



An Episode of Your Life:

Rich narrative engagement with episodic stories

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Abstract

This article describes a new practice map, an “Episode of Your Life”, which adapts existing narrative “... of life” practices to an episodic story from a person’s life using metaphors from film and television production. This practice map draws significantly on ideas of “peopling the room” and the Team of Life in order to scaffold safety in imagining the process of telling painful stories through the collectivising of the storytelling process. This practice map specifically does not require that the storyteller tell the story, but rather invites them to imagine how they might tell a story from their life in a way that aligns with their values, hopes and preferred storylines. Some of the significant effects that we discovered were related to the richness of the visual metaphor for adding another layer of possible meaning-making in the storytelling process, and allowing for a “proliferation of what’s possible” in the imagining of the storytelling, such as through the use of time jumps; computer-generated imagery; inviting rich descriptions of preferred relationships, histories and values; and dignifying of stories that otherwise might be left unspoken. Participants were left with a feeling of solidarity and a “safe riverbank” from which to imagine telling their stories.

Key words: *metaphor; visual media; television; re-authoring; non-individualising practice; narrative practice*

Originating context

The Episode of Your Life (EYL) practice map emerged within an existing narrative peer consultation group that met from early 2020 to mid-2023. This group first came together to create a collective document in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it continued to meet because we appreciated each other's companionship and solidarity. We met virtually and included participants from Canada, Australia and the United States of America. In February 2021, we hosted a series of conversations about media and narrative therapy. These conversations explored how we could join community members in conversations about cherished media when we lacked the same awareness of the show or character, as well as what becomes possible when we have shared awareness. Later in the month, we conducted two live interviews with outsider witnessing on the topic of cherished TV shows. These interviews highlighted how powerful it could be to articulate the role of TV in our lives and in our own understanding of ourselves. Shows can serve as important companions in difficult times (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009), examples that make us feel possible (Salja, 2022), and as conversational scaffolds to explore the meaning of our own lives (Tilsen, 2016).

This new map is indebted to the many "... of life" conversation maps in the history of narrative practice. Beginning with the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), which explores histories, supportive relationships, hopes and values, the many "... of life" practices have been developed using distinct metaphors and perspectives to work with painful problems and to help us "[tell] stories in ways that make us stronger" (Wingard & Lester, 2001). These include Seasons of Life, which supports people in telling stories of surviving experiences of incarceration (Abu-Rayyan, 2009); Voyage of Life, which supports developing preferred relationships with substance use (Coleman, 2015); and Soundtrack of Your Life, which uses imagined playlists to engage young people in narrative conversations (Maund, 2021). Because its focus on inviting in other voices to assist in telling the story, the EYL practice map is particularly aligned with the Team of Life (Denborough, 2010). In each instance, these metaphoric practices have responded to the specific contexts and resonant metaphors of the communities in which they were created. We believe that the EYL map will resonate for community members who have an existing relationship with visual pop-culture media.

Much of collective narrative practice has been in response to invitations from communities experiencing trauma and hardship (Denborough, 2008, 2018). In contrast, the EYL practice map emerged from a different community context: not a context of hardship or trauma that required response, but out of a shared interest in media and curiosity about what media metaphors might make possible. This distinct originating context positions EYL differently in the lineage of collective narrative practice than many other "... of life" narrative projects. The stakes appeared lower in the initial creation of this metaphoric practice; we were not, in that moment, experiencing or responding to a specific context of exceptional hardship or trauma. We found that the practice allowed us to engage with a metaphor that richly resonated for our group of media-loving people, and that this resonance and the careful construction of the practice map to align with narrative values of resisting individualism (Freedman & Combs, 1996), seeking the "riverbank" (Kaseke, 2010), attending to issues of gender, culture and justice (Dulwich Centre, 2020), storytelling rights (Denborough, 2014), and re-authoring (M. White, 2007), offered significant and sometimes unexpected effects.

Method

The EYL map of practice invites the storyteller to think about how they would want to film a story from their life as though it were a TV episode or film, with a focus on the making of the episode and imagining who they would choose to involve in the process and how they would choose to distribute it in the world. Vermeire (2017, p. 51) wrote that "opportunities to step into unfamiliar positions, such as that of researcher, can ... provide fresh vantage points and insights". We wondered what it would be like to approach a story, whether a difficult or traumatic memory or a precious or preferred memory, in the subjunctive realm, from a novel position of agency (Vermeire, 2017), while surrounded by a chosen support team engaged in a collective effort (Reynolds, 2011). We were curious about the effects of bringing a carefully chosen team into the room before approaching the events of a story as a form of scaffolding safety (M. White, 2007) and enhancing the "reflexive consciousness" of their community (Myerhoff, 1992, p. 232). We were also interested in the effects of focusing more on imagining story craft itself in the subjunctive/imaginal realm and less on retelling the details of a story. Hedtke and Winslade (2017) described the subjunctive as:

the voice of the “as if”. It enables a speaker to make speculative references without committing to the actuality of a situation. It is thus the grammatical mood of the virtual and it opens up a space between the past and the present. (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017, p. 80)

Imagining film techniques such as computer-generated imagery, special effects and film editing opens up even more virtual territory in the possible retelling of a story.

The subjunctive posture of EYL aligns it with response-based practice (Squire, 2016; Wade, 1997); it connects the storyteller to a skilful or preferred (re)imagining of an experience. The storyteller experiences the process of connecting with their own skilfulness, knowledges and preferences around the story, which allows them to experience themselves acting on the story rather than feeling like the story is exerting its will over their memory or experience. We found this particularly effective when telling stories that included the intrusion of shame.

The map invites storytellers to imagine being on the set of this production and asks them to consider how they might create a preferred experience for themselves and others involved. The set is a creative space where anything can happen. The map also invites storytellers to exercise agency and boundaries around the telling of their episode by deciding who does and does not get to be involved with this production, an invitation that aligns with Lorraine Hedtke’s “membership mapping” processes (2020). Additionally, the map invites participants to imagine how the episode, once produced, might circulate in the world, its intended audience, hoped-for audience response and hoped-for effects, providing additional opportunities for storytellers to reflect on and speak about who and what matters to them.

An Episode of Your Life *narrative practice map*

Choose an episode

- What’s the story you want to work with? Feel free to be vague here – just the overall event.
- Would this story follow the plot points of the memory or diverge in some way?
- What themes would you want to emphasise in this telling of the story?
- What would you hope this story would stand for?

Gathering your artistic collaborators

- Who would you want in the writers’ room?
 - What about their perspective, lived experience, values and/or understanding of you might help you tell the story?
- Who would be behind the camera?
 - What would you want them to focus on or not focus on?
 - Is a particular genre or style suited to the story (comedy, soap opera, sitcom, cartoon, sci-fi, etc.)?
- Who would design sets and costumes?
 - Are there specific costuming decisions – wardrobe/hair/makeup – that would help convey what you want this story to stand for?
 - What would the costuming decisions make more possible in the story or for the characters?
- Anything is possible in the telling of this episode. Would special effects or time travel play any role in the story?
 - Would there be any supernatural or metaphysical elements in the way the story was told? If so, why?
 - Would there be flashbacks/flashforwards to other moments layered into the story that might be important?
 - Would there be any easter eggs in this episode? (An “easter egg” is a subtle piece of content that viewers might notice if they are familiar with the material, but that other viewers might miss.)
- How would you cast the episode?
 - If you are in the scene, who would play you? If not yourself, why this person?
 - Are there new characters who would need to be introduced to tell this story right?
 - Who would you cast in this episode? The people who lived it? Other trusted friends or loved ones? Especially skilled actors? What would these people get right about portraying the story?
 - Would your set include any of the following: an intimacy coordinator, therapists for the cast and crew to consult with, therapy animals, a ball pit, massage therapists, Elders, tarot readers, nap pods, particular snacks, a rehearsal period, team building, child care or something else?

- How might these contribute to the story telling environment?
- Is there anyone you would want on set or available to consult who has not been assigned a role yet (script supervisor, props manager, producer, etc.)? What effect would their involvement have?
- Is there anyone who would not get to be on set or have a consulting role in this production even if they wanted to?

- What would they notice and appreciate about this story and how it is told?
- Is there anything else you would want known about this production?
- If you included anyone you know personally in the crew, what might it mean to them to know that you wanted them involved?

Post-production

- Who would you choose to edit the episode?
- Would voiceover or narration add something important? Whose voice(s) would you choose?
- Who would you choose to score the film or create the soundtrack?
 - Why this/these particular artist/s? Why these particular songs or pieces?
- Would this episode work best as a stand-alone film or part of a series? Why?
 - Are there questions or cliffhangers the audience would be left pondering?

Episode reflection

- Do you see the story in any way differently than you did before this exercise?
- What specifically would you want to remember about this telling of the story?

Imagining your audience

- What platform(s) would this episode come out on (theatres, cable, streaming, public library, YouTube)? Why?
- Who would you hope would see this episode?
 - What would matter about these folks seeing the episode?
 - How do you hope they might be affected by seeing it?
 - Is there anyone you would rather wasn't allowed to view this episode, even if they wanted to watch?
- Is there anyone you would want to watch this episode with?
 - What would they notice and appreciate about this story?
 - Are there particular snacks that are right for this screening?
- Whose recap/think piece/podcast about the episode would you be excited to read or be interviewed for?

The interview process

This map offers a set of possibilities, not a manualised treatment. The role of the interviewer is to follow where the storyteller wants the story to go. As interviewers, we also relied on many narrative questions we were already familiar with to draw out the values, relationships and meanings reflected in the crafting of the episode. Rather than following the practice map as a strict script, we became curious about the specific words, phrases, metaphors and images that we heard, and we used these to elicit further rich description.

The practice map deliberately does not include direct questions about the story being described. This gives the storyteller the opportunity to be as indirect as they prefer, while still making choices about how the story would be told and who would be part of the telling.

Hayward (2006) described scaffolded narrative questions as ones that “can provide a handhold or purchase on unfamiliar knowledges and a resting place from which, with other questions, further ascent is both possible and exciting” (2006, p. 41–42). He further suggested that “It’s hard to even get a good view of problems until you have some other place to stand” and that a scaffolded map can offer “multiple vistas and vantage points for people to survey the territory and adjust their heading so it better fits a preferred track” (2006, p. 40–41). The filmmaking frame offers a move beyond the known and familiar (Vygotsky, 1986) by scaffolding questions that invite a different vantage point, and then opportunities to speak to what the person gives value to. White (2004) described the critical importance of double listening “for signs of what

the person has continued to give value to in life despite all that they have been through” and believed that “people take steps to try to protect and to preserve what they give value to” (p. 47).

We see this practice as a form of double listening in which the storyteller is invited to consider why they would make the artistic and collaborative choices they do in the retelling of the episode. This line of inquiry allows them to speak about values and preferred identities. We noticed that when the interviewer scaffolded examples of what was possible by referencing specific shows or films as examples or by scaffolding concepts from film production, storytellers were able to generate additional creative possibilities in their approach to their own episodes. There is risk in such scaffolding that the interviewer could become too centred, taking up an expert position by offering examples or references. We found it important to take the storyteller’s lead, and if they were not resonating with the metaphor, to stop. One participant found that although the episode metaphor didn’t resonate, it led them to thinking about telling their story in the form of a children’s book. The same sorts of questions – about who would write it, what the aesthetics of the book would be and the audience for the book – still elicited a rich telling of a preferred story. During the group conversation, we identified a few specific examples of visual elements in television shows that offer narrative possibilities, including the camera snap and photograph imagery in *Scandal* (Rhimes, 2012–2018) offering a way to highlight an important moment, and the record scratch freeze in *Saved by the bell* (Engel, 1989–1993) as an invitation to look at the discourses that are operating in the scene.

In our own experience as storytellers, we each took up different questions in the map and discarded others depending on what fit with our interests and stories. We took varied approaches to filling the roles in the episode team; some of us filled the team with close loved ones; some with famous artists; others with concepts, values and skills. We worked with positive stories, painful stories and traumatic stories. We found the practice impactful with more distant stories of at least a year in the past. We also worked meaningfully with stories as far back as 30 or more years.

Effects

Peopling the room

For some storytellers, the creation of the “creative team” meant that they were invited to richly “people the room” (Reynolds, 2011). As one storyteller said, “It just felt like there was so much agency in talking about it this way. Instead of [feeling] powerless, it feels like standing in collective power”.

By imagining their story told by a group of largely queer and trans collaborators, one storyteller experienced themselves as more connected to that community:

I think it’s made me feel like part of a community in a more real way, which is really interesting, because sometimes I feel a little bit weird about the way that I relate to the construct of gender and what that means for other people who are not cisgender but who relate to it wildly differently than me.

Another storyteller populated not just the crew, but the scene itself, which took place in a swimming pool, with supporters:

I’m picturing ... having previous selves and people show up beside the pool while I was doing this. So, you know, my 18-year-old self learning how to be around dogs. I think that would be kind of cool to see that self show up ... And then also, for a while ... I would take my niece once a week for an adventure, and we went swimming one time, and usually when we would go swimming, we would just stay in the shallow end. [My niece] was only like, four or five at this time ... So we went to go and get [my niece] a lifejacket so she could do the slide. And I was like, I was crying, I could barely breathe, I was so afraid. And [my niece], who was just so little, took my hand and she was like, “It’s okay, auntie, I’ll be here with you”. So I would have her also show up beside the pool ... I think it would highlight that I had friends with me in the pool.

Effects of visual metaphor

By asking about what the storyteller would want the camera to focus on or not focus on, we were able to speak about “the gaze” in terms of power relations and social dynamics (Foucault, 1977). This allowed for rich inquiry into people’s experiences of looking and being looked at, and their preferred experiences

of visibility. This connects the practice map to existing narrative practices of “turning the spotlight back on the normalising gaze” (Hutton, 2008), and also to ideas of feminism and visual culture (Jones, 2010b). A feminist and anti-oppressive lens is not only useful but necessary here, since in asking the storyteller to imagine the preferred visual framing of the story, we are inevitably asking about the cultural experience of visibility. Amelia Jones (2010a) noted that:

Feminism, in most of its forms, proposes or demands a political and/or ethical stance towards cultural experience ... Both modes of thinking – feminism and visual culture – are ... driven by political concern and focus primarily on cultural forms as informing subjective experience. (Jones, 2010a, pp. 1–2)

There are many ways to use visual culture and the visual metaphor to make space for previously unseen stories (Mulraney, 2024; Oliver-Powell, 2023), ways in which “visual documents break down oppressive tropes” (Hillman, 2023). In imagining how a story can be told, the storyteller is invited to engage, to the extent that they choose, with these questions of power and visibility. We found that some storytellers did want to engage in this way, making choices that directly addressed power relations and the gaze. For example, one storyteller commented, “What I would not want is any kind of sexualising gaze”.

In addition to the invitation to explore power relations in the gaze of the camera and audience, the visual metaphor invites rich description of preferred aesthetics. In these conversations about aesthetics, we saw an opening to conversations about, as one group participant put it, “What invites us into the outside ... What makes us see that the neutral is not neutral? What are the moments where it’s revealed that Oz¹ is not as magical as he thought he was?” The opportunity to make the operations of power and discourse visible was a significant effect of this way of speaking.

The invitation to think about aesthetics elicited many forms of meaning-making and allowed storytellers to move beyond verbal expression as the primary storytelling method. One storyteller shared:

There’s a filmmaking technique that comes to my mind, which is sort of like ... slide down columns of seeing many faces. And I think what I would want to capture is the emotional resonance of people’s experience. So I would want there to be a lot of looking at faces. Not a lot of talking, but

a lot of acting through, like, micro expression. And then maybe intercut with flashbacks about different people that help you understand maybe why a moment is so resonant for them.

Aesthetics also allow storytellers to make visible the specific timeframe of their stories. This honouring and dignifying of specific moments in time is linked to narrative practices of honouring history, such as in Cheryl White’s (2016) *Memory book for the field of narrative practice*. The imagined films have the potential to define and tell the story of highly visual memories of episodes in time. One storyteller shared:

Production design would just be the people from [the TV show] *PEN15* [Erskine, 2019–2021], because ... the ways that high-school kids try to experiment with expression would be treated with appreciation. I think at this point, one of the three friends was wearing like, utilikilts and punk t-shirts, and I would want that to be rendered so lovingly. And, oh God, I was going through some fashion choices at that point. But just the awkwardness of what we wore, or things that maybe were important to people that you wouldn’t know.

Another storyteller spoke to the importance of colour, which helped them articulate the feeling and complexity they wanted the episode to hold:

I think I’d want colours. Like a vibrancy of colours ... blue feels like a colour that’s connected for me not only to sadness, but also to fear and a feeling of constriction, but it’s also tied to, like, calm and expansiveness. So it feels like blue, a lot of blue tones would hold all of that complexity.

When one storyteller was invited to reflect on how or whether they would want their fear represented in the episode, they commented:

I think I would want the visuals to be focused on the actions and the effects of the fear rather than making the fear manifest ... I wouldn’t want the me in this episode to be, you know, surrounded by a cloud. Maybe it would be there in an audible, like, a racing heartbeat or a sound of breathing, so that at moments where the fear is most intense it’s somehow present but not visual.

This line of inquiry facilitated not only the externalisation of the problem, but also significant agency in how the externalised problem would be represented. The problem story still exists in the episode, but the actions of the storyteller are brought forward in the visuals.

Relationship-focused responses

We noticed that questions that centred who the storytellers gathered around them to tell the story mattered in a number of ways. One storyteller noted that the effect of the group of collaborators they gathered to tell the story would mean that the plot of the story would have to change:

I think that the “right” way, that this version of the writers room [is] a kind of collaborative process of writing that scene with a lot of viewpoints and just a really rad group of people together writing that scene. I think it would have gone very differently.

They further realised that they wanted the group they were gathering to make decisions not only about who would be added to the team, but how the story would be told:

Perhaps that group of people would use their collective knowledge to identify the right [camera] person who was interested in telling that story. And sort of in some ways actually kind of giving [the writers’ room collective] the creative freedom to be the ones to determine what comes from it.

By centring their value of collective action, the storyteller noticed that the answers to many of the interviewer’s questions would be best determined by the collaborators. Few details of what the story would look like in the episode were decided in the interview, but the values and knowledge of the collective were thickened over many questions and responses. The storyteller described the effect of this way of conceptualising the story as strengthening their confidence in their values and ability to handle similar difficult situations in a congruent way in the future.

Allowing others to take a more central role was an outcome for multiple participants. One shared:

I think the challenge that I’m having is because of the wrestling that I’m doing with the effects of shame, some of which is quite old and it’s historical ... there’s an awful lot of “I don’t wanna take up space”. But I’m persisting ... I can see that the experience that I’m having now is a helpful thing ... This has me thinking to make an episode about being tucked under the path and shining the light up on other characters. A character whose job is to be supporting other characters and helping (more marginalised) stories to be given light.

Another storyteller said:

I think my mom would be really excited to see the costuming story, since the story we most often tell of us at that time is of the struggle between us. Telling this counter-story would be a big deal, I think. Maybe I will tell her after this.

Multiple participants noted a desire to share their experience of the story with those they identified as potential collaborators. Others reported a sense of healing in the relationship at the awareness they would want someone involved in telling the story, even if they might not choose to share that with the person presently.

Proliferation of what’s possible

One participant in the group conversation commented on working with a memory of experiencing violence:

I actually found myself not at all beholden to one choice in the way I was thinking about it. I actually felt so many choices available and to sit with like, I could do this, I could do this, I could have everyone else who is standing in this crowd of people where this happened, like, turn around and respond. I could choose that that entire crowd of people is people who love me. I could choose that that entire crowd of people is people who have been through this thing and understand it, and I kinda could just choose all of them or I could choose to say something. I could choose to elbow this person in the face. I could choose to, you know, go into a loving flashback about this person’s humanity. And just the proliferation of what’s possible on its own meant a lot to me.

The participant also shared:

This is a moment of feeling trapped and disempowered and like the only way through it is to subjugate yourself or to freeze ... I want a chance to say everything that I wanted to say, to have every different fantasy response to this, to have a collective of people respond to this.

Another storyteller shared:

[The questions] moved me from a position of [being] an object to which this all was happening and into a position of subject ... I could see what was possible, so it became about seeing other pathways, possibilities, things that were present in the scene and other pieces of context that had

impacted things. So the feeling of shittiness was dissolved and maybe replaced by a desire to feel accountable, which feels much more useful.

In one instance, a storyteller used multiple shots of the same moment to express multiple preferred responses to a situation when one was not enough. They used montage for multiple purposes such as showing “everything this agency could have done and never did”, and “the closing credits would have a montage of everything we did on purpose in how we told the story differently”. They also employed a Greek chorus:

It's gonna be, like, a two minute scene in five hours. But, like, a group of people who live outside of the gender binary who ... stop and have a conversation among themselves ... I think there is some sort of narrator or narrative function that comments on what's happening in the story ... I like the idea of having a chorus to comment and help the people who need to learn from this do the learning ... like, visibilise and render legible the power that is operating.

This process of speaking about the making of the story (rather than just a telling of events) allows the storyteller to *advance* the story or *change* the story in ways that they may have not previously imagined possible. The subjunctive framing of the exercise not only opens spaces around the memory where there may not have been any before, but it also creates a degree of emotional and reflective safety to explore the events within that increased space and gives voice to the preferred (safer/calmer/ bolder/more just/less secret/less isolating/more colourful/more dignified, etc.) version.

Another way to understand the “proliferation of what's possible” is to extend Freedman and Combs's (2008) “dot map” metaphor of narrative practice to include other dots on the map; experiences that may not have happened in real life but that have an effect on the experience of the story by offering new metaphors and visual images.

Safe riverbank position

Some storytellers shared stories of significant hardship or trauma; this metaphoric practice map allowed them to speak about hard stories without the requirement to speak directly and in the first person about their experiences. We discovered that thinking of our stories in this way shifted the angles from which

we saw them in our memories. For some of us, traumatic experiences became more distant, and we felt less powerless when the memory was held from the vantage point of a camera crane. From this “riverbank” position (Kaseke, 2010), cherished and present values became more visible.

One member of the group conversation commented:

I say this with the caveat [that] the memory I was approaching didn't feel dangerous to approach; it felt like one that I could think about safely. But it felt even safer approaching it in this way, because I felt so in control of what was going on, that there was no suffering in the way that I thought about it; it just was like, who would be with me? I think to me, the idea of approaching a painful story, once you have gathered in this community of co-conspirators, before you necessarily spend a lot of time thinking about the story, feels like scaffolding a lot of safety.

Time effects: Reconnecting with agency/ skills/solidarities

In my work with people who have been subject to multiple and recurrent trauma, one of the primary considerations is to restore that valued sense of who they are, that preferred sense of identity or personhood that in this presentation I will refer to as the “sense of myself”. There are a number of key aspects to this work. One key aspect involves discovering what it is that a person gives value to in life. (M. White, 2004, p. 46)

We noticed that revisiting past stories and strengthening a connection to a sense of agency helped storytellers to connect with feelings of possibility and solidarity in the present.

One participant noted that the interview:

invites so many opportunities to think about people and the roles that they can play. And actually, every person who is part of the story, there's resonance across [time] ... It's been almost 10 years since [this story]. I'm not close with many of these people anymore. I haven't talked about this in ages ... But still, telling this story gave me some hope and some feeling of connection to a sense of agency and community ... It was nice to remember that I actually do have a history of doing hard things ... It was nice to remember that this is not the first time I have felt crushed by my life, and I have often responded to that feeling by doing something.

Another participant shared:

One of the things I realised was these two stories of being assaulted and being harassed actually felt like they had to be one episode for me. And I genuinely don't know if they happened the same year of my life. Like, it's been too many years. But they just felt so entwined and the people who responded to them felt so entwined. So I actually wound up putting two stories together that didn't actually happen together, in a way that allowed me to make meaning and feel agency and see my own responding through a story that had no limits, which was really cool.

We discovered that this effect – reconnecting to experiences of agency and a sense of connection to values and long-held precious hopes – was present even when the storyteller was telling a precious or preferred story. One participant, reflecting on the experience, shared:

It was really emotional in a way that I didn't quite anticipate, because I intentionally did not think about any of the hard stories in my life. So many of these questions brought me to very tender memories of that experience with my mom, of watching *Doctor Who* [BBC, 1963–1989] with my dad, of playing dress-up with my sister in the basement. I found that this brought me to early memories in a way that I didn't quite anticipate, and in a really emotional way, and it felt like it made those stories feel accessible and worth telling, like that there would be some value in sitting with some of those stories that feel very small and that are not— like there are trauma stories that often feel like they're the more relevant story. And I guess what came for me was all of these other stories, that are not trauma stories, felt like there'd be some value in [asking], how would I light and score and direct hundreds of sessions of dress-up with my sister? What would that look like, to tell that story in a way that is honouring and then that connects to my values? That was— yeah, it felt emotional in an unexpected way.

Choosing the right audience

Sometimes, keeping people away is an act of agency or an expression of values; other times, letting them participate or see in controlled ways is. Choosing not to allow people to collaborate but still wanting them to witness the final film was another choice. These are all practices that enable a “shifting

in proximity” (Hedtke, 2020) or a “revision of membership” in the club of life (M. White, 1997), and allow different identities to develop, as this transcript section demonstrates.

Q: Is there anyone who would not get to be on set, or to have a consulting role in this story, even if they wanted to?

A: Most people? Definitely the people from my old job. [Laughs] Although again, if people were, like, coming in good faith and wanting to learn from this thing that is happening, there would be a group of cisgender people who would take responsibility for anybody who wanted to come and watch the way this was being filmed, and deal with any bullshit or nonsense, and ask questions, and hold people to a standard of accountability about their questions and their interests and their feelings. And they would be able to watch, like, from you know, like, the mezzanine maybe.

Q: Who would you hope would see it?

A: Everybody. Um, a lot of cisgender people [Laughs], and a lot of not cisgender people. Like, trans and nonbinary, agender people, but for different purposes ... I would want the people that it is *to* to see it, and I want the people that it is *for* to see it.

Q: Is there anyone that you'd rather skip this thing?

A: No.

The storyteller later shared:

In terms of audience, I think if anything it may be an expression of faith in my audience ... I think it's an expression of faith in cis people to learn. Like there's a hopefulness, [but] there's an assuming the best of them, that like, if they had access to something that could help them, you know, do better, they might try to? ... Like, I think this telling of the story sees the best in people and their ability to change.

Experiencing our stories as worthy of telling

This approach to storytelling had dignifying effects on many storytellers. One storyteller commented that the interview enabled them to engage with their story “as a story to tell, or a story worth telling and worth rewriting”. They further reflected:

There was a part of me towards the end of the interview that was like, oh, maybe [interviewer] should just share this video with people. Like, that would be cool, this conversation is really cool and really interesting, and I'm really interested in this conversation, maybe it'll be important for them to just be able to share it and this process and maybe this process can be meaningful.

Another storyteller experienced a dignifying effect on many of their stories:

I think it'd be kind of cool to have a series ... It'd be cool to have the story of my fear of animals, and this one, and like, leaving my marriage and ... there actually have been quite a few of these that I think it'd be fun to tell.

One of us has also since imagined turning their story into a zine in hope that this telling of their story might help others face challenging problems.

Rich engagement with privilege and representation: Practices that can sustain solidarity

The flexibility of the practice map in inviting many different collaborative roles in the team made space for storytellers to richly engage with ideas of privilege and representation. Many of the practice map categories ask some variation on the question, "Who would you want to be alongside you in telling this story, if anyone?" This is asked about the writing, the set design and visual effects, the costuming and the direction – there are many opportunities to bring in other voices.

We found that values and awareness of social location and privilege informed how some storytellers situated themselves in the storytelling collective. Particularly because this practice map emerged from a context of curiosity rather than responding to trauma, some storytellers had questions about whether their stories were needed in the world, especially when they occupied an identity group whose stories are often privileged. These moments of hesitation opened up rich possibilities for using the storytelling process as a practice of decentring themselves in the telling of their own stories.

Some storytellers found that occupying a supporting role in the crew or entrusting decision-making to imagined collaborators whose perspectives they valued felt like an important expression of accountability and made it more possible for the storytellers to engage

with the map of practice and to experience their storytelling process as being aligned with their values.

One storyteller took up the metaphor of "lighting" in a significant way, identifying their own preferred role as "shining a light" on the stories of other, more marginalised, community members. Telling the story in this way, with this focus on supporting other stories to be told, to locate themselves in this supportive role, sustained their connection to practices of allyship. The storyteller reflected:

For a light to do its job, of, well, lighting, it needs to show up: to turn on and to shine. [This shining allows the light-holder to attend] to the justice-doing of space making and holding, stepping out to lean in – ears first, eyes fully open, mouth closed. Centring the important job of decentredness. Maybe that's the thing about allyship, all the fumbling and worrying of "getting it wrong" wastes valuable energy that could just be turned to the cause at hand ... I think of light like a face turned towards, creating not only visibility, but a witnessing gaze.

Another storyteller wanted many voices in the writers' room:

... people who have a really positive lens for both feminist work and intersectional feminist work and anti-racism, and probably some community members, whether that's locally or nationally, to be able to be part of that conversation and to be part of writing that scene.

This allowed them to imagine how the story might have gone differently if there had been more collaboration from a wider range of justice-informed voices. They said that, "The wrong director would be focusing on me" and that they would rather the director "be paying attention to how power was experienced in the room". They reflected:

I think a lot of people, me included, spend a lot of time (often more than desired) thinking about the ways we wish something could have gone differently, or what we wish we could have done, or what we would do now (with hindsight) in a given situation. Having the opportunity to utilise a conversation like this to not only make space for these considerations, but to also bring in the imaginal aspects of recruiting additional voices, connecting with others whose opinions and perspectives really matter, and to utilise new knowledge and subsequent learnings

to participate in changing the outcome also allowed me to feel less powerless around the situation that happened. It also allowed me to feel more competent and skilful (and trusting of that skill set) as a result. For example, it was very comforting and edifying for me to recognise through the process of this conversation that even though I still might not have a great deal of trust in my own skills around how best to have navigated the difficult situation I was in, or how I could have most meaningfully participated in changing the outcome exactly, I did feel that I could trust my ability to identify the right people to entrust this story with.

Conclusion

The Episode of Your Life map of practice grew out of a context of practitioner peer conversations and curiosity about the effects of media in narrative conversations. We found the EYL conversations richly supportive of double-story development, and in the years between those first conversations and the writing of this paper, we have found that the effects of these conversations have lingered with us. We would love to hear from other practitioners who take this practice map out into the world to learn more about the effects of this way of speaking about episodic stories.

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Note

¹ This is a reference to how the wizard from *The Wizard of Oz* (LeRoy, 1939) presents himself as magical and powerful ruler of the land of Oz, but turns out to be another non-magical person from Kansas, USA, who found his way to the magical realm, just like the protagonist Dorothy. This has become a metaphor for when something is believed to have more power or magic than it really has.

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