

Immersive Storytelling

ABSTRACT:

Narratives, both personal and public, define how we understand the world around us, and storytelling is the journalist's stock-in-trade. New approaches to teaching this craft skill are required in a disruptive age, characterised by lack of trust: Changed environments throw questions of individual identity into sharp relief, both for the journalist – the storyteller - and the people whose stories they tell. Through critical evaluation of the dialogue around storytelling experienced in workshops by students and faculty at the Salzburg Academy – and drawing on exemplars from global journalism practice - this essay reflects on how immersive storytelling processes, embracing as many voices as possible, could indicate a way ahead. It sketches out a design for teaching immersive storytelling, with a focus on the importance of listening, the primacy of voice and the value of empathy. This transformative pedagogy is shaped by the concept that journalists who are emotionally and digitally literate are more likely to produce journalism that is inclusive and connected.

Keywords: *storytelling; voice; empathy; emotional literacy; connectivity*

Immersion and re-imagining:

By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge (Minh-ha, 2018).

A strict definition of immersive storytelling describes a technique that gives people the feeling of 'really being there' (Arrow, 2016), usually through employing augmented and virtual reality technologies. This essay defines immersion as getting as close as possible to the voices of those whose stories are being told, as film-maker Trinh Minh-ha (2018) urges us to, in order to break down dominant language and avoid fixed identities. In doing so we can 'free ourselves' (*ibid*), to imagine new ways of telling stories. The transformative space of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change has afforded me the opportunity to work with groups of students and faculty from all over the world to explore where this 'low-tech' oriented idea of immersive storytelling might take us as media-makers in the future.

The workshops are designed, drawing on my own background and practice as a journalist and journalism educator. They are framed by journalism's normative values but translate more widely across media: I discern journalism as truly interdisciplinary, embracing long form storytelling in documentary and film, animated and interactive narratives, for example, as well as news reporting. Moreover, the workshop participants in

Salzburg are students and faculty whose backgrounds range from corporate communications through media production and film to journalism.

Ultimately, we are all storytellers: The human ability to narrate our lives heightens our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Storytelling is journalism's stock-in-trade, but new approaches are urgently required in a disruptive age, where levels of trust in media are low (Edelman20; Kakutani, 2018; Rusbridger, 2018) and journalism is perceived to be part of the problem; too cosy with elites, disconnected from community and lacking inclusivity (Snow, 2017). The brief respite afforded by the current pandemic, whereby frontline reporters in the UK have been labelled by the government as 'key workers'¹ and a momentary turn towards mainstream news sources for information and updates, cannot conceal the sense of crisis running like a red thread through journalism practice. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in the United States on 25 May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests worldwide have shone a bright spotlight on media systems that proclaim not to be impartial about racism² but continue to struggle with systemic issues around diversity and voice. In 2020, the global pandemic and anti-racism protests have highlighted, even more starkly, socio-economic disparities that are often reflected in media coverage. It is now, more than ever, crucial to scrutinise closely the inclusivity of media organisations and their outputs and to interrogate journalism's core values. This essay considers whether the concept of immersive storytelling could offer a way of retelling the stories of others with salience, through transforming perspectives.

Transforming perspectives:

Mezirow (1981) defines perspective transformation as:

¹ See report in the UK Press Gazette, Available here: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/government-gives-key-worker-status-to-all-journalists-reporting-on-coronavirus-pandemic/>

² In the UK, for example, BBC executives made it clear that they do not expect impartiality on racism after initially reprimanding breakfast TV show host Naga Munchetty for expressing her opinions on Donald Trump's tweets : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-49859060>

'The emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships' (Mezirow, in Kitchenham, 2008, p.109).

This requires the destabilisation of norms and assumptions through a process of critical deconstruction or interrogation in order to reconstitute our worldviews 'to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these understandings' (*ibid*, p.109). In the case of journalism, these assumptions could be discerned as normative values, such as objectivity. Within the Salzburg storytelling workshops, perspective transformation is inspired 'through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, [so that] we can then act critically to transform reality' (Freire and Shor, 1987, p.13). Here, the pedagogic approach of working collaboratively and reflexively adopted in the workshops chimes with a call to imagine new journalism practices that shift from 'telling' towards listening and 'talking together'. This can facilitate storytelling that is clear and truthful about events and facts³ - so bolstering the normative values of truth and accuracy, for example. It is not about throwing out the old, but re-imagining, to offer new perspectives that balance out the prevailing tech-utopianism to prioritise human agency.

The storytelling workshops unfold iteratively, based on the premise that we need to first know ourselves through critical reflection on assumptions and norms, then engage in dialogue about the context within which we function and have agency, and finally, draw on our transformed perspectives to re-imagine storytelling as an immersive and empathic rather than 'top-down', all-knowing way of re-telling the stories of others. Each year the workshops are framed by the theme of the Academy, which emphasise re-imagining and civic agency, for example: in 2017: 'Re-imagining Journalism: News and Storytelling in an Age of Distrust and in 2018: 'Voices Against Extremism: Media Responses to Global Populism'. The workshops also support the group projects which create playbooks and multimedia artefacts⁴. Current contexts naturally feed into the discussions, as they shape

³ The workshops as making a contribution to transformative journalism pedagogy were discussed and 'tested' in a MES Conversation, *New Journalisms: Rethinking Practice, Theory and Pedagogy* at the Media Education Summit in Hong Kong on 6 November 2018.

⁴ See: <https://www.salzburgglobal.org/multi-year-series/media-academy/pageId/programs.html>

the lived experiences that we bring to the Academy each year. If we had been able to convene in 2020, the global pandemic and anti-racist protests would have framed all of our conversations around disruption and re-imagining.

Storytelling workshops at Salzburg

‘For all their vitality, the ‘banlieues’ feel isolated from the city, and from France itself. Parisians and tourists rarely visit them, and residents complain that journalists drop in only to report on car burnings and drug shootings’ – George Packer, The New Yorker, 24 August 2015.

At the outset of the workshops, I draw on exemplars of global journalism practice, to anchor our observations around notions of empathy and compassion, that are perhaps less tangible than skills, core values, or storytelling techniques. In one workshop we looked in detail at the *New Yorker’s* feature writer, George Packer’s reporting, which offers an exemplar of long form storytelling that is immersive: He spends time close to the voices of the people that he is writing about. Packer reported from the suburbs of Paris, the *banlieues*, after the wave of terror attacks in the French capital in 2015.⁵ We analyse his article ‘The Other France’ which tells the story of Mehdi Meklat, a young Muslim writer at the Bondy blog who debunks the stereotypes of the banlieues as a breeding ground for terrorists. The article blends the observations of the journalist and the views of the young writer, in an immersive style of reporting where time, location and listening are prioritized to bridge, what Meklat describes as ‘two parallel worlds’ where a ‘schizophrenic’ dynamic exists between Parisians and the residents of the suburbs. The article shines a spotlight on the dangers of stereotype and othering; generations of French Muslims from north and west Africa were born and had grown up there, but do not ‘feel French’, since: ‘If you lived in the *banlieues*, you were voiceless and mostly invisible ... mainstream France never cared for their perspectives on anything’ (Marsh, 2016). It also highlights the dangers of ‘parachute journalism’, where, as Packer (2015) says, journalists ‘drop in’ to report on ‘car

⁵ The offices of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo were attacked in January 2015, leaving 12 people dead. On 13 November 2015, a series of co-ordinated terror attacks in Paris and the suburb of St Denis killed 130 people, including 90 at the Bataclan theatre.

burnings and drug shootings'. This compounds stereotype and represents storytelling that fails to get close to the voices of others. Conversely, Packer's work epitomizes immersive storytelling.

BBC foreign correspondent Fergal Keane is the master of empathic reporting. In his address to journalism students at the 2018 Media Education Summit, he urged them to 'rigorously investigate your own opinions' in order to be able to understand another's point of view. Thus, he conveys that we need to have a sense of our own identity in order to tell the stories of others with empathy. Exemplars such as those offered by Packer and Keane set out the context for the Immersive Storytelling workshop, which engages with:

- i) Core identity construction and building relationships, or the 'storied self';
- ii) The impact of contextual challenges on the ways that stories are told;
- iii) Re-imagining the core values of journalistic storytelling to consider new approaches that :
 - a) focus on listening rather than telling and
 - b) include emotional literacy and empathy as core values.

'Me. Myself and I': core identity construction

Storytelling defines our existence as humans and cognitive processes structure our experiences. Aware that identity is not a rigid construct, in the workshops we engage with a notion of self, which connects to a sense of identity that is characterised by the 'crucial feature of human agency' (Taylor, 1989: 33-4) and based on an awareness that we are each 'a culturally understood self, grounded in a larger story' (Denzin 1989). Hence, we start by thinking about our own place within the stories that we tell: how do we describe ourselves to others? Do we present ourselves in a way that we feel is 'socially acceptable, or that projects a persona that we would like to be seen as, rather than who we really are? Who are we really? The answers to these questions are more difficult than we might originally believe them to be. We consider the use of labels to describe ourselves – and the inherent problems and dangers of labelling or stereotype. Do we use different labels, depending on who we are speaking to? When telling the stories of others, we all use labels as a quick and easy way of identifying people according to their ethnic origin, their religion, their familial

relationship, their profession, for example. But these labels might not accord with the ways that they would describe themselves. To illustrate this, I have retold a moment of lived experience shared with me by a journalist reporting in Bosnia during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, who asked an old man who had fled his home whether he was “a Croat or a Muslim?” The man simply replied: “I am a musician” (Fowler-Watt, 2020a). A learning point emerges here: we must avoid assumptions and ‘free ourselves’ (Minh-ha, 2018) from fixed identities. A simple exercise in pairs, where the students conduct mini-interviews with each other, helps to break down these ideas as they reflect on how they describe themselves to others: is this as they wish to be perceived or is it an honest reflection of ‘self’? What agency do they have in the construction of their own identities? Is their voice heard? What considerations influence the ways in which they present themselves to the world? Through interrogating our own subjectivity (Coward, 2007), an understanding emerges of the dangers of rigid categories, stereotype and confirmation bias. This dialogic approach to considering how we construct our own identities encourages us to reflect on the ways in which we present our storied selves to others and how we narrate the lives of others. It may also encourage an emotionally literate approach to storytelling.

Contextual challenges

Alcoff (1992) reminds us that ‘where one speaks from affects the truth and meaning of what one says’ (p.2). Context and social location shape the stories that we tell. In retelling the stories of others, it is important to acknowledge the performative aspect of the journalist within these spaces and the potential impact of context on journalism’s core values. Through engaging in thinking about the challenges thrown up by context and the shifting shape of the media landscape, the students consider the influences of location, time and memory on individual stories as well as the wider socio-political and cultural context within which they function as human beings and storytellers. At the Academy in 2017 and 2018 we considered challenges such as: the drive to populist and extremist politics, decline in trust; the distortion of public discourse with demagogic narratives that inflame fear of ‘the other’ and portray the media as ‘the opposition’; how the 24/7 news cycle can lead to disengagement with stories due to repetition or a ceaseless diet of ‘traumatic news’ that

can induce *ennui*, perhaps less through indifference, more through fear (Sontag, 2004); the blogosphere, and noise created by social media leaves voices unheard with filter bubbles determining what people listen to in the first place.

At the time of writing this essay, the impact of the global pandemic where we are living in the story and we are a part of that story, whilst also trying to teach students how to report on it⁶ shapes our practice, potentially heightening the autobiographical qualities of our storytelling. The antiracist protests and Black Lives Matter movement reconfigure the socio-political context and heighten awareness in our journalistic narratives. Location and time shape the storied life (Erben, 1998) and through engaging in debate about the importance of context in storytelling, the students and faculty are encouraged to be ‘participatory and active’ (Donnelly, 2016). As Freire and Shor (1987) remind us: ‘a critical perception of reality is fundamental for social transformation’ (p.21). We then take this heightened awareness of our storied selves and our lived reality into the third stage of the workshops – re-imagining.

Re-imagining journalism’s core values

The normative values of journalism practice could be seen as assumptions, which we accept on the basis that journalism is usually defined by the practice of journalism, the ‘doing’ of it ,and ‘good journalism should speak for itself, but that only works if people are reading or listening’ (Sill,2004). A critical awareness of the constraints imposed upon us, both by contextual challenges and assumptions can lead to a shift in perspective (Mezirow, 1997). This shift can be effected by taking critical perceptions of reality into a space where we can test the core values (assumptions) of journalistic storytelling, which can be defined as:

- i. Fair and Impartial
- ii. Truthful and accurate
- iii. Independent and Ethical

⁶ See: Fowler-Watt et al.,(2020)., ‘Reflections on the shifting shape of journalism education in the Covid-19 pandemic’ in *Digital Culture and Education*, 22 June 2020.

<https://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/reflections-on-covid19/journalism-education>

- iv. Humane
- v. Accountable

(adapted from EJN, Ethical Journalism Network).

Working in small groups, these values were unpacked and discussed to consider why they are important:⁷ for example, fairness and impartiality were appraised as values that enable people to make up their own minds, independence as a value ensures freedom from influence or interference. All of the core values were considered to be under attack from contextual threats and challenges and in need of bolstering to ensure salient storytelling - for example, a 'climate of fear' threatens fairness and impartiality and reporting with humanity. The personal experiences of the participants, sharing stories from their own countries (the refugee crisis in Lebanon; the Syrian conflict; life in Trump's America) brought a richness and range to the conversation and enabled us to transcend borders, looking for common ground and connectives.

Next, I offer an intervention, where we revisit the dialogue about self and identity to consider whether placing that self-awareness in our stories offers an emotionally literate approach, since the journalist is not assuming a detached position of authority, rather sharing, with transparency, how they comprehend the story. Transparency could perhaps convey more effectively the value of impartiality and build trust. The process of interrogating our assumptions sparked new thinking about storytelling, where empathy becomes a core value. But empathy does not happen in a vacuum it is engendered within human relationships and through connectedness. Empathy, humanity, emotional literacy

⁷ For a full analysis of the participants' responses in the storytelling workshops, see: Fowler-Watt, K., (2020). 'New journalism, new pedagogies' in *New Journalisms: Rethinking Practice, Theory and Pedagogy*(Routledge).

are less tangible than the normative values of journalism, but they could shape new approaches to journalism pedagogy that

‘could restore journalism practice [storytelling] as an essentially human activity wherein, journalists are, first and foremost, seen as (and understood to be) people just like those in their stories’ (Fowler-Watt, 2020b:42).

Emotional literacy involves the ability to listen to others, as well as understanding one’s own emotions. An emergent theme from these workshops and others conducted in the UK suggest that self-reflexive and emotionally literate journalistic storytelling could ‘engender better connectivity, between journalists and publics and within journalism practice’ (Fowler-Watt, 2020b:41).

Transformed perspectives, transformative pedagogies

Reflecting on the dialogues within the Salzburg storytelling workshops, as a whole, they were emancipatory and transformative, insofar as we embraced Minh-ha’s (2018) call to ‘free ourselves’, to ‘try to get out beyond the sources of our own identity’ to find ‘common ground’ (Wright, 2017). If ‘knowing what we are in fact doing will help us do it better’ (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 29), we sought that knowledge through the forensic inspection of our ‘sense of self’ (identity construction), the interrogation of normative values (assumptions) and our own subjectivity (lived experiences) with a heightened awareness of socio-political and cultural challenges (context). Improvement, or transformation might be secured through rethinking journalism pedagogy to elevate it from a focus on skills-based teaching, shaped by industry codes, to prioritise immersive

approaches to storytelling that get us as close as possible to the voices of those whose stories we are [re]telling. The corollary is an emotionally literate and dynamic journalism practice that would actively engender human connection with authenticity (through transparency), care (through humanity) and civic agency (through shared experience). This essay started with Min-ha's (2018) call to reject the idea of storytelling as 'all knowing', it concludes with the reflection that immersive storytelling that is empathic and inclusive could flatten hierarchies through listening and 'speaking nearby' (Minh-ha in Chen, 1992), to transform journalism pedagogy and practice.

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