

Storytelling and youth: An emerging force for social change

by Andre Heuer

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MINNEAPOLIS, Minn., USA -- I often hear the lament from some storytellers, "Where are the young people? Who will carry on the tradition?" I too have felt this concern. I am aware of the dedicated work of storytellers like [Kevin Cordi](#), [Elizabeth Rose](#), and [Judy Sima](#), who work hard to involve youth in storytelling with programs such as the National Youth Storytelling Showcase. However, in spite of their significant work, I see few youth at the National Storytelling Network conference or many of the other storytelling events that I attend. Do we need to be concerned? Are there young people involved with storytelling? If so, where are they?

Well, recently I found out, and I am no longer concerned.

This summer I attended the [Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference](#) (PTO) in North Carolina and the [Midwest Social Forum](#) (MWSF) in Wisconsin. I met many young people in their teens and twenties who are working with storytelling not only as performance art but as a tool for social change and transformation. The good news is that the young people at these conferences are creating a new context for their storytelling work. Their language in describing their story work at times is different and older storytellers might not always recognize their forms of storytelling, but they are telling stories.

Amalia Anderson is a 20-year-old who is co-lead of the Raíces project. This program developed by the [Main Street Project](#) helps rural Latino individuals and communities reduce their level of poverty. When I told her that I was writing this article about young people working with story, she voiced her enthusiasm. She expressed how important the telling of story is for individuals and communities. Anderson spoke about how the telling of story helps the community understand who they are and their hopes and dreams. In Raices she uses story as a basic tool of helping individuals and communities to develop, implement, and sustain income producing strategies and initiatives to improve their lives. In our conversation I mentioned storytelling as performance, and though she is aware of this aspect of storytelling, she said it is not where she finds her passion. Anderson's passion is in helping people create the space to share their stories. She believes that story-sharing enables the knowledge and wisdom of the people to be identified and forms the basis of a sustainable community.

I gave a workshop at the PTO conference on narrative consciousness, critical thinking, and how our stories affect the way we perceive and respond to the world around us. More than 300 people attended the conference with at least 40 percent in their teens and twenties. The PTO conference is described as a gathering of people committed to liberating education, community action, and interactive theater for social change. These young participants were intent on understanding how their stories and the stories of the people they work with affect their lives.

One highlight of the PTO conference was the work of Michael Rohd with the [Sojourn Theatre](#) in Portland, Ore. **Witness Our Schools** gives voice to the stories of the Oregonian people, creating a dialogue about the Oregon educational system. Rohd's

work began in the late 1990s at Virginia Tech when he was a student. The book [Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue](#) describes his work. Rohd's work, like Anderson's, is rooted in story for the purpose of supporting social change.

At the MWSF there were more than 500 participants with 50 percent in their teens and twenties. Many of these individuals, like Anderson and Rohd, involve story in their work. The evening sessions at the MWSF included a time for performances of music, rap, and story. These sessions were loud, and my ears sometimes needed a break, but story was being shared throughout the evening. My workshop at the MWSF focused on the role of story in oral culture. Most people attending my workshop were young.

At the forum I met a young man, Cesar Sanchez, who helped set up communication technology for the gathering. I attended his workshop on media activism. The workshop demonstrated ways media can distort the news. I was one of the older persons in the room and once again the session was attended primarily by young people. Sanchez offered a solution to counter the misinformation of the media: digital storytelling. He demonstrated how video storytelling gives individuals opportunities to tell their own story rather than be interpreted by the news media. The intent is to give first voice or public voice to the stories of those who often remain hidden and voiceless. Presently Sanchez and his partner Demetrio Maguigad work with a neighborhood council in Evanston, Ill., to help address the needs of the Latino community. His organization, [Video Machete](#), hopes to demonstrate how media technology can help the community to grow. In this endeavor digital storytelling is one of their essential tools of developing story. They aim to produce cultural works that address real change enhancing the life of their community.

Do we need to be concerned about young people's interest in storytelling? My answer is no! Many young people are concerned about story. However, their primary concern is not in telling stories per se, but in creating the opportunity for those without a voice to tell their stories. Storytellers who come from the more traditional art of telling need to make the effort to listen to these young people, to go to the places where they work with story, and to learn from them.