



Understanding digital storytelling: individual 'voice' and community-building in youth media programs

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Abstract

Digital storytelling (DST) has been widely used as a means of empowerment for marginalised voices across community-based projects worldwide. This paper discusses uses but also limitations of the practice in the context of a Melbourne-based youth media program for 'youth at risk' called YouthWorx. Based on our ongoing, long-term ethnographic research, we explore the cultural production of digital stories as a co-creative process that exposes a range of controversies to do with the politics of 'voice', genre's communicative potential and ethical considerations. Concrete examples from YouthWorx's pedagogical work serve to illustrate the values of self-expression ('voice'), critical reflection and collaboration that form part of broader social transformations generated by these creative practices. The critique of DST practice offered here connects with existing studies concerned with the socially contextualised processes of media education, and the theoretical shift beyond 'the right to speak' towards 'the right to be understood' (Husband, 2009). The paper recommends more analytical attention be paid to a dynamic social process of learning (of media, interpersonal competencies) and community-building, extending beyond the immediate DST situation, rather than narrowing the focus on end-result atomised media products.

Keywords: digital storytelling, youth, media education, 'voice', 'right to be understood', community-building

Introduction

Digital storytelling (DST) has been widely used as an empowering technique for marginalised voices across community-based projects worldwide. The idea of providing ordinary people with access to media and basic editorial skills to allow personal stories to be told through a simple, two – three minute digital format has found application across a range of educational, developmental,

and public contexts. There is now a large body of academic literature that documents the development and various social uses of the practice (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009; Lundby, 2008; Couldry, 2008; Spurgeon, 2009), in addition to guides or tool-kits meant for DST practitioners (Ohler, 2008). Digital storytelling, along with user-generated content, has become a symbol of the changing communication ecology (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009; Lundby, 2008) and a fertile ground for theoretical discussions around 'mediation' (Lundby, 2008), representation or participation (Carpentier, 2009), identity formation (Livingstone, 2008), and the concept of 'voice'.

In the area of community-based youth organisations, including our case study of YouthWorx Media, the idea of empowerment through self-representation underpins much of the social inclusion work with disadvantaged youth. Media education in these contexts takes advantage of the popular appeal of media making and autobiographical content to encourage young people to express themselves. It helps them to develop confidence, media skills and social competencies. The intention is that personal growth and agency acquired in the process translates into active engagement in education, employment or democratic processes (Huesca, 2008). And yet media pedagogies or forms of participation based on the objective of 'voice' (Soep, 2006; Spurgeon et al., 2009), as promoted across community organizations, are not without problems. Elizabeth Soep, drawing on her experience as a radio practitioner and researcher, is right in her critique of the notion of an 'authentic voice' – often romanticised by artists or facilitators, or 'automatically assigned an emancipatory value' (Soep, 2006: 201; see also Buckingham's [2009] critique of creativity as an atomised individualised 'inner self' process). Soep proposes instead the consideration of a 'youth voice' as socially embedded 'crowded talk', a product of interactive processes underpinned by mimicry and 'ongoing self-and peer-evaluation' (Ibid. 199). Empirical studies of youth media participation programs demonstrate that the experience in cultural production of 'voice' is structured by social relations, including instruction and discipline (e.g. Soep 2006), and influenced by reflections about potential audiences, genre conventions, social meanings and expectations attached to any cultural representation (Buckingham, 2009; also Livingstone, 2008). In the field of education more generally, Lave and Wenger (1991) draw attention to broader systems of relations between people, their actions, and the world – all mutually constitutive. Learning, according to Lave and Wenger's social model, includes networks of meaningful relations, evolving membership in 'communities of practice' rather than isolated, specific activities or just tasks (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 53).

These accounts about the inherently relational, collaborative and structured nature of creative (media) processes resonate with Spurgeon et al.'s conceptualisation of workshop-based digital storytelling as a 'co-creative' practice (Spurgeon et al., 2009). In institutionalised contexts, Spurgeon et al. (2009) note, DST relies on a series of interventions by experts and organisations that facilitate and shape both the process and outcomes of the practice. In this paper we extend these discussions using empirical material from our case study - media project for disadvantaged young people called YouthWorx Media. We argue that participation in media production at YouthWorx, including DST, allows young people to express themselves by building on their individual capacities and personal interests. This is however a strongly collaborative, contextualised system of positive feedback (Soep, 2006; see also Heath and Kramsch, 2004) and 'understanding' engendered by the project's pedagogy and institutional culture (Podkalicka and Thomas, 2010). There are both educational and sociological reasons for this deliberate choice by YouthWorx to operate between the extremes of individualism or social determinism. Learning always happens in a context, never in a vacuum. We learn in relation to other things that we know. Likewise we function as people in relation to other people and settings (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991),

and this is especially important with young people who have experienced a profound exclusion from normal social support.

This deliberate position agrees with a recent recognition within human rights and communication research that traditional politics of recognition and self-expression needs to be balanced by attention to listening, captured by the notion of a 'right to be understood' (Husband, 1996; Downing, 2007; see also O'Donnell et al., 2009; Couldry, 2009). The conceptual focus on the reception rather than production side in the communicative cycle is also useful; it allows the move beyond the conventional privileging of individual 'voice' or 'free speech' towards the demands of dialogue and 'understanding' (Dreher, 2009: 445). In line with Dreher's argument, this is not to underestimate traditional calls for increased opportunities to 'speak' and the assertion that they are no longer valid or socially unproductive (Dreher, 2009: 446-7). Rather than theorising 'voice' as 'the simple claim to speak', Couldry insists on the 'second-order value of voice' – of mutual recognition of other claims, reflexivity and entanglement in others' stories (Couldry, 2009: 580). Our argument is similarly concerned with the key role that 'linked practices of speaking and listening' (Ibid. 580) play in communication, opening up a possibility of a more broad form of social change. In the YouthWorx setting the 'right to be understood' flows from the right to be included, to be recognised and belong as a social being. Communication is much more than voice; it is the interaction of the world of the speaker and the world of the hearer to create a third reality, opening possibilities beyond the imagination of either person (see, for example, Gadamer's [1991: 300-307] discussion of 'horizon'). The focus on 'understanding' and effective communication underscores the importance of 'sustaining difference and guaranteeing connectedness' (Husband in Dreher, 2009: 450). Media-making is a useful tool for fostering social connectedness, but it is neither unproblematic nor sufficient when it comes to sustaining learning or participation.

Additionally, Husband raises critical questions about actual distribution and reception of 'voices' – often absent in celebratory accounts of the proliferation of new media-enabled communicative possibilities. In relation to digital storytelling initiatives specifically, this point of view is consistent with criticisms about the overemphasis on individual expression and the lack of 'systemic considerations' about DST content distribution (Watkins and Russo, 2009), media skills dissemination (Rennie in Watkins and Russo, 2009: 273; see also Rennie, 2010), or social implications beyond DST-training situations. As Couldry notes, digital storytelling practice requires that attention be paid to 'not just the forms and styles of DST (...) but [to] wider contexts and conditions [under which] digital stories are exchanged, referred to, treated as a resource and given recognition and authority' (Couldry, 2008: 388). Our argument similarly highlights the value of DST for learning media skills, critical evaluation/reflection and social competencies. However, as we observe, the participatory potential of digital storytelling format is enhanced by its broader integration within a longer-term media education process centred on reciprocal systems of knowledge transfer and exchange rather than delivery of one-off DST workshops (see Watkins and Russo [2009] for the same argument concerning DST used across cultural institutions).

Empirical material presented here draws on our ongoing, long-term ethnographic research conducted at the YouthWorx media production site in a northern suburb of Melbourne. It was conducted between June 2008 and November 2009 through a mix of regular participant observations, focus groups, one-on-one interviews and conversations. The names of young people quoted in the paper have been changed. The researcher functions as participant-observer, and the acknowledged subjectivity is a valuable stance enabling critical reflection from inside the digital story telling process. The researcher works from alongside the storyteller mapping history, context, educational and transformative impact.

What is Youthworx Media?

YouthWorx Media¹ (YWX) is a youth media organisation set up in 2005 as a product of collaborative partnership between the not for profit social agency Youth Development Australia (YDA), The Salvation Army, a local technical education college, youth community broadcaster Student Youth Network (SYN) Media and researchers at Swinburne University's Centre for Creative Industries and Innovation. It engages marginalised young people in creative learning around media production to contribute to their positive transition. The definition of success depends on the student and their circumstances. For one it is the breaking of the cycle of criminal behaviour, when a past offence resulted in incarceration, and the returning to YWX on the day of release. For another student it is coming out of the isolation of his bedroom and suicidal ideation into a wholehearted engagement with the YWX program, and from this to a computer gaming course. The YWX media education program involves a small number of open access and accredited courses offered to 'youth at risk', a term that encompasses young people with a variety of personal circumstances. Participants in the program can be between 15 and 21 years old, disengaged from education, homeless, in a refuge or foster care, with experience in juvenile justice or drug /alcohol abuse problems.

Digital storytelling at YouthWorx

Digital storytelling practice at Youthworx is part of the program's broader media pedagogy, including also original music recording, mini-documentaries, short films and radio making. The pedagogical tasks are deliberately sequenced to move a learner-participant through personal and subjective content towards more objective, critical and reflective tasks. Digital storytelling is primarily used as an introductory media tool to lay the ground for a more professional engagement with media production based on stronger team collaboration and high quality standards. When young people join YouthWorx they get started on making 'digital stories' or 'monologues' – as they are called at YWX. The use of different vocabulary points to the project manager's background in community arts and education where giving people an opportunity to find a 'voice' has a long tradition. Young people are encouraged to use a classic DST format to tell their stories, using picture stills, short video clips, voice-over and basic editing skills. Rather than conducting typical for the genre story circle workshops (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009), individual monologues build on a rather formulaic narrative structure, prompting students to focus on selected key facts from their lives such as their name, age, hobbies, future plans. Since '[the young people] basically talk about themselves' (Staley, 2009), participants work largely on their own, with minimal technical support from teachers. Young DST-makers are generally comfortable with the format; they enjoy the production process, but some do admit to finding it difficult to 'talk about themselves'. The monologue-making at Youthworx can be a long process, sometimes stretching over a couple months, due to especially erratic attendance patterns.

Apart from working on a monologue on their own, many students have sought help from their co-students, either in the use of the camera, editing or material-selection. The project manager and a media facilitator, Jon Staley observes, some of the students can be 'suprisingly frank' about what they are prepared to share through the digital form. Staley elaborates:

At times it surprises me how candid they can be about their lives. They are often quite revealing about their past, about the school, and things they've not necessarily done well at, [or] smoking dope or whatever it is, they often talk relaxedly about these kind of things, whereas I probably wouldn't be that candid about things I've done once [laughs] (Staley, 2009).

The audience for YWX monologues is imagined as young creators' friends and family, and a small circle of YWX students and staff. They are made aware that stories will be uploaded to the YWX website and screened at an in-house public screening that draws together students from the BYS and the project's stakeholders (e.g. NMIT, YDA, Swinburne staff). Monologues are also used as an advocacy tool to promote the project and forge new partnerships, rather than broadcast products per se. Yet, this apparently low-risk media activity, with a small number of participants and very limited distribution is fraught with practical challenges, exposing a problematic associated with 'voice' production. It also exposes tensions inherent in 'sustaining difference and guaranteeing connectedness' (Husband in Dreher, 2009: 450).

Young people draw directly on their immediate life experiences, which are often riddled with endemic problems and put them 'at risk' of longstanding social marginalisation in the first place: violence, street crime, or substance abuse. As some educators point out 'youth at risk' 'may have already developed a negative street-life-attitude' (Stauber, 2007: 38). This 'attitude' experienced thus far 'as pressure, force or stigmatisation' of their 'regime-structures' (Stauber, 2007: 38) can materialise occasionally – as in the case of YWX participants - in content that exhibits blatant racism, endorsement of public vandalism or ignorance. Stories often connect and interweave thematically with other stories produced in this context. A fifteen-minute monologue that oscillates between self-hatred and self-abuse, a video interview with a nineteen-year old girl who recounts her last five years of homelessness or a rap song about hatred of 'wogs from the neighbourhood' are raw and powerful. Stories are also being told disarmingly spontaneously, like a radio interview response on the rising number of teen pregnancies in the UK by a 15 year-old Andrew. Researched and rehearsed, the segment was turned on its head after the quiet and not very articulate teenager revealed: 'Well, I recently became a father myself'. His 'closest' mate-interlocutor was shocked too. He didn't have any idea that Andrew's child was born a fortnight ago. The difficulty of working with and on young people's 'voices' is exemplified by a story from YWX's experience. It highlights the necessary flexibility of the pedagogic approach and the subtle ethical considerations that underlie creative processes in this context (see also Huesca, 2009; Taub-Pervizpour, 2009):

A 21 year- old Scott locks himself in the radio studio to record a voice over for his monologue. He produces a 15 minute-long piece, too long to be acceptable for the short DST format but also – importantly - not suitable for an audience content-wise. 'So what's the point of me being here?' – asks the frustrated young man, and from now on refuses to do anything with the monologue. Actually he refuses to speak at all for the whole week. One of the teachers suggests eventually grabbing a video camera and asking Scott a series of questions. Nothing scripted, not probing, just a casual interview. What comes out is again content of perceived self-uselessness, self-hatred and abuse. 'We'll leave it at that and use it as a draft' – decided the somewhat defeated teacher. The boy leaves just after the morning coffee break. 'Have I pushed him too far?' – wonders the teacher. But the boy is back the following day. Some other kid doesn't turn up for the scheduled radio show. Teachers look for a volunteer to fill in urgently. Scott is keen. Surprisingly, he's got a prepared CD with all the music as required. On the radio, he turns out to be really "switched on"; apart from getting into a bit of trouble with the SYN trainer because he licks the mike at some stage. Back at YWX, a proposition to make a micro-documentary instead of a monologue strikes a chord. He's since made a charmingly quirky little video piece about his favourite blue sunglasses. Praised for this creation, he's now working on a companion piece about his extra-large jacket.

Sustaining differences and guaranteeing connectedness

In its simplest form YWX seeks to work with young people who are disengaged from normal social supports, especially from formal education, in learning how to learn. Scott's monologue making process illustrates many aspects of this learning process, including voice, skills, understanding, empowerment and the pains and pleasure of transformation. In seeking to give an opportunity to 'find a voice', Scott is offered a somewhat structured DST format: a few minutes responding to semi-structured questions. He exceeds the time frame, and, importantly, introduces content deemed by Youthworx staff unacceptable to be produced. In essence this sets up the tensions inherent in this pedagogy between the free *individual* voice and the *social* voice that is formed and informed to enable a dialogue or understanding. A crafted voice requires the application of skills and a critical awareness of oneself and an audience for understanding to occur. Scott resisted the offered DST convention: his *voice-over* was way too long, and importantly, the recorded material socially unacceptable. The idea of talking about himself materialised, in Scott's case, in content depicting self-hatred. Both the student and the institution needed some protection from any future and uncontrolled use of this material, so responsibility for both content control and potential consequences rested ultimately with the expert facilitator. The process required editorial intervention, responsibility for YouthWorx students, and critical feedback not only to enable effective communication with others, but also to sustain a genuine learning engagement and encourage further participation.

Thus a tension arises between finding a voice in a looser, more general sense and gaining media competence and skills as such. The project's staff recognised that if the institution or the student settled for expression of voice only, the opportunity for gaining excellence in communication might be lost. The young people quickly sense if they are being patronised and often then slip into the easy game of meeting the lowest level of demands. And yet, according to the YouthWorx media facilitators, overemphasis on skills development can remind the young people of continued failure in mainstream education, and YWX is then no longer a safe place where they can learn how to learn. 'Sustaining difference and guaranteeing connectedness' demands such tension within the educational process. In Scott's case the non-linear dynamics described above take his task in a new direction. He refuses a second approach to the same task and seems to withdraw from active participation. Surprisingly he grasps an opportunity for a different, unrelated radio presentation task and it is noted that he does remarkably well. He works with and builds upon his own strengths, and is caught 'getting it right'. Out of this the original task is reframed to a micro-documentary, apparently less personal but ultimately equally self-revealing. Scott's piece becomes the representative work shown to visitors to the YWX centre, expressive of the creativity of genuine voice skillfully crafted to communicate understanding and emotion.

Knut Lundby is right to highlight the importance of institutional power structures that shape the DST activity (Lundby, 2009: 181). Careful attention to power relationships in the process is needed so that the story teller remains in charge of their own story while incorporating external feedback about what and how their story communicates. Indeed the processes both of narrative media production and of identity and social transformation are non linear. Cause is not followed by predictable effect. Scott's creative – and transformatory - process is allowed to happen in an organic, flexible fashion, in the dynamic interactions between the storyteller and their peers and expert facilitators. 'Power with' or 'power from alongside' was crucial to his experience. Such power facilitated both voice and understanding. It was clear to the media facilitator that 'power over' would have silenced the voice. Abdication of any power by the teachers, on the other hand, would have reduced the outcome to an over-long statement of self-hatred. The pain of the

process was palpable, for learner and teacher/facilitators. Spontaneous applause greeted Scott's micro-documentary when it was publicly screened at the end of semester celebration, and his pleasure showed. In the balance of that semester he had flourished as an actor in the productions of other students' work, as well as completing a companion piece to his own work. We witnessed a marked development in media skills for sharing understanding, along with an apparent deepening of sense of identity and social connectedness.

DST is different from social media production practices. In the YouthWorx institutional context it provides a means for developing a capacity for not just self-expression but self-reflection, offering reasons as to 'why' something is not acceptable. Participants are also guided through the production of their story for a successful media effect. YWX teachers go through young people's scripts to help them tease out content that 'the audience would be really interested in hearing more about' (Staley, 2009). Although, as David Wardell, a YWX media facilitator admits it's hard to pin down what makes a good story. 'Sometimes a story about someone's old blanket can work really well', he tells us. 'But generally, from my experience as a DST trainer at Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACMI) a lot of stories can be not very entertaining from the media point of view'. And he adds, 'it's ultimately up to DST workshop participants how they tell their stories but we as trainers do suggest what photos, what bits of information, etc. can work better' (Wardell, 2009). This socially embedded media awareness has translated into new training arrangements that focus on more prescriptive strategies around script-writing and production, and less improvisation. ACMI digital stories are shown now before the production of monologues to model pieces that other people, both young and old have done, present a diversity of storytelling styles, and 'fuel the fire a little bit' (Staley, 2009).

The social connectedness involved in DST comes to expression particularly in an educational task that sequentially follows making digital monologues. The next assignment requires more emphasis on 'external' content and knowledge/skill transfer. In the project manager's words:

...telling a story that's outside you, an external thing, whether it's a topic, you can be involved in it, but the idea is you're using the form, the medium of film to start to tell the story that is relevant to a community, to an audience (Staley, 2009).

Learning to interview others, for example, serves to introduce the idea of mini-documentaries. This exercise is followed by a main film project where collaboration and team-based work becomes crucial. One of the students, twenty-year old Mark, chose, for example, to make a rap music video as his second media project. He drew in three less able learners, coached them into jointly recording his rap, and then took them to landmark sites in Melbourne to record video footage. Additional participants staffed the cameras and microphones. The impact this collaboration had on Mark's colleague performers was extraordinary, clearly noticeable on their faces during the public screening of their DVD clip, and revealed in our conversations with the students. One of these participants, an eighteen-year-old Tom, is a recently arrived refugee from Sudan. Until this point he had been very tentative, as he struggled with language and adaptation to a new and alien culture. Mark's invitation into this creative process marked a turning point of inclusion and acceptance that continues to express itself. Although Tom continues to have difficulties with the technical aspects of media production – something that YWX media facilitators attribute mostly to his lack of linguistic competence – he never misses a school day, and is always present for additional recreation events. He joins in the meals, where formerly he contented himself with bread and butter eaten away from the group. Now he smiles a lot, and will pause for conversation. It can be said, Tom is 'finding voice', but more importantly is

discovering understanding, and a sense of social connection that provides him with a supportive environment to explore his creativity. This example lends evidence to the thesis that voice alone is never enough; voice does not equate with communication. A right to voice is complemented by a right to be understood, and this in turn requires skill development and openness to interaction and a critical review among young people 'at risk'. Indeed, understanding arises from social connectedness and contributes to a deeper connection. Young people who initially find it difficult to talk about themselves discover social networks and a sense of belonging that enriches their learning and confirms a stronger sense of self.

Conclusions

YouthWorx is one of very many community-based organisations that engage disadvantaged young people in media training and production to reconnect them with further education or employment. Digital storytelling is an important and relatively low-resource practice deployed to allow self-expression and the extension of media competencies. The media skills, and, importantly, social competencies (self-confidence and effective collaboration with others) acquired in the process are intended to translate into other aspects of participants' lives outside the project. While DST is a powerful tool for many YouthWorx participants to experience the pleasures of being a media creator and extend their social skills, the process is also fraught with problems. As we have illustrated, there are numbers of ethical issues that need a careful consideration in the description of the DST creative practice. Crucially, the case study of Scott's experience with DST format is representative of broader issues at the heart of participatory media pedagogies and practices - and not just those involving 'disadvantaged' young people. As we have seen, the emphasis on self-expression ('voice') needs to be balanced with the need to forge social competencies in relation to both interpersonal and media skills. Processes of editorial guidance and moderation are part of learning self-reflection.

Still, the processes of DST offer markers that can indicate growing confidence and competence in the story teller, not just in the telling of their story in a media narrative or aesthetic sense, but also in their own identity and their connectedness with others. Confidence and competence begin to emerge in the articulation of voice and grow at deeper levels in the critical processes of self-listening, peer review and expert input from a facilitator, as part of a deliberate, facilitated, sequential process of participatory learning. This confidence and competence is consistently confirmed in the creative directions that the learners develop, beyond the expectations of the expert facilitators. The potential of DST can be further enhanced by media projects in which students are invited to talk about 'something else'. Mark's video clip is a clear example; many contributed to subject matter beyond their own personal stories, in a collaborative approach, and the emerging outcome is far greater than the sum of its parts. YouthWorx's media pedagogy deliberately seeks to promote this social dynamic rather than narrowly focusing on the DST product. Effective understanding, in Husband's sense is essential, as is an institutional culture built on the value of understanding between a youth organisation staff and young participants. Our cultural observations reveal that young people involved in the project have responded well to more collaborative processes of DST, with students helping others in shooting short videos, choosing a soundtrack or editing. They have responded particularly well to public screenings organised to celebrate their achievements. The spirit of community belonging and mutual support is palpable in a genuine experience of connectedness that sustains difference.

YouthWorx experience shows that the shift from self-expression to community-building is a basis for young people to be able to move on into a

broader, less supported community setting, be it another educational course or a job. The role of projects such as YouthWorx is to facilitate a learning engagement that can lead to personal transformation. The proposed implication from our investigation is to focus on digital storytelling as process rather than product. This is consistent with calls from academics and practitioners (e.g. Soep 2006: 200) for further research to explore various ways in which media and social competences acquired in the creative process translate into other aspects of young people's lives, including their social networks, further education, or employment opportunities. The focus on the process rather than the final product opens avenues for the study of the complexities inherent in cultural production, and the ways in which social connectedness and differences particular to an individual storyteller are always negotiated.

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Bio

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Link to YWX website, for viewing of *My Glasses*

http://www.youthworx.org.au/Youthworxmedia/Students_Work.html

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