flippant but pointed, showing the adults in the story being slain by a cat, and featuring a bird whose call resembled the alarm which frequently went off in their residential unit.

### ***Transposition***

This is the most complex of the categories, which describes how some participants used the story to explore or articulate aspects of their own experience in a way that was at least partly conscious. To borrow Winnicott's (1971) term for play, the story became a 'transitional space' for them. For these participants the mythological scope of the stories (perhaps precisely their lack of psychological detail) enabled them to approach their own concerns through a kind of knowing obliquity – that is an ability to comment on something intentionally and even pointedly, but at an indirect remove. The distance of the mythological storyworld allowed them to map parallels between the story and their own experiences and beliefs of the world around them.

Crucially, the workshops never asked participants to link the story to their own experience or to use it as an opportunity to tell their own autobiography. In this we were deliberately avoiding impulses from the use of story within therapeutic settings, where it becomes a tool of psychological enquiry (Sunderland 2000; Crawford et al 2004), and also the more direct, instrumental engagement with issues and personal experiences in forms such as Forum Theatre or the devising practices of many applied theatre practitioners. Of course inevitably participants drew upon their own lives, knowledge and experiences, whether to booster the authentic detail of the story (creative copying), to supply incongruous intertextual references (fantastical), or to transpose the story to something connected to their own world. In all instances, however, we sought to remain within the realm of story, operating through narrative modes of knowing where we never moved to reflect upon or explicate the meaning from the narrative unless, as occasionally happened, the participants chose to do so spontaneously. Transposition occurred on several (intersecting) levels: the metaphysical, the political, and the psychological/autobiographical. The following provides brief examples for each of these.

*Some examples*

**Metaphysical transposition** – Some participants made striking use of the story in order to explore or make visible abstract or philosophical concepts – concerning issues such as existence, personality, hope. For example, a group of university students spent almost an hour in impassioned discussion of the themes in the ‘Tír na nÓg’ story, on a metaphysical level: whether the central focus of the story was Oisín’s losses and regret; whether Niamh was a temptress, a tragic character, or a blank slate on which the audience could engrave their ideas; whether Oisín was selfish, and abandoned his duty of protecting Ireland, by going to Tír na nÓg; whether the perfection of Tír na nÓg made it hazy and unreal, or even a representation of drug-induced oblivion. Their brainstorming sheet indicates the range of their discussion, as do the poems and music they composed together (available as Audio 4-8 on website).

**Political transposition** – A small number of groups found clear parallels between the story and a pre-existing shared concern of their community. This was the case with two groups from opposite ends of the age spectrum (a rural primary school group and an inter-faith group of older people) who both found themselves identifying with the villagers in the ‘Tiddy Mun’ story on a political level, as each group had been involved with local debates about development on green spaces valued by their community. They used the opportunity offered by the ambivalent stance of the story to explore both sides of these controversies through drama and feltmaking.

**Psychological/autobiographical transposition** – Some individuals used the opportunity of retelling the story through various art forms to express aspects of their own personal experience or psychological makeup. For example, a member of another older people’s group responded to Oisín’s journey to the ‘perfect world’ of Tír na nÓg (and back) by leading a discussion about her own experience as an immigrant to the UK: her disappointments, regrets, and her feeling that return was

impossible because of the time that had elapsed and the change that had occurred. The story seemed to be a vehicle with which she could explain both her autobiography and the impact it has had on her psychology to her fellow group members. The prints made not only by this woman, but by others in the group, seemed to reflect this sense of irreparable loss and nostalgia (Figure 3).

**[Figure 3. Collaborative concertina book of the 'Tir na nÓg' story.]**

The transposition of the story to engage with elements of their own experience was particularly evident in groups whose purpose in coming together was related to mental health and wellbeing. In one example a teenage girl from a mental health setting created her own mythology around the 'Tiddy Mun' story in stop-motion animation (available as Video 4 on website) which arguably encompassed all three of these levels of transposition. In her cosmology, the Tiddy Mun was one of many beings in thrall to a dark underground god, who was then overcome by a female god of light, liberating the Carrs. This resoundingly archetypal resolution (to a story which previously contained no clear 'force of darkness', victories or guarantees) may have had personal importance for her in her struggles against her illness, as well as containing a feminist message about the potential of finding power in an overtly female identity, and an overarching statement of the power of hope over oppression. The distinction between storytelling-as-therapy and storytelling-as-storytelling is a complex discussion which cannot be accommodated here. However, it is interesting to consider whether this free choice to resolve the ambiguity and create a powerfully hopeful ending would have been available to her in a more directed, 'therapeutic' use of story.

What is important to note is that in all of these transpositions there is an act of re-telling, which enables the experience to remain in a narrative form and thereby contain ambiguity, contradiction and fluidity. Rather than becoming argument or logical statement, this is knowledge contained within the form of narrative in the manner that we have termed, within this paper, storyknowing.

### ***Conscious refusal to engage***

In any process of working with people in a participatory manner there are always occasions when participants actively or passively refuse to engage. In the workshops this was occasionally experienced, with some adolescents opting simply not to join in. In one instance, however, there was a more active and conscious refusal or inability to engage.

On this occasion, a group of adults from a mental health setting, after hearing 'The Children's Crusade' story, stood up en masse and asked if they could leave the workshop. They explained that for some of them the story touched on themes that were extremely raw, while for others the demands of reciprocal listening and story-retelling were more than they could fulfil given their current ill health. Their apologetic but decisive choice to avoid the risk of re-traumatisation by not engaging further felt as significant a response to the story as a retelling would have been. There were, of course, multiple reasons for this conscious refusal to engage and this was a one-off experience. Nonetheless, it could be seen as a direct challenge to our approach of open-ended exploration of evocative stories – it demonstrates the potential impact of stories in their invitation to place the self within the narrative. The particular reward of 'open' stories is also their challenge; the difficulty was perhaps not that the story tackled painful themes, than that it failed to resolve them. It could be argued that this particular group needed a story chosen carefully with their needs in mind. Alternatively, the solution might have been a more guided, therapeutic framing to the workshop which would have provided the safe structure which the story itself did not.

### **Towards a Participatory Practice of Storytelling**

Our practice in the ICAN workshops represented, for the majority of participants, an unusual engagement with story. Unlike in most educational or therapeutic contexts, they were not being

guided to certain concepts (the story was not a parable); unlike in most drama workshops, their own personal experience was not being explicitly elicited as raw material (the story was not a parallel). Instead the workshops positioned story as both a sufficient starting-point and sufficient end-point, and sought to actively establish a micro-topia in which the participants' status as storytellers was affirmed.

As we progressed we came to articulate certain values and methodologies which constitute a participatory practice of storytelling:

- **We choose especially open-ended, ambiguous or unfamiliar stories**, with an unusual narrative arc, so as to provoke greater attempts to interpret. The stories engage with prominent concerns, but do not provide solutions or make value judgements.
- **We tell the story sparsely**, with 'chaste compactness' (Benjamin 1969) and without psychological interpretation.
- **We keep the experience of listening and of interpretation firmly communal.** We are interested in intersubjective, situated and relational encounters, between participants and each other; between participants and the artist; between participants and the story. In Donna Haraway's words, 'Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals' (1988: 590).
- **We hold the story open.** We use different art forms to enable participants to 'spend time with the story' before creating their own retelling. We thus hold the story open by artistic means for longer than would otherwise happen.
- **We allow understanding to remain within the form of story** – recognizing that the participants' retellings represent a narrative mode of knowing.
- **From storylistener to storyteller** – the workshop structure invites participants to make the transition from listener to teller: 'as I have heard it told, I tell it to you in my turn'.

Across these approaches we propose that the workshops generated a collaborative, collective narrative mode of knowing that was inseparable from the story. To take the example of the 'Tiddy Mun' story: in terms of content it raises questions about environmental and societal change, in terms of narrative it embeds this within social relationships between people, place, history and power. Through the workshops we saw that 'Tiddy Mun' enabled a different way of thinking about these issues, one that did not require a linear response, that allowed unusual, intuitive, even illogical connections, that permitted surprises and for multiple (sometimes contradictory) elements to be in play at once. Here we return to Lyotard's 'strange brand of knowledge' and to Bruner's description of a particular narrative mode of thought. To know within and through story (storyknowing) is to know something in a situated and relational manner. It is to know about impact and affect, about consequences and thoughts and feelings located within gestures, within bodies and within the fine grain of experience. Storyknowing operates as a strategy to recognise and appreciate this form of tacit, narrative knowing, without requiring its transformation into something abstract and explicit.

The development of the ICAN workshops has been an open and exploratory process, for both the participants and the researchers. Our proposal is that a participatory practice of storytelling enables storylisteners to become storytellers, with retelling a valuable activity – though its benefits may be intangible, impossible to predict or pin down. The proposal of this project, that remaining 'within the story' can give voice to participants' own perspectives without explicitly drawing on their own life experiences, may also suggest to theatre practitioners an alternative way of working with story and with participants. We would like to encourage others working with story (in education, therapy and other settings) to consider this open-ended, relational and non-instrumental engagement with story as having a value in itself.

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<sup>1</sup> For example Alexander Carmichael describes a storytelling 'ceilidh' in the Scottish Highlands in 1861-2, including the free expression of emotion and the animated discussion which followed it, as the enactment of community within the event. (Briggs 1977:9-10)

<sup>2</sup> The key method within this process – the thing that enabled us to see and know what it was that we were doing – was the systematic documentation and ongoing analysis of the different kinds of stories that participants produced during the workshops. This included moments of process or working through (e.g. mind maps, photographs of dramatic tableaux, creative writings), but most crucially of participants' story-retellings (which took the form of music performances, animations, re-enactments, oral stories, illustrated books, postcards and more.

<sup>3</sup> Namely: Janet Fulton, Adam Cliff, Serena Partridge, Emily Harvey, Cath Heinemeyer, Natalie Quatermass, Rosanna Johnson and Juliet Forster.

<sup>4</sup> Ethical approval for the research was obtained from York St John University Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee, and in this paper care has been taken to ensure that individuals cannot be identified.

<sup>5</sup> A full text version of this source is available at [http://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/balfour\\_lincs\\_cars/pages/index.html](http://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/balfour_lincs_cars/pages/index.html)

<sup>6</sup> Unlike other quotations from participants in this paper, this is an extract from a transcription of an oral retelling by one of the ICAN practitioners of a story which was developed by the group of children and simultaneously re-enacted by them.