Digital Storytelling as a Participatory Research Tool

A Sample Research Protocol

The digital storytelling approach suggests a method for engaging community members as partner knowledge producers to ensure that research design, process and outcomes arise from the community (i.e., are community-based), include the community (i.e., are culturally-informed) and serve the community's goals. The following suggests one way digital storytelling might be applied to research with communities.[1]

Step 1 – Identify research topic and community.

Step 2 – Become acquainted with the digital storytelling genre and connect with the community to identify practitioners with experience facilitating workshops related to your topic and/or with your target population. For researchers new to digital storytelling, practitioners can advise on logistical and technical setup[2], provide insights regarding best practices, as well as valuable guidance for your approach to the community (Step 4) and connect you with digital storytelling training opportunities.

Step 3 – Participate in a digital storytelling workshop. A key principle of digital storytelling practice is first-hand participation in a workshop. These workshops are emotionally demanding, and it's essential to be able to identify with the storytelling participant's perspective of the process. This experience should inform the prompts the researcher develops to elicit stories (Step 7). Researchers who plan to actively participate as co-facilitators should also participate in facilitators training(s).[3]

Step 4 – Identify gatekeeper(s) – individuals and/or organizations who can assist in providing access and introductions to the community. Propose digital storytelling as a community-based participatory approach to conducting a needs assessment that involves the community in identifying salient research questions to guide research design. Ideally, the gatekeeper(s) would introduce the researcher to the community at an appropriate community forum where the researcher can present the project goals and again articulate interest in involving participants in developing the project design, as well as partnering on research and publication. Along these lines, the community forum can be leveraged as a means of involving the community in developing prompts that fit their project goals. The forum will also provide a first opportunity to assess interest and solicit the community's advice on recruiting participants. *How much time can potential participants reasonably commit? (i.e., Will a 3-day workshop format be appropriate?) Will accommodations or incentives facilitate broader, more inclusive participation (e.g., childcare, transportation vouchers, or other compensation)?* Digital storytelling practitioners with experience working with your research community will also have additional advice along these lines.

Step 5 – Assemble your digital storytelling facilitation team. Whenever feasible, at least one member of the team should represent the participant storyteller (community) demographic. Ideally, this would be a trusted member of the community other than the gatekeeper, who is willing to learn from an experienced practitioner how to facilitate digital storytelling workshops (i.e., a train-the-trainer approach). If a community member is not available, seek an experienced facilitator from the digital storytelling community who matches the project population demographic.

Step 6 – Based on feedback from the gatekeeper(s) and community, finalize the workshop schedule, venue and incentives (if appropriate) and work with the gatekeeper(s) to recruit workshop participants. An ideal participant to facilitator ratio is about 3:1, but may need to be adjusted for groups with limited computer literacy.

Heather Gerhart, M.A.

Step 7 – Conduct digital storytelling workshop(s) using prompts that generate stories related to the research topic. In developing prompts, allow plenty of leeway for participants to choose how to represent themselves and their experiences in ways that do not anticipate the salient issues for the community. Examples[4] might include:

> *Write about a time when listening to someone changed something for you.*
> *Tell about the most important time you stood up for yourself or for someone else.*
> *Write about a time you looked at yourself through the eyes of another.*

A related approach might be to conduct an "image walk" where participants take photos in response to a research-related story prompt.[5] The photos and digital stories that result will provide an "insider's" representation and framing.

Throughout the workshop, the facilitation team should work to intentionally level the playing field between facilitators and participant storytellers. This is often best accomplished with humility and transparency – by explicitly communicating a willingness to learn, and by recognizing the potential for mistakes as the group gets to know one another. Whenever practical, facilitators should also share personal stories, as well as use their own digital stories to illustrate design elements, technical issues, etc. This opens up opportunities to reciprocate with stories, and critique without making participants feel vulnerable. Other strategies for interrupting the facilitator/participant power dynamic include: 1) involving participants in designing story prompts that reflect their concerns, as well as ground rules for the story circle; 2) staggering facilitators around the table among participants rather than at the "head" of the table[6]; and 3) acknowledging positionality, privilege or assumptions we may bring to this work.

Step 8 – Allow sufficient time following the story screening to have a facilitated discussion of the stories among the workshop participants. Ask: *What did participants hear?* Assess participants' interest in hosting a community screening and further discussion.[7]

Step 9 – Following the digital storytelling workshop, debrief among the facilitation team, and analyze stories for themes related to issues, challenges, meaningful moments/relationships, etc. that the community storytellers identify as important. If participants have agreed to a community screening/discussion, this provides an opportunity to member-check outside of the workshop as well. Alternatively, facilitators can meet individually with participants to reflect themes back to the storytellers and check for (dis)agreement.

Step 10 – Design a research question and approach that is responsive to salient issues that surfaced in the digital storytelling workshop and in collective follow-up discussions with the community. The digital storytelling approach can also be used iteratively throughout the research process. For example, researchers might use photographs or other visual media collected in the course of an ethnographic project as prompts to generate additional insights from the community. In other words, reflecting these products back to the community to generate a digital story dialogue in response. Inviting the community's participation in this way ensures that the community participates in informing research conclusions. Furthermore, the resulting dialogue and digital stories produced may reveal further insights – or even limitations – related to how the emerging visual ethnography has been framed.

The ultimate goal is to design and conduct the research project in a way that is accountable to the community that informed the work.

Heather Gerhart, M.A.

References cited:

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Willox, Ashlee Cunsolo, Sherilee L. Harper, and Victoria L. Edge. 2012. "Storytelling in a Digital Age: Digital Storytelling as an Emerging Narrative Method for Preserving and Promoting Indigenous Oral Wisdom." *Qualitative Research*: 1468794112446105.

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[1] This protocol is for illustrative purposes only; it is not intended to address Institutional Review Board requirements.

[2] For a summary of the challenges, skillsets and steps for implementing a digital storytelling workshop, see: Dush 2009.

[3] Alternatively, Willox *et al.* make a case for training community facilitators and suggest that research goals are best served when the researcher does *not* participate with the community in their digital storytelling workshop. They distinguish this approach as "a method that puts the participant story and lived experience first, and that allows researchers to analyze the stories only after they have been created and does not include the researchers until the stories are finalized and produced" (2012, 12). In either case, it is essential that the researcher prepares by participating in a digital storytelling workshop in order to become familiar with the process and to experience the participant storyteller's perspective. This experience is important in that it will 1) inform the workshop design – e.g., adapting the format in order to accommodate different competencies or cultural norms; and 2) inform the design of prompts – e.g., how do participants experience prompts that are directed vs. open-ended?

[4] Source: StoryCenter

[5] Given that stories are "relational entities," researchers should establish guidelines with participants about representing others in their stories, and may wish to restrict photography to material culture versus people to protect the privacy of proximate others (Dush 2013, 637). For example, researchers could challenge participants to photograph emotions without including people. NOTE: an emotional response need not be sad, and might include guilt, joy, fear, passion, etc.

[6] In addition to helping to mitigate power, staggered seating enables the facilitation team to better observe participants and provide assistance or emotional support to participants who are in need.

[7] Whenever practical, involve storytellers in designing the format for disseminating their work and connect storytellers with platforms for sharing their stories if they wish.

Heather Gerhart, M.A.