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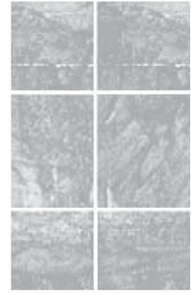
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What is This?

Intergenerational digital storytelling: a sustainable community initiative with inner-city residents

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ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling (DST) is being increasingly used in a range of contexts to exploit current technological capabilities of capturing and reproducing community stories. Methods of storytelling collection are typically realized over short time frames of days or weeks, and appropriate visual images and interview data produce multimodal outputs. A particular stream of work has developed in community-based DST around intergenerational storytelling in environments where student researchers may work with older storytellers in culturally diverse urban settings. DST also emphasizes the participatory nature of the process and outcomes with respect to enabling untold but significant stories to emerge, and technical and storytelling skills to be transferred to participants through the process. This article addresses the particular concerns of relationship building and the pedagogical aims of training students to carry out research using this participatory DST research approach where intergenerational and cultural issues are foregrounded. In the conclusion, the author reflects on this particular focus and the shortcomings of the project with regard to the substantive participatory and democratic benefits exemplified by other projects; he also provides evidence of the other achievements of this project in an intergenerational project supported by an inner-city health organization in Melbourne, Australia.

KEY WORDS

design education • digital storytelling • intergenerational • participatory research

DIGITAL STORYTELLING: COMMUNITY-ORIENTED AND VERNACULAR CREATIVITY

The practice of digital storytelling (DST) is currently 'extremely multivalent, referring variously to hypertext fiction, computer game narratives and various artist-led forms of narrative presentation' (Klaebe et al., 2007: 4). In its core formulation, DST is the process of creating a narrative, driven primarily by a central narrator or storyteller and supporting that narrative with a combination of text, still photographs, audio, graphics and animations, often with a view to creating or supporting community building (Fields, 2008). Digital stories are produced by combining storytellers' spoken words with memorabilia from their personal archives, such as photographs, films, certificates, music and sound. This material is used to create short, e.g. 3-minute, multimedia files that can be screened on computer, TV or the internet. The interaction and compromises required by the institutional environment, technological resources and cultural expectations of storyteller and facilitator inevitably lead to a mediated construction of identity and community that needs to be acknowledged (Thumim, 2006). Storytelling is not an unmediated and direct window on life experience and the compromises of technology, institutional and cross-cultural mediation influence the success and limitations of the process.

According to Burgess (2006: 207), the popularity and emergence of digital storytelling, paralleled by the growing significance of YouTube, is a key example of vernacular creativity, which 'is a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges (of, say, television genre codes) with older popular traditions and communicative practices (storytelling, family photography, scrapbooking, collecting)'. Murakami (2008) also points to the potentially beneficial mediating role of digital storytelling in the context of intergenerational relationships, e.g. teacher–student relationships. The exploitation of a genre of vernacular creativity familiar to younger participants and the opportunity for an older generation of parents and teachers to contribute expertise in the development of project outcomes can create new opportunities for dialogue; again such 'dialogue' is not an automatic achievement of DST projects.

The original motivation for DST providing a voice for community groups came from the late 1990s at the University of California at Berkeley's Centre for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), headed by Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert (see Lambert, 2007). In the UK, Daniel Meadows of the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, University of Cardiff, introduced DST to the UK after visiting the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California. This developed into the Capture Wales partnership with the BBC (Meadows, 2003), which aimed to 'capture' the voices and experiences of communities in the region (see http://www.bbc.co.k/capturewales/). DST has also been used in the Australian context in public history projects and in the consultation phase of urban renewal projects. Klaebe et al. (2007), for example, describe the use of participatory DST for encouraging input from community residents about the emergence of a new residential community. In these community-oriented
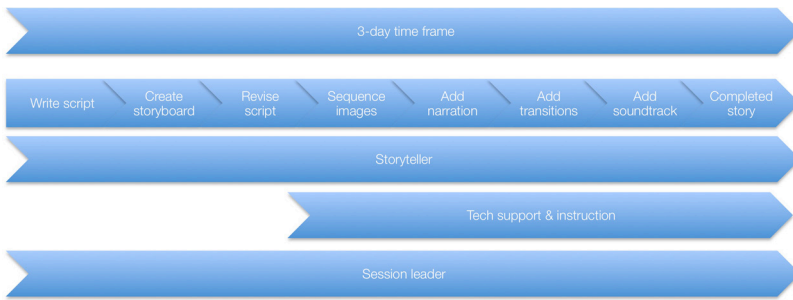
Figure 1 Lambert's (2007) 3-day DST method.

projects, time frames for consultation and action must extend over sufficiently long periods to achieve the relevant aims. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne has also incorporated digital storytelling into its exhibits in addition to offering workshop training in the process (Simondson, 2009). These and other examples of DST have helped to formulate a set of methodological principles which are now discussed.

CURRENT DST METHODS

Different approaches to DST variously stress the technical or human constraints and processes in the development of such projects. Lambert (2007), for example, identifies essential features of effective storytelling, including clear enunciation of a point of view, a dramatic question, emotional content and, where possible, an accompanying soundtrack (see Figure 1). This data collection is then fed into a process that integrates technology and sources through storyboarding and scripting, and ultimately leads to the multimedia narrative.

In the BBC Capture Wales (Cipolwg ar Gymru) team approach, there is a four-stage process (see Figure 2), with the various stimulus methods providing the origin for a scripted production, which can be storyboarded, scripted and sequenced in the way indicated earlier. This helps storytellers to structure their story and provides a concrete method for the process.

Although the BBC Capture Wales process makes the actual time frame for the project rather short (3 to 5 days), this does not necessarily reflect the overall time commitment for the project. So, for example, the Capture Wales workshops typically run for 5 days over a 3-week period (Meadows, 2003: 190). In the BBC Wales Guide to Digital Storytelling, the participatory nature of the process and its benefits for participants is emphasized. Specifically, facilitators are encouraged to help storytellers tell their story in the best way possible with storytelling and technical skills passed on to participants. Those with direct experience in the project report that the participatory dialogue created by the project is distinct from that of other more scripted projects (Kidd, 2006). Ultimately, storytellers must have a sense of ownership of their stories.
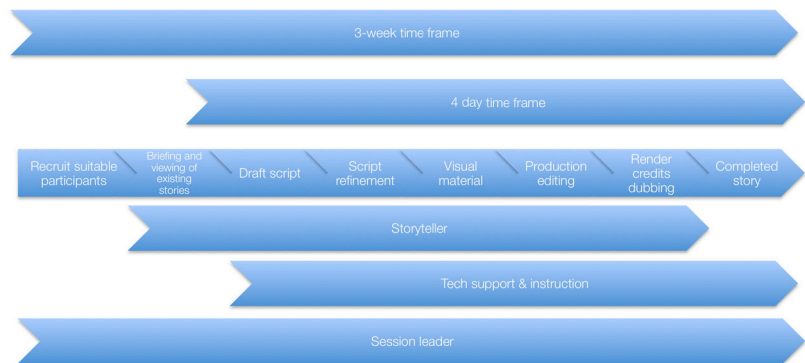
Figure 2 BBC Capture Wales process.

Figure 3 ACMI 3-week DST method.

ACMI in Melbourne has incorporated digital storytelling into its exhibits and also offers workshop training in the process, which extends the story collection to a 3-week time frame (see Figure 3) although the technical support stage remains short (4 days). ACMI has faced some opposition to this, including the 'challenge to encourage some members of the wider audience to accept user generated context as having a legitimate place in a cultural institution'; the process is also informed by visiting the Centre for Digital Storytelling (Simondson, 2009: 119).

As described later in this article, these methodological precedents and principles were reviewed and applied in our project through several iterations. Although the participatory benefits and processes were also significant for us, the particular benefits and focus of this article were in the area of student–participant intergenerational encounter.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: A COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS: http://www.ischs.org.au/) is a government-sponsored organization offering a wide range of health and

Figure 4 Design Centre ISCHS project 3-month process.

community services to an urban multicultural region in Victoria, Australia. In 2006, ISCHS commissioned Swinburne University Design Centre (SDC) to produce a number of digital stories. Although the project was commissioned and paid for by ISCHS, it was a collaborative project between ISCHS and SDC.

The project team (the Design Centre students and myself) examined how previous methods for DST would work with our client group (predominantly tenants aged over 55 from the housing commissions) so that students could interact with the tenants using these models, and how we could achieve our outcomes in such a short period of time. We felt we needed an overall 3-month time frame for students and participants to work on the stories, interact with the tenants and create relationships between the tenants and the students (see Figure 4).

Following established precedents, we limited the stories to 3 minutes. We recommended to the students a variety of approaches for developing the narrative, either through the script or by recording interviews with the tenants, or a mixture of the two. We avoided video in the creation of these stories as we felt it would lead to video filming and focus attention excessively on the present rather than the past.

Intergenerational student–participant relationships

Projects employing DST typically involve multiple partners and the interactions and relationships that develop are critical to the success or failure of the project. In addition to the storytelling subjects, those recording the project may benefit not only in terms of skill development but also from their exposure to stories and experiences they would otherwise have ignored. This is particularly the case in relation to students who learn the life stories of participants who would usually be socially invisible to them and who may be from culturally distinct backgrounds.

In the first month of the SDC process, the students attend an initial meeting with the social workers from each high rise block, the tenants chosen for the project and myself; each student is assigned a tenant to work with. After this initial meeting, the students arrange times with the social worker and the participants to arrange follow-up visits, preferably of an hour each week. The students are told to report any disturbances, emotional issues, or memories that come up that might upset the tenants, so that the social workers can support the tenants.

Some tenants have a large collection of resources to draw on to support their stories; others who had arrived as immigrants with no possessions have no resources or photographs that can support their story. In these situations, the tenants rely on the design and illustration skills of the students to create resources from scratch. The students have to work through any material or artefacts they are given, look after and respect them as they originate from someone's life and are often the only documentation of important family memories. The tenants are closely involved in the process, and the students create artwork that tells the story in a way that makes the tenants happy with what is produced, ensuring that the final outcome is a product of shared creative input.

The following images illustrate some of the complexities and aesthetics of storytelling in such projects. The three images show the range of visual communication challenges faced by the students. For instance, in Margaret's story about her pet monkey that she had as a child in India, there were no photographs available, so the student created illustrations for each part of the story and animated the illustration to the story (see Figure 5). With Guillermo's story about his life in Chile as a long-distance bus driver, the student had three or four images of Guillermo from that time, so the student matched illustration style with the available photographs to ensure the story was graphically
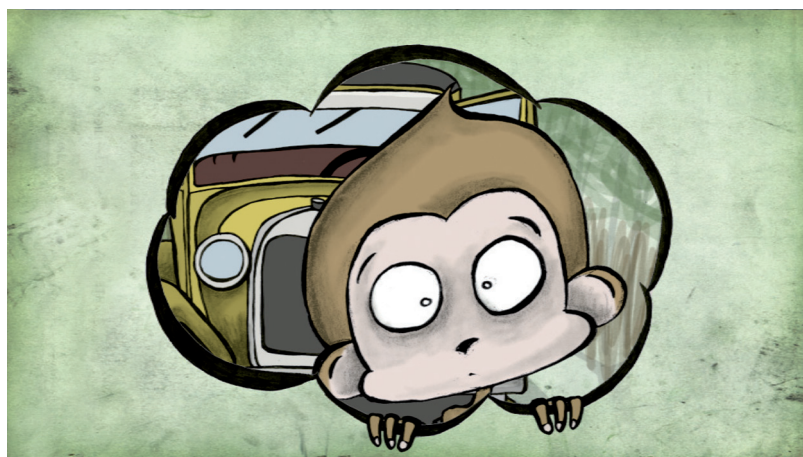

Figure 5 Margaret's story was about the pet monkey she had as a child in India.

Figure 6 Guillermo's story was about his life as a bus driver in Chile.

Figure 7 Eileen's story was about her brother Jack, and how he looked after her as a child.

rich. With Eileen's story about her childhood and her brother Jack, she had numerous impressive photographs of this time, so the student blended these photographs with a constructed landscape in order to present the story in a way that expanded beyond a traditional slide show (Figure 7).

To formulate the narrative, we recommend a variety of approaches to the students. One approach is to develop a fully scripted narrative, which

involves interviewing the participants over a number of sessions and creating and refining a script of their story. Participants would be asked to read the script and this would be recorded either at home or in a sound studio at Swinburne University, depending on which option suits them best. Another way of working is the semi-scripted approach, where the student would have a number of sessions with the participant to ascertain what the participants wanted to talk about; from these sessions, the student would devise a series of questions which lead on to recorded question-and-answer sessions that could be later edited to the 3-minute length.

An alternative method that we suggest the students might try is to 'record everything'; this is particularly relevant when the participants are unsure about what aspect of their lives they want to focus on. Using this method, the students would record their conversation with the participants, and from these sessions would emerge the threads of stories that could then be further refined at later sessions and edited down to the 3-minute limit. At the end of the first and subsequent months, we hold a group progress meeting to discuss progress made on each participant's story.

The second month of this process is used to gather resources to support the chosen narrative and to record the narrative. This involves scanning tenants' photographs, with students advised to treat such images with the utmost respect. The third month is used to produce the digital stories, with students working on the production of the stories and the tenants reviewing the work in production during the students' visits. This involves working with the scanned material, drawings, voice recordings and any additional music, sound effects and other material and putting it all together using Adobe After Effects, Final Cut Pro and Sound Track Pro. At the end of the third month, we have a final group presentation where the students and participants view the completed stories.

The final stories are compiled on DVD and exhibited at the local gallery for two weeks, after which they are on show in the community rooms at local government housing commissions where the tenants that took part in the project came from. Each of the tenants receive five copies of their own story on DVD to give to their families as well as a copy of the compilation disc. If the tenants do not have a DVD player, Inner South Community Health provides them with one. At the end of each year, we debrief the students about the process and search for ways in which we can improve the methodology for the following year. One area that remains a significant weakness is implementing a true participatory methodology with skills transfer.

REFLECTION AND REFINING METHOD

Over the three-year period that the project has been repeated, we have refined our project methodology to allow for adaptation and evolution. Each year we have made subtle changes to the program and our approach. At the end of 2006, we had an exhibition of the stories at Swinburne University and invited

members of the public to view the stories; this was highly successful with over 100 people attending the launch and many more visiting the exhibition over the 2 weeks it ran. In 2007, we added non-English speakers to the program and featured both Russian- and Spanish-speaking tenants from the high-rise blocks.

The second series was built on the pilot, included stories in languages other than English and brought together the many different nationalities that live side by side in public housing in the inner south of Melbourne.

In 2008, instead of focusing on individual storytellers, we chose to work with couples, or pairs of storytellers who shared a bond of friendship; this included a Russian-speaking couple, as well as two individual indigenous storytellers. This third series encompasses two themes – the celebration of friendships and starting to explore the richness of our indigenous community. Five stories focus on the unique nature of friendships, which are often taken for granted; our first two indigenous stories provide an insight into the indigenous community. The stories are very diverse, reflect the varied cultural and linguistic mix of the tenants, and are important in promoting a more positive image of older people living in public housing.

In 2009, ISCHS and SDC were approached by the department of housing to create 20 digital stories around the themes of homelessness, housing affordability, and employment and training.

We produced six digital stories in 2009 about the lives of tenants from the SRS (Supported Residential Services) program. The following year, with the tenants from the high-rise program, rather than producing a digital story, we are creating a printed publication of the tenants' stories.

RESIDENT BENEFITS

At the end of each year of the project, ISCHS have conducted short interviews with the tenants and the students for use as promotional banners for each year's exhibition of the project. The evidence from these short interviews suggests that participants experience social benefits across a generational and cultural gap that is often bridged through the more sustained time frame. When asked what they enjoyed most about the digital storytelling project, the tenants highlighted a range of personal benefits, particularly in relation to the intergenerational relationship, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> For me it was talking to the student about my recipes and my children.

> It brought back happy memories and I also enjoyed the student's company.

> I have enjoyed being surrounded by young company. It makes me feel younger and accepted.

Friendship – it takes a minimum of two to make a friend but to have friendship you need to be prepared to be one.

Working with a younger person was great. She really listened.

I enjoyed meeting many new and interesting people and working with the student.

I think I enjoyed the company of the student, which is interesting considering the generation gap.

The thoughtfulness of the young lady doing the interviews.

Sharing with the student who helped me create the story.

It allowed me to learn about new technology and meet young digital artists, which has inspired my further studies at school.

Just company and an outing to meet others.

Meeting the other storytellers and the people who did the organizing. I feel I have overcome some of my shyness.

STUDENT BENEFITS

Through the project, the students have learned how to be strategic and patient, as well as being good listeners. For some students, it has been a painstaking process. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students have encountered people from many different backgrounds, races and cultures, and of different ages, and learned how to deal with them on a human and professional level.

Students who had participated in the project over its lifetime have developed personally and professionally in ways identified by the following quotes:

As an international student coming to Australia, it never crossed my mind who or what indigenous or aboriginal means, because I didn't read any history of Australia. So it's my first time coming in contact personally with them. Since I need to have a bit of knowledge about them, I went and read up a little bit about Australia's history. By doing that I found out there are certain sensitive issues that should not be mentioned depending on their reactions on the topic, unless they are comfortable talking about it. The two aboriginals that I've met were very nice and understanding, they were willing to share their past, thoughts and feelings to me. Both of them actually have very different opinions and thinking towards their past. To summarize that, depending

on a person's upbringing it will affect how they think, how they act and how they live their lives. By looking at them, I realized that understanding and accepting your past is what shapes you for the future. Besides that, because of their past they are trying to make a difference in the society that they live in by sharing and helping others to understand in a positive way. They are still living strongly without being forgotten by the major population. They are proud of their origins. (Kelly Lo, on working with Indigenous participants of a DST project)

Digital Storytelling has improved me in my people approach skills. Dealing with old people is not an easy task; listening, understanding and orienting them to complete the project sure need lots of time and progress, and this project has really pushed me into it. I learnt how to be strategic, patience, and be a good listener at the same time. It has been a painstaking process, but it's worth it. Digital Diaries on the opposite way have taught me how to deal with young persons. Dealing with kids who've been living in residential care is also not just a walk in the park. They've undergone a tough life which also eventually affects their personality. Trying to understand and make them happy is our goal, and we're pleased to know that we succeeded.

Design Centre has taught me the most essential aspect of working in the industry, which is a social based approach, and dealing with clients. I have learned to encounter people from many different backgrounds, race, culture, age and learn how to deal with them. It is truly a priceless experience. (Stefanto Tandyasraya, on working on a range of community projects)

Working on the Digital Storytelling project provided me with experience in working collaboratively with people of different demographics. The project gave me an insight into the lifestyles of these people and provided me with a challenge. (Alex Zhadan)

I have been involved in the Digital Storytelling project for two consecutive years and am happy I was given this opportunity. Such community engagement projects have allowed me to widen my knowledge about today's society and to be exposed to the not so 'pretty' side of the society as well as communicate with those that are less fortunate. With this project, I have grown to be more appreciative of what I have and was given today. Which, in turn, made me more appreciative of my parents and friends that shared my ups and down and have been there all along to support and care. My involvement also made me understand the saying 'do not judge a book by its cover' better. P.S. At least I know that taxes paid are going to good use, being spent on these elderly. (Jevon Wong, on working with aged people as part of a Digital Storytelling project)

My experience doing the visual diaries project was quite different. The challenging part was on the first meeting where everyone was sort of all over the place and not sure of what was expected. However, as soon as the activities started and everyone was being introduced to their project partners, things got easier and much more fun. The highlight of the whole project was when everyone sat together telling stories about their journey in life without any embellishment. The fact that they feel comfortable enough to be honest in front of us was very touching. The benefits of this project were way more than just academic achievement for me. I would love to do it again! (Yuanita So, on working with aged people as part of a Digital Storytelling project)

Working on the Digital Storytelling project was a learning experience. Working with someone who passed away made it a challenge, as I only met him once, but I at least could put a face to his story. By meeting him, it made me put more effort and passion into the project. In completing this project I realized that it had more meaning. To share someone's story with everyone is a difficult task, but I did my best to show his story to all. This project was more about the story and experiences from the person than the final product. As a person I was very lucky to work on such a project that was involved with people with such deep and personal stories. (Daniel Maffei, on working with aged people as part of a Digital Storytelling project. Daniel took over the project when one of the students had to leave for personal reasons.)

We have not received any negative feedback about the project from the students or the participants. The common thread running through the students' feedback is the nature of the experience between them and the storyteller. It is a relationship that has touched some of them very deeply. It has been an eye-opening experience for most of the students. In line with the project goals, the close working relationship between the students and participants has removed any negative stereotypes they had about people from housing commissions.

DISCUSSION

The core of the methodology is driven by the relationship between the student and the tenant. This is a key strength in creating the collaboration: it provides the participants and students with one of the most rewarding aspects of the process. If there is a breakdown in the relationship between student and participant, it can be detrimental to the final outcome.

We do not rely on a written script for the production of the story, the students may produce a script if necessary; this is helpful when dealing with non-English speaking participants who require translation, but we do not feel the use of a script adds to the project. In fact, a written script can be detrimental

to the final outcome as the participant's voice does not sound natural, they are not trained actors and their reading can sound flat. One of the strengths is the non reliance on artifacts; with the students' considerable skills in areas of multimedia and design, they can create support material for a narrative when there is no material to hand, either through researching archives, drawing and animation, photography or other methods of multimedia production.

CONCLUSION

The intergenerational and intercultural benefits of digital storytelling as practised in SDC are evidenced in student and participant responses. We recognize, however, that the full benefits of participatory DST are yet to be realized. Skill transfer from the facilitator to the participant is a key part of the DST process. Skills transfer from the facilitators to the participants is one of the central tenants of DST projects, thus increasing participants' technical literacy and enabling the participants to 'do it themselves' to some extent. This is one area where our approach has not yet been successful, although this was never a goal of the project when we initially started work with ISCHS. At the end of the process, the participants know the process and methods of making a story; they cannot make the final product themselves. This is, however, an area that we would like to develop in future iterations.

One of the goals of the projects was to change the stereotypical view people have of residents of government housing and, through their engagement with the participants, students' stereotypes are challenged and they learn about social disadvantage. In terms of ownership, the tenants own their stories, give input to the graphic direction and have creative control over the end result but the stories are produced in partnership with the students. At the exhibition of the stories, the participants have the right to choose whether their story is included or not. They are given DVDs of their finished story for themselves and their family and there is a compilation DVD of all the stories in which participants can choose whether their story is featured. The students can use the final story as a folio outcome.

The divergence of the SDC method from traditional DST methods (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009) shows that DST continues to grow and evolve. SDC has introduced skilled practitioners into the DST process whilst maintaining the integrity of the participants' stories; it adheres to some of the principles of DST that are part of its commercial remit but leaves other roles to organizations that are best suited to conduct those activities.

FUNDING

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DYLAN DAVIS manages mentors and is actively involved in the applied research and design activities of the multimedia design students in the Swinburne University of Technology Design Centre. Dylan works to achieve sound academic and professional standards and to meet agreed commercial outcomes on a project by project basis. He has created a number of multimedia artworks outside Swinburne, which have been exhibited around the world, most notably ACMI Melbourne, File Festival Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Soundtoys.net exhibition, London, UK.

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