

Awaz Chitrako “Voices of Photo”;
Nepal;
Middlebury Institute of International Studies – MIIS;
Karan Kunwar

Summary

“Katha Chitrako” (Story behind a photo) supported 17 youth who grew-up in a boarding school away from family for prolonged periods of time to explore their own story of internal conflict and process their thoughts on how their integration in the larger community is impacting their personal and professional lives by using storytelling tools through photos.

Project Description

My professional work experience started as a volunteer for a film festival, which focused on telling stories of the lives of mountain people in 2012. Since then, I have worked with storytelling through visual mediums, especially giving the spotlight to youth. For example, we organized various film competitions for young filmmakers to participate in focusing on topics ranging from poverty, climate change, and education. In 2017, we changed the format of how we approached the film competition. Instead of requesting the final version of a film, we now asked for ideas on what the youth wanted to make. This allowed us to guide the youth to explore the stories in a different light and perspectives. Through this, we realized that rather than the competition and choosing winners we were making the journey of filmmaking a discovery of self for youth.

We focused on working with the Care Experience Network Nepal (CENN) which has created Shine Together, a platform to explore different social issues and create a change agent for adolescents who grew up in the care system. Initially, we planned with our local collaborator to organize the event for 15 youths, however, we had 17 participants for the event. The five-day workshop included the basics of story-telling and photography. The continuous five-day workshop was later modified from the request of students to practice their skills. Hence, in the end, the five-day workshops were divided into three phases and spanned over a month-long interaction.

Phase I: two-days focused on storytelling and photography, followed by two-day practice with mentors guiding remotely.

Phase II: two-days focused on details of the topic and exploring how we could approach the work done by participants in the last two days.

Phase III: 20-day gap for participants to write a photo-story, while getting support from the mentors. One-day focused on presentation of their story to mentors and additional guest mentors. The guest mentors were not part of the initial planning.

Likewise, the participants went to observe and learn from an exhibition featuring photo stories by 6 emerging Nepali photographers that were produced as part of the International Storytelling Workshop 2023 by Photo.Circle.

The team utilized the expertise of local art organizations to enhance the learning experience and create future partnerships. To enhance the learning experience, we invited Bunu Dhungana and Sagar Chhettri as guest mentors. Bunu explores and questions the world around notions of gender and patriarchy in her practice. Sagar focuses on socio-political stories with a particular interest in questions of identity, representation and justice. Unfortunately, Bunu could not be part due to personal and medical reasons. Likewise, we had invited stencil artist Suzanna Shirish to observe the process to understand and see the potential partnership for her upcoming exhibitions.

The guest mentors are the members of Photo. Circle, a platform for photography in Nepal that brings photographers and other visual storytellers together to nurture unique voices that document and engage with social change in Nepal. We are exploring a partnership with them to showcase the final product created by participants and provide a platform for selected participants to be part of their upcoming extensive Storytelling workshop in October.

Unexpectedly, one of the storytellers in the exhibition grew up in the similar system and now is a parent of a daughter who lives away from him. The artist explored the story from his own perspective as a father. He captures nuanced moments of when his daughter visited him with insights from a father's perspective.

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The participant got an opportunity to step in the shoes of a parent who faced similar challenges while making hard decisions. It encapsulates how learning about love goes beyond face value and is often showcased by layers of hidden actions and decisions made by parents in complex situations to make their kids' lives better.

One of the takeaways from the workshop was: sometimes it was overwhelming to give attention to each participant's story. Considering the diverse backgrounds, experiences and depth of the stories shared by the participants, more mentors are required. Hence, we recognized the need for a more focused and personalized approach and work towards fulfilling this in future. For example, we could assign one guest mentor to closely work with a small group of participants (2-3) whose stories align closely with the mentors' expertise. Similarly, as participants were also members of CENN Shine Together, they believed that documentation of their bi-weekly meeting through a story-telling approach would be beneficial and so they hope to run a similar program with future youth who are part of the network.

Reflection

Peace is an outcome of a situation where a person is at ease to share their life experiences and be vulnerable in order to overcome challenges. Only after this, a person can have hope to positively impact society and overcome differences existing in society.

Our vision for the project is to make a significant and lasting impact on the participants who have been disconnected from their families for an extended period of time. We believe that by giving them a tool to navigate their own emotions and experiences, and to connect with themselves and communities, we were able to achieve short term goals. In the long-run, we see CENN incorporating these activities as a part of their core activities to help the newer cohort of CENN youth. Likewise, in their recent convention at Care Experienced Network of South Asia, participants shared the importance of the workshop.

One of the assumptions we had was that all of the participants would have some memorabilia or things to associate with. In one cases, a participant did not have anything of a relative who had died by suicide. As the culture in her community is to burn everything belonging to the person is a norm, there was nothing of the sort. This particular incident pushed me hard to think about how easily I and our team have assumed that people have something to hang on to as a memory.

Right from the start of the day when we delved into personal experiences, we quickly realized the profound and emotional nature of the stories they were carrying with them for many years. Some even a decade. Many shared experiences openly while some shed tears. During this period, as a team we made sure they felt heard and safe at the same time. The ratio of mentor and participants were high in the beginning, by quickly reaching out to bring guest mentors we were able to ensure that we could achieve this despite the challenges.

We also observed that some participants preferred to distance themselves from their own stories, choosing to write their narrative in third person. Over time, we provided guidance and support to those who chose this approach; to recognise and write their own stories from how they were best able to express themselves. One of the participants echoed that the interaction had “positive energy and sense of safe that wants me to express because I am very much introverted... and the contents was very easy and productive as well as understandable.... I feel very close and connected.” Such recognition made us feel elated.

Over the course, the lingering question from the participants were, “Why did my parents do this? Why don't they call?” This was explored time and again. Personally, these questions made me realize that the facilities are not to fuel humans; rather it's a positive life-experience of emotion, care and love from the community and specially from parents that fuels and ignites humans.

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While we were working together, our visit to exhibitions by other artists was wonderful as they found new motivations to work on their own to share their stories and saw the power of photography as a tool for healing. The participant informed us that they wanted to work on the stories to convey their thoughts impactfully.

Personal Statement

“Trusting your team, communicating with the team often to make quick decisions to make the best out of available resources brings the best outcome. Feedback from participants often allowed us to completely revamp the structure of the project while ensuring the quality of work. And reaching out to similar organizations working in the field helped us in collaborating quickly to forge better partnerships to explore human emotions and strengthen community support structure for youth to work towards transforming society”