



## RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY WORK

This section explores how to bring the research and social engagement phase to life. It focuses on helping new storytellers develop the skills to gather and share diverse stories with care and respect. It offers practical tips and links to exercises for creating meaningful conversations within communities and turning deep research into powerful, engaging performances.

### What is Social Engagement?

Social engagement in storytelling is more than just gathering information- it's about building relationships and creating safe spaces for stories to emerge. It requires empathy, openness, and a genuine commitment to understanding the lives and experiences of others.

At its core, social engagement involves:

- **Building Trust:** Ensuring people feel safe and respected when sharing their stories.
- **Collaborating with Communities:** Working together to shape how stories are told and represented.
- **Exploring Complex Themes Creatively:** Using metaphors, symbols, or other imaginative approaches to make abstract or difficult topics accessible.

This approach allows storytellers to go beyond the surface, uncovering layers of meaning and multiple perspectives and creating authentic narratives that resonate with individuals with lived experience of the theme and broader audiences with no experience.

### Balancing Agency and Responsibility

Socially engaged storytelling allows artists to explore their own creative expression while connecting deeply with real-world themes. The storyteller is not a community facilitator but an artist with the agency to interpret and express stories in a unique way. However, this creative freedom comes with the responsibility to approach others' experiences with care, respect, and authenticity.

By embracing the dual pillars of artistic and ethical storytelling, we can create work that amplifies voices, explores complex themes, and remains true to artistic visions while honoring the stories and people that inspire it.

## Building Ethical Frameworks

We recommend creating an Ethical Framework with your participants before research and social engagement has begun. Working within an ethical framework in storytelling means balancing the creative freedom and interpretive nature of the craft with a responsibility to respect the people, communities, and subjects involved. While storytelling allows for imagination and artistic license, it does not exempt storytellers from ethical considerations, such as:

- **Respecting Consent and Privacy:** Ensuring that individuals whose stories are being shared (directly or indirectly) have given informed consent and that their privacy is upheld.
- **Avoiding Harm:** Being mindful of how stories, even fictionalised or metaphorical, might perpetuate stereotypes, misrepresent communities, or cause emotional harm to those involved.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Remaining respectful of cultural narratives, traditions, and histories, mainly when drawing on experiences outside of one's own.
- **Transparency:** Acknowledging the artistic choices made in shaping the story, especially when blending fact and fiction.
- **Accountability:** Taking responsibility for how the story might impact audiences, subjects, or broader societal conversations

## Whose story is it? Am I allowed to tell it?

A central question in socially engaged storytelling is: *Whose story is it?* While storytellers maintain full creative agency, their work often involves engaging with the experiences, identities, and histories of others. This requires great care to avoid appropriation or misrepresentation.

When navigating this it may be useful to consider the following:

- **Understand the Story's Origin:** Acknowledge the individuals or communities whose experiences inform the work and approach them with respect and care.
- **Balance Representation and Ownership:** While the storyteller shapes the narrative, they do not “own” the experiences of others. Their role is to interpret and express these stories responsibly, not to exploit or misrepresent them.

- **Reflect on Biases:** Regular self-reflection—asking “Why am I drawn to this story?” or “How might my viewpoint shape the narrative?”—helps storytellers remain thoughtful and self-aware.
- **Seek Support:** Engage mentors, peers, or collaborators to navigate emotional or ethical challenges without compromising the integrity of the work.
- **Honor Creative Freedom:** Recognize that the work is ultimately the artist’s own creative expression. This means taking responsibility for how the story is shaped while respecting the people and themes involved.

## Choosing a Theme

Often, storytellers report feeling that they don’t *choose* a theme—it chooses them. A theme might spark in an everyday moment: a conversation with a stranger, a magazine article, or a statistic from a news headline. These small encounters take hold in the artist’s imagination, growing until they feel compelled to explore them.

Themes can also emerge from deeply personal places. A storyteller may draw from their own life, family history, or the landscapes and communities they are connected to. Many are driven by a deep concern for a social issue or a connection to a specific topic or group of people. These personal and emotional ties often fuel a storyteller’s passion and authenticity, bringing richness and depth to their work.

In socially engaged storytelling, the artist is not a passive observer but an active participant. They are “switched on” to the world around them—curious, open, and deeply engaged. This approach is often political, with the artist positioning themselves within the discussion, reflecting their own experiences, values, and concerns. They may have opinions they want to express, questions they want to explore, or injustices they want to expose.

For storytellers who are unsure how to choose a theme, it can help to encourage reflection and exploration. Consider these strategies:

- **Pay attention to what resonates emotionally:** What new stories, conversations, or observations spark curiosity, anger, or passion? What issues feel too important to ignore?
- **Explore personal connections:** If they feel comfortable doing so, encourage storytellers to think about their own life experiences, family histories, or communities. What stories feel untold or underrepresented?
- **Be open to serendipity:** Sometimes, themes emerge unexpectedly. Suggest that storytellers remain curious and attentive to the world around them, noting moments that capture their imagination.

- **Research and experiment:** Encourage storytellers to read widely, watch films, visit exhibitions, or engage with other socially engaged art forms. Exposure to other worlds and works can spark inspiration or help refine their focus.
- **Collaborate with others:** Conversations with friends, mentors, or peers can help clarify ideas. Collaborative brainstorming can uncover connections or angles they might not have seen on their own.

Ultimately, choosing a theme is an organic process. It often begins with a seed of an idea—something that feels urgent, fascinating, or deeply personal—and grows as the storyteller delves into research, reflection, and experimentation. Supporting storytellers in this process means helping them trust their instincts while staying open to exploration and discovery.

In the Cassandra project, the types of themes which emerged were:

- **Identity & Self-Discovery:** Stories about coming of age, gender, sexuality, body image, and cultural belonging, reflections on personal own transformations and journeys of self-discovery.
- **Family & Relationships:** Parent- child dynamics and cultural inheritance, how patterns within families influence identity and emotional resilience.
- **Mental Health & Wellbeing:** Anxiety, depression, PTSD, and neurodiversity, creative explorations of personal struggles can connect the artist to broader societal pressures.
- **Power, Rights & Belonging:** Stories about migration, diaspora, LGBTQ+ experiences, and religious freedom highlighted the struggles for rights and belonging in a complex world.
- **War, Violence & Historical Trauma:** Storytelling can tackle the heaviest of contemporary issues, such as the impacts of war, political violence, domestic abuse, and displacement
- **Climate & Environmental Concerns:** Climate change and environmental degradation emerge as urgent themes. Storytellers may explore the human and ecological impacts of climate collapse, the role of industries such as oil, and the emotional toll of living in a world facing an environmental crisis.

## Making a Research Plan

Once a theme has been identified, the next step is to create a plan for your research. Begin by defining a research period. The time you'll dedicate to gathering information before or alongside the creative process.

The length and structure of your research phase will depend on:

- **Your timeline:** How much time do you have before your first tryouts and performance? A shorter timeline means focusing on essential sources, while a longer one may allow for deeper exploration.
- **Your process:** Are you someone who prefers to complete research upfront before creating, or do you like to research and create simultaneously? Both approaches are valid, but your research plan should reflect your working style.
- **Access to sources:** Consider how quickly you can reach the people, places, or materials you need.
- **Familiarity with the theme:** If the theme involves familiar topics or personal experiences, the research may feel more intuitive and require less time. For new, less familiar territory, allocate extra time for discovery.
- **Level of detail and challenges:** Themes requiring technical expertise, cultural context, or sensitive material may demand more thorough research, especially if sources are difficult to access or the topic is complex.

As you go, we would recommend documenting as much as possible. Keep detailed notes, recordings, drawings, mood boards or photos to reference later.

## The Next step is asking

*Who or what might hold the key to these stories?* We recommended identifying a variety of potential sources. These could be:

- **Individuals:** Local storytellers, elders, or community members with personal experiences and unique insights.
- **Support groups and charities:** These are Organisations that can provide valuable perspectives and background knowledge without requiring direct engagement with individuals who may be too vulnerable to participate.
- **Experts:** Historians, researchers, or specialists who can provide context, verify facts, and point you toward additional resources.
- **Archives:** Libraries, museums, historical societies, or online collections where you can uncover documents, photographs, and recordings.

- **Places:** Significant locations tied to your theme, such as historic buildings, landscapes, neighbourhoods, or landmarks that hold cultural or historical meaning.
- **Cultural or community groups:** Organisations that preserve folk traditions, oral histories, myths, and rituals, offering insight into collective memory and shared heritage.
- **Folklore and traditions:** Myths, legends, stories, and superstitions associated with your theme, which can reveal deeper cultural, historical, or symbolic meanings. Folklore can often be accessed through books, the internet, cultural groups, and, of course, individuals who are keepers of oral traditions.
- **Other art inspired by the theme:** Literature, films, music, visual art, or performances that explore the same theme. These works can provide creative interpretations, highlight different perspectives, and inspire new ways of approaching your research.

By drawing from these sources—including artistic representations—you'll gain a well-rounded understanding of your theme, uncovering both factual and imaginative dimensions that can enrich your storytelling.

## Creating With Consent

Consent is essential but not always straightforward in storytelling. It means asking for clear and informed permission before including someone's story in your project. Be honest about your intentions and how the story might be used, even if you are unsure of all the details. Give people the freedom to say no, set boundaries, or change their minds later. Consent is not a one-time action; it is an ongoing process.

If you cannot get permission, prioritise the person's privacy by removing or altering details that could identify them. Alternatively, you can create composite stories, fictionalise elements, use metaphor, or focus on your own reflections rather than directly using someone else's words. Always prioritise respect and avoid putting pressure on anyone to share their story.

As artists, we are not bound by the strict legal rules or formal codes that guide journalists, lawyers, or academics. Instead, we work in a space of creativity and subjective interpretation. For us, consent is not just about filling out forms—it is about understanding and respecting the human connection behind the story.

At the same time, it is important to stay mindful of the potential consequences of your choices. Think carefully about the impact of sharing a story. Could it cause harm? Could it provoke a strong reaction from a powerful group, such as a multinational company? You might decide that you are comfortable taking that risk, but it is important to make informed and thoughtful decisions. Balancing creative freedom with respect and responsibility is key.

### Key Reminders:

- Be clear and honest about your project and how you might use the story.
- Respect privacy by anonymising or adapting stories if consent isn't possible.
- Avoid pressure and make it easy for people to say no.
- Find alternatives like fictionalising or blending multiple stories.
- Legal codes may not apply to storytellers; however, care, respect, and accountability do.

### Working With Support

Support is essential for new storytellers engaging in socially engaged storytelling, especially when navigating complex, sensitive, or deeply personal themes. This work requires emotional resilience, ethical responsibility, and collaborative networks, which is why a robust support system is critical for both the storytellers and the communities they engage with.

**Mentors** are Key to this and will play a vital role in supporting new storytellers, especially when the work involves exploring sensitive or personal themes. It is essential that the mentors are experienced in working in sensitive contexts with vulnerable people, have excellent listening skills and be able to offer thoughtful feedback and provide guidance without judgment. They must also have the ability to create and maintain safe, supportive, and positive working atmospheres where storytellers feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions.

Alongside the festivals, the mentors will also be able to open doors when it comes to research, connecting the storytellers to relevant people, networks, and organisations, as well as providing expertise and resources.

**Partnership Working:** These partners can include charities, community groups, advocacy organisations, health and social care providers, and others with direct experience supporting specific groups or communities. These organisations can bring valuable expertise and insights to projects, but their primary responsibility is to ensure the safety, dignity, and well-being of those they support.

New storytellers who may lack experience in sensitive contexts can benefit greatly from the ethical guidance provided by these organisations. In some cases, organisations may decide not to grant storytellers direct access to their service users—a decision that is often necessary to safeguard those involved. Instead, they can offer alternative resources, such as:

- **Case studies** that provide anonymised or generalised insights.
- **Their own expertise and experiences** help storytellers build a broader understanding of the complexity of the issues being explored.

By working in partnership, storytellers ensure their work is **respectful, responsible, and ethically sound** while protecting both service users and themselves from potential harm.

## Peer Support

A key aim of initiatives like the Cassandra Project is to cultivate new communities of storytellers. By fostering trust, collaboration and a shared vocabulary early on - through creative laboratories and workshops—participants can build a network of mutual support.

This sense of community can be strengthened throughout the project through regular in-person or online meet-ups - a space to share progress, discuss challenges, and exchange ideas with peers on a similar journey. Also, creating and encouraging opportunities for the group to work alongside each other through shared rehearsal spaces, on or offline writing cafes and group feedback sessions. Such peer support helps storytellers feel less isolated, providing a shared space for reflection, constructive feedback, and motivation.

## Social Engagement Research Methods and Approaches

When gathering stories, there are many ways to connect with people, places and communities meaningfully.

Simple **Interviews** can be a great starting place, helping you hear personal stories directly from individuals. Open questions like “Can you tell me about your life here?” encourage people to share in their own words, revealing unique perspectives. In the right context, more creative questions like, “If this place were a person, what kind of personality would they have?” can help people move out of normal thought patterns and introduce a more playful interaction.

**Workshops** provide a structured, collaborative space where groups can come together to share, explore, and create stories. Using activities such as story circles, drawing timelines, creative mapping, or handling and talking about meaningful objects, workshops encourage democratic contribution and active listening, ensuring that multiple voices contribute to shaping the story. The opportunity to develop workshop facilitation skills is also especially useful for storytellers working in collaborative or socially engaged settings.

Sometimes, quietly **observing** can be just as powerful. Observations allow you to notice how people interact, what they do, and the overall atmosphere of a place. These small details



bring stories to life. Reading and **archival research** are invaluable for adding context and depth. Exploring books, photographs, letters, or records uncovers the history and culture of a place, grounding the narrative.

For broader input, **surveys** can gather perspectives from a larger group. Simple questions like “What does this place mean to you?” highlight shared experiences and themes. Meanwhile, keeping **field notes** ensures you record what you see, hear, and feel. Writing down impressions in real-time or reflecting on them later keeps your observations fresh and organised.

When words aren’t enough, **visual storytelling** uses photos or videos to access material. Documenting daily life or events visually adds richness, and asking people to share their thoughts about the images deepens the connection. Similarly, **cultural immersion** invites you to experience the life, traditions, and activities of a place, community or culture firsthand. Participating in festivals, volunteering, or attending events helps you understand values and rhythms.

### Lessons from the Cassandra Project:

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 at times as institutional and social barriers emerged when approaching protected groups; most research required careful navigation to engage with community gatekeepers or a change in approach.

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 more 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

### Placement of Social Engagement

The plan for the Cassandra project initially, was for young storytellers to create their pieces by researching within and engaging directly with the communities they were representing in

a more immersive way. However, it became clear that because of the timescales and the importance of the YST's personal relationship to their theme, a more self-reflective approach was necessary for many. As one young storyteller said,

*"The biggest restriction turned out to be the specific time frame that we had to do research, create and perform in try-outs. My initial idea was to interview a refugee amateur football team in [my home city] that I support, but I quickly realised that it would take great care and time to reach out to people I have never met before and to form such a bond that they would trust me and support me in creating a story around them. Above that, I also realised that their story was probably not mine to tell, as I don't have a refugee background."* YST

The YSTs had to learn more about their subjects from different angles while recognising their own biases and emotions related to those topics. This process involved establishing their own boundaries. For some, it involved creating small, controlled "circles" of trusted participants before expanding their reach. Some YSTs focused on personal and family histories to develop their narratives.

With this groundwork laid, they can now approach broader social engagement with their own ethical framework and clarity about their themes and strategies for creating safe spaces for difficult conversations. The 20-minute performance they created is now a tool, in its own right, for building trust and creating dialogue spaces, particularly when approaching vulnerable groups. While some YSTs have already made significant contributions to their communities, for others, the most impactful social engagement lies ahead.



Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union