



Empathy and Compassion in Art-based Research

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With support from Changing the Story Mobility Fund, I attended a 4-day online convention on non-violent communication (May/June 2020). I learned a lot about how communication, performance and embodiment can be powerful tools for social change, transformation and awareness.

In this writing, I explain my reflections and takeaways from the major practice exercises and sessions I attended. To close, I discuss how my reflections from this event can be applied to performance based research like Changing the Story.

My Reflections and Learning

First of all, the session by Sabine Gieger helped me to explore what community means to me during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways we can connect to our communities -individually and collectively.

I have often realized in my life that it is not always easy to listen deeply. It is not an art I learned as a kid unfortunately and especially not something I received as an adult either. During another session “The Art of Listening, Introduction to the Art and Craft of Empathy” by Orian Boyer, I got a chance to focus on how we can be good at empathetic listening by practicing the art of presence through actively listening.

The “Speaking from Our Heart- The Power of Authentic and Vulnerable Honesty” session by Shari Elle helped me to practice honesty in speaking and handling vulnerability with full expression through communication, where we open our heart fiercely and honestly and compassionately.

Truth and reconciliation has been a big issues in my country (Nepal) for the last 14 years. This is always (a) very scary invitation because an enemy image is a picture I paint in my mind about a certain person/people and it’s really difficult to see the humanity in a “killer” “dictator” or even “rapist”. I do not agree nor support the actions the people do as such, but, the session “Transforming Enemy Images: Liberating yourself from thoughts of Hatred” by Samuel Odhiambo helped me to understand differently. After focusing on the healing and compassionate connection, it helped me to imagine, “Why don’t we speak our Truth?” and “What are the prices we pay for not speaking?”

Similarly, the “Trauma-informed NVC” session by Azzam Talhami was a good example on how we can create more inclusive dialogue spaces for historically traumatized communities and people. I learnt how the power and privilege differentials change the way we relate to our communication language. I also realized that it is possible that the effects of past pain can be transformed into sweet pain and into new possibilities. At least once in our lifetime, I guess we all have wondered what would it be like to be free of the constrictive influences of past pain as we move through our day, our life? The internal dialogue goes something like: “What’s wrong with me? Why am I so reactive? What’s holding me back? What’s mine to give to the world?” To be human means to experience shame, loss, disappointment, betrayal, abandonment. Our body always portrays how we take our life. “Empathy, Presence and the Body”, by Kirsten Kristensen was wonderful session to realize that sensing the energy in my body and grounding myself is very important so that I can fully visit the other person’s reality and experience. The session showed examples of open-hearted body embodiment (which I think) is very important when we work with marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Empathy and compassion in performance based researches such as Changing the Story

After attending this event, I deeply realized that arts and performance, which carries empathy and compassionate values, can make it relatively easier to communicate difficult messages. A takeaway from the Empathetic Performance as Research Convention is the skills (I've developed) around how to present multiple voices, or contrasting voices, without negating the other. **Arts-based approaches can help researchers access, illuminate, describe, and explain that which is often invisible by other methodological approaches i.e. empathy, healing and reconciliation.** The articulation in arts based research is performed, felt and heard, thus, empathy and compassion components from non-violent communication are a very powerful element for performance based research such as Changing the Story.



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