

Sharing our Stories: Reciprocal Personal Narratives as a Critical Cornerstone in the Public Interest Design Process

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This paper outlines the significance of storytelling and specifically personal narrative in the teaching and practice of Public Interest Design. It discusses a variety of narrative tools and expectations imbedded in a studio course offered at Lawrence Technological University. Student case studies are presented to qualify a variety of levels to which a student's own personal narrative informs the work undertaken, and reinforces a connection to their community partner. Observations of the student experience are analyzed and reinforced through literature review drawn from multiple disciplines. Conclusions discuss both the benefits and pitfalls of introducing personal narrative into the student work, and the relationships with community partners. (Authors note: Due to the personal nature of some of the material included, studio participants are identified by first name and last initial only.)

INTRODUCTION

A story is the most powerful method of inspiring, teaching, uniting, and forging connection. Oral storytelling, in particular, is intrinsic to all cultures. It serves as an intimate way of providing invaluable linkage to ancestral beliefs, values, and history. In West African cultures, for example, a storyteller is a revered profession that is inherited from generation to generation. Known as a griot, they are specially trained as orators, singers, or musicians to keep alive the shared heritage of their family or village. In our technologically advanced modern world, the enduring capacity of the oral tradition to promote connection between storyteller and audience is evidenced in the popularity of TED Talks and Moth Story Slams.

Storytelling is also an effective political tool for social activism. Why? Because information can persuade someone, but it won't inspire them. When we listen to a story, we are drawn in as a participant. We start to connect on the most fundamental human levels. According to the non-partisan social justice organization Narrative Arts, "Statistics and lists of facts can communicate information, but stories communicate meaning and emotion, which are what motivate people to act. People don't relate to issues, they relate to other people—in other words, to their stories."¹

As such, storytelling has become a core tenet of Public Interest Design (PID) practices. While in normative practice there tends to be a hierarchy of positions where the professionally trained architect is the expert, placing the client / user in a diminished role, PID practitioners seek to engage a range of constituencies in a process of 'co-design'. Gathering and understanding the stories of communities and potential users serves as a basis for breaking down this normative hierarchy.

In a typical academic studio setting, there is an innate gulf between a student (aka architect or designer) and their usually fictional client or user. In the Public Interest Design studio setting, students are tasked with breaching that gulf and establishing a common bond and equitable alliance with a community partner. If projects truly move at the speed of trust, that bond often starts with the story.

THE COURSE

Since 2007, the Activist Architecture and Design Studio has been an elective offering in the Master of Architecture program at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield, Michigan. The course (which has been offered at various times at both the undergraduate and graduate level) asks students to identify an issue of concern to them, demonstrate the nature and magnitude of the issue, outline the ecosystem of the issue, and identify all constituencies impacted by the issue (both negatively and positively). Students then develop partnerships with individuals, organizations, and non-profits that share an interest in this issue, and collaboratively develop design visions and proposals that further the community partner's core mission. This design proposal need not be a building, and students have undertaken a variety of projects, ranging from instruction manuals to carts to small-scale urban plans.

A required narrative structure is at the core of the pursuit and presentation of student efforts. Through application of the Massive Change Story Formula² students frame their research, experiences, and collaborative interactions. The Story Formula utilizes the categories of Situation, Design Team, Users, Realization, Solution, and Impact to provide a full account of

the journey of discovery, exchange, and creation undertaken by students and their community partners.

While all the components of the Story Formula play a role in creating a document of the studio experience, a few hold a significant place in demonstrating the objectives of the course. The Design Team section is where students identify every participant in the project (community partners, consultants, themselves, etc), and outline the roles each person played. Realization is the documentation of the design process, including case studies, outreach and engagement tools deployed (and the significant data collected), partner and community interactions, and the revelations that came from these encounters that influenced iterations of the project. Impact is the section where the students and their partners reflect upon the design proposal, assess its potential to address the objectives set forth early in the process, and project what new opportunities and challenges may present themselves.

What became readily apparent iteration after iteration of the studio was that the students who performed the best, forged immediate and productive partnerships, and were most dedicated to the project they (and their partner) undertook, were those who had a personal connection to the core issue driving their work. Instead of simply 'being interested' in a topic such as homelessness, climate change, or abandoned buildings, the most successful students were passionate because the topic *impacted them personally*. These students often introduced their topics with statements such as:

"I was raised by a single mother, and had limited access to all the tools and materials I needed."

"Both of my daughters are on the autism spectrum."

"My brother has Muscular Dystrophy."

"People took my dyslexia as a sign I was 'slow'."

"I'm expecting my second child, and I am concerned about mental health trends among children."

"I was an addict, and without recovery I could never be where I am today."

This observation prompted a pivot in the course that included a newly established matrix: one that insinuates and elevates a student's personal narrative to the first project position, even before a student leaps into the first assignment that focuses on situational research. This underscores the principle that a personal story is foundational to forging a relationship with potential partners.

To facilitate crafting of their personal narrative (something architecture students are likely never asked to do), a class meeting

is dedicated to a presentation by, and dialogue with, an expert in story telling and personal narrative. To gauge and analyze success levels of the personal narrative, there are also established metrics to help a student navigate their personal journey throughout the project. Students are required to present an ongoing visual and written catalog of stakeholder interactions, along with a record of the dialogue that took place with the primary community partner. There is also a reciprocal archival record provided by the community partner, which both complements and confirms the process undertaken by the student.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies demonstrate examples of how students have used their personal narratives to forge deeper connections, and build trust, with their community partners. In addition, each case study reflects various levels of integration between student stories and those of their community partners and project constituencies.

Josh (constructing the narrative)

Josh S. was circling several topics, including affordable housing in his economically depressed hometown and the potential of repurposing an abandoned mall site. Both salient issues. But what did these issues mean to him? How was he personally impacted by them? Why did he care? When probed to dig deeper, Josh experienced a self-described "ah-ha" memory moment. As an intern, he had been asked to field measure a house which had once been a drug den. Among the detritus he discovered a child's filthy mattress tucked under the eaves of the attic. It stopped him in his tracks. Imagining what kind of life a small child had to endure in a windowless, airless space struck a chord. And one Josh wanted to revisit.

In this instance, Josh did not mine his own story. Instead, he found an artifact and created a story that allowed him to understand a situation, complete with a sympathetic protagonist. This is not an uncommon function of the human mind. In referencing the writing of James Wallis, who points out that humans see abstract patterns and resolve them into a complete picture, Jonathan Gottschall notes: "There are a lot of neat studies that make Wallis' point, showing how we automatically extract stories from the information we receive, and how – if there is no story there – we are only too happy to invent one."³ What was authentic was the empathy Josh developed, which put him in a position to better connect with a potential community partner.

Serendipitously, Josh became connected with a local nonprofit dedicated to serving youth who are at risk. It was founded by a woman named Lena P. who knew struggle firsthand---parents who were drug addicts and drug dealers, early substance abuse issues of her own, a pregnancy at age 13. As an adult, her story fueled a desire to serve as a champion and role model for teens. Lena's nonprofit now serves as a resource for empowering young people through education and mentoring.

When Josh and Lena first met to discuss a potential partnership, he relayed his credentials and the hoped-for goals of a PID project but, more important, he shared the constructed narrative / story that had viscerally impacted him and opened up his worldview. Josh adamantly maintains that his story provided the necessary entrée to spark a collaboration based on transparency and common ground. Although they came from disparate backgrounds, Lena P. had faith that Josh had an emotional investment in advocating for youth who are at risk.

Over the course of the semester, Josh and Lena continued to bond and worked in sync on an immediate goal for the non-profit, which was to design a single facility that would integrate their existing teen services as well as those of their extended partnership organizations. Such a one-stop hub for teens would provide a stable and safe haven and coordinated continuum of programming.

Fiorela (amplifying shared narratives)

In fall 2017, early in the Trump presidency, Fiorela L. was deeply concerned about issues surrounding immigration, particularly shifts in United States policy that allowed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to expire. Fiorela and her family immigrated with green cards to the U.S. from Albania when she was five years old. As an adult, her own immigration status was not in jeopardy, but she felt a responsibility to champion children who were at risk. “Imagine growing up and living your whole life in a city in the U.S, only knowing how to speak English, then finding out when you reach adulthood that you may be sent to a place you don’t have any connections to. This is what is happening to these young Americans.”⁴⁴

Fiorela’s community partner, Michigan United, was working on the front lines of immigrant rights. They also recognized the importance of garnering support by bringing personal narratives to the attention of the general public. The organization created podcasts featuring recorded interviews of DACA participants. Fiorela stated: “These stories bring a face and a personal experience to the 800,000 (DACA participants). The podcast is on the Intersection’s website, which also has social media pages to help spread the social campaign.”⁴⁵

While the podcasts created by Michigan United had wide *potential* reach, one had to seek them out. Fiorela and the organization had a shared desire to create the opportunity for members of the general public to directly encounter these stories in a compelling way. To this end, Fiorela utilized her unique talents as a designer and fabricator to expand public access to the immigrants’ stories by bringing them into the physical realm. The solution was to create an adaptable, easily-demountable system of display frames. This system allowed for short-term ‘pop-up’ exhibitions, which could be placed in a variety of locations to encourage serendipitous encounters with images and accounts of immigrants, putting the human face to the story, and persuading



Figure 1. Intersections mock up by Fiorela L.

the viewer to see the immigrant as an individual, rather than part of a faceless group (Figure 1).

The curation and amplification of community stories is not an uncommon tactic in PID / Community-based work. An example is *Zeitgeist*, “a storytelling project which brought together residents living in long-term (senior) care and design students (from the Emily Car University of Art + Design) to co-write and co-design publications featuring stories of the residents’ lives, experiences and their answers to big life questions.”⁴⁶ A distinct difference is that the *Zeitgeist* student participants needed time to forge relationships with the senior residents, as they had only second-hand exposure to similar life experiences via relatives and other connections. Fiorela, on the other hand, could demonstrate immediate empathy through her own immigration experiences, and therefore quickly built credibility and trust with her community partner and the individuals they sought to serve.

Fiorela’s example is a case of empathy gained from her own experiences, and a perspective of ‘this could have been me’. Her personal narrative as someone who immigrated to the U.S. as a young person, however, was not something she foregrounded within the studio context. Instead, she chose to background her own story for the sake of spotlighting those of others, magnifying their voices.

Rawan (storyteller as movement leader)

While the previous example demonstrates a decision to make one’s own story secondary, Rawan I. chose to foreground her own experiences in order to connect with others, build trust, and encourage empowerment. While still an architecture student, Rawan was struck by an SUV in January of 2017. She spent the next year enduring medical treatment, physical therapy, and challenges with health insurance. Her injuries (and recovery) forced her to step away from work and her graduate studies. To

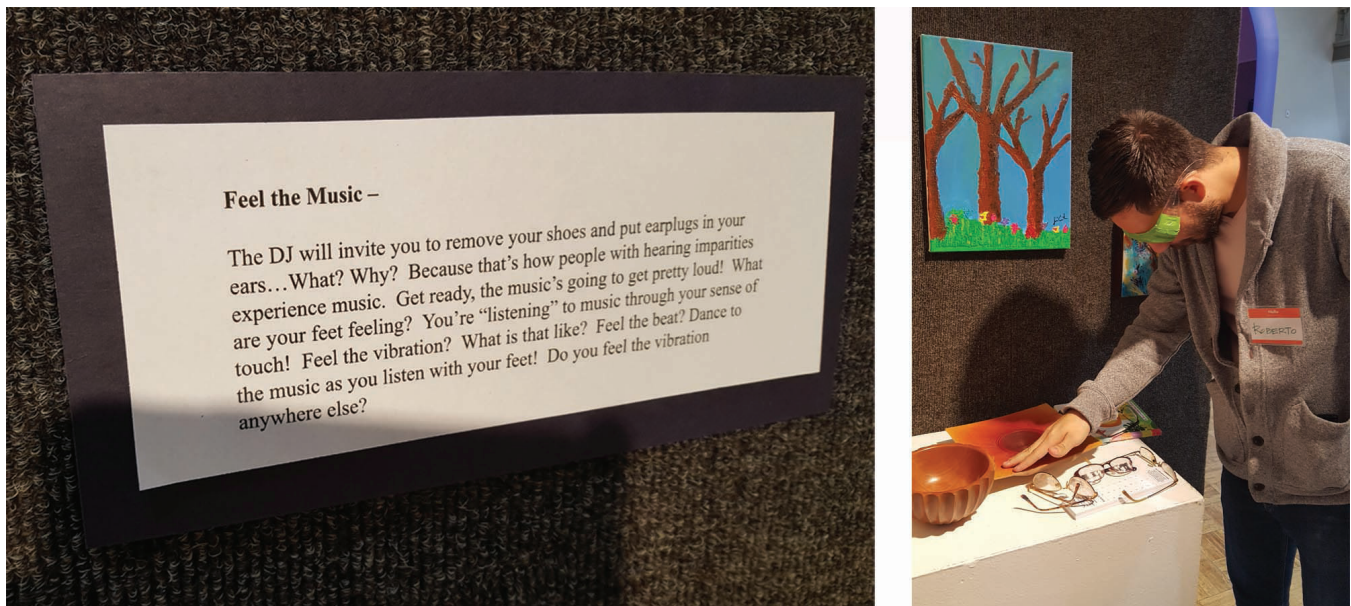


Figure 2. Project Access installation by Rawan I.

this day, Rawan deals with pain and limitations to her mobility, often relying on a wheelchair.

As she recovered, Rawan took comfort in her passion for making and enjoying art. Her dexterity was compromised by her injuries, but she discovered that working in fluid mediums provided the expressive venue best suited to her altered dexterousness. Believing that others must surely find themselves in similar straits, she founded Project TheraPaint as a means to tell her story, combining her personal narratives as both as an artist and a person with disabilities. By the time she returned to her studies, and participated in the Activist Studio in fall 2019, she was already a voluble advocate for the therapeutic benefits of the arts.

Moreover, following her accident, Rawan became keenly aware that much of the art world did not accommodate those with visual, hearing, or physical impairments, either in representation or in the manner in which art is displayed and accessed. In most introductory discussions with classmates, reviewers, and her community partner, the Pontiac Creative Arts Center (PCAC), Rawan punctuated her own narrative with an incident that occurred when visiting a gallery. Frustrated by the fact that the artwork was hung so that only a standing individual could properly view it, Rawan implored her fiancé: “let me get up from my wheelchair. I can’t see that.”

The revelations she experienced regarding lack of inclusivity became a driver of the work Rawan undertook with the PCAC, in whom she had found an ally in equitable access to the arts. Rawan did propose a new entry experience to the PCAC’s facility that would allow all guests – regardless of mobility – to enter the building at the same place. A major focus of their collaboration,

however, was the building of empathy towards the experiences of the disabled.

In concert with the organization’s holiday event, Rawan and her partners launched what they called ‘Project Access’. Held on December 14, 2019, the Project Access installations included “stations that address the issue of ableism as well as information/statistics on people with disabilities,” Rawan stated. “Other than spreading awareness throughout this event, we are also creating situations in which guests are able to experience a brief moment of what it may be like for people with imparities to experience an art gallery. These exercises test standard settings and help people become more aware of the various ways that people function. The empathy exercises are used to inform, inspire, and ignite a passion to support the inclusive direction that the Pontiac Creative Arts Center is eager to take.”⁷ (Figure 2)

In her essay “Storytelling in Social Movements”, Francesca Polletta investigates the power of the story to move people to action, and coalesce disparate constituencies. “I want to focus on activists’ strategic use of stories to persuade. Their persuasive efforts go beyond recruitment, of course. Activists seek to persuade funders to support their efforts; reporters to cover their demands; judges to hand down favorable decisions; Congressional subcommittees to press for legislation; ordinary citizens to think differently about their everyday practices. It is easy to see the appeal of stories in all these tasks. Personal stories, especially, make the abstract real and the political personal. ...Personal stories compel their audiences to sympathize and, occasionally, to act.”⁸

By leading with her own story, and her inspiration through art to push through her disability and pursue her personal goals,

Rawan sought to act as an exemplar and inspiration to others, and – in truth – to create a movement. Continuing her dedication to the accessibility to, and visibility of art by, people with disabilities, she co-founded The Art Spread in February of 2020. The Art Spread works to increase awareness of the healing power of art, support and promote artist with disabilities, and hold and promote in-person and virtual events connecting the arts and physical and mental well-being.

Jamie (direct shared experience)

For Jamie S., identifying a core issue was not a problem. A mother of two children married to an Iraqi war veteran, she was keenly aware of the struggles her husband and children faced. Moreover, over the previous thirteen years, she discovered that while the Veteran’s Administration could serve the needs of the veteran themselves (albeit with mixed results), no formal structures existed to provide aid and comfort for the caretaking spouse, who often was ill-prepared to manage the familial effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “The soldiers rarely have the support needed, but they at least have the VA and each other,” Jamie wrote. “As a spouse, one is lucky to find another spouse and make a connection”.⁹ Her isolation was exacerbated by living in a less-populated location in northern Michigan.

Jamie’s struggles came from addressing her own story. It was easy to accrue and synthesize information on the impacts of PTSD: veteran homelessness, substance abuse, suicide rates, and how a veteran’s PTSD affected their children’s academic performance and mental health. She had difficulty, however, opening up about how her husband’s condition had continued to affect her and her children. This stemmed in part from years of having to handle the situation on her own, and an understandable reticence to speak openly to her peers and the professor. This latter component was two-fold: first, she feared betraying her husband (or painting him in a bad light) by speaking of their shared struggle in class. Secondly, no one in the studio had a shared experience to provide a frame for truly empathetic dialogue.

Jamie reached out to Brave Hearts Estate, and spoke to its caretakers, Mike and Paula B. Brave Hearts Estate is a 238-acre retreat dedicated not only to veterans, but to the entire family unit, and is affiliated with Operation Injured Soldiers. Jamie was able to share her story, and formed a bond with Paula, who was herself a veteran’s spouse, as well as the mother of three children who also served in various branches of the military. Here she found the person with whom she could be open about her struggles, and receive (as well as offer) understanding and support. Paula trusted Jamie to work in the best interests of the Brave Hearts families, because Jamie was ‘one of them.’

Jamie and Paula brainstormed ideas, and collaborated on a set of small proposals for the grounds of Brave Hearts Estate. One was the design of a caretaker’s apartment, which allowed for more staff to be available to serve retreat participants. They

also devised a circular gathering space where veterans and their families could congregate, share their experiences, and offer one another support and healing, much like Jamie and Paula had done early in their working relationship (Figure 3).

Sandra Dolby Stahl notes that “when people tell personal narratives, they offer their listeners an invitation to intimacy” and further, “by exchanging personal narratives, people create intimacy where it might not have existed otherwise.”¹⁰ By forging this intimacy and common ground of experience with Paula, Jamie found the courage and support to better address the situation at home. In a message sent after the end of the semester she wrote: “Thanks to this studio, my husband and I have a new and better understanding for each other’s obstacles while we navigate through this.”¹¹ Moreover, she was emboldened to tell her story openly to classmates and guest reviewers, as evidenced by this excerpt from the introduction of her final project”

“I did not go to war; I will never know how it feels to lose a brother or sister in arms.
I will never be haunted by the nightmares of war...
But...
I do know the struggle of helplessness.
I know the story behind the night terrors.
I know the disappointment our children feel on a rough day and unkept promises.
I know the anniversary dates of his triggers.
I know war through his experiences...
Yet, I am just a Veteran’s Wife...”¹²

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The provided case studies demonstrate the manner in which students in the Activist Studio utilize personal narratives to construct a frame for their approach to a project, and their interactions with others. This poses a distinct challenge for the students, as formal training in architecture (by the nature in which studio projects are outlined) leverages intellectual detachment over interpersonal engagement. In normative studio contexts, the student develops concepts based upon observation and analysis of program and site, with minimal consideration of users beyond generalized assumptions of functional and phenomenological needs. Student work is interrogated based upon intellectual and practical ‘soundness’, and the emotional component of design does not fit easily into most assessment rubrics.

Injecting a personal narrative into PID design work carries with it a set of risks. First and foremost is the danger of the designer’s story overshadowing that of others, which leads to ill-fitting solutions and the diminishing of community agency. These are ill effects that experiences like the Activist Studio seek to avoid. There is also an element of discomfort for the student: architecture majors are seldom asked to reflect upon their personal experiences, emotions, and trauma. After four to five years of intellectual detachment buffering their personal connection to the work (excepting the ego), sharing their own stories – and



Figure 3. Image caption. Image credit.

stepping out of the normative hierarchy of designer / client - can leave students feeling vulnerable.

Secondly, any personal narrative, be it a published memoir or the stories we tell friends, family, and acquaintances, may not be 100 percent ‘truth’. Our memories shift over time, and stories often morph after frequent retelling. As Gottschall notes: “We spend our lives crafting stories that make us the noble – if flawed – protagonists of first-person dramas. A life story is a ‘personal myth’ about who we are deep down – where we come from, how we got this way, and what it all means. Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings.”¹³

Consider, however, that in the context of the Activist Studio, the spark of the student’s personal narrative is a driver to connect with their ‘better angels’, and reach out to others for a connection that purely intellectual tools cannot so easily provide. Stahl states that “the personal narrative has as its primary function the articulation and evaluation of fundamental values, themes, and symbols, rather than the superficial recounting of mundane information.”¹⁴ Seen under this lens, students reveal themselves as advocates through identification and confirmation of shared values with their community partners, utilizing their core skill

(design) in concert with the embedded knowledge of the partner and the communities and constituencies they aim to serve.

Whether or not a student of design pursues a path of service practice, the skill set that comes with effective storytelling will prove invaluable. Students who are nurtured to embrace the personal story as an essential part of the architectural process will, to expand upon a quote from Nadia Anderson, “[learn to] value communication as a critical architectural skill and will carry these experiences with them . . . as [a] method for incorporating values of equity and empowerment into their future work.”¹⁵

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