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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Creative Capstone Project: Storytelling Through Silence

Honors Thesis
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By

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Abstract

Storytelling Through Silence

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A few of the earliest forms of communication between people include talking, dancing, and singing. Storytelling is a popular art form of communication that is used to convey stories. Storytelling can be conveyed through talking, dancing, and singing. These stories can be told using spoken language to recall a specific event that happened and the emotions one felt during this event. According to the National Storytelling Network, storytelling is used to “encourage the active imagination of the listener” (2023). This means that a storyteller presents their story and the audience actively listens or watches to interpret its meaning. Typically, spoken languages are used to verbally communicate these stories. While storytelling through oral communication is the most popular medium used, there are other ways to communicate past events and feelings. Stories can be told through music, dance, poetry, written communication, signed languages, and orally. There are many examples of storytelling including spiritual rituals, speeches, English oral poetry, American Sign Language (ASL) poetry, written work, dance choreography, musical compositions, and visual vernacular. These allow people to communicate their feelings through various means. This paper discusses different forms of storytelling and how they can be used. The forms specifically highlighted will be ASL poetry, dance, and song (music and lyrics).

Keywords: storytelling, communication, ASL, dance, music, Deaf, hearing, medium

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Introduction

Spoken language is not the only medium that can be used to tell stories. Both the Deaf and hearing world can equally partake in storytelling. This common art form is used in both spoken and signed languages. Storytelling is just one of many artistic approaches to sharing events and feelings. Storytelling is utilized in many different fields of work, including teachers, doctors, pastors, directors, and journalists. There are also occasions where no language is used and communication is expressed through facial expressions, gestures, and the body. Stories can be interpreted in various ways. For example, a storyteller may have a different idea in their mind than the story the audience interprets; however, it can still be understood without using a language that is known by all. By examining the expressive nature of song, ASL, and dance as mediums for storytelling, the ability to transcend language barriers and convey narratives through multimodal approaches is discovered.

What is Storytelling?

According to the National Storytelling Network, storytelling is “an ancient art form and a valuable form of human expression” and is used to connect with others (2023). Each culture has derived its own definition of what storytelling is. Storytelling is an interactive art form between a storyteller and a listener (National Storytelling Network, 2023). Stories are passed down from generation to generation and told by the community. According to Peter Cook, a Deaf performer with a Master of Arts in Storytelling, the purpose of storytelling is to allow people to express their feelings, share past experiences, teach lessons, entertain, give people a sense of identity, and share one’s culture (2011).

A study conducted by Georgina Barton and Margaret Baguley further investigated this idea of storytelling through multiple modes (2014). The study focused on children from multi-age school, prep to year 7. These children worked together to show their knowledge through drama, dance, and song. The children then were asked to translate the story “The Sign of the Seahorse” from an approach that differed from verbal communication. The children’s knowledge and comprehension were tested as well as their ability to collaborate and express themselves. By expressing their knowledge through other mediums, the teachers were better able to understand the children’s capabilities (Baguley and Barton, 2014). Baguley and Barton stated that storytelling has been “found in most civilizations” to make sense of the world, make connections, and find their identities (2015). Arts allows students to explore these topics and dive into the world of creativity. The result of allowing children to express themselves through art makes them more socially confident, better able to work with others, and bigger risk-takers (Baguley and Barton, 2014).

Musical Storytelling

Music is another form of storytelling where musical composers, vocalists, and musicians tell stories through their compositions. People can share their stories by composing music or performing these pieces. Amanda Niland, an early childhood music educator and researcher, emphasizes the importance of music in children’s lives and how children can use music to express ideas (2007). This allows children to open their minds and imaginations to increase their creativity and confidence. Each musical composition created tells its own story that the artist wants to express. Word painting is a technique used by some composers to “paint” or show the literal meaning of a word. Such as a high pitch on the word “high” or quickening tempo when the text says “run or speed” which is used a lot by Jocelyn Hagen (Culloton, 2013).

Jocelyn Hagen

Jocelyn Hagen is a popular female vocalist in the 21st century and has composed over 126 pieces, each about a different story with its own meaning. Hagen has received over 30 commissions, 40 premieres, and 90 performances (Hagen, 2022). Most of her compositions tell stories about other women's lives. Jocelyn Hagen is a songwriter, vocalist, and pianist (Hagen, 2022). Her husband, Timothy Takach, is also a composer. Her husband and she studied at the College of St. Olaf. Jocelyn Hagen earned degrees in Theory, Composition, and Vocal Music Education as well as a Master's Degree in Composition from the University of Minnesota (Hagen, 2022). She admits that she did not discover her singing voice until the age of 30 (Jocelyn Hagen. personal communication. 6 March, 2024). Some of Hagen's commissions consist of the Minnesota Opera and Orchestra, the International Federation of Choral Music, Conspirare, Cantus, and St. Olaf Band (2022). She is a co-founder of Graphite Publishing, with Timothy Takach. She is inspired by American Composer, Libby Larsen (Jocelyn Hagen. personal communication. 6 March, 2024). Some of her former teachers include Judith Lang Zaimont, Peter Hamlin, Mary Ellen Childs, and Timothy Mahr. On March 6, Jocelyn Hagen said, "You can't create art in a vacuum" and explained that people are impacted by the world around them based on what they hear and see.

Jocelyn Hagen released an album called *The A-Team* in 2014 which consisted of popular pop music songs that she sang covers for. One of the songs on the album is "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" which was originally sung by the metal band, Poison. Poison released this song in 1988 to tell a story about how Bret Michaels's career was taking off and blossoming, but at the same time, this success caused him to lose an important relationship. Jocelyn Hagen recorded this song due to a similar reason. Hagen had given birth to her second son which was an amazing time, but

then she was diagnosed with vertigo (Jocelyn Hagen. personal communication. 6 March, 2024).

Vertigo is caused by issues within the ear and makes someone constantly dizzy and nauseous.

The time that Hagen should have been raising her son instead she was dealing with medical issues. She became depressed and lost all hope. She decided for herself to record this album to heal and restore her hope. She started to make music for herself again. Overall, Hagen and Poison both make a point to show that every good situation has its misfortunes. The following lyrics are from the song “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” originally sung by Poison and covered by Jocelyn Hagen:

We both lie silently still in the dead of the night
Although we both lie close together, we feel miles apart inside
Was it somethin' I said or something I did?
Did my words not come out right?
Though I tried not to hurt you
Though I tried
But I guess that's why they say

Every rose has its thorn
Just like every night has its dawn
Just like every cowboy sings his sad, sad song
Every rose has its thorn
Yeah, it does

I listen to our favorite song playin' on the radio
Hear the DJ say love's a game of easy come and easy go
But I wonder does he know
Has he ever felt like this
And I know that you'd be here right now
If I could have let you know somehow, I guess

Every rose has its thorn
Just like every night has its dawn
Just like every cowboy sings his sad, sad song
Every rose has its thorn

Though it's been a while now
I can still feel so much pain
Like the knife that cuts you, the wound heals
But the scar, that scar remains

I know I could have saved our love that night
 If I'd know what to say
 Instead of making love
 We both made our separate ways

And now I hear you found somebody new
 And that I never meant that much to you
 To hear that tear me up inside
 And to see you cuts me like a knife, I guess

Every rose has its thorn
 Just like every night has its dawn
 Just like every cowboy sings his sad, sad song
 Every rose has its thorn

(Poison, 1988).

Some of the specific lyrics in this song that match the ASL poetry piece include: “every rose has its thorn,” “every night has its dawn,” and “every cowboy sings his sad, sad song” (Hagen, 2022). These lyrics show the bad that follows the good or vice versa and tell a story about the singer’s past. The dance piece, “Behind Closed Doors”, and the ASL poetry I choreographed for my creative project are related to Poison’s story and Jocelyn Hagen’s which can be understood by both the hearing and Deaf world.

Storytelling Within the Deaf Community

The Deaf community uses handshapes, classifiers, location, movement, palm orientation, and non-manual signals to express feelings and thoughts through storytelling. Handshapes are the shapes that one forms with their hand to make up an ASL sign. Classifiers are descriptive signs. For instance, they describe the size and shape of an object, represent the object itself, demonstrate how an object moves, and convey how it relates to other objects (“ASL Classifiers,” 2020). ASL poetry is one form of storytelling that is similar to oral English poetry where a performance uses repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and meter. It uses patterns to signify the importance of the meaning. Someone does not need to hear or communicate in the same language to

understand a story. Facial expressions and gestures are typically commonly understood. Facial expressions are used to explain how one feels and some gestures can be understood without having a background in ASL.

Storytelling has been used to form connections between the performer and the audience. Peter Cook specifically uses experimental research to discover if there is a relationship between sign tellers and non-sign tellers (2011). Sign tellers are “those who perform their stories using a signed language” compared to those who do not and use spoken language to convey a personal narrative (Cook, 2011). The difference between the two is the medium of communication used. Cook refers to ASL storytelling as the time when “the body becomes the text” because ASL is expressed using the face, head, and hands (2011). Kinetic movement and visual vernacular are two methods used in ASL storytelling to convey a message. Kinetic movement is the use of non-manual signals such as facial expressions which is similar to spoken languages having vocal inflections (Cook, 2011). Visual vernacular is when a character comes to life using the hands, face, and movement to embody the persona. It combines ASL, elements of poetry, mime, storytelling, facial expressions, gestures, and movement to entertain. Visual vernacular is mainly performed by Deaf artists, such as Peter Cook and Justin Perez. Through these methods, the Deaf community connects by sharing their culture, discovering their identity, and entertaining others (Cook, 2011).

Storytelling Through Dance

Dance allows people to explore their identity, experiences, meaning, context, history, the future, and the body through movement (Eli and Kay, 2015). People can communicate their feelings without verbally discussing them. Karin Eli and Rosie Kay completed a study where the participants choreographed dances based on their experiences of an illness, such as eating

disorders (2015). This observation was conducted on the everyday life of women ranging from nineteen years old to thirty-one who had eating disorders. Contemporary dance was used by the participants to communicate their experiences through movement rather than talking about it. To create movement based on their feelings, the dancers are immersed “in remembered spaces and times” related to their illness (Eli, 2015). These women were able to convey their feelings and recognize the impacts that eating disorders had on their lives which were difficult times for them to talk about. Rather than describing what happened to them, they were able to express their emotions through dance (Eli and Kay, 2015). The result of using dance to express feelings, enabled these women to share their stories verbally by “defining and describing their experiences” (Eli and Kay, 2015).

Hiie Saumaa also researched and found that dance can positively contribute to the health and well-being of an individual (2020). Dance provides individuals with the ability to be mindfully and empathetically connected to a community, the environment around them, and nature. Sheila Ward discusses this aspect as well by claiming that the human body “communicates ideas, beliefs, and practices of a culture through the expressive language of movement” which affects one’s physical and mental health (2013). Ward also expresses the benefits of “dance movement therapy” which allows people to share their stories through movement without verbally talking about them (2013). Dance helps individuals to open up and share stories, but also increases one’s physical fitness at the same time.

Laura Apol and Tina Kambour also conducted a study observing storytelling through dance. The goal of this study was to “develop a person at home in her body, a person capable of expressing their feelings and ideas through movement, unafraid to move freely in a room with people, capable of learning a sequence, willing to try new things, and willing to engage in the

simple act of moving for no reason beyond the joy of the experience” (Apol and Kambour, 1999). The participants were asked to move outside their comfort zone and explore their feelings by using their bodies (Apol and Kambour, 1999). A group of senior women and young high school students were observed during this time. They each shared their stories through movement, in their own words, and were able to connect through their experiences (Apol and Kambour, 1999). At the end of this study, the women were “taking more risks and could move beyond their preconceived boundaries and limitations” (Apol and Kambour, 1999). Apol and Kambour said that “the art process allows us to confront ourselves, our narratives, and to ultimately understand what it is to live in the world and what it is we live for” (1999). These narratives can be discussed through dance. ASL, or a combination of both.

ASL and Dance

Each person has their strengths and weaknesses and nobody learns the same. For example, some individuals are more visual learners while others are more hands-on. In this case, teaching everyone the same way (visually) will only play to some people’s strengths. By bringing a multimodal approach, everyone can learn and express their knowledge with their preferred method. Giving people the option to choose the mode they desire, will foster more creativity and positive feelings toward sharing one’s story. Therefore, both ASL and dance offer a positive impact on every person's life. Immersing individuals in a creative, artistic world will encourage them to use multiple “meanings and modes of communication (aural, verbal language, gestural, spatial, visual)” (Baguley and Barton, 2014). According to Hart-Johnson, ASL and dance are examples of body language that focuses on the visual-gestural mode of communication (1983). Both dance and ASL are not universal; meaning there is no signed language that everyone understands nor is there a choreographed dance piece that everyone can comprehend.

Therefore, both can be interpreted differently. ASL and dance use the body to communicate how one feels, specifically with facial expressions, and no spoken words are used. Similar to dance, ASL uses movement to change the meaning of something. The dynamics of the movement can impact the meaning as well: using slow, fast, sustained, and sudden stops (Hart-Johnson, 1983). Donna Jo Napoli and Rachel Sutton-Spence investigate how dancers and signers can both embody characters, but the interpretation of a specific story can be different between audience members (2023). Both dance and ASL can be open for interpretation and there are no wrong answers. The performer and audience members try to encode and decode the meaning or purpose of the art piece (Streeck, 2015). Some variations occur in performances and the audience and performer may not be on the same page for the entire time of the artistic piece, but the audience can understand how the performer is feeling based on their facial expressions and movement (Napoli and Sutton-Spence, 2023). Facial expressions tell a story using emotions but music is one form of storytelling that does not use facial expressions; however, an audience can still feel emotion (2007).

Every Coin Has Two Sides

I am an American Sign Language and English Interpretation major. Within this program, I have learned how to utilize storytelling and ASL poetry. The ASL poetry piece I created is titled “Every Coin Has Two Sides.” It highlights the fact that you never know what someone is dealing with. Behind closed doors, someone may be depressed and struggling, but when in public they put on a fake smile and try their best. When I faced the left side, I would focus on a negative feeling or emotion while the right side represented positive and happy emotions or feelings. I used gestures, facial expressions, and ASL to express how I felt. At the start I was breathing heavily, biting my nails, could not sit still, and was looking around. On the other side, I

was relaxed, smiling, and overall calm. On the left side, I was crying, wiping my face, and breathing heavily again while on the right I was laughing. On the left side, I put my hood up, hid my face, and looked around a little to see who was looking at me while on the right side, I was chatting with my friends and being outgoing. On the left side, I was trying to focus and read or do homework but I had no motivation, so I pushed it away. On the right side, I was focused, studying, and completing my assignments. On the left side, I tried to sleep but failed to get comfortable and instead tossed and turned all night. On the right side, I was sleeping peacefully and dreaming happy dreams. On the left side, people were talking to me, and I was ignoring them, wanting to be alone. On the right side, I was engaged and chatting with my friends. On the left side, I was acting shy like an introvert while on the right side, I was outgoing and saying hi to interact with everyone. For food, on the left side, I was repulsed and did not want to eat while on the right side, I enjoyed a delicious apple. For my pet dog, on the left side I pushed him away and wanted to be left alone while on the right side, I pet my dog and played fetch with him. At the end of my ASL poetry piece, I signed and acted sad and depressed on the left side and happy and excited on the right. Even though the audience members might not know ASL, they were able to receive the message through the acting and facial expressions. A similar method that uses storytelling to entertain and to express one's feelings through the body, facial expressions, and movement is dance.

Behind Closed Doors

I trained in professional dance schools for nine years and learned ballet, modern, jazz, and contemporary dance. To create this dance, I decided to use the emotions I felt when I found out my best friend committed suicide. When I was graduating high school and excited to move on with the next chapter of my life, I found out my best friend passed away. I would fake being

happy around my friends and outside of my house, but behind closed doors, I was a completely different person. That is why I titled my dance piece “Behind Closed Doors.” The outfit I wore in the dance piece was black to symbolize something one would wear to a funeral. The shadows created by the light symbolize the darkness that followed me after I found out about my best friend. The dark color can also represent the darkness in my soul and depression. The rose is related to the song “Every Rose Has Its Thorn. When I would pick up the rose and then put it down or throw it, that signified when feelings of sadness flooded me. The dancing in a confined space showed the internal conflict I was facing, and when I traveled outward, I was showing how I wanted to connect with other people, nature, and things beyond my internal self. When I danced more slowly or with smaller movements, I had negative feelings and thoughts. When I danced more quickly with larger movements, I had positive feelings and thoughts. Throughout my dance piece, I used facial expressions to show how I was feeling. My dance could be interpreted differently or my artistic choices could be misunderstood; however, the audience could feel my story was heavy and emotional.

Conclusion

ASL, dance, and song can all be used in storytelling. One does not need to be hearing or Deaf to understand. The use of the body and facial expressions show the feelings of the storyteller. Storytelling through a creative aspect can aid others in opening up and expressing their past experiences with more confidence. This project brings awareness of the various mediums that can be used to pass along information and ways someone can express themselves to share their story. As well as the overall importance of storytelling through multiple approaches. There is no one correct way of presenting knowledge, showing emotion, expressing a story,

recalling historical events, and showing growth; instead, one should embrace their strengths and choose what one feels best represents them.

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