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Once Upon Online:

Conversations With Professional Storytellers

About Adapting From In-Person to Virtual Storytelling Performance

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies and Storytelling

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Storytelling Studies

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by

Leticia Ann Follett Pizzino

December 2023

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Dr. Wendy Doucette

Keywords: storyteller, online storytelling, narrative inquiry, audience engagement, trance

ABSTRACT

Once Upon Online:

Conversations With Professional Storytellers

About Adapting From In-Person to Virtual Storytelling Performance

by

Leticia Ann Follett Pizzino

This study examines how professional storytellers negotiated a new storytelling stage—the videoconference platform—as they pivoted their careers during mandated shutdowns due to COVID-19. An examination of the literature reveals extremely limited research involving either professional storytellers or live virtual storytelling. After interviewing five professional storytellers, I analyzed their stories through narrative inquiry. Analysis revealed that the storytellers negotiated the limitations and affordances of Zoom and adapted their storytelling to successfully connect with their audiences. Through crafting a narrative of their stories, I was able to represent their emotions, unique experiences, and abilities to adapt to the online environment. Their stories document significant changes in the art of storytelling during a historic era. This research reveals how storytellers can master the techniques of online storytelling and effectively tell stories to synchronous virtual audiences.

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DEDICATION

To Milayla, Aila, and Eliza—my darling story listeners who help me hone my virtual storytelling skills during our weekly Zoom Storytime. Your memories likely don't reach back to the time before Zoom, but I'll tell you stories all about those olden days.

And to storytellers everywhere whose in-person storytelling abruptly stopped mid-March 2020, I hope you were able to discover a virtual world of storytelling possibilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must honor the five professional storytellers who so generously shared their stories and experiences with me—Antonio Rocha, Cooper Braun, Fran Stallings, Sheila Arnold, and Simon Brooks.

I'm grateful for each of you, named and unnamed, who have supported my academic journey. I may or may not have bent your ears a little too much as I excitedly shared my research and ideas, but it means so much to me that you expressed interest in my work. May your kindness be returned to you manyfold.

Thank you to my committee members—Dr. Delanna Reed., Nancy Donoval, and Dr. Wendy Doucette—for their work on my behalf. My deep appreciation goes to my committee chair, Dr. Reed, for her sustaining belief in me. With an impeccable balance of compassion and intelligence, she provided the ideal encouragement and expert guidance I needed to make it through challenges to arrive at a successful conclusion. Many thanks to Dr. Doucette whose brilliant mind and sincere interest have been a guiding light since the first moment I stepped into her domain—the library. I owe a debt of gratitude to Nancy Donoval. Your chocolate and conversation were the perfect antidote for the challenges of academia and isolation.

I'm also thankful for the other teachers and staff in our department who touched my mind, heart, and life, including Molly Catron, Dr. Kinser, Dr. Dorgan, and Dr. Herrmann. Additionally, I sing the praises of the professionals who made themselves available at the library and graduate school, often going out of their way to support me. And a special thanks to Dr. Lance Strate of Fordham University for being willing to teach someone who wasn't your student. My mind has been expanded.

My cohort extraordinaire—Lydia, Wendy, Debora, Tejaswini, Megan, and Chris—were caring and constant companions, even after our classroom moved out into the ether. We made it through together. To all my fellow students, thanks for your stimulating conversations and encouragement in and out of class.

My humble gratitude to God for giving me all. And a huge thank you to my kith and kin, who've given me a world of stories and support. I can only name a few family members here. My mother has spent my lifetime being my number one cheerleader. My father told me I could do anything in such a way that I believed it to be true. My siblings have always been there for me. My children have rallied around me. Especially, thank you to Allegra Bel for tech support and Arianna for artistic advice. And most of all to my husband, Jeff, whose tender care kept me going. I admire how your recipe repertoire has expanded while I was in grad school. What's for dinner tonight?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 2
DEDICATION 4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 5
Chapter 1. Introduction 9
Statement of Purpose 11
Scope of Study 15
Conclusion 16
Chapter 2. Literature Review 17
Natural Narrators and Narrative Inquiry 17
Narrative Inquiry 21
Storytelling and Storytellers 26
Storytellers 29
Professional Storytellers. 36
Virtual Storytelling 37
Presence 38
Videoconferencing 42
Chapter 3. Methodology 49
Constructivist Paradigm and Narrative Methodology 49
The Storytellers 51
Data Collection 53
Data Analysis 56
Chapter 4. The Story: Re-Zooming Storytelling 58
Chapter 5. Epilogue 86
Recommendations for Telling Stories in Videoconference 91
Constraints and Challenges 93
Future Directions 96
Conclusion 97
References 100
APPENDICES 111
Appendix A: Email to Storytellers 111
Appendix B: Flyer 112

Appendix C: Interview Question Guide 113
VITA 115

Chapter 1. Introduction

Lives were turned upside down when everything came to a screeching halt in March 2020. Society changed radically. With stay-at-home orders due to the mandated restrictions associated with COVID-19, people became isolated and hungry for connection with others.

Our university campus closed, and my educational experience was drastically altered. Schooling abruptly shifted from in person to online, relying on electronic technologies, including the videoconferencing platform, Zoom. I am aware of and grateful for the advantages of attending school during an era of computers and high-tech telecommunications. Unlike my granddad, who regretfully did not return to complete his education after the Spanish Flu pandemic closed his school, I could continue my coursework—albeit in an alternative format.

Suddenly, I found myself challenged by a classroom reduced to a computer screen. Reading others and making connections with professors and classmates within the new limitations of onscreen interaction presented a challenge. Additionally, as a storyteller, the compressed classroom on my desk doubled as a storytelling stage. As I worked to apply my in-person storytelling strategies to the Zoom environment, I wondered how other professional storytellers were faring. Professional storytellers are typically self-employed independent touring performance artists. Artists Standing Strong Together describes the "'feast or famine' life of an itinerant performer" as precarious in the face of a pandemic-fueled economic shutdown (Artists Standing Strong Together, 2020). Historically, storytellers have told stories in person (Pellowski, 1990), but access to their audiences ceased when stay-at-home orders were enacted by authorities in response to the March 11, 2020, announcement of a pandemic from the World Health Organization (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020).

I was raised on storytelling. Both of my parents, like their parents and grandparents before them, told stories to their children, so naturally we siblings told each other stories too. My children tell me stories. There is no telling where storytelling began in my family . . . or will end. When I stop to count, I am amazed to realize that I have heard stories directly from the mouths of six different generations of my family. Our storytelling is a way of being together, of connecting.

Not only are stories a way I connect with others, but they are also a lens I use to make sense of the world around me. Once when we were young teens, my friend and I were biking quite a distance to a friend’s house in another city in our metropolitan area. We became terribly lost. The streets were unfamiliar. Undaunted we rode on, searching for a landmark or a street we recognized. Finding none, and not knowing what else to do, we rode on . . . much too far. My response instead of frustration or aggravation was an optimistic, “Well, this'll make a good story.” I innately understood story as a way of processing my experiences. The stories I tell myself give me perspective and help to shape who I am.

When I was a young mother, in my mid-twenties, I became involved in telling stories in our local library. This exposure quickly put me on the path to becoming a professional storyteller. My audiences helped me hone my storytelling skills as I improved my performances primarily by watching the reactions of my listeners as I told them stories. In this way, I learned what worked and what did not for various audiences and settings. I loved the feeling of connection with my listeners while I performed. I consciously cultivated relationships with my listeners through the stories I told. Storytelling performances and projects, both at home and on tour, kept me busy performing and teaching storytelling. My full-time storytelling work substantially helped support our young, growing family, and our family came to depend on my income. After more than a decade, our family needs changed, and I scaled back to occasional

storytelling work to focus on our children. Throughout the following years, I continued my part-time status as a professional storyteller while maintaining ties to local and national storytelling communities. Staying involved kept me aware of the trends and changes in the storytelling world through the years.

Storytelling is a form of communication common to every culture (Fisher, 1987). From the beginning of human history and throughout nearly all our existence, oral storytelling has been a face-to-face event, conducted as an interactive, social experience between a storyteller and listeners located in the same physical space. Only recently in humankind's existence have technological advances in telecommunications, such as videoconferencing, allowed otherwise. Even with the opportunity available, performance storytelling remained focused on in-person performances. In March 2020, with public and private gatherings prohibited to slow the spread of COVID-19, professional storytellers quickly found their contracts cancelled and gigs gone. As the live venues for performing and presenting were shut down, storytellers saw the structure of the performance economy collapse (Florida & Seman, 2020). They needed to adapt their performances if they were to continue working and earning income as storytellers. To find new ways to reach their audiences, storytellers reimagined their workspaces and transitioned their craft to computer-mediated environments. Formerly, many oral storytellers eschewed online storytelling, yet during government mandated COVID-19 shutdowns, they came to depend on technologies such as Zoom to reach their audiences.

Statement of Purpose

This study focuses on the experiences of professional storytellers shifting their performance platform from face-to-face to videoconference. Telling stories online differs from the traditional face-to-face performance experience. Much of that difference stems from the

inherent characteristics of each environment that affects communication (Tang et al., 2013). I assume because of my own experiences telling stories and teaching classes on Zoom that videoconference-mediated environments influence the co-creative storytelling process. Oral storytelling must be adjusted when teller and listeners meet in virtual spaces where communication cues and interactions are altered. This study seeks to learn how professional storytellers perceive and manage similarities and differences in telling stories in two different mediums—face-to-face and videoconference.

I sought professional storytellers to explore and share their perspectives on the impact of the shift on their storytelling career, performance, and relationship with listeners. Because professional storytellers are necessarily tuned into their audience to co-create a storytelling experience, they are highly aware of variances between the face-to-face and videoconference environments, including obvious, as well as nuanced differences in aspects of communication. They tend to be attentive to audience needs and capable of required adjustments to reach their listeners. To stay viable as performers during a period when face-to-face was not possible, they had to adapt their knowledge and experience of in-person performance to computer-mediated formats.

I aim to explore how professional storytellers pivoted their careers during COVID-19 stay-at-home orders from face-to-face to virtual performance. My exploration addresses this central research question: What do the stories of professional storytellers tell us about how moving from face-to-face performance to online performance impacted their storytelling performance during mandated stay-at-home orders? These following related questions are also addressed:

- What strategies did storytellers use to adapt their storytelling to videoconference environments?
- What are storytellers' perceptions of the similarities and the differences in performing stories in videoconference-mediated environments compared to face-to-face environments?
- How do storytellers make connections with their audience when telling stories in a videoconference-mediated environment?

This study contributes to the limited, but growing, body of research on professional storytellers and contemporary storytelling (Forest, 2007; Wilson, 2006). Although communication in videoconference has been studied, storytelling in videoconference is another area of limited research. This study begins to fill a gap in the research on professional storytellers, as well as videoconference-mediated oral storytelling. It enlarges the understanding of computer-mediated communication, especially storytelling, and particularly performance and how we connect with others.

Knowledge and the stories gleaned from this narrative inquiry offer information and encouragement to other storytellers who perform, or wish to perform, in similar virtual settings. All who tell stories are provided with an opportunity to learn how these professional storytellers improved the experience of virtual storytelling and connected with their listeners. While sharing their expertise and insider knowledge, professional storytellers engaged in meaning-making for themselves as they narrated their experiences facing these unprecedented circumstances. By articulating the meaning they created through change and growth, the study participants provide a catalyst for continued conversations within storytelling communities about online storytelling. Organizations such as Artists Standing Strong Together and the National Storytelling Network

facilitated discussions about navigating virtual storytelling (Artists Standing Strong Together, n.d.; National Storytelling Network, 2020). There is an opportunity for the storytelling world in general to engage in what it means for their art form to adopt this technology. Sharing this information with storytelling communities serves to advance the art of performance storytelling. Furthermore, stories of professional storytellers pivoting and meeting the challenges of adapting their performance skills from stage to videoconference platforms has the potential to inspire and encourage other tellers, from hobbyist to professional, to do the same. Online storytelling is likely to continue, and those who might not have tried it yet may be inspired to follow the examples of these professional storytellers. Understanding how the tellers in this study connect with their audiences during videoconference storytelling can empower others to reach their own audiences through story.

Because of the interdisciplinary (Haven, 2007) and universal nature (Fisher, 1987) of storytelling, this research can benefit others beyond professional and performance storytellers. With more and more people relying on communication on Zoom since March 2020 (Bailenson, 2021), individuals who may not identify as storytellers, yet tell stories in their vocation or avocation, have reason to learn how to masterfully tell stories online. Indeed, there are many fields (e.g., education, business, health care) with research on their use of stories (Haven, 2007). Moreover, videoconference oral storytelling research is relevant to other videoconference communication. The value of understanding connection in computer-mediated environments extends to wider applications. Video chatting and Zooming will not be going away anytime soon (Bailenson, 2021), therefore those who need to effectively connect with others on these platforms, such as educators, presenters, and business professionals, could use the research to improve their videoconference presentation skills and connection with their listeners.

Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the shared thread between communication studies and storytelling. As a student in a master's program that has successfully wed these two areas of scholarship, I have been curious about the nature of their connection. Each field is equally rigorous. One emphasizes analytical processes—communication studies; the other emphasizes creative processes—storytelling. Their approaches can be distinct, but clearly there is an important and supportive relationship. Within communication studies, stories and storytelling are addressed. Performance storytelling is a form of oral communication. And most importantly, both concern themselves with individuals and human interaction. The whole is greater than the sum of the two parts because of the synergistic combination of communication studies and storytelling. This research strengthens the strand by using communication theories to frame the study of storytelling and give credence to storytelling scholarship while also expanding the use of story and narrative within communication studies.

Scope of Study

This narrative study is limited to five professional storytellers. Narrative tends to focus on the individual (Kim, 2016) and is not necessarily indicative of generalization to others. These participants are a small sampling of professional storytellers, and their experiences may or may not be reflective of the experiences of other storytellers. Circumstances and perspectives vary from person to person. Those participating in this research told of their experiences during a historical event, and individuals experience phenomenon in uniquely diverse ways.

This study focuses on the approximately 17- or 18-month period beginning mid-March 2020 and continuing until the dates of the interviews, which were conducted in late August through early September 2021. It is limited to participants' experiences of synchronous storytelling on live videoconferencing platforms when face-to-face performances were not

allowed. Storytelling performances presented in other computer-mediated environments, such as webinars, video and audio recordings, digital storytelling, and social media, are excluded from the study. Some storytellers may not have opted to try videoconferencing, or altogether avoided telling online. Storytelling to hybrid audiences—some members face-to-face with others concurrently online—happened occasionally but is also beyond the scope of this study. Although it would be interesting to explore the experiences of listeners in a videoconference storytelling performance, this study concentrates solely on perceptions of storytellers.

Videoconferencing includes the capacity for the teller and their audience to be mutually aware of each other during the storytelling experience. In this manner, videoconferencing most resembles the experience of face-to-face (Fullwood, 2007). Live storytelling through videoconferencing is synchronous, and the audience is present in the same space as the storyteller, albeit a virtual space. I am interested in exploring the performance differences of a storyteller interacting with their audience while in videoconference versus interacting with them face-to-face.

Conclusion

This first chapter introduces the study, including my motivation and reasons for exploring computer-mediated storytelling, and the purpose and the scope of the study. In Chapter 2, first, I note the limited literature on professional storytellers, then I review literature relevant to my study. Chapter 3 describes the methodology I used to gather, study, and analyze the research data. I present my research findings in Chapter 4 by telling the story of the storytellers' shift from in-person to virtual storytelling. Chapter 5 includes a brief summary of research and discovery, followed by a discussion of constraints and challenges. Before I conclude, I suggest possible directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

To understand the implication of what changes occurred for professional storytellers, it is important to understand their work and their relationship with their audiences. An examination of the writing of storytellers reveals what they have to say about their craft. Knowing the differences between in-person and virtual environments, coupled with the nature of Zoom, will clarify the changes and challenges storytellers faced to continue performing. Because there is minimal research on professional storytellers and virtual storytelling, I looked to a multitude of disciplines to set the background for my study. Examining the work of scholars in various fields, including communication, storytelling, education, psychology, and philosophy, I found literature addressing aspects related to my research. This chapter examines the following three areas: natural narrators and narrative inquiry; storytelling and storytellers; and virtual storytelling. It begins with the role of narrative in human cognition, which helps establish the relevancy of narrative inquiry.

Natural Narrators and Narrative Inquiry

We humans are natural narrators who use story not only to communicate, but also to make sense of our world. As a result, stories surround us in an abundance of shapes, sizes, and circumstances. Philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) asserts "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (p. 201). Inspired by this, Walter Fisher (1984), a communication scholar, developed the narrative paradigm as an alternate to what he calls the rational world paradigm. Key to traditional Western thought, the rational world paradigm is based on the work of the ancient Greek philosophers and relies on learning the skills of logic and argument (Fisher, 1987). Central to the narrative paradigm is the position that humans have an innate capacity to use reasoning based in narration. "Good reasons" guide

decision and sense-making based in stories, which are judged by two principles: “narrative probability”—the coherence of a story, and “narrative fidelity”—the credibility of a story (Fisher, 1987, p. 5). Fisher does not intend to replace the rational world paradigm and its scientific reasoning; instead he argues that the narrative paradigm is an appropriate lens through which to enrich the understanding of human communication, behavior, and social interaction.

Others have discussed how humans have two ways of reasoning or knowing. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) explains “there are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another” (p. 11). He uses the term paradigmatic mode for what he describes as the logico-scientific mode of thought that is employed in fields such as science and math, which uses categorization, observation, and testing to discover universal rules and theories. Where the paradigmatic mode is interested in the general, such as forming a generalization that is true of a large sampling or population, the narrative mode concerns itself with the particular, such as individuals, action, details, and temporal sequence. The narrative mode “deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). Through stories we assign meaning to our complex and ever-changing lives.

I find parallels between Fisher’s (1984) two communication paradigms and Bruner’s (1986) two modes of thinking. Important to my purposes, their arguments, which arise from distinct discipline perspectives, each signal the significance of story in making human experience intelligible and relatable. Both note the value and purpose of two ways of understanding but focus on the importance of narration. When approached with scientific logic, the world is understood through generalized rules. When approached with narrative, the world is understood

through individual experiences. The paradigmatic mode of thought and the rational world paradigm favor formalized knowledge that is taught, while the use of narrative for communicating and sense-making resides as an indwelling human skill.

This concept of natural narrative vis-à-vis learned logic aligns with the notion of orality and literacy advanced by Walter Ong (1982/2002) in his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. He discusses differences between oral cultures (those without writing) and literate cultures (those with writing). Within oral cultures, story is an important implement to transmit and preserve knowledge. Literate cultures heavily depend on the written word for transmission and preservation of knowledge. Furthermore, Ong (1982/2002) attests that writing "enlarges the potentiality of language almost beyond measure" (pp. 7–8). Haven (2007) agrees that "story predates logical thinking and argument, writing and exposition, and informative and persuasive structures" (p. 113), which are available only through literacy. Moreover, application of the technology of writing "restructures thought" (Ong, 1982/2002, p. 8), yet the "the basic orality of language" remains in literate cultures (Ong, 1982/2002, p. 7). With repeated use over time, the technology of writing wrought a change in human consciousness and allowed for another means of knowing. This accounts for and supports the two paradigms or modes of thought: one that is natural and one that is learned. The long history of story being valued as a way of knowing supports the validity of the narrative mode and the narrative paradigm.

Two important distinctions of narrative thinking are its accessibility and practicality. Stories are accessible in that "anybody (at almost any age) can tell a story" (Bruner, 1986, p. 15), and a "lay audience" (Fisher, 1987, p. 72) can understand story. Everyone uses story because it is the natural way we think. Through stories we develop "good reasons" which "express practical

wisdom" (Fisher, 1987, p. 94). Fisher (1987) asserts that we do not have to be educated or expert in narrative reasoning; it is more a matter of "common sense" (p. 72). Narrative and story are commonly accessible and practical because of our very nature. It is core to who we are as humans.

Thinking with story is foundational in our psyche and to the way we relate to everything and everyone around us. Our human brains have developed to use story as a means of communication and of knowing (Haven, 2007). Recent scientific discoveries provide further evidence through physiological proof of what philosophers, social scientists, and storytellers have been telling us about our relationship to narrative. Haven (2014) tells us we have a Neural Story Net where "neural connections physically exist and link together the neural subregions that form a fixed network of brain regions that fire together to process incoming signals" (p. 31). We are born wired to process, communicate, understand, and store information in the context of narrative (Haven, 2014). Groundbreaking discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive science explain chemical and neurological processes in the human brain and body that show how ingrained narrative is (Barraza et al., 2015; Iotzov et al., 2017; Regev et al., 2019). Researchers in natural science (paradigmatic knowledge) are recognizing what has been long understood by certain scholars within social science—humans think in story (narrative knowledge).

Knowing that story is woven into the actual and physical fabric of our being explains why narrative is pervasive in human existence. Stories have been found in all cultures throughout the ages (Haven, 2007; Ong, 1982/2002). Because our use of story is universal, Fisher (1984) proposed the term, "*homo narrans*" (p. 6). For us storytelling animals, or homo narrans, narrative and story are time-honored and well-verified forms of human communication, knowing, and

reasoning. Stories give us an accessible and reliable structure through which we can understand our and others' experiences, as well as understand the significance of those stories to their tellers.

Narrative Inquiry

Understanding through narrative accesses the oldest natural way of knowing. As Bochner and Riggs (2014) eloquently express:

> Our lives are rooted in narratives and narrative practices. We depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe. Air keeps us alive; stories give meaning to our lives. They become our equipment for living. (p. 196)

Because narrative is inherent to how we think and behave, it is possible to understand humans through narrative research in ways quantitative methodology cannot. For example, human motivation and emotion can be revealed through story with depth and detail unavailable through scientific logic. Hatch (2003) states "storied knowledge" (p. 19) makes understanding available that is not possible through paradigmatic knowledge. Not only does narrative inquiry provide an understanding of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), but it also allows the complex to become visible (Andersen et al., 2020). Narrative research has the power to tell of human experience, as well as tell the individual story.

Narrative has been utilized and developed for research in numerous ways. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that uses oral and visual narrative to examine the multi-layered experiences of individuals. MacIntyre (1981) reasons:

> It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told. (p. 197)

In a world full of individuals with a wealth of experience, narrative naturally abounds, creating a rich field for assorted studies. Scholars employ multiple theoretical approaches to narrative inquiry (Chase, 2018; Kim, 2016), numerous applications of narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2016; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012), and varying definitions of narrative (Clandinin, 2016; Daiute, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995). Due to the expanding boundaries (Chase, 2018) and diversity (Clandinin, 2016) of narrative inquiry, Chase (2018) and Clandinin (2016) admonish researchers to clarify what they mean by narrative. In addition to explaining my use of the term narrative in this study, I distinguish between the meanings of narrative and story and explain narrative analysis.

My discussion begins with narrative as discourse, that is narrative as an expression of understanding or knowledge. Labov and Waletzky (1967), in their seminal work in narrative analysis, identify narrative as oral recounting of personal experience in an aligned temporal order. Additionally, they describe five elements of narrative, which include orientation (the set-up of place, time, and characters), complication (the action), resolution (the outcome of the action), evaluation (the point of the narrative), and the coda (to return to the present). Over time, as scholars increasingly engaged in narrative inquiry, the definition and use of narrative expanded beyond verbal biographies to interviews, as well as a wide variety of written documents.

> Narrative theorists define narrative as a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. (Chase, 2011, p. 421)

With definitions creatively expanding, researchers now study photos, art, feelings, thoughts, actions, and interactions as narrative. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) verify that “many researchers

view almost any oral, written, or visual text as narrative" and note "inclusive definitions of the term *narrative* . . . set broad parameters" (p. 1) for what counts as narrative. Chase (2018) warns "the concept becomes meaningless" (p. 548) without clearly stated justification of how less obvious choices for narrative study are being considered as narrative. A range of data may be considered narrative, but everything cannot be narrative. Stretching a term over a large territory dissipates its potency. An imprecise word loses power.

To be of value, like knives with honed edges, words should maintain distinct definitions, even if nuanced, and especially if closely related. Frequently, the terms story and narrative are used interchangeably in conversation and academic literature. In my experience, no one requests, "tell me a narrative." Yet, they do say, "tell me a story." It seems we have a sense of some difference between the two, yet in practice any demarcation of meaning is obscured. Haven (2007) helps extricate the terms with his classification of narrative into three types: "plot-based event descriptions," "stories (character-based)," and "information-based articles, reports, data sets, and other similar documents" (p. 79). This approach reveals that not every narrative is a story, but all stories are narratives. "Stories are a specific subset of the more general narrative characterized by specific structural elements" (Haven, 2007, p. 76). To clarify, for the purpose of this study, I subscribe to Haven's (2007) definition of narrative. When I use the word narrative, I refer to a spoken or written text recounting related events, actions, or information.

With the definition of narrative established, I turn to teasing apart the difference between story and narrative. I begin with Clandinin's (2016) version of a typical recipe for story. "People will tell their stories, usually in the Western tradition of a beginning, middle, and end—with a plotline, characters, and resolution" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 215). Similarly, Polkinghorne (1995) describes story as an "*emplotted narrative*" (p. 7) with a beginning, middle, and end. He points

out plot is a structure, an element of story, that temporally organizes sequences of events. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) concur “time is essential to plot” (p. 8). In definitions of story, plot is often mentioned as a critical component, so I briefly address it here. Daiute (2014) establishes that “plot involves certain lifelike elements” (p. 115) that include character, setting, action (initiating and complicating), high point, resolution, ending, and coda, which may occur in a variety of orders and combinations. According to Haven (2007), some narratives other than story also feature plot. Although it is an integral feature of story, there is more to story than plot.

Another story theorist, psychologist Bruner (2004), elucidates the characteristics of emplotted narrative through a discussion of concepts of the “Russian formalists, who distinguished three aspects of story: *fabula*, *sjuzet*, and *forma*—roughly theme, discourse, and genre” (p. 696). Fabula is the timeless human plight and moral within a story. Sjuzet is the sequenced plot flow, spun by word and action. Fabula and sjuzet weave together a story under the influence of the particulars of the genre. Bruner suggests this perspective is a start to the discussion of what story is but concludes with his broader view: “Stories are about the vicissitudes of human intention” (Bruner, 2004, p. 697). He argues that “trouble drives the drama” (Bruner, 2004, p. 697), and the characters respond to the plot. Or in other words, central to story is how agents deal with problems they face. In their work, Labov and Waletzky (1997) refer to the series of events a storyteller relates as complication or complicating action. From these scholars, we learn the heart of story is *the intentions of characters in concert with how they deal with situations they encounter*.

When professional storyteller and former scientist, Kendall Haven (2007), conducted a robust study of research about story within fifteen fields, he realized the necessity of a clear definition of story. In his book, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*

(Haven, 2007), Haven provides a definition of story and description of story structure. Confronting and countering myths and misunderstandings surrounding story and its structure, he explicates "effective story "and its "specific set of definable common characteristics" (Haven, 2007, p. 19). As with Bruner (2004) and Labov and Waletzky (1967), Haven (2007) also identifies the pivotal role of characters and their response to the problem in the story. He lays out the argument for his bold conclusion that "a better definition" for story is "a detailed, character-based narration of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal" (Haven, 2007, p. 79). Drawing on these theorists' descriptions and Haven's (2007) clearly stated summary statement, I conclude that a story is a specialized narrative employing the unified elements of character, plot, problem, goal, and change within the character.

With a better understanding of the distinctions between narrative and story, I now delve into narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a type of discovery or research process within the broader category of narrative inquiry. How researchers approach, study, and present data will be the result of choices they make about how they employ narrative analysis. These decisions can be guided purely by the data or the intended use of the results (Chase, 2018).

Polkinghorne (1995) discerns two categories of narrative inquiry: analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. He aligns them with Bruner's (1986) two modes of thinking: analysis of narrative with paradigmatic cognition and narrative analysis with narrative cognition. For analysis of narrative, researchers engage paradigmatic reasoning as collected stories are examined for themes and patterns. Data are presented as descriptions of categories and generalizations. Hatch (2003) observes that analysis of narrative research resembles other qualitative research. Alternatively, for narrative analysis, emplotment and narrative are applied to the data. Researchers collect descriptions, events, and actions with the results presented as a

narrative product or story in which the analysis occurs. Analysis of narrative focuses on generalizations, while narrative analysis attends to the individual and the particular. Both analysis approaches to narrative have their place because each reveals certain aspects of human experience.

As storytelling beings, we experience our life through narrative. Narrative helps us communicate, as well as understand others. Because "narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and *making meaning* of experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80), it is ideal to examine the experiences of individuals. Knowing the strength of story to carry depth and detail of information to head and heart, I argue that analysis of narrative and narrative analysis make ideal choices to examine, as well as to present, research that focuses on individual experiences. These perspectives set the stage to study human experience and sense-making. With the definitions of narrative and story in hand, next up is storytelling and storytellers.

Storytelling and Storytellers

It is important to be precise with language, but as with narrative and story, storytelling and storyteller are words that have been broadly applied in sundry ways to describe a multitude of disparate things. For example, storytelling has been used to describe things such as movies, advertising, dance, and lying. Similarly, the title storyteller has been bestowed upon authors, songwriters, and politicians. As more people have come to understand the value of narrative in the past few decades, there has been an increase in the use of the words story, storytelling, and storyteller in business, medical, educational, and other fields, even to the extent of becoming buzzwords in some cases. In this section I clarify the use of the terms storytelling and storytellers in this study.

I recall the efforts of members of the National Storytelling Network toward defining what storytelling was in the 1990s. Lacking a clear definition of storytelling created a challenge for storytellers as they sought to explain their work, declare their place among the performing arts, and apply for grants. There are times I have been confronted with the quandary of where to place my work when the closest options were literature, drama, or folk art. After identifying the need to define storytelling, the National Storytelling Network wrestled with how to describe storytelling in a way that encompassed the many different approaches yet set boundaries to differentiate what oral storytellers do different than other performers or entertainers. Their website currently states: "*Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination*" (National Storytelling Network, n.d.).

They continue by clarifying the five important characteristics of storytelling encompassed in their definition: "storytelling is interactive," "storytelling uses words," "storytelling uses actions such as vocalization, physical movement and/or gesture," "storytelling presents a story," and "storytelling encourages the active imagination of the listeners" (National Storytelling Network, n.d.). According to the National Storytelling Network (n.d.), storytelling is only established by the presence of all five characteristics. Their definition is descriptive enough to understand what storytelling is, but also it has room to include many styles and variations.

Another formative definition of storytelling is given by Pellowski (1990) in her seminal book, *The World of Storytelling*:

> Storytelling . . . is . . . the entire context of a moment when oral narration of stories in verse and/or prose, is performed or led by one person before a live audience; the narration may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other

accompaniment, and may be learned from oral, printed or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes must be that of entertainment or delight and it must have at least a small element of spontaneity in the performance. (p. 18)

Note that Pellowski (1990) mentions a live audience. At the time she wrote this, storytelling was understood to be an in-person event, that is face-to-face (FTF). Spontaneity in performance implies freedom—freedom from exact text, and freedom to be creative. Furthermore, it suggests although the story is prepared and rehearsed, there is room for improvisation, which would allow for a storyteller to respond in the moment. In a supple mode a storyteller's sensibilities are free to notice the environment, as well as respond to their own performance, the audience's reactions, and other ambient stimuli, such as a loud siren or an annoying insect buzzing around the teller. Spontaneity creates space for flexibility and enhances the liveness of storytelling.

Another definition comes from the National Council of Teachers of English (2022):

> Storytelling is relating a tale to one or more listeners through voice and gesture. It is not the same as reading a story aloud or reciting a piece from memory or acting out a drama—though it shares common characteristics with these arts. The storyteller looks into the eyes of the audience and together they compose the tale.

The National Council of Teachers of English carefully distinguishes storytelling from other closely related art forms. Their definition emphasizes communication through the eyes and an audience's role in the collaborative effort to create a unique story event.

Common to these three definitions of storytelling are a teller, a story, and an audience. Another key point they each include is creating an interactive social event through live performance. Cassady (1990) describes storytelling as a "temporal art" (p. 13), while Lipman (1999) adds that storytelling happens "in the moment of interaction between" (p. 207) teller and

listener. The definition of storytelling for this study is: the experience of sharing story through word and action to listeners who are present and whose imaginations and responses are available to help shape the story. While acknowledging it may be argued that defining storytelling in this manner may exclude legitimate forms of storytelling, a clear definition must circumscribe the specific event this research is examining—the type of storytelling performed by professional storytellers FTF with an audience and its adaptation to videoconferencing (VC) and the videoconference (VC) environment.

Storytellers

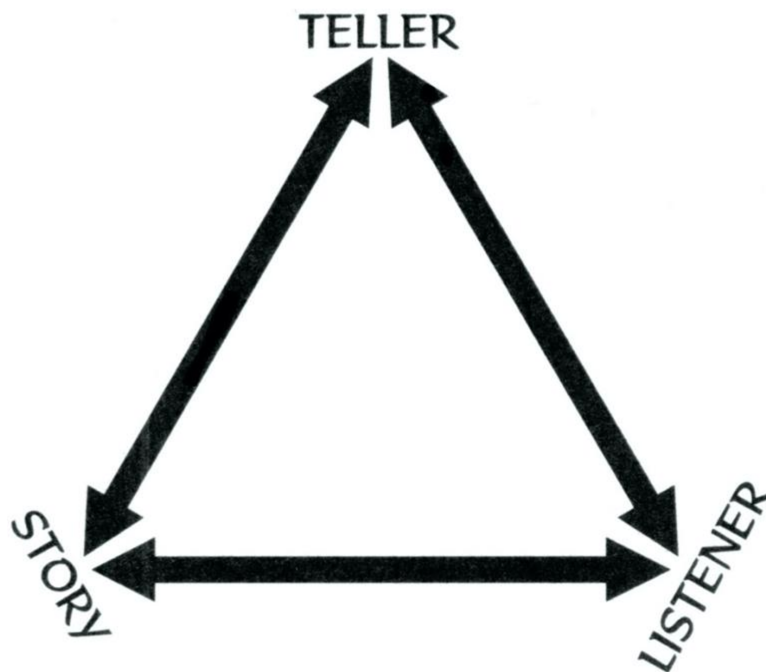
Storytellers are those who engage in telling stories. Often movie makers or writers are referred to as storytellers. In this study, the term storyteller refers to a person who tells stories to an audience using oral or sign language. As a storyteller uses their voice and body to tell a story, their listener responds nonverbally and at times verbally to both the storyteller's performance and the story. In turn, the storyteller is influenced by the audience's responses, as well as the story as it unfolds. However, as Daniel (2018) clarifies, "the relationship between any storyteller and audience is necessarily asymmetrical, as the storyteller is the one who knows and controls the narrative" (p. 207).

Storytellers describe this dynamic relationship between story, audience, and teller as a storytelling triangle. Figure 1 underscores the interconnection of these three fundamental components of storytelling. Niemi and Ellis (2001) explain that the order of relationships are teller to story, and then teller to listener. Finally, a third relationship occurs between listener and story with the first two relationships factoring into its level of success. The bidirectional arrows clearly indicate the reciprocal nature of the relationships between the three entities that contribute to the storytelling experience. Lipman (1999) tells us the line between the listener and

the story is dotted, illustrating its potential while emphasizing the lack of direct control the teller has over the relationship between listener and story. Daniel (2018) clarifies the relationship is "on a scale of involvement" (p. 188). A storyteller offers their story, and listeners ultimately choose how they engage with, imagine, and respond to the story.

Figure 1

Storytelling Triangle



From *Inviting the Wolf In: Thinking About the Difficult Story*, by L. Niemi and E. Ellis, 2001, August House, p. 56. Copyright 2001 by Loren Niemi and Elizabeth Ellis. Reprinted with permission.

While at first glance storytelling may seem simple, it is more complicated than it appears to the eye or the ear. More is involved in the process than merely telling a tale. "The storytelling event is a multi-layered, complex experience" (Forest, 2007, p. 28). A story is in the storyteller's imagination. They encode the story into messages, which are sent through words and actions (Poe, 2011). The listeners receive these messages from the storyteller and decode them, engaging

their imagination. The listeners respond to the message sending their encoded message for the teller to receive and, in turn, decode. In the same moment both storyteller and listener simlutaneously signal and read each others' embodied messages. The bi-directional communication between the teller and their audience forms connections with and in this shared experience. Each person imagines the story in their mind while present in the moment, attending and responding to the telling and each other.

Paradoxically, it is a social relationship between teller and audience that causes a listener to turn inward to experience their imagination. "Stories are fundamentally *social* phenomena" (Strate, 2014, p. 9) dependent on the relationship between teller and listeners. The communal nature allows teller and listener to collaborate in the construction of the story (Hibbon, 2016). Live storytelling is born of a relational act with communication given and received in a feedback loop. Cassady (1990) confirms that "you can't separate the teller from the audience. There would be no teller without the audience" (p. 13). For storytelling to occur, not only must a teller share their story, but also an audience is required to receive it. Story is constituted in the social activity of relating a story to another, forming a relationship between the teller and listener. Forest (2007) shares from her perspective as a professional storyteller that she "tacitly understand[s] storytelling to be a co-creative, living event that dynamically interweaves the teller, the tale, and the listener" (p. 28).

Stallings (1988) noted that "the story contributes the words; a skilled teller brings the words to life" (section IV, para. 2). To accomplish this, storytellers employ a variety of techniques to invite interest and imagination. Beyond the words they speak, a storyteller communicates additional information with verbal and nonverbal signals. According to professional storyteller Carol Birch (2007), "live performances are primarily aural events with

physical components that serve a story most effectively by using all the verbal and nonverbal cues available to performers" (p. 26). These multimodal signals or cues provided by language (e.g., syntax, grammar, word choice, repetition, metaphor), voice (e.g., tone, volume, emphasis, phrasing, inflection, tempo, pitch, pace, pause), and body (e.g., gestures, posture, movement, facial expression, eye contact) give rich meaning to the story (Birch, 2007; Hibbon, 2016; Lwin & Teo, 2015; Stallings, 1988; Sturm, 2000). Furthermore, storytellers strive to connect with their listeners using these "multimodal cues" (Lwin & Teo, 2015, p. 239), or put another way, "a series of deliberate engagement strategies" (Daniel, 2018, p. 187). When a storyteller responds to audience reactions, they are confirming the audience's co-creative role in the storytelling experience. A storyteller's engagement with their audience aids in building a connection between themselves and their audience. Through their shared experience, the teller and listener create a relationship.

Of the communication cues, eye contact seems highly potent in facilitating a connection between a teller and their listeners. Presenter eye contact, above any other facial cue, has greater influence on their relationship with their audience (Gamble & Gamble, 2018) and can provide opportunity for greater benefits from immediacy messages (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). Immediacy messages signal physical and psychological closeness between communicators (DeVito, 2017). These messages are delivered through verbal and nonverbal cues (DeVito, 2017) with eye contact located "at the heart of immediacy construct" (Andersen & Andersen, 2005, p. 115). The research of Lenhart et al. (2020) with children found that eye contact, as well as gesture, held attention during storytelling. Knowing how to skillfully use eye contact is a valuable tool for a storyteller to master. Eye contact facilitates the direct communication between the storyteller and the audience, which engenders social connection and collaboration.

Experienced storytellers' successful use of eye contact helps develop a special rapport between themselves and their listeners. Collins and Cooper (2005) discuss "the teller's focus and extent of audience inclusion" (p. 69) in terms of four circles of awareness. The first circle of awareness is when the storyteller experiences feelings, memories, and images in their mind's eye. They do not make direct eye contact with listeners, but instead their focus is inward. The second circle of awareness happens as the teller focuses on the world of the story. As they are telling they are looking at the characters and setting. The focus is shifted outward to the audience for the third and fourth circles of awareness. Eye contact with individual audience members indicates the third circle, while the fourth circle takes in the entire audience. Collins and Cooper continue in their descriptions of the third circle as zooming in on particular listeners and the fourth circle as scanning the group of listeners. The storytellers' awareness flows between the circles—especially the second, third, and fourth—while they share their story, which contributes to the dynamic nature of oral storytelling.

A mutually responsive relationship is facilitated as storytellers speak directly to their listeners, attend to their listeners' communicative behaviors, and respond directly in the moment. This co-creative effort is more readily available when the theatrical fourth wall is not being used. I agree with Daniel (2018) who posits that typically performance storytellers do not use the theatrical fourth wall with the same frequency that actors do. A hallmark of storytelling is that the teller normally speaks directly to their audience, whereas often in theater, actors employ the fourth wall. When the technique of the fourth wall is used, a performer does not acknowledge the presence of the audience. Professional storyteller Heather Forest (2007) describes the importance of listeners in the work of responsive tellers:

> Storytelling is a reflective practice. Unlike actors in the theatre community, storytellers don’t usually have directors. Much of the artistic work is self-directed in tandem with audience response. The speaking of the tales and the listeners’ response teach much about how to shape and tell a story. (p. 27)

Storytellers watch their listeners for signs they are understanding and connecting with their story and message. Mundy-Taylor et al. (2015) suggests that storytellers “read their audience” (p. 168). Then they adjust their telling according to the audience’s verbal and nonverbal communication. Audience engagement is observed and communicated in their behaviors and responses (Mundy-Taylor et al., 2015). In my experience, very often listener responses are obvious in observation, but some responses are more subtle and can sometimes be imperceptible to the storyteller. Many storytellers process and respond intuitively, and some may be incognizant of the process, though it can be learned and further honed with practice.

Because storytellers are unique and storytelling experiences are dynamic, awareness and responsiveness of storytellers and audience are on a continuum. Depending on the context, “modification of the performance is not always immediately apparent" (Daniel, 2018, p. 187). This back and forth during the storytelling experience is an integral part of the co-creative process between teller and listener. In experiments with conversational storytelling, Bavelas et al. (2000) assert that “listeners were co-narrators both through their own specific responses, which helped illustrate the story, and in their apparent effect on the narrator's performance. The results demonstrate the importance of moment-by-moment collaboration” (p. 941). These findings directly correlate to the dynamic relationship between teller and audience in performance storytelling.

Live oral storytelling allows for the component of responding to an audience. Professional storyteller Susan O’Halloran (2020) points out this important characterizing relationship, which is a prime distinguishing factor of live storytelling from the perspective of a performer. “You want to maintain your connection with your audience throughout” (O’Halloran, 2020, p. 4). In part, the reason may be because established rapport seems to be a crucial factor in audience commitment to the story. Hibbon (2016) explained that storytellers assess the understanding of listeners and “can tailor an orally told story to suit the audience as it is being told” (p. 227). In a study, Kuhlen and Brennan (2010) showed that speakers’ perception of listener feedback, including inattentiveness, shapes their narrative. Commonly, storytellers watch their listeners and use listener cues to gauge audience engagement. Then storytellers can accordingly adjust their performance, and at the same time more easily direct audience attention toward the story. Listener engagement can open the door for the story to take place in an imaginal world of their own making (Hibbon, 2016).

The collaboration between teller and audience contributes to the ephemeral nature of oral stories. The performance of a story is a brief moment, a specific period in time. A storyteller may repeat the same story, but the retelling is not the same event due to any number of deviations in performance, such as alternate wording, gestures, and vocal intonations. The variation may be intentional or a response to the audience and situation. Indeed, a storyteller never exactly has the same mood, thought, emotion, skill, or intent from one telling to the next. Because of individuals’ personalities, thoughts, feelings, and experiences, no audience is the same. Subtle influences on the collaborative effort could include the mood of the audience, the weather, or ambient sound. Therefore, because the storytelling experience cannot be precisely duplicated, each performance is a unique experience created by the storyteller and their audience.

Lipman (1999) lists four tasks a storyteller uses to relate to an audience in performance: uniting, inviting, offering, and acknowledging. Gathering the audience invites them to become a group. He explains when an audience is unified there is a shift and the energy in the room is collective rather than individual. “Performing for a strongly united audience . . . is a powerful experience of unity and connection” (Lipman, 1999, p. 128). A teller’s invitation (verbal and/or nonverbal) beckons the listener to join the teller on the storytelling journey. Next, the storyteller offers the story. The offering continues throughout the story or stories. Finally, the teller acknowledges that the audience has been on the journey with them, and the teller acknowledges any appreciation from listeners. According to Spaulding, (2004) story is “social glue” (p. 166). There is a strong, energetic connection that can be felt in the room when a storyteller successfully unites listeners.

Neuroscience verifies the communal nature of narrative. Studies show while listening to a narrative among listeners there is heart synchronization (Pérez et al., 2021) and neural coupling, which is when listener’s brain activity mirrors speaker’s brain activity (Kuhlen et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2010). Furthermore, measurable physiological processes reveal that being involved in an experience together and sharing emotions facilitates social bonding (Cheong et al., 2020). Many seasoned and professional storytellers are familiar with the feeling of synchronization and collaboration with and within their audiences as they tell stories. Through scientific research and the firsthand experiences of tellers, we conclude that storytelling is relational, and storytellers use communicative skills to present their stories. In the telling, listeners have the opportunity to imagine and co-create in story.

Professional Storytellers. A wide variety of individuals tell stories. Among them are conversational tellers, hobby or amateur performers, and professional storytellers. While

storytelling may be a secondary part of a chosen career, professional storytellers who develop their craft into a career may do it full- or part-time. I am interested in the experiences of professional storytellers. I distinguish professional storytellers as those whose career is storytelling. Professional storytellers can be seen performing at festivals, schools, and many other venues. Although some of their work may be applied storytelling (i.e., the practical use of storytelling in fields such as education, business, and counseling) and teaching storytelling, much is based on their ability to perform and connect with their audiences. Their livelihood depends on the success of their storytelling performances. Consequently, professional storytellers have the incentive to develop their skills to relate well to their audience. Many are self-employed and involved in the gig economy, similar to other independent artists. Although there is interest in stories and storytelling in many fields, there is little research on professional storytellers. The research I found regarding storytellers performing stories was mainly in the field of education.

Virtual Storytelling

In my review of the literature, I found few researchers discussing oral storytellers performing online. Within the context of library storytellers and online graduate storytelling courses, McDowell (2008) identified the need to "navigate the complexities of the online environment" (p. 215) to successfully tell stories. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015) suggest that mediated storytelling is a blend of old and new elements, allows different audience engagement than in FTF contexts, and enhances capabilities of distribution. Furthermore, these benefits, as well as the limitations of virtual storytelling vary according to the chosen mediated environment. Although De Fina and Georgakopoulou apply the term storytelling in a broader sense (inclusive of social media, etc.) than I use in my research study, their observations have

merit in the discussion of professional storytellers moving their performances to a new platform—a virtual stage.

There is scant evidence of storytellers participating in live online storytelling before March 2020. In 2017, a special section of the National Storytelling Network's *Storytelling Magazine* (Miller, 2017) introduced its United States-based membership to storytellers (the majority located outside the United States) who tell stories virtually. Eric Miller, the guest editor based in India, admits his discomfort with using the term storytelling for events that were not FTF, yet encouraged storytellers to use technologies, including VC, to share stories. The section includes invitation and encouragement to overcome reluctance to use online technology for stories and describes storytellers' observations of its limitations and potential. Research and experience indicate telling stories in a live virtual environment presents challenges, but also provides unique possibilities for storytellers and their audiences.

To gain insight into the challenges and benefits that storytellers face when performing within the VC environment, I look to research that addresses how humans interact in virtual settings, beginning with the concept of presence. An examination of presence brings clarity to the interactions between storyteller, audience, and the storytelling environment. For a storyteller and their audience to be available for a collaborative relationship means they must be present to each other, which is affected by the mode of interaction, whether FTF or virtual. Building on the understanding of presence, I give brief overviews of three theories relevant to VC, then follow with a discussion of challenges and benefits of using VC.

Presence

The concept of presence has importance because of its application to a wide range and high volume of human to digital interfaces in our society (Lee, 2004). The study of presence is

represented by “multidisciplinary research in the fields of higher education, social psychology, educational psychology, information technology, and computer science” (Mykota, 2018, p. 2), and is increasing in interest (Lee, 2004). Because of the variance of understandings and methods between scholars and the resulting variance in terminology and concepts associated with presence, scholars have attempted to codify terms (Biocca et al., 2003; Draper et al., 1998; Lee, 2004; Mykota, 2018; Zhao, 2003). Nevertheless, consistency between fields has not been achieved.

I will review the concept of presence beginning with Goffman’s (1963) definition of FTF presence as “persons immediately present to one another” (p. 17). He further clarifies:

> The physical distance over which one person can experience another with the naked senses—thereby finding that the other is “within range”—varies according to many factors: the sense medium involved, the presence of obstructions, even the temperature of the air. (Goffman, 1963, p. 17)

Presence, the state of being available to and aware of the other, is affected by the environment. For storytellers and their listeners, the setting or environment contributes to the potential of their interactions. It is illustrative to think about the ambient differences, such as sight and sound, between a large outdoor arena and an intimate theater.

Describing the conditions for copresence beyond simple FTF presence, Goffman (1963) states that “persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” (p. 17). In other words, copresence is being in close enough proximity to another individual to be aware of them, while also being aware that they are aware of you. Zhao (2003) differentiates between “mode of copresence” and “sense of copresence,” with mode

defined as “the physical conditions” of the interaction and sense of copresence defined as “an individual’s perceptions and feelings of being with others” (p. 450). Scholars expanded the concept of copresence to include telepresence, which Westera (2015) defines as “extending a human presence to a remote location without moving” (p. 16). Individuals are telepresent when they are within the same “electronic proximity rather than physical proximity” (Zhao, 2003, p. 447). We can sense each other when we are together in a virtual location. Copresence is not only the means and conditions of human interaction, but also how individuals experience their interactions whether it is FTF or virtual.

Sense of copresence is not unlike social presence in other literature. The term social presence can be traced to the seminal work of Short et al. (1976) who viewed it as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). It seems that sense of copresence and social presence are used for nearly, if not the same, phenomenon. According to Zhao (2003), “Copresence has also been called *social presence* (Biocca & Harms, 2002; Rice, 1992; Short et al., 1976), which refers to the sense of being together with others in a mediated—either remote or virtual—environment” (p. 445). In contrast, Lee (2004) distinguishes between the terms, claiming that copresence is the sense of sharing a virtual space with another person, while social presence is the psychological engagement of individuals within virtual environments.

Similar to Lee (2004), Biocca et al. (2003) distinguish between physical presence/telepresence as “the sense of ‘being there’” and social presence as the “sense of ‘being together with another’” (p. 459), which also seems to correspond with Zhao’s (2003) concepts of mode and sense of copresence. In their review of presence literature, Biocca et al. (2003) posit social presence is connected to the psychological aspect of interactions, with involvement,

immediacy, and intimacy being measures of social presence. Lee (2004) agrees that presence is better understood when viewed through a participant's feeling of their experience and furthermore states that "researchers have begun to realize that the feeling of *presence* (Biocca, 1997; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Lombard, Reich, Grabe, Bracken, & Ditton, 2000; Tamborini, 2000) lies at the center of all mediated experiences" (p. 27). Mykota (2018) explains "social presence is the way individuals develop inter-personal relationships, communicate, and project themselves online" (p. 2). Social presence goes beyond the sense of being with others and includes the perception of connection with others. Individuals use social presence in communicating and relating interpersonally both FTF and online. Without the feeling of being together, storyteller and audience co-creation of a story would be stymied. Social presence, or the feeling of being connected, plays a significant role in storyteller and audience collaborative story experience.

Social presence is affected by the place of colocation. Biocca et al. (2001) define colocation as being together in a specific space or place. Communicators' colocation makes a difference in how they perceive the other. For instance, consider the differences between how we sense another's presence in an elevator, a noisy neighborhood, or a foggy field. This illustrates the concept that the mode of colocation makes a difference in perceptions, which can affect social presence and how we communicate. The opportunities for immediacy and intimacy for storyteller and audience colocated in a large arena with amplification are different than in a smaller, unplugged venue, or in an outdoor environment near the noise of a playground or a train track.

Physical presence is not the only manner of colocation. Telepresence allows for colocation also, with the location being online. Our sense of colocation contributes to our sense

of social presence (Zhao, 2003). Whether in FTF or computer-mediated environments, social presence is directly affected by the manner of colocation. Short et al. (1976) argue that social presence is influenced by the mode of communication. Therefore, decisions we make about methods we use to communicate impact how we perceive and perform our social presence. Furthermore, social presence is on a continuum that is, at least in part, dependent on the environment (Biocca et al., 2003; Mykota, 2018). Social presence is influenced by environmental and technological choices involved in the interactions of humans.

The features of VC can facilitate a degree of social presence that can support live storytelling. Goffman (1963) explains that in the perception of social presence each of the senses are acting as a medium. FTF storytelling allows more senses to participate in our experience. Goffman (1963) "cited two distinctive features of FTF interaction: richness of information flow and facilitation of feedback" (p. 17). Both qualities play an important role in storytelling experiences. Although FTF has historically been considered the most desirable mode of colocation for oral storytelling, the circumstances of the pandemic created the need for storytellers to find an alternative for their FTF storytelling performances. Storytellers who sought a synchronous solution capable of information richness and feedback that most closely resembled FTF storytelling turned to VC platforms.

Videoconferencing

The medium of VC has more similarity to FTF than other forms of communication (Croes et al., 2019). "Because VC can handle visual cues and produce feedback instantly, it is usually seen as a rich medium—although not as rich as FTF interaction" (Denstadli et al., 2012, p. 69). The qualities of immediacy and intimacy contribute significantly to the ability for participants to feel social presence in VC environments. As a synchronous medium, VC creates

conditions that allow for a virtual experience that most closely fits the definition of storytelling I use in my research study: the experience of sharing story through word and action to listeners who are present and whose imaginations and responses are available to help shape the story.

Scholars have theorized and researched the choices and behaviors of users of communication media. Social presence theory emphasizes the influence of social presence on user experience. VC is a medium with “higher social presence” than other media (e.g., online games, text messaging) (Nguyen et al., 2021). Oh et al. (2018) state “social presence often predicts positive communication outcomes” (para. 17). In contrast, media richness theory focuses on the communication tools available to use in a medium. Media richness describes the quality, complexity, and number of cues available in a communication medium (Croes et al., 2019; Denstadli et al., 2012). Because VC is richer in cues than other media, it allows more sensory information, which renders it closer to FTF communication. Denstadli et al. (2012) observe that some scholars suggest media richness determines the effects of human interaction when using that medium.

Yet another perspective, the affordance theory centers on the user’s perception of the environment and the possibilities they see within it. Affordances are “properties of communication media or interfaces that ‘afford’ or enable people to engage in interdependent interaction” (Burgoon et al., 2002, p. 660). Larsen (2015) notes that “an affordance lens directs attention to what users perceive themselves as being able to do with technology—the communication possibilities that they perceive through the use of VC” (p. 9). The medium a user chooses, along with its affordances, will influence their experience.

Some scholars argue that a combination of these theories influences a user’s virtual experience (Larsen, 2015; Tang et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2012). The capability of a medium to

transmit signals determines how fully or completely a message is conveyed. “A medium is literally something intermediate: it captures and transfers messages between one party (the sender of a message) and another (the receiver)” (Westera, 2015, p. 33). The richness of a medium determines the possible capabilities within its environment, which influences the users’ communication. Presence is linked to the nature of the mediated environment according to Biocca et al. (2003), and “the changing relationship of one individual to another is affected by the salience of the relational cues available to both individuals” (p. 464). It can be concluded that media richness and affordances impact social presence. Furthermore, Tang et al. (2013) suggests “social presence is determined by not only the nature of the media but also individuals who use the media” (p. 1069). Agreeing with the role of user impact, Wei et al. (2012) argue that “user interface and social cues have significant effects on social presence” (p. 529). Larsen (2015) posits the lenses of social presence and media richness have relevance when considered in tandem with how users perceive the possibilities of exploiting affordances to facilitate communication within the VC environment. I agree with these scholars that draw on multiple concepts or theories to explain how individuals perceive virtual experience because each has strengths and limitations. But when considered together, the three theories create a fuller understanding of communication and media. An experience within a medium is shaped by the dynamic influences amongst user, media capabilities, and social presence.

The dynamics of VC create an environment closest to FTF, with a multitude of cues available in visual, auditory, and text channels. VC platforms provide “visual cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, body posture and stance, eye movements, dress, and appearance. The audio cues, including pitch, speed, tone and volume of voice, are transmitted by audio” (Wei et al., 2012, p. 531). Other VC communication tools include screen sharing, whiteboards, emojis,

and text chat. Important aspects lending to VC being closest to FTF are the high number of natural communication cues (Tang et al., 2013), which include verbal (Biocca et al., 2003) and nonverbal (Croes et al., 2019; Wegge, 2006), in addition to instant feedback (Denstadli et al., 2012).

More cues are available because more senses are involved in communication through VC platforms than other media, yet VC has limited sensory channels compared to FTF interaction. Croes et al. (2019) explain two essential differences: communication between two physically separated people is mediated by technology and information is diminished by technology that cannot deliver at natural FTF speed. Additional challenges include the limitations of using a camera. Bailenson (2021) explains “cameras have a field of view, an area they can see. Close up to the camera, the field of view is small, while farther away from the camera the area is larger” (p. 1). He explains this restricts movement when the user is closer to the camera, yet if the user moves too far away from the camera where the field is larger, their facial expressions are not discernable. Another example is eye contact in VC. Bohannon et al. (2013) claim that “eye contact is arguably one of the most important non-verbal cues in communication” (p. 177). Yet in VC if one looks at the other person’s eyes, the image is on the computer screen while the camera is located right above the screen, so it appears as no eye contact to the other person. One must look at the camera instead to give the impression of eye contact (Fullwood, 2007). Wegge (2006) points out more features that may cause communication challenges:

> Communication via videoconference has its unique characteristics and also some very specific potential disadvantages that are usually not present in FtF or audio conversation. These disadvantages are mainly based on some of the following phenomena: missing eye contact due to the use of cameras and camera positioning; a temporal delay of signals due

> to coding, transmission, and decoding of information; a sometimes observable asynchrony of video and audio data; low bandwidths for transmission that restrict video and audio quality; the fade out of some information; and the use of physically separated rooms. (p. 276)

Not all difficulties stem from the characteristics of VC. Some obstacles to communication involve negative feelings of the user toward VC (Wegge, 2006). Not everyone is eager to adopt technology. Campbell's (2006) study shows that communication apprehension affects the perceptions of, and interaction, within VC.

Because it is user friendly and robust, Zoom became widely used during the pandemic to the point that Zoom has become a substitute term for VC (Bailenson, 2021). In this spirit, Bailenson uses the term Zoom in his examination of the effects of VC. Along with affordances of Zoom come constraints. Bailenson (2021) focuses on four of these issues VC users face: close proxemic eye gaze, cognitive load, self-view, and limited movement. The distance we sit from our computers puts us closer to others' faces than we usually are when we interact in person, plus we end up spending more time looking straight at others, which is not natural behavior. We have a higher cognitive load on Zoom because we must work harder to communicate. We send more and receive fewer cues, and those cues are altered in the VC environment from what we are accustomed to when communicating FTF. Self-view is unnatural and makes us self-conscious. We have limited movement because the norm is to sit in front of the computer facing forward within range of the camera. Furthermore, close to the camera, the frame is a smaller area than the larger frame that is further away. Staying within the camera's view restricts our gestures and movement.

Although some of the disadvantages may lead to misinterpretations of messages (Wegge, 2006), users adapt to VC communication (Croes et al., 2019). Communicators can adjust their cues to accommodate the differences in this virtual medium. Regarding VC, Fullwood (2007) states that "humans can adapt and apply emerging technologies" (p. 267). There are reasons to adopt technology. Advantages include potential for connectedness because of the higher social presence (Nguyen et al., 2021), capacity for immediate audience feedback (Kuhlen & Brennan, 2010; Marlow et al., 2017), savings on energy (Bailenson, 2021) and related travel expenses, opportunities to "go" where one might not be able to otherwise, and participation of audience members who cannot travel (Wegge, 2006).

The challenges and benefits discussed in this section have implications for storytellers performing on Zoom. Communication on Zoom is altered from FTF because participants' copresence is mediated through the VC platform. The degree of social presence is in part influenced by the medium of interaction. Zoom is a rich medium with capabilities to facilitate social presence. In other words, it carries the qualities of immediacy and intimacy which can create connection. Zoom has capabilities that, provided the disadvantages and advantages of the medium are understood, can support storytelling.

In summary, this literature review sets the foundation for researching the experiences of professional storytellers shifting their storytelling from FTF to VC platforms. Narrative inquiry is well-suited to discover the storied knowledge of professional storytellers regarding their change to and connection through virtual storytelling. Plentiful research in other fields touching on aspects of my study is helpful, but there is little literature dedicated to professional storytellers or virtual storytelling. The perspective of communication scholars and storytellers on the telling of stories explains key concepts relevant to storytelling performances. The concept of presence is

instructive of the relationship between teller and listener. Storytellers need to navigate limitations and capitalize on affordances of Zooming to access the potential reward of connecting with their listeners.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The qualitative research approach that best addresses my topic is pairing the paradigm of constructivism with the methodology of narrative inquiry. I begin this chapter with a description of my approach within the constructivist paradigm. Next, I situate the methodology of narrative inquiry within the constructivist paradigm. I conclude with an explanation of my research methods, introducing the storytellers and describing the methods for collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data.

Constructivist Paradigm and Narrative Methodology

As humans, we are curious and want to understand ourselves, others, our environment, our experiences, and how these relate with each other. We want our world to make sense. As we interact and participate in our world, we develop understanding and knowledge through our experiences. Viewed from our distinctive perspective and with our own understanding, we each create meaning out of our life experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain "social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" and "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (p. 24). In other words, experiences do not happen in a vacuum; individuals develop meaning and knowledge through interactions with others and with culture. Bujold (2004) posits:

> The epistemological perspective represented by constructivism has to do with the way individuals know, and by implication, find meaning in what they come to know and experience. Although these processes have undoubtedly a social component, they are primarily psychological and individual. (p. 474)

The meanings we construct are personal even as social influences inform our knowing. For Hatch (2003), "the objects of inquiry ought to be individual perspectives that are taken to be

constructions of reality" (p. 17). Researchers rely on these perspectives and meanings, while also considering the context of the experience from which they are drawn (Bujold, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018). "Subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically," which allows for "varied and multiple" viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). While events and social processes change perspective and meaning within an individual, no two individuals are the same. It is expected that different individuals have different perspectives of the same experience. Constructivists not only allow for the dynamic nature of meanings within an individual, but also, they acknowledge multiple viewpoints are equally legitimate.

As with other qualitative approaches, acknowledging and bringing a researcher's "own experiences and background" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24) to their research is understood as part of constructivism. I, like the professional storytellers that I interviewed, have created meanings, understandings, and knowledge from my own experiences. To that end, I strive to situate myself within my research. Part of that process is recognizing the influence I might have as I "make sense of (or interpret) the meanings" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24) the storytellers ascribe to their experience. Their experience, its context, and the interpretive meaning assigned by the storytellers themselves guide discovery. Researcher interpretation of data within the framework of the constructive paradigm allows for development of concepts around the overall experience or phenomenon.

A constructivist world view and narrative inquiry methodology are compatible, having similar premises around the ways in which an individual constructs meaning in their life. Fisher (1987) views constructivism as related to the narrative paradigm in that both are nonpositivist approaches that "account for *how* people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" (p. 87). Each addresses how humans make sense of the world around them. Narrative inquiry "provides an

explanation and analytic approach for understanding narrating as an activity of critical and creative sense making about the environment as well as about the self" (Daiute, 2014, p. 15). As explained in Chapter 2, individuals use narrative as a way of creating meaning of their experiences, making sense of their lives, and sharing their experiences with others. I accept Bruner's (2004) suggestion to examine "self-narrative," which is an individual's retelling of their life experiences, through a constructivist lens, which "takes as its central premise that 'world making' is the principal function of mind" (p. 691). Because they both consider how humans construct meaning, constructivism and narrative inquiry work together to accomplish my research agenda.

Furthermore, Bujold (2004) claims that "constructivism addresses career as narrative" (p. 470). Bujold (2004) lays out a clear case to use a research approach connecting constructivism to narrative in career research "since it is concerned with the individual's construction of meaning, knowledge and experience, and since narrative can be seen as a form of self-construction" (p. 474). The storytellers' narratives are central to my research study to explore their experience, knowledge, and meaning making as they negotiated their performance careers during the precarious times of a declared pandemic. Their individual stories reflect their understanding and wisdom. Moreover, Creswell and Poth's (2018) claim that social constructivism calls for "more of a literary style of writing" (p. 35) supports the writing of a narrative to present my research. My research study employs "constructivism, *via narrative*" (Bujold, 2004, p. 475) to explore the stories of professional storytellers.

The Storytellers

To begin the recruitment process, I compiled a list of professional storytellers known to be active in virtual storytelling, including names recommended by faculty members of my

university Storytelling Program. Before adding a teller to the list, I first considered the basic criteria: (a) 18 years or older, (b) a professional storyteller residing in the United States, (c) earned income as a storyteller before and up to March 2020, (d) lost gigs and necessarily shifted their work online during mandated stay-at-home orders due to COVID-19, (e) have experience telling stories in videoconference performances. In addition, I included names of storytellers who upon hearing of my research, expressed interest in participating in the study.

To accommodate the depth and detail of their stories within the limits of a thesis, I needed to narrow this list of 32 storytellers. Four tellers were removed from the list because they did not have experience on a national storytelling stage. Next, I coded the remaining storytellers by geographic region, career length, audience types, story genres, and styles of telling (e.g., performance energy level, movement on stage, use of music or songs). Using the codes, I sought a group of individuals that represented a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and styles.

I assembled a small research cohort comprised of national storytellers from a variety of regions in the country. Within this group of three women and three men, their career length varies from one to four decades. Most of them have in-person international storytelling experience. One teller performs only for adult audiences, while the others tell to a variety of audiences, including adult, children, and family audiences. The types of stories in their repertoire run the gamut from traditional, folklore, personal, original, historical, folktale, fairytale, and more. They embody a variety of styles. Some are more energetic or move more than others. For example, one is a mime; another is calm in telling, while the others fall in between. One, along with telling other types of stories, specializes in historical stories. A few may at times include songs in performance. Since spring 2020, two have had considerable experience producing virtual storytelling shows, in addition to performing live online. Each of the six took a unique

pathway to professional storytelling and have different storytelling strengths and skills that set them apart from each other, as well as other tellers.

After determining this well-rounded combination of six storytellers, I sent an email (see Appendix A) with an attached flyer (see Appendix B) inviting them to participate in my research study. Two women and three men quickly responded, each affirming they met the basic study criteria. The sixth teller responded too late to participate. The five professional storytellers who generously granted interviews and agreed to be named in this study are Antonio Rocha, Cooper Braun, Fran Stallings, Sheila Arnold, and Simon Brooks. Each are experienced, respected tellers with an online presence, including a website.[1]

Data Collection

While constructivism values individual perspectives equally, not only are interviews a method apt for collecting those individual perspectives, but also, they provide an excellent opportunity to gather narratives. The storytellers met with me for one-on-one interviews conducted on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. The interviews lasted approximately from 1 to 1 1/2 hours. After Cooper's initial interview, we had a second interview because he had more to say. Although I initially chose to interview on Zoom because FTF meetings were prohibited due to COVID-19 restrictions, using Zoom turned out to be advantageous. I could meet with storytellers from other regions in the United States without budget and time related travel constraints. Using Zoom is apropos, since after all, it is a critical component of the study.

Other researchers have reported success conducting qualitative interviews through live video although there are fewer social cues than when conducting FTF interviews (Irani, 2019; Paulus & Lester, 2022; Tuttas, 2015). Communication information typical of FTF that is missing

[1] For more information on the individual storytellers see their websites: Antonio Rocha, Cooper Braun, Fran Stallings, Sheila Arnold, Simon Brooks

from the videoconference environment includes the senses of smell and touch, a full view of the other person, normal eye contact, and the natural speed of communication. What we see, filtered by a temporal delay, is a reduced and truncated two-dimensional image of someone. Conversely, video, which is rich in visual information, provides more communication cues than audio.

Each storyteller gave permission for me to record their interview, which I did using the Zoom recording function. As soon as possible, I carefully reviewed each Zoom audio transcription while listening to the corresponding interview to ensure accuracy. To create a verbatim transcript, I made the appropriate edits and corrections. Next, I reviewed the video recordings of the interviews while making notes on the transcripts about determinative visual communication cues. The ability to review the interview for not just audio but also visual data provided meaning and information that I did not notice or note during the interview.

I began the interview by articulating to the storyteller what I hoped to learn from them—their stories of managing their career and reaching their audiences when they could no longer perform in person. Choosing a semi-structured interview format allowed me to use predetermined questions as a guide, which could be adjusted to the unique experiences of each interviewee (Chase, 2011). Often, the storytellers answered questions naturally in their narration, precluding my questions. As could be expected of professional storytellers, their attentiveness to their audiences, good memory for details, and adeptness at oral expression brought a richness of description to the recounting of their performance experiences.

Interviews are a method of gathering narrative data that creates space for participant voices. Following the admonition of Chase (2011) "to work at transforming the interviewee-interviewer relationship into one of narrator and listener" (p. 423), I sought to be a responsive listener by showing attentiveness and responding to their expressions—both verbal and

nonverbal. In this manner, I became a participant in their construction of narrative. “Researchers are often joined with participants in a process of co-constructing reality through mutual engagement in the research act” (Hatch, 2003, p. 17). A researcher’s own narrative influences their work.

The practice of self-reflexivity throughout the research process is used to acknowledge and find balance in my role. Since the interview environment or medium can influence outcomes, I applied the advice of Paulus and Lester (2022) for researchers to be “fully reflexive throughout the research process, including our relationship with digital tools and spaces” (p. 336). I remain mindful that the interviews are impacted by our telepresence, even as we leverage the affordances of Zoom. Paulus and Lester (2022) advocate for researchers to take “an orientation to digital tools that is *not* purely optimistic and instrumentalist, neutral, and under the researcher’s control, but instead viewing the digital world as a *coresearcher*—helping to shape, construct, constrain, resist, and transform our practice” (p. 336). I noticed we were able to establish a strong rapport in the virtual interviews due to their experience and familiarity with the virtual space. Being sensitive to the impact of technology on our communication, I tried to be aware of the challenges of limited cues and signal latency. I worked to minimize this effect by pausing before speaking, but still at times it caused overlap of speaking when I thought they were finished with their answer. Reflexive practices help to maintain awareness and acknowledgement of technological influence on these interviews particularly when aspects of this research study are related to the same virtual platform where the interviews are held.

A key reflexive method I employed was journaling throughout my research process, especially writing reflection notes immediately after each interview to capture my experience as a listener and researcher. I am a storyteller and have had my own experience shifting online to

virtual storytelling. Therefore, I need to continually examine my role in my research to ensure that I reflect what participants tell me and not unbalance the data I collect. To accomplish this, I strove to be aware of and write about my feelings and biases. The researcher shapes the study as they interpret the data, so I tried to remain cognizant of my handling of the data collected from the storytellers' interviews. Also, I include my own stories and narrative in my thesis to situate myself within my research. These efforts were intended to keep the storytellers and their narratives central to this research study.

Data Analysis

For my study, at different points I followed each of Polkinghorne's (1995) two approaches to handling narrative data—analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. First, I employed analysis of narrative to collect data through interviews with the professional storytellers. The video and audio recordings, written transcripts, transcript notes, and my reflections on the interviews are my data. Continuing with analysis of narrative, I searched for common themes both within and across the interviews. I categorized them to better understand their commonalities, as well as the unique experiences of the storytellers. I identified the narrative threads in each interview. Heeding the discussion of narrative from the previous chapter, I coded for narrative elements, such as setting, plot, action, high point, and resolution. I read the transcripts closely to discover the heart of the story—the storytellers' intentions, as well as their means of facing the situations in which they found themselves.

To create a narrative, I chose stories that would illustrate a basic story structure, described as: characters live a normal day to day existence when something happens that causes challenges they must overcome to create a new normal. Criteria for selecting which specific stories to weave into the narrative included stories that:

- aided in building the overall narrative
- introduced problems or demonstrated challenges
- demonstrated resolution
- had action
- had emotion
- provided insight into the storyteller's personality or style
- added original information (i.e., not redundant, because some of their experiences were similar)

Next, I turned to narrative analysis to create a cohesive report of the data—the story of storytellers telling stories on Zoom when in-person events are banned. In narrative research, Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that researchers "restory and interpret the larger meaning of the story" (p. 199) in their results. To create an effective story, I applied my earlier definition of story as "a specialized narrative employing the unified elements of character, plot, problem, goal, and change within the character." I reorganized the data, then I shaped the storytellers' individual stories into a flowing overall story of their experiences. With the framework of constructivism and narrative inquiry established, the methodology for gathering and studying the data explained, and most importantly the storytellers introduced, it is time for the story.

Chapter 4. The Story: Re-Zooming Storytelling

Once upon a time there were five storytellers—Antonio, Cooper, Simon, Fran, and Sheila. Now, this might sound like the beginning of a fairytale, but it is nothing of the sort. This is a true story that begins with the declaration of a worldwide pandemic in March 2020. Everything came to a screeching halt, and life as these five professional tellers knew it was turned upside down. Stay-at-home orders threatened to silence storytellers.

"It was the ugliest magic trick I have ever seen!" declared Antonio with a hearty laugh. "My whole calendar disappeared. *Poof*!"

Cooper had some upcoming interesting and fun storytelling bookings. "I was gonna travel a bunch. And then that all went away."

With hands punctuating each phrase, Simon repeated the message he kept receiving: "We're canceling this. We're canceling this. We're canceling this."

"Things just shut down," stressed Fran.

"It was gone. . . . You know, just boom, boom, boom, boom, boom," emphasized Sheila, snapping her fingers with each rapid boom.

All five professional storytellers experienced complete loss of their storytelling work for the near future. With no contingency plans, the only recourse for event organizers was cancellation. But why would there be alternate plans anyway? After all, it had been approximately one hundred years since a pandemic provoked bans on public gatherings and closures of venues in the U.S. In 2020 it certainly was not on anyone's mind to create an alternative to their storytelling event. All storytelling work quickly vanished for these tellers. Sheila noticed people in the storytelling community panicking, "Are we completely lost? Have we lost everything, including the ability to tell?"

Storytellers sought ways to continue telling stories and found virtual solutions. To connect with live audiences online, they turned to videoconferencing. This narrative is woven from the stories that Antonio, Cooper, Simon, Fran, and Sheila told me about adapting from in-person to online storytelling.

Among the tellers there was some use of other online formats—airing prerecorded stories and live storytelling via webinar. But in these approaches, the storyteller cannot see nor respond to their listeners, unlike the immediate interaction possible in videoconference.

At the onset of the pandemic, the videoconference platform as a stage for the performing storyteller was virtually uncharted territory. Furthermore, it so happened that if the storytellers had any pre-pandemic experience with Zoom, it was limited to meetings or workshops. The reality is that previous to March 2020 none of the storytellers had performed a *virtual live storytelling program*.

But inexperience with virtual storytelling didn't stop them. With no work, they had little choice. Facing a new frontier, the storytellers forged forward. "There were a number of us that just jumped right on it," Simon pointed out.

Then as Sheila said, "Now it was—what are we doing here?" When storytellers took their performance art into the uncharted waters of the online environment, they learned and fine-tuned as they went. It cannot be said with certainty that all storytellers shifted to tell stories online. And not all who did favored Zoom. But many storytellers who wanted to continue performing to live audiences migrated to Zoom Meetings—a previously unexplored storytelling stage.

It wasn't just that storytellers moved to a virtual space. They were forced into an unexpected, isolated, and unprecedented place of performance—the intimacy of their own

homes. “We’re in a new space,” affirmed Cooper. He approached it as more than doing something to get by. “How do we make this work? How do we make this new world work?”

There was a consensus among the storytellers that they missed the audience breathing and laughing together. Suddenly, it was as Fran said, “Just me in front of my laptop telling a story.” Cooper experienced virtual performance as “speaking into the void.” He compared telling stories in a normal theater to telling on Zoom. As he tells stories from a stage, he’s looking all around the room at the listeners. “And in Zoom, you know, I’m just talking to the walls of my room. There’s no one else in here.” Antonio started out performing in his living room, but that required set up and take down of equipment every time. Quickly, he eliminated that hassle by creating a dedicated studio space. Simon’s garage houses his studio, and Cooper performs in his basement in what he dubbed The Zoom Lair. Finding the space within their homes was crucial to creating a virtual storytelling stage.

Storytellers became responsible for their performance environment in a way they never had been before. They had worked with in-person venues, coordinating with the organizers who set the stage. For online audiences they had all the responsibility for setting up their own performance space. Now there were considerations for creating a storytelling environment and interacting with the technology within the environment that they may not have even known existed.

Not all storytellers who wanted to shift to virtual storytelling had the kind of equipment required for quality production. They needed computers with power to run video, quality microphones and cameras for improved visual and audio output, lights for better video, and ethernet cords wired to the internet for faster speeds to optimize their performances. According

to Cooper, “One of the things that Zoom has done to so many storytellers, it’s made them deal with things that they haven’t done before, which is the technical side of the job.”

Once they had the equipment and technology, storytellers had to learn how to use it. To understand how to interact within this new space, they began by drawing on their past experience and applying their current knowledge. Then they researched and experimented. Simon said, “A lot of it was challenging work, making myself learn things that I’d never really had time for before. But with all the canceled gigs, suddenly, there was nothing but time. And I had to be able to make sure that I could work.”

Setting up the computer and camera was foundational. Cooper achieved a more natural angle by putting his computer on a stack of books on a table with the camera at eye level. Cooper observed, “You know, we’re all used to doing Zoom, where our computers are on the tables in front of us, and we’re all looking at each other’s nostrils. This is an unnatural position of eyesight. And that’s not a great way to do is show.”

While Cooper sits for virtual storytelling, Antonio stands and moves. Antonio set his computer on a column of stacked cubbies for the correct height and left enough room to walk completely around it. Further attention was given to lighting and backdrops so tellers’ expressions and movements could be highlighted. In addition to figuring out how to set up a virtual storytelling studio space, storytellers needed to understand how to interact with the technology within the new performance space.

Antonio had confidence to move online because of the previous experience he’d had interacting with a camera. Fran has a passion for the environment, as well as telling environmental stories, so she appreciated the potential of Zoom to reach and teach far and wide with less ecological impact. Sheila had faith in the future and felt things would work out, so she

got busy gathering storytellers online. Simon had experience with cameras as a professional photographer and knew he had to master online technology quickly. As a theater technician, Cooper understood design of performance space and was comfortable with the technical side of things.

In addition to becoming more tech savvy, the storytellers worked on improving their online performances. They learned from watching recordings of themselves telling stories, as well as watching others tell online. Individuals and groups of storytellers not only created storytelling opportunities but also offered support and shared information with each other online. Similarly, storytelling organizations supported tellers. Having support was important for storytellers to shift online and adapt to performing in a new space. They needed to learn new technology while negotiating this foreign space. How they perceived themselves and others was different on this virtual stage. Storytellers had to adjust and adapt to perceptions and altered cues to successfully perform stories in such a foreign place as the virtual stage.

Antonio explained, “People experience this brain fog of adaptation. It’s like when you go to a foreign country, you need to adapt to hearing the different sounds, and the different smells, and the different food. So, there is that adaptation, and there’s nothing dangerous about it, you know, just like being in a foreign land. It’s just new things. And you need to watch. If you go to England, you’ve got to look at both sides of the road. Because the car’s coming from a different direction. So, there are these things that you have to step up.”

The storytellers needed to learn their way around Zoom and understand how to tell stories effectively within that environment. Cooper recalled, “Those first shows were a lot of learning experiences. It was a lot of figuring out—how do you frame this? how do you make Zoom work for you?” His concern was, “How do I make the image work best for me?”

Cooper reflected, “I generally stand on stage. I don’t walk around much, but I speak a lot with my hips. Suddenly on Zoom, I don’t have hips. And I speak a lot with my arms, but my arms very quickly disappear out of the frame. And so, I’m having to figure out how to change my own telling to fit this new format.”

Simon quickly learned some limitations of Zoom. “I discovered that a lot of the stories I tell for kids are very high energy. There’s lots of movement. I’m bouncing up and all over the place. And I found that I was really restricted.”

Once, to show a character’s action in the story, Simon tried to run around behind his camera and then come back in view on the other side. In live online performance, it didn’t turn out quite as he planned. “I’ve only done that once, ‘cause I found out that with tripod legs and all the cables, even though you make a path you’re still jumping around trying not to fall over.” Simon’s animated story had me laughing along with him as he recalled “So, you’re not really in the story when you get back in front of the camera. You think, ‘Oh, I made it. Whew!’ And then you have to get back in the story. There was a lot of learning going on.”

After that, to stay on screen and remain within the camera’s field of view, Simon learned to rein in his range of motion. Simon warns when telling on camera you can’t put out the same kind of energy as for a 6,000-person audience at an outdoor storytelling festival, where he has performed. “You really have to pull it back. And you can be a lot more subtle online, which I’m actually really enjoying as someone that’s not known for subtlety.” He also began leaving out the “fizz-bangs,” paring back to the essentials of his stories. He came to appreciate the importance of learning stories deeply. He says, “I think you have to connect with the story. You have to hope that the story connects with the audience. That’s where the connection will happen. Because if I

tell it in such a way that that the story just washes over them, I become invisible. It’s just about the story.”

Cooper learned immediately about how the environment of Zoom changes the teller’s experience of telling stories. “For storytelling I want the lights on above the audience because I want to be able to see them. I want to be able to look them in the eyes. I want to be able to talk to individual people. You do not get the feedback from the audience that you’re used to. I think I told 20 minutes in my first show, and it felt like I told an hour. It was much different when there wasn’t the feedback. It felt longer. It felt strange. That’s changed now.”

Antonio says, “It’s a different animal. And I can see that people have a hard time. I had a hard time in the beginning. Trust me. This has not been a breeze. The very first Zoom show I did—I didn’t know anything about Zoom,” he owned up with a laugh. Then he began his story:

“My first Zoom show was horrible, even though it was wonderful. I got a call from a school in Brooklyn, New York. They had been referred to me by another group. And I was like, ‘Wow! This is so exciting! My first Zoom show.’

“I did a Zoom show with this school. But they said, ‘We don’t want the kids to be viewed.’

“And I said, ‘Fine.’ I had never done a Zoom before—I said, ‘Fine.’

“The kids were muted, and I couldn’t see them. I was like, ‘Oh, my goodness. This is really awful!’ And I’m doing my best to pretend that I’m there with them. But then at the end of the story, I’m like, ‘And that’s the end.’

“I couldn’t see their faces—I don’t need to hear the voice, but at least see the face. And I said, ‘Okay. I hope you can hear me. You know, I’m not getting any feedback.’”

Antonio then leaned forward and used an authoritative, disembodied voice to mimic the teacher's feedback he'd received, "You're doing just fine. Carry on."

Antonio leaned back and laughed again at the memory of that awkward experience. After a moment, Antonio continued, "So I said, 'Lesson learned. I want to have at least one face there.' If I was doing a show now for, let's say there are a hundred people on Zoom, if all I see is you, if you are one of them, that's all I need. I need one face, because when you're telling a story, how many faces are you looking at, at once? One face at a time. You can have a sense of all of them. Well, when you look at the audience, you can't look at two faces at the same time. That's impossible. Right? So, all I need is one face."

"There was a *massive* learning curve," admits Simon. He worked diligently to find technology solutions, but he also learned to adjust his storytelling style. The first time he told his Goldilocks version online, he instantly knew it was awful. "It just felt wrong. It was this gut feeling that I had—it just wasn't going to play off. This was just me. It was for kids who are fairly young, and so they don't care. But I care. I want to give them the best show that I can give them. I don't give them second rate, shoddy rubbish. If I know I could do better, then I want to give them the best I can. That is, I have to find a new way of telling that story."

When Simon watched the recording of his performance, he realized that he told the story okay. It didn't work for the format though. His question was, "How can I change that?" That's when he learned not to use big movements in the small virtual space. He decided what works are smaller movements and exaggerated expressions. Instead of jumping out of the frame, he could use a gesture to indicate the character has run off.

When he backed up enough that his entire body was on camera, he was so far away that appeared small. Children were watching on phones and other small screens. His concern was,

"So, if I'm just this tiny little matchbook figure, right? There's going to be no connection with me and the kids!"

It went the other way for Fran. When the students finally returned to school after reopening, she resumed telling stories in a teacher's classroom she's been going to for years. This time though, she met with them through Zoom. The teacher had the students spread throughout the classroom. They watched Fran tell on the big screen, but to her, they appeared very small. She said, "I do know that working with the kids, it's harder to feel the connection when I can't see them very well." Interactions were difficult because she couldn't hear them well either, but she continued, while trying to do the best she could in spite of the challenges.

Eye contact is not the same in videoconference as in person. Simon demonstrated the importance of understanding how to work with the camera to better communicate and connect with listeners. When he told me he was looking directly into the camera, I felt eye contact with him. When he shifted his gaze to look at my face on his monitor, we lost "eye contact." He explained, "When I'm looking at the monitor, I'm connecting with something else, and it's not you. The number one thing is connection with the lens." When the storyteller looks at the camera, their listeners feel eye contact with the storyteller. Each teller understands the importance of the listener feeling eye contact and while telling stories looks at the camera for eye contact.

The five storytellers learned to stay within the camera shot using self-view. Watching oneself can be distracting but also informative. How they use it varies from teller to teller. Antonio doesn't always use it. He hung things from the ceiling just off camera on either side so he would know how far he could go and stay on screen. When his self-view is on his monitor, he doesn't look directly at himself, but instead uses peripheral vision to see his video. This parallels

what he does onstage to keep from falling off a stage, bumping a microphone, or tripping over cords. He can still see himself in the small self-view even as he moves around his studio. Most of tellers these practice self-view by displaying themselves as part of the gallery view (the screen full of participants) or in the strip of small videos of Zoom participants at the top of the page. Others, like Cooper, have their self-view pinned with the strip of listeners at the top.

Because audience feedback is important in storytelling, listeners are encouraged to have their cameras on during storytelling performances. Still some listeners choose to have their camera off. If a teller is looking at the camera, they need to find a way to receive audience cues without staring at the screen or monitor. Peripheral vision, like Antonio described, is one way tellers keep track of audience cues. Simon explains another way to see listeners. “If I’m telling a story, I might look away and look down at the screen surreptitiously. And then look back up at the camera. If the monitor’s to one side, like it is right now, then I might glance over here. As I’m glancing back, I look at what’s going on, just to catch an idea of how people are feeling about the story. Some people just listening intently. Some people—sitting on the couches further away—you can’t really see them. But there’s going to be a face that you might see. And that might be something that you want to pull up, so that you can see this person’s interacting really well.”

When the listeners appear small in a gallery view with or in the strip of videos, some body language and facial expressions are readable. Antonio said he senses listeners even without seeing details of a specific face, but he can look closer at them if he so chooses. Cooper described the listeners in the small boxes smiling and laughing at a joke, while he warned that humor that counts on “the rolling, building laughter of an audience” doesn’t work well on Zoom. Even if the listeners were unmuted, their laughter would sound random and awkward, not the

expected group sound of laughing. But still, Cooper said it was hard to see when audience members check out because either they're small figures backed away from the camera or their camera is off.

Visual cues are the main source of audience feedback because listeners are usually muted during stories. Noise, whether accidental or not, from another participant could override and take the microphone from the storyteller. When people are comfortable in their homes, they might not behave in the same manner as they would at an in-person event. Having listeners at home is also why Simon and Fran cautioned that gallery view with a screen full of listeners can potentially be distracting with all the different environments. Yet Sheila regularly uses gallery view with 25 individuals displayed. Then from time to time during a story she might shift between the multiple pages of listeners on gallery view or check the chat. Regarding online audience feedback compared to in-person, Sheila said, "I'm using a lot of the same cues because I can still see their faces. I'm looking to see where your body is, what your face is showing me. Is there confusion? What is the chat saying so that I know that people are nudging each other?"

Storytellers' perceptions of how well they can read their audience on Zoom varies. Some of that depends on monitor size or choice of view. Or their perceptions may be affected by their comfort level with technology. Challenges come with technology and distractions within Zoom. However, there are those who choose to embrace it and take advantage of the features available in Zoom. Cooper asks the audience to wait until after a story to use chat, while Sheila appreciates chat during the story. According to Cooper, emojis are a more recent Zoom feature used by audience members to react in the moment to the story they are hearing. Tellers are adapting to how audiences are adapting to giving feedback in Zoom.

As the storytellers gained experience performing to a camera and monitoring on a computer screen in the Zoom environment, they could play and have fun with stories in ways that wouldn't work in person. Antonio tried creating moments of surprise with a prop without the prop upstaging the story. "I've had some fun picking up props," he explained. "I don't like props. I've never used props before, but because of Zoom, I've been able to throw in a couple of things in the story and surprise the heck out of the audience. Like, there is a splashing scene in a story I tell that I literally had a tray of water off camera. And there was a splashing, and the water went on my face, you know. People are laughing out loud because they were not expecting that to happen. If I had been onstage, they would have seen that there was something about to happen.

"Another story that I do is a real story about a squirrel that came into our house, and we did not know was a squirrel. For 12 hours we thought the cat had gone nuts. So, it's very funny because we were blaming the cat for what happened in the house. We discovered the squirrel. Then there's the scene when the squirrel disappears. I turn myself around on camera looking for the squirrel. As I'm turning around, attached to my back is the squirrel I carved out of foam.

"Now, in Zoom you don't hear the people laughing. If it was a live audience, you'd hear them laughing. In Zoom, I have them muted. But I'm having fun doing it, and I know that they're enjoying it because they give me feedback afterwards. So, it's a delayed feedback. You can see the people's faces. You know they're still laughing."

Storytellers had a lot to learn to perform online. Yet many aspects of telling stories in person transferred to the virtual environment. Antonio gave an example: "It's different than videotaping just to the camera. It's very unnerving because I don't have that same urgency as when I have the audience watching me. You know, when you step on stage—there is that

urgency and that adrenaline rush of like, ‘Okay. I must deliver something good here because there are people watching.’ I have the same thing on Zoom. It’s amazing. The same energy.”

Determined to offer live storytelling, albeit virtual, the storytellers figured out how to manage the challenges of Zoom performance as they went. Some of the challenges were unique, such as Zoom bombing—when unknown people join a Zoom meeting and make a disturbance.

Cooper produces and performs storytelling shows with Rachel Ann Harding as Stories with Spirit. They were Zoom bombed in two shows. Cooper avowed, "I *deeply* am committed to Zoom Meetings. And the Zoom bombing drove it home. This reconfirmed that I am doing it the way I want to do it. And the reason I want Zoom Meetings is that it is the closest thing that I have found to being in the room with an audience." Creating a situation similar to an in-person audience brought with it some of the inherent risks. One of these is that among those who enter the doors of a public performance venue could be individuals who want to cause trouble, such as hecklers, and an equivalent in Zoom are Zoom bombers. Making their Zoom Meetings link available opened Stories with Spirit to that risk as they welcomed the public to their performances and worked to create the sense of an audience seated together.

To create the sense of people being present in a space together, Stories with Spirit begins by "opening the doors" on Zoom ten minutes before the show start time. The tellers greet and talk with audience members as they join. Cooper discovered that people, especially in the isolation of the pandemic, wanted to talk to and be around people they’re not around every day.

When the show starts, Cooper mutes the audience, choosing the option that prevents them from unmuting themselves during a story, so only the teller can be heard. At the end of the story, he clicks the button to ask all to unmute. People clap, causing the spotlight, or the speaker view, to jump from participant to participant. They are muted again for the next storyteller. This is

repeated throughout the show. Then after the show, they stay on to chat with people. Stories with Spirit has received lots of positive feedback about this format and the environment it creates.

Cooper explained, “My goal was to keep myself as close to the style of storytelling that I am used to, and my audience is used to.” The farther he moved away from in-person performance, the more distance he felt between himself and his listeners.

But with live performance comes a certain risk. "Zoom bombing has killed shows for me,” Cooper said. “We had Zoom bombing in the preshow. I think it was two people that were running their mouths in audio in a way that it took a moment to figure out."

As a producer and host, Cooper was creating a certain experience, but at that moment the community he was curating was attacked. His response was the same as if a drunk stood up and began yelling at the performers in the middle of an in-person performance. “We wouldn’t try to ignore it. We wouldn’t pretend it wasn’t happening,” he reasoned. “We would pause. We would make that person leave the room. And then we would take a moment for us all to settle. And then we would go back to the show.”

Because they hadn’t learned yet to disallow listeners to rename themselves in Zoom, Cooper and Rachel Ann couldn’t identify who was causing the problems. The offenders hid themselves by changing their names associated with this Zoom Meeting. With the desire to protect the story experience for tellers and listeners, Cooper kept the audience muted for this show to avoid further disruption. That meant there was no applause or other aural reaction between stories. "The whole show shifted to being a little bit more on edge. Rachel Ann and I got rattled."

Yet, with subsequent shows they continued using their interactive format. “I really like Zoom Meetings,” Cooper asserted. “When we got Zoom bombed, it reconfirmed to me one of

the things that I think is important in live performance—there is an aspect of danger. Film is a format wherein you click the button, and the same thing happens every time. There is no potential for the film to change because it has been prerecorded. And I think in any live performative art, part of the art is the fact that the audience is in the room with you. There is always that potential for an audience not going along with you, an audience turning against you. And then there is the potential that an audience is exactly with you. And that is part of the reason I love live performance."

When a storyteller and listeners are in the same room, they influence each other. Storytellers noticed qualities of Zoom Meetings that create a unique manner in which the teller and audience interact. As storytellers gained experience telling virtually, they discovered how the characteristics of Zoom could draw them close to their listeners.

Cooper reasoned, "In Zoom I have access to my face in a way that I do not have access to my face on an in-person stage. Someone 30 feet away cannot see me twitch the corner of my mouth, can't see me sort of like tweak an eyelid down just a little bit. Right? But in Zoom they can. There's this intimacy in this world.

"One of my biggest takeaways is our best show had five people there. Some shows we had 40 people. That was great. And at one of our shows, we had five. If the in-person house could seat 50 people, and there were five people, that would feel dead. That would be a really, really hard show to do. It's a lot of empty chairs. But the way that I perform on Zoom, I use speaker view. I am looking at myself on the camera. And then, I have the little boxes across the top with four or five people who I'm performing to, as it were. And so that's the room that I see. And if there are 150 people in the room, or there are four people in the room, I still only see four or five boxes across the top.

"And so, that was the moment that I said, 'Oh. This is intimate in this way—that it can be the same show for four people as it can be for 150.' I really liked that moment, because there was suddenly this realization that a show for four people is often really a dead show in a live theater, where it was an intimate, beautiful show in Zoom."

When Sheila talked with teachers about why her Zoom program was working for the students, she realized its power was in part due to a phenomenon of the platform. She explained, "It was front row seating for every single child. No one was four rows back or five rows back where you don't see as well anymore. Every kid got to see completely my face and expressions and hear clearly what I was saying.

"It's called The Front Row Experience. Everybody got The Front Row Experience."

On Zoom the storyteller appears close when they are on the screen right in front of the listener. When the storyteller speaks to the camera, each listener can feel as if the storyteller is looking and speaking directly to them. Cooper suggested this incredible intimacy on Zoom is related to how the shot of each participant is framed—from the sternum up. In film it's the frame of the shot of individuals seated across from each other.

"You don't have that intimacy on a live stage. I'm this big on a stage," he said, holding up his thumb and forefinger. "And while in person I may be able to make direct eye contact with you for a moment and speak to you, on Zoom I am speaking to you the whole show. And so, it is a different kind of intimacy.

"There isn't the intimacy of breathing together as an audience, the release of breath of the whole audience after a show and feeling the applause together. But on Zoom there's a direct contact that you don't get in a live show, because in Zoom I'm just talking to you—and all the

other hundred and fifty people in the room. But I'm going to your camera as opposed to talking around the room on a stage."

Simon enhances this effect with his posture. "When I do my shows, I'm standing up. And I would pretend that I was leaning on a counter to give that feeling of familiarity, to give that feeling of coziness." Other times he employs the depth of the camera field and leans in to the camera.

Antonio explained, "Interestingly, the techniques I use on stage transfer to Zoom very, very well. The presentation techniques I use—the use of space, the way I use my eyes to create the illusion of the story—translate on video just as they do on stage. I can look at my audience to tell the story. I can look at the story. I can speak with a character that is over there. I can respond to a character that's over here. And people enjoy that a lot. In my studio, I can back away. I have depth. I can show more of my body. I can show less of my body."

I was delighted when he broke out into a mini story performance to illustrate what he meant. "So," he said, leaning in with eyes wide looking directly at me (by looking into the camera). "You won't believe what happened. Whoa!" He looked upward tracking something imaginary. "The bird flew overhead, and it was amazing." He continued using dynamic voice, movement, and energy. "The kids were looking. . . . And the bird was flying. . . . And the feathers were falling down," gently gesturing with his hand to indicate the motion of a feather floating down. "And all of a sudden . . ." Antonio jumped back abruptly, shifting expression and focus. "Boom!"

Antonio dropped out of the story to tell me, "You know, there is that dynamic. It's not like I'm lecturing. Right? Sometimes storytellers lose that because of the camera."

Antonio has received feedback from schools on multiple occasions that it feels like he's right there in the classroom with them. He believes the reason for this is his variable approach in using his eyes to create images.

When storytellers worked with the camera or their view of other people, they took advantage of characteristics of Zoom to promote the feeling of closeness. "The Front Row Experience is not just for the audience," Sheila insisted. "It's also for the storyteller—if they're willing to look at it—because I can see people's faces better than I've ever seen before or as well." This virtual proximity in which storytellers and listeners experience one another's presence provided opportunities to create connections. The Front Row Experience became a key factor for storytellers and listeners to connect.

"The whole thing about storytelling is connecting with the audience," declared Antonio. "There are senior citizens who are stuck at home and *thirsty* for connection. They came to our show and said, 'We are so happy that you guys exist and provide high caliber storytelling right in my living room. And we can hang and linger with you guys afterwards. We feel like we are doing a community thing here with you. I feel part of it.' That's a beautiful thing to hear."

Storytelling events were a place to connect during the isolation of the pandemic. Among the audience members of online storytelling programs were fans who could no longer attend in-person events due to age or disability. Sheila marveled, "We had a whole lost group of people that storytelling didn't even realize we had lost. And we opened the door for them to be found again." The virtual storytelling door also welcomed listeners new to storytelling. Additionally, distance was no longer a barrier for attending events. The door swung wide open to welcome people from all over the world.

Connecting with audiences can be understood as finding and performing for audiences, but it also means connecting with the members of the audience. Each storyteller acknowledged it was different to connect with listeners in a virtual environment. “There is absolutely a difference,” Cooper insisted. “There is a visceral connection that one gets from being in a room with people.”

What’s more, storytellers sense energy from their in-person audiences. Fran said, “As a teller you can kind of feel the temperature in the room. You don’t have that on Zoom. You don’t have that feeling.”

As they tell their stories, tellers do what Sheila called “checking the pulse of the room.” The storytellers listen to their audiences. They watch them. They’re looking into the faces of their listeners. Tellers can see emotions and what is going on with them—if they’re getting tired—if they’re confused. It is important to watch for indications whether listeners are with them and following the story, such as people leaning into the story or sitting back. Then a teller can identify who’s there and who’s not and respond appropriately, such as providing clarification or changing something.

Checking the pulse of the room and interacting with an audience is altered in the world of Zoom. For Cooper, “One of the beauties of live storytelling is sometimes you watch it click for someone. Or you watch someone take the hook, and you bring them in.” He described the play that he has with individuals separately in his in-person audience. But moving his gaze around the room, returning to each audience member as he tells doesn’t work on Zoom because everyone has the same attention from him, and the listeners’ videos are all directly in front of him.

In person, Simon monitors the people by watching their faces and feeling their energy as he tells. “I feel personally that you cannot fully understand what the audience is feeling on an

online show, because you can't feel the energy usually from the audience. You can't see all of the faces and can't gauge all of the faces sometimes," he said, adding that it's especially difficult when people have their cameras turned off.

On the other hand, Sheila gets definitive energy from audiences, even on Zoom. Seeing their faces is enough for her to know that they're there. Not seeing anyone is difficult. Sheila shared a story about creating strong connections through the story. "For one program I got to do a longer story. I'd chosen a story—inside me I was pushed to tell a story—at that point I'd only told in person. But it also had been like three or four years, maybe even longer since I told it. But it bubbled up in me to tell it.

"Because it was a story about dance, when I used to do it, you know, there was some movement and performance. I would move a little bit, while I was telling it. Well, of course I couldn't do any of that during the story online.

"The story was a huge success. Just a huge success. I mean, after that people said, 'Oh my gosh. Where did you get that story?'

"One woman said, 'You've hit on what my life has been like. I'm just bawling right now because this is exactly what I needed.'

"The story completely did what it was supposed to do. Someone said that they could clearly see the people of the story. But I think what happened was because I couldn't do the dance, I was able to focus on the characters and the emotions much more. And it gave a depth, a deeper story. A story with more depth. I didn't even know why I was being pushed to tell it, but I do try to listen when I'm being pushed to tell something. So that worked out really, really well."

Sheila shared another experience she had with an entirely different level of connection with her audience. "I did a program, and in the story that I thought was going incredibly well, no

one wrote anything in the chat. The entire story. And I thought—I'm just not connecting. I'm trying to see the people. It feels like there's just silence everywhere.

"Their faces—they were just kind of there, but I couldn't identify what this was. It was a different kind of look. And I don't know how to describe it, except that usually people are relaxed. They're at home. They're listening. They're animated.

"It was only afterwards there was that burst of ovation. And I had to say, 'Ah, this is that thing that happens sometimes.' When people are so into the story, they almost aren't breathing. They're there with you, but not, because they're taking the journey of the story. You're looking at them, and they don't look like they're there because they're not there. *They're in the story.* And that's what had happened. People said, 'Oh my gosh. I was so there. I was right there.'

"The ovation—the chat blew up afterwards. And people's faces afterwards—there was crying, and there was, you know, all kinds of things. But I didn't think they were there because I'm a little better at identifying that in person.

"But in person, generally, when that happens with them, I also am far away. I am in that other place as well. I'm telling the story, and I'm so into the story that every now and then in that story, I might peek out and go, 'Oh. Are they with me? Okay. I think so.' But now I've learned to identify—oh yeah, they're with me. I mean, they're *really* with me. They're all in there walking beside me and with me on this journey. I just hadn't really had that on Zoom.

"Like when I told the story about the dance, people were typing all the way through it, you know. It wasn't that it wasn't powerful, but they were just burning up the chat in there. They had to remark on stuff. This one, there was nothing. I had *nothing* in the chat. And *nothing* coming from their faces. I had forgotten that's something that happens in person, and so I did not expect it to happen on Zoom. It's pretty powerful.

“I think it’s not something that happens often. I mean, people can enjoy stories and even be transported in stories, but there’s sometimes a story that hits you just the right way. And sometimes it’s not just the story. It’s the environment—everything that’s around you. It just happens to be raining out there. The lights happen to flash at a certain time. There’s the story before you that leads kind of into what you’re telling. There’s oftentimes other parts of the environment that are making a part of that. In thinking about this, I don’t know if there was any environmental factor.

“It definitely was different for me to see that—just to stop the breathing. For me it’s the breathing. When I stop seeing you physically breathe—I know they’re breathing—but just for a moment, they’re zombies or something like that. They’re just someplace else. They’re not in body right at that moment. But they’re not supposed to be. They’re hanging out with me on this journey that we’re taking. But it’s deeper. It's usually stories that have some real depth. And it was my new story, “Red Hair,” which is a very, very powerful story.”

Being familiar with this phenomenon, I felt surprised first, and then delighted when I heard Sheila’s moving story. According to Fran, certain deep stories when told in the right setting can create a deeper listening state. But with the limited feedback and participants in separate physical spaces on Zoom, this seemed improbable. Fran referred to articles she wrote in 1988 and 1993 where she identified, described, and named this altered state the “storylistening trance” (Stallings, 1988, 1993). There is a recognizable feeling in the room as the teller dissociates and becomes a listener too while telling the story and at the same time listeners are right with teller, but very still and breathing together. Fran said, “I love to tell that kind of story, because we all go to such a very special place.”

Sheila, along with other storytellers, has not only told stories successfully on the synchronous virtual storytelling stage, but also has made meaningful connections with audiences. Out of necessity, their physicality during online storytelling changed. Sheila observed, "To watch how people have changed and adapted has been brilliant!"

Sheila explained because your face is much of what you have available in Zoom, you really have to work on facial expressions. Tellers have changed how they use their faces. She began demonstrating for me, her face growing bigger on my screen as she leaned forward with exaggerated expression while exclaiming, "Aaaaaohhh." Then she enthusiastically remarked, "It probably will be that people's faces will be different when they're on stage as well. I think my face is ending up being bigger than it was before." Her expressive demonstration left no doubt in my mind that she was right.

Tellers adapted to the smaller performance area and learned to generally limit their body language to their mid to high torso and above, as well as keep their arms closer to their body. When Simon returned to stories in person, he discovered he was much more static than he had been before. He remembered, "It changed the way I performed—yeah, it did!—because I was used to working in the parameters of this box. I'm here, and I have to do everything in this space." He gestured with his hands to indicate the small area he'd learned to tell within to stay on screen. During his performance he thought, "Oh my gosh. I'm not even moving. Why? What's going on? Like from the waist down I'm dead—you know, nice!—that's not right! I'm running around all over the place normally. And so, I had to get back and find that rhythm inside me of—like what I can do, what I can't do in person—and what I can and can't do in the box."

Cooper's first performance outside of The Zoom Lair in his home in over a year was on a beautiful stage in a museum. As he told his story, he was fascinated to see how his performance

had changed since he'd been using Zoom. It had become a habit without him realizing. Pre-pandemic, he was used to communicating with his hands and hips. Now his arms weren't opening all the way, and his hips weren't moving—even when he had plenty of space on the stage. All his emotions and movement were constrained to the small area that would be within a computer camera view.

"It was very fascinating," Cooper noted, "as I started to perform live again and realizing that I have work to do to figure out how do I perform differently live? Because now I've gotten really good at performing on Zoom. And I'm really used to being able to watch when my hand leaves the frame. And so, it's been very fascinating—what are the subconscious ways that my performance has changed."

Adaptation of storytelling has affected storytellers, as well as the art of storytelling. Cooper reasoned, "Is this a new art form? I think that it's a different art form. It's very closely related. It's not a lesser art form. And those of us, I think, who have reached out and grabbed this new art form have had incredible success. People for whom this was a thing they had to do to get through the pandemic, a necessity, who want to get back to *real* storytelling—you just told me that virtual storytelling is not real storytelling. No! It's all real!"

Online storytelling grew too. Sheila claims, "The fact is, we've broken down so many barriers and boundaries. We, actually, are much stronger because we don't have the boundaries between each other anymore. There's no great pond between us. There's no passports that are required. We're literally becoming global in our storytelling in a way that we've never been.

"We can do more work if we are online. We can spread the word better if we are online because we can go more places. People can afford to have us come. There's no travel involved.

We can go to lower income places, to rural places, to places that would not normally have this. And it works."

Without travel, there was a certain ease and convenience for tellers to walk to their home studio to perform. Antonio says with a lot of humility, "It's literally a miracle. It's—it's emotional, actually, to talk about it, because you know, it's been a pleasure to be home with my family. I have a ten-year-old. My wife is a teacher. And it's been a good thing for me to be in the house to support and be with them in this moment of crisis. And, you know, when my wife had to go online for a while, when it all hit, I was here to give her emotional support.

"And then in the summertime I was here. We live by a beautiful lake—literally. We walk five minutes—we're at the beach. We go swimming. We go sailing. And then like, 'Okay, I have a 10 o'clock show in Delaware now.' And I would come home, get dried up, put on my clothes, turn on Zoom and perform, then turn it off, and go back swimming." He laughed joyfully as he remembered. "I'm like, 'Oh my gosh. This is incredible.'"

Antonio approached the loss of his work with deliberate positivity: "The way I've been doing gigs ended, for the time being. It doesn't mean it's forever. It ended. A new way came up, so let's learn it." Stepping up to face the fog of adaptation, he learned how to apply his storytelling techniques to the virtual space. He had a hard time conceptualizing virtual bookings, but for Antonio the challenges were an opportunity to grow. As a result, his storytelling grew in places it never would have otherwise. It was a time of creativity and productivity. The journey took him from not knowing anything about Zoom performance to feeling like many times he created more connections with his audience online than on stage.

Cooper still sits alone in The Zoom Lair to perform virtually but he reached through the void and finds connection. He worked and stumbled while he kept trying to figure out how to

make online storytelling better—more than a recitation of a story. He sees his listeners, allows them to respond to stories, and has conversations with them. His goal has been to create an experience that feels like everyone is in the room together, rather than a webinar or livecast. "I've embraced virtual performance—maybe more than anybody that I know," Cooper claimed. "But I didn't realize how much I missed an audience breathing together and laughing together. My career has flourished. I've reached wider audiences on an international level and made friends. This has been the best time for me as a storyteller since I began storytelling. I have *flourished*." Amid the cloud of sorrow and hardship of COVID, Cooper felt he received the gift of a silver lining—incredible success with Zoom storytelling.

Simon said, "When COVID hit, I *have* to master this. And I have to do it now!" He dug in not only to learn the technology side, but also the performance aspect. His skills grew as he observed others and himself telling and then experimented with performance techniques to adapt his high energy to a small stage. Learning to work with the camera and shifting posture and gaze in a way that shifted focus, he could draw listeners to imagine the story world with him. His style is to engage in conversation and play with specific audience members with the others listening. He made adjustments and adapted that to his virtual performances. He engaged listeners in conversation or called out their names or interacted with comments made in chat during the program. It was gratifying to him to have a listener comment, "This is the first time I've watched something that actually made me feel like I was part of it." He found ways to play with the audience. Due to the number of Simon's performances and online availability of them, this has turned out to be the most prolific time for him to learn stories.

Comparing virtual and in-person storytelling, Fran reflected, "I think the hard part is—as for telling a story—the hard part is that I can't tell when a story is going well. Whereas, if I'm in

the room, with a group of people, it is different. I get some feedback that indicates that they really did hear the story." The many different backgrounds and movement along with limited audience cues in Zoom are a distraction for her. She has had more satisfying storytelling events with smaller groups. In response to the positive comments after those experiences, she said, "I am encouraged to think that sometimes my storytelling can go over with a virtual audience as well as it does in person."

Sheila drew strength from gathering a virtual storytelling community. The first online storytelling programs were rough due to lack of knowledge about technology and how to interact with it. When things weren't working or needed improvement, she found people who could help her and other storytellers learn. She encouraged others to share what they learned with others. In the process Sheila learned to be more successful at online storytelling. Performing online made her work a little harder on telling her stories, which helped her to develop as a storyteller. For example, she learned better how to portray empathy and emotions to connect to an audience. By exploiting the affordances of Zoom, Sheila discovered ways to read the virtual room that aren't possible in person. Additionally, she credits this time as the most prolific and creative period for her.

This narrative has a satisfying conclusion. Surprisingly, during the pandemic the majority of these tellers maintained or increased their income from previous years despite the initial cancellation of all their work. This is in contrast to the situation for many other independent artists. According to research conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 on the arts by the non-profit Americans for the Arts, "Artists/creatives were—and remain—among the most severely affected segment of the nation's workforce" since quarantine conditions began (Cohen, 2021). Other measures of their success included experiencing more creativity and greater productivity

during this period. They learned Zoom performance, which helped improve overall storytelling skills. Storytellers and their listeners made satisfying connections through story in a time of isolation and adversity.

Although the scramble to shift storytelling online brought challenges, Antonio, Cooper, Simon, Fran, and Sheila found opportunity too. Moving to the videoconference stage allowed them to continue their stories. The majority of their work during this time was synchronous virtual performance. Telling stories in the new virtual environment affected their styles and brought occasion for growth. There were some mistakes and mishaps along the path to success, but they reached out and connected with others in ways they never could before, even in ways they could not have previously imagined. Adapting to virtual storytelling has impacted storytellers and their art—their perceptions, skills, performances, and connections with stories and listeners. This impact will carry into the future.

And so, amidst the adversities of COVID times, there were once five storytellers who responded when opportunity disguised as disaster came knocking at their door. Their response to the challenge beget online oral storytelling performances. As the art of storytelling was thrust on the anomalous stage of the videoconference platform, the storytellers nourished humankind through virtual storytelling. And in return, their own stories were enriched. From their hearts and homes, they shared stories with a worry-worn world. Storytellers could not be silenced.

Chapter 5. Epilogue

In this closing chapter, I begin by summarizing my research findings, including recommendations for virtual storytelling. Next, I will discuss constraints and challenges I encountered in this study. After suggesting possible directions for future research, I conclude by sharing a few final thoughts.

This narrative study examines the experiences of five professional storytellers whose work was impacted by shifting from in-person to virtual stages. When in-person storytelling performances were not permitted because of quarantine conditions, storytellers migrated to the video conference platform, usually Zoom, finding it to be most similar to their in-person storytelling experience. The question crucial for storytellers aiming to successfully perform online, according to Cooper, was "How do I exist in this world?" This study provides evidence that there were storytellers who discovered not only how to exist, but also how to thrive in the live virtual environment.

Although altered, when mediated through Zoom, the communication cues used by the storytellers during performance were generally sufficient to create the immediacy and intimacy important to telling stories for a live audience. Furthermore, the affordances of Zoom allowed for adequate social presence to produce a level of connection for facilitation of the storyteller-audience collaborative experience. The perceived proximity of the videoconference platform, as well as the cues it provided, allowed participants to be aware of one another's presence and to be available to one another. Although in remote locations, tellers and listeners met in a virtual space creating a perception of being together in storytelling experiences. Their mutual social presence empowered them to communicate and relate with each other.

To develop effective storytelling techniques for Zoom, storytellers combined prior knowledge and skills with online research, advice of colleagues and experts, and audience feedback. Furthermore, the support storytellers found and gave each other within groups and organizations boosted their transition to technology use and adaptation to telling online. Short et al. (1976) suggest experience with new media brings about smoother communication. With repeated trial and error, in time the storytellers improved in their video conference storytelling.

The tools we use influence and transform us (Carr, 2020; Ong, 1982/2002). Differences between the video conference and in-person environments that the storytellers negotiated (e.g., camera field, eye contact, perception, limited cues, signal latency, audio and video asynchrony, technology user error, technology glitches and failure) caused adaptation of storytelling techniques. How they perceived, adapted, created, and worked within the new platform varied from teller to teller, just as in-person telling varies. Storytellers altered their telling to fit the new performance space as determined by the parameters of the space and technology (e.g., smaller movement, appropriate energy, attention to facial expression, impression of eye contact, choice of feedback). What storytellers learned continued to shape the stories they told, even as they returned to in-person venues. Carr (2020) posits that adopting and using technology leads to becoming a routine. The storytellers who performed more recently in the few in-person events as public gathering bans lifted, initially, caught themselves performing in their adapted virtual mode out of habit although they were freed from the constraints of the camera view. They found themselves unnecessarily in a static body stance limiting their arm movement.

Being pushed to use videoconference for live storytelling not only provided opportunities for growth and enhanced skills, but it also created opportunities to consider different aspects of their stories, storytelling, and audiences. Telling in a new environment allowed storytellers to

gain insights they might not have otherwise discovered (e.g., the possibility that more deeply knowing a story strengthens a teller when audience response is less accessible; the potential power to engage listeners with reduced physicality during a storytelling performance).

Storytellers developed and adopted new approaches to connect with and engage their live audiences as they responded to new means of receiving and giving cues. By exploiting the affordances of Zoom, they were able to create relationships with their audiences and offer them intimate storytelling experiences despite the physical distance. Tellers adjusted their styles as they learned to tell within an environment that provided a manner of experiencing closeness differently than in person. They adapted to telling stories within close virtual proximity to each listener, i.e., The Front Row Experience, and found connection with their audience members.

Moreover, the virtual platform was robust enough for Sheila, in one instance, to connect her audience to her story in a manner that created a deeper than usual experience. She unwittingly evoked the "storylistening trance," identified by Fran (Stallings 1988, 1993), as the rare phenomenon of an audience's inwardly focused intense attention state, which may occur when a storyteller masterfully tells a powerful story. This hypnotic state can be identified by an "unusually deep stillness" (Stallings, 1988, p. 6) when story listeners become motionless with blank faces and slowed breathing.

When we hear or read a story, our imaginations can transport us into that story. This is related to the storytelling trance state Fran described where an audience is breathing together and there is a palpable feeling in the room. Sheila distinguished this type of transport from the deeper focus state that she reported when her audience was transfixed as in Fran's description. My father, Edson R. Follett (a science teacher who tells stories, has a master's degree in psychology, and is a Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming), has attended my storytelling

performances innumerable times in various settings. He told me that he has observed listeners in a state of self-hypnosis as I told stories, as evidenced by breath, eye focus, and posture. I learned from him that the listeners could have individual depths of trance or self-hypnosis varying throughout a story. Sturm (2000) confirms that a listener's consciousness can "flicker back and forth between a deep involvement in the story, during which the story happens around them, and a distant involvement with the story, during which they are aware of the story as a performed entity" (p. 291). Through varying depths of a light trance, we can be transported into the environment of the story without being in a group experience of the profound storylistening trance.

Strate (2014) suggests that the idea of narrative as an environment can begin to be understood in the "sense of getting lost in the story, being transported to another space and time through reading" (p. 19). Although he is referring to written stories, I argue that this applies to oral stories. The place and events of a story is an environment. "It is in the nature of environments to be in effect invisible" (Strate, 2014, p. 19). When an individual is transported into a story, they may become less aware of their physical environment and the storyteller's performance as they become immersed in the story's environment (Sturm, 2000). When her audience was in a storylistening trance, not only was Sheila effectively invisible, Zoom was as well. Sheila's previous experiences with audiences and herself in a storylistening trance occurred in the same physical space often with a contributing environmental element, so she was surprised when it happened on Zoom.

The Zoom environment may initially seem too complicated and distracting to support a storylistening trance. It is a conceptually-gathered audience, together only in the virtual sense. Fran described all the distractions of Zoom storytelling performances, which included individual

participants in multiple and varied separate physical environments. As Sheila's Zoom audience became entranced with her story, they were able to not only become less aware of her performance, but also at the same time, Zoom, which is an additional challenging layer of environment or mediation, apparently disappeared or at least was not noticed.

Strate (2014) explains a relationship between environment and media:

> Media are environmental because they mediate between ourselves and our outer environment, and in coming between us and the outer world become the environment we actually experience, but also because they quickly become routine and therefore ignored in favor of the content they convey or the way in which they are used. Unless the technology or form is entirely new, or ceases to function properly, we generally do not pay attention to the medium itself. (p. 19)

As Sheila masterfully told her powerful story, her listeners were well enough accustomed to Zoom that they were able to ignore it and as a group enter a storylistening trance.

Sheila's storytelling performance was a portal into the story. Listeners crossed the threshold of awareness from the Zoom environment into the story environment by means of a trance. In a conversation with Dr. Lance Strate (personal communication, April 14, 2021) about his article that discussed written story as environment (Strate, 2014), I proposed that oral stories could also be considered an environment. My reasoning was the correlating, if not selfsame, relationship between being transported into a story environment and the phenomenon Stalling (1988, 1993) identified as the storylistening trance. When I explained how storytellers and listeners had been observed being transported into a story during a trance, Dr. Strate coined the apt term "trance-port."

My research shows that while storytellers found important opportunities to grow and tell as they shifted to virtual storytelling, they also discovered ways to use the unique power of the videoconference environment to tell and connect with their listeners. Furthermore, online connectivity allowed their reach to suddenly expand exponentially to connect with others well beyond a locally gathered audience. They gathered new audiences and brought storytelling to those audience members no longer able to travel to live storytelling events. Now that their opportunities have expanded, the tellers each indicated they will continue using the new virtual stage, but they and their listeners miss in-person storytelling.

The impact of necessarily shifting to virtual storytelling will continue to affect professional storytellers. This study suggests that although successful for reaching and entertaining audiences, virtual storytelling will not replace in-person storytelling. “There remains something unique about the social contact achieved in a face-to-face meeting.” (Short et al., 1976, p. 174). In-person storytelling will continue to be the gold standard, while Zoom storytelling will claim a complementary role, remaining strong in the spaces where it is appreciated and needed.

Recommendations for Telling Stories in Videoconference

As Antonio, Cooper, Simon, Fran, and Sheila adapted their storytelling to perform on Zoom, they learned lessons that can be useful to others who communicate with virtual audiences. To continue their career, they needed to successfully connect with virtual listeners during a time when in-person audiences were prohibited. Therefore, they learned about videoconferencing through research and from experts. Furthermore, because of the co-creative nature of oral storytelling, professional storytellers were aware of their listeners and further honed their skills

in virtual communication in practice. The following recommendations for virtual storytelling were gleaned from interviews with these five tellers.

- Ensure your computer can run Zoom.
- Use an Ethernet cable.
- Depending on quality of your computer microphone and/or camera, consider using external microphone and/or camera.
- Know how to use your computer equipment.
- Place camera at eye level.
- Use lights behind the camera.
- Practice using Zoom features.
- Carefully consider your background.
- Use a green screen if you are using a virtual background.
- When using a green screen, don’t wear green.
- At least your shoulders should be on screen and space above your head.
- Self view can be helpful to monitor your movement, so you remain on screen.
- If self-view is distracting, hide it, and mark off the camera view area.
- For eye contact look at the camera or light next to the camera on the computer.
- Avoid staring at the computer screen.
- To create the location or characters of the story, shift focus away from camera.
- Choose how you will view your listeners—gallery view or small strip of videos.
- The strip of videos is best positioned just below the computer camera.
- Use peripheral vision or glance to see listeners.
- Consider whether you will sit or stand.

- Consider how you can move closer to and further from the camera for effect.
- Consider what possibilities in the virtual space can support your story and your storytelling.
- Tell the story to your camera as if it was a person.
- Record yourself telling a story for practice and review.
- Practice with a colleague to receive feedback.
- Designate a colleague to alert you if you have sound or other problems during performance.

Constraints and Challenges

Any research study is not without its constraints and challenges. A possible limitation could be the publishing of participant names in a study. Some individuals might be guarded in an interview if they knew they would be identified. Many studies require anonymity, but the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board allowed the storytellers' names to be used in this particular study because they are public figures known to seek publicity. All the storytellers easily agreed to this clearly stated condition. Using their names did not appear to be a constraint because the storytellers seemed to speak freely in their interviews.

An obvious limitation of this study is the small sample size. Using narrative inquiry within the time restraints of research for a thesis dictated the need for a limited number of interviews. When seeking depth and richness of the experiences of individuals, a choice to narrow the number of participants in a study may be necessary. And indeed, a feature of narrative inquiry is its focus on an individual or small group.

A limitation of my chosen method of analysis of narrative to examine the data is the large amounts of data the interviews produced. I could not use all the stories and information.

Therefore, the largest challenge was the task of sifting through the information to find the stories that best represented the data. With the wide range of data, it became difficult to discriminate which were the most pertinent to include when everything seemed interesting and important. When I wrestled with wanting to add details and instructive information, I found my way to writing the narrative by zooming out from the data points to examine them with the lens of my chosen method of analysis of narrative. I had to leave out details and forego telling some interesting stories to shape a flowing narrative for a cohesive report of the research. When creating the narrative became challenging, I returned to my research aims and the associated questions for guidance. I looked to narrative analysis and the principles of story crafting to guide my decision-making process with an eye on how to shape the narrative to reflect their experiences accurately.

During the design of the study, I wish I had created the opportunity for input from the storytellers in the final writing stages. They could have reviewed the overall narrative I created for Chapter 4, ensuring I understood their experiences, perceptions, and emotions. I would have liked to have their input on how I represented their stories.

Analysis of narrative and narrative analysis served my study because stories carry depth and breadth of emotions, contexts, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences. Antonio's lively demonstrations of telling in front of a camera, as well as the body language and vocal expressions indicating the rich humor with which storytellers told their stories may be excluded if other methods of analysis were employed. I was able to collect a wide range of data within the stories the tellers told. Furthermore, storytellers are skilled at communicating with story. Their animated storytelling provided rich information. Moreover, using story to gather data and share research findings is a natural and engaging manner of communicating information.

I acknowledge that the stories of the five storytellers were filtered through the lenses of my experience as a professional storyteller and as a student affected by our university shifting online. Any medium that a narrative might pass through has an effect. Hoping to keep the tellers' perspective firmly in the narrative, as I wrote I reminded myself to be reflexive as I made choices in selecting, arranging, and writing their experiences. This motivation remained foremost in my mind throughout all stages of research. If not artfully, I hope that I have at least authentically retold their stories.

Notwithstanding any disadvantage that may have come with my background as a professional storyteller, it also gave me an advantage. Before we began their interviews, I gave a brief introduction of myself and mentioned that I am an experienced storyteller. Having insider knowledge has been helpful to understand the terms and topics that came up in interviews, as well as recognizing storytelling techniques the storytellers described or demonstrated. Understanding story has also been a particular asset as I wove the research data into a cohesive narrative.

Conducting the interviews through Zoom proved beneficial not only because it provided richer communication cues than other available means during the stay-at-home orders during which the interviews were conducted, but especially because the tellers demonstrated how they tell stories on Zoom. I could feel for myself the successful ways they communicated with listeners. I experienced a variety of effective ways to facilitate connection in Zoom. Experiencing and learning the power of virtual storytelling during the interviews proved helpful in understanding the data I used to create an interesting narrative. And as a benefit, I connected better in online classes and storytelling performances.

Future Directions

In general, more research needs to be conducted that involves professional storytellers. In particular, it is important to continue collecting and researching their stories of the unprecedented, even historic, time of COVID when their art form transcended the traditional stage. Furthermore, study is warranted regarding if and how storytellers' work has changed now that in-person storytelling has resumed.

Multiple perspectives would provide a broader view. If I were to do the study again, I would interview more tellers to gather a wider variety of stories and perspectives. Additionally, I did not realize three of them belonged to the same group, TDB Storytellers, until I saw it in the interview transcriptions. But conversely, that may be a strength because despite their connections, the individuality of their methods of interacting with technology varied (e.g., audience and self-view, level of chat, physicality). This may indicate our perception and responses to new media is personal. This notion is also borne out by the varying paths and degrees of ease with which the tellers shifted to virtual space.

Because this study focused on those who successfully performed on Zoom, other perspectives and stories would give a fuller picture of the overall experience of storytellers during this trying time. Other storytellers chose different formats to present their storytelling. There are individuals who readily embrace new technology, while others remain skeptical (Carr, 2020), and a good many are on the continuum somewhere in between. It would be valuable to study other perspectives, including the choices and experiences of those that did not enjoy telling stories online, or did not successfully make the transition to online telling or, lastly, chose not to venture into virtual storytelling. Gathering the experiences of a time when storytellers and

storytelling were impacted so profoundly is a worthwhile goal. Preservation of these stories during a consequential episode will be vital to the history of storytellers and storytelling.

As I worked to shape the narrative of these storytellers, I found myself wondering how the audiences experienced the events that the storytellers shared with me. Exploring connection through storytelling from the audience perspective could be an insightful area of study. Moreover, it would be interesting to collect and compare experiences of audience and storyteller at the same virtual storytelling event to discover corresponding data on connection, particularly of the level of connection Sheila when her audience went in a trance.

Although I focused on professional storytellers, the aspect of connecting on a synchronous format goes beyond performance. The more I learned about the process of connection from the storytellers' experiences, the more I realized the applicability of the skills to anyone who communicates via video conference. Furthermore, stories impact many fields and areas of human life because they are fundamental to the way we communicate, think, and make sense of the world. Therefore, this study has broad application (e.g., in education, health care, performance, business, personal relationships). This knowledge about virtual storytelling needs to be shared. My goal is to publish the narrative to make their stories available.

Conclusion

Cooper suggested that virtual storytelling might be a new art form, while Simon and Antonio implied it was the same, just in a new medium. While I appreciate Cooper's point, I agree with the latter two. It is the familiar event of telling stories to a live audience, with the difference of merely being filtered through another medium: Zoom Meetings. The storytellers' performances still fit the criteria I described earlier in Chapter 2. On Zoom, storytellers are still using their voice and body to tell their story to a live audience, with the possibility of being

influenced by their listeners who may respond verbally or nonverbally to the story. In a sense, the physical stage has been replaced by a virtual stage.

In trying to understand and describe my perceptions of the synchronous—but not physically present—somewhere-in-between world of Zoom, I found relatability in Sobol's (1996) description. "It is the nature of oral transmission, when a performance is truly received to be not simply oral, but a full-body imprinting, a human technology of which videorecording is a pale imitation" (p. 209). Full-body cues are not available in Zoom, yet it offers a measurably more satisfying connection than video due to its live nature. Perhaps there are enough cues to create a partial-body imprinting. Video conferencing resides in the space between in-person and video recording, situated closer to in-person.

Videoconferencing is a recent technology, while Zoom is a newcomer to the market as of 2011 (Zoom, 2014). And it has been argued that storytelling is the oldest art form. The notion of nesting "the most ancient art in the newest technology" (H. Forest, personal communication, August 31, 2020) fascinates me. The length of time I have spent with this research has not dimmed my enthusiasm for the subject. Quite the contrary, my interest has grown with each stage of my research. This journey has removed my skepticism towards using videoconferencing as a platform to tell stories, even growing to join in Antonio's enthusiasm for a "specialness about the technology" as I have been given a glimpse into these storytellers' experiences. Virtual storytelling has its place. Learning how others have connected through storytelling gave me knowledge and confidence to tell my stories to virtual audiences when in-person audiences were banned. With the positive feedback I received, I can echo Fran. It is encouraging for storytelling to connect with virtual as well as in-person listeners. I continue to return to the virtual storytelling stage, even now as I have returned to in-person storytelling performance.

It took a dramatic event, even a forced shift, for storytellers to venture onto the video conference platform even though the technology was previously available. I felt the change keenly when we were enjoined to stay home and many of our interactions were forced online, so I related to the tellers' challenging experiences. I was inspired by the stories that rang out with resilience. Their interviews included humor and positivity even while they told stories of their challenges. The event that created extended social isolation drove us to find virtual connection. Storytellers provided a service by gathering, interacting, and connecting with stories. When in-person performance was taken from them, they found the means to keep telling stories, which resulted in virtually a new medium for live oral storytelling. In turn their stories have encouraged me. I am optimistic that in the telling of these stories about the historic time when storytelling shifted online, others will be inspired to share their own stories and a growing body of these stories can be preserved for posterity.

Since time immemorial, storytelling has been with us. Stories have been in all cultures, but technology has brought an increasing number of mediums to present stories. More than ever, oral storytellers have been competing with the digital world of story creation. Yet, they continue to have a place in our society. Storytellers adapt to their environment and will always exist because storytelling is at the essence of what it means to be human. In trying times, once again they adapted—and storytelling thrived.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Email to Storytellers

Dear [Name of storyteller],

Hello. My name is Leticia Pizzino. I'm a graduate student in the Department of Communication and Performance at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). I'm doing research that involves storytellers making the shift from in-person storytelling to virtual storytelling during COVID-19 shutdowns. This study seeks to examine the connection that storytellers make with their online audiences.

I'm looking for professional storytellers who are willing to participate in an approximately 1-hour interview via Zoom at a time that's mutually agreeable, hopefully sometime within the next couple weeks. Storytellers may qualify for this study if they performed live before March 2020, have experiences with online synchronous storytelling performance since, are 18 years or older, and reside in the U.S. Please see the attached flyer.

Please consider participating in this study. Participation is voluntary. To schedule an interview, or if you have any questions, please contact me at pizzino@etsu.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,
Leticia

Leticia Pizzino
MA Candidate | Communication and Storytelling Studies
East Tennessee State University
pizzino@etsu.edu

Appendix B: Flyer

Storytellers Needed

For a research study about storytellers managing their career during pandemic shutdowns.

Were you a storyteller before March 2020?

Was your work or were your performances affected by pandemic shutdowns?

Did the way you connect with your audiences change?

I'm seeking storytellers, 18 years or older, who reside in the U.S. and are willing to participate in a one-hour online interview.

Contact: Leticia Pizzino
Graduate Student ETSU
pizzino@etsu.edu

TELL YOUR STORY

Appendix C: Interview Question Guide

Interview Question Guide

1. Describe a little bit about your career as a performing storyteller.

   Possible prompts:

   - How long have you been a professional storyteller?
   - What proportion of your work is storytelling?
   - How much online performance did you do before March 2020?

2. What happened to your storytelling when COVID-19 isolation measures were enacted?

   Possible prompts:

   - How did COVID-19 shutdowns impact your storytelling career?
   - How has the COVID-19 shutdown changed your storytelling business?

3. How did you manage the shift to virtual storytelling?

   Possible prompts:

   - How have you adapted your storytelling to online platforms?
   - What physical movements did you have to modify for Zoom?
   - Describe a time when your presentation methods failed, and how you knew it.
   - Describe a time when your presentation methods succeeded, and how you knew it.
   - What resources have you used to facilitate performing stories online?

4. Could you share experiences you've had telling stories in synchronous, virtual settings?

   Possible prompts:

   - Is there a particular time that telling stories online went well?
   - Is there a particular time that telling stories online didn't go well?

5. How do you connect with your audience while you're performing stories in synchronous, virtual settings?

   Possible prompts:

   - When you're storytelling online, how do you create a connection with your listeners?
   - When you're storytelling online, how do you perceive your listeners' connection with you?

6. Have you done any in-person storytelling performances since March 2020?
7. What do you see moving forward regarding virtual storytelling?
8. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that's important to you regarding this topic that you'd like to share?

   Possible prompts:

   - What is one thing a respected, experienced storyteller wants everyone to know about storytelling in a pandemic?
   - Do you have any other thoughts about synchronous, virtual storytelling?

VITA

LETICIA PIZZINO

Education:	M.A. Communication and Storytelling Studies, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee
	Vocology Certificate, National Center for Voice and Speech, University of Utah
	B.Mus., Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah
Professional Experience:	"'Who I Was Is Not Who I Am': A Qualitative Study of Effects of Voice Loss on Professional Voice Users," podium presentation, Pan-American Vocology Association Symposium 2021
	"Voice and Human Well-Being," panel member, Pan American Vocology Association Symposium 2021
	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, Department of Communication and Storytelling Studies, 2019-2021
	"The Road to Reliable Resonance: Vocal Use and Care," workshop, 2015 National Storytelling Network Conference
	National Storytelling Network, member, past Utah State Liaison
	National Storytelling Network regional showcase (multiple years)
	National Storytelling Festival, swapping grounds emcee, 2023
	Timpanogos Storytelling Festival, storyteller (multiple years)
	Timpanogos Storytelling Festival, emcee (multiple years)
	Boulder City Nevada Folk Festival, storyteller (multiple years)

Pan American Vocology Association, member

Institute of General Semantics, member

Graduate and Professional Student Association, member

Teaching Artist (UT, AZ, VSA, ARTabilityAZ)

Soprano

Storyteller

Private Voice Teacher

Music Teacher, BASIS Mesa, Mesa, AZ, 2017-2018

Publications:

Pizzino, L. (2021). “Unlocking Hearts.” *The Mockingbird*. pp. 17–20.

Pizzino, L. (in publication). “Resilience.” Language and Culture Resource Center, East Tennessee State University.

Pizzino, L. (2003). Stories Live at Neighborhood House. In D. Albert, & A. Cox, (Eds.), *The Healing Heart Communities: Storytelling to Build Strong and Healthy Communities*. New Society Publishers. pp. 124–130.

Pizzino, L. & Baxter, S. (2000). Storytelling basics for middle school. In R. Batt, (Ed.), *The sky is green: True stories of artists and teachers of children with disabilities* (pp. 88–95). Art Access/VSA Arts of Utah and the Arts Education Program of the Utah Arts Council.

Pizzino, L. (1999). *Fold ‘n’ Tell*. I.M. Telling Productions.

Honors and Awards:

Research Grant, National Storytelling Network, 1999

1st place for nonfiction, "Unlocking Hearts," *The Mockingbird* 2022.

The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi

Pi Kappa Lambda Music Honor Society

Golden Key International Honour Society

Brigham Young University Talent Scholarship

Brigham Young University Presidential Scholarship