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How to make digital stories

What is digital storytelling?

Digital storytelling is a simple, powerful tool which provides people with skills to tell their personal stories as a two minute film. Such films may be shown in a community setting before being stored on the internet so others can share it. Successful films would find audiences through television or other net applications (for instance through You-tube).

Digital storytelling is in fact more than the simple use of emergent digital technology. It flows directly from a myriad of creative traditions and established practices, stills photography, forum theatre, filmmaking, oral history and campfire storytelling. Combining these with the potential offered by digital technology creates a new hybrid form – the DIGITAL STORY. It is thus a powerful tool between a slide show and the traditional short film. Good personal digital stories give everyone a platform for being seen and heard.

Digital storytelling has been used to develop reflective learning in higher education. In cases where written communication is cumbersome or not relevant because of language or cultural barriers, the visual imagery of digital storytelling can be used. Documenting activity and telling a story may be much easier for students and volunteers in local activities than writing a report. A digital story could catch the eye of the not so interested observer. Storytelling is a means for people to express, comprehend and articulate experiences in the everyday world. A spinoff effect would be to increase the sense of coherence in life among those engaged in making the digital stories. Unemployed people could use digital stories to present themselves to prospective employers.

- Digital storytelling is a simple and effective way to provide training in basic computer use. The users learn how to employ simple programs and processes including work with images. These skills are sorely needed by employers and in everyday life.
- Digital storytelling is empowering, individuals participating in workshops have a chance to build confidence needed to enable them to escape social exclusion and access further opportunities. The work raises self esteem and provides people with the self belief needed to progress in life.
- Digital storytelling is a powerful means of personal, creative expression. Individuals are given a chance to use their own resources to tell a personal story, express their own views and build their own understanding. Completed stories acquire a currency when they are shared with friends, colleagues and beyond. Our own experience in Sagene municipality in collaboration with Oslo and Akershus University College underscores this.

Digital stories have been used in diverse settings, as documented in the booklet "Digem – digital empowerment – a methodlogy for digital storytelling" (http://www.digem.eu/images/guide/01). In a story called Communicar pintando a volunteer tells her passionate and committed story from a society for the aphatic people. Another tells the story of discrimination against people who have AIDS. A boy recovering from substance abuse tells his story in digital form to share something that was hidden, for him and others, contributing to his return to the normal society.

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Digital storytelling may also be used within health care as a therapeutic tool.

What resources do you need?

There are some limitations. Both trainers and volunteers or students will need access to computers and the necessary software, though it is often possible to use mobile phones and Mp3 players. Another challenge may be the level of technical skill among trainers and volunteers. Hardware and software needed may take some time to get used to. Some organizers experience very high expectations on the quality and diversity of the work. This may use more time than the purported impact of the story needs. Making digital stories trigger emotions. The trainers should be aware of this and consult health care workers if deemed necessary.

The usual setting of learning to make digital stories is a dedicated workshop.

The four stages approach

1. Resourcing your workshop with trainers who have the right skills, knowledge and experience. Deciding on the length of the workshop according to the needs of the participants or volunteers. People do need from 2-5 days for such a workshop. The trainers, usually two must cover these areas: Pedagogy and teaching, qualitative and social research, creative filmmaking skills and sufficient technical expertise
2. Finding your stories through defining and refine a simple "story question". The stories must be structured to fit into a digital frame. Instruction for writing a story script.
3. Telling your stories through recording voices and sourcing music. Ordering and manipulating images in order to maintain the interest of the viewer of the digital story. Simple editing software is used to make a story.
4. Sharing your stories through finding screenings in the community settings, or showing the stories at special events or even broadcasts. Uploading if the story on the internet.

Finding your stories

A sample of a 3-day intensive workshop:

- **Day 1:**
- Introduction to digital storytelling
- Storytelling exercises. Creating the story circle.
- The story circle enables the group to get to know one another and build trust. A relaxed, trusting atmosphere must be there to introduce exercises in storytelling. The participants must have confidence to tell their own story. Introduce tools to go from a personal story to a script. Sitting in a circle is the most comforting position for all to tell their stories.
- Find participants' stories
- First draft scripts and feedback

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- **Day 2:**
  - Second draft script
  - Storyboarding
  - Editing presentation and exercise
  - Script redraft and finalise
  - Scanning and recording voice
  - Editing
- **Day 3:**
  - Legal issues and editorial policy
  - Editing/introducing other effects than music/music
  - Export final film
  - Screening and feedback

Helping people create their own digital stories must rely on building a network and collaboration atmosphere between the parties giving the practical course and the community or group at hand. Trust is all important and because the workshops require people to give a lot over a short period of time, there is little time to build this from scratch. It is thus best to work with a partner organization which has the confidence of the target group you are working with. This was done in Norway where Sagene municipality worked together with three volunteer societies. The University College arranged a two day seminar for health ambassadors to teach the digital storytelling essentials. The course was outsourced to a specialized firm teaching digital storytelling.

An introductory session for prospective trainees with o group of up to 12 participants should explain the background and purpose of digital storytelling. Showing some example films from a range of project increases the interest. The coming participants must confirm that they have the time necessary, and to the workshop they would have to bring a favourite object and 10-20 photographs of themselves relating to their object or a transformational / important moment in their lives. An idea which is not fully developed may also be used.

When introducing the course the participants may play story games to loosen natural timidity.

A white sheet of paper can be dauting and a barrier to writing a script. Then you should employ dictation or recording, especially when making films with people having less literary skills.

Index cards can be used to write down simple points of the story.

The story parts may be written down in bubbles and organized around a theme card.

Do also remember copyright of both written and oral material that you intend to use.

A volunteer activity?

Digital storytelling as depicted above is an excellent way to introduce volunteers for different types of activities. The coming activities may pretrained by making digital stories, material for the volunteer activity may be made interactively with the volunteer organizations or NGOs and the target group.

There is no limit to the scope or content of a digital story in preparing the health ambassadors for their coming activity, and learning to use such digital stories enable the participants to master a tool which is of interest to almost any group or community.