Digital Storytelling for Reflective Practice in Communities of Learners

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ABSTRACT
This paper will present the use of digital storytelling* in community development settings to promote reflective practice and foster connections in communities of learners. Through digital storytelling, individuals learn to tell a story, and in doing so, become more effective actors in collaborative work environments. This particular form of digital storytelling encourages participants to communicate meaning on multiple levels (voice, point, emotional content, tension, story arc), and it allows storytellers to take fresh perspective on their work. Participants abstract meaning, but also give it a concrete form, as story, which can then be shared. We consider the benefits of this approach as a way to strengthen ties among participants in the creative and social outreach work in which they engage.

Keywords
reflective practice, storytelling, digital stories, multimedia, narrative, community of learners, adult education, informal learning, organizational learning, community development

INTRODUCTION
We are using workshops in digital video production to spark discussion in community groups in order to define salient narratives within these organizations as they arise from reflection-in-practice. This paper focuses on two projects in progress: a public health network in Springfield, and an informal learning environment for urban youth. Our work with digital storytelling to support reflective practice is premised on four guiding principles: articulation, abstraction, audience, and affinity, described below.

Articulation
The form of digital stories forces participants to focus on their own storylines in order to make them as compelling and as efficient as possible. In this close examination, participants choose to shed details that may not be vital to the heart of the narrative. They become more able to clearly articulate the importance of why they do what they do in this discovery and discernment process.

Abstraction
As participants work to construct their digital stories out of heterogeneous elements (images, music, voice, for example), they find that they must distill the meaning they hope to convey into abstract media symbols. They then carefully balance how these interact in the timeline of the piece, filling in gaps as they communicate their message through several channels simultaneously.

Audience
Digital stories begin with an assumption of communicating with an intended audience. Participants must “step outside” their day-to-day experience to reflect upon their work in a new light. The promise of a channel for communicating with an anticipated group of people creates a welcome “performance pressure.” This affects the final piece, in that the participants must consider point of view and accessibility of their pieces, more than if the digital stories were simply private video journals.

Affinity
As participants see other digital stories within the group of stories, themes emerge, and stories begin to influence one another and develop connecting themes. We find that the community defines this metastory, a story of the collected stories, of the group—out of many, one. The stories become “things to think with”, constructed objects which foster dialogue and discussion. Fellow participants serve as critics to one another and provide valuable guidance as the story takes shape, acting as an in vitro audience. This iterative feedback, as well as the anticipated final screening, improves quality of the pieces generally.

We cannot examine the important role of storytelling without also paying close attention to the context in which story is used and to what end. We now focus on how these four principles apply in our work with two communities.

* “Digital storytelling” can be an ambiguous term: for the purposes of our work, we refer to a form defined by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California (see [1]). The CDS model, which we have adapted and implemented, integrates existing photographs, music, home video, and voice into brief (2–5 minute) digital video pieces.
CASE 1: THE NORTH END OUTREACH NETWORK
Since 2000, the Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP) [2] at MIT has used digital storytelling in workshops and coursework, and, most recently, with the North End Outreach Network (NEON), a public health initiative in the North End of Springfield, Massachusetts. The process began with creating a “story bank” of narratives owned and created by the community. As neighborhood leaders, NEON community health advocates (CHAs) each chose an issue that they have witnessed in their work and created a story based on their own experience confronting that issue. These issues ranged from teenage pregnancy to gang involvement to domestic violence. For each CHA, having personally confronted these issues drives their desire to work as a community advocate. Many, however, had not articulated this connection in such terms, or revealed their experiences to their coworkers.

The process of digital storytelling is a collaborative one. CHAs listened and critiqued multiple drafts of each other’s stories, borrowing ideas, exchanging photos, and sharing music with one another. The workshop occurred as a three-day training at MIT, complete with seven producers (and two infants!). In both English and in Spanish, these stories have been used as organizing tools throughout the North End neighborhood of Springfield. (Fig. 1)

These newfound producers took the initiative to arrange various screenings at drop-in centers and health clinics and with their clients. This audience related closely to the themes and struggles portrayed by the stories. Beyond building community among the participants of the workshop, CHAs found that their stories connected them closely with neighborhood residents, thus leading to more effective advocacy.

The second phase of this project is the implementation of a “train the trainer” model which will build local capacity in multimedia production. Participants plan to infuse the neighborhood with digital stories. From the desktops of computers in community technology centers to the health clinic waiting room, NEON has learned to use narrative to boost their role as advocates, organizers, and educators.

CASE 2: THE COMPUTER CLUBHOUSE
Since its founding in 1993, the Intel Computer Clubhouse [3, 7] has grown to become an international network of after-school centers offering youth from underserved communities access both to technology and to adult mentors who support members’ pursuit of creative projects based on the members’ own interests. A visitor to any one of the more than fifty sites might have difficulty reading the scene on a typical day. The room may buzz with action, but the decentralized structure makes it difficult to assess what important and real learning is happening within the space. Looking around the room, one might see some color laser prints of digital art or dormant sculptures made of LEGO building bricks, but these offer little insight on the dynamic nature of the most accomplished projects produced by the youth. Often, visitors may request a short tour, and in doing so they hear some stories of what activity the space fosters. We believe that the production of digital stories by the Clubhouse community will address these concerns of documentation and sharing and will further enhance the interaction and influence between Clubhouse locations.

A collection of “learning stories” underlie the constructionist learning theories of Seymour Papert (see, e.g. [4, 5]). As an epistemologist, and like many social scientists, Papert tells these stories about the people he is observing (or about himself), but the subjects he follows do not tell their stories to us themselves. In our work with youth of the Clubhouse, we turn this around, asking members to tell stories of, by, and for the members, who benefit from being able to articulate more clearly about their work. We are organizing workshops in Computer Clubhouses for members to reflect on their creative process, and for mentors to reflect on their work with the youth. Through digital storytelling, we expect that this opportunity will provide Clubhouse members and mentors with a richer experience and a deeper connection to their work and to one another, as we have witnessed among participants in our previous digital storytelling workshops. (Fig. 2)

Figures 1 & 2. Storyboards: NEON (1, left), the Computer Clubhouse (2, right). View full digital stories at [10].
In the day-to-day life of the Clubhouse, critique and feedback happen informally, as members and mentors circulate in the room. The network sought to migrate this interaction beyond the walls of any single site by encouraging members to post their work to a shared intranet, The Computer Clubhouse Village, which it launched in February 2002. Built by Intel’s Internet Business Solutions team in partnership with the Clubhouse network staff at the Museum of Science, the Village extends a previous database modeled on MUSIC [9].

A number of pieces have been deposited in the project library. Concerned that a form like digital stories could be lost in this database context, we are designing a video streaming system, Channel C, which Clubhouse members will build collaboratively. That is, if they want to share a piece, members will schedule it to be seen in a future “broadcast” composed of other contributions from other members throughout the network. It is a bottom-up model, in which the producers of shared stories are also the consumers. Because the medium is more language-independent than, for example, a text-based form for reflection, we feel that such a avenue for communication fits especially well in this multilingual network, which extends from Bogota to Delhi, Haifa to Miami.

DISCUSSION
Stories do not become stories automatically, formed from lists of events, but rather require careful crafting to achieve voice, point, emotion, tension, and story arc. It is this craftsmanship that is of special relevance to us in considering the communities of learners with which we work.

We propose the development of digital stories as important not just in its product but also in its process. For our process, we have adopted the notion of reflective practice, a term first coined by Donald A. Schön in his work The Reflective Practitioner [8]. One researcher in management learning has described reflective practice as periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one’s immediate environment about what has recently transpired. It illuminates what has been experienced by both self and others, providing a basis for future action. It thus constitutes the ability to uncover and make explicit to oneself and to one’s colleagues what one has planned, observed, or achieved in practice. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of experiences that may be overlooked in practice. [6]

Through reflective practice, individuals and groups give their work conscious attention, thereby examining and improving their positions as leaders and learners in their communities.

In our workshops, our community partners answer not just “What do I do?” but also “Why do I do what I do?” We have observed these positive outcomes from infusing reflective practice into community development settings:

- The capacity to respond to complexity in introspective ways deepens as impulsive theory building is discouraged.
- Practitioners develop tools for transformation in the areas of technology, economic development, and community empowerment; they change mindsets.
- Shared knowledge leads to greater opportunities for struggling communities to achieve wealth and empowerment in the information and knowledge economy. [2]

CONCLUSION
To reflective practice we have added the creative challenge of story; to digital storytelling we have added the richness of reflection. Digital storytelling for reflective practice is a valuable, transformative tool for personal, professional, organizational, and community development. As stories are shared, the sense of community itself is strengthened. Once complete, the stories serve as objects which mediate relationships. As our interaction with the North End Outreach Network and the Computer Clubhouse Network continues, we look forward to what we have yet to learn from our experiences watching stories unfold in different work environments and different generations.

REFERENCES
10. To see several digital stories online, please visit http://llk.media.mit.edu/projects/channelc/crcp-stories