

*Discussions*

*Philology, Social Sciences, Social Innovation:  
The WeTell Project*

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# WeTell Project: Rethinking Storytelling as a Tool for Social Innovation

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## 1. The Project

*WeTell – Storytelling and Civic Engagement* is a research project promoted and supported by the University of Bologna to encourage civic and social engagement among students in a variety of areas of studies within Higher Education by way of researching and exploiting the potentiality of storytelling as an empowering performative practice, using different media and forms of communication. WeTell proposes to boost social innovation starting from a new understanding of the role that the humanities can play at a time of deep cultural change. In particular, it emanates from some core areas that intend to gain (or regain) a functional use within our evolving and complex ecosystem: philology, literary studies, discourse analysis.

The project is conceived in the wake of the UNESCO Global Citizenship Education Guidelines (2014, 2015), starting from a renewed role of Higher Education today. As per UNESCO, ‘The role of education is moving beyond the development of knowledge and cognitive skills to the building of values, soft skills and attitudes among learners. Education is expected to facilitate international cooperation and promote social transformation in an innovative way towards a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world’ (UNESCO GCE, 2014, 11). Consistently, this project translates into examples of good practices to foster social engagement and inclusion, as well as awareness of intercultural successful strategies to forge a new consciousness of what it means to inhabit a global and globalized world. Against such a context, core disciplines within the Humanities become strategic tools for reconsidering free will and civic awareness, reassessing the place that a more conscious

and performative storytelling can and must play within our heterogeneous societies.

As Sir Peter Medawar, the Nobel prize in Medicine in 1960, said, ‘we all tell stories’ but our stories ‘differ in the purpose we expect them to fulfil, and in the kinds of evaluations to which they are exposed’ (Medawar, 1972). Inevitably, ontologically storytelling embeds the possibility to bring people together through the simple act of ‘telling’, in fact the most traditional way for sharing and discussing ideas and visions. However, We-Tell intends to go beyond the traditional uses of storytelling and develop new strategies to turn it into a tool to make people use storytelling to also experiencing civic engagement and good practices of active citizenship at a time when media are no longer just ‘the extensions of man’ (McLuhan, 1964), but a pervasive environment (Strate, 2017).

Storytelling is, in fact, old, but in our post-digital age its means and potentialities are new. When an event of huge cultural significance occurs, stories ricochet from TV to Internet, from cell phone to text message with a speed and proliferation unknown even a decade ago. This creates a dazzling plethora of messages and images in the media, leading to a widely shared sense of uncertainty and disorientation in which fearful and regressive reactions towards cultural differences or a shared future become problematically routine. We therefore need new and effective ways to understand the making of cultural processes in a multi-media environment, in order to learn and develop strategies to make sense of cultural shifts in a given context and in the shortest span of time. The development of such strategies is especially urgent given the recent and fast-paced transformation of Higher Education under the new economic, social and technological realities, whereby the entanglements of Higher Education with digitally mediated spaces have carried institutions of higher learning beyond their national boundaries into highly networked international and virtual realms. This too has caused disorientation and unwelcome regression around student narratives of learning, and has led to new problems around making sense of digitally mediated cultural encounters. Therefore, this recent transformation requires a reconceptualization of how the traditional mandates of Higher Education around student emancipation, mobility, citizenship and civility can be productively carried out via the storytelling potentials of such digital spaces.

As said, WeTell wants to promote civic engagement and social inclusion among scholars students through a renewed approach to storytelling.

It seeks to foster the values, attitudes and skills also outlined by the recent Council of Europe Report on Competences for Democratic Culture which specifically revolve around renewed self-efficacy, civic-mindedness, tolerance for uncertainty and complexity, openness to a pluralism of perspectives, and an understanding of digital media. As a rule, the study of storytelling takes place within traditional programs in the humanities, where it is investigated as a specific form of either communication, or genre. Similarly, more fashionable programs in digital humanities have expanded the study of storytelling to include new media and new technologies. However, neither the former nor the latter are truly exploring the potentiality of storytelling as a performative practice enhancing social engagement and civic participation, as well as the democratic competences of students and researchers. WeTell addresses this issue and tests tools and practices cross-reading previously separated methodologies to innovate the way we process unforeseen societal transformations; a better understanding would help us to come together as an alerted community quickly and coherently when facing unexpected change or adversity.

Therefore, in addition to more traditional academic outputs, WeTell is exploring innovative and integrated forms of teaching methodology, conceived and tested through a dedicated Summer School designed as an interactive pedagogical space based on learning by doing. Consistently, social inclusion and open and innovative practices are experienced first within our Higher Education communities, too often separated by rigid educational programs that, while turning students into ‘professionals’, do not always prepare them to be socially engaged citizens, aware of intercultural or diversity issues, equipped with a sense of solidarity and open to difference and complexity.

## 2. The School

Inevitably, the WeTell Summer School addresses some precise questions. How can our students be prepared to face the challenges of a complex society if they are trained only to practice their specific disciplinary knowledge with no real awareness of the richness and diversity already existing within their educational contexts? Should we frame the study of social

inclusion and civic engagement only within specific university programs, or should we consider that a horizontal skill to be shared no matter the specific field of study? How can core areas in the Humanities pursue social (and also academic) innovation through a ground-breaking approach to performative storytelling? What is, in fact, performative storytelling but a fertile dialogue across areas of studies that want to go beyond notions and trigger action? Hence, WeTell approaches storytelling as a way to overcome a closed approach to methodological issues, considering method more a tool than a truth.

WeTell Summer School moves from two inter-related considerations: firstly, the social and civic context of Higher Education has transformed radically due to the advent of digital media tools, so that the relationship between pedagogies of empowerment, emancipation, mobility, and inclusion with these tools needs to be radically re-explored. Furthermore, this changing landscape of Higher Education in Europe and abroad has resulted in the mission of Higher Education increasingly overflowing traditionally institutional, national and cultural boundaries, thus calling for novel ways to help students make sense of the disorientation, now-ness and nearness of cultural and academic encounters both offline and online. Secondly, digital technologies have so far largely been researched and implemented in Higher Education – at least in the European context – as mere e-learning instruments, thereby foregoing the possibly fruitfully performative aspects of new digital media. Instead, digital storytelling needs to be explored and mobilized as not merely a communicative tool, but rather as a way to engage the cognitive and affective properties of new interactive tools and their networking properties; it must give light to performative (conscious and interactive) storytelling. Consistently, the school aims to prove that this performative aspect can productively be mobilized through the potentialities of social storytelling, as this allows for the coupling of the digital medium to a reorienting form of meaning-making and civic awareness.

WeTell Summer School is a creative, intercultural space where students are given the possibility to investigate and perform the act of storytelling in new and original ways, combining traditional and digital media, thus acquiring sound knowledge and skills of different modes and moods of communication. Within WeTell Summer School, the practice of performative storytelling is therefore employed to make students aware of the potentialities of storytelling as an empowering tool (civic awareness); to encourage them to listen to and engage with other people's values and

beliefs (inclusion and diversity); to discuss strategies to properly convey and channel their original ideas (intercultural and intermedia practices); to discuss strategies to detect poisonous storytelling, such as e.g. stereotypes, fake news, etc. (civic awareness). The Summer School follows a three-year teaching plan that, in turn, develops around an annual key theme, namely: responsibility (2018); dissent (2019); vulnerability (2020). It is a strategy that enables to approach storytelling not as a subject, but as a functional tool, as storytelling is a practice that stands in between the mere mapping of a given situation and all ensuing responses, in turn leading to individual and collective engagement. (MIT-Centre for Civic Media, 2017). Cultural phenomena are not based on absolute truths but on given situations that are constructed over time and through language by different individuals within and across nations (Creet 2014; Leavy 2007). Each time, individuals must take side and choose actions, drawing lines based on their personal and collective histories that are, consequently, relative and culturally situated. A thematic approach to complex cultural environments enables to better analyze and understand practices to communicate differing narratives of the situations people experience/construct through time, as well as various ways to listen to and better understand other people's perspectives (UNESCO GCE 2014/2015; Bishop 2014).

### 3. Some examples

WeTell Summer School intends to play a role in the creation of a new ecology of Higher Education, establishing and testing an integrated system of analysis that uses storytelling as a connective tissue to develop new practices to process societal change and foster civic participation under different environmental conditions. As said, this educational need is borne out of the changing nature of sociality due to technologies of virtualization, simulation, networking, and mediation, making it pertinent to attune the ideals of Higher Education (empowerment, emancipation, upward mobility) to new and alternative pedagogies that productively appropriate such technologies.

The learning by doing approach of the WeTell School develops through a two-week program that leads to shift the role of the participants from students to teachers: in the first week, participants attend **morning**,

**seminars** and **round tables** followed by **fieldwork** and **city activities** in the **afternoon**; in the second week, they are invited to work together to realize group projects exploring the potentialities of performative storytelling as a social tool. By way of example, here below is the teaching schedule of the first edition of the WeTell School, developing around the key theme ‘responsibility’.

The first week, classes focused on the notion of responsibility as an active practice of communication that implies responsiveness to people and to environments. To conceptualize express and mediate awareness of environments and people we used a variety of philological, literary and sociolinguistic approaches along four conceptual roads:

- A. STORYTELLING, COGNITIVE MAPPING, AWARENESS STRATEGIES. Including: spatial awareness and neuro-cognitive continuity in time; Exploration and appropriation of space in art and language; Group formation and the relationship with strangers; Examples of movement in urban spaces with exercise of cognitive mapping around Bologna; Awareness through Movement (Feldenkrais Method)
- B. TELLING/ACKNOWLEDGING THE ‘OTHER SIDE’ OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT. Including: interfacing different abilities, different stories; Invisible addictions; Simulacra & Simulations: violence, the self, the group.
- C. CONTESTED IDENTITIES. Including: addressing or dressing people?; Stereotyping and political discourse; Constructions of identity; Cultural mediations
- D. MEDIATED & MEDIATING CULTURAL MEMORIES AND TRAUMA. Including: different literacies, different cultures; Interfacing media-languages; Re-telling stories: from silence, to words, to images, to sounds; same histories, divided memories.

The second week, students worked in groups to conceive and develop group projects, assisted through a variety of labs & tutorials, including: Inter-art / Intermedia storytelling: film & music; Image enhancing and photoediting; Videotelling; Lecture-Performance & Radio-Podcast; Performing intercultural practices.

Also important, through the two weeks, WeTell Summer School proposed an experience of psychosynthesis counselling, conceived as an approach that emphasizes the creative potential of individuals to help them

to develop self-awareness through a more conscious act of telling. In this session, the essay by Monica Notari further explains this pedagogical choice. Similarly, the essays by Valeria Reggi, Brigitte Jirku, Luigi Contadini and Francesco Vitucci, offer some examples of key topics introduced and discussed during the first week, respectively in Road C – CONTESTED IDENTITIES (Reggi, Jirku) and Road D – MEDIATED AND MEDIATING CULTURAL MEMORIES AND TRAUMA (Vitucci, Contadini). These were “disciplined” approaches to carefully chosen case studies in the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis, performing arts and memory studies that became the starting point of specific but ‘undisciplined’ (in fact trans-disciplinary) seminars, fieldwork and city activities. Knowledge became a shared responsibility, notions became actions and passive approaches to storytelling became active awareness of social issues and challenges, in the past as in the present.

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