

What Is The Value Of Socially Engaged Storytelling?

A Theoretical Consideration

Storytelling is more than just entertainment; it's a powerful way to educate and preserve lore (traditional knowledge, stories, and customs). As oral traditions fade, modern storytellers are finding creative ways to bridge the past and present, allowing audiences to experience stories more deeply than reading alone permits. This honours tradition while ensuring its relevance today.

One of storytelling's most *magical* powers is imagination, which engages both the teller and the listeners. Unlike theatre, storytelling needs no sets or costumes; spoken words paint vivid mental pictures. Traditionally, oral cultures used a unique kind of imagination distinct from reading. Scholar Walter Ong distinguished between the "oral mind" (thinking shaped by spoken words) and the "written mind" (thinking shaped by reading). In oral traditions, words felt physical and alive - embodying the ancient Greek concept of "epea pteroenta" ("winged words"), which carry shared meaning between the storyteller and audience. This connection creates a special, equal space where every storytelling moment becomes a unique exchange.

Today, storytelling can revive our ability to listen and imagine - skills often diminished in our screen-filled world. Both spoken and written stories adapt to modern life, leading to fresh ways of connecting.

Projects like the Cassandra Project illustrate how storytelling can drive social change and foster community reflection. This initiative gathered young storytellers from various cultures and used English as a bridge, revealing how storytelling enhances imagination, empathy, and critical thinking. It also improves too often neglected language skills. By using metaphor, storytelling enables audiences to discuss current social and political issues, thus helping to rebuild human connections in an increasingly disconnected age.

In the Cassandra Project, young storytellers embraced their respective cultures, drawing from their local traditions while highlighting universal themes such as justice, migration, and resilience. This cross-cultural collaboration demonstrated that storytelling is not only an art form but also a means of social action.

Crucially, storytelling thrives in the moment of sharing. Its power arises from three elements: the story, the event, and the people present. This connection can also have therapeutic benefits, helping individuals process emotions and experiences. Psychologists regard storytelling as a valuable tool for understanding the mind. Therapists use it to help patients create healing metaphors, make sense of life changes or trauma, and foster resilience. In many cultures, including Hindu traditions, elders share folktales with children facing anxiety, allowing them to engage metaphorically for self-healing.

The study of traditional narratives has evolved significantly through approaches focused on structure and form playing key roles. Structuralism seeks to understand the underlying patterns and relationships within stories, while formalism emphasises the construction and style of narratives rather than their content. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a central figure in structuralism, analysed myths and narratives in search of universal patterns reflecting deep aspects of the human mind, such as binary oppositions (contrasting elements) and element transformations. He noted that legends serve as "narrative frames," permitting new interpretations over time, which makes them meaningful in varied social contexts. This idea was further developed by Jack Zipes, who examined how fairy tales adapt to incorporate contemporary social issues, reinforcing or challenging dominant values. Thus, myths, legends, and tales can respond to cultural changes, surviving as living forms of expression in both popular and literary contexts.

Ethnography highlights the crucial role of stories in community life, serving purposes far beyond mere entertainment. It demonstrates how narratives reflect cultural identities, values, conflicts, and collective aspirations. Ethnographers emphasise that stories convey

historical accounts, moral codes, and beliefs, playing a vital role in reinforcing social cohesion and preserving collective memory.

Research on orality has elevated storytelling as a distinct form of verbal art with its own poetics and aesthetics. Scholars like Stone, Tatar, and Bottigheimer have addressed gender issues in traditional narratives, revealing the male perspective's dominance not only in the texts but also among storytellers and researchers. This critical reflection emerged alongside feminist movements, challenging stereotypes of passivity and the portrayal of female characters needing rescue. Researchers like Turner and Greenhill highlight the lack of representation for non-normative identities, helping to uncover how stories negotiate identity and power dynamics.

Building on the oralist perspectives of Albert Lord and others, it is clear that traditional storytellers are not merely guardians of history; they are agents of cultural renewal and transformation. Each telling adapts the narrative, resonating with changing mentalities and values without losing the core story itself. These transformations allow stories to take on unique meanings.

Orality is inherently ephemeral. Each telling is unique and unrepeatable, and oral transmission is an ongoing adaptation influenced by cultural and situational contexts. As storytellers narrate, they adjust their tales to fit the present moment, often in a conscious way that ensures the story is well-received and resonates with listeners.

Listening to stories brings essential skills to the forefront, such as imagination, empathy, innovative thinking, and creativity. These skills are increasingly vital in our rapidly changing world. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her book *"Cultivating Humanity,"* argues that engaging in this way allows individuals to understand others' experiences better, fostering a sense of global citizenship and ethical responsibility.