Storytelling and Arts to Facilitate Community Capacity Building for Urban Planning and Social Work

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Abstract: Creating social connections and fostering engagement in communities is a growing challenge for community work. Planners, social workers, and community activists are starting to look towards the arts and storytelling as a way to promote community capacity. A community in Lopez Island, Washington, facing sustainable housing and agricultural issues brought in a two-day storytelling and theatre program to build capacity for their ecosocial work. This research describes facilitator engagement methodology and pilots a community capacity survey to evaluate the experience of workshop participants. Preliminary results show that the storytelling program makes strides in deepening connections to others and generating authentic dialogue. Participants reported both positive experiences of building trust and negative feelings of vulnerability. As funding can be a major barrier for community groups to incorporate arts programs, this research introduces a preliminary survey that communities can adapt and improve upon to help them start gathering evidence-based data for assessing measures of community capacity. Though the facilitators brought unique theatrical and choreographic skills to the programming, planners and social workers can take away for practice a simple storytelling exercise that participants enthusiastically expressed fostered listening, trust, and connection.

Keywords: arts; storytelling; community theatre; community capacity; community facilitation; survey; urban planning; social work

1. Introduction

Working in neighborhoods and alongside community members to support their locally-driven projects is a fulfilling, yet increasingly challenging part of planning and social work. Public health scholars have recognized for decades that building community capacity is a precursory step for empowering communities to be able to identify and address not just public health, but all kinds of social issues [1–3] including environmental concerns. Researchers have found that building community capacity supports program sustainability [1] as the longevity of local funding often requires evidence-based results [2]. Financial resources and technical expertise are not the only barriers for community work as weak social ties are a growing concern [4]. Americans report feeling less connected to other people and their communities as they have no or few close connections with whom to discuss deep important issues [5]. In an attempt to explore ways to foster relationships and connections, community planners and social workers are starting to look towards the arts as a way to creatively engage in and with communities. Story Bridge is a program that uses storytelling in a variety of artistic mediums (e.g., community theater, dance, and painting) to spark dialogue among community members about matters close to their heart, with the mission of empowering communities.

This research takes place within San Juan County on Lopez Island, Washington. San Juan County is Washington's smallest county in terms of land size and is composed of a cluster of islands populated by over 16,000 residents, with nearly 32% aged 65 or older [6]. Following San Juan Island at approximately 8047 people and Orcas Island at approximately 5548 people, Lopez Island is the third most populous island within San Juan County at approximately 2545 people [7]. The Lopez Community Land Trust was formed in 1989 to provide permanent affordable housing options on the Island using environmentally sustainable practices [8]. This paper introduces the Story Bridge program hosted by the Lopez Island Community Land Trust and makes the following contributions.

- Acknowledging the important role of social ties, we address the call by the American Academy of Social Work to explore innovative approaches to help "rebuild the fabric of frayed social connections" [4] (p. 8) by exploring arts and storytelling as capacity building work. Moreover, Nissen calls to action a need for more social work and related disciplines to incorporate the arts [9].
- We discuss the concept of community capacity and empowerment from a public health perspective and explore how a community group could assess the capacity of an arts and storytelling workshop.
- We describe how storytelling can be used to engage in community work and discuss how the unique power of storytelling can be used to facilitate authentic dialogue and foster connections.
- We pilot a storytelling program evaluation and community capacity survey in an effort to provide communities an assessment that they can adapt for gathering evidence-based data for funding requirements.
- We offer recommendations on how planners and social workers can take away for practice a simple storytelling exercise that fostered listening, trust, and connection.
- Expanding on social work's call, we seek to expand awareness to the planning profession for the need for more capacity building projects to address the challenges associated with social isolation in community work.

2. Community Capacity

Scholars, at a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) symposium, collaborated to define and create operational measures for community capacity [3]. Researchers from the symposium came to a consensus that capacity entails a community's potential to define and address social issues [10] and the ability to leverage group-level and individual-level resources for action [11]. To differentiate capacity from competence, Goodman and his colleagues identified "capacity as a potential state and competence as an active state" [3] (p. 260). Capacity gauges the level of supportive characteristics within and surrounding the community to prepare them to take action towards their goals. The CDC symposium researchers created the following list to represent the dimensions of community capacity: citizen participation, leadership, skills, resources, networks, sense of community, understanding of community history, community power, community values, and critical reflection [3]. Drawing from this list of nine, researchers who were assessing the capacity of an obesity prevention program chose to examine four dimensions [1].

Chaskin further defined and operationalized community capacity in 2001 with his highly impactful multisite case study as "the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing withing a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community." [12] (p. 295). Other scholars define capacity building as interventions that enable communities to address health concerns through new structures, approaches, or values [13] and call for higher education to draw from applied developmental science to help collaboratively address social justice issues in the community [14]. Moreover, researchers have looked to capacity building to address public health issues facing disadvantaged children [15] and families [16]. Researchers have stressed the importance of looking at capacity to narrow the gap between research and practice [17] for program interventions as communities might face significant barriers including overly complex processes, insufficient expertise, differing theoretical orientations,

lack of resources, and challenges adapting programs to the local context [2]. Practitioners, who are focused on program effectiveness in their local setting, may not connect with vague implementation processes or overly scientific terminology found in hard to access academic materials [17].

Community capacity serves as a broader frame that is inclusive of the measure of community empowerment. Extensive research is available on evaluating empowerment at the local level by identifying domains, [18,19] describing creative approaches to stimulate group engagement including storytelling and photovoice techniques [20], and presenting program evaluation findings in a highly illustrative manner using a graph that resembles a spider's web [20]. This body of empowerment work does an excellent job of reporting details of internal and external power dynamics including both the leadership perspective and membership experience. The level of detail on the dynamics of the actual community group is, however, outside of the scope of our research. We are focused on evaluating the workshop and not the community group who serves as the host. For an in-depth arts study spanning multiple sites in Australia, researchers found that a dance program connected not only the performers to the community and deepened their understanding of contemporary dance, but the audience as well as passive participants [21]. Arts-based and entrepreneurial programs have the potential to strengthen capacity in rural areas by enhancing social networks, promoting a sense of community, and creating innovative avenues for change [22]. Community capacity is a better measure for our research as we are assessing how an arts and storytelling program can create support for the community's future ecosocial work.

Linking social work and environmental topics can lead to ecojustice and sustainability projects. Ecosocial work is a growing area that is drawing attention to conservation of the natural world and human-environmental connections [23,24]. For example, researchers have started to identify community gardens as sites for ecosocial work for food justice issues [25] and investigate how climate change impacts local drought conditions [23]. Interacting with environmental justice issues out in the field, social workers have started to ask for more education and training concerning environmental topics [26] including food justice [27]. To build capacity for addressing sustainability issues, environmentalists have looked to storytelling as an invaluable skill to expand community outreach. World-renowned biologist and naturalist E.O. Wilson was known to start class with a story. "Let me tell you a story about two ants." He harnessed the power of storytelling to help students relate and retain information [28].

2.1. Storytelling as an Asset for Urban Planning and Social Work

Renowned planning scholar and filmmaker, Leonie Sandercock, argued that planners use story "in policy, in process, in pedagogy, in critique, as a foundation, and as a catalyst for change" [29] (p. 11). The art of storytelling has been used in planning as a tactic to persuade stakeholders about the planner's future vision [30]. Planners can use stories as a way to describe what the numbers in a plan mean for an individual living in a community [31]. Stories can also be used for community participation in the process [32]. Researchers are curious about how to spark more public participation and interest in the planning process. Research from participatory theatre offers an example how the public engages in a mock planning process in a play called *The Town Meeting*, where participants from the audience offer input about a proposal for a fictitious town being demolished. With public input strategically ignored in the participatory theatre exercise, the researcher gathered a range of feedback from the audience concerning their experiences [33]. The highly contentious point that is embedded into the play is the consultation process, which is infamously depicted on Sherry Arnstein's 1969 ladder of citizen participation [34], where citizen input is invited and then subsequently ignored. Participatory researchers have advocated for ways to empower communities in order to move up the rungs of Arnstein's theoretical ladder. Involving citizens in the process in a meaningful way is a well-established concern in planning [34]. Just as planners strive to enhance their storytelling abilities [29,31], community groups and individuals can benefit from training to communicate their own stories.

How planners and other institutions approach community building from a needs-based perspective of identifying problems and issues [35,36] may actually hinder community capacity. In their highly influential book *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing Community Assets*, John Kretzmann and John McKnight introduced the concept of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) to enhance community capacity by taking an asset-based approach, building the community from within by the community members, and strengthening relationships [35]. The ABCD approach has been used as innovative strategy to promote population health [37] by empowering communities. Community development scholar, Ivis García, discusses how the needs-based approach can inadvertently label communities as low income or high school dropouts, which may ultimately lead to disempowering the community's problem-solving capacity as they now feel overly dependent on outside assistance to address problems [36]. Essentially, outside experts identify the deficiencies that need to be addressed and communities members are asked to continually retell stories of these challenges in order to keep receiving assistance. This relationship places the community member in the role of a client receiving services rather than in the role of a citizen [38] engaging within their neighborhoods. In the ABCD approach, communities map out their assets related to (1) the residents, (2) associations, (3) institutions, (4) land and the built environment, (5) exchange in non-monetary and monetary forms, and (6) stories of local culture [36,39]. The ABCD approach entails that communities self-reflect on their list of assets in order to determine what they can accomplish on their own independent of outside influence, what the community can achieve with some help, and what needs to be done externally by an outside partner [36]. Stories serve as powerful connectors within a community that help strangers become friends [39] and links the community to outside institutions.

Stories can connect people and even bridge the disciplines of social work and urban planning through shared historic ties to public health. Stories hold power for presenting information as our minds seek to relate and ascribe meaning to the narrative based on our own understanding of the world. For example, a nephew describes a tale of his resilient aunt.

> Living and working in the roughest section of Chicago, there were two separate occasions that burglars crept into her bedroom while she slept. My aunt awoke to one burglar as he snuck into her bedroom window. As not to wake me while I was sleeping in the room next door, she told the first burglar "Don't make a noise." Surprised, he started back toward the window and she said "You'll be hurt if you go that way. Go down by the stairs and let yourself out." The first would-be burglar left never to be seen again. For the second burglar, she requested for him to come back the next morning and she would help him find work. He did and she did. [40,41] (pp. 113–114; p. 136)

His aunt was none other than Jane Addams and her unique responses to the attempted burglaries was shaped by her life's work in the community and the stories she uncovered. Her observations while visiting England and reading Andrew Mearn's text *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An inquiry into the condition of the abject poor* were instrumental in her work and foundation of Hull-House in Chicago [42]. As a historical figure for the social work profession, she is known for helping immigrant communities affected by situations of poverty in Chicago [43].

Social work has strong ties to public health through Jane Addam's place-based interventions and the charity organization movement [44] with Mary Richard as a predominant figure for the Charity Organization Society [45]. Social work made great public health strides with the Children's Bureau by helping to reduce infant mortality rates by investigating the social determinants of health at the household level and epidemiological practices to build a partnership between policy advocacy and data collection [44]. Social work scholars discuss that settlement houses during the progressive era, such as Hull House, provided a real-world connection to communities that more contemporary social work researchers and advocates have struggled to maintain [46,47]. Ruth and Marshall offer a thoughtful history of social work's ties to public health from the progressive era, the increased need for social work following the Great Depression and World War II, the challenges maintaining hospital social

work departments during the 1980s, and the more contemporary interest in social work helping to address the HIV epidemic, disasters, and trauma [44]. Social work scholar, Laura Nissen, offers an engaging history of arts and social work by linking Hull House as an often-overlooked location for artistic education and production [9].

In addition to social work, Jane Addams has ties to urban planning due to her social inquiries related to sanitary reform and upgrading of the environment to include parks and playgrounds [42,48]. As planning history is predominantly dominated with Planning Fathers, scholars argue in support of Jane's inclusion in the story of planning history as a Planning Mother [48] due to her advocacy in upgrading the urban environment. Both social work and planning have ecosocial ties due to the human-environmental relationship of where you live can impact your health and well-being. Stories can serve as a powerful tool to explain how people relate to their environment and help them connect to each other. "One of the central challenges for asset-based community development is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations, and local institutions" [35] (p. 11). In an effort to connect communities to their story and to others, a community group invited the Story Bridge program to help address the challenges associated with building community capacity.

2.2. Story Bridge Program

Story Bridge is a participant-driven process of sharing personal stories and turning them into theater, which brings diverse people together, establishes empathy and a shared identity, and energizes a campaign of social transformation. Theater Director, Dr. Richard Owen Geer, collaborating with the small rural community Colquitt, Georgia originally created the method in 1990. In 1992, Swamp Gravy became the first project of the process now called Story Bridge. For 26 years, Swamp Gravy has been creating new productions annually and revitalizing Colquitt from a dying community to a pioneer in building creative economies in the rural setting [49]. The Story Bridge program uses the S.P.A.C.E. methodology to build relationships among participants concerning participant-driven topics (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Researcher illustration of the Story Bridge SPACE method.

- Story—Participants tell stories in pairs, circles, and to the entire group.
- Performance—Participants act out one another's stories, with options of adding dance and music, to perform for a live audience.
- Affinity—Participants bond with one another as they listen and perform stories while building authentic relationships.

- Collaboration—Participants begin to collaborate with strong rapport and share diverse perspectives.
- Engagement—Participants continue to engage with one another and with community building activities.

As participants tell and share their personal and community stories, they feel heard and seen. This allows participants to make room for each other's differences without having to agree with those differences. Stories can help people release burdens and connect with others.

> When we tell a part of our story to another, and it is not taken as something totally weird but as something that another person can understand, relate to, and accept, we realize that we are not so unusual as we might have thought we were. Our own particular story is then seen as legitimate, as something that is valid and has its own value. We then discover our experience is actually similar to that of other people [50] (p. 15).

As participants move on to perform each other's stories, the stories become lived experiences and greater unity is created from deep appreciation of the diverse individuals. Trusting relationships and generative social space are created that catalyzes further dialogue, planning, and action. "When a system is failing or performing poorly, the solution will be discovered within the system if more and better connections are created" [51]. A stressed community heals itself through connection. Story Bridge serves communities as a connection generator. We share a fieldwork example from Lopez Island, Washington.

3. Methodology

The Lopez Community Land Trust serves as the single case with embedded cases of residents who live on Lopez Island and participants who reside outside of Lopez Island. We selected this case because of the affordable housing disparities, the sustainability challenges associated with an aging Island community, and the potential for reconnection for the Coast Salish people who were long ago displaced from their traditional lands.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of San Juan County compared to the State of Washington-based data from the 2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey [6]. The population is slightly more female than male compared the State's more even distribution. San Juan County is less racially and ethnically diverse than the State. San Juan County's population is approximately 94% white, of which nearly 94% are not of Hispanic or Latino or Spanish culture or origin. The State of Washington's population is approximately 80% white, of which 87% are not of Hispanic or Latino or Spanish culture or origin. San Juan County has a much higher percentage of people aged 65 and over, with nearly 32% compared to the State, with approximately 15%. San Juan County also has a much smaller group of adolescents and children, under 14%, compared to the State, at approximately 22%. Residents of San Juan County are highly educated, with almost 49% completing a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the State levels, at approximately 35%. With its plentiful islands, these demographics reflect that San Juan County attracts highly educated individuals who are likely to be retirees.

With 46 percent of the households earning 50,000 dollars or less, only one affordable rental unit exists for every 2.7 of these households in San Juan County [52]. On Lopez Island, approximately 57 percent of the housing is for seasonal, recreational, and occasional use [52]. Figure 2 shows a photo of Lopez Island. As part of the Coast Salish people who inhabited Southern British Columbia, Vancouver Island, and the Western part of Washington, the Lummi tribe suffered the theft of their traditional lands for reservation life and lost cultural artifacts to museums [53] (pp. 41–52).

We conducted this research collaboration as an evaluator who has completed Story Bridge facilitator training and a facilitator who worked directly with the Lopez Community Land Trust during the workshop. From this collaboration, we describe the workshop process from facilitator observations and pilot a survey to collect participant experiences from the workshop. The survey, Figure S1, is available in the Supplementary Materials.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of San Juan County and the State of Washington.

	San Juan County		Washington State	
	Count	**Percentage**	**Count**	**Percentage**
Population	16,473		7,535,591	
Gender				
Male	7956	48.3%	3,766,859	50.0%
Female	8517	51.7%	3,768,732	50.0%
Ethnicity				
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish culture or origin	1024	6.2%	970,353	12.9%
Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish culture or origin	15,449	93.8%	6,565,238	87.1%
Race Alone or in Combination with Other Races				
White	15,535	94.3%	6,041,370	80.2%
Black or African American	207	1.3%	422,547	5.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	348	2.1%	226,088	3.0%
Asian	436	2.6%	857,031	11.4%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	52	0.3%	95,373	1.3%
Some other race	417	2.5%	398,348	5.3%
Age Group				
Under 18 years	2232	13.5%	1,661,939	22.1%
18 years to 64 years	8993	54.6%	4,709,665	62.5%
65 years and over	5248	31.9%	1,163,987	15.4%
Education				
Population 25 years and over	13,414		5,001,943	
Less than 12th grade	545	4.1%	444,721	8.9%
High school graduate or equivalent	2237	16.7%	1,109,016	22.2%
Some college	3201	23.9%	1,183,496	23.7%
Associate's degree	913	6.8%	501,449	10.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher	6518	48.6%	1,763,261	35.3%
Total Housing Units	14,030		3,148,084	

Figure 2. Researcher photo of Lopez Island, WA.

3.1. Facilitator Description of the Lopez Island Workshop

In 2018, the Lopez Community Land Trust invited the Story Bridge team led by a Theater Director, an Executive Director, and a Choreographer to facilitate a weekend workshop with the local community. The Story Bridge team held three online pre-design sessions to co-create a participatory two-day workshop with the local community. The goals were to: (1) achieve greater participation by the younger population and develop succession leadership in the community; (2) raise awareness concerning the needs for the newer members of the community (including access to affordable housing and farmland); and (3) deepen relationships with one another.

In Lopez, people of different ages were actively engaged throughout the process. Teenagers and elders were invited to be part of the program design team from early on and they played major roles in designing and executing the weekend event. On the first day of the weekend event, the Story Bridge team facilitated a "Play-in-a-Day" workshop, which was a daylong interactive session of sharing personal stories, collecting community stories, and culminating them into a community performance open to the public that same evening. Forty-eight participants of different ages and diverse backgrounds participated in the workshop, including four people who are part of the Lummi Tribe. On the second day, participants engaged in interactive role playing and visioning exercises to explore food, farming and affordable housing for the next generation.

3.2. Survey

After learning about the difficulties collecting data for grant funding opportunities from both facilitators and community groups in the field, we piloted a survey to collect participants' experiences of the program including questions related to community capacity. Researchers have discussed the difficulty in capturing the community impacts of art interventions as an artistic program may foster an increase in smiles rather than a direct, quantifiable measure [54]. After receiving approval from Florida State University's Institutional Review Board (STUDY00001459), we deployed the pilot survey post-workshop in an effort to design a tool that community groups, such as Community Land Trust, can use and modify for future workshops to help them collect evidence-based data. If we were investigating the outcome-based work of the Community Land Trust with the storytelling workshop as part of the broader programming, we would attempt to replicate key themes of the empowerment work [20] within the survey.

Our survey included measures related to community capacity as we were assessing how the storytelling and arts program can support the Land Trust's ecosocial community work. We included community capacity questions specific to the workshop on participation, skills, social networks, sense of community, community history, and community values. The first half of the survey included program-specific questions including attendance, reasons for attending, experience engaging with facilitators and peers, and the strengths and weaknesses of the programming. The second half of the survey included demographic questions about gender, ethnicity, race, age group, education, employment status, volunteer behavior, housing, and residency on Lopez Island.

We distributed the survey in digital format with the assistance of the Community Land Trust. We compiled descriptive statistics for our close-ended survey questions. For the open-ended survey questions, we performed a qualitative content analysis in order to identify themes. We asked a colleague, who has expertise in qualitative research, to review the coding strategy for potential revisions.

4. Preliminary Results

We received eight completed surveys (for a nearly 17% response rate) out of 48 potential workshop participants. Table 2 details the demographic information of our survey respondents. Our respondents were mostly female (with two male respondents), majority white (with one Asian respondent), and all were 45 years of age or older. The respondents were also highly educated, with at least some college-level education, held professional jobs or had retired, and were very active as volunteers. All of

the respondents were home owners who lived on Lopez Island. Many of the respondents reported choosing Lopez Island because of its natural beauty and sense of community.

Intergenerational partnership including a mix of individuals at a range of ages is a powerful means of nurturing social and environmental responsibility by helping to address such complex social and ecological challenges that require cross-sectoral collaboration [55]. One survey respondent did provide a comment that Story Bridge was successful in "Bridging human to human across what may seem like barriers—race, class, age, gender, etc." However, another respondent wrote a request for future workshops to "Involve more young people." Though facilitators also reported the actual workshop represented a mix of gender, race, age, and participants residing outside of Lopez Island, our pilot survey did not capture the diversity of individuals reflected in the workshop. One explanation for the lack of diversity in the sample is because the survey was not distributed on site by facilitators who were working directly with the respondents. Higher response rates are more likely to occur if the survey is distributed during the weekend workshop than in a post-workshop and less familiar environment.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents.

	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	2	25%
Female	6	75%
Ethnicity		
Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish culture or origin	8	100%
Race		
Asian	1	13%
White	7	88%
Age Group		
45–54	1	13%
55–64	3	38%
65–70	1	13%
71 or older	3	38%
Education		
Some college	2	25%
College	1	13%
Graduate school	5	63%
Employment Status		
Professional/self-employed	4	50%
Mid-range/white collar	1	13%
Retired	3	38%
Monthly Volunteer and Participation Behavior		
None	1	13%
1–4	3	38%
5–10	1	13%
11–15	2	25%
25 or more	1	13%
Housing		
Owned, free and clear	4	50%
Owned with a mortgage or loan	4	50%
Lopez Island Residence		
Within the Land Trust	1	13%
Outside the Land Trust	7	88%

Overall, survey respondents gave a lot of positive feedback about the Story Bridge program. Table 3 shows details about program feedback. All of the respondents participated in both days of the workshop. Two of the respondents also reported attending the pre-planning sessions. One participant revealed that their motivation for attending was "To bring a creative force forward in the community in

order to approach wicked issues in a new light." Others were motivated by a love of theatre, community building, general curiosity, or an interest in learning new skills.

Table 3. Story Bridge program participant survey feedback.

	Count	Percentage
On what days did you participate in the workshop?		
Pre-Planning, Play-in-a-Day, and Discussion	2	25%
Play-in-a-Day and Discussion	6	75%
Received training or sharpened skills		
Yes	1	88%
No	1	13%
Experience engaging with facilitators		
Very good	7	88%
Good	1	13%
Experience engaging with peers		
Very good	7	88%
Good	1	13%
I felt _____ in my ability to identify a clear set of community values.		
Very confident	2	25%
Somewhat confident	3	38%
Neither confident nor uncertain	3	38%
Story Bridge was _____ for discussing community history.		
Very helpful	2	25%
Somewhat helpful	5	63%
Somewhat unhelpful	1	13%
Would you participate in Story Bridge again?		
Yes	6	75%
No	2	25%

Most participants felt that they received training or sharpened skills and listed that they learned about theatre, creating a story, dancing, listening, and connecting to others. One participant commented about the theatrical training "Though I had to get over my dislike for being on stage, I found the work on the first day to be enriching." Respondents reported generally very good experiences working with their facilitators and peers. Story Bridge participants reported mixed responses concerning community values and discussing community history. Nearly 63% felt at least somewhat confident in being able to identify community values. Almost 88% felt Story Bridge somewhat to very helpful for discussing community history (with one respondent who reported Story Bridge was unhelpful).

Figure 3 shows that the major themes from the open-ended survey responses were collective and connection, theatre and dance, learning and creativity, as well as pain and vulnerability. The "Play-in-a-Day" created powerful bonding among the participants. Story Bridge participants shared the following feedback concerning the relationship-building experience.

- One participant commented how the process helped build relationships as it has the "ability to bridge people who may never have encountered or wanted to approach one another in a meaningful, loving way."
- Another participant stated "It was fun! It taps into something deeper with fellow neighbors and friends that we don't get to in the day to day."
- A third respondent reflected it was a way to "learn more about people that I smuggishly thought I knew already!"

Following the play, five participants specifically wrote that the break-out session with a partner was one of the most memorable parts of the workshop. One of the respondents recalled the experience as

Stepping into another person's shoes and deeply listening to the other. Ability to recognize and compose the arc in the story. Ability to tell someone their story back to them in a meaningful and accurate way.

Respondents expressed several comments about feelings of vulnerability and discomfort. One participant found sharing personal stories to be a rather painful experience.

The workshop focused on building community by sharing personal stories. It opened up a whole chapter in my life that had been dormantly painful for decades. Caution about how powerful the experience can be, especially with its capacity to open emotional wounds.

Another participant commented that the process was "personally pushing me into areas of discomfort and learning to get comfortable." All of the women reported that they would participate in Story Bridge again, while the two men showed no interest.
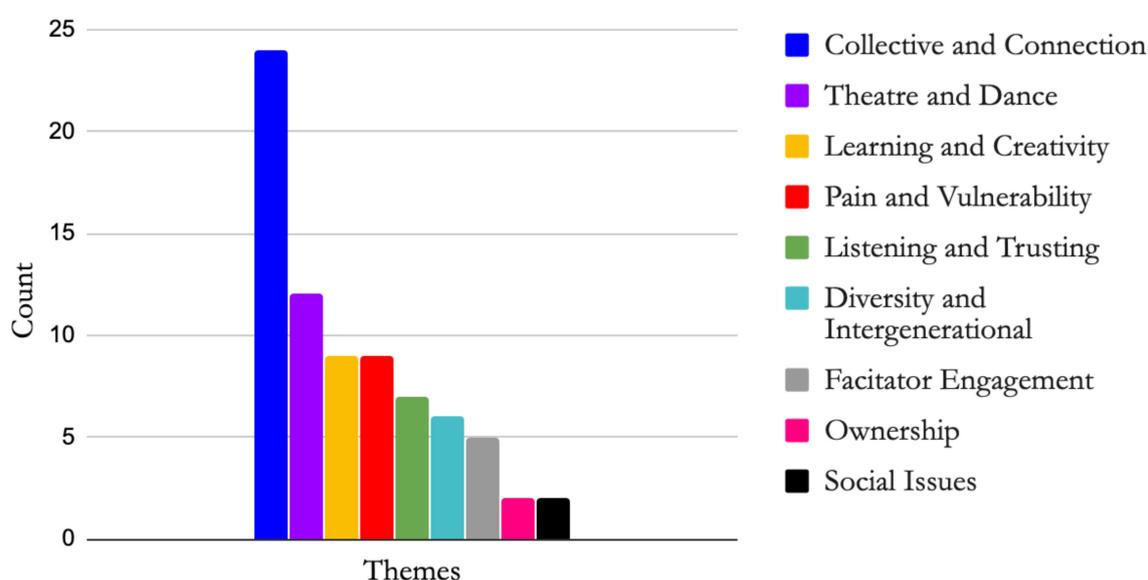
Figure 3. Themes from the Lopez Island Story Bridge.

5. Discussion, Limitations, and Future Directions

The work with the Lopez community is one example of how Story Bridge facilitates capacity by connecting the community to itself and creating generative relationships from inside out as the foundation for social health. Social isolation is a growing issue for community work as it entails potential negative public health consequences and hinders collaborative opportunities to promote citizen empowerment. Isolated individuals with weak social ties are more likely to suffer from mental illness, decreased levels of physical health, and report a diminished sense of well-being [56]. From 1985 to 2004, "the number of people who have no one to discuss important matters with nearly tripled" as close connections with non-family neighborhood and volunteer group friends decreased [5]. Despite rapid technological advances and social media innovations, people have weaker close support networks. Though social media tools can be used proactively for organizing rallies and as an excellent resource for coordinating events, heavy social media use may even exacerbate feelings of isolation [57,58]. Thus, an individual might have hundreds of social media connections with few to no close confidants. For a growing population without close community ties, being able to foster engagement and conversation about important citizen-inspired matters is becoming vital to increase a sense of belonging. Arts and storytelling presented an alternative strategy to create bonds and stimulate authentic dialogue.

As a limitation of this research, we piloted the survey after the workshop ended. For future storytelling programs, we plan to deploy or recommend that community groups deploy the survey

while on site in order to increase response rates and improve recall for participants. Though not everyone's story is represented in this preliminary research, we offer the pilot survey as a potential ABCD tool that community groups can adapt and deploy with or without our assistance. The Lopez Community Land Trust has a clear asset of being a highly educated group. We hope that our survey presents some options for future groups who are determining their own assets and what external partnerships work best for them. In terms of survey design, researchers should try to balance between academic rigor and meeting community needs. Empowerment researchers recommend following ranked-response (Likert-scale) questions with open-ended questions [59] to improve the reliability. Though we could have included more questions in the survey, we wanted to keep the survey design relatively simple during the pilot study. Communities often desire simple, straight-forward surveys that allow them to receive rapid feedback in order to apply for funding [60].

As take away advice for practice, planners and social workers do not necessarily need to have a background in theatre and dance to replicate one of Story Bridge's impactful tools. To create connections between strangers and to deepen existing bonds, our preliminary research from Lopez Island shows that pairing up individuals in a simple storytelling exercise can be a first step toward building community capacity. By providing the entire group with a story prompt, the facilitator can give each pair instructions to tell their story at different time increments (e.g., two minutes, one minute) and ask their counterpart to tell their story back to them as if it were their own personal story. Though we did not ask about this exercise directly in our survey, our respondents wrote this down as being a memorable relationship-building exercise. The book, *Open Circle: Story Arts and the Reinvention of Community,* by Richard Geer and Qinghong Wei offers additional guidance on the facilitation process for community performances [61]. Facilitators do need to be mindful that sharing personal stories can be a powerful positive or negative experience for participants. For this reason, we do recommend education and training on storytelling and capacity building prior to conducting community work.

Harnessing the power of story, scholars are making inspiring strides in the digital world to promote intergenerational relationships [62] and improve cultural competency [63]. Though social media use has been linked with increased feelings of isolation [57,58], conscientious use of social media involving face-to-face interactions is associated with reducing feelings of isolation [64]. Moving forward, Story Bridge is excited to explore how digital stories in collaboration with fieldwork can serve as a method for growing those close relationships that are a vital element for nurturing community work.

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