Visiting Hannah Arendt: Reflections on the civic affordances of storytelling in design education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I consider the role of storytelling as a civic act, which is made visible through a reflection on the storytelling processes that informed the underpinning of a curriculum project showcased during the *Stories Worth Telling exhibition* (2023). To this end, I focus on how the stories worth telling are shaped, archived, and celebrated through participatory engagements and experiences by fourth-year Information Design students at the University of Pretoria. Underscored by Hannah Arendt's notion that storytelling serves as a bridge between the private and public realms, I highlight the civic affordances of the storytelling process that may ultimately augment the students' critical thinking and not only their technical design capabilities.

Keywords: Storytelling, design education, citizenship, civic engagement, higher education, South Africa.

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A reflection

> In a sense, I not only captured the story of my subject [for the book project], but also mine. We became more connected (Information Design alum 2019).

Taking a cue from the alum's reflective statement above, I begin this paper by relating a story of my own. Recently, a colleague asked me to comment on the canon of graphic design history. Her overarching question 'What can be done to rediscover underappreciated women designers?' (Resnick 2023/04/28) – was aimed at addressing overlooked mid-century women designers. More specifically, the intent was to investigate how to dismantle the widely accepted existing canon that relegated these female designers from their male counterparts. In response, I mentioned the need for marginalised voices to be enabled and heard more widely. Essentially, the heart of my exchange was a deliberation about whose stories are worth telling. I highlighted that someone's worth should not be legitimated by the status quo, but rather, it is through conversations with others that we make connections and thereby honour people's stories of their lived experiences, irrespective of their identity.

Introduction

Echoing the above vignette (or more aptly, the inciting incident),[1] a redefinition of validity is brought to life in the breadth of stories that were exhibited as part of the *Stories Worth Telling* (2023) exhibition (henceforth SWT). The exhibition was a retrospective of BA Information Design alums' fourth-year editorial design project spanning 20 years. In retrospect, what may have started with purely pedagogic, editorial design intentions for the project during its inception in 2003 has turned into a storytelling activity with wide-ranging civic worth.

Stories and storytelling as ways of making sense of the world and one another are not new ideas. Close to home, Africa's tradition of storytelling, specifically oral storytelling, has a rich cultural history.[2] From a political/philosophical perspective, Hannah Arendt (1998), for example, believes that storytelling is essential to the human condition. Arendt considers stories a critical force enabling political equality in public spaces. Thus, she recalls how the Greek *polis* provided an ideal space that prided civic plurality and conversation. Subsequently, civic efforts to have one's voice heard (despite the waning of public spaces such as city squares or bowling clubs)[3] are central to contemporary ideas of what it means to be a citizen.

Nowadays, being a citizen is not constrained to the designation that bestows voting rights. For example, Isin (2009) rejects an inclusion-exclusion dichotomy of national identity in his discourse on citizenship; he positions citizens as claimants of rights who are bound by a shared awareness of injustice that motivates critical thinking, communication, and acts of resistance.

Underpinned by the aforementioned thoughts on storytelling and contemporary citizenship, in this article, I aim to bring the alums' experiences of their storytelling processes of the editorial design project into a broader discussion about storytelling as a civic act. To this end, I begin by expanding on Arendt's idea of storytelling as a bridge between the private and public realms to facilitate conditions that are conducive to citizenship. It is necessary to acknowledge here that while storytelling is neither intrinsically nor exclusively a civic act (its myriad uses include education, entertainment, cultural preservation, and moral instruction), it may be used as political praxis to amplify the voices of marginalised groups or to challenge power structures. Consequently, viewing storytelling through a political lens for the purposes of this article, the case study unpacks the participatory, civic engagements that the book project facilitated by way of the reflections from the alums who participated in the SWT exhibition. Ultimately, the empirical evidence underscores how the project provided alums with tools for engagement beyond the classroom, in general, and tools for dialogical encounters towards citizenship, in particular.

Storytelling: "visiting" Hannah Arendt

Arendt's concept of storytelling is inextricably linked to her understanding of the human condition[4] and, specifically, her views on political action. Given her formative life experience, her existential political thought was shaped against the backdrop of the rise of totalitarianism.[5] Her subsequent experience as a German-Jewish *émigré* profoundly influenced her work and perspectives, particularly in understanding political subjecthood, freedom, and the complexities of the human condition. She was drawn to participatory democracy, although an unconventional narrative methodological approach distinguishes her philosophy. Seyla Benhabib (1990:180) argues that 'for Arendt totalitarianism required not so much a new science as a new "narrative"'. In line with this perspective, Arendt's is not a theoretical treatise – her innovative political discourse is predicated on the concept of storytelling and is thus primarily concerned with the setting/context of politics.

According to Arendt, the act of storytelling is like that of throwing a bridge across the chasm between the private and the public realms, where both realms have their

own characteristics and functions. Her distinction between the private and public realms, which follows, is crucial in understanding the setting of storytelling and, by extension, political action. The private realm is linked to the realm of necessity and comprises personal matters and actions that fulfil basic physical needs. For example, it is characterised by the labour of our bodies, which are cyclical, repetitive and focused on meeting biological needs. As a result, the private realm is a space where individuals are not seen or recognised by others, and the immediacy of their actions does not bear on the public sphere. Whereas Arendt ranks labour and work as the modes of existence in the private realm, in the public realm, she recognises action as the primary mode of being in the world.

Arendt identifies three categories as conditions for action in the public realm: plurality, natality, and storytelling. Plurality denotes that the public realm requires the presence of others: 'It is a space not necessarily in any topographical or institutional sense' (Benhabib 1990:194), but rather where people act in concert. To quote Arendt (1998:198-199), it is 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly'. It is a shared space – a space where individuals can be seen and recognised and where they engage and participate with others. It provides a common ground for human initiative and the human capacity for change; that is, natality. The public realm is thus characterised by a diversity of perspectives, which ultimately enables the expression of human diversity and involves actualising human capacity for freedom.

Unlike Arendt's designations for private and public realms and her characterisations of plurality and natality, she does not provide a definitive notion of storytelling. Nonetheless, like her use of the aforementioned bridge analogy, Arendt draws on two useful metaphors in her arguments about the power of storytelling. Firstly, she describes storytelling as the way one trains the imagination to 'go visiting'. Essentially, this metaphor invites citizens to depart intellectually and emotionally from their private positions and to disclose their own image and identity in relation to others in the public realm. According to Benhabib (1992:129), 'narrativity' (the term she uses for Arendt's storytelling) is 'the identification of our intentions (as actors) in terms of a narrative of which we are the authors'. Storytelling then is enacted in a space between people (Young-Bruehl 1977:184). Moreover, by being immersed in 'inter-subjective' spaces (Benhanib 1990), individuals can figuratively visit a diversity of perspectives, cultures and narratives. However, Arendt contends that storytelling is not merely a form of communication to recount historical events and experiences, nor is it in service of erasing differences among people. Instead, 'going visiting'

denotes being in one's own identity but visiting what the world would look like from different positions.

While it does not sway the theoretical scaffolding of this article, Arendt (1998:176) may be critiqued for her idea of communicating stories only as 'speech acts'; for instance, Jørgensen (2018:418) draws on Butler's (2015) understanding of public assemblies as plural forms of performative action when he contends that embodied and performative storytelling are necessary too. Nevertheless, Arendt recognises storytelling as a tool to rise above personal experiences and, through public debate, negotiate new narratives that shape the 'common world' (Arendt 1998). This informs her stance that the journey that results from allowing one's mind to go visiting beyond one's own sphere of existence will enable individuals to engage with the complexities of the human condition and thereby has the potential to foster a nuanced and deeper understanding of human life. Disch (1993:666) interprets Arendt's storytelling as a term 'to describe critical understanding from experience', implying that storytelling facilitates understanding from within. According to Disch (1993:668), 'storytelling is the way that Arendt proposes … to dispel the presence of the Archimedean vantage point'. Hence, Arendt's act of storytelling is a point of departure and not an end. It is also a process of understanding that doesn't begin with preconceived categories and norms. This viewpoint elicits a second analogy related to storytelling by Arendt (1979), namely 'thinking without banisters'.

The phrase 'thinking without banisters' is informed by Arendt's deliberations about the loss of bannisters – traditional structures or moral frameworks – that historically supported and guided human thought and engagement with the world. Consequently, Arendt affirmed that the absence of such bannisters presented an opportunity to foster a shared sense of understanding without making claims of absolute objectivity or neutrality. To counteract conditional appearances that she maintained are characteristic of nationalist and populist movements, Arendt (1998) stressed the importance of robust public debate among citizens. She favoured legitimate power, a dynamic she believed that emerges amidst citizens' consenting and collaborative political actions. The traditional Greek *polis* thus offered valuable insights for Arendt in her examination of the modern condition and its decline in genuine political engagement.

From these two metaphorical actions that facilitate the creation of an environment for political action, it may be gleaned that Arendt's concept of storytelling holds promise to challenge normative or hegemonic narratives. Within the context of this paper, a fitting example is the narrative of racial superiority that both the Nazi and apartheid regimes peddled in their respective countries during the twentieth century.

Both regimes relied on consensus-building actions that used language to uphold a false reality by those in power. As Arendt would state, these regimes stirred people to act without thinking, negating people's humanity. Hence, Arendt's story-telling has 'redemptive power' (Benhabib 1990) because it allows people to reimagine politics and engage with the world in an open and imaginative way to construct a more inclusive and just society. To this end, Arendt argues that storytelling calls for situated critical thinking, or what Disch (1993) refers to as 'situated impartiality'.

Even though Arendt's concept of political action is focused on the broader implications of human agency and the creation of a shared world, the theoretical framework of this article emphasises the act of storytelling as collective action for change. Bearing this in mind, the following working definition of citizenship is constructed around Arendt's ideas of political action and public space. Citizenship is a political form of engagement, which necessitates individuals confronting each other in the public realm to exert their capacity for action and freedom for the common good without foregoing their plurality. It is a relational practice that takes place within and through collective spaces to make sense of the past while framing the future.

Case study: reflecting on *Stories Worth Telling*

I now turn to a case study to present the experiences of the University of Pretoria's Information Design alums in the editorial design project. For curatorial and administrative purposes of the SWT exhibition, the alums were asked to complete a questionnaire (Lange 2023) with their submission specifications. In addition, the questionnaire asked alums whether the curriculum-related project that inspired the exhibition had any noteworthy influence on their professional design development. This question prompted reflection by the participating alums, and the resulting empirical evidence recounted below points to the fact that the project got alums to think about the many affordances of the storytelling process.

For background and contextual purposes, it should be reiterated that the SWT exhibition was a retrospective of BA Information Design alums' editorial design project, fondly referred to as the "book project" by current and past staff and students alike. The project, completed annually since 2003, forms part of an exit-level, studio-based Information Design module characterised by professional practice areas to equip students with the relevant and necessary skills to enter the design industry once they graduate. As such, the book project serves as a culminative design project for design educators to evaluate students' understanding

and mastery of core skills in design thinking and making, and their ability to apply these discrete skills in the context of creative writing, editorial design and editorial imaging. That being the case, the project brief asks Information Design students 'to develop a unique concept for a hardcover printed book dealing with someone they perceive to be a person of worth or whose story is worthy of telling' (Lange & Lubbe 2023).

From the project's onset, the brief necessitated that the alums venture beyond the classroom in search of stories. The following anecdote speaks to how the project took alums out of their comfort zones and literally brought them face-to-face with other people:

> [The] project taught me that a spirit of excellence requires a level of discomfort … This project demanded objectivity, authenticity and vulnerability – emotions that are sure to result in some level of discomfort. So has every worth-while project or piece of work since (Information Design alum 2004).

The relational nature of storytelling was central to the generation and co-creation of editorial content. Alums recognised 'how important the team behind the book design/production is' (Information Design alum 2010) and that 'a successful project is not necessarily a one man job' (Information Design alum 2010). Similarly, another alum (2016) reflected on how the book project inadvertently provided a heuristic device for future design projects, noting that '[the project] changed my perception of the creator and the consumer thus fundamentally an opportunity to be able to think outside the box'.

Through the storytelling process, the alums also learnt to straddle the fine line between empathy and exploitation when engaging other individuals. For example, they experienced first-hand the significance of consent as a condition of participation. The alums learnt they needed to act with integrity and not take advantage of their subjects' time and/or stories. From a pragmatic design perspective, the experience highlighted how respecting someone else's privacy does not hinder creativity. In fact, one alum notes how constraints prompted creativity:

> The anonymity of the book gave me a unique challenge that taught me to solve problems creatively and come up with ways to portray a message and emotion that differs from the norm (Information Design alum 2020).

Participation also facilitated a type of mutual humanisation or, in the words of an alum (2010), 'finding care in another's life story without judgement'. Another alum echoes this sentiment in the following excerpt:

> It allowed me to listen, let go of my own biases and fully immerse myself with the subject. It's a practice I use to this day – always listening first before jumping into a design. I find myself taking more of a co-design approach because of this – and in a way that creates something special and authentic – something people can resonate with. And that in its own right is powerful (Information Design alum 2019).

Through suspending judgement, the alums became more attuned to listening rather than merely hearing what they wanted. The resulting range of stories and themes that emerged for the books were neither normative nor contrived. For example, one alum had the following to say when explaining the premise of the story that is presented in his project:

> [It] is a non-fictional narrative of an inspirational woman who dreamed of becoming a successful farmer and managed to achieve her goals despite her hardships and criticism from others in the farming industry. This is not a Cinderella story but one of a woman who realised her own dreams instead of waiting on a fairy godmother to conjure them up. An anti-Cinderella who does not wait on a prince to free her from her struggles but rather saddles up her own white steed to overcome them. A story of a woman succeeding in a man's world (Information Design alum 2017).

Other themes that emerged from the alums' stories included trauma and adversity, physical disabilities, geopolitical conflicts, diasporas, *sangomas* and traditional healers, as well as pranksters, to name a few. Accordingly, alums were exposed to new perspectives; listening to other people's stories allowed them to consider the world from a different standpoint than the one they're used to. The relatively atypical nature of these themes suggests that alums sought marginalised voices, gave their subjects a chance to be heard, and honoured individual's lived experiences through design. Students also acknowledged elements of archiving and preserving collective memory. For instance, one alum shared how the project initiated her 'lifelong personal genealogy "project"' (Information Design alum 2005).

Interestingly, by navigating other people's stories with them, the alums expressed how the project helped them recognise and disclose their own appearance in an otherwise broad-based design course. The following reflections illustrate this observation:

> During the IOW 400 book project I found "my voice" as an illustrator (Information Design alum 2015).

> The project rekindled my love for writing and language which inspired me to pursue design opportunities that included copy writing and written

> content development as well as graphic design which has greatly enriched my experience as a professional designer (Information Design alum 2005).

> [R]etrospectively the project and its copywriting component served as another reminder that writing … was my strength (Information Design alum 2010).

Also, in terms of professional development, the following excerpts speak clearly to the fact that the implications for a user- and human-centred design mindset continued once the alums entered the design industry:

> The book project made me realise what an incredible impact storytelling can have – especially in the UX/UI world. It's important to get insight into your users and build empathy in order to reach them emotionally (Information Design alum 2015).

> It also enhanced my interactive skills for interviewing people. Being an experience designer – user testing is a big part of my job and being able to understand people's problems and providing them with the best solutions is key (Information Design alum 2016).

> It taught me to constantly question if my designs are relevant to the content it speaks (Information Design alum 2015).

In addition to listening attentively to ensure relevant and meaningful design solutions, the story generation process expanded alums' understanding of broader-ranging issues their subjects and their community faced. Likewise, many alumni noted how the project empowered them to actively contribute to the public sphere, either directly or indirectly. Both of the excerpts that follow speak to this point:

> I went on to study a Master's degree in Visual Arts … My thesis explored digital storytelling during the Fallist protests – it was a continuation of my interest in student politics and how to visually represent some of the complexities facing young South Africans in higher education (Information Design alum 2016).[6]

> I was commissioned to contribute to a book project … the book is based on research, stories, and little-known court records of marginalised South Africans who resisted the colonial government. What I learned from the book project gave me good insight and experience for the work I would take on (Information Design alum 2014).

Overall, the ripple effects of the project's mandatory participatory engagements are evident in the following thematically-related reflections:

> [The story the subject shared] … was a great example of being a woman who can practice a career that allows for the space to make a home and raise children. It showed me the balance that I would have struggled to see when I started my own business and was a big driver to my own success (Information Design alum 2007).

> Although I don't produce or design books today, the storytelling aspect for most creative projects originate from the same space: listen, respect, interpret, and visualise (Information Design alum 2007).

> Designing and developing this book sparked my love of storytelling, a tool that I have utilised throughout my career (Information Design alum 2008).

Discussion

The book project's inherent storytelling focus facilitated a space where the alums and their "person of worth" encountered one another. In fact, the project nudged them to interface with citizens they may otherwise not have engaged with. This insight from the empirical data is resonant with Arendt's ideas of going visiting, and it is precisely in this encounter that the following civic affordances of the act of storytelling were ignited: recognition and promotion of plurality, fostering dialogue, preserving memory, encouraging critical thinking, and empowering individuals to use their skills towards the common good. For discussion purposes, the implications of these civic affordances are considered below, specifically from the particularities of the South African socio-political and higher education contexts.

Through direct engagement and dialogue with a diverse range of citizens, the alums encountered multiple perspectives and lived experiences that were distinct from their own. Sharing personal narratives allowed the alums to dig deeper and think critically about the stories and related themes that emerged. To this end, the alums were not necessarily engaged in factual or historically accurate accounts. Like Arendt, they resisted the ethnographic truth-story in favour of stories that captured the essence of lived experiences and realities of fellow citizens. Such 'little narratives' (Holtzhausen 2012:128) allowed for dissensus because they challenged alums' assumptions and metanarratives. It can, therefore, be inferred that this type of storytelling has the potential to initiate enlarged thinking. Storytelling can aid comprehension of different social realities and what it means to be a citizen in a way that is espoused in Arendt's philosophy.

Furthermore, the consensus-resisting themes in the books imply that moral judgements did not hinder the alums. This suggests that the alums operated in a space where they could think without bannisters. To borrow a term from Benhabib (1990:193), the nature of the project's storytelling processes enabled a 'discursive space', meaning that storytelling enabled a space for alums to engage with themselves, others, and the power relations that they exist within as citizens. Owing to the longstanding run of the book project, not only does the project enable discursive and inter-subjective spaces, but it also reaffirms them. This is significant firstly because there is 'always a tension between the stories people have to tell or want to tell and the stories they are permitted to tell in the public square' (Jackson 2017), and secondly because of the complex socio-political realities in South Africa.

First, it is important to mention South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was assembled as a consultative process at the end of apartheid with the central purpose 'to promote re-conciliation and forgiveness among perpetrators and victims of apartheid' (Apartheid Museum 2024). Despite differing views regarding the TRC's efficacy, the idea of storytelling – or, in this case, truth-telling – as a catalyst for change is not unfamiliar to the South African populace.

Notwithstanding the TRC as a historic precedent, citizens still face challenges when participating in the public realm because the legacy of apartheid continues to be felt. A current challenge that impedes civic engagement in South Africa is the increasing lack of trust in the ruling government – a government that loses legitimacy owing to the lack of social cohesion and growing educational and economic disparities. The politics of identity is another variable that contributes to the exclusion of other voices and perspectives. However, as demonstrated in the book project, storytelling did not dehumanise any individual. Instead, it celebrated the diversity of South Africans. Analogous to citizens being constructed as equals in Arendt's conception of the public realm, the broad scope of themes exhibited in SWT suggests that all citizens were presented on equal footing in the alums' books.

Recalling Arendt's emphasis on the importance of the public realm for political action, the book project implies that storytelling may be an effective mechanism for South African citizens to act in concert to reclaim the public space. Considering Ratto and Boler's (2014) argument that social media and do-it-yourself practices have enabled new forms of political participation, further research on storytelling within a South African context may augment and redefine contemporary public spaces. Irrespective of the form that public spaces take, therein may lie the potential to bridge the gap between abstract images of South Africans and their concrete, real-life experiences to nurture a vibrant democratic society and successively foster equitable political action.

Considering storytelling from an educational lens, the current socio-political context in South Africa also provides a rich backdrop for the prescribed higher education design project. The project's innate aversion to one-dimensional identities and stories speaks to the decolonial agenda, which champions a plurality of perspectives. As I've argued elsewhere (Cassim 2020), a decolonial agenda is gaining momentum in global design discourse and is certainly prevalent in a South African higher education context in which the curriculum project is situated, and the SWT exhibition showcased. The fact that students are increasingly being addressed as clients by higher learning institutions also begs the question of higher education's role in citizenship education. The case study, therefore, serves as one example of how public universities can share in the collective responsibility of nurturing critical thought and civic participation. By drawing on Arendt's concept of storytelling, the case study sheds light on how storytelling embedded in design education may give students the tools to activate a critical citizen within. While storytelling is by no means a panacea, its exploration in this paper nevertheless offers a call and response: it is an Arendtian call to begin further inquiry, and it provides one potential strategy[7] in response to the current need to develop responsible design practice and to educate citizen designers (Costandius 2018; Resnick 2015). Ultimately, by encouraging the telling and sharing of stories, design education may potentially 'forge design practices as possible tools for resistance and emancipation of different political subjects' (Montuori *et al*. 2019:1).

Concluding remarks

The experiences presented by way of empirical evidence illuminate the seminal Brazilian educator Paolo Freire's sentiment that '[t]he educated man is the adapted man, because he is better "it" for the world' (Freire 2012:76). Additionally, the alums' reflections reiterate the value of action-based reflection (Schön 1983) and episodic knowledge (Lawson 2006) for designers' personal and professional development. In terms of the civic affordances, the critical thinking that stemmed from the alums' experiences of storytelling resonates with practices of active citizenship, namely 'participation that requires respect for others and that does not contravene human rights and democracy' (Hoskins 2014). Hence, the storytelling process that informed the book project supports Arendt's notion of storytelling as a civic act. This participatory act may have the potential to augment critical thinking and technical design capabilities to nurture designers who espouse civic values and are committed to the common good. Likewise, as a design educator, I hope the book project will continue to extend storytelling opportunities akin to the introductory vignette. The

reason for this is so that the next generation of design students can reflect on and interrogate the institutionally upheld canons to ensure a more just society and a better common world.

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Finally, the paper is in memory of Professor Elmarie Costandius who was seminal in spearheading research on critical citizenship and educating citizen designers in South Africa, and who inspired me to contribute to the discourse.

Notes

1. In literary terms, the inciting incident is the part of a story that sets the main story in motion. For purposes of this paper, the vignette is included as it supports the central argument.
2. It should be acknowledged that even though African storytelling and folklore may be critiqued as consensus-building practices owing to their moral disposition, it is not the underpinning theoretical focus of this paper.
3. Putnam (2000) surveys the loss of American civic life by referring to the decline in bowling leagues; he argues that participation in communal, cultural activities allows diverse groups of people to interact and in doing so, to build cultural capital.
4. Arendt (1998) distinguishes between modes of existence, namely labour, work, and action, in her account of the human condition.
5. Arendt's emigration was prompted by the rise of totalitarianism and increasing antisemitism in 1930s Nazi Germany. These conditions compelled her to initially seek refuge in France before eventually settling in the United States (Antoni 2018).
6. The Fallist protests refer to the 2015 Fees Must Fall protests in South Africa. The protest, which sparked broader debates on education financing, inclusivity, and knowledge politics in South African universities, was driven by students' concerns over slow transformation (Cassim 2020).
7. Other educational strategies for nurturing civic values in design students include, but are not restricted to, service-learning projects, community co-design projects, and design activism interventions.

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