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## Digital Storytelling

by TESSA LEWIN

**Introduction**

We know that good communication is a two-way process. To engage the public and have an impact on the people who shape policy we need real stories, told by people in their own words, on their own terms. But there is an inherent tension between making a communication product that speaks for itself – which is powerful enough to elicit a strong emotional response from an audience or change their views – and one where the emphasis is on the integrity of the process. A process that is concerned with engagement and voice has participation at its core. A process overly concerned with the quality of the final product will privilege this end at the expense of the means by which it is arrived.

New digital tools somewhat change this as, for example, they make constructing visual arguments more accessible and affordable to ‘non-experts’. But producing fantastic products from truly participatory processes is just the beginning. How do we then get the right people with influence to



Photo: Tessa Lewin

**A story circle at a Dhaka workshop.**

see or hear these arguments? And how do we ensure that desired changes are then made?

This article looks at a particular participatory methodology – Digital Storytelling (DST) – and how it can be used in a development setting to draw out stories and engage both storytellers and their future audiences. Through this example, I examine the extent to which it is possible to practice communication that is both truly participatory and produces ‘useable’ results – communication as engagement rather than communication as marketing.

Participatory processes such as DST

Photo: Tessa Lewin



Participants building their egg mobile in the 'egg game' icebreaker at a Dhaka workshop.

allow NGOs to listen to, and learn from, the people and the communities with whom they work. They also enable these NGOs to use these stories to lobby and advocate on particular issues. For NGOs interested in increasing awareness and understanding of a particular issue, or in genuinely exploring how best they can support the communities with whom they work, DST offers a fun and empowering means.<sup>1</sup>

### What is Digital Storytelling?

Digital Storytelling is a methodology that was developed in the mid-90s at the Centre for Digital Storytelling in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> It has been widely used since then by activists, researchers and artists. The

process involves intensive workshops during which participants develop a personal narrative, usually around three minutes long. They then record and illustrate this narrative with still images or photographs. The final product is a short film, which has been produced and edited by the narrator. A first person voice is used in the narration.

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium that uses creative communication at every stage, both to broaden engagement and to synthesise ideas for influence.<sup>3</sup> In November 2008, the Pathways communication team was involved in the Feminist Technology Exchange instigated by APC (the Association for Progressive Communica-

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous online resources on Digital Storytelling. See e.g.: <http://tinyurl.com/dst-10-steps>. Full URL: [www.socialbrite.org/2010/07/15/digital-storytelling-a-tutorial-in-10-easy-steps](http://www.socialbrite.org/2010/07/15/digital-storytelling-a-tutorial-in-10-easy-steps) and [www.storycenter.org/cookbook.pdf](http://www.storycenter.org/cookbook.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Every element of this process is 'digital' – i.e. enabled by computer technology – and participants are able themselves to control each stage. It is the access to relatively affordable technology that has made this methodology possible.

<sup>3</sup> The consortium comprises activists and researchers based at universities and research units in South Asia, Latin America, West Africa and the Middle East – more details can be found at [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org)

Photo: Tessa Lewin



Participant working on her storyboard.

tions). Two members of the team took part in the Digital Storytelling track and were so profoundly impressed by the experience and the methodology, that they began lobbying within Pathways to launch our own digital story project.

DST is both about enabling people to tell stories and enabling others to listen to those stories. The combination of visual images and first person audio narrative is compelling. It is hard not to listen to these stories, and they are generally far more accessible than the academic or legal documents that often articulate policy debates. Some argue that Digital Storytelling is a 'feminist' methodology, in that research participants control the way in which their stories are represented, and through the process learn new skills (see Box 1). So researchers are 'giving back' to the participants, not merely extracting data for their research. Digital Storytelling has often

### Box 1: DST – a 'feminist' methodology?

There is much debate about whether or not it is possible to call a methodology feminist. Without going into details of the debate, I believe that there are tools that can be used in feminist ways, to protect and promote women's human rights. Digital storytelling lends itself extremely well to feminist projects. The process of women creating their own digital story is designed to transform their 'inner' embodied worlds, as well as have an impact on 'outer' material or structural conditions. In articulating their stories, the women are developing both technical and creative skills, and confidence.

The collaborative nature of the workshops, and the sharing of each other's stories, helps the women develop a sense of solidarity with each other. They are 'not alone' in their struggles. This kind of transformative learning process follows in the tradition of Freire and others, who see the development of personal critical consciousness as a necessary precursor to action for social change.

been used with groups that have experienced stigma or violence. They experience the process of telling and constructing their narratives as therapeutic, empowering and solidarity-building. In southern Africa, for example, workshops have been held for people affected by the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS.<sup>4</sup> In Palestine, workshops have been held with marginalised youth in refugee camps.<sup>5</sup>

### Digital Storytelling workshops – introducing the methodology

The Pathways team first used the methodology in Bangladesh in 2009. We ran three Digital Storytelling workshops, facilitated by an international team, between November 2009 and February 2010: two in Dhaka and one in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Participants included Pathways researchers from Dhaka, university students, local government officials,

<sup>4</sup> This was part of an initiative funded by the Open Society working with the Centre for Digital Storytelling and Women's Net. More details can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/sa-hiv-workshop>. Full URL: [http://storiesforchange.net/event/open\\_society\\_initiative\\_for\\_southern\\_africa\\_hiv\\_stigma\\_workshop](http://storiesforchange.net/event/open_society_initiative_for_southern_africa_hiv_stigma_workshop).

<sup>5</sup> Voices Beyond Walls project. See: [www.cs.uiowa.edu/~hourcade/idc-workshop/sawhney.pdf](http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~hourcade/idc-workshop/sawhney.pdf) and [www.voicesbeyondwalls.org](http://www.voicesbeyondwalls.org)

women's rights activists, peace activists, staff of local NGOs and performers from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>6</sup>

The three workshops enabled participants to learn about the methods and develop their own digital stories. People learnt through doing: creating, editing and showing their own digital stories together. Participants were told about the process before the workshops. They were asked to think through possible stories and bring relevant materials with them (such as photographs). Where this was not possible, participants drew illustrations to accompany their stories, or persuaded their colleagues to do so. Some participants also took photographs at the workshop.

After initial icebreakers, participants were introduced to the Digital Storytelling process and shown several digital stories showcasing a variety of narrative devices. While showing digital stories we talked about confidentiality and ethics and discussed what might happen to the stories after the workshop. We also looked at how other organisations had used stories in different contexts. In the workshop for Pathways researchers, we also introduced various DST web resources and looked in-depth at the history of its development as a methodology, anticipating that they might use DST in their future work.

We were nervous about showing too many completed stories for fear of influencing participants' own presentations of their stories. However, we all agreed afterwards that we could have shown more, as the discussions that came out of the screenings were extremely useful, and the participants found the stories inspiring rather than prescriptive.

### Creating digital stories

The story circle is the point in the workshops when participants start to get their teeth into the process. The idea is that through publicly articulating the story it

#### Box 2: Digital story workshops: the basic steps

- **Ice breaker:** relaxing the participants and getting them to feel more comfortable with the facilitators and other participants.
- **Explaining the process:** looking at examples of digital stories. There is always debate amongst facilitators about the timing of this – some feel that it is important to give participants concrete examples of what they will be doing, others feel that this may overly influence participants' creativity.
- **Story circle:** participants outline their ideas to the group – normally followed by small group work where participants refine and structure their narrative. This process is very important and it is vital to spend enough time on it so that participants are happy with their stories.
- **Recording the audio narrative:** This is usually done using a voice recorder and some basic audio software (Audacity is the most popular free, open source software).
- **Storyboarding:** Working out which images to use at which stage of the story.
- **Editing:** putting the audio and the images together – most commonly done using Windows Movie Maker.
- **Rendering:** Exporting the final story as a movie file that can be uploaded or copied.

begins to emerge and, as others respond to it and participants pick up on new ideas and narrative devices, their stories are refined.

Each participant outlined their broad ideas for their story to the rest of the group and then fleshed out the details of the story in smaller groups or pairs. Often the stories that people ended up telling were not the ones that they set out to tell.

Once participants had structured, written and edited their stories, or shared them with others in the group, they rehearsed and recorded themselves narrating their story. Meanwhile, others began the search for supporting visual material and music (bearing copyright issues in mind). Participants who didn't have photographs used this time to illustrate their stories.

With a clear sense of their story structure, and with the necessary audio

<sup>6</sup> More details about the Chittagong workshop and the stories can be found here: [www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2010/06/02/education.htm](http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2010/06/02/education.htm)



Photo: Tessa Lewin

Sohela Nazneen discusses story structure in one of the Dhaka story circles.

segments recorded, we began the editing process. In some workshops, participants created a storyboard of the visuals in preparation for the edit. Editing was done using Windows Movie Maker, as it is the most common simple video-editing tool.

The last phase of the process was often rather frenetic, as people struggled to put the final touches to their creations. But we learnt to make sure to keep enough time for screening, as this gives participants valuable insight into the thoughts of the other participants – and the benefit of seeing their own story on screen in public, which is always a moving experience. We also found it worthwhile to keep time aside to talk through the stories and facilitate a group discussion about their feedback and reactions.

### What we learnt about the process of storytelling

The DST process allows a reflective space that not many people are given, or able to take time for. Beyond that, the act of telling one's story can be healing and empower-

ing. Participants actively construct and reconstruct themselves and their stories through the process of narration. And then the stories are shared, and the 'audience' take the narrator seriously – the feeling that one is being actively listened to is profoundly important.

As with every truly participatory process, getting the best out of DST takes commitment. It involves people using unfamiliar technology and developing personal stories, which takes time. Our first two workshops were compressed into three days, which was not long enough. The next workshop was five days long and much more coherent as a result. It is also worth budgeting additional time for the unexpected technical hitches that invariably accompany the use of technical equipment. Seven out of the eleven computers in the Chittagong computer laboratory could not be used.

Another interesting element of the DST project process was how it disrupted our own organisation's age and power hierarchies. Junior members of the team



Photo: Tessa Lewin

Team celebrates egg landing in the 'egg game' icebreaker, Dhaka.

in Bangladesh led the project and taught the senior researchers. Because younger team members were more confident with the technology, the usual age hierarchies were reversed. I would argue that this shift had implications beyond the DST workshop, in increasing both the confidence of the younger members of the team and the older members' respect for their work.

### Using the digital stories

I have talked about the process and why it is valuable, but what about the product? The end result is usually a short video, made by a first-time director, often one who has never used video or computer equipment before. It is not the technical quality but the content which has most impact. What is interesting about these stories is related to the positionality of their creators.

So far, the stories generated through Pathways of Women's Empowerment have been used to give policy makers a sense of the textured, everyday reality of the women

storytellers, from a variety of backgrounds. But using the stories can be tricky, especially when moving to different contexts. One highly entertaining story, generated at a workshop in Dhaka, was not considered appropriate to show to participants in the Chittagong Hill Tracts because the narrator was 'too upper class' and therefore her story would not resonate with the participants. Another story, though aesthetically beautiful, was seen as 'too flat', with little dramatic tension or direct linkage to 'policy' or 'research' issues. In one of the Chittagong stories, there was a disjuncture between one narrator's understanding of history, in particular local violence, and the researchers' understanding of that history. The researchers felt that using the story could both compromise the researchers, and possibly incite political unrest.

In all of these cases, the fact that the final product was not necessarily of use to Pathways in a particular context does not undermine the significance of the process of their production.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that if a research or communication process is to be truly participatory and yield a 'useful' product, it is likely that the process will need to be iterative and time consuming. If the audio narrative of a digital story is well recorded, it is always possible to spend time after the workshop refining the video edit. Some of the participants we worked with, who had access to computers outside the workshop setting, planned to 'perfect' their stories on their own, after the workshop. It would have been useful to have the resources to do this with them and to further 'polish' the visual elements of the digital stories.

### The impact and influence of digital stories

People are inherently story-driven – the way we understand the world is through narrative. First person stories are very powerful and emotive, particularly when they offer us a view on the world that we have not encountered previously. Because there are so few authentic indigenous voices in mainstream media, DST provides us with genuine, non-stereotypical and often unexpected representations of people, gender roles and relationships. These representations often contradict dominant images of both men and women. These stories should not be seen as just anecdotal but as a potential source of change for both creators and viewers. If they can be used to support, amplify or better articulate a policy campaign then they can be extremely influential.

There is a growing body of literature asserting the importance of using non-text-based policy arguments. In a policy culture where women and girls in particular are increasingly identified as drivers of – or responsible for – broad social change rather than as individuals with their own needs and differences, and where 'evidence'

means statistical, quantitative data, bringing real people back into the picture seems ever more important. Understanding and articulating the specific, nuanced stories of individual injustices are vital if we are to make any progress towards substantive and sustainable social change. Otherwise ordinary people are in danger of being rendered invisible by the very people who purport to act on their behalf.

How you assess the capacity of Digital Storytelling as a process to catalyse or create change depends to a large degree on your theory of change. Most practitioners accept that policy change happens both in formal 'policy spaces' and in the broader environment within which these 'spaces' sit. If I want to influence change around a particular issue I need to address not only these formal spaces, but also their broader environment. There are numerous cases of new legislation, for example, which cannot be adequately implemented because the social environment within which it operates is not adequately receptive to the changes. South Africa's progressive constitution is a good example of this. It was the first in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation. This has not, however, stopped the horrific cases of 'corrective rape' that continue to be a threat to South African lesbians.

Another example is the legal reform *khul* in Egypt – which gives women access to a 'no fault' divorce, provided they give up their financial rights. *Khul* has helped some women extract themselves from abusive marriages. But divorce, including *khul*, is still very taboo in Egypt. 'It's important as a rights-giving mechanism – but what can it do to change how people think about gender norms?'<sup>7</sup>

Because of Digital Storytelling's emotive power and its participatory approach, it is an excellent tool to build awareness, strengthen groups with a shared agenda or

<sup>7</sup> Mulki Al-Sharmani talking at the Birds Eye View film festival in 2011 about her research on Islamic legal reform in Egypt. See: [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Familycourts.pdf](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Familycourts.pdf).



Photo: Pathways, Bangladesh

All participants and trainers from the two Pathways digital storytelling workshops after the final screening, Dhaka.

facilitate mutual understanding amongst those who do not. Women's Net and the Sonke Gender Justice Network in South Africa have used DST to address complex issues around gender and HIV/AIDS. Their work with digital stories has helped to build community solidarity, break down prejudices, facilitate public debate and inform organisational priorities, approaches and policies.

In Uganda, Engender Health (with Silence Speaks and St. Joseph's Hospital) has used DST in communities with genital fistula to develop nuanced policy implementation strategies that have at their heart a strong understanding of the many and varied factors that affect these women.<sup>8</sup> DST has been used similarly to inform approaches to mental health problems in the UK National Health Service (NHS)

and to explore the complex dynamics of institutionalised racism in the US.

### DST, learning and change

Through constructing a story, narrators are pushed to articulate a position in an engaging and efficient way. This process is likely to help clarify their thoughts and in doing so lead to further engagement or action. Participants regularly set out to tell a particular story and then, to their surprise, find themselves telling another one entirely. This can be extremely revealing as to where their true convictions lie. Freidus and Hlubinka (2002) talk about how through the group working alongside each other crafting their digital stories and influencing each other, there is often a meta narrative that develops in the group.

<sup>8</sup> Genital fistula is a painful and uncomfortable condition, usually caused by difficult childbirth, and that leaves women with chronic incontinence. Read more on the storytelling project mentioned: [www.engenderhealth.org/our-work/maternal/digital-stories-uganda-fistula.php](http://www.engenderhealth.org/our-work/maternal/digital-stories-uganda-fistula.php)

DST genuinely has the capacity to contribute to community building, through the space it offers for reflection and through the process within a group. But it is also because the story can then be shared. By giving people a platform and tools to articulate a personal story, DST can in itself be transformative, particularly in severely marginalised communities – not only for the storyteller, but for their friends, family, colleagues or NGO workers and activists fortunate enough to see it.

The potential for DST to impact on people's immediate social environments and their individual capacity to make change is fairly clear. They also have the potential to disrupt organisational orthodoxies and hierarchies. But as the ripples of the immediate personal impact of digital stories extend outwards, away from the original context, they tend to get weaker and less influential. The digital stories need to be supported within wider processes of lobbying or learning, and with complementary material which clearly identifies

and explains some of the issues in a broader sense.

An individual digital story can enable someone to articulate her views directly to someone on the other side of the world. This makes for very powerful viewing and does not necessarily need an intermediary to interpret and relay the material. If it is done well, it should speak for itself. Having said this, to influence organisational thinking and learning more widely, the story needs to be linked into larger processes with more voices or analysis. Advocates need to think carefully about how to talk to the issues raised by the stories, and link them to concrete concerns or perhaps broader campaigns.

As other articles in this section highlight, there are tensions inherent in using this kind of material out of context and out of the control of the narrator/editor. But with care and respect, the power of these digital stories can have enormous value to organisational and individual processes of learning and understanding.

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