

Silence Speaks > Rationale

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Silence Speaks draws not only on the StoryCenter's extensive history of exploring the relationship between personal narrative and multimedia, but also on an interdisciplinary body of theory and practice in public health, feminist media studies, and human rights advocacy which understands that:

1. Sharing and listening to stories in a group can be transformative.

An abundance of academic literature and anecdotal evidence from trauma studies, oral history practice, and global movements for justice has made it clear that speaking one's truth to a listening audience, if done with appropriate preparation, facilitation, and follow up support, can have a profound impact on the ability of both the speaker and witnesses to thrive, sustain mutually healthy and loving relationships, and participate in civil society. We know this from our hands-on experience with storytellers in communities around the world.

2. First-person narratives have a vital role to play in health and human rights advocacy.

Hearing an individual's story and watching it unfold with images often moves viewers more deeply than does simply reading words on a page. Making a beautiful piece of written, visual, and/or sound art out of an experience of human suffering can give dignity to pain, promote learning, and inspire compassion and action within families, communities, and institutions. *But attention to context is critical.* We believe that it is our responsibility as facilitators to assist storytellers in situating their lives within broader frames, so that stories do not reinforce the misconception that "problems" reside within individuals but instead implicate social, cultural, historic, economic, and political structures.

3. Cheaper production tools are just the beginning.

The global spread of neo-liberal approaches to information and communications technology (ICT) education and media production and distribution has largely ignored the need to critically analyze the underlying economic structures that determine who has access to media training and tools, and whether or not technology education can improve the life circumstances of

students and their families. Rather than glorifying gadgetry or training a "professional" class of media producers, we champion an alternative vision for narrative and media – one that emphasizes clarity of purpose in making and sharing stories, advocates the transfer of concrete knowledge and skills that can benefit storytellers and their local communities, and employs ethically-responsible participatory processes.

4. “Participation” is complicated.

We strive for transparency in determining what participation looks like and how it will be impacted by the inevitable power dynamics that arise between and among project partners, facilitators, and storytellers. Rather than assuming equal ground, we work to acknowledge privilege and inequality, promote reflection and cultural humility, and identify strategies for accountability and empowerment as stories are revealed, produced, and shared.

5. The benefits of authorship can be elusive.

When privacy and safety issues are pertinent, storytellers may not be able to claim ownership of their work. In an effort to maximize the benefits of participating in a workshop for our storytellers, we consult carefully with our project partners to determine which people will face minimal risks, in creating stories, and to decide how and where these stories will be shared for maximum positive impact to storytellers and local communities. We emphasize the importance and value of involving storytellers in all aspects of a project, from production to distribution -- to whatever extent they wish to be involved.

6. Creating meaningful spaces for experiencing stories is essential.

Amidst the explosion of online video content, we question the notion that simply enabling isolated individuals to view videos online will on its own lead to substantive change. When does the passive consumption of stories about distant suffering fuel appetites for image porn or merely encourage pity, and how can the power of the Internet and social networking tools instead be harnessed *effectively* to support health, equality, and justice? We see Internet distribution as merely one option among many; we emphasize strategic venues for sharing stories, such as at counseling sessions, trainings, or community education events; as part of media and communication campaigns to promote policy-level change and shift social norms; and within longer-term movement building efforts that view storytelling as essential to personal evolution, community development, and political activism.