

Inspired By Human Connective Stories: Unfolding in Text, Sound, Photographs

For University Library at a new stage of social communications development (UniLibNSD),
October 5-6, 2023

http://conflib.diit.edu.ua/Conf_univ_Library_2023

Presentation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mipbu46VrLI>

Abstract

As someone far from crises like the people of the Ukraine have faced, I have almost no business presenting answers to inspire others, only to share what I have received. My own awareness became more meaningful than what I saw in news and social media, thanks to the individual efforts to share stories at the human level. Through colleagues online I have been fortunate to first read the first hand stories of a USUST librarian living and working through the Russian invasion, and more opportunities to hear more in voice with caring support of a gifted translator (sharing the one Ukrainian expression I know), and to see in photos the people who preserved books, the inspiration and understanding grows exponentially. Later I can see in the background of one conference video a vase of sunflowers, which I cannot help seeing as a human thread over these distances. Small stories of individual experiences at the human level, unfolding and opening like flowers through multiple forms of media, are what inspire me.

Video Script

Привіт ... how is my accent?

Hello, I am Alan Levine and humbled to be speaking to a library conference in Dnipro about being inspired through the disruption of crises. I speak to people who have lived experiences in this. I come far away from you, from a place of utmost safety here in central Canada.

I grew up in similar safety, far from war, on the eastern seaboard of the United States. My grandparents and great grandparents fled the violence of eastern Europe to make new lives for later generations, suffered hardships, violence, but they survived. My mother grew up in the Depression era. My image of the time was influenced by grim photographs and history books, yet when I asked her what it was like, she described it as joyous, playful, as she was young and made felt safe by her parents.

These human stories, ones I can see people and places are to me more illuminating than a broad sweep of textbook history. And so I have had a long standing interest in storytelling in often simple forms, just a picture, or just in sounds, but also enabled by the ways they can be shared via the internet, enabling what might never have been possible before.

And now, please bear with me a minor diversion, an attempt to demonstrate the point I am hoping to make in this talk.

I look out my window to see in my front yard, a large, wide spreading tree, with sprawling large branches, a prairie poplar, noticing how the wind gently shakes all of the yellowing autumn leaves. Beyond a thick hedge of caragana bushes, I see the shimmering tops of our natural prairie grass, and beyond, the calmness of tilled agriculture fields beyond.

These are words I have written in text. Alone, they might generate an image in your mind. That's what our brains do well, they weave our own experiences, understandings of things in the world, and generate an internal image the words suggest. Or you create comparisons between the places you know in the places you live. Next you hear my recorded audio, my own voice trying to paint the feeling of this scene, perhaps I open the window, and allow you to hear the sound of the wind in the trees. This adds more layers to our understanding of someone else's place in the world.. Next I might share a photograph looking out the window, and you see not only the tree, but perhaps my cat jumps into the frame or you may notice a hammock as a place for contemplation under the tree. These personal elements change the photograph from more than a depiction of an object into something with human connections.

Each element I add, ideally, creates a more human, connected experience to another location in the world, one I may never get to see in person, and ideally allows you to feel more from it than the facts from the Wikipedia entry about that particular tree's species.

Enough about the tree! I am humbled to try to think what can I tell you from my safe location, with a view of a tree, that is relevant to librarians and educators gathered in Dnipro for a conference about knowledge in a time of crisis.

Actually I have little to tell you who have lived through much.

I can only share as a recipient of inspiration from stories of the resilience of Ukrainian educators. This was made possible by being part of a network of generous colleagues who initiated a path by which I got to appreciate a single human window into the experience of the Ukraine war, that unfolded through first in text, then voice, and later in, photos. It is this progression I find compelling.

Here we witnessed the news of the February 24, 2022 Russian invasion through news reports, social media. My wife's father is among many who are from families of Ukrainian immigrants to this part of Canada. As horrible as the act of war was, I am ashamed to say from being far away, without a personal connection, I did not give the war full attention.

But other educators were considering the implications of war and what it meant for students. Just a week later in the OEG Connect online discussion for open educators, a colleague from Norway wrote [an open call for open educational resources in Ukrainian](#) to help support the anticipated wave of refugees.

Responses came with suggested links, offers to help, possible sources of support. All very positive. But what stood out was a personal story, in a message from a colleague well known here, Paola Cort (Hi Paola)j. [She wrote](#)

I am in contact with one of our ENOEL members; she lives in Dnipro, lately in the basement of her home with family members (grandchildren and daughters-in-law). Here is what she wrote to me in one of her last messages: “Ukrainian librarians, despite often unbearable conditions, continue to work remotely and physically in their institutions (if possible). But we are still working in groups of volunteers: we bake pies, weave camouflage nets, help people in need get medicine, clothes, water, food. There is enough work for everyone..... Of course, as far as possible, in the conditions of frequent lack of electricity, communications, air raids and missile attacks, we continue our library work.”

These words create a story at the human level, “We continue our library work.” That says so much, in just words.

I might add that language is not really a total barrier for communication. While imperfect, the fact that we can at least through software read and reply text in a language we do not speak, makes it possible to have conversations.

And these words are from someone I do not have to introduce here. but this was a new connection for me at the time– Tetiana Kolesnykova at the Scientific Library of the Ukrainian State University of Science and Technologies. Three months later Paola shared again with our community a letter from Tetiana titled [“Open Education developments in Ukraine in times of crisis: A librarian’s perspective”](#) with the interesting subtitle “almost a confession”. Her words opened up even more the real inspiration at work, she as one of many who leaped into action from basements and bomb shelters, equipped with mobile phones, crisis plans, and strong hearts. Quote:

We managed to overcome the fear, despair, and confusion of those first days thanks to family and friends, as well as thanks to work.

When you do something for others, it gives meaning to life and helps you move on.

Woah.

It was more than fitting that [our organization's open education award for resilience](#) went to Tetiana Kolesnykova and her colleagues.

And here is where my understanding of the invasion experience and feats of facing disruption opened up so much more, as I had the opportunity in March 2023 to record a conversation with Tetiana, along with library colleagues Paola Corti and Mira Buist-Zhuk for a podcast.

[Tetiana speaking in Ukrainian, then Mira translates]

Thinking about it now, reminiscing about it now, a year on is a little bit easier than it was just a year ago. Because by now Ukrainian librarians, in particular, have come to terms with the new reality. It was the new reality of living under constant threat of air raid attacks, air raid alarms, hiding in bomb shelters and so on.

They have adjusted in their own way. But she can think back and she can go back in her thoughts to those more peaceful times.

Hearing the story in Tetiana's voice, and deftly translated by Mira in real time, again, set the story in a person's experience. I have to say that the process of speaking thorough translation is unique in first listening to the tone and emotion in a language I do not understand, and then adding to it the translation. The pauses give us time to really appreciate the intensity of the story.

Plus Tetiana warmly responded at my offering of one word in Ukrainian I know from my wife's family, the toast of *diborja*, which I know as, "to life".

I cannot quote enough from this episode, please listen to it yourself. But what came through was the strong Ukrainian human spirit, and a focus on doing what was needed to not only survive, and also keeping a focus on research, science, education, student needs, and all with an embracing even more, of open publishing and open education practices.

For some reason one small story from the podcast stayed with me, when Tetiana described just three weeks after the bombs fell on Dnipro, how one researcher messaged:

There were crazy enough researchers, Tetiana calls them, who were emailing them 10 days into the war saying, "Hey, Are you still providing research support, publishing support? Would like to submit an article into the science and transport progress journal."

That's the journal the libraries maintain. So they were on the deadline and they were still keeping in touch and doing business as usual despite all the other circumstances.

I had parts of this story first in words, then in spoken voice. Yet I still did not have too many visual images— what kind of place was Dnipro and its regional setting? What did the university look like? And the people performing this remarkable work?

A short time later, Tetiana, Paola, and Mira presented online at the OER23 conference, and I see images that fill the story even more. I see a photo of prairie grass that could be the same field right outside my back door,. Plus now I see the photos of people, librarians, teachers, staff who performed the brave acts I had read and listened to— but seeing the photos now wove all of the other story elements together. At a human level.

This might all sound very trivial, that being able to read words, hear voices, and see photos makes for a story. In terms of communication in media forms, naturally it seems that video might relay the most information.

But for generating connection, empathy, I believe that it is the human capacity to create visuals from words or to develop what a voice sounds like from reading dialogue, that we will in these spaces with our own experiences and understanding. We look for things that are common and also different, they make for curious questions, and all of these, at least for me, work better at creating an understanding from different media elements that each add to a human story .

And this is well at work in this conference, as I have been watching the Residence of Heroes videos, where we can learn about speakers at a very human level. This is something not often done at conferences.

As I watch the introductions to the videos, again hosted by Tetiana, I am seeing her in a room that makes me wonder about the piano she stands next to, as well as atop it a vase of sunflowers. This is something I can relate to, and I am inspired by not only the stories in the video, but maybe to tell her of the sunflowers my wife and I grow here in Saskatchewan.

Yes, the stories are ones that inspire. But they create opportunities to share something as simple as a common flower. Like words in text, adding in the human voice, and perhaps photos, can we be inspired but also more connected over all the positive things that make us human.

I do not have a specific suggestion how we can make more possibilities for more stories like this to happen. This one was enabled by a dedicated educator like Tetiana and international colleagues like Paola and Mira who were already working together before the war. I believe when we retell this story, and connect more small stories of human connection, it expands the network of care one human at a time.

Thank you.

[Text on screen at end]

This I saw as a place in the Ukraine...

This you can see as a place in Saskatchewan

Дякую

Wait!

There is more!

Since 2009 I have collected Amazing True Stories of Openness

<https://stories.cogdogblog.com>

Alan Levine

alan@oeglobal.org

<https://cog.dog>

Music credit:

curious ft. airtone by Apoxide Licensed CC BY-NC

<https://dig.ccmixer.org/files/Apoxide/64769>

