

Carnivalized storytelling: A workshop method for intergenerational creativity

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an intergenerational workshop method that intertwines poetic inquiry with storytelling and visual art. Drawing on findings from community workshops held in the Amami Islands, Japan in spring 2024, we bring attention to the value and place of intergenerational creativity within community heritage work. We suggest that humour alongside collaborative creative practice can lead to the reinterpretation of culture and age hierarchies and enable spaces for the reimagining of heritage and cultural norms. This brief 'on-the-horizon' paper outlines a workshop process relevant to community heritage work and contributes some lessons learned on creating meaningful intergenerational dialogue within community education settings.

Keywords: creative pedagogies, intergenerational communications, heritage work, poetic inquiry, storytelling.

Introduction

Small island regions are facing unprecedented challenges with outmigration, changing norms, and economic and environmental uncertainty. Community arts can contribute to local social sustainability by supporting intergenerational understanding and social cohesion (Rugg et al., 2021). Prior research on intergenerational relations within community heritage projects have noted how new relationships and stories about 'community' can be developed through participatory arts (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2010). However, intervention studies show that age-related biases are difficult to change simply through intergenerational contact (Bétrisey et al., 2023).

This paper presents an intergenerational workshop method that supports the reinvigoration of storytelling about community heritages through collaborative creative practice. The workshop procedure brings together storytelling with poetic inquiry, photography and drawing to engage community members across the ages in collaborative dialogue about heritage stories. This process incites participants to creatively play with differing standpoints of maturity, in relation to both place and age, which enables spaces for the

reimagining of heritage and cultural norms. In this paper we specifically discuss the first application of an intergenerational workshop that follows this format hosted in Tokunoshima, Amami Islands, Japan.

The workshop method was designed following a Participatory Arts Roundtable hosted by the authors at the University of the Highlands and Islands in September 2023, that considered case studies from Japan and Scotland and reflected on tools and methods for fostering meaningful communication within community arts projects. This roundtable, along with follow up discussions amongst the authors, explored different processes for engaging with poetry, photography and image making, which informed the intergenerational workshop held in Tokunoshima. Before considering the workshop process and outcomes, we provide some background on poetic inquiry as a key facet underpinning our methodology.

Poetic inquiry

The international field of poetic inquiry is a landscape inhabited by various communities of practice, carrying out research involving poetry into a range of issues or domains. It is based, most often, on epistemologies that conceive of poetry as able to express different kinds of knowledge from other forms of text, because it highlights and makes patterns with the sounds of words and phrases, it uses textual and visual art motifs for displaying words on a page, and perhaps most of all because it tends towards a register and style that is emotionally expressive, enabling its users to avoid having to artificially separate thought from feeling, head from heart, or disembodied mind from bodily voice (Owton, 2017; Faulkner, 2020).

Poetic inquiry is a creative method that enables researchers to delve deeply into the nuances of the words that research participants use. It is frequently used by researchers who adopt post-colonial, feminist, queer and intersectional theoretical perspectives to respect their research participants as equals, with a key element being to present findings in their own words, using the power of poetic form to enhance the status of the words, to highlight the beauty, power or emotion of their expressions, and above all to evoke the orality and sound quality of their testimony (Faulkner & Ruby, 2015; Faulkner, 2017; Reale, 2014; Reale, 2015; Katt, 2022; Zaino & Bell, 2021). Poetic inquiry is most often found giving voice to people who are least listened to in the world, including immigrants and asylum seekers (Haripriya, 2019; Reale 2014; Reale 2015), marginalised youth (Furman, et al., 2007; Görlich, 2015), deprived families with young children (Foster, 2012), women (Faulkner & Ruby, 2015; de Gennaro, 2022), the LGBTQI+ community (Faulkner, 2020), sufferers of abuse (Owton, 2017), people with illnesses or disability (Donovan, 2021; Claisse, et al., 2021; McCulliss, 2013), protestors (Davis, 2021; Katt, 2022) and those in informal housing (Carroll et al., 2011).

The landscape of poetic inquiry is rich in poor housing estates, ghettos and urban deprivation and throbs with calls for social justice, however there is relatively little rural use of poetic inquiry, with Fernández-Giménez et al. (2019) giving one of few examples of its use in a natural resources context and Peterson (2019) combining it with video in exploration of a bog. Poetic inquiry is frequently used as a method to integrate multiple voices or to distil collective expressions from groups of participants (Haggith, 2021) and, with its strong link to the oral transmission of knowledge, it is thus an appropriate method to apply to research into intergenerational situations.

Intergenerational poetry in the Amami Islands

The workshop discussed in this paper was part of a series of activities that aimed at sharing knowledge and understanding about participatory arts methodologies among academics and practitioners in Japan and Scotland, and community members in two island settings: the Outer Hebrides in northwest Scotland and

the Amami Islands in southern Japan. Ethics approval was obtained by the University of the Highlands and Islands Research Ethics Committee (ETH2223-1273). This short paper reports initial insights developed from the first workshop held in Tokunoshima, Amami Islands. The authors plan to build on these initial insights to develop a full research paper exploring the role of intergenerational creativity in heritage work.

Context

Situated between mainland Japan and Okinawa, Amami Islands have endured periods of colonisation from both the South and North. Following US military control in the aftermath of WWII, Amami Islands were the target of a series of development policies aimed at eliminating “backwardness” in what was considered to be the most ‘underdeveloped’ region in Japan (Kuwahara, 2012). Loss of local cultural knowledge and language accompanied the new development plans that saw the rise of transport networks and food systems that devalued local practices. Further restrictions on land use have arisen along with the designation of the region as a UNESCO natural heritage site in 2021. Recent years have seen interests in the resurgence of Amamian identities, as distinct from Ryukyuan and Japanese colonial influences, and in the resurfacing of traditional foodways and cultural practices. Documenting historical knowledge is an important part of this movement, and town councils have launched digital heritage databases while regional museums have drawn on local recordings and media productions to document music and dance practices, which differ significantly between villages and towns. Language also differs significantly within the islands and there are challenges in documenting language in writing as it cannot be captured with the Japanese lettering system; town councils are looking to explore new modes of documenting local dialects through recordings and ways to engage with younger generations.

Workshop procedure

As part of the local council’s community events schedule, the first and second author facilitated a creative workshop on Tokunoshima Island in March 2024. The workshop aimed to engage community members across the ages in older people’s storytelling. The process was based around elements of poetic inquiry as described above, and involved the steps outlined in the following.

Workshop procedure:

1. Older people from the community act as narrators, telling stories of traditions and lifestyles, speaking freely to other community members.
2. Participating community members listen to the storytelling and, using sticky notes, write down short phrases or words that they find important or interesting.
3. Participants are put into small groups of three to five people, including community members from across the ages, and share their notes with other members of their group.
4. Each group freely arranges the words and phrases to create a poem.
5. Groups present their poems to the narrator and other participants, allowing opportunity for questions and discussion.
6. Using photography, drawing, and objects from around the room, the groups create and exhibit their poems as visual artworks.

The workshop involved 12 participants, including older adults, middle-aged adults and four children under ten years of age. The facilitators explained the procedure and time allotted for each stage of the workshop, beginning with 30 minutes of storytelling where the narrator recounted life experiences, including stories of what life was like during the war and children’s daily work in harvesting potatoes and carrying water. Participants were arranged into three groups, with each group including members of different age groups.

Outcomes

The workshop process enabled members of all ages to become increasingly engaged in the activity, particularly in the final phase. However, notetaking about the stories was challenging for some of the younger children. In two of the groups, the children showed little interest or involvement in developing the initial construction of the poem. In the third group, which included two children, they were able to interweave their single word cards into the poem, and added funny words from the tradition bearer’s story, such as ‘poo’, which the adults accepted and helped them to place within the poem. This resulted in a poem they all exhibited ownership over when reading back to the group.

Notetaking was also challenging for some of the ‘newcomers’ to the region who were not familiar with the local words that had been used in the story. At this point, some participants took the opportunity to check with the storyteller on the meaning of different words, and this enabled them to feel more comfortable including their notes in the poem. An interactive environment during the storytelling phase, where participants were able to ask questions, supported participants to feel comfortable asking further follow-up questions during the poem creation process.

The final step of the workshop supported further interaction by children, including those who had felt left out in the initial phases. The creative interplay with photography and drawing also encouraged adults to become ‘childlike’ in their behaviours, and to exhibit excitement and competitiveness as they found new ways to visually illustrate their poem. Introducing a polaroid camera in the final step repositioned children as key actors in the creative output, as they took hold of the cameras and directed images, and positioned images on the papers, or what had become three dimensional artworks.

Figure 1. Participants’ intergenerational poetry displayed at the workshop in Isen, Tokunoshima.



All participants filled out a reflection sheet upon completion. Participants noted that the workshop was fun, imaginative, and creative, and that they enjoyed learning how words could be brought together into a poem. Participants also noted how they felt they learnt more about the others in their group and enjoyed

seeing how others had different perspectives on the same story. One participant described feeling weary at first as “what we talked about was disjointed” but noted that “some things could be reconstructed and seen”, which incited new reflections on the meaning of “richness”.

The intergenerational aspect of the workshop was highlighted as a strong point, which supported participants to think differently about traditions by working together. A participant explained,

We showed each other the words we had received, and it was like we were having a ‘chat’ with each other, with some sympathy, some surprise, and some discovery. It was an enjoyable time. ...Both adults and children enjoyed working together to combine their sensibilities into a single work.

The narrator, an older woman who had lived through many social changes, was able to see how her stories were received by the listeners and could lead to the creation of something new. This shows not only the importance of inheritance and transmission, but also its potential to inspire creativity.

Concluding reflections

Involving children, newcomers and older tradition bearers in a creative poetry workshop enabled the hierarchies that often arise in community heritage work to be playfully broken down. Children took on positions of authority as they engaged adults in the playful use of photography and worked with adults to draw and redesign their poems, while newcomers worked alongside longstanding community members to reinterpret traditional concepts. In the workshop, we saw how humour supported the inclusion and reevaluation of traditions, and that this was particularly supported by the intergenerational context, where differing ideas of humour could be validated. In this way, the findings suggest that intergenerational creativity can be an important way to meaningfully engage with island traditions and lifestyles as community assets. Including image making, photography and objects allowed participants to create meaning on multiple levels. This can be a vital conduit for people who find it difficult to express themselves using more traditional forms of writing. Further attention could be given to levelling power relationships in the initial phases of the workshop as some members found it difficult to participate in the notetaking; for example, an ice breaking activity before the storytelling could help children to engage in the activities from the outset. In addition, visual forms of notetaking could be further encouraged.

In Isen Town, Tokunoshima, where we facilitated the workshops, older adults, middle aged adults and children are accustomed to coming together to participate in community activities. There was a sense of pre-existing intergenerational ease among the group, and adults and children were able to collaborate and understand each other without framing their interactions in stereotypes. This pre-existing ease may have supported participants to develop the collaborative creativity we witnessed within a short period of time. Further research could explore how this workshop procedure can be adapted and used in other contexts, and how intergenerational interactions may change when Internet technologies are used, as generational stereotypes can be heightened around the use of new media technologies.

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Biographies

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Sarah Wagner is Senior Researcher at the Centre for Living Sustainability, University of the Highlands and Islands Inverness. Sarah is a critical ethnographer and community media researcher with interest in individuals' civic positioning in our increasingly digitalised and datafied societies. Sarah has worked on critical, creative and collaborative media projects in Argentina, Bolivia, Japan, Canada, and Scotland.

Rosie Blake is an artist, and Lecturer at University of the Highlands and Islands North, West and Hebrides. Living and working in North Uist, Rosie's main areas of research are art and environment, art and ecology, rural community knowledge exchange, and creative exploration of emotional space within climate change work.

Mandy Haggith is a Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literature at University of the Highlands and Islands Inverness. A poet and novelist, she uses creative methods, especially poetic inquiry, to explore people's thoughts and feelings about environmental topics, including climate change, trees and the sea.

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