

Preliminary Research Proposal:
Facilitating Storytelling for Creativity
Evelyn Thorne
University of Oregon

Keywords

Storytelling, Facilitation, Creativity, Creative Agency and Best Practices

Abstract

This purpose of this paper is to describe my preliminary research proposal. The first section explains my reasons for choosing the topic of storytelling and why I believe storytelling is an important field to study. The second section provides a chronology of how my research idea developed and describes my current research plan. This section also details my research topic, question, limitations & delimitations, supporting literature, methodology, methodological framework and timeline. Lastly, the final section describes how and why my research plan has changed since presenting my idea to the faculty. I am sure that this story will continue to change with each new step.

What's My Story?

Just like an arts organization, I too have a mission: to provide a voice to others by facilitating opportunities for creative engagement. This is exactly how my application for this graduate program began, except the mission was different. Back then, my mission was simply: to inspire creativity in others. This is still the foundation of my current mission, but now I've found an avenue in which to inspire creativity: storytelling. It is my belief that storytelling is the most accessible art form and if used properly, it can be a tool for creative agency. However, this was a recent realization.

I came to the AAD program with the intention of accomplishing my mission through museum education. I thought that if the art museum experience became more participatory then the divide between artists and the public would lessen. I wanted to use the science museum model of hands-on learning in exhibition design for art museums. I had encountered a few museums that did this, namely the San Jose Museum of Art where I had worked. At this museum, visitors could go to a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit and then use a fully equipped studio to take their own portraits. Or they could see a Wayne Thiebaud exhibit and sit down at an easel to draw colorful deserts (the cupcake I drew at this

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exhibit is still proudly hanging on my friend's wall). These are the experiences I wanted to learn how to administer through museum programming: the kind of experience that both inspires and provides creative opportunities. This is why my ultimate goal was to start an art museum where the art exhibited was made by community members. At this museum, the public could create art with artists that would then be proudly displayed at the museum thus validating the worth of their art. My hope was that this kind of programming would both build community and individual creative confidence. While this idea is still a part of my career aspirations, over time I have come to see flaws in the design.

During my first quarter of graduate school, I took Bill Flood's class on community cultural development. This is when my career first started moving away from museums. I learned about the concept of asset-based community development, Pablo Friere's conscientization education model and the value of grassroots learning. After being exposed to these ideas, I started to look at art organizations in a whole new light. I suddenly understood that most art organizations have a top-down approach to arts education: the learned teaching the ignorant or culture brought the uncultured. Even my favorite museum, the San Jose Museum of Art, still wasn't truly community based. While they have great participatory exhibits, they still bring culture from the outside, not build from the local community's unique assets. Thus, while I don't believe this is the wrong method, my understanding of the museum world had shifted. I was no longer sure that museums were truly the right place for my mission.

After taking this class, I went through a period of searching. Where in the art world did I fit? How could I best accomplish my mission? What is the audience I am trying to reach? This last question is what gave me direction. I realized that if my goal is to inspire creativity, then I wanted to reach those who don't believe they are creative, the kind of person who doesn't seek out creative experiences, and the type of person who would probably not go to a museum. I now recognized that if I wanted to reach this segment of the population, I wouldn't be able to do so within the walls of a museum. I needed to find a way to make creativity accessible and not intimidating. Most museums do not fit these criteria.

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Thus, I chose to move away from museums and towards a new direction. Though I didn't yet know where.

Prior to starting graduate school, I spent a year in Portland establishing Oregon residency. When I was living there, I went to my very first poetry slam and fell in love with spoken word. I started going regularly to slams, poetry events, writing workshops and classes. I challenged myself to perform and write poetry as often as I could and I learned a lot about presenting a story. This is also when I first discovered The Moth. I started listening to all kinds of radio programs and got obsessed with storytelling radio. However, it wasn't until my second term of graduate school that I realized storytelling was the accessible art form I had been looking for. I was listening to The Moth podcast when it hit me: everyone can tell a story. If there was one art form that is not intimidating, it is storytelling. This epiphany is what led to my new mission. If I can learn how to facilitate storytelling, then I can provide creative opportunities to the widest demographic: everyone who has a voice.

How am I Telling My Story?

Now that I had discovered a way to pursue my mission, I had to form a plan. If I was no longer going to focus on museums, I would need to find a new career path and more immediately, a research idea. My strategy has always been to use my research as a way to further my career, thus the two were intricately linked. This is why I was interested in AAD's new Professional Project option. I imagined that if I could work with an organization collaboratively on my research then this organization would be much more likely to hire me out of graduate school. Hence, my first idea was to work with the organization that inspired my research epiphany: The Moth.

The Moth is a perfect organization for me to pursue my mission. They are a non-profit focused on the art of storytelling and they have incredibly interactive programming. Their StorySLAMs are complete open mics; I've witnessed more than one person at the Portland StorySlam sign up to tell a story last minute and end up on stage performing, sometimes even the winning story. Though it wasn't

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until I discovered The Moth's educational program The MothShop that I knew this was the organization I wanted to work for. They hold regular storytelling workshops for marginalized adults and teens that culminate in a community performance. The mission of The Moth's educational programs is "to seek to give voice to individuals whose stories might otherwise go unheard" (themoth.org). They go on to describe how storytelling can build self-confidence and self-awareness. While they don't specifically mention creative agency, this program is exactly what I want to do. If I could find a way to conduct my research in connection with The Moth, I would be one step closer to achieving my mission.

With the new goal of working for The Moth in mind, I started to devise a research plan. I was looking for a project I could develop with them, when I realized that their educational programming is only in New York. If I were to do an internship with The Moth and observe their MothShop, perhaps I could convince them to let me develop similar programming on the West Coast. This would be a perfect way for me to ensure a job after I graduated, because I would literally be creating a position for myself. However, there were some definite flaws to this plan. For one, I do not intend to stay on the West Coast for now. I want to experience some other places, hopefully Chicago or New York, before I come back to the West. Furthermore, this plan relied entirely on The Moth's willingness to adopt it. This would be a huge project that would take a lot of resources and I didn't even have an internship with The Moth yet. Thus, I felt uneasy pursuing this plan with so much at stake, not to mention the unclear directions for the Professional Project. I didn't know how to develop a proposal for this project or what to research for my literature review. This lack of direction worried me and I wanted to develop a plan now. Thus, while my hope is still to work with the MothShop, I decided to focus on designing a Research Project.

At this point, I knew that I wanted to create a Research Project focusing on storytelling in connection with The Moth, but I didn't know how. However, this idea changed again when the question was asked in Research Methods: "Would you still be doing your research if didn't support your career?" I had thought: "No, of course not, that's the point of doing my research, right?" But then I thought

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“What is the true reason for my research?” and I returned to my original mission: to inspire creativity in others. I ruminated on this thought for a while and came to the conclusion that if anything, my research needed to provide more opportunities for creative expression. And thus, I came back to the question that had changed my career path: What audience am I trying to reach? The answer is the fringe: those who rarely interact with the art world, those who can’t engage with creativity because they don’t have the opportunity. Thus, I needed to refocus my research: it had to prove that storytelling could be a way to reach this audience.

This is where I hit a road block: how could I prove that storytelling inspired creativity? For one, to scientifically prove that storytelling affects creativity is far beyond the scope of a Master’s Research Project. This would take gathering a large sample size and administering creativity tests that would somehow implicate storytelling as factor in increasing creative ability. I had no idea how to run such a study nor had the time and resources to do so. Thus, I needed to think of a way to demonstrate the effects of storytelling in a timely, manageable and doable manner.

At about the same time I was grappling with this question, I was conducting my literature review and discovered that there is a lack of academic writing on storytelling especially in relation to creativity. Consequently, I would have to look outside academic literature to prove my case and returned once again to The Moth. If there was an academic gap on how to facilitate storytelling for creativity, then I could fill it by studying the organization that is doing this. However, I recognized that just researching The Moth may not be enough evidence to show that storytelling is a viable option for creative education. I started researching other well-known storytelling organizations and I came across the Center for Digital Storytelling and StoryCorps. If I could use these three organizations as case studies then I could build a stronger argument for the power of storytelling. However, I still had the problem of limited time and resources. I needed to hone down my research to be doable in a year and thus the idea to focus on workshops was born and my current research plan came together.

My Current Research Proposal

Topic

My research topic is currently divided into two parts: 1) best practices for facilitating storytelling and 2) how storytelling affects creative agency. I plan to look at well-known organizations that run storytelling workshops, interview the facilitators, observe facilitation practices and study the effects of taking these workshops. My hope is that this research will serve both the teacher and student by acting as a resource for best practices in facilitating storytelling and as proof that learning storytelling can have a positive effect on creative confidence. However, I realize that my research is grounded in the assumption that learning storytelling will positively affect creative agency. Thus, I had to design a question that is guided by the research results rather than my beliefs.

Question

My current question is: Does facilitation of storytelling affect participants' creative agency? This question allows for both a positive and negative answer. It also offers a wide range of options for how storytelling could affect creative agency. I imagine that once I develop my research methods further (especially the survey) that I will be changing my question to be more specific. Although, for now this question asks what I truly want to know: is my assumption true?

However, this question does not include best practices. While I want researching best practices to be a part of my study, I could not find a way to include best practices in the question without implicating assumptions. For instance, my original question was: What are best practices for facilitating storytelling for creative agency? This question not only assumes that there are best practices specifically for facilitating creative agency, but also that these best practices could correlate directly to creative confidence. My research will not prove that particular practices lead to specific creative outcomes. Thus, my question has to be broad. This is why my current question just asks if facilitation of storytelling in general affects creative agency. I can design research methods that show if participants' creative agency

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is affected by learning storytelling, but I can't prove specifically how or even why. Thus, I did not add best practices to the question in order to avoid this problem. However, I would like to develop a question that covers both areas of my research.

Limitations & Delimitations

Based on the time constraints of conducting this research project, the scope of my research will be fairly limited, but the implications could be great. I am currently planning to look at three case studies, which could allow me to triangulate my data and discuss my research as a trend rather than just one method. However, I will only be studying three case studies and more specifically their workshops, so I will not be able to generalize for the whole storytelling field. On the other hand, if I can demonstrate that three different storytelling workshops affect creative agency, then my claim could have more legitimacy. My hope is that while my research will only provide key examples of storytelling education in relation to creativity that they will act as a start to building a foundation on this theory. These organizations could set a precedent for others to follow.

I have already discussed the delimitations of my research, but the essential issue is that I am not studying the effects storytelling has on creativity but creative agency. The difference being that creativity is a skill that can be measured through quantitative tests, while creative agency is a psychological response that can only be measured through individual's beliefs. Therefore, I do not plan to prove that people are more creative as a result of learning storytelling, but that they feel more creative. Furthermore, as discussed above, I am not intending to prove that certain facilitation skills lead to particular effects on creative agency, but that facilitation of storytelling in general can affect participants' confidence in their ability to create.

Supporting Literature

The areas of my literature review have changed significantly since I first compiled my supporting literature. When I wrote that literature review, I had chosen these topics:

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- The power/value/need/effects of storytelling
- Culture of creativity; definition of creativity
- Lack of creative opportunities/creative decline for adults
- Storytelling as agent for creative expression/engagement
- Current documentation on how to facilitate storytelling

I will still be covering some of these areas, however I will be focusing some of these topics and I've completely dropped the third point. While my research will hopefully show that storytelling is an accessible medium for teaching creativity, it is unnecessary to look specifically at the adult population in my literature review. Since most of the storytelling workshops I'll be looking at include an adult population, I could demonstrate that learning storytelling affects adults just through data collection. Thus, while I could use this research to justify that storytelling is a great way for teaching creativity for adults, I am no longer researching why the adult population needs increased creative opportunities. This is beyond the scope of my research and too specific for a foundational project.

Furthermore, after talking to many people about my research, I realized that I need to use my literature review to explain the storytelling field. Storytelling is an extremely variant field. One could study storytelling in relation to social justice or marketing. Or one could be a storytelling performer or writer. This means that my literature review would need to provide an overview of the storytelling field and explain specifically what kind of storytelling I'm researching. This is why I have chosen three areas of storytelling to focus on: performance, digital storytelling and personal history. My literature review will delve into exactly what each of these terms mean and how they are different. To provide a basic synopsis, performance is the act of telling one's story in front of an audience. This is not fictional stories or theater, but people telling true stories about themselves to an audience. This is the model The Moth uses as well as many storytelling shows across the country. The second topic is more defined as field, because there is a Center for Digital Storytelling (that I may intern at) that has created a training program for facilitators. Furthermore, there is a lot more academic writing on digital storytelling, so it will be easier to present as a legitimate field. Essentially digital storytelling is the act of creating a digital

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video for a story, usually involving a slideshow of pictures set to music and a voiceover of the story.

Lastly, I want to look into personal history, which is different than oral history. I had originally planned to study oral history, but when I talked to people in the field, they told me how restrictive oral history can be and that many people decide to present personal histories instead. Moreover, oral history is usually done by a researcher who has collected specific stories rather than the storyteller seeking out ways to present his or her history. Thus, oral history is not really related to creative agency, hence why I changed my focus to personal history: an individual's presentation of their past.

As a result, the topics for my literature review have been redesigned to cover:

- An overview of the storytelling field
- A detailed description of the three storytelling styles: performance, digital storytelling and personal history
- The definition of creativity and creative agency
- Current documentation on how to facilitate storytelling

This last point is what will provide me with an understanding of already existing practices for facilitating storytelling in order to determine what the best practices are. However, as mentioned, there is a lack of research in this field, so I am worried that it may be difficult to establish guidelines for best practices based on literature.

Note: My current bibliography is at the end of this document.

Methodology

My current research methodology has three parts: interviews, observation and surveys. After conducting my literature review, I plan to interview facilitators at three case studies about their facilitation methods. My top three case studies are The Moth, The Center for Digital Storytelling and the Association of Personal Historians. Each of these case studies line up with the three areas of storytelling I described: The Moth for performance, The Center for Digital Storytelling for digital storytelling and the Association of Personal Historians for personal history. All of these case studies teach storytelling workshops and are highly respected in the field. I had originally chosen StoryCorps for personal history,

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but they do not teach workshops. Interviewing key facilitators at these organizations will build upon my literature review into best practices and provide a clear understanding of how facilitators are working in the field. I have not yet crafted the questions I plan to ask them because the literature review will guide me as to what to ask. However, I suspect I will be asking questions regarding procedures, strategies, training and difficulties. For instance, I could ask: How do you facilitate storytellers to improve the quality of their story without negatively affecting their creative confidence? Or I could simply ask: What do you believe are best practices for facilitating storytelling? These questions will be far more fleshed out once I have secured the case studies and have built up my understanding of storytelling and creative education.

The next step will involve observation of each of these case study's workshops. I realized recently that in order to ensure that these organizations are using best practices, I would have to observe the workshops. This will mean traveling to New York City, Berkeley and Washington DC. Traveling costs alone may make it difficult for me to observe all three workshops, especially if I want to observe more than one workshop at each site. However, it is possible that I could watch the workshops though Skype. Also, the Association for Personal Historians holds workshops all over the country, so I could probably find one that was local. I plan to fully disclose the purpose of my observations to the classes, but this will put pressure on the teacher rather than the participants, so I don't believe it will affect results. In fact, if the purpose of my observation is to review best practices in action, then full disclosure could actually help ensure that facilitators are following best practices. I'm not sure yet if I will be doing observations before or after interviews. The observations could provide me with a good context for asking questions; however the interviews would give me good criteria for evaluating the workshops. If possible, I may conduct in-depth interviews before the workshops and then do follow-up interviews after. Regardless, these observations will provide me with real examples of facilitation strategies and allow me to better understand each case study's methods.

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The last step is the most important step for answering my research question. I will create a survey to be handed out to participants pre/post the workshops that will measure their belief in their creative abilities. The survey will start with some basic demographic information such as age, race, income, and education level. I will also ask if the participant has taken a storytelling workshop before because that could affect the results. Then I plan to use a likert scale of 1 to 5 (O'Leary, 187) for participants to measure their creative confidence with a series of questions. I have not yet designed those questions, but I know that the difference between asking "do you feel confident in your ability to create?" is much different than "do feel that you are creative?" It is my assumption that while not many people think they are creative, they might believe in their ability to create. I will have to research these assumptions by reviewing literature on creative agency and craft appropriate questions. My goal is to write a long list of questions and have them reviewed by experts in creativity to narrow down the best questions. Once I've designed the questionnaire I will have the facilitators hand out the survey to their students before and after the workshop. Since I will already have developed a relationship with the facilitators and they will have a captive audience of students, I think it will be highly possible to gather good results with the surveys. I do not yet know how many workshops I will be able to collect surveys from. This will depend on my schedule and the workshop schedules. Some of the organizations don't hold storytelling workshops regularly, so this could affect the sample size. I may have to re-examine my case study choices once I figure out how their workshop schedules aligns with mine. However, I think this plan is doable considering I'm only focusing on specific workshops within organizations rather than conducting a full case study of each organization.

Methodological Framework

I could not decide upon a research paradigm until I understood my research process. After developing my plan, it is now obvious that I am using a subjectivism approach. Since my data is based on upon each participant's personal experience, the foundation of my research is grounded in subjective

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experiences. If I were to prove that storytelling affects creativity rather than creative agency, I would be using a more positive approach. However, I will only be able to speak to individual's experiences and beliefs, thus my lens is subjective.

Timeline

As discussed above, my timeline will be based upon each case study's workshop schedule, but here is my current plan: Next quarter I will delve into my literature review and develop a strong understanding of the three storytelling fields. I will also start to compile a list of best practices that will help structure my research methodologies. By the end of the quarter, I will know where I will be interning, hopefully at one of my case studies. Regardless, I do already have connections with The Moth and The Center for Digital Storytelling. So, even if I don't get an internship there, I still believe I could work with them on my research. Although, of course it would be best to spend my summer observing storytelling workshops. If I get an internship at a storytelling organization, I will use my summer observing facilitation practices and conducting informational interviews with practitioners.

Next Fall I will be re-designing my research based on my experiences during the summer. I'm thinking I may have to get an IRB approval early so that I can conduct research over Winter Break to save money, especially since I will have to go to several different locations in order to observe the workshops. If I can do my observations and interviews over Winter Break, I would have all of Winter and beginning of Spring term to administer the surveys. Although I could possibly hand out the surveys when I observe the workshops. My hope is to get the bulk of my field work done during Winter Break so that I can spend the rest of the year focusing on analyzing data and writing my paper.

I also plan to take this 6 months facilitation training by the Partners for Youth Empowerment. They run an in-depth training in facilitation methods for creative learning programs. I believe this would be a perfect fit for both my career and my research. This training could provide me with more best

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practices on facilitation that I could compare with my literature review and interviews. I hope one day someone will be interviewing me about best practices for facilitating storytelling.

Why Has My Story Changed?

I am glad that I didn't finish this paper till this weekend, because my research plan has already changed significantly. I got a lot of great feedback at the research presentations from faculty. Phaedra provided the best advice by telling me that I should focus on the surveys, but that I could study best practices in designing the survey. Thus the interviews and observations should be supporting documentation, while the surveys should be key data. She also pointed out that it may be difficult to compare my three case studies since they have such different storytelling models. She said it would be better for me to conduct several surveys at one case study then to only get surveys from one workshop at each case study. This is why I'm now thinking I will conduct a more detailed program review of one organization's workshops. This will allow me to delve deeper into a case study's facilitation methods and will provide more accurate data. The case study I choose will be dependent on which internship I get and what my literature review reveals.

The timing of writing this research proposal could not have been perfect. This weekend I observed a digital storytelling workshop with the Trauma Healing Project. I met the facilitator and she happens to be doing her dissertation on digital storytelling and how it affects efficacy. At first, I was afraid that she was doing my exact research, but she is focusing on social justice issues, not creativity. She even said she would share her bibliography with me! This meeting and observation has me leaning towards studying digital storytelling. I'll have to see where my story leads next.

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