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Storytelling from remote: Safety and care in online spaces

The shift from an in-person meeting to an online workshop in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an experimental exploration of creative and feminist space-making that is grounded in collective care. Developed by Superhumans: hvale vale, Jennifer Radloff, Zana Fauzi, Liy Yusof

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Introduction

Superhumans: hvale vale, Jennifer Radloff, Zana Fauzi, Liy Yusof

This module sprouted from a digital storytelling workshop for EroticsSA partners and APC staff held online in August 2020. The shift from an in-person meeting to an online workshop in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an experimental exploration of creative and feminist space-making that is grounded in collective care. A few months later in October, APC held their 2020 global member convening, Closer Than Ever, where themes of care, safety, and change emerged again. Some seeds from that event are in this document too. The facilitation team of both events saw an opportunity to create a section to share learnings and reflections as building blocks for future storytelling workshop space-making.

> “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” — Ursula K. Le Guin

Why do we tell stories?

Stories have long been one of the most powerful methods to connect people and communities. When we tell stories, we express our truth, our version of our experiences. With stories, we long to be heard, not to be judged. Our stories are the connections we have to our past and our memory. In telling our stories, we embody a part of ourselves, our gift to the people listening. In telling our stories, we recognise we are not alone in our experiences, as anyone could relate to the stories we tell. In telling our stories, we heal.

We also tell stories to advocate. Stories spark action and movement in others, whether internally or externally. Stories have the power to relate personally to people more than headlines in the news or a factual article. This is why the role of storytellers is more important than ever. As we communicate our hopes, our realities, our lessons, and our radical imaginations into the world, we have the capacity to inspire the change we need.

When we conduct storytelling workshops online, it is safe to assume that not all experiences, facilitations, and methodologies offline would easily translate online. At the same time, we can no longer assume that everyone has equal access to the tools we have, or respond the same way online as they would offline. We must consider these nuances and face them to create an inclusive and caring space.

Getting storytellers to tell stories remotely would mean we need to contend with two layers: content and data. With content, how do we represent ourselves and our communities in the way that will not sideline our and their experiences? With data, how do we get our stories out into our audience in a way that we know will not inexplicably cause harm to themselves and their identities? How do we, as trainers, inform these practices and safety decisions?

How to use this document

This module hopes to serve as an opportunity to rethink the ways we conduct storytelling workshops in a remote setting environment. It aims to embed digital safety at all levels of the storytelling process and can be used to support existing work in other themes. It is written for facilitators and trainers as a starting point of considerations for the process of making safer and caring spaces for remote storytelling workshops in any context. It has more questions than answers.

This is not an exhaustive document. We welcome every feedback and insight that will help us build an evolving storytelling manual built on the feminist principles of participation and technology, with the practical elements of care and safety made central in every step of the way.

As you read through, it may be helpful to unpack the following questions:

- Can this help us design our storytelling workshop remotely?
- How can we embed care and safety in every step of the process?
- How could this consideration look like for us? What would we need to rethink in our context to incorporate elements of care in a practical way?

Rethinking communication

Workshops should not replicate the asymmetrical communication structure of webinars. A key difference is a storytelling workshop requires a convening of a group of people to work on their stories and come to a set of conclusions with each other, and celebrate together. To run a storytelling workshop remotely is even trickier: How do we engage people in the absence of face-to-face communication? How will they work together? In what ways can we be understood and cared for? What happens if we experiment with different ways of communicating with our participants?

Synchronous vs. asynchronous communication

Trying to schedule a remote storytelling workshop is made even more challenging when your participants are spread across time zones and with various needs. Synchronous communication means an exchange of information in real-time. Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, refers to the exchange of information between us without the requirement to respond promptly and at each other’s own pace. Synchronous communication can provide our participants with a sense of togetherness and community, while at the same time, it is also recognised that asynchronous communication would allow our participants to work at their own pace.

Consider

Rethinking our over-reliance on real-time communication

Can we opt for a workshop to be run asynchronously instead? Do we really need everyone to be in the same space at the same time, or can they be assigned homework and report on some agreed timelines?

Asynchronous communication can be a form of inclusive care

It allows our participants to respond to us at their own pace and whenever they feel comfortable, prepared, and safe. What we can learn about asynchronous communication from disability justice

activism, which places the utmost care and safety towards the understanding that we have varying needs and capacities— which means making learning aids, transcripts, translation, and other necessities available to our participants (that might be limited if we were to do this in real-time).

The tools we use to connect with each other

How accessible they are for everyone, and the types of communication expected from participants.

What can we learn from the practice of asynchronous communication in ‘seasoned’ remote workers

Who often use a variety of tools to get in touch with each other despite the dividing time zones and physical spaces?

Rethinking funding

With in-person meetings, we allocate funding to visas, elements of privacy, spaces for focused attention, meals, technology, and materials needed to make the workshop possible. Now that the money isn’t going to venue rental or accommodation, where should it go to achieve the care and safety of everyone involved? Is it really cheaper to move online?

Funding direct support for participants

It is not often recognised that both online and offline events require a travel process— commuting to a space where they can devote their full attention to the matter at hand. What do ‘travel costs’ look like for attending a remote gathering? Participants at remote workshops should not have to bear the burden of their varied hidden costs to be fully present at your event.

Consider

Why not **include a flat per diem** with no claims process that allows them to determine what they need to participate fully? This may include the cost for arranging for elder care, child care, cooked meals, renting a private space with internet access, paying for data, internet, and electricity, buying art materials needed to participate fully and commit themselves to the workshop. This could include sponsoring devices and apps.

Funding a dedicated support team

An online team looks different and may function at a slightly different dynamic than an offline team. While a clear terms of reference (TOR) are always needed for every organising team — online or offline — at physical workshops, a lot of tasks are not obfuscated by the limitation of the screens we sit in front of, so someone can easily jump in and help if the other team members need them.

> (Note from Liy and Zana: It would also be helpful to solicit a list of the typical tasks of the tech team as a resource for creating TORs.)

Considerations on the documentation team

Making a list of expectations

For writing and graphics. What would be important for both the immediate and long term? Is there a meta-layer of learning that you want to capture for future organizing?

How can your documentation team be part of the agenda-making processes?

What do they need to look out for from each day's sessions in the workshop, and what should they do about it? Consider setting expectations and co-creating ways of working together during the workshop, especially on forming links between the more immediate work of a graphic documenter and more belated work of a rapporteur. They may need briefs about what needs to be captured at different points of each day.

Is one documenter enough?

Consider that recording the session is not a substitute for coherent documentation. For example, matching the chat box to what is being said on video— or compiling side conversations in chat— needs active work simultaneously and alongside documenting the event. In our experience it requires at least two rapporteurs to get a full sense of the event's proceedings.

Live visual documentation is an emergent practice

How do we explore it in online spaces? What expectations do we have of the process and how do we see it being useful beyond the event? In what ways can rapporteurs and artists support and build on each other's work?

Considerations on the tech team

How many ways can the tech team offer guidance to the participants?

Some of your participants might be new to using the platforms and tools of the workshop. Consider the kind of support you want to make available to them and when.

Can they offer a short custom tutorial asynchronously or in real-time

To explain ways to use the features of each platform used for the remote storytelling workshop?

Rethinking facilitation

Circumstances have compelled us to change our notion of space, even for people already working semi-remotely. Many facilitators find it challenging to adapt to holding space online despite years of experience facilitating in-person meetings. Iterative workshops such as the Erotics digital storytelling workshops could not and will not neatly translate to online spaces. Maybe this is because the ‘space’ is not directly comparable to a tangible hall. Although visas are no longer a requirement to attend, every person in the room still accesses it from their own unique digital circumstances.

1. Recognising the digital situations of your participants.

Knowing what access needs your participants have beforehand can help you design a workshop with more safety and care.

Consider

Reflecting on how varied or particular their circumstances are

Which could include: Load-shedding, mobile data access, devices that they use, subtitles, live captions, or interpreters, physical health and circumstances, eg. no flashing lights in presentations or videos, colour blindness for designing visual material for the workshop, content warnings, being in a timezone that is not often considered in meeting design, participants who are only able to type in chat, power dynamics between participants and facilitators, and any other situations.

What can we as trainers and facilitators do to **account for these variety of needs?**

2. Preparing the workshop digital space

A single technology may elicit many possibilities, from the extent of communication to the politics they may impact us. In organizing the digital space for remote storytelling workshop, we need to account for the apps and technology we use for real-time and asynchronous communication throughout the event.

Consider

How much tech is too much tech?

Is it possible to opt for a low-tech setup as long as the focus is on story, community, and audience?

Are all the costs of the apps and services we use accounted for

And do we have all the features we need? Check the details of the pricing plans to avoid being charged for several extra users during or after the workshop, or having to suddenly pay for access to important features during the workshop.

How do we assess security and risk assessments for the apps involved?

What is the role of the tech person/team in this, and how is it different from the facilitators'? Would it be useful to make a decision-making guide for participants to weigh the nuances of their decisions on visibility?

How can we consider the politics of the technology and the platforms we decide to use?

Our workshops might involve the participation of marginalised people and care is important to avoid inflicting harm. When possible, prioritise FLOSS (free/libre and open source software) and open standards tools driven by community needs, sustainability, and security.

Put together a list of tools and resources for the participants

Adhering to the FLOSS and open standards tools whenever possible to prepare them for their upcoming storytelling processes together. Work with the tech team to be ready for any questions that might come up when the participants start to install these tools.

Presenting a feminist principles of participation

To orient the room to the same direction. Knowing that there are clear values grounding the space that they agree with can help them open up and participate more fully.

3. Reimagining introductions

Storytelling is a magical, creative process, but that does not mean it should just be owned by the storytellers in our workshop. We as facilitators, too, can tell stories in our very own role and capacity. What better way to do this by exploring the new ways we introduce each other in the sessions?

Consider

How many ways can we imagine memorable introduction activities done remotely?

How many ways can we adapt the existing ways we conduct introduction activities offline to online?

- One idea is to combine the Photo Exhibition activity in remote storytelling workshops with introductions by asking participants to post a photo and introduce themselves in its caption.
- Another idea is to share a current favourite song and make a playlist curated by everyone in the workshop.

4. Cameras on / off?

It might seem like a small decision, but there is a lot to account for in the request to turn a camera on.

Consider

Thinking about what is on the screen and when

Sharing something on-screen will typically minimise the facetime of the facilitator(s) or others with their cameras on, so consider what you want to be the main view on screen at different parts of the workshop process and align it with other facilitators and the tech team.

Consent and safety

What does it mean to have cameras turned on when there is a recording of the session? Give your participants the option to turn their cameras off before you begin recording any session. To help them make their decision, inform them of where and when the recording could reappear and who will have access to it.

Multiple cameras take up a lot of bandwidth

If any of your participants are connecting with mobile data, they may be streaming more data than they need to. Will the data requirement of turning cameras on affect the ability of some participants to stay connected to the whole workshop?

The story of a square

It came up at the APC Closer Than Ever convening that "what you show in your little frame says a lot about you and your circumstances." It may be a point of care to consider that a reluctance to turn on the camera may be the participants negotiating what limited control they have over their boundaries to equalise themselves in the room.

5. Working with and around mics

In a remote storytelling workshop, we would definitely expect our participants to be willing to pick up the mic and share their stories. However, there are some instances where they might forget to turn off the mic, causing some background noise to spill into our digital space, or in very rare instances, inadvertently voicing out in the middle of someone else talking. How do we, as a trainer, establish the boundaries between these many different scenarios?

Consider

Establishing some procedures

If participants want to pick up the mic and speak — for example, Zoom has the HAND option, or to type HAND in the chat area. Remind them to mute whenever they are not talking to the room.

Expecting to mute microphones on behalf of other participants

If you have the capacity to.

Establishing reminders

Before asking others to take the mic, for example not to attribute others, or offering content warnings.

Giving options for participants

Who could not speak over the mic e.g. noisy background, sore throat, feeling uncomfortable etc. to voice out in the chat area.

6. Checking for engagement

Checking for engagement matters to facilitators in an interactive online workshop space when silence falls and visual cues are lacking. Feedback forms after the event is a common practice, but it might be helpful for facilitators to ‘feed’ themselves by designing more immediate ways to discover feedback as the workshop happens.

Consider

How can we design more reciprocity in online workshops?

Maybe this could be as simple as asking everyone to respond with a word in chat if they understood or relate to what was being said. Participants could also write a word on paper and hold it up for workshop documentation (over their own faces if they prefer).

How can we reimagine the consultation process for remote workshops?

What support and availability can the facilitators offer to guide participants remotely? At the Storytelling from Remote workshop, some participants had last-minute tech emergencies, eg. a virus when trying to install editing software. From that experience we learned that participants may need to be reminded and prompted to seek guidance, and be clear about what requests they can make. These are not as easily intuited as at an in-person meeting.

Exploring ways of working with silences or non-verbal communication

At an APC care session, participants turned off their mics and talked to each other in chat while the facilitator quietly played the ukulele.

7. Exploring ways of using a facilitators back-channel

Building a good thing takes a village. In the case of our storytelling workshop, we have a team of amazing people who will be involved with us in trying to make our remote storytelling workshop a success. How does a good team relationship translate to facilitating practices?

Consider

Giving instructions in multiple ways

In offline spaces, there are ways of intuiting what to do beyond verbal instructions, but in an online space it is just a screen and a chat box. Give instructions in multiple ways beyond verbally— have it on standby in chat to paste, make a slide of instructions that stays on as long as the exercise is going on, translating instructions into more languages, check for understanding before activity begins.

Creating a different channel for facilitating team for coordination

This could work for any app the conversations will take place — Mattermost, Telegram, etc. Different platforms have different affordances, politics, and more importantly the capacities to which we will adapt. How many announcements does a backchannel platform need? Can we opt to send messages to our team to an even later / earlier time when a lot of their time zones overlap?

Which platform to use best for what purpose?

8. Releasing yourself of perfection!

It is very easy to want to fall into the trap of perfection when you are in the role of a trainer, especially if this is your first remote storytelling workshop. Remember that it is as important to practice care with yourself and your team as you would practice care for your participants.

Consider

Agendas are there as a framing and holding space

Agendas change, and so we will adapt. It is helpful not to to get too attached to this agenda so you are open to shaping it strategically if needs arise.

Don’t forget to extend the endorsement of ‘No Perfection’ over to the participants and the support team

Your participants might feel uneasy to share their stories to the room especially if they are yet unfinished. Ensure them that stories are a journey and always in the making, they can share what they have. It can be as simple as telling them “Perfection is for tomorrow.”

Recommended resources, tools and further reading

Recommended resources, tools and further reading to kickstart your remote storytelling workshop

Tools we used to run our remote storytelling workshops

- BigBlueButton
- Mattermost
- Telegram
- Etherpads (eg. on Riseup.net)

Tools to create your stories

These tools were used at the workshop and many were recommended by our participants.

Media, images, photos, icons, and general content

- Creative Commons: https://search.creativecommons.org
- Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Internet Archive: https://archive.org/
- The Public Domain Project: https://www.pond5.com/free
- Pexels Creative Commons: https://www.pexels.com
- Flickr Creative Commons: https://www.flickr.com/creativecommons /
- Unsplash: https://unsplash.com
- The Noun Project: https://thenounproject.com/ (icons)
- Freepik: https://freepik.com/
- Cliply: https://cliply.co (GIFs)

- Giphy royalty free GIFS: https://giphy.com/explore/royalty-free

Audio

- Musopen: https://musopen.org/
- CC Mixter: http://ccmixter.org/
- Free Music Archive: https://freemusicarchive.org/
- Bensound: https://www.bensound.com/
- Freesound: https://freesound.org/
- Youtube music library: https://studio.youtube.com/
- Thematic: http://hellothematic.com/michellephan/
- Audacity: https://www.audacityteam.org

Video

- Adobe Premiere Rush?
- Open Broadcaster Software https://obsproject.com
- https://itsfoss.com/open-source-video-editors/ (check if this complies with FLOSS)

How others tell their stories

- Using voice notes to tell stories: https://www.apc.org/en/blog/community-networks-stories-sharing-vision-and-importance-network-improve-and-strengthen-peoples
- MFI Africa E-Zine: https://archive.org/details/mfiafricaezinefinal/page/n5/mode/2up
- AfroQueer podcast: https://afroqueerpodcast.com/episodes/
- End of the World: https://www.endoftheworldshow.org
- Digital storytelling from APC: https://stories.apc.org/browse/