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The Cassandra Project Social Engagement Summary Document

The Cassandra Project is a European Storytelling initiative spanning five countries (Poland, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway) that aims to develop young storytellers aged 18-30 into socially engaged performers while helping international storytelling festivals reach new audiences. The project, led by the Federation for European Storytelling, focuses on creating performances that connect personal narratives with broader social issues, to produce a public training resource for youth and socially engaged storytelling.

Social Engagement in the Cassandra Project

In line with the Cassandra Project's mission of supporting the next generation of socially engaged storytelling, the young performers crafted deeply resonant storytelling works, researched via community engagement, that bridged personal experiences with broader societal impact. Each of their 20-minute solo performances tackled pressing contemporary issues designed to spark dialogue and inspire change. These were performed to international audiences in Amsterdam during the Cassandra Showcase on the 4th, 5th and 6th of November 2024 and will go on to be performed at the international festivals of the performers' home countries as well as the FEST Annual conference in Rome in June.

The Role of The Mentors

The young storytellers' community engagement was significantly enhanced by the guidance of experienced national mentors. These mentors served as cultural bridges, helping YSTs navigate local networks and institutional structures whilst offering practical advice on accessing sensitive communities. Their expertise helped develop appropriate engagement strategies and maintain ethical boundaries. Beyond technical support, mentors provided essential emotional scaffolding as young researchers tackled challenging themes, helping to process difficult encounters and overcome

setbacks. The mentors' established professional networks opened doors to community organisations and specialist groups that might otherwise have yet to be inaccessible to young researchers.

Preparing YSTs for Community Engagement

The initial in-person training in Alden Biesen laid crucial groundwork for the young storytellers' community engagement work. Through structured masterclasses and facilitated discussions, mentors shared practical methodologies whilst creating space for peer learning. The training focused on essential aspects of ethical community research, from practical approaches to accessing groups through to the complexities of representing others' stories.

A key element was helping YSTs understand their own positioning and potential biases before entering communities. The program introduced tools like the CASSANDRA code of ethics and explored various story-gathering methodologies, from direct community narratives to metaphorical approaches. Particular attention was paid to handling sensitive material, with mentors sharing case studies from their own practice to illuminate potential challenges and solutions.

Many of the approaches introduced during this initial training, became foundational to the YSTs' subsequent research practice.

Changes in the Project's Placement of Social Engagement

While some YSTs carried out significant community work, for others the most impactful social engagement still lies ahead.

The process of researching sensitive themes like sexual violence, war trauma, exile, or mental health required storytellers to first establish their own boundaries. Some YSTs began with controlled "circles" of trusted participants before expanding their reach, while others focused on personal and family histories to develop their narrative before taking the theme to the wider affected communities. This groundwork allows storytellers to approach broader community engagement within their own ethical framework, with clarity about their themes and strategies for creating safe spaces for difficult conversations.

While participatory storytelling that builds narratives directly with communities remains valuable, many of these YSTs demonstrate how having a developed story can open up deeper possibilities for social engagement. A well-researched and personally processed narrative becomes a tool for building trust and creating dialogue spaces, particularly when approaching vulnerable groups - an insight that emerged through the project's evolution rather than its initial design.

That said, this document outlines the social engagement that the 15 YST undertook before the Amsterdam Showcase in November 2024.

What Themes Did the YST Choose and Why?

The themes exclusively emerged from a desire to understand personal experiences within broader social contexts, while many used creative approaches and metaphors to make difficult subjects more accessible. As one YST demonstrates with a stork metaphor for exploring family relationships and parental autism: *"Delve into a tale that explores the stretchability of unconditional love between mother and child."* YST

Easy access to primary research sources through existing relationships and networks, such as family and friends, proved particularly powerful and influenced decisions to choose a theme.

Mental health emerged as a central theme, with storytellers examining intergenerational trauma, family dynamics, neurodiversity and the struggle for well-being in an increasingly complex world.

"I chose the theme of depression because it is a subject I have always wanted to explore in my creative work. Normally, I gravitate towards stories inspired by myths, legends, or fairy tales, rather than deeply personal narratives. Taking on such a personal topic felt like a challenge, but this project provided a safe and supportive environment with a mentor who encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone. Depression has been a significant part of my life, and I wanted to express my experience in a way that felt authentic and imaginative."
YST

Coming of age and youth Identity formed another key focus, with performances exploring sexuality, gender, and cultural belonging in a modern European context.

"It is a story about the transformation from a girl into a woman... a story about coming to terms with one's own history and identity" YST

"There are the innocent years before you realise you are being watched and sexualised, and there are the years after that" YST

The intersection of technology and society is featured, with works examining online spaces, sexuality and digital ethics.

"It's about a journey for love where nothing seems to be about love, the expectations, trials and the people you across." YST

The heaviest of contemporary issues were tackled - with some performers exploring intergenerational trauma resulting from genocide, torture the oil industry's role in climate collapse and the lasting impact of pornography. These weighty themes emerged from personal connections to the themes and the damage inflicted by them.

(Regarding Chilean political unrest) "I learned things about my grandmother and started to understand why she had never talked about Chile before. So it was really hard to find the courage and the right way to speak to her about this."

Each storyteller's research approach was distinctly shaped by their personal connection to their chosen theme, whether through family history, lived experience, or passionate concern for societal issues. This personal investment meant they each came to the project with experience and research to draw on; this coloured not just their research methods but also how they interpreted and presented their findings through performance.

More broadly, the themes that were explored were:

- 1) Personal Identity & Transformation, covering topics like gender, cultural belonging, and self-discovery
- 2) Family & Generational Themes, addressing family relationships, cultural inheritance, and intergenerational issues
- 3) Cultural & Social Issues, including topics like immigration, religious freedom, and environmental concerns
- 4) Mental Health, Power & Rights, encompassing mental health challenges, human rights, and various forms of discrimination and freedom.

How Was the Research Carried out?

Social engagement methods across these storytelling projects demonstrated diverse and effective approaches to community research. Direct interviews yielded compelling results, particularly when exploring family histories and established community groups. One of the YST's conversations about generational trauma unveiled patterns of trauma-responsive behaviour that had never been verbally acknowledged within their family; another exploration of political exile demonstrated how displacement has rippled through generations, affecting the identity formation and cultural belonging of their family.

Professional consultations enriched personal narratives with broader contexts, too. A YST worked with children's rights organisations and expert psychologists to develop their metaphorical approach after learning how young people process trauma.

Group discussions and workshops employed dynamic participatory techniques. Some storytellers used object-based storytelling, where participants shared narratives through meaningful personal items, which proved particularly effective in breaking initial barriers. Timeline mapping helped another group visualise collective histories. Story circles, structured with clear guidelines and rotating speaking rights, created safe spaces for sharing sensitive experiences. Simple prompts like "Tell me about a time when..." or "If this story were a landscape..." opened up metaphorical thinking and deeper reflection. Workshop facilitators used mapping exercises to help groups identify shared themes across individual stories.

The most successful projects combined multiple methodologies, allowing storytellers to gather nuanced perspectives while maintaining clear awareness of their own positioning within communities. Throughout the process, storytellers balanced ethical considerations with creative approaches, fostering a deeper understanding of their chosen social group.

Were There Challenges to Engagement and Research?

Without a doubt, the Young Storytellers were exploring highly sensitive social issues and inevitably encountered several logistical and social barriers while conducting their research. Access to vulnerable or protected communities was difficult and at times not possible as Institutional and social barriers emerged when approaching protected groups; most research required careful navigation to engage with community gatekeepers.

Additionally, some personal topics - such as religious identity, sexual identity, experiences of displacement or mental health - required building careful trust relationships before meaningful dialogue could begin; this was one of the reasons that many of the YST turned to existing relationships with family and friends.

While the young storytellers demonstrated a remarkable ability to engage with these complex subjects, they didn't have the extended time frame useful for relationship building, particularly when working with vulnerable groups or addressing historically unspoken experiences.

This observation suggests future iterations of such projects might benefit from extended timelines that better reflect the rhythms of community engagement and the sensitivity required when working with personal narratives of trauma, transformation, and resilience whilst allowing time for the YST to build skills and trust in new communities.

Conclusion

The social engagement phase of the Cassandra Project provides insights into how young storytellers can effectively research and develop work around complex social themes. This document has outlined their research methodologies, workshop approaches, and the various barriers they encountered. It has detailed the range of themes explored, from mental health, climate responsibility and gender identity, and demonstrated how different engagement techniques yielded varying results across various communities. The findings offer practical considerations for future projects involving young artists in socially engaged performance work.