

LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

ARDI DIVISION

UNDERSERVED CULTURAL COMMUNITIES (UsCC) UNIT

LGBTQIA2S UsCC Subcommittee

2024 Narrating Our Truths: The Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project



LOS ANGELES COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF
MENTAL HEALTH
hope. recovery. wellbeing.





Figure 1: Participants



Figure 2: <https://youtu.be/NPXmIsR51ww>

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The "Narrating Our Truths: The Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project" was an initiative launched through a collaborative effort between Wombat Mental Health Services and the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Stakeholder Engagement Unit Underserved Cultural Communities (UsCC) Mental Health Services Act (MHSA). This project aimed to address the unique needs of the LGBTQIA2-S+ communities in Los Angeles County, with a particular focus on the Two-Spirit community.

Specifically, the identified outcomes for this project were to *increase awareness of mental health issues within the Two-Spirit community*, and to *develop culturally sensitive practices and resources to promote mental health and wellness for Two-Spirit people* in Los Angeles County. As such, Wombat Mental Health Services (a) *increased awareness of mental health issues* and (b) *developed culturally sensitive practices and resources to promote mental health and wellness* and (c) *developed recommendations on how to create specific resources for the Two-Spirit community* by:

- collaborating with community practitioners to provide space for culturally relevant and holistic wellness activities,
- shifting existing narratives related to the Two-Spirit community,
- increasing visibility of this community,
- educating the community as a whole.

The project's development began in December 2023 with a series of initial meetings and progressed through various phases over the next several months. The facilitator worked with our community engagement team to recruit two-spirit storytellers for the cohort and attendees for the final showcase. Pre- and post- surveys were given and shared with the UsCC subcommittee. Each phase was designed to focus on various aspects of storytelling, totem animal exploration, and narrative development, with a final showcase to highlight the work throughout the project. The project culminated in a showcase event held on May 25, 2024.

Co-facilitators played an essential role throughout the project's duration, providing vital support and specific recommendations based on their indigenous identities and lived experiences. Their involvement ensured that the activities and objectives outlined in the grant were culturally sensitive and met the specific needs of the Two-Spirit community.

Participants in this project also had personal experience as storytellers within the two-spirit community.

Participants met 6 times and for 3 hours each project meeting. Food, travel, and accommodation for the event were pre-organized. In addition to the project events, final summary reports were provided to the UsCC subcommittee which included strengths and barriers of all elements of the

Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project (including the Storytellers Cohort gatherings and the Showcase), and a summary of the pre and post-tests, which included data outcomes utilizing a match pair analysis.

PROJECT RESULTS

Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project gatherings provided a space where members of the Two-Spirit community could share their personal experiences and narratives. These events served as a platform for engaging traditional wellness activities within diverse forms of storytelling. Participants shared and expressed their mental health journeys and experiences through various mediums, including spoken word, art, dance, and music. These narratives also educated the broader population about the experiences of the Two-Spirit community and queerness as associated with indigeneity.

OUTCOMES

The project achieved several significant outcomes:

1. **Increased Mental Health Awareness:** The project raised mental health awareness within the Two-Spirit community and among the general public. It highlighted the unique mental health challenges faced by Two-Spirit individuals and the importance of culturally appropriate support.
2. **Development of Culturally Appropriate Practices:** The project contributed to the creation of resources and practices which were culturally sensitive and tailored to the needs of the Two-Spirit community. These practices aimed to enhance the mental health and wellness of the participants. Flexibility and communication were very important in this phase as facilitators, co-facilitators, and also participants engaged through conversation to develop and
3. **Enhanced Visibility and Understanding:** The project elevated the visibility of the Two-Spirit community, fostering a better understanding of their experiences and challenges among the broader population. This increased visibility helped to break down stereotypes and promote inclusivity which was incredibly important because this was severely lacking in Los Angeles County.
4. **Community Engagement and Support:** The project demonstrated strong community engagement and support, with over 120 community members attending the showcase event. The supportive environment created during the gatherings contributed to the enhancement of community capacity and solidarity.

The success of the "Narrating Our Truths: The Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project" underscores the importance of culturally tailored mental health initiatives and the power of storytelling in healing and community building.

In order to demonstrate the project's impact on community capacity, Wombat MHS collected data in pre- and post- survey measures.

Survey Descriptions and Summary

Participants were asked the following demographic information:

- **Storyteller:** Identifier for each storyteller.
- **Age:** Age of the storyteller.
- **Heritage:** Heritage of the storyteller.
- **Mental Health Experience:** Indicates if the storyteller has experience with mental health issues.
- **Zip Code:** Geographic location of the storyteller.
- **Understanding Two-Spirit Storytelling:** Self-rated understanding of Two-Spirit storytelling (scale of 1 to 5).
- **Understanding Significance:** Self-rated understanding of the significance of Two-Spirit storytelling (scale of 1 to 5).
- **Confidence in Expressing:** Confidence in expressing their stories (scale of 1 to 5).
- **Storytelling as Tool for Mental Well-being:** Agreement with using storytelling as a tool for mental well-being (scale of 1 to 5).
- **Excited to Participate:** Level of excitement to participate in the project (scale of 1 to 5).
- **Post-Project Responses:** Responses after the project's completion (scale of 1 to 5).

Initial Survey (*pre-survey*)

Based on the Likert scale below, please answer the following attitudinal questions.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Pre- Survey Questions:

1. I have a basic understanding of Two-Spirit storytelling
2. I have a good understanding of the significance of this project.
3. I feel confident in expressing my experiences and perspectives through storytelling.
4. I believe that storytelling can be a powerful tool for promoting mental well-being.
5. I am excited to participate in the Two-Spirit storytelling as medicine project and contribute to the final showcase.

Key Pre-Survey Insights

The following key survey insights describe some general data descriptors of our survey population vis a vis the attitudinal pre-survey.

- **Population:**
 - n = 11
- **Age Distribution:**
 - The ages of storytellers range from 26-39 years old, with a mean age of approximately **33.63 years**.
- **Heritage Diversity:**
 - Many of the storytellers come from a variety of diverse heritages including Nuhua, Creek, Yavapai, Apache, Yurok, and Cherokee.
- **Mental Health Experience:**
 - All storytellers have indicated experience with mental health issues.
- **Geographic Distribution:**
 - The storytellers are geographically distributed across various zip codes in Los Angeles.
- **Understanding and Confidence:**
 - Storytellers generally have a good understanding and significance of Two-Spirit storytelling, with ratings predominantly 4 and 5, with an **average score of 4**.
 - Confidence in expressing their stories is also high, mostly rated 4 and 5, with a **4.05 average score**.
- **Storytelling for Mental Well-being:**
 - There is strong agreement among storytellers on using storytelling as a tool for mental well-being, with a **4.9 average score**.

- **Participation and Post-Project Responses:**

- The storytellers are very excited to participate, with an average score of 4.9.
- Post-project responses are also highly positive, with an average score of 4.9.

The survey data highlights the diverse demographics and backgrounds of the community members within Los Angeles County, emphasizing the importance of reaching and engaging this population. With ages ranging from 26 to 39, the participants represent a broad spectrum of experiences, with a mean of 33.6 years. The community's rich heritage includes individuals identifying as Nuhua, Apache, Cherokee, Creek, Kavuk, Yurok, and Yavapai, underscoring the cultural diversity that is integral to the region. All participants had personal experiences with mental health challenges, reflecting the need for supportive mental health initiatives. The zip codes provided, spanning areas ranging from 90000-90050, indicate a wide geographic reach within the county. The unanimous positive response to the Two-Spirit storytelling project highlights the community's readiness and enthusiasm for culturally relevant mental health interventions.

Showcase Survey Summary

Post-Survey questions:

6. How likely are you to recommend the Youth Graphic Novel Project and its exhibits to others? Please rate on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not likely at all and 5 being extremely likely.

7. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for improving future exhibits or projects related to mental health?

Post-Survey Data Analysis:

- **Population:**

- n = 121

- **Age Distribution:**

- The ages of storytellers range from 20-59 years old, with a mean age of approximately 35.79 years.

- **Heritage Diversity:**

- 64 of the Showcase participants come from a variety of diverse heritages including Navajo, Lakota, Hopi, Zuni, Blackfeet, Nuhua, Creek, Yavapai,

Apache, Yurok, Crow, Chyenne, Apache, Seminole, Sioux, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Ottawa, Potawatoni, and Cherokee.

- **Mental Health Experience:**
 - 61 members in attendance at the Showcase had previous experience in mental health.
- **Geographic Distribution:**
 - The participants in attendance are geographically distributed across various zip codes in Los Angeles.
- **Gender Identity:**
 - There were a variety of different gender identities who attended the showcase event, including Two-Spirit individuals, TGNC folks, and cisgender individuals.
- **Participation and Post-Project Responses:**
 - Post-project responses are also highly positive, with an **average score of 4.9**.

The unanimous post-project feedback, where all participants rated their experience and understanding as highly positive, demonstrates the project's effectiveness in promoting mental well-being and cultural pride. This underscores the critical importance of tailored, culturally sensitive mental health programs in fostering community engagement and support in Los Angeles County.

LESSONS LEARNED

Importance of Cultural Sensitivity:

- **Vital Role of Cultural Practices:** The cultural significance of totem animals and storytelling in Native American traditions was fundamental to the project's success. Respecting and accurately representing these cultural elements ensured that the project resonated deeply with the Two-Spirit community. Participants felt a sense of validation and connection through the inclusion of these culturally significant practices.
- **Authentic Representation:** It was crucial to involve cultural advisors and community elders to guide the integration of these elements, ensuring authenticity and respect for traditions. This approach helped build trust and foster a safe and inclusive environment for participants.

Community Engagement:

- **Regular and Meaningful Interaction:** Ongoing engagement with the community was essential. Regular feedback sessions and the incorporation of recommendations from the

cohort ensured that the project remained aligned with the evolving needs and preferences of the community. This continuous dialogue helped in fine-tuning activities and maintaining participant interest and satisfaction.

- **Building Trust:** Consistent and open communication helped in building a strong rapport with the community, encouraging more active participation and a sense of ownership among the participants.

Challenges Encountered:

- **Scheduling and Accessibility:** Coordinating schedules for the gatherings proved challenging due to the diverse availability of participants. Ensuring accessibility for all participants, including those with disabilities, required careful planning and resource allocation.
- **Addressing Transportation Needs:** Providing Uber vouchers for transportation was an effective solution to overcome logistical barriers, ensuring that participants could attend events without facing transportation issues.
- **Venue Accessibility:** Ensuring that the venue was wheelchair accessible was another critical factor in accommodating all participants, highlighting the importance of inclusivity in event planning.

Suggestions for Improvement:

- **Flexible Scheduling Options:** Future projects could benefit from offering even more flexible scheduling options to better accommodate participants' varying availability. This could include holding events at different times of the day or on weekends to ensure maximum participation.
- **Enhanced Outreach Efforts:** Expanding outreach efforts to engage a broader audience is crucial. Leveraging social media, community partnerships, and local media can help in reaching more individuals and raising awareness about the project.
- **Feedback Integration:** Establishing a robust mechanism for continuous feedback allows for real-time adjustments and improvements, ensuring the project remains responsive to the needs of the community.
- **Diverse Communication Channels:** Utilizing multiple communication channels to reach out to participants and gather feedback can enhance engagement and ensure that all voices are heard.

By learning from these experiences and addressing the identified challenges, future initiatives can be more effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the Two-Spirit and broader LGBTQIA2-S+ communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the experiences and insights gained from the "Narrating Our Truths: The Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project," the following recommendations are offered to enhance future projects aimed at providing outreach and mental health promotion to the target community:

1. **Enhanced Cultural Integration:**

- **Ongoing Cultural Relevance:** Future projects should continue to integrate cultural practices and traditions into mental health promotion activities. This ensures that the initiatives resonate deeply with the target community and respect their heritage. Activities could include traditional ceremonies, use of indigenous languages, and incorporation of culturally significant symbols and rituals.
- **Community Involvement:** Engage cultural leaders and elders from the community in the planning and execution phases to ensure cultural authenticity and relevance.

2. **Flexible Scheduling and Accessibility:**

- **Adaptive Scheduling:** Offer more flexible scheduling options for events and activities to accommodate the varied availability of participants. Consider evenings, weekends, and other times that may be more convenient for community members.
- **Accessible Venues:** Ensure that all venues used for gatherings are fully accessible to participants with different needs, including those with disabilities. This includes providing transportation options, ensuring physical accessibility, and offering virtual participation options when possible.

3. **Broader Community Engagement:**

- **Expanded Outreach:** Increase efforts to involve a larger segment of the community by utilizing a multi-channel approach. This could include social media campaigns, local media partnerships, and collaborations with other community organizations.

- **Partnerships:** Build partnerships with schools, healthcare providers, and other relevant organizations to extend the reach of the project and attract a diverse audience.
4. **Continuous Feedback Mechanism:**
- **Real-Time Feedback:** Establish a continuous feedback mechanism that allows for real-time input from participants and stakeholders. This could include surveys, suggestion boxes, and regular feedback sessions.
 - **Adaptive Project Management:** Use the feedback to make timely adjustments and improvements to the project. Ensure that participants feel heard and that their suggestions are taken seriously and implemented where feasible.
5. **Diverse Expression Mediums:**
- **Encouragement of Diverse Mediums:** Encourage the use of various mediums for storytelling and expression, such as visual arts, dance, music, digital media, and traditional crafts. Recognize that different individuals may have unique ways of sharing their narratives.
 - **Resources and Training:** Provide resources and training for participants to explore and develop their preferred mediums of expression. This could include workshops, access to materials, and mentorship from artists and storytellers.

Implementing these recommendations will help future projects build on the success of the Two-Spirit Storytelling as Medicine Project, ensuring that outreach and mental health promotion efforts are effective, inclusive, and culturally resonant. By prioritizing cultural integration, accessibility, community engagement, continuous feedback, and diverse expression, future initiatives can foster deeper connections and more meaningful impacts within the Two-Spirit and broader LGBTQIA2-S+ communities.

