

Holding Space for Each Other's Stories: A Phenomenological Study of an Adolescent Story Slam

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Abstract: This research features an investigation of the interactions between adolescent storytellers and audience members during a live storytelling event. Seven storytellers and seven audience members participated in extensive interviews describing their respective experiences. Utilizing a phenomenological design, the researcher identified four major essences of the participants' collective experiences of connection and transaction between storytellers and audience members during the event including 1) the relational symbiosis of storytellers and audience members, 2) the nature of the story slam as a planned and produced event, 3) the storytellers' inclusions of specific, personal details which resonated with specific, personal details in audience members' lives, and 4) the storytellers' intentional style and content choices which corresponded with reactions from audience members.

Objectives: Utilizing a phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014) and drawing from reception theory (Bennett, 1997; Hall, 1980) as a framework, this study addressed one main research question:

- How do storytellers and audience members experience the phenomenon of interaction, connection, and transaction when live, true stories are shared in the specific context of an adolescent story slam event?

Perspective/Theoretical Framework:

- **Storytelling:** Gutkind, 2012; Griffith, 2017; Mendelsohn, 2010; Campbell & Moyer, 1988; Lewis, 2011; San Pedro, 2015
- **Reception Theory:** Bennett, 1997; Brook, 1968; Hall, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1978

Methods: I partnered with a 9th and 11th grade English teacher at a public charter located in the downtown of a major Southwest city and a spoken-word poet/youth workshop leader to produce an extra-curricular story slam event. The total participation for the story slam event numbered between 50 and 60 students, teachers, parents, and friends. Central to this group were 14 adolescent participants, 7 storytellers and 7 audience members, who provided detailed reflective interviews (Roulston, 2010) about their experiences as teller or listener, respectively.

Data sources for this study included video and audio recordings of the storytellers' performances, audience members' surveys, and audio recordings and transcriptions of the follow-up interviews with the 14 research participants. Since "[e]vidence from phenomenological research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84), the main source of data collected were the participant interviews; however, the video and audio recordings, as well as the audience member surveys, were used as memory aids and guides during the interview process.

My systematic manner for reading and writing through data drew from Moustakas's (1994) procedural stages of epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (pp. 84-102) to describe, analyze and interpret the phenomenon of connection between adolescent storytellers and audience members during a live, storytelling event. By working through these stages, I produced three narrative descriptions including a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a textural-structural synthesis.

Results:

My final textural-structural synthesis of participants' collective experiences of a live storytelling event included four essences:

1) The experience of a live storytelling event involved a symbiotic perception between performers and audience members. Performers considered their experience based on the presence and reaction of the audience, and, in turn, audience members regarded their experience in relation to what the performers did on stage.

2) Another essence of the experience of a live storytelling event was that it was a planned and produced event. The presence of a DJ fostered a lighthearted and welcoming feeling as the music filled the silence of the auditorium and welcomed storytellers to the stage. The DJ, as well as the event's MC, provided physical support to storytellers by being on stage with them as well as by using physical cues like pointing, high-fives, and fist-bumps.

3) A third essence of the experience of a live storytelling event involved the sharing of specific, personal details. When storytellers shared personal details that resonated with audience members, it generated a sense of connection and a feeling of, "that could have been me." Especially when the personal details were perceived as vulnerable, they also generated vicarious emotion.

4) A final essence of the experience of a live storytelling event included intentional stylistic choices by storytellers and corresponding reactions from audience members. Storytellers planned and executed deliberate moves in both their content and delivery, and audience members moderated their responses in return.

Significance: The implications I draw from this dissertation suggest that an invitation to hold space for the creative expression of adolescents is not to be taken lightly. A reframing and rethinking of roles and responsibilities from participants, both performers and audience members, in a performance space can lead to a greater sense of connection, interaction, and transaction.

- *Reconsidering the Role of the Teacher as MC*
- *Focusing on The Importance of Educating the Audience*

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