



STORYTELLING AND THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUES: NARRATIVE AS A VEHICLE FOR EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Introduction

Storytelling has long been one of the primary ways in which societies transmit values, norms, and collective memory. Before widespread literacy, oral traditions carried moral lessons and cultural frameworks from one generation to the next. Today, narrative is increasingly understood as both a cognitive and cultural tool that helps individuals and communities construct meaning and shape identities (Bruner, 1990).

Within the European context, storytelling continues to play a crucial role in reinforcing values such as human dignity, democracy, equality, and respect for cultural diversity—values formally enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). At the same time, storytellers work with concrete realities: the lives of their audiences, the communities whose stories they carry, and the ethical choices involved in telling those stories.

This section examines how storytelling contributes to the transmission of values in Europe, and how this becomes visible in practice. It outlines the general mechanisms by which storytelling conveys moral and cultural principles, analyses digital storytelling and educational applications, and considers the role of narrative in the European integration project and in responding to contemporary social challenges. It then turns to *Cassandra*, a Creative Europe–supported project in socially engaged storytelling; to show how young storytellers use the medium to reflect, negotiate, and embody European values in their performances.

Storytelling as a Medium of Value Transmission

Narrative and Moral Learning

Narratives transform abstract ethical concepts into concrete experiences. Through characters and plotlines, stories illustrate the consequences of action and inaction, fostering moral reasoning (Nussbaum, 1997). Fables, for instance, distil complex moral lessons into accessible scenarios: Aesop’s “The Tortoise and the Hare” communicates the virtue of perseverance, while “The Lion and the Mouse” exemplifies reciprocity and empathy.

Traditional folktales in many cultures also function as tools for value transmission. The Parable of the Long Spoons, for example, appears in texts and teachings connected to Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In each setting, the story invites listeners to imagine how cooperation, empathy, and a sense of shared fate can transform a situation of scarcity or conflict.

Narrative and Collective Identity

Storytelling is also a key form of cultural memory. According to Assmann (2011), cultural memory is preserved not only through institutions but also through narrative frameworks that bind communities together over time. Myths, legends, and national epics embed values such as courage, justice, or unity, thereby safeguarding a sense of collective identity. In European contexts, these narratives include both “big stories” (for example, the memory of war and post-war reconciliation) and the “small stories” of local communities, family histories, and regional traditions.

Narrative and Empathy

Contemporary psychology underscores narrative’s role in fostering empathy. By identifying with characters, audiences can temporarily inhabit perspectives different from their own (Green & Brock, 2000). This empathetic dimension is particularly relevant in pluralistic societies, where mutual understanding is essential for social cohesion and democratic stability. As De Waal (2009) argues, empathy functions as a necessary social “glue” that helps communities hold together.

Storytelling in Education

Education remains a crucial site for the intentional use of storytelling in transmitting values.

- **Historical Narratives:** Testimonies from Holocaust survivors or personal accounts of migration render abstract values such as tolerance and human rights emotionally compelling.
- **Role-Playing and Simulation:** Educational storytelling methods, including role-play and simulations based on stories, allow students to inhabit and discuss ethical dilemmas, thereby deepening moral reasoning.

By embedding storytelling in curricula, educational institutions ensure that values are not merely abstract principles but lived experiences.

Storytelling and European Integration

The European Union (EU) is often described as a “community of values” (European Commission, 2012). Storytelling plays an indispensable role in legitimizing and reinforcing this identity.

Foundational Narratives

The EU has framed integration as a moral response to the devastation of war. The oft-repeated story of Franco-German reconciliation, embodied in the meeting between Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, functions as a narrative of peace and cooperation.

Diversity as Value

Storytelling across member states emphasizes Europe’s cultural diversity. Literary anthologies, film festivals, and cross-border cultural initiatives funded by EU programs (e.g., Creative Europe) present diversity as a strength rather than a threat, reinforcing pluralism as a European **value**.

Institutional Narratives

European institutions actively promote storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Initiatives such as the “House of European History” in Brussels employ narrative exhibitions to convey the shared history and values of Europe. In this way, storytelling operates as a soft power instrument in fostering European identity.

Contemporary Challenges and Applications in the EU

Storytelling is increasingly deployed in response to Europe’s pressing social challenges, many of which unfold in digital environments. Social media platforms, streaming services, podcasts, and interactive media enable narratives to circulate rapidly across borders, but they also create new risks for value transmission:

- **Disinformation:** False or manipulative narratives can undermine trust in institutions, distort values, and fuel conspiracy thinking.
- **Polarisation:** Digital echo chambers may reinforce division rather than solidarity by supplying users with content that confirms existing beliefs and identities.
- **Commercialisation:** Platform logics often favour sensational or emotionally extreme content over nuanced, value-rich storytelling.

At the same time, storytelling remains a key tool in addressing a series of concrete policy-relevant areas:

- **Migration:** Narratives of migrants’ experiences humanise public debates, counteracting reductive stereotypes and reinforcing the value of human dignity.
- **Climate change:** Youth-led movements use storytelling—through documentaries, speeches, podcasts, digital campaigns, and performance—to frame climate action as a moral imperative, aligning with sustainability and intergenerational justice.
- **Democratic participation:** Grassroots movements and civic initiatives mobilise stories of empowerment and resistance to encourage engagement in democratic processes and to counter apathy and authoritarian tendencies.

These applications demonstrate storytelling’s ongoing relevance as a tool for value transmission in dynamic socio-political contexts, both offline and online.

European Values, Socially Engaged Storytelling, and the Cassandra Project

The *Cassandra* project, co-funded by the Creative Europe programme, illustrates how socially engaged storytelling functions as value transmission in practice and how young people grapple with contemporary challenges in the EU. Many—if not all—of the performances and methods developed by the young storytellers can be linked to the aims and values of the European Union.

Cassandra is based on socially engaged storytelling: working with real communities, listening to their experiences, and transforming these into artistic narratives. This approach relates

directly to the values of **democracy**, by making space for a plurality of voices, and **human dignity**, by treating individuals and communities with respect. Considerable attention was paid to the ethics of both speaking with community members and reinterpreting their responses for the stage.

Value-driven and socially engaged storytelling does not just arise only from selecting a theme connected to European values. Instead, it emerges organically from the creative process itself. When this process is built on democratic principles, ethical engagement, and artistic craftsmanship, it naturally leads to narratives that embody empathy, participation, and social responsibility.

The process starts with the recruitment of the participants. A basic knowledge of and/or being interested in the art of storytelling is a first condition. Also, the candidates should not be passive receivers of content but active citizens, perhaps already engaged as volunteers, activists, or idealistic (young) people eager to contribute to their communities, willing to engage in change.

The creative path is anchored in self-reflection. The storytellers explore their own identities, values, challenges and lived experiences, bringing authenticity into the process. This can be confronted or complemented with democratic community engagement: dialogue with peers, conversations with family members, and encounters within their wider social environment or an intended 'target group'. This helps situate personal narratives within broader social and cultural contexts.

Whether engaging with community members, gathering stories, or preparing public performances, sensitivity, respect, and responsibility are central. Storytellers learn to approach communities with care, to listen deeply, honour ethical boundaries, and acknowledge the trust placed in them.

The research phase offers a solid cultural basis. Storytellers investigate local heritage, cultural roots, and community narratives, uncover voices and (traditional) stories that enrich their creative work.

Throughout the process, democratic mentorship - supportive, dialogical, and scaffolded – empowers the emerging artists to develop their ideas while maintaining ownership of their stories. Mentors guide rather than dictate, creating a safe space for experimentation and growth.

Finally, the storytellers learn to shape their material with artistry and craftsmanship, integrating narrative structure, performance techniques, and aesthetic choices. One example of how the participants worked with these tools is **Simen Tobias's** performance *Modern Masturbation*, which addresses young men's relationship with pornography. He prepared the performance through interviews, workshops, and small-group dialogues that allowed participants to speak without judgment. The show was followed by moderated audience discussions at Fortellerfestivalen – The Norwegian Storytelling Festival, giving the audience the opportunity to participate actively in reflecting on the themes and values raised

in the performance. Here, storytelling, dialogue, and critical reflection work together to address issues connected to **digital freedom and responsibility** and **mental health and well-being**.

Another example is **Sarah Andersson's** performance *Success Has Many Fathers, but Failure Is an Orphan*, which explores violence in close relationships. Knowing that she wanted to create a performance for children, Sarah chose not to interview victims directly because of the risk of re-traumatisation and her lack of clinical training. Instead, she interviewed subject-matter experts and consulted children's rights organisations, crafting a story grounded in research rather than personal testimony. This process demonstrates an ethical approach to storytelling that still supports values such as the **rights of the child, protection from harm, and human dignity**.

Winter de Cock's story **Not your Girl** explores women's relationship with the male gaze and the feelings of guilt of being a subject to it. De Cock spoke to other women about the subject by telling her own experiences of the phenomenon and then letting the women tell her their stories. Then, using the myth of Daphne as a framework, she combined traditional storytelling, the research and her own personal stories to create the performance. In this way De Cock became both a bearer of traditional storytelling and transfer the European values of **human dignity and equality**.

In different ways, the participants have sought to address some of the challenges identified earlier in this section. They work against **disinformation** by grounding their performances in research and carefully designed processes, and against **polarisation** by engaging directly with communities and inviting audiences into dialogue. Other performances tackled issues of human rights, equality, mental health, freedom of expression, and cultural diversity—values explicitly listed in the European Union's aims and values.

The intention is that the Cassandra participants will continue to develop their craft using the tools they have learned, to collaborate with other storytellers across borders, and to inspire the next generation of storytellers. In doing so, they carry European values not as abstract concepts but as living, evolving commitments expressed in practice.

Full table of the performances and their themes and associated European value:

Performance	Performer	Themes	Associated European Value
But Daddy I Love Her!	Willemein Hordijk	Toxic relationships, Mental health, Gender Equality	Human Dignity and Equality; Mental Health and Well-being
The story that disappeared	Meja Ohlsson-Rogriguez	Migration, generational trauma, dual national identities	Cultural Diversity and Inclusion; Human Dignity and Equality
Breidablikk	Mari Qviller	Climate change, environmentalism	Sustainability and Climate Action
The tallest mountain in the world	Meja Johansson	Finding meaning, religion, faith	Freedom and Democracy (freedom of thought, belief, identity)
Bed Story	Wera Katna	Mental health, relationships (Something I missed here?)	Mental Health and Well-being; Human Dignity and Equality
How to rebuild a Meadow	Hanna Asefaw	War, resistance, hope, national identity	Rule of Law and Human Rights; Cultural Diversity and Inclusion
Have you ever been called a whore?	Dan Arnauts	LGBTQ+, relationships, abusive relationship	Human Dignity and Equality; Rule of Law and Human Rights
Overshadowed	Samora de Boer	Depression, alienation, mental health	Mental Health and Well-being
Tangled	David Pigut	Tradition, toxic relationships, community	Human Dignity and Equality; Cultural Diversity and Inclusion
What's the difference	Geoffrey can der Ven	LGBTQ+, alienation, acceptance	Cultural Diversity and Inclusion; Human Dignity and Equality
Aurora - Daughter of the Dawn	Natalia Drąka	Identity, parental relationships, war(?)	Human Dignity and Equality; Rule of Law and Human Rights
Success has many fathers, but failure is an Orphan	Sarah Andersson	violence in the home, rights of the child	Rule of Law and Human Rights; Human Dignity and Equality
Modern Masturbation	Seimen Tobias	Pornography, connection, disintegration	Digital Freedom and Responsibility; Mental Health and Well-being
Not your Girl!	Winder De Cock	Gender equality, the male gaze, feminism	Human Dignity and Equality; Freedom and Democracy
The stork that raised me	Ynys Covents	Mental health, parental relationships	Mental Health and Well-being; Human Dignity and Equality

Conclusion

Storytelling has historically functioned as one of the most powerful mechanisms for transmitting values. From ancient epics, fables, and biblical parables to modern testimonies, performances, and digital narratives, stories have preserved moral lessons, reinforced collective identities, and inspired civic action. In the European context, storytelling has been central to shaping and sustaining values such as human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

Today, the key challenge is not only to tell stories, but to ensure that they are critically reflective, inclusive, and ethically grounded. As the European Union continues to define itself as a “community of values”, storytelling—whether in classrooms, community projects, cultural institutions, or digital spaces—remains a vital medium for cultivating empathy, fostering solidarity, and supporting a sustainable European identity.

Projects such as *Cassandra* demonstrate that young storytellers are not passive recipients of European values but active co-creators. Through their performances, working methods, and ethical choices, they show how values can be questioned, negotiated, and renewed. In this sense, the future of European values will be carried and continually reinterpreted in the stories that the next generations choose to tell.

References

- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- de Waal, F. (2009). *The age of empathy: Nature's lessons for a kinder society*. Crown.
- European Commission. (2012). *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.
- Treaty on European Union (Consolidated version). (2012). *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326, 13–390.
- <https://fest-network.eu/project/cassandra/>



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