

Story Circles as Ongoing and Collaborative Evaluation—Roadside Theater’s “Story to Performance”
Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship

Roadside Theater is a professional, ensemble theater company founded in 1975 in the heart of the Appalachian mountain coalfields of rural eastern Kentucky. Roadside Theater is a part of non-profit cultural arts organization Appalshop.



From Roadside Theater’s website: “Roadside Theater’s **MISSION** is to create and present an indigenous body of plays richly reflective of the lives of Appalachian people; to collaborate with other professional ensemble theaters to create intercultural plays that explore issues of race, place and class; to strive for artistic excellence and a vital relationship with its poor and working — middle class audiences; and to serve as a resource to communities regionally and nationally that desire to stage their local life.

Roadside has a long history of collaborating with and teaching in colleges and universities as well as of partnering with cultural and other community organizations to help communities find and tell their own stories.

This case study highlights Roadside’s use of one of its core creative methodologies—the Story Circle—as an assessment practice. The study also illuminates the tensions that can arise between institutional values of assessment and arts- and community-based practice.

This summary draws upon an interview, follow-up communications, and written materials provided by Donna Porterfield, Roadside Theater’s managing director, as well as essays by Roadside’s Artistic Director Dudley Cocke.

Brief description

This case study focuses on the assessment of a collaborative project involving Roadside Theater, a local agency on aging, and a regional university. The goal of the project was to promote awareness about cancer. As Porterfield explained, the project involved conducting “a ‘Story to Performance’ intensive training and follow-up work with cancer survivors in three Appalachian communities, wanting to make public presentations of their, and their families,’ cancer stories for use at cancer prevention and detection events. The project resulted in multiple plays, media productions, and touring performances in the region.” The “Story to Performance” project (called “Capturing and Telling Your Community’s Cancer Story”) was one of several funded by a grant received by the University’s health division, but its focus on

community storytelling and community organizing was an anomaly in the group. Roadside participated in the project at the request of the local agency on aging, with whom Roadside had worked in the past.

Roadside's collaborative approach to assessment

As they began to work on the project with the agency on aging, Porterfield explained, Roadside “did what they always do”—engaged in a collaborative process of goal-setting and assessment which involved developing assessment goals, methods, and a timeline. This timeline involved assessing the process at each stage both with the participants and with the project partner (in this case, the agency). At this point in the process, the University partner was in the background.

The storytelling project involved a two-day story-to-performance workshop held in August with participants from three communities. Even though Roadside had already established project goals with the agency on aging, Roadside again “sat down with [workshop participants] at the beginning and at the end, for them to set goals and talk about what they did.” (More about Roadside’s use of story circles in this process below). Then, the workshop participants returned to their home communities and completed a storytelling project there, collecting stories, writing scripts, and performing them for their own purposes. A Roadside trainer worked with the agency on aging to follow up with the groups after the workshop via email and in some cases in person to answer questions. But, Porterfield explained, “they really didn’t have questions, they had learned what they needed to learn.” A Roadside member visited one of the communities for its performance, talked to all the community’s leaders on the phone, and wrote up a final report for the agency based on these visits and conversations.

The final report drew directly on the interviews Porterfield conducted with each community leader. In it, Porterfield included the details of the three community projects and then summarized each leader’s sense of the purpose, process, successes, and challenges of each, as well as their overall evaluation of the story to performance workshop itself in relationship to what they actually learned, did, and needed as they worked on the storytelling projects. The report also captured participants’ descriptions of the impact of the storytelling project in their community—for example, plans for the future and audience responses. The report distinctively combined summary and narrative from Porterfield with the voices of the participants represented through extensive interview summaries, highlighting the perspectives and experiences of the people directly involved in creating the performances.

As we see from this example, Roadside’s process of assessment focuses on continually refining—in direct conversation with all participants—what the participants’ goals for the project are. In this way it is deeply collaborative, involving stakeholders in defining meaningful outcomes, together, and grounding the process in a shared and evolving understanding of

inter-related goals. In the case of “Capturing and Telling Your Community’s Cancer Story,” Roadside’s assessment process functioned to help each participant better understand her goals for her community project, and, by returning to the evaluation of these goals several times during the process, allowed these goals to develop and change. As one workshop participant and community leader explained in her reflection on the workshop itself, “We learned how to focus on the people we were working with, the community where we are, rather than relying on a simple formula—do a, do b, do c.” This quote aptly describes Roadside’s approach to assessment overall, which invites critique of program structures as well as the details of Roadside’s own participation while focusing on reflections in local contexts. Roadside’s process effectively centers project impacts in the language, values and goals of the community.

Story Circles—generative, practicable, rigorous

“Story circles are more about listening than telling. There is not enough listening going on in evaluation. Reflection makes for good evaluation.” (Donna Porterfield)

Story Circles are the primary tool Roadside Theater uses for its ongoing evaluation of its collaborations—whether they are course-based (like an annual, semester-long Appalachian String Band Class taught in partnership with a local community college) or project-based (like the cancer storytelling project or any of Roadside’s other numerous

community storytelling projects).

A Story Circle is, in Roadside’s words, “a group of people sitting in a circle, telling personal stories,

led by a Story Circle facilitator. Each Story Circle is different according to its purpose.” Both formal and informal, Story Circles bring people together to answer questions posed by the facilitator with stories drawn from their lives. Roadside uses Story Circles extensively both to generate performance and to structure audience response. Story Circles are the heartbeat of Roadside Theater’s approach to grounded and creative collaboration on all levels.

The fact that “each Story Circle is different according to its purpose” is key to Roadside’s use of the Story Circle as an assessment methodology. For example, Porterfield explains:



Facilitated by Roadside Theater’s Artistic Director, Dudley Cocke, a 2013 story circle at Illinois Shakespeare Festival with 10 high school students from Israel, in partnership with Friends Forever and Normal Rotary. Photo by Jim Carroll.

If the purpose of the project being evaluated is to learn to play the banjo by ear, evaluation story circle themes might be any of the following:

- Tell a story about something important that happened to you and/or your classmates during the course.
- Tell a story about something difficult you and/or your classmates encountered during the course.
- Tell a story about something satisfying you and/or your classmates encountered during the course.
- Tell a story about something frustrating you and/or your classmates encountered during the course.

In “Capturing and Telling Your Community’s Cancer Story,” the evaluation story circles were conducted in three rounds:

The first Story Circle is about their first experiences, thoughts, responses, then another go-around that speaks to how people think they will use this information, then another go-around that evaluates the actual workshop.

The Story to Performance evaluation Circles were not audio or video recorded (though this is permissible if participants give their permission). Instead, Roadside had someone recording general responses by hand on a flip chart, and putting checks by responses each time that thought was repeated. Roadside used this input to improve its Story to Performance Training practice. In adopting the Story Circle as a primary assessment tool, Roadside Theater uses the method entirely consistent with its own artistic and community-building practices. At the same time, and by no accident, this is a method consistent with Roadside’s local culture in the central Appalachian region, where a strong oral tradition of storytelling and music prevails. By carrying out assessment in a way continuous with its overall practice, culture, and context, Roadside models a **practicable** and **generative** as well as **rigorous** approach.

Assessment in the form of a Story Circle is practicable because it takes place as part of the central collaboration itself; it is endlessly adaptable (in terms of who is in the circle and the purpose and questions/themes of the circle) yet also easy to replicate with few resources. At the same time, Story Circles are by their nature generative.

As you might imagine, these types of themes garner way more information than the theme implies, because once a person begins to tell a story all sorts of doors are opened, including the experiences of others in the class and the instructor as perceived by the teller.

Evaluation Story Circles do not limit participant assessments to Likert scales or yes/no questions. The open-ended and creative responses generated in a Story Circle authentically

capture the messiness and diversity of participant experiences. The evaluations collected this way also differ from other, more conventional measures of participant satisfaction (via the exit survey, for example) in that they are not solicited from participants, individually, in order to be fed to program directors and funders. Instead, the reflections shared in an evaluation Story Circle are shared immediately and publicly with those present, generating new insights and sparking more stories as they are shared. Story Circles differ from focus groups, another group process for evaluation that can be generative, in at least two key ways: the democratic structure of Story Circles gives everyone equal time, and Story Circles center the story as a narrative form, rather than inviting participants to answer a series of questions. While they certainly may provide material for funders and final reports, the reflections that emerge in a Story Circle become part of an ongoing and dynamic process of personal, programmatic and community development.

Evaluative Story Circles privilege knowledge rooted in human experience and meaning and capture authentic and contextual information in a transparent manner. Stories provide a great way to elicit personally meaningful representations of programs and their impacts on the lives of participants, given the right story telling prompts. Story Circles also allow for more ethnographic, qualitative data gathering, which can yield far more contextual detail for highly complex impacts. The data constructed through such a methodology roots in orality and lived experience, as well as effectively depicting the collaborative nature of the project as a whole. Story Circles are a rigorous approach in that they involve a valid and reliable way of gathering information that allows for thorough, balanced, and collaborative assessment of whether program goals are achieved.

Challenges—differing assessment agendas limit reciprocity

The question of what counts as knowledge—as data—and how “assessment” is understood and practiced highlights a challenge in university/community partnerships. After attending the final performances, conducting interviews, and writing the final report for the local agency on aging, Porterfield received the assessment questionnaire from the University partner administering the grant. While some of the requested information was different (e.g., statistical), most of what the questionnaire asked seemed to be clearly answered in the interviews Porterfield had already summarized for the agency on aging. When she submitted the same report to the University, however, it was returned with a request for more information.

The information requested, and Porterfield’s responses, point to some tensions between the goals of the assessment for the University partner and the goals of the assessment for Roadside and for the agency on aging. For example, the University requested more detailed information about the “focus of stories/from whom,” asking for a description of the “focus of each of the three communities (e.g., prevention, type of cancer, type of age/gender segments, etc.) and why it was selected).” This question points in part to the University’s very understandable

desire for participation data that might be extrapolated across the array of programs funded in order to make a larger statement about the grant's reach and impact. But it also speaks to the epidemiological expectations the University had for the community projects; perhaps they expected each community leader to pick a focus for reasons that could be cited statistically (e.g. high rates of a specific type of cancer or higher rates among a specific age/gender) and then to target the storytelling project around that specific focus. In her addendum to the final report, Porterfield described the focus of each of the three projects separately as requested, including in each a version of the statement, "the focus of the project as stated by [community leader] was to raise awareness in the community of cancer prevention and diagnosis; stories were collected from cancer survivors and family members of survivors and victims; the focus of the stories was personal accounts, in the form of personal stories, about cancer and its effect." Consistent with its mission and practice, Roadside continued to value the goals as defined and driven by community participants, and to highlight storytelling as a method that opened up communication with diverse participants.

At the close of the project, the University's health division brought all grant fundees together. Members of other fundee groups talked about their projects, and then one of the community groups trained by Roadside performed. "At which point," Porterfield remembers, "everyone in the room said, 'A ha! Now we know what you are talking about!' It was unanimous in the room, having this piece as part of the grant made their work, their research and statistics, have meaning." By request from the other fundees, the University commissioned Roadside to conduct a boiled-down one-day workshop, for the other funded groups and University staff. Because of this final experience, Porterfield reflects, the University did end up understanding and respecting the projects' specific definition of knowledge and success, and the director of the University program that funded the project became a strong supporter of Roadside's work. But the University did not share its final evaluation of the project with any of the partners, suggesting that it continued to view assessment as an end-state activity performed about but not with or for project partners.

In summary, Roadside's approach to assessment as evidenced in "Capturing and Telling Your Community's Cancer Story" is highly **collaborative**, grounded in an ongoing reflection about shared goals with all participants and partners. In that it is woven into the fabric of the project itself, conducted in a way that is continuous with Roadside's overall artistic and community-building practice, the Roadside approach to assessment—and particularly Roadside's use of Story Circles—is **practicable, generative** and **rigorous**. The gaps in communication about and differing expectations for assessment between Roadside and the University health division provide a cautionary tale about the ways that universities limit reciprocity when they conceive of assessment as a separate, closing activity and not as part of the partnership and project itself. At the same time, the success of Roadside's partnership with the agency on aging and with individual community participants highlights the ways that collaborative assessment can

set the foundation for deeper and reciprocal partnership. As a result of this project, the agency on aging began to use story circles as an evaluative practice in their own meetings.

Where to learn more about Story Circles:

- Roadside Theater offers story circle guidelines on their website:
<http://roadside.org/samples/story-circles>
- John O’Neal, founder of New Orleans-based Junebug Productions and innovator of the story circle, discusses the methodology here:
<http://www.racematters.org/storycircleprocess.htm>