

Inclusive Storytelling

It is now widely acknowledged that our screens don't reflect the diversity of Australian society – which is limiting the range, relevance and reach of the stories we tell.

The screen industry is making new efforts to be more inclusive both on screen and behind the camera. In taking on this challenge, practitioners are navigating new creative relationships and, often, unfamiliar approaches to storytelling. We need to acknowledge what we don't know and find creative ways to engage with difference. We can all get better at this.

Authenticity

It is now generally accepted that when non-Indigenous people develop stories with Indigenous content they will enact best practice and collaborate with Indigenous experts to creatively drive Indigenous stories. The same principle applies to stories that rely heavily on the lived experience of a specific community eg. culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTQIA+, people with disability, low socio-economic background, etc.

This makes for better content. When writing about a place, a community or a character, it's important to have a depth of understanding of the subject so the stories don't rely on stereotypes.

In general, if you are telling a story about a specific community that is not your own you should ask how your story may impact the community. Do you have sufficient insight, have you done enough research, have you consulted with members of that community? Is there someone within the community who you can support to tell the story better? Can you find mutually beneficial ways to collaborate for great content outcomes?

Story Consultants and Writers' Rooms

In an effort to inform authentic storytelling, story consultants and collaborators from diverse backgrounds are being invited into development meetings and writers' rooms. This delivers positive outcomes when handled ethically. Ethical storytelling means taking the following into consideration;

- Are representations authentic or do they rely on stereotypes?
- How will the story impact on the community in the real world?
- Will the story consultant be paid for their time and/or receive a credit?
- Can the story consultant be a collaborator and take a greater role in the development process?

A good producer considers these questions and creates a positive and respectful environment for creative input from the early stages and throughout the development process.



Authenticity and inclusivity is hard work, but, if done well, it makes a real difference.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is about having an openness to incorporating diversity in your work. Creating characters that represent the broad spectrum of identities in Australia is a good way to support diversity. This practice offers access to a new world of storytelling, however it's important to recognise if you're writing about a subject you don't know about and interrogate whether it's something you want to continue doing, and if so, how you can go about doing so thoughtfully, by engaging with the issues of authenticity and ownership described above.

Another way of being inclusive is through non-traditional casting. Sometimes known as color-blind casting, this is the practice of casting roles without specifying the actor's ethnicity or skin color. This principle can also be applied to age, gender and disability. This is a very simple way of supporting diversity if demographic background is not central to the story. It's great when industry supports casting agencies who have the skills and connections to achieve this.

Here are some key principles for inclusive storytelling:

- Go beyond the typical: Seek out new voices and sources of talent
- Really listen: Consult in ways that allow for different perspectives
- Be self-reflective: Be prepared to adapt your approach
- Skill-up others: Build capacities in the people you work with
- Give credit: Find ways to help progress the careers of talented people from under-represented communities

The rewards for doing these things can be fantastic. They can add new levels to your work and support multifaceted storytelling. They can also give you credibility that connects you with new audiences.

SEEING OURSELVES:

Reflections on Diversity in Australian TV and Drama. Screen Australia 2016.

FURTHER READING:

Inclusive Pathways Framework for Screen Storytelling Talent. AFTRS 2016.

