The Limits of Memory: Storytelling as a Method of Recovery

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Collective Storytelling
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Background to Research

• Final piece for class: paper and presentation of research

• Beginnings of a wider study on the Limits of Memory for a conference at New School in March 2009

• Inspired by discussions with Tom Hennes, Principal, Thinc Design (Cabinet of Wonders)
Format of Today’s Presentation

• Storytelling: some basics

• **Why** tell stories of trauma

• Examples and limitations

  • International **Law**: a recognition

  • International Tribunals

• **Community** Storytelling in Africa (Malawi and Lesotho)

• Conclusion
Introduction and Theory: Storytelling & Memory

• Following trauma - we are encouraged to tell the story of the trauma

• Therapy - both individual and as a group

• The story of the trauma externalizes the pain

• Narrative breathes life into a memory

• Begins the process of understanding
Inspiration: South Africa Freedom Park
Why Tell Stories?

Non-Anomalous Curiosity:

• Please help me to understand

• We are often forced by the social circumstances we are in to create questions for ourselves to answer.

• We have developed various methods to cope - we ask ourselves questions.

Theory from Tell Me A Story, Narrative and Intelligence, Roger C. Shank, Chapter 3, Understanding Other People’s Stories
Why Tell Stories?

• Since we are both asking and answering these questions, we need to know we can answer a question before we ask it.

• Memories are called upon.

• We want to know the questions one might ask oneself in response to a story of one’s own to come to mind
Why Tell Stories?

• People begin to recall stories and others listening respond “sameness”

• When someone tells you a story, you ask yourself: “are there any events in my memory where I had a similar goal for a similar reason?”

• Ie. do we know already know a story like the one we are hearing?
Why Tell Stories?

• So - we match stories to old ones on the basis of identical goals.

• “Do I have a story in my memory where the main goal is the same as that being pursued on the story I am hearing?”

• Connecting and Identifying
Storytelling after trauma

- After genocide legal frameworks set up to deal with punishment and reparations

- Earlier examples following WWII:
  - Criminal Tribunal at Nuremberg
  - International Military Tribunal for the Far East
Recognition of the Importance of Victims to Tell Their Story

- Later examples:
  - The International Criminal Tribunal For Rwanda (ICTR)
  - Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

- Criticisms - do people get to actually speak?

- Response - Rome Statute
Recognition of the Importance of Victims to Tell Their Story

- Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute)
- Adopted July 17, 1998
- Paved the way for victims and their families to tell their stories publicly in court for the first time
Recognition of the Importance of Victims to Tell Their Story

“For the very first time victims of crimes and their families can have access to the court to express their views and their concerns (Article 68) and to claim reparations for the wrongs suffered (Article 75).”

The International Criminal Court Reparations to Victims of Crimes (Article 75 of the Rome Statute) and the Trust Fund (Article 79), Recommendations for the Court Rules of Procedure and Evidence, Dinah L. Sheldon & Thordis Ingadottir, prepared by the Center on International Cooperation, New York University for the 26 July - 13 August 1999 Meeting of the Preparatory Commission for the International Criminal Court
Limitations - what next?

“So you sort of enter a period of depression. You start with euphoria, you perhaps have unrealistic expectations, but certain things haven’t happened that people thought would happen, and nobody ever thought clearly about how they could be done. So there is that period you enter into now of uncertainty, disillusionment, cynicism. It’s hard for people to do anything in that period.”

Interview with Masitha Hoeane, Dean of Student Affairs, Technikon Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, SA, November 2001
Continuing the Story Within the Community

- The dialog needs to continue
- People need to feel part of the ongoing discussion
- Community building - strengthening ties between groups now that ‘official barriers’ removed
- Education, awareness and understanding
- Helping to find a new path
Case Study 1: David Kerr - Malawi

- Community theater in **Malawi** in 1980s

- **Community theater** as a method of development work

- For example, plays on health issues (diarrhea, malaria, water borne disease)

- 5 year project using theater as a communication strategy

- **Participatory** theater acting as a combination of stimulus, social lubricant and safety net in conflicted area of creating safe sanitation practices

- Plays addressed contentious issues such as conflicts between: villagers and government, elites and villagers, indigenous villagers and fish traders and men and women

The Challenge of Community Theater in Malawi and Botswana. David Kerr in Adams and Goldbard’s Community Culture and Globalization, 2002
Case Study 1: David Kerr - Malawi

• Successes:
  • Good vehicle to promote messages about public health
  • Measured success, genuinely participatory (songs, stories, workshops, didactic messages)

• Issues:
  • Success resulted in curtailment of scheme by one-party dictatorship in Malawi at the time, honest developmental communication virtually impossible
  • Dealing with trouble as a result of offending the “status quo”
Case Study 2: Masitha Hoene - Lesotho

- Worked as Dean of Students at National University of Lesotho

- Encountered first hand many of the issues post-Apartheid as a result of integration for example;
  - University opening up to black students but them being further behind than their white counterparts, hence falling behind and failing
  - Language barriers classes usually in English, but sometimes not the dominant language of the class
  - School often seen by black people as a place to fight authority, legitimate places to fight the system - now so different
  - White professors struggling to deal with the change
Case Study 2: National University of Lesotho
Case Study 2: Masitha Hoene - Lesotho

- **Solution: Diversity Project**

- Undertaken in the second half of 2001 up to October

- Finding away to connect the different racial and cultural groups within the university - reaching across barriers

- Informal workshop sessions, entertainment but the overall concept is to get students talking - to give them an experience which society denies them

- Concept of the university as a ‘laboratory for cultural transformation’

Masitha Hoene, former Dean of Students, University of Lesotho, interviewed by Arlene Goldbard in Adams’ and Goldbard’s *Community Culture and Globalization*, 2001
Conclusion

• We tell stories to breathe life into memories

• Initially for therapeutic reasons

• Then for justice, reparations, understanding

• This is being recognized by international law-making bodies

• But what next after the initial euphoria of change has passed?

• Community storytelling has huge potential, challenge is to overcome the not inconsequential challenges faced, both in telling the stories, and as a result of telling them