

Amplifying voices and perspectives through digital storytelling

The most common way of producing stories using digital media is to make short (2-3 minutes) stories using digital video which are made up of still images and a narrative voice over. The story is told in the first person and recounts a personal story or experience. The images come either from the storyteller's own personal photographs or are found or made by the participant during the workshop, which usually lasts two or three days, and during which the story is written and recorded.

Digital media has enabled new ways of telling and sharing stories. The average PC or laptop is sold with software which allows you to incorporate your own photos, videos etc. and to mix sound and still and moving images. Developments in internet technology and web and web 2.0 applications like Facebook, blogs, youtube and flickr, facilitate the sharing and dissemination of digital stories. And recent developments in mobiles and location sensitive media are making it possible to make and share stories on phones and also to connect them to physical locations and/or maps.

Use of the workshop methods and story format developed by the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) has been adapted over the past decade in a variety of settings. The workshop process has helped groups explore a shared issue or experience, to get different perspectives on the same issue, or as part of a process of coming to terms with or making sense of an experience.

Developments in technology have supported production of large web-based digital storytelling archives and sites on particular places or themes (www.digi-tales.org , www.bristolstories.org, www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales) and have been integrated within museum work (Australian Center for the Moving Image www.acmi.net.au/digital_storytelling.aspx).

Digital storytelling workshops have also become quite widely used in community development, health and education contexts for informal learning, developing communication skills and self confidence, campaigning, advocacy and awareness raising (examples include projects which are dedicated to raising awareness about a particular issue such as the work of Silence Speaks on Domestic Abuse or community-based media organisations like Knowle West Media Centre that embed digital storytelling into different programmes and projects (www.silencespeaks.org, www.kwmc.org.uk/index.php?article=156).

Digital storytelling is increasingly being used in health contexts as part of patient involvement or consultation schemes and for advocacy. Mental Health Media developed a web-based resource for young people which introduced issues around mental health through the digital stories of young people experiencing mental distress (www.boldcreative.co.uk/work/education).

The Patient Voices (PV) programme founded and run by Pilgrim Projects has taken a lead in this area in the UK. PV “aims to capture some of the unwritten and unspoken stories of ordinary people so that those who devise and implement strategy, as well as clinicians directly involved in care, may carry out their duties in a more informed and compassionate manner.”

A number of projects have been using digital storytelling as part of programmes to combat stigma and discrimination in regard to HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa. Examples include the work of OSISA (http://storiesforchange.net/event/open_society_initiative_for_southern_africa_hiv_stigma_workshop) and a collaboration between the Sonke Gender Justice Network and Silence Speaks (http://storiesforchange.net/event/sonke_responding_to_violence_hiv_aids_digital_storytelling_workshop).

Key Features of the process

Digital stories can be powerful examples or (deceptively simple) accounts of experience which are capable of connecting with an audience or creating a new perspective on particular experiences. This may be to do with some of the key features of a digital story and the way in which they are produced. The workshop process, initially developed by Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley, who formed the Centre for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), has close links to methods used in creative writing for theatre. An important aspect of the workshop process is the story circle. Individuals work on their own story but as part of a group process with other participants where the stories are shared and then developed and refined in a mutually supportive environment, considering aspects of the story such as: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of voice, power of soundtrack, economy, pacing. As digital storytelling has been adopted in different cultural contexts, then there have been different understandings of what makes ‘a good story’.

Developing a powerful short narrative is at the heart of the process and a range of methods enables participants to experiment with different ways of telling their story to get across what someone feels is important.

- There is an emphasis on economy, especially economy of language but also using the visuals and tone of voice to tell the story as much as the words.

‘For sale: baby shoes, never worn’ | [Ernest Hemingway thought this six-word story was his best work](#)

- Emphasis on voice, mood and pace are also important, since much is conveyed in how a story is told - the emotion in someone’s voice or pace of delivery.

- Additional emphasis is placed on the choice of images and the centrality of images to the story.

Challenges and questions

Digital storytelling is one of many approaches which can enable people’s voices and experiences to be heard. Although it is a very powerful and flexible approach it does not suit every context. These projects are resource and time intensive. They require some degree of commitment from participants and this is not always practicable. The approach does not always suit the capabilities of the participants; it is not the case that everyone can create a personal story in a three-day workshop. On the other hand the methods can be adapted. It is important to know about the ICT, media, reading and writing experience and confidence of the group.

Digital stories are personal stories and accounts of experience. For some contexts and when working with groups of communities who wish to tell a story, it might be more appropriate to use a participatory video process. Why use digital stories and not a documentary, or a postcard campaign? If this is part of an advocacy or awareness raising campaign will it reach the people it needs to reach?

Digital storytelling can be an emotional experience for participants recounting traumatic or distressing events. Project planning needs to ensure that there is adequate support and, where appropriate, follow up for participants. Participants in digital storytelling workshops frequently refer to the process as therapeutic but it is not therapy.

The facilitator is always a co-creator of the story to some degree. This is a position of power where stories can be manipulated to fit a particular format or present a particular aspect of a topic.

An over-rigid application of method can neglect different understandings of story and flexibility, which enable participants to approach the shaping of their story in ways that work for them (for example working with images rather than focusing on scriptwriting). Where a project has a specific outcome, such as a set of digital stories, there can be pressure to ensure that certain kinds of stories and experiences come through in the stories. There may be an expectation that stories will reinforce particular aspects and enable the continuation of funding or the communication of a particular idea. This can turn into a story mining process where people are involved in workshops in order to extract particular kinds of stories which suit a purpose, irrespective of what stories the participants might want to tell. This kind of process also runs the risk of creating victimhood or stereotype stories, particularly sets of stories which address one aspect of people's experience (as a victim of violence, as HIV positive, as a youth offender, a child in care etc.).

This is not to say that a digital storytelling workshop that focuses on creating stories for the purposes of advocacy is not a valid thing to do. It is more that it needs to be designed and managed with input from the participants and with clarity and transparency about the purpose from the outset. And with options for participants to tell stories that don't fit the script.

Two different projects working with domestic abuse can illustrate this. One works explicitly (and with transparency and a clear duty of care to participants) to produce stories about experiences of violence in order to share those stories publicly through DVD and a website. The other project had a more open remit: while it would like to have stories it could use on its website, the organisation did not want to dictate the nature of the stories that participants would tell. The resulting stories focused on other aspects of the participants' lives, including family holidays and long-term friendships. These stories were not used for advocacy, they were certainly more ambiguous about experiences of abuse, but they did have something to say about the women as something other than victims.

How are digital stories used?

Increasingly digital stories are being produced and posted on the web. This provides relatively easy means of distribution of stories. But the stories are posted to the web and then what?

- There is little control over the context in which stories are viewed or used. This has issues for participant consent and confidentiality.
- It also has issues for use of stories in advocacy or awareness raising. A large number of stories can lead to overkill or a disinterest (not another digital story....) especially where stories are overly similar in tone and form. It is possible to create web-based repositories or sites where stories are contextualised in imaginative ways (see for example www.boldcreative.co.uk/work/education)
- A good deal of anecdotal feedback and some research into the value of the digital storytelling for participants. In regard to dealing with experience, developing communication skills, gaining new perspectives on a situation, and sometimes being able to make changes as a result.
- There is less research and understanding about the use of digital stories in campaigning and awareness raising and in influencing change.

Examples and resources

Stories for Change is an online meeting place for community digital storytelling facilitators and advocates. There are stories, resources such as curricula and advice about technology choices, and information about different projects. <http://storiesforchange.net>



The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Stories for Change' website. The header is green with the logo 'Stories for change' and a search bar. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for HOME, STORIES, RESOURCES, EVENTS, FORUMS, MEMBERS, and ABOUT. There are also links for 'VIEW STORIES', 'SEARCH FOR STORIES', and 'HELP'. The main content area features a story titled 'Yanaiso's Story: Stigma and Discrimination in My Country'. The story is by Yanaiso Zhou and is described as a story of resistance. It was created in a CDS workshop organized by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). Collaborators include Women's Net and Boston Media House. A related event is mentioned: 'Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa HIV Stigma Workshop'. The story is accompanied by a video player showing a person's hands holding a small object.

The Center for Digital Storytelling – www.storycenter.org

A San Francisco Center established by Joe Lambert who has led the way in developing processes and applications for digital media and story. Some useful resources about all stages in producing a digital story.

Bristol Stories - www.bristolstories.org

Bristol Stories has over 150 stories produced in workshops in Bristol. It also has some very useful sections about software, copyright free images and audio and general issues and guidance about making digital stories.

DigiTales - www.digi-tales.org

A European digital storytelling project. The website also includes an outline of the digitaes approach.

Capture Wales - www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales

A huge BBC project that has produced community based digital stories across Wales.

Patient Voices – www.patientvoices.org.uk

The Patient Voices works with patients to tell their stories in order to inform medical services about the needs and experiences of patients.

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