Chapter Title
Unlocking Contested Stories and Grass-Roots Knowledge.
Digital Storytelling as a Participatory Method to Explore Communities' Sense of
Place

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Abstract

Digital storytelling is a form of engagement that enables people to share personal stories and to produce new knowledge(s). Digital stories reveal unexpected connections across different communities of interest, places and time periods. They reflect shared and conflicting values, feelings and concerns surrounding a particular place. Digital storytelling as a process can guide us during a journey over time, by enabling storytellers to use their creativity to trigger memories from the past and to stimulate critical thinking around current situations and possible future scenarios. It also reconnects storytellers and story-listeners to physical and emotional journeys, whilst they are disconnecting themselves from places that, after dramatic transitions, can't exist anymore as they were.
Reflecting on some examples of practice-led research projects, this chapter will consider questions such as: how to connect individual stories to community narratives? How to unlock grass-roots knowledge and bring unheard voices into a debate? What kinds of social impacts can personally meaningful stories - especially if they are contested - produce?
Since co-design and co-production have been identified as key elements of the digital storytelling process, this chapter intends also to inquire if and how this methodology can be enriched by *contaminations* with other creative approaches absorbed from the visual arts and music.
Comparing digital stories and other forms of narratives may represent an additional way of uncovering conflicts and also discovering unexpected common ground in the dialogue between lay and experts' knowledge, due to the authenticity of personal stories and the natural 'mess' of storytelling (Wilson, 2014).

Introduction

'The time has come for subversive storytelling'.
                              (Zipes, 2016)

In this chapter the concept of digital storytelling as a transformative process will be explored through four different lenses, that I often apply in my practice-led research to have a closer look at the process itself and understand how to improve storytellers' engagement and how to make the methodology constantly evolve and adapt to diverse contexts.
The idea is to challenge these four elements - time, space, truth(s), and practice - by sharing some examples of ways in which digital storytelling has been applied in a

variety of projects, whose main focus was on facilitating the access to different knowledge domains and on enriching the communication among multiple knowledge systems.

Time and space are presented here and challenged in their relationship to digital storytelling as two separate components just for the pragmatic need of stressing specifically each aspect while presenting different case studies. Nevertheless, we recognize that understanding the connectedness of the 'chronotope' (Bakhtin, 1981) and comprehending the multiple elements of the 'storyworld' (Herman, 2002) are preliminary steps to have an 'integrated view of narrative, with time and space being two important and complementary aspects' (Wei et al., 2010).

For digital storytelling, in the context of this study, we mean a creative method for participatory research and public engagement which enables participants to reflect on a specific subject and share a first-person narrative in the form of a 2-3-minute video, that combines the voice-over of the storyteller with personal images or other visual materials produced or collected during a workshop. The process we are referring to consists in a well-established methodology both in academia and arts practitioner/community development worlds. The original process as designed by the StoryCenter (Lambert, 2010; 2013) includes five steps for a standard digital storytelling workshop: story-circle, script writing, audio recording, video editing, screening of all the stories. In the section in which we are describing and challenging the 'practice', we will outline which of these steps are perceived by some practitioners essential to make a 'good' digital story and why. Here we just want to emphasize how much being open to alter and adjust the process is crucial, for a researcher and a facilitator, to suit different contexts, especially when we approach digital storytelling in participatory research projects.

When we do research about and through digital storytelling, we are observing and reflecting on the process and analysing the outcomes at the same time. Defining digital stories as distinctive media is a crucial step to deeply understand the potential of this practice. A good starting point to extrapolate a definition of digital story could be reminding ourselves of Trifonas' definition of the picture book essentially as 'an open and fluid artistic form embodying lexical and visual signs and codes in an unceasing interaction of word and image and reader' (1998). This definition would work perfectly for digital story as a genre if we'd include an additional dimension and a consequent action: sound/voice implies an essential component of the digital storytelling process, the story-listening. Yet form and process are linked to each other. In the same way the picture book 'is dependent upon the interaction of two integrated systems of signification, lexical and visual, (…) and facilitates the creation of personal cognitive, affective, and aesthetic meanings for the reader' (Trifonas, 1998), the digital story requires the integration of a third system of signification, that is related to the listening process during the creation and the fruition of a digital story. Furthermore, during the story-making process, this third system is connected to the performative element of the voice-over and the transformative process of shaping the narrative throughout the five steps, starting from the oral transmission of the story during the story-circle, passing through the creation of the script to then transit to the recording of the voice-over, before concluding with its editing combined with other sound effects and/or music.

Indeed, when we talk about the potential audience and the meaning-making of a digital story, we have to consider a viewer, a listener and a reader, and the implications of how perceptions and understandings could change when the audience act primarily in one of the above-mentioned categories, in addition to contextual

factors that could influence perceptions. Sometimes the different dimensions are hierarchical, sometimes are complementing each other, and the fusion of the components is very much linked to individual attitudes and contextual/technical circumstances. This happens during the story-making process too, when the storyteller perceive her/himself as a writer, as a teller and/or as a producer of a visual output. How the three roles communicate to each other depends not only on the storytellers' individual attitudes, but more often on the workshop environment created by the facilitator. Moreover, one or the other one of these three roles is sometimes privileged consciously by the storytellers to communicate or hide a contingent emotional state triggered by the storytelling process itself. Most commonly, the choice is made depending on personal abilities in using and adapting vocabulary, visual imagery and voice/sounds. For example, for second-language storytellers, the visual component is often dominant, but for everyone a 'cross-media agreement' (Trifonas, 1998) is essential to deliver the message that each story needs to uncover. Within this context, the role of the workshop facilitator becomes crucial especially in terms of how to balance the storyteller's authorship and ownership of the story with the need to produce 'a good' story. As consequence, additional ethical implications related to who has to decide - and based on which criteria - what makes a digital story 'good' have to be considered. This is even more crucial because in the digital storytelling process the expected role of the facilitator is to activate the storytelling/story-listening loop among participants in a way that they all inform each individual's story-making.

Before challenging the four components identified as main lenses through which looking at digital storytelling as a tool to unlock grassroots knowledge, an additional concept needs to be highlighted. Since I approach research as 'cooperative inquiry' (Heron and Reason, 2008), what I am arguing here is that the digital storytelling process includes and stimulates the four ways of knowing depicted in the 'extended epistemology': Experiential knowing, Presentational knowing, Propositional knowing, Practical knowing (Heron, 1992; 1996a). In fact, digital stories, as an output of a creative and participatory approach, can show how 'our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives' (Heron and Reason, 2008).

Time: Is storytelling only about the past or the future?

'Community is denied contemporary being-ness, always deferred, lost, projected into the future, the past'.
(Studdert, 2006)

In this section I aim to focus on one of the main challenges that I had to face and overcome while being involved as a researcher, applying creative and participatory methods to facilitate the co-production of knowledge, in a UK-wide project on issues related to water management titled 'DRY Project' (http://dryproject.co.uk/). The challenge was revealed at the beginning of the research project, while I was working with other team members in some rural areas of Southern England to start building connections and mutual trust at local level with a group of stakeholders. Our intention was to co-design the research methodology and the plan of action to eventually generate, in collaboration with local communities, contents for an online *utility tool* for informed decision-making on drought and flood issues in UK. 'Drought Risk and

You – DRY' is an inter-disciplinary research project, funded under the RCUK Drought and Water Scarcity Programme, with the aim of developing an evidence-based resource for drought risk management in which scientific data and multiple narratives are brought together to facilitate decision-making processes. One of the aims of DRY is to subvert knowledge hierarchies by proposing digital storytelling as a tool to facilitate the co-production of knowledge and to encourage active citizenship and increase democratic participation at community level. The project is adopting digital storytelling as one of the multiple narrative approaches to investigate people's perceptions and behaviors in relation to their river, water use and water scarcity within and across seven rivers catchments in UK. Researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds have explored these issues across a complex patchwork of various communities to reveal nuances of sense of place.

The challenge I am referring to here was disclosed by one of the first storytellers that we invited to share local narratives on drought issues: he commenced the storytelling process by saying that 'no one here is really interested unless it affects them personally' (Peter T., Stanford Dingley, UK, March 2016). In that moment the personal angle of digital storytelling appeared as a potential limit: the connection between personal narrative and personal interest, quite naively highlighted by that workshop participant, suddenly challenged the whole methodological approach, considering the specific aims of that research project. Digital stories are personal by definition and they embed subjective and experiential knowledge, therefore applying digital storytelling within that context implies to answer some tricky questions: how can we connect individual stories to community narratives? How to bridge expert and lay knowledge(s) and bring unheard voices into a debate? How to understand how personally meaningful stories can simultaneously have a social impact?

By shaping the methodology in collaboration with our stakeholders and hybridizing digital storytelling as a form, we were able not only to solve those issues, but also to achieve an unexpected result: namely re-establishing the 'contemporary being-ness' of the community we were working with, while collecting their memories from the past and stimulating the creation of visual representations of their imagined future stories.

The turning point was when we organised a series of workshops to explore future scenarios and possible climate change impacts at the local level in 50-year time. In the process of co-designing these workshops with our stakeholders, we understood that drawing and song-writing were perceived by community members as effective tools to unlock their creativity and project themselves into the future. Therefore, we explored how storytelling and song-writing could work together to facilitate the journey from personal to collective, or what Jerome Bruner described as turning 'private trouble into public plight', which supported the generation of environmental narratives that could influence the decision-making processes. To do so we collected micro-narratives, digital stories and oral histories, and co-created with the local communities two songs composed by the folk singer Sharron Kraus who accompanied us throughout the process to reflect on and encapsulate these stories. This approach was applied in two separate events that we organised, one in rural Cambridgeshire - 'The Reasons in the Fens' (Bakewell and al., 2018) - based on a traditional form of conflict resolution applied in Sardinia (Italy) until the late 1960s; and another in Sheffield - 'Water Stories of Sheffield'. In both cases we combined storytelling practices, storyboarding techniques and song-writing to trial a creative process that enabled individual storytellers to 'see' their thoughts, feelings and concerns translated into and represented by a community song.

While reading the stories produced by the workshop participants about their future, we saw that their narratives were less personal and more community-oriented compared to the ones generated about their past. One participant concisely pinpointed something that completely changed our perspective: 'I remember my life as individual because I know more details and I can explore those memories more deeply from a personal perspective; but I project myself in the future as a community member or on behalf of someone else, my children, someone younger than me, because it's easier to imagine the unknown as a shared and collective experience'. Switching from memories to future projections throughout the creative process appeared to be perceived as a sort of transition from self-interest to participation.

The connection between imagination and community building was already stated by Irene Baker when she wrote: 'Listening to a story is not a passive act. It engages imagination and abstraction. It creates a community' (Baker, 2016). Her main focus was on the educational value of storytelling. Nevertheless, what she was mainly referring to is the social function of the story-sharing.

An additional crucial component that our experience in DRY Project would suggest is also the 'temporality' of the creative process that somehow shape content and form. Therefore, the storytelling process itself can be presented here as the connector between the past and the future to explore communities' adaptation to change. Yet the social act of creating and sharing stories can represent the 'contemporary being-ness' for a community, elsewhere denied.

Space: Storytelling as a 'safe place' to enhance creativity and facilitate a 'compassionate and realistic dialogue'.

'Some level of connection is essential for a story to be effective'.
(Fabritius and Hagemann, 2017)

Throughout history, 'the building blocks of all compelling narratives have remained intact: challenge, struggle, and resolution' (Bowman, 2014). Throughout my personal experience as digital storytelling facilitator, I had to acknowledge that these building blocks are not always all visible nor present when a 'lay' person creates, delivers and shares compelling narratives. Digital stories can exist and be effectively received even with a missing block, because they are conceived to represent and embed an ongoing process of story-sharing. In fact, during the story-telling/story-listening process, that is the essential component of a digital storytelling workshop, the absence of one of the elements which conventionally are crucial to build a narrative is not perceived as a contradiction to its form, but as a trigger to generate additional stories: in fact, in a social space, new stories can respond and complement what the original story is missing. Yet the multimodality of the digital story can mitigate the flawed structure of an individual's narrative. Digital stories can't be considered as isolated and static objects, but as creative expressions of a process that enable *lay* storytellers to create a space for social interaction while sharing their stories.

While observing the delivery of digital storytelling workshops, we could identify the story-sharing dimension as environment, the *space* in which the storytelling process happens and reveals its social dimension. It is the *space* in which individuals are able to reconnect with their place, that combines prior knowledge and experience, and act as a natural hook for emotional connections.

Place is the background to stories and memories and also the context through which stories emerge (Pile, 2002). Therefore, we propose *sense of place* is an important

factor in the way that people respond to disruptive events in their communities or in their personal lives, and 'local distinctiveness' might be a reason for different responses and ways of coping with/adapting to change.

In this section the main focus is on how digital storytelling might triangulate between personal experience, place attachment and crisis response. To do so I am sharing a workshop experience during which we explored individuals' reactions to displacement through *hybrid storytelling practices*. The workshop was delivered as part of 'NAR-SPI - Narrative educational resources for socio professional inclusion', a European project, funded under the Erasmus+ Programme KA2, that aims at creating Open Educational Resources for socio-professional inclusion. The objective of the workshop was to co-design with the participants an exhibition that looked closely and creatively at the concept of social inclusion. The product of their creativity was then transformed by project partners in learning objects to train psychologists and volunteers working with and assisting new comers. The event was organized in collaboration with the British Red Cross (Nottingham, UK) and involved a group of 40 participants who shared stories of socio-professional inclusion and explored a variety of creative approaches (drawing, storyboarding techniques, craft-making, song-writing) to co-produce the contents for an exhibition that was displayed from the 7th to the 21st February 2018 at Loughborough University (UK). On this occasion the storytelling process was left completely open and the facilitators, to kick-off the activity, allowed participants to choose and use the 'creative tools' they felt the most appropriate to express their attachment to their place of origin.

The storytelling research team based at Loughborough, in collaboration with musician Sharron Kraus and visual artist Céline Siani Djiakoua, facilitated the process of producing objects, digital stories, sounds/songs, short performances, to create the main elements of the exhibition. With a focus on co-production, the researchers had the opportunity to share their practice on digital storytelling and learn how to adapt and hybridize that methodology to explore different meanings of social inclusion and place-attachment. The volunteers from the British Red Cross had a chance of sharing their experience/expertise in working with new comers and learning new participatory creative approaches to be applied in their ongoing activities. The beneficiaries of the Red Cross refugees support service had an occasion to spend a day out in the biggest one-site University campus in the UK, socialise with people coming from different backgrounds, look at their journey through the lenses of creativity and also explore potential ways of having access to Higher Education courses. For all of them the workshop activated a process of mutual learning that also stimulated further opportunities for collaboration. Participants were split in two groups, each group worked for half day on two different tasks: producing objects to be displayed in the exhibition supported by the visual artist, and unlocking creativity through multiple storytelling approaches. For the storytelling session the first activity consisted in working individually on storyboards to narrate their personal experience of social inclusion while reflecting on their sense of place. They were asked to choose one of the three different storyboard templates that the facilitators printed in advance to help storytellers frame their narrative in one temporal dimension and link their story to a specific place: the first one was to recall stories from the past before the forced displacement occurred and was on 'A song from your childhood. A lullaby your parents used to sing to you or a song you remember singing as a child'; the second one was on 'Something from the Present. A feeling, a thought, an image, something that relates to your life now'; the third one was on 'Something for the Future. A wish or a hope for the future or an image or idea that inspires you'.

Only a couple of participants decided to develop a story by using the second storyboard template, but they weren't able to identify a place in which they could position their narrative. They realized that sharing stories about themselves moving from place to place was a way of positioning themselves at present in a non-place, a way of expressing visually their difficulty to find a place to belong to. They described their displacement as a never-ending search, as something that completely changed their perspective on the meaning of place-attachment. They also clearly identified the reason why their mindset suddenly changed: namely the fact that the place where they come from doesn't exist (and won't exist) anymore as they remember it, because the war or a natural disaster changed dramatically its built environment and its tangible heritage. By sharing the story of them constantly moving, constantly seeking for a place to live in, made them think about the idea of imagining their ideal place as a 'mosaic' in which to recompose all their memories linked to each of those places they've been moving through. During the story-sharing process, when everyone talked about the storyboard produced giving each other feedback, they eventually thought to co-produce for the exhibition a collective narrative: hence their intention was to find together a shared way of expressing their sense of belonging by revitalising their intangible heritage, perceived by all of them as their constant environment and the only space for 'infinite freedom'.

The majority of participants chose the first storyboard template to express their 'local distinctiveness' and they presented their storyboards by singing a lullaby from their childhood, instead of sharing stories. In that moment we discovered that there was a recurrent tune sung in various languages, therefore we thought to use that tune as the basis to co-create a common narrative and to write together the lyrics of a new song that could embed a message unfolded by all their stories. At the end of the session they coproduced, in collaboration with songwriter Sharron Kraus, 'The Mosaic Song'. This process is the effective demonstration of what Mike Wilson said, talking about the NAR-SPI project at the Annual Storytelling Symposium organised in Cardiff at the University of South Wales: 'storytelling is the art form of social interaction' and it can bring unexpected results by unlocking creativity. In this specific case, we see digital storytelling in its hybrid form as refuge and as 'safe place' to enhance creativity and facilitate a 'compassionate and realistic dialogue' (Rappoport, 2014) about the multicultural society.

This experience also suggested that the role of emotion in the digital storytelling process is central to the promotion of *embodiment*, a specific form of knowledge that exists in the telling of stories with emotional meaning. The idea that the embodiment of a location is what construct a *place* obviously refers to Michel de Certeau's famous statement that 'space is a practiced place' (1980), where the embodiment of a place is crucial to its space-ness. He clearly distinguishes between experiencing the world, the inside view, and looking from a distance at a person experiencing it, the outside view. The hybridization of the digital storytelling process showed how to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside view and how to facilitate a creative process that generates a common narrative and the collective embodiment of a shared (intangible) place, a space for mutual understanding and 'infinite freedom'.

Truth(s): Unlocking alternative perspectives.

'Stories can have an impact that is different from just telling a fact'.
            (Christine Trace, Librarian, Montgomery College, Maryland, US).

One way of approaching digital storytelling that has been demonstrated to be particularly effective is its use as a participatory methodology for 'knowledge translation', and in particular as a tool 'to illustrate the usefulness of qualitative results in any given context' (Bourbonnais and Michaud, 2018). Stories can generate empathy and trust in the audience and at the same time demonstrate their usefulness because they 'have the power to give meaning to human behaviors and to trigger emotions' (Bourbonnais and Michaud, 2018). This happens because stories are perceived as vectors of truth. They also challenge the meaning of truth itself and suggest a deeper reflection on how various perspectives embedded in personal narratives about *contested* themes and events can generate multiple truths.

We acknowledge the existence of multiple truths when we recognise, as the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'the danger of a single story' (Adichie, 2009). As she observed, 'because our lives and our cultures are composed of a series of overlapping stories, if we hear only a single story about another person, culture, or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding'.

By proposing digital storytelling as a social process during which a story-listener has an active role, I am arguing that digital stories convey various understandings of facts with social interest and stimulate a shared and communal 'holistic thinking' (Meadows and Kidd, 2009) of the world around us.

To demonstrate this concept, in this section I present an example from a project in which digital storytelling has been applied to facilitate learning processes in formal and non-formal contexts with the aim of unlocking participants' alternative perspectives and of enhancing learners' critical thinking.

The project we are referring to was delivered in the D.C. area, in US, during the Spring 2018, as part of a Fellowship at the Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access (SCLDA), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) UK.

Collaborating with the Smithsonian offered a unique opportunity to test, both face-to-face and virtually, the effectiveness of digital storytelling to enhance the 4Cs (Creativity, Critical thinking, Collaboration, Communication) in both formal and non-formal learning. As part of that project I had access to the Smithsonian digital collections within the context of SCLDA's ongoing development of new heritage-related learning resources, and involvement in public engagement programmes that support different types of learning. The pilot programmes were designed and developed in collaboration with educators in several museums and partner organisations, and were presented in both formal and non-formal learning settings.

Workshop participants engaged in a self-reflective process whose goals were to understand if and how digital storytelling can enhance the 4Cs; to identify which step/s of the creative process has/have had an impact on a particular skill; and to highlight any moments in which their emotional responses and feelings supported the learning process. The researchers involved in the project also intend to recognise any limitations and challenges of the digital storytelling methodology when applied to explore how individuals connect personal memories to museum objects.

"Explore Teaching with Digital Storytelling" was a hands-on interdisciplinary workshop organized by the Paul Peck Humanities Institute at Montgomery College and the Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access, designed for faculty in all disciplines, as well as other staff members and librarians. In response to participants' requests, researchers designed two separate five-hour sessions at the school's Rockville campus, with two groups in two consecutive days, totaling 55

participants over the two sessions. Some faculty and staff members had already had digital storytelling training sessions, but none had ever applied the methodology in their teaching or for any other professional use.

By reflecting on this specific workshop activity and on the feedback received from participants, I am trying to recognize in the digital storytelling process the production values that come from 'the scrapbook', where each clipping contains its own truth, to braid together different perspectives, co-produce a common thread and develop more nuanced views on what originally was presented as an accepted fact as part of a learning process.

Furthermore, triggering personal stories (both factual or fictional) as a teaching strategy can on one hand problematize the interaction between opinions and facts, and on the other hand stimulate a deeper reflection on learners' beliefs that drive their behaviors and ways of knowing.

A week after the workshop, a series of questions were discussed with some of the participants, such as: do stories have to be true and reliable to facilitate effective learning processes? Is what people believe is real more important than facts per se? Can opinions produce new knowledge?

The lesson learned while delivering this digital storytelling workshop was that even if misconceptions are perceived to complicate the picture, they also expand the horizon while we are investigating learners' perceptions of contested narratives: non-factual narratives provoke discussions, enable us to elicit counter-narratives, bring different stories together. Stories tell always the *truth* about learners' views, but they may reveal a conflicting set of information and data. What they certainly achieve effectively is learners' engagement with knowledge sharing and (co)production, and eventually enhance their critical thinking.

Yet reflecting from a 21st-century learning perspective, this pilot research project exemplifies how using digital storytelling within the Smithsonian Learning Lab (https://learninglab.si.edu/) can unlock creativity and demystify the use of cultural artifacts for teaching. Regarding the 4Cs (Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication and Collaboration) the researchers and the educators involved in this project learned that these skills are often combined, and it is difficult to separate them. Skills are developed through different stages of the digital storytelling process, and the primary challenge – still to be explored in future research – is how to assess these skills through digital storytelling. The majority of the educators involved in this project acknowledged that "Crea-tical thinking" (meaning a combination of Creativity and Critical thinking) is the essential skill to be enhanced in the younger generation, to help them cope with complexity and change in today's digital world (Trilling and Fadel, 2009). As a remedy to this lack of abilities and dispositions in identifying, understanding, and creating multiple perspectives, this research suggests bringing multiple voices to the fore and using storytelling as a way to do so in both formal and non-formal learning contexts.

Zipes in *Once Upon a Time* highlights the importance to weaken and undermine what he calls the 'master narrative' (Zipes, 2016), that in this context I would define the dominant voice, so to unlock people's 'creative and critical potential'. Yet I would argue that 'polyphonic narratives' (Mark C. Marino, 2014) and personal stories that unlock alternative perspectives and multiple truths can embed social values more than a story perceived as true because in line with the master narrative or the dominant voice.

Practice: Dismantling an orthodoxy to be coherent with the digital storytelling essence.

'Digital storytelling enables the transition from information receivers to curators of knowledge'.
(DS workshop participant, Montgomery College, Maryland, US)

Michael Wilson explored the concept of *mess* in storytelling 'to primarily describe a range of multiplicities (multiplicities of forms, of media, of perspectives, of truths, of meanings, of texts, of relationships)' (Wilson, 2014). I would add multiplicities of practices and processes too.

Having been a digital storytelling facilitator for a decade, mainly developing and co-designing new approaches for action research, I eventually understood the importance of this range of multiplicities at different stages of my practice. In the first half of this decade, I was acting as a knowledge broker and I identified as the main objectives of my digital storytelling practice to: create or 'maintain links between researchers and their audience via the appropriate translation of research findings' (Lomas, 1997); reach new and larger audiences through public engagement events; listen to unheard voices to discover hidden stories.

Having had the opportunity to work with Michael Wilson for the second half of this decade, I've been also encouraged to explore digital storytelling as a different 'way of knowing' and in particular as a way to: unlock grass-roots knowledge and dismantle knowledge hierarchies; combine traditional forms of communication and learning processes with new technologies to explore the workshop participants' transition from knowledge consumers to knowledge implementers and eventually to knowledge producers. The most exciting achievement of my experience as a digital storytelling facilitator in the last few years has been acknowledging that the methodology itself should be challenged to avoid the risk of being trapped in what was becoming an orthodoxy.

During the first half of this decade, I followed the original process as designed in the late '90s by the group of creative practitioners gravitating around the StoryCenter (https://www.storycenter.org/). That process includes the seven elements that outline 'the fundamentals of digital storytelling' (Lambert, 2010; 2013) and can be unfolded throughout the five steps of a standard DS workshop, regardless its duration: story-circle, script writing, audio recording, video editing, screening of all the stories. All these seven elements (or five steps) are suggested as being essential to make a 'good' digital story as they enable participants to own the story, understand its meaning, become aware of their emotions, identify the plot, choose images and sounds to be combined with the voice-over, build a dialogue between what can be seen and what can be heard in a story, and reflect on the potential audience of a story. Either through the five-step process (if an immediate link to the structure of a workshop is mentioned) or through the seven elements (if the principles of that process are referred to), the digital storytelling is presented as a facilitated group process, a sort of collective journey during which participants are accompanied towards a common destination. Yet the journey itself is perceived as more significant than the destination, because the exchange (of knowledge and emotions) among participants and the acquisition of new skills (oral communication, writing, digital, editing) are more vital than the individual production of the story itself. Hence for the first half of the past decade, I was replicating in various contexts the same approach and the only

variable was represented by the human being 'performing' their role as participant in each context in which that same approach was applied.

During the second half of the past decade, I had the opportunity to experiment with a variety of storytelling practices within digital storytelling and to reflect more deeply on its effectiveness as a participatory visual method while enabling the workshop participants to co-design the process itself, therefore broadening their engagement and enhancing their sense of ownership not only on their story, but also on the methodology and on the communal space created during the story-sharing process. What I realized is that the digital storytelling methodology, in order to be coherent with the original aims identified by the founders of the digital storytelling movement in the San Francisco Bay, should be open to constant change. In fact, replicating it as it was conceived originally and delivering digital storytelling workshops all the time as they were somehow 'codified' by the StoryCenter would limit its own nature. Yet it would be in contradiction with its own essence, because it would not respond appropriately to participants' needs in our always changing digital society.

One of the first issues that a participants' needs-oriented approach suggested verifying is about the structure of that process: are the seven element or five steps (Lambert, 2010) all crucial in the same way in different contexts? I acknowledge the importance of working through these steps together and the efficacy of this process to build mutual trust, but workshops can mean that those already engaged or those with both the time or funds are more likely to attend, which prompts a deeper reflection on its actual inclusiveness, especially for projects seeking to bring hard-to-reach voices into a debate. If we understand that for some groups of people (not only for a few in a group) the writing phase or the video editing represents an obstacle for their participation, and we decide to creatively 'remove' these obstacles and to prioritize other phases, are we still applying the digital storytelling methodology? When we approach digital storytelling as a participatory visual method for action research, I believe that we should emphasize a more flexible approach that enables the hybridization of the form and the process, in particular if we are working in more 'difficult to engage' research contexts.

Performative storytelling, song-writing, storyboarding techniques have been demonstrated to be effective tools to expand and enrich the conventional digital storytelling methodology, especially if we think of 'storytelling as a means of sharing knowledge, building trust, and cultivating identity' (Cianca et al., 2014).

Dismantling what was becoming an orthodoxy in my practice gave me the opportunity to be coherent with the digital storytelling essence and also to reflect on the legacy of that process on participants' experience, that ultimately aims at giving them the tools to recognize their authority and authenticity: the authority of lived experiences and the authenticity of personal storytelling. A digital storytelling process always open to change will be able to re-build this legacy in ever changing contexts, so to generate human interest on 'good' stories.

Closing thoughts and way forward

'Storytelling speaks to what makes us human: a search for meaning'.

(Bowman, 2018)

The present chapter addresses the need expressed for a re-consideration of digital storytelling as a tool for understanding how people produce, exchange and disseminate knowledge in today's digital world and if/how they relate their personal experiences to a specific place. While crossing the boundaries between tangible and

intangible environments, an open-to-change digital storytelling methodology that enables participatory hybridization of its process and form has proven to facilitate the promotion of *embodiment* and the creation of a social space for *community being-ness* and individuals' *crea-tical thinking*. For both community and individuals, the emotions unlocked through the digital storytelling process were revealed to be crucial in the production of new knowledge(s). Therefore, people's emotions are complementary to cognitive skills and dispositions to extract meanings from facts, opinions and behaviors.

As Bowman stated, 'in diverse instructional settings, non-stories provide information while resonant narratives teach, inspire, and motivate students by engaging them emotionally and intellectually' (2018). Stories don't need to generate agreement to engage their listeners: they have to resonate with others' personal experiences but should also generate counter narratives and alternative perspectives to prove full engagement. This is valid in formal learning processes but also in everyday social life. By sharing some examples of projects and workshops in which digital storytelling played a crucial role in investigating how to unlock grassroots knowledge, I'm arguing here that 'subversive storytelling' (Zipes, 2016) represents one way to cope with complexity and change in today's digital world, and gives us the tools to play an active and communal role in a society in which digitisation is bringing more fragmentation of knowledge and human interaction.

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