FACILITATIVE TEACHING, DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND MEDIA MAKING: CREATING CONNECTIONS OR MISSING OPPORTUNITIES?

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ABSTRACT: Digital storytelling (DST) dovetails well with facilitative teaching and is frequently lauded as an avenue to positive outcomes within and outside of educational institutions. Ascribed results include empowering marginalized voices, building community and fostering engagement, deepening cultural identity and understanding, engendering empathy, and facilitating dialogue. In my experience as a community practitioner and as an educator, I have witnessed many of these transformative impacts. A setting in which diverse university students and international service employees work together in learning partnerships seems an ideal scenario for DST and its attendant benefits. Nevertheless, I have developed some hesitancy regarding my use in the context just mentioned, and of education's perhaps indiscriminate embrace of digital storytelling. In this paper, I first characterize the genre, reflect on the complementary resonance of the form with facilitative teaching, and locate digital storytelling within the spectrum of educational philosophy. Next, I describe my teaching context with undergraduate students mentoring employee adult learners, provide examples of my experiences with media-making, and problematize co-creative digital storytelling.

Keywords: digital storytelling, facilitative teaching, collaborative creativity, multiparty story work

Digital Storytelling Today

Over recent decades, the growth in digital storytelling (DST) has markedly expanded into many venues, including multiple types of educational settings. Singaporean scholars Wu and Chen (2020) found in their systematic review of educational digital storytelling that the practice is expanding in the United States and increasingly gaining adoption in European and Asian countries. Whereas media-making once required expensive equipment and numerous people with specialized or professional preparation, now nearly anyone with a phone can produce digital communications. Instructors have embraced digital storytelling with gusto, citing numerous potential educational benefits. In their research covering studies published during the decade of 2008 to 2018, Wu and Chen identified eight areas of development attributed to incorporating media-making into the classroom: "affective, cognitive, conceptual, academic, technological, linguistic, ontological, and social" (p. 1).

Furthermore, digital storytelling is lauded as an avenue to positive outcomes within and outside of educational institutions. Ascribed results include empowering voices (Chapple, 2023; Nilsson, 2010; Tacchi, 2009), building community and fostering community engagement (Davaslioglu & Lizarazo, 2022; Rouhani, 2019), deepening cultural identity and understanding (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Humairoh, 2022; Karakuş et al., 2020), engendering empathy (Hess, 2012; Vaudrin-Charette, 2013), and facilitating dialogue (Yearta et al., 2018; Iseke & Moore, 2011). In my experience as a community practitioner and as an educator, I have witnessed many of these transformative impacts. Nevertheless, I have developed some hesitancy regarding my own use in the context just mentioned and

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of education's perhaps indiscriminate embrace of digital storytelling. In this paper, I first characterize the genre, reflect on the complementary resonance of the form with facilitative teaching, and locate digital storytelling within the spectrum of educational philosophy. Next, I describe my teaching context with undergraduate students mentoring employee adult learners, provide examples of my experiences with media-making, and problematize co-creative digital storytelling.

Figure 1.

Ngram: Occurrences of "digital storytelling" in books published in English, 1980-2018
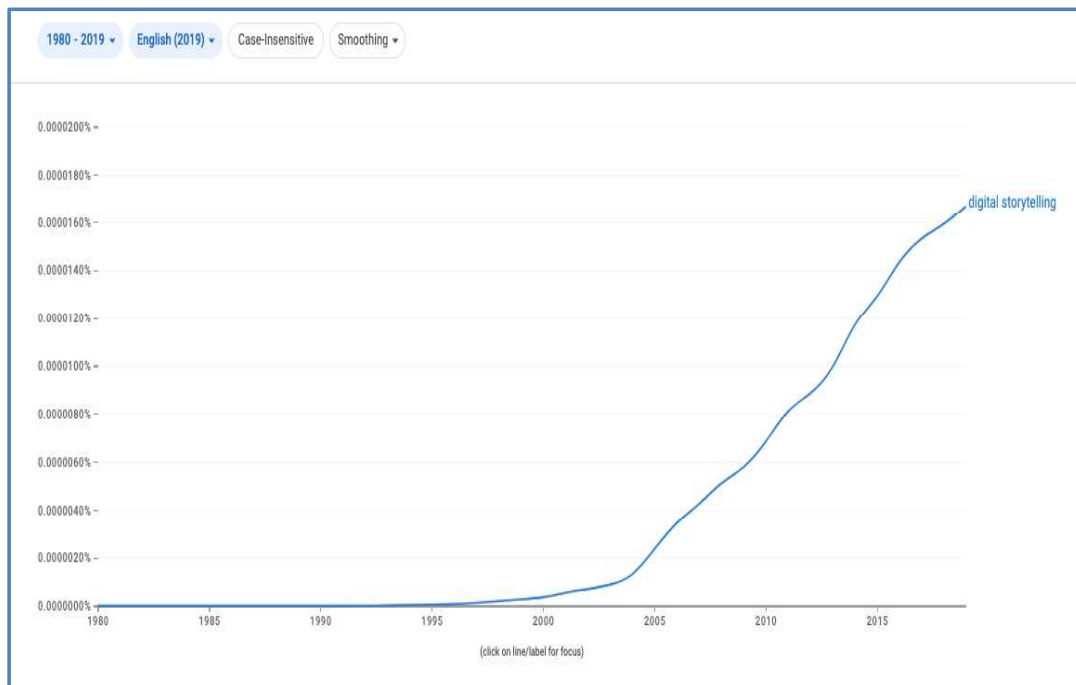
Digital Storytelling and Media Making

For some, a digital story refers specifically to a personal narrative of a short, set length, although the exact minutes in length may vary. However, many take a broader view. As communications scholar Amanda Hill explains:

> Digital storytelling, as an overarching term, can encompass a range of meanings beginning with a broad understanding where all 'mediatized' stories, those stories told using digital media and media-based storytelling methods and practices, are included. Understood in this way, the term can encompass diverse storytelling platforms including video games, video essays, and social media posts, all of which can make use of the tenets of storytelling in digital spaces using digital tools (Hill, 2023, pp. 1-2).

Professor Bernard Robin, who has written extensively on the educational value of media making, does not limit digital storytelling solely to personal narrative (2008, pp. 224-

225). Digital storytelling is greatly about the social experience of deep listening, being heard, and working together during the course of developing the resulting media. The ancient craft of storytelling has been fostering understanding and connection since the emergence of human communication, and a wider scope of participatory media-making seems apt for increasing comprehension and respect not only on an individual basis but also among people of differing nationalities, places, and cultures. Andragogical approaches align well, and educationists have been advocating for utilizing digital storytelling with adult learners for years (see e.g., Panchenko, 2021; Prins, 2016, 2017; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010).

Facilitative Teaching and Philosophical Affinities of Digital Storytelling

The mode of introducing and working with digital storytelling is facilitative (Engle, 2010; Lambert 2009). Andragogy and facilitative education have been intertwined since Malcolm Knowles (1977) observed that great teachers in antiquity viewed "learning as being a process of enquiry in which the learner had an active role, in fact the primary role, and the role of the teacher was that of a guide to the enquiry, a facilitator of the enquiry" (. 202).

In my andragogical practice, I impress upon learners that they are the primary directors of their own learning; that we each have contributions and responsibilities for creating a collaborative climate; and that students have input into designing some of the assignments and meaningful evaluative tools. Through fieldwork, I add, we'll be looking to apply what we learn. In short, I share with them my belief that we learn democracy by doing democracy–i.e., by acquiring and practicing the skills, attitudes, and knowledge entailed in reasoning together, bringing out the best in one another's thinking, challenging each other, and engaging together to frame issues and queries, problem-solving and innovating, and coming to considered decisions.

As collaboration and co-creation are emphasized in digital storytelling, the manner of facilitation employed aligns with Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasized the role of social interactions and cultural tools in the development of knowledge and understanding (Overall, 2007). According to Vygotsky, learning takes place through social collaboration, where learners engage in joint activities with more knowledgeable peers or instructors.

Yet, typologies of educational philosophies, like all typologies, are heuristic devices we create to make sense of boundaryless realities. Digital storytelling, especially of the genre limited to personal narrative, can also be framed as humanism with its paired emphases on self-actualization and individual potential fulfillment that would please Abraham Maslow (1971, 1979). In crafting and sharing their stories, individuals are empowered to reflect on their experiences, values, and aspirations, fostering a greater understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Nonetheless, the radical educational theory of Paulo Freire most informs my practice (1985, 1998). Freire was quite a lover of story, and his communication style reflects this

(Cruz, 2013. The radical stance in educational philosophy advocates for raising consciousness and driving societal change. Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue, critical reflection, and praxis (action and reflection) in education. He believed that education should not be a one-way transfer of knowledge but rather a transformative process that empowers learners to critically analyze social inequalities and work toward societal change. Digital storytelling aligns with Freire's vision by providing a platform for individuals and groups to share their diverse stories and challenge dominant narratives or social norms. Through digital storytelling, marginalized voices, untold stories, and alternative perspectives can be amplified, promoting empathy, understanding, and the recognition of social injustices.

This Particular Learning Setting—Global and Adult Learning Context

I oversee the Education Minor's andragogy curriculum and direct an exceptional adult education program called the Community Learning and Service Partnership (CLASP) at Cornell University. CLASP matches campus staff members, primarily UAW Local 2300 service employees, with students enrolled in our adult learning courses. This unique partnership pairs one student with one employee, with a focus on the employee's learning goal. Students utilize their knowledge of andragogical practices to mentor adult learners, while employees gain a supportive colleague to help them pursue their largely self-selected educational goals. Through these partnerships, students learn from the wisdom and experience of adults, and employees gain a dedicated mentor and ally. Both partners grow individually and together, gaining new perspectives on the campus community and the world at large. Participating in CLASP leads to significant changes in knowledge, confidence, life circumstances, and career paths for both employees and students. As many Cornell students go on to influential positions after graduation, those involved in CLASP can draw upon their understanding and appreciation of the lives and experiences of those who are often underrepresented.

Reciprocal relationships are the heart of CLASP. Many participating adults are first- or second-generation immigrants, and a considerable number of Cornell students in education courses are international students as well. While most of our andragogy courses are offered at the undergraduate level, we also welcome graduate students and staff members on a space-available basis. For learning partnerships, beyond our primary commitment to service employees, we accept professionals and faculty adult learners into CLASP. These individuals often desire a study partner as they pursue a degree or seek opportunities to practice their language skills. The most commonly requested areas of study among CLASP participants, in addition to English, include computer skills, career development, preparation for vocational certifications and non-English language study, such as American Sign Language. Importantly, a growing number of the employee/adult learners want to create digital media. Today CLASP receives many requests for photography, filmmaking, web design and media production. We have a diverse range of adult and international learners engaged in the student-employee partnerships. Therefore, our academic courses incorporate soft skills, intercultural communication, and relational learning. For CLASP employee/adults, we offer optional orientations to adult learning.

Audio-Visual Adventures

Being from a state often maligned in popular culture (Kentucky), I deeply appreciate the wisdom and power of community members' telling their own stories–speaking for themselves–rather than being spoken about by others. I am particularly thankful for the Appalshop collective whose members have been making community-based media in the state and elsewhere since the late 1960s (Charbonneau, 2009), and their example influences my teaching. Over the years, I have incorporated digital storytelling and media-making in various ways, including:

- Conducting interviews with adult learners for StoryCorps' Great Thanksgiving Listen (National Public Radio, 2016)
- Guiding students in creating digital stories to depict their journey as educators and learners.
- Assisting students in producing radio segments that explore their cultural identities.
- Analyzing how media portrayals of cultural motifs influence one's sense of self.
- Collaborating with adult learners on digital stories for Any Person Many Stories, a Cornell initiative aimed at exploring the university's history of inclusion and exclusion through storytelling, fostering conversation and a sense of belonging.

These projects have been highly meaningful and significant experiences for students, as indicated in their written reflections. I will share just a single example that resonates with the sentiments expressed by other students:

> During the course, I discovered my most authentic and engaged self when given the freedom to experiment with visual design and when the course content connected to my own life experiences…While creating a digital story based on my personal narrative, I exceeded the time limit, choosing instead to focus on the lived experiences of others. Annalisa, our instructor, graciously allowed me to explore this direction. This assignment sparked a strong desire within me to pursue similar work, leading me to embark on a personal project—a podcast in the form of a digital story…This type of learning, which challenges students while giving them space to explore their passions, honors the learner and ignites a sense of enthusiasm. I believe there should be more opportunities for self-directed learning to intersect with the structured college curriculum, as the creation of this digital story represents the most authentic learning experience, I've had this semester (Student, 2017).

In this specific case, the student deviated from crafting a personal narrative and opted to interview individuals of varying ages about the books that profoundly impacted their childhoods. The resulting digital story not only highlighted the influence these books had on participants' lives, but it also emphasized the enriching power of sharing and listening to spoken narratives. As mentioned before, employee/adult learners enjoy making media with their student learning partners. Recent projects have included art films, instructional videos, and creating a digital guide to stress relieving exercises.

Problematizing Media Making

In their chapter on threshold concepts, digital story innovators Hessler and Lambert (2017) present a thought-provoking scenario. "Consider this," they wrote:

> two videos of similar quality in terms of format, topic, and style; each three minutes long, telling a first-person story through voiceover narration and a sequence of images. Both done as academic homework assignments. One was produced through a process of guided critical reflection, story-sharing, and collaborative making; the other was assembled in a rush to meet a deadline—the student read the assignment, was skillful enough as a writer and video editor to compose a nice project on her own, and completed the whole thing in a few hours—the same as she might crank out any other homework task (Hessler & Lambert, 2017, p. 20).

They then posed a pair of questions; the first, whether both products are digital stories, which they answered in the affirmative. Next, they asked whether both projects are examples of digital stories, and to this, they answer dually yes and no before calling attention to a need for a "… sensitive understanding of the principles and practices that make digital storytelling a potentially transformative educational experience…" (p. 20).

What conditions facilitate transformative digital storytelling? In my Fall 2021 course, I set out to foster a conducive learning environment that encouraged teamwork and camaraderie as we created digital stories for the Any Person Many Stories initiative. I incorporated critical reflection, facilitated workshop story circles, and considered practical aspects such as the adult interviewees' schedules and parking needs when scheduling course meetings.

Upon reflection, I realized that I overlooked an important aspect: more meaningful engagement of partners, i.e., the employee adult learners. I had not adequately laid the groundwork to generate interest and involve employees in project planning. Considering my experience with community-engaged learning, this realization came with a good dose of chagrin. Expanding the focus of digital storytelling beyond autobiographical accounts requires a more thoughtful consideration of community engagement responsibilities and ethics. I failed to fully grasp the extent to which this aspect of the coursework relied on individuals outside of the course itself. Although the course was generally well-received and left a positive impact on students and the adults interviewed, I question to what extent the project truly forged connections or fostered a sense of belonging.

In her 2018 paper, media professor Nassim Parvin noted the rise of scholars and others, "collecting, archiving, and sharing stories to advance social justice…These practices differ in their aims and scope, yet they share a common conviction: that digital storytelling is empowering especially when curating and disseminating life stories of marginalized groups" (p. 515). Parvin took issue with the assumption and asks, "is it possible that such practices take away from what is found to be meaningful and

worthwhile in practices of storytelling and listening, and, if so, how?" (p. 515). This particular passage jolted:

> An understanding of justice highlighted by reciprocity could limit our appreciation of what's at stake in collecting and sharing stories, as it leaves out qualities of relationships that are mediated in the acts of storytelling and listening. That could risk reducing the relational nature of storytelling and listening to a transactional process, starting with the assumption that stories are ready-made commodities for exchange and that consent—that is others' willingness to share their story—is sufficient for doing justice to stories. (Parvin, 2018, p. 524)

Parvin asserted that stories are not commodities, that they result from dynamic social exchanges (p. 524). In my view, the transformative aspect of story work (the processes of eliciting and producing narrative media) lies in its ability to foster relationships. Having grown up in an environment that cherishes, teaches, and produces stories, I only truly grasped the profound impact of these practices upon moving away. Consequently, I have taken my students to The Highlander Center for Research and Education (2023), facilitated screenings and discussions of Appalshop films, and participated in grassroots theater productions with Maryat Lee, the creator of EcoTheater and a friend of Flannery O'Connor (French, 1998). In each of these exceptional organizations, the creative process is intertwined with relationship-building and community. Previously, during my time as an undergraduate student, I worked in the college audio-visual department (now known as media production). Collaboration there was less of an intentional endeavor to deepen human connection and more of an essential requirement for coordinating equipment and meeting tight deadlines, akin to individuals' spontaneously coming together after a natural disaster. Although different, it too was exhilarating and quite possibly one of my greatest learning experiences.

Recently, when I felt a sense of unease about the class digital storytelling project, I pondered whether the absence of the adrenaline rush that accompanies traditional media production—requiring cooperation, on-the-spot problem-solving, and heightened sensory awareness during location filming—was the cause. I shared this speculation with my colleague Melina Ivanchikova, co-creator of the Any Person Many Stories digital story initiative designed to capture accounts from our university's positive and negative history to prompt authentic conversations about belonging and exclusion (Ivanchikova & Vanderlan, 2023). My colleague remained unconvinced. "I think the idea of feeling fully alive gets to the heart of why learning is so exiting and empowering. Some people doing the digital work seem to experience it—is it being generated in ways we aren't observing?" (M. Ivanchikova, personal communication, June 12, 2023).

What To Do Better?

In retrospect, where I went wrong was in my failure to fully appreciate that digital storytelling was not simply another teaching method. In her chapter, "Not Media About, but Media With," Mandy Rose (2017) wrote about "co-creation as convening" (p. 50). She pointed to the work of Manuel Castells (2023) and others to highlight the idea of co-

creation as an avenue for those convened to become a *public*, "a group conscious of itself and its shared sense of purpose" (Rose, 2017, p. 52) While we had interested stakeholders who visited class, and the course members themselves went through a collaborative, iterative process in constructing their digital stories, we did not have story circle gatherings with all interviewees and interviewers together. Thus, those outside of the course were not part of anu communal identity as members of a shared endeavor, collectively experiencing the compelling power of deeply listening to vulnerable fellow humans. That some students and partners found the experience transformative was by serendipitous.

Others encountering ethical quandaries pertaining to digital story include academics such as Lisa Dush (2013) who raised "ethical complexities" about sponsored projects and development practitioners such as Lara Worcester (2012) who argued for fully understanding the co-creative nature of DST. More recently, Amanda Hill (2023) published the book, *Digital Storytelling as Ethics: Collaborative Creation and Facilitation*. As I write this, I am reminded of being interviewed previously by a student for an ArcGIS StoryMap project in a colleague's course. The semester ended without hearing about the finished story or the resulting map, and my emails to both the student and the colleague went unanswered. I am experienced firsthand an instrumental use of story collection rather than a convened, co-creative media project. Personal narrative does entail considerations of trust, responsibility, and compassion; yet it is one matter for storytellers to decide how to recount their experiences and how to represent themselves and quite another to give a story to someone else and only to be consulted during the media making, rather than collaborating as a true co-creator.

Before undertaking another multiparty media project, i.e. one that extends beyond personal narratives and involves other people, I want to think through four questions.

1. When attempting genuinely co-creative media making, how do we recognize the boundaries of time and energy interviewees care to give to a project? Do we work only with those who, for their own reasons, want to be fully involved?
2. Does the prior question imply that community-based media making can only be undertaken in settings in which a pre-existing role for digital storytelling is present?
3. How do instructors plan for alternate media expeditions in the event that neither enough available and interested partners nor a pre-existing situation amenable to digital storytelling can be identified?
4. Is the most ethical option for digital storytelling in a course context to set the parameters for personal narratives?

Educators, including adult educators, can use the power of digital storytelling to facilitate transformative learning to deepen understanding and create moments of insight and appreciation across differences. At the same time, we must carefully think through the design of our assignments, especially if those projects entail students working with other people to make stories of experiences other than their own. Multiparty story work is not simply an alternate format for a student-centered exercise. Instructors and researchers

wanting to undertake co-creative media work will need to use the same care and time to build reciprocal relationships as they would with any other responsible community engagement endeavor.

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