Digital Storytelling as an Emergent Method for Social Research and Practice

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Chapter 21
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Introduction

Media production contains expanded possibilities for multimodal representation, shared authorship, and interactivity, and with that new methods for doing research on a range of subjects in a variety of disciplines from education to public health. Kress (2003) argues the shift from word to image presents new possibilities for communication and representation that may have far-reaching cognitive, social, technological, and economic consequences that deserve more theorizing and study. The concept of multimodal media production (MMP) explains the myriad of modalities people use to understand the world they live in, express themselves, be entertained, and defend themselves, including documentaries, digital stories, hip hop music, digital video poetry, music videos, computer games, public service announcements, youth radio, web sites, blogs, wikis, and others (Turner, 2008). Outside the school setting, people use MMP as a way to engage with their everyday life experiences. These technologies are no longer separate from us; they are ubiquitous to the ways we now live our lives. For any social research project, it is necessary to understand how people are learning and making meaning of their lives. Increasingly, the public is using MMP to publicly document, comment upon, and create their own meaning of events around them.

This was trenchantly demonstrated through user-generated content covering the case of Oscar Grant. Oscar Grant was a young man living in Oakland, California who was assassinated by a police officer while coming home on the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), early in the morning on New Year’s Day 2009. What was particularly remarkable about this incident was that so many people photographed and video recorded the event, thereby publicly documenting this to record police malfeasance. Within hours of the event, raw footage of the murder, as well as commentary on the raw footage, was posted on YouTube. What is so striking about this example is that media production was not just constructed online. As a form of popular social research and activism, people also worked “off-line,” pulling a variety of clips, both user-generated and from the mass media, produced about this event as elicitation materials for conducting interviews with “experts,” such as community activists. These clips were also used to draw upon these resources to create various
MMPs about the shooting. As one example, Jasari X (n.d.) produced a hip hop song/music video/documentary/digital story about the shooting. What was especially compelling in this case was that MMPs such as this were eliciting a visceral response from the people to get out on the streets and demand that this police officer be brought to justice. Using these technologies, which are all pervasive, the public essentially served as a cop watch that monitored police brutality. Increasingly, this phenomenon is one example of much larger phenomena around the world to document injustices and organize protest movements (Rheingold, 2002; Yang, 2007). Essentially, the people themselves served as ethnographers, specifically as participant observers, interviewers, and documentarians, producing counter narratives of the incident.

Narrative inquiry is especially useful in helping researchers to more richly capture how people make sense of their experiences. In particular, the “thinking through” of events and experiences may be seen, in part, through the recording of these phenomena. Therese Riley and Penelope Hawe (2005) write of “internalized soliloquies” that serve as data in narrative research: “These are the conversations one has with oneself or imagined others” (p. 230). Internalized soliloquies signal the narrative sense that people make of their experiences in their social worlds and the ways that people represent their experiences to themselves and to others. However, narratives may be just as useful for interrogating the social and cultural as they are for investigating individual or group phenomena (Riessman, 2008).

As an emergent technological method in social research, digital storytelling adds to the picture of narrative inquiry. As a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method, digital storytelling may be used to investigate individual, group or sociocultural understandings of health, while also increasing community members’ participation and input on studies of health issues and other community concerns (Gubrium, 2009). Digital stories are 3–5 min visual narratives that synthesize images, video, audio recordings of voice and music, and text to create compelling stories (Lambert, 2006). As a project outcome, a digital story may serve as an artifact of “internalized soliloquies,” in which the storyteller is having “conversations” with imagined others, as well as sociocultural understandings and identity performances constructed by participants in the digital storytelling process.

In this chapter, we begin by describing the digital storytelling process. We then present the emergence of digital storytelling as a research method and discuss how digital storytelling serves as an innovative method in social research, proposing ways that the process may be analyzed. Indeed, the process of digital storytelling serves as much as a site for analysis as does the product of digital storytelling. As a component of analysis, we review how the stories produced may be intertextually transcribed for analytical purposes. Finally, to provide clarity for the reader in terms of how digital storytelling may be useful in social research and practice, we provide a case-study example of digital storytelling in a classroom setting. Here, we examine the case as a forum for discussing the prospects and problems associated with using this method in social research and practice.

**Digital Storytelling Process**

As a CBPR method, digital storytelling may bolster community building and community members’ abilities to address local issues of concern. The method is based on a Freirian
model of using images to generate dialogue and to tap into the “funds of knowledge” that people already have (Moll, 1992). These generative images are used to reflect on and tell stories about their lives as a way of coming to understand and challenge oppression (Freire, 1970).

To Freire (1970), the purpose of education is human liberation, which means that people are the subjects of their own learning, not empty vessels filled by the knowledge of experts. To promote the learner as subject, Freire proposes a listening-dialogue-action approach…. The first step is listening to the generative themes or issues of community members in order to create a structural dialogue in which everyone participates as co-learners to jointly construct a shared reality of themselves as individuals in their social context. Individuals must not only be involved in efforts to identify their problems but also to engage in conscientization to analyze the societal context for these problems. (Wallerstein & Duran, 2002, p. 42)

As with other Freirian approaches and many narrative research methods, the goal is to listen to the themes or collective issues of participants. The creative aspect of digital storytelling transforms these themes and shared understandings into physical form, such as a digital story. One affordance of a digital story is that people can publicly represent their experiences through multiple modes that elicit greater illocutionary force.

The process codified as digital storytelling originated in the San Francisco Bay Area at the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) (www.storycenter.org). The center has played an integral part in the production of digital stories in conjunction with oral and local history projects (Meadows, 2003; Tucker, 2006), K-12 and higher education programs (DUSTY, n.d.), public health and youth services (Dupain & Maguire, 2005, 2007), domestic healthcare and international health and development programs (Silence Speaks, n.d.), and Spanish language projects in the United States (Contando Nuestras Historias, n.d.), and in countries such as Norway, India, and Brazil (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009; Lundby, 2008; Sahni, 2003; U.C. Links, 2002). In each of these cases, the ways that digital stories have been produced were adjusted and adapted to fit the needs and interests of participating communities.

Gubrium (2009) reviewed the digital storytelling process, especially as it relates to health promotion research and practice, in a prior publication. CDS follows a train-the-trainer model in which those who have experience with digital storytelling, known as the trainers, train others, known as the participants, to construct their own digital stories. To be a digital storytelling trainer, you do not have to be a technology or storytelling “expert”; you just have to have completed your own digital story and be willing to share the process with others. Thus, the train-the-trainer model moves away from the idea of “experts” running the show. During a workshop, participants “learn by doing” and produce their own digital story over the course of three 8-hr days. By the end of the workshop, all participants have constructed a digital story. The aim is to have participants construct their own digital story and to avoid having the trainer construct a story for them.

Training workshops may include as many participants as can be accommodated by available computers. However, we recommend that the number of participants not overwhelm the number of trainers available, as trainers are expected to work closely with participants in a mentoring relationship. While 3-day workshops are the norm, a concentrated period of time better allows for undisturbed participation in the digital storytelling process. Time allocation for completing a workshop should be flexible according to the
daily schedules of participants. All told, participants should expect to devote approximately 24 hr to complete a story.

Participants are usually asked to come to the first workshop session with a page to a page and a half draft of their story, or at the very least an idea for their story in mind, and to bring along digital photos, print photos to be scanned, or video clips they may want to incorporate into their stories. In terms of subject matter for the story, the digital storytelling process is notably fluid. For example, if the aim of a project is to better understand high school student perspectives on sexual health education, the workshop trainers may ask the participants to focus on constructing a story that takes their experiences with sexual health education into consideration. The research and practice process, thus, is initially driven by the research or advocacy topic, but the content comes from the experiences of participants. Other workshops, however, may contain a more open agenda and ask only that participants focus on constructing a story that is meaningful to them.

Workshops and the digital storytelling process are commonly organized into phases, but there is also flexibility in this. The first phase of the workshop is usually devoted to an overview of digital storytelling in which participants become better acquainted with the process. As participants often arrive at a workshop not quite sure how to identify a digital story, the moderator may present digital story samples to the group in order to exemplify the final product. Trainers may then present a brief lecture on the seven elements of digital storytelling as conceptualized through the CDS: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, voice, soundtrack/music, economy, and pacing (Lambert, 2006). These elements represent the basic ingredients of a multimedia story and are kept in mind throughout the production process. Participants are asked to consider these elements when revising their own stories and when listening to and commenting on other participants’ stories during collaborative discussion sessions. Participants also may be asked to take part in several talking or writing activities, which can be used as warm-up activities to encourage a less formal writing style.

The digital storytelling process is a highly collaborative and interactive one. Indeed, participant observation of the production process may serve as a site for the analysis of the social construction of narrative and identity. The second phase of the workshop deals with participants crafting the script of their stories, beginning with the story circle process. The purpose of a story circle is to create a safe and comfortable space for participants to present the first draft or initial idea for their stories and to allow group cohesion in discussing and mutually mentoring each other in story construction. In this regard, storytelling can serve as a kind of medicine for healing (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Story circles can be used by participants for discussing difficult experiences and may provide the first outlet for participants to acknowledge and create something positive from these circumstances. All participants are given the same amount of time to present and discuss their stories, with listening participants encouraged to consider the seven elements of storytelling when discussing the storyteller’s narrative. This provides a shared format for both story construction and supportive commentary. Out of the discussion of participants’ stories, a unity of mission develops that forms a sense of collaborative accomplishment. In our experience, social research incorporating MMP methods, in particular those projects that incorporate social networking sites or other virtual methods, is shifting toward looking at how people are collaborating using these new media (boyd, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). This collaborative nature disrupts traditional notions of authorship that see thinking and learning as individual in nature, instead of rooted in a sociocultural context where people collaborate

After the story circle is completed, workshop trainers may present a tutorial on working with a digital image editing application, such as Picasa, which is available for free download from the Internet, or Photoshop Express. Participants are taught to scan printed photos into their computers and to visually modify scanned and digital photos for use in the digital story. Trainers can add a separate lecture on photography and/or run a photo activity with participants so that they may think more critically about the visual representations they use to develop their digital stories.

Participants revise their story scripts with the assistance of the workshop trainers, and are asked to consider comments made about their idea/draft during the story circle. They then record a voiceover of their scripts, which is used as the audio portion of the digital story. Voiceovers are usually recorded in a room separate from the main training area. This provides the participants privacy in audio recording their stories and allows for better acoustics in recording. Trainers work with participants to teach them how to use the voice recording software, advise them how to properly position themselves in front of the microphone, and encourage them to speak as much as possible with their natural speaking voice.

While some participants record their voiceovers, other participants create storyboards for their digital stories. A storyboard serves as a visual layout or menu for digital story construction. A storyboard consists of a large sheet of paper, on which participants align oral/aural elements of their stories, such as story scripts and soundtrack/musical elements, with visual elements, such as photos, video clips, or scanned visual objects. Participants are taught to consider the timing and placement of elements of their stories, such as the order of parts of their story, as well as the interaction between elements (Lambert, 2007).

The final phase of the digital storytelling workshop centers on incorporating components of the digital story (visual, oral, and aural elements) into a nonlinear video editing application such as iMovie (available for free on a Mac) and Final Cut Express for Macs or MovieMaker (available for free on a PC) and Adobe Premiere for PCs. Through a trainer-provided tutorial, participants learn how to import and work with their source materials within the application, beginning a rough edit of their digital stories. A range of collaborative practices takes place among participants and trainers in making choices in the production process.

By the end of the workshop, each participant should expect to have a digital story ready to present to the group. As part of a collaborative effort, workshop closure is important in the digital storytelling process. Screening each digital story at the end of the workshop is a way of celebrating the groups’ collective accomplishments (Lambert, 2007). The first showing of a digital story is usually restricted to participants and trainers within the workshop, helping to sustain the safe space and group cohesion built over the course of the workshop.

Digital Storytelling as a Method for Social Research

More than 20 years ago, feminist and postmodern social researchers led a discussion of the ways that we produce and represent the individual, society, and culture through social
The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research

research and representation by challenging the norm of the detached social scientist and inviting the “objects of investigation” to “talk back” in scholarly texts (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Few of these critics, however, challenged the notion of written text as the central medium for empirical data. Shifts in the everyday use of technology from written texts to multimodal texts have implications for social research (Kress, 2003). While written texts remain a central practice and expectation in social research, some researchers are interested in turning to new media for scholarly production.

More recently, varied disciplines in social research, including anthropology, sociology, and cultural geography, have reinvigorated the discussion of the relevance of ethnographic knowledge. In public health, nursing, education, and other applied fields, community-based participatory research (CBPR) has gained prominence as an approach to ethnographic scholarship and understandings applied in practice. In response to the critique of ethnographic representation, visual social researchers have begun to embrace CBPR approaches. Digital and visual approaches to participatory research offer opportunities to open up the social research process and to share research with a diverse array of audiences. In this regard, digital storytelling serves as an exemplar. The digital storytelling process and product offers up an array of visual, oral, textual, and aural ethnographic empirical material for analysis, while both are largely directed and produced by the digital storyteller.

Digital Storytelling Innovation

Digital storytelling is rooted in community arts and oral history traditions. It first emerged as a method of community activism, most notably linked with radical community theater in the San Francisco Bay area. Thus, the roots of digital storytelling do not lie in social research so much as in community building and pedagogical or alternative literacy efforts (Meadows, 2003). The method is said to have originated with Joe Lambert’s and the late performance artist Dana Atchley’s collaborative work on “storying” lives through community theater production. While staging their theater productions, the two community artist activists realized that the people in the audience watching the performances were also interested in producing their own stories. CDS workshops emerged in the early 1990s as a response, with Lambert and partner Nina Mullen, committed to helping other people tell their own stories, using emerging digital technologies as media for producing their own stories (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005).

As a method of social research, the aims of digital storytelling may be linked to an iteration of participant observation popular in Great Britain in the late 1930s through the mid-1960s, that later reemerged in the early 1980s (Fyfe, 2007). The Mass Observation Movement claimed that any person could serve as observer and that only through “mass observation,” which is the everyday observations of millions of people involved in public events, could we have a mass science of everyday life. According to this perspective, each individual observing an event, whether through diaries, interviews, conversations, or the direct observations and recordings of field notes, serves as a point of observation (Hubble, 2006). Known as an “anthropology of ourselves,” the Mass Observation Movement was not “issue based, but holistic, seeking to observe the [previously] unobserved, and resisting objectification of those observed by not only being about the people, but also for them and created by them” (Fyfe, 2007, p. 5). The digital storytelling process can be used to
create similar individual or group observation points on everyday life, as the aim of this process is also to understand the everyday life experiences of ordinary people (Fyfe, 2007). Thus, the epistemological roots of digital storytelling are quite similar to that of the Mass Observation Movement, which foregrounds local understandings as empirical data.

As a method of social research and activism, however, digital storytelling moves beyond the observational qualities of Mass Observation. Analysis of the process begins from the interlocution of participant and trainer/researcher with the researcher present and helping to work with the population she is trying to learn from in projects aimed at improving the material conditions of participants’ lives (Freire, 1970). This active involvement on the part of the researcher reflects the philosophical or epistemological perspective of phenomenology that is aimed at facilitating reflection in order to represent the life-world of participants (Barab & Roth, 2006; Favret-Saada, 1980; Merleau-Ponty, 1973; Ranciere, 1991). Seeking to respect the uniqueness of every individual and experience, phenomenology challenges the idea that there is no one singular universal truth. Instead, it seeks to understand how local knowledge relates to the historical and social context from which it arises. Thus, multiple purposes may be realized from the digital storytelling process, as it serves up both empirical data for analysis and may be implemented as a vehicle to challenge social injustices in local and international arenas.

While digital storytelling has been used in primary, secondary, and adult education as a way to increase student access to alternative forms of literacy (DUSTY, n.d.; Educause Learning Initiative, 2007; Kajder, 2006; Ohler, 2007), it is an incipient method for use in social research and research in health programming and practice. Research efforts incorporating digital storytelling tend to center on identity as a locus of concern (de Leeuw & Rydin, 2007), research-based practice, or research that contributes to knowledge production and intervention (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Burgess, 2006; Chavez et al., 2004; Marcus, 2004; Meadows, 2003), and research on pedagogical processes, such as literacy projects and conceptual learning projects (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Mahiri, 2004; Morrell, 2004). As an emergent method in social research, digital storytelling may be used to address social inequities and to shed light on individual and community understandings of experience. Organizations such as Stories for Change (n.d.) mobilize workshop trainers and facilitators specifically to use digital storytelling to incite action within and between local groups.

Daniel Meadows (2003), director of BBC Wales—Capture Wales, describes the shift of power in representation played out through digital storytelling:

No longer must the public tolerate being “done” by media—that is, no longer must we tolerate media being done to us. No longer must we put up with professional documentarists recording us for hours and then throwing away most of what we tell them, keeping only those bits that tell our stories their own way and, more than likely, at our expense. If we will only learn the skills of Digital Storytelling then we can, quite literally, “take the power back.”

(Meadows, 2003, p. 192)

Invoking a sort of grassroots empowerment that may be felt by participants of the digital storytelling process, Meadows seemingly responds to a 1980s crisis in social research and representation in which “the native” was invited to “talk back” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Digital storytelling plays with the notion of empirical reality in terms of who is in control of producing and interpreting reality. As process and artifact, digital stories may be linked to the social construction of memory. For example, de Leeuw and Rydin (2007)
use digital storytelling as media to study children’s lives. They note the accessibility and user-friendly qualities of digital storytelling and other participatory media methods in studying children’s lives. Their central research question is to analyze the ways that children represent and express their experiences of migration. De Leeuw and Rydin use digital stories as sites for analysis to investigate the ways that children socially construct their experiences of cultural identity. Echoing Meadows’ claim (2003), they regard children as media producers, with their media productions serving as sites for analyzing the social construction of identity.

In their Media Clubs project, children participated in any number of media clubs, one of which included a variant of a digital storytelling workshop. De Leeuw and Rydin (2007) focus on a small set of participating children’s media productions from these clubs that serve as exemplars for analyzing self-representational processes and identity construction. Here, digital storytelling may be used as a “process of active construction of personal history through the use of what Hoskins (2001) calls ‘memory devices,’ pointing to photo albums, home videos [and I add here, digital stories]. The medium at least partly becomes memory” (de Leeuw & Rydin, 2007, p. 460). The process allows participants to use expressive means to construct individual and collective identities and to represent their memories from the past, present, and future (de Leeuw & Rydin, 2007).

Indeed, the digital storytelling process may serve as a trigger for the social construction of memory. The Charlestown Digital Stories project (Digital Stories @ UMBC, n.d.), focused on remembering and relating forgotten memories, is a collaborative project between students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County’s New Media Studio (NMS), and residents of the Charlestown Retirement Community. Digital stories produced during the project are broadcast on Retirement Living Television, a cable network syndicated in the Mid-Atlantic and New England, dedicated to serving the needs of adults over the age of 50. The Charlestown project serves as an example of an intergenerational initiative, with younger students and older retirement community resident participants working together in the digital storytelling process (Shewbridge, 2007). Students participating in the Charlestown project noted in their evaluations of the digital storytelling workshop that they found commonalities and relevance between their own experiences and those of the retirement community residents. Importantly, both young and older participant groups noted that several components of the digital storytelling workshop, but especially the story circle activity, encouraged them to remember and relate forgotten memories.

Analyzing the Digital Storytelling Process and Outcome

While the process of producing a digital story has been codified to some extent, the ways to analyze a digital story are in a nascent stage of development. Social researchers using digital storytelling as a method of narrative inquiry should take note of other methods of narrative and visual analysis. The analyst might think of the various modes of representation demonstrated through the digital storytelling process, as well as within the product of digital storytelling. During the digital storytelling process, participants involved are constructing their stories or voiceover scripts to be read aloud as narration for the digital story. The script itself, then, could be analyzed as a textual artifact, with “what,” “how,”
“why,” “when,” and “for whom” questions asked of the script and the storyteller. “What” questions would be the focus of a thematic analysis. Focusing on these questions, the analyst would explore the generative themes of the story. In addition, the analyst could look at visual images used by the storyteller to tell his or her story in relation to key themes of the story.

“How” questions are the focus of a more structural analysis of the digital story. In this sort of analysis, the aim would be to look at the types of speech and images used to produce the story to better understand the meaning of the story through a microanalysis of the language used (Riessman, 2008). Through a structural analysis, the researcher strives to understand how the digital storyteller uses language to produce meaning.

Focusing on “why,” “when,” and “for whom” questions of the text, the researcher may delve into dialogic/performance analysis terrain. This perspective sees stories more as social artifacts, in which the storyteller produces identities through storytelling with an audience or audiences in mind. In a dialogic/performance analysis, the notion of identity is problematized; identities produced through storytelling are not static. Rather, they are seen as polyvocal, with meaning produced through storytelling up for interpretation through a dialogic interpretation of the story between the storyteller, the researcher analyzing the story, and the audience viewing/listening to the story (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialogic/performance analysts “treat identities as dynamically constituted in relationships and performed with/for audiences” (Riessman, 2008, p. 137). Identity performances are the locus of concern and the amalgamation of text, visuals, and soundtrack of the digital story are analyzed as sites for identity production. Therefore, digital stories are not seen as individual productions, as might be the perspective taken in thematic or structural analyses. Rather, digital stories may be viewed as sites for the production and transformation of identities of the small groups or social networks that produce them. In turn, the work of these social networks may hold implications for addressing issues of social justice. For instance, the digital stories produced by a group of community member participants may be seen as representative of group/community concerns and shared through the Internet. As a group performance, digital stories may enable participants to talk about issues of importance and to build a group culture capable of mobilizing larger numbers of people to address these issues at local and state government levels (Yang, 2007).

Visual analysis may employ multiple modes of inquiry. Noted cultural geographer and visual analyst Gillian Rose (2001) writes of three sites of inquiry in conducting a visual analysis of data including representation, production, and performance. The first site of inquiry is the representation itself. With a digital story in mind, the researcher looks at the image or digital story and responds to the “what” questions produced in the story. The focus here is on key themes generated in the story. The seven elements of storytelling (Lambert, 2006) are relevant terms for analysis in this mode of inquiry. Guiding questions for analysis might ask about the point of the story (the point of view and dramatic question), what is included and what is left out of the story (known as economy), and how the component parts of the story, such as the voiceover, images, and soundtrack, are stylistically produced via voice and soundtrack/music and arranged through pacing to create a particular mood (known as emotional content) for the story.

Another site of inquiry is the production process of the digital story. Here, the researcher focuses on the “how” questions, with guiding questions for analysis focusing on how and when the digital story was made (known as the socio-historical context behind the digital story), the social identities produced through the collaboration of the participants during
the digital storytelling process, and the intended social identities of the recipients or audience of the digital story. An ethnographic analysis of the digital storytelling process is equal to, if not more important than, the artifact produced through the process (de Leeuw & Rydin, 2007). Field notes on participant observation taken by the researcher or facilitators during the digital storytelling process, such as those focusing on observations taken from introductory writing and oral storytelling activities, story circles, the script revision process, and the event of putting the story together on the computer, as well as interviews of participants and facilitators before, during, and after the workshop might be material for analysis in considering the production of the digital story. In addition, feedback from audiences viewing the digital stories could also serve as data in analyzing the story of production.

A third site for inquiry is the performative qualities of the digital story. When interrogating the “audiencing” process of digital storytelling (Riessman, 2008), the researcher might look at the individual and group responses to the digital story, the other types of stories that the viewers may associate with the particular digital story being viewed, any written text or curricular material that is designed to guide the viewer in watching and discussing the digital story, as well as the ways that the digital storyteller situates his/her identity within the confines of the digital story artifact, as well as in discussions and explanations of his/her digital story during semi-public workshops and public community exhibitions.

Our take on digital storytelling is inspired, in large part, by Riessman’s perspective (2008) that personal narratives, read here as digital stories, are largely about the telling of social worlds:

> Whether personal narratives are spoken, written, or visual, they do not generate unmediated and unclassed portraits of an “essential” self….An investigator cannot elicit an autobiographical story that is separable from wider conditions in which it is situated and constructed…[visual narratives] are performances of “selves,” crafted with an audience in mind—a “staging of subjectivity.” (Riessman, 2008, p. 177)

Indeed, an analysis of the production and artifact of digital storytelling allows for an analysis of power relations. The researcher may gain a deeper understanding of narrative constraints placed on meaning-making in relation to structures of power, such as race, class, and gender, by looking at the language used in a digital story, the ways that the narrator chooses to situate herself within her story, and reflecting upon what is possibly left unsaid in a digital story. In doing so, we might ask ourselves as the audience why and when we are made privy to some stories and not others, how digital stories are completed according to the context in which they are produced, and how the process and production of meaning-making interact with institutional and/or sociocultural norms (Riley & Hawe, 2005, pp. 231–232).

**Transcribing Digital Stories: An Intertextual Method**

We have used an intertextual transcription method to visually represent and begin to understand how people make meaning across the different modalities of visual, chronological, aural and oral, emotional, gestural, and textual elements found in a digital story. The transcript features multiple tracks, representing linguistic and nonlinguistic elements of the story. Below is an example of one digital story transcript we have completed. We
chose this particular digital story because it is exemplary of an issue of interest to social researchers—gun violence—and due to its brevity.

During a year-long social research study on multimodal media production in the development of multiliteracies, Nat worked with middle-school students in an extended-day program called Digital Underground Storytelling for You(th) (DUSTY). The transcript example provided here represents a digital story produced by a 6th grade student, Edward, who participated in the DUSTY program. Edward is a student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), typically provided for students with special needs. A visual artist who writes and illustrates his own science fiction chapter books, Edward proclaimed a love for video games and animated cartoons and distaste toward rapping, unlike many of the other boys in the course. Whereas his media practices and talents were usually kept private, the DUSTY program provided him with an opportunity to share these interests and practices in a public forum at school.

After Edward completed his digital story, Nat interviewed him about the story in order to better understand his choice in topic for the digital story, his choice of visual materials to represent the topic, and the sociocultural context of his story production. It is important to note that while Nat interviewed Edward, he used the digital story as an elicitation device. Therefore, the “interview transcript” part of the intertextual transcript reflects the particular scene of the digital story they are discussing (Figure 21.1).

**Interview Transcript**

E: It was on about stop guns in Newton and it was all the death in Newton caused by guns all the mayham, death, violence and other things.

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![Image: STOP GUNS BY EDWIN SHY](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (sec.)</th>
<th>0–3</th>
<th>3–8</th>
<th>8–11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soundtrack</td>
<td>[None]</td>
<td>[None]</td>
<td>[None]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Script</td>
<td>My PSA is titled Stop Guns.</td>
<td>I am tired of all the deaths in Newton.</td>
<td>Police car is going to Hillside. It is very sad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location represented</td>
<td>Virtual space</td>
<td>Police gun heist</td>
<td>Random community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Powerful suggestion</td>
<td>Shock</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of visual objects</td>
<td>Blue letters on black</td>
<td>Big guns</td>
<td>Police car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special effects</td>
<td>Still title page</td>
<td>Long pause</td>
<td>Still image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text on screen</td>
<td>Stop guns by Edwin Shy</td>
<td>[Illegible tags on guns]</td>
<td>London Police Community Service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 21.1* Multimodal media transcript sample 1.
The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research

| Image: | ![Image](image1.png) ![Image](image2.png) ![Image](image3.png) |
|---|---|---|
| Time (sec.): | 11–16 | 16–18 | 8–11 |
| Soundtrack: | [None] | [None] | [None] |
| Script: | It is very sad that adults, children, and teens all have a gun. They always think that guns will help, but they are wrong. It will only get worse. Do you think that God |
| Location represented: | Representation of Newton | Police station | Police station |
| Emotion: | Community | Arrest | Arrest |
| Features of visual objects: | Strip mall business | Hand gun | Hand gun |
| Special effects: | Long image | Quick image | Quick image |
| Text on screen: | [Unintelligible store name/logo] | [None] | [None] |

**Figure 21.2** Multimodal media transcript sample 2.

| Image: | ![Image](image4.png) ![Image](image5.png) ![Image](image6.png) |
|---|---|---|
| Time (sec.): | 22–27 | 27–32 | 33–37 |
| Soundtrack: | [None] | [None] | [None] |
| Script: | has made us to make guns war and death? So stop with all the guns, death, and war and bring peace to all for God. [None] |
| Location represented: | Police gun heist | Anywhere in U.S. | Virtual space |
| Emotion: | Threatening | Fear | Inspiration |
| Features of visual objects: | Many types of big guns | Magnum | Green letters on black background |
| Special effects: | Long image | Long image | Still title page |
| Text on screen: | [None] | [None] | THE END! |

**Figure 21.3** Multimodal media transcript sample 3.
KCNT: What images did you include in your PSA to address that?
E: Death, Newton, Hillside and police car… oh yeah death (Figure 21.2).

*Interview Transcript*

E: Well, it’s kinda like I suppose it’s kinda like [unintelligible] some kids may have guns secretly its for teens and adults because you never know if they have a gun or not. Until they get drastic measures and figuring out things that’s what they say (Figure 21.3).

*Interview Transcript*

E: Well around me I always see a lot of guns and death and even saw one gun when I was five years old when I was in Houston so that is why I picked “stop guns” because guns are way to viol… sometimes guns are useful but now they are used for just to many things now.

KCNT: Have you ever seen that before?
E: No but once this mysterious character put a big gun behind my house when I was living on Hillside. I think probably like a M-10 or something.
KCNT: Put it behind your house?
E: Yeah but we didn’t get blamed they understand someone just put it behind there because someone saw this one teen with a machine gun in his hand

Edward combines multiple modalities to, in effect, multiply meaning. For example, the multiple images of so many guns and the large size of the guns reinforce the point of Edward’s digital story, which is about the urgency of gun control. The moment in the digital story where he says “I am tired of all the deaths in Newton,” he presents a picture of a variety of nearly 30 large guns to link the deaths with gun violence. Again at the point where he says “Everyday a police car is going to Hillside. It is very sad,” his inclusion of a photo of a police car opens the analysis up to several possibilities. As an explicit image, the police could represent an ideal version of police coming to the rescue. However, alternatively as an implicit image, it could also serve as a critique of the criminalization of Edward’s community. Unprompted, Edward suggests the possibility of being blamed for gun violence, which indicates a potential irony to include an image of a police car with the words “community service” on the side.

We found the process of analyzing Edward’s digital story akin to analyzing other discursive genres such as song lyrics or poetry. While he does not write or present his story in a traditional essay format, his digital story is equally sophisticated in the different ways that he produces meaning. Additionally, as with other genres, social researchers looking into analyzing how individuals are making meaning would ideally interview the producer and then work in teams to co-construct interpretations of the story. Essentially, this produces a more active analysis, which accounts for the collaborative nature of digital storytelling.

While we are aware of the move to recognize multimodal texts, we feel compelled to use print text to transcribe multimodal media because it continues to be the currency of academia. In addition, a reader who does not have access to multimedia can still get a sense of the whole MMP. This multimodal form of transcription takes its influences from...
Theories of communication, literacy, and multimodality (Finnegan, 2002; Hull & Nelson, 2005; New London Group, 1996); we hope it can be a kind of bridge to MMP. This system could allow a researcher to chart the meaning participants make in their media and to show changes in how they choose to represent themselves. Intertextuality is especially important in MMP as participants “remix” by selectively cutting, pasting, and combining resources, to represent, produce, and perform identities and the knowledge they are constructing (Erstad, Gilje, & de Lang, 2007). By decoupling modalities, we highlight the meaning and effect of each mode individually, as well as the choices participants make to combine certain modalities together to multiply meaning (Lemke, 1998). Additionally, the researcher could use participants’ meta-level analysis of their multimodal media by including their interview notes as part of the transcription (Bauman & Briggs, 1990).

Challenges and Benefits of Digital Storytelling

A Case Study of Digital Storytelling in the Classroom

In Spring 2008, Aline, a feminist and medical anthropologist who uses narrative methods to better understand women’s health issues and to construct health interventions rooted in a social justice framework, taught a public health and social justice course that introduced students to digital storytelling within the context of community-based participatory health research. Student reflections on this course and lessons learned about digital storytelling are also reviewed in another publication (Gubrium, 2009). After the course ended, Aline consulted with Nat, a literacy researcher studying multiliteracy development using multimodal media production. Nat holds a special interest in the language and literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse urban adolescents in school and nonschool settings. Aline sought Nat’s contribution to this chapter because of his expertise with transcribing and analyzing digital stories as sources of social research data. In this section, we present an analytical case of using digital storytelling in a classroom setting, especially examining the representation, process, and performance of participants involved in a public health and social justice course.

Digital storytelling was situated in the course as a method for community organizing and civil engagement in health promotion activities. For the first half of the semester (7 weeks), 14 graduate students, most of whom were taking a Master’s of public health program or a Master’s in public policy program, were trained in the digital storytelling process. Students met for a 2½-hr period every week. By the middle of the semester, each student had produced a digital story related to his or her own experiences. The students were not asked to construct digital stories based on a particular topic, such as health or social justice. Rather, the only guideline they were given was that they construct a story that was meaningful to them, written in their own voice, and about themselves. For the second half of the semester, students partnered with a range of other youth, both on and off campus, to train them in the digital storytelling process. The graduate students registered for the course were asked to meet weekly with partnering students to provide cohesive and consistent training sessions in digital storytelling.

At the end of the semester, digital storytelling participants, those registered for the course and partnering students, participated in a gallery exhibition of their work. The
Digital Storytelling as an Emergent Method for Social Research and Practice

Digital Storytelling Challenges

While digital storytelling can serve as a method for participants to produce something concrete and tangible out of their experiences, thus serving as a forum for advocacy on issues of concern, a number of challenges may be faced in running a digital storytelling workshop. One initial challenge faced may be how to approach an Institutional Review Board (IRB) about incorporating digital storytelling as part of the research process. As a nascent method for social research, the procedure for applying to the IRB for approval to use digital storytelling as a research method is not well established. Issues that may arise in seeking approval include addressing informed consent. In particular, obtaining participant consent to air digital stories in a public forum for advocacy, such as a website or a public exhibition, and, in relation to consent, maintaining the confidentiality of participants if digital stories are to be used in media and advocacy campaigns, especially if stories contain recognizable images of the participant or others depicted in the story. Within the context of the digital storytelling training sessions, all participants were asked to sign consent forms to air their digital stories and/or to use their stories for educational or research aims. However, they were asked to sign consent forms only after they had produced their digital stories, as we wanted to make sure that participants had the chance to experience the digital storytelling process, as well as to know the final outcome of this process—the sort of story they had produced. Asking participants to sign a consent form before participating in the workshop or having a final product in hand did not provide them with adequate information to give true consent.

Other challenges arose during the second half of the semester, when graduate students trained other students to produce digital stories. In terms of using digital storytelling as a social research method, one main challenge of using this method, as opposed to other qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, is that the method is heavily
dependent upon the mutual ability of participants and trainers to devote a significant amount of time to completing a workshop. Two graduate students in the social justice course met this challenge and, unfortunately, were not able to overcome it. The students attempted to run a digital storytelling workshop through an after-school program for middle-school youth, developed through a public school-based initiative. Due to the fact that attendance at the after-school program was optional for students and that virtually no mandates were placed on students to consistently participate in the program week after week, the graduate students found it extremely difficult to run the workshop. They also found that communication among the people directing the program (administrators), people on the ground organizing and running the program (teachers, volunteers, and the two graduate students running the training sessions), and students participating in the after-school program were poor. This limited the graduate students' ability to properly organize for each session. Not only were the graduate students never sure of which middle-school students would show up for the program each week, they were also unsure of what technological equipment (computers, scanners, microphones, external hard drives) would be available or working during the session, or what classroom space they would be allotted during each session. Quality of the equipment, especially in under-resourced urban schools, is an important consideration when attempting to engage participants in the technology-dependent practice of multimodal media production.

One of the graduate students spelled out her frustrations working in this setting. While she found digital storytelling compelling as a method for youth to represent their own experiences and produce something concrete out of these experiences, she realized that one major obstacle in accomplishing her goal of running a complete digital storytelling workshop was the very collaborative nature of the digital storytelling endeavor. Ironically, while this collaborative quality may serve as a boon in other contexts, here it served as a barrier to accomplishing the task at hand: “An organization’s culture can interrupt the flow of the digital storytelling process. Going into this setting, an educational institution, allowed me to see that while the application of the digital storytelling process was extremely pertinent…collaboration among different levels of personnel…was difficult. Everyone had a different vision of digital story engagement” (Guevara David). In this case, running the workshop within a more rigidly defined institutional setting, such as in school as part of the regular school day, might have provided easier and more consistent access to students, as well as access to the equipment required for use during the workshop.

In addition to the context of participation, graduate students working with middle-school students felt especially challenged by the age of the workshop participants. Both noted that the maturity level of participants should be considered when planning workshop sessions. One graduate student commented on the need to consider the participant’s potential attention span and ways to keep participants actively engaged in workshop activities. Workshop organizers should keep in mind that with pedagogical components regularly incorporated into the digital storytelling workshop, such as the lecture on the seven elements of storytelling, younger participants may quickly grow bored with a presentation model quite similar to the one they face in school, day in and day out. The graduate student working with middle-school students noted: “having to work on the story narrative before working with the ‘cool’ technology may have…been seen as a drawback (or boring) by some of the youth involved. Working on a story seemed like something you did in school, not after school” (Guevara David). Not only do facilitators need to take into the need to be flexible with project activities and related materials, they should also be
willing to shift the schedule of workshop activities to accommodate the needs of different participant groups.

When working with a diverse array of participants, especially in an out-of-school setting, the facilitator/researcher must allow for flexibility in the process and realize that their own agenda or plan for the session may not mesh with that of the participants in the session. This signals a possible tension in the digital storytelling process. How does one run a workshop based on a CBPR approach which, from a grass roots approach, has participants producing and directing stories in their own flavor, while at the same time run a workshop focused on a particular research topic and provide training in a method that, due to technological and time constraints, does not allow for so much flexibility? Several students in the social justice course seemingly responded to this conundrum with frustration, as they realized that while some amount of flexibility was needed in planning the workshop so that it was sensitive to the needs and abilities of the participants involved, allowing participants too much leeway in the workshop was negatively associated with the ability of participants to complete a digital story.

**Digital Storytelling Benefits**

While accommodating the needs of individual participants in a workshop may provide a challenge to the researcher/facilitator, in our overall experience of conducting workshops, participants comment that the digital storytelling process is quite therapeutic. Graduate students participating in the social justice course spoke of a cathartic experience in producing a digital story about difficult experiences. For example, one graduate student showed her adoptive mother her digital story about their mother–daughter relationship on Mother’s Day. Another graduate student, an African-American woman who is currently attending a predominantly white university, produced a digital story about body image. She related that the digital storytelling process was therapeutic for her because she was finally able to produce something concrete out of experiences that she had held onto for so long and was able to share her experiences in an MMP format to which she felt many viewers would be able to relate.

Not only do participants experience catharsis from a tangible digital storytelling product, they also note a therapeutic aspect to participating in activities associated with the storytelling process. In particular, activities associated with script construction, such as story circling and interaction with others centered on revising the draft, allow participants to shape and represent experiences the way they see fit. One graduate student reflected this sentiment when commenting upon her training work with participants in a school for pregnant and parenting young women: “Being able to put their story into words, which I guessed many of them had not done before, was wonderful to observe and I have a better understanding of the importance of this aspect of the digital storytelling process” (Shannon). Instead of dreaming about what they could achieve and simply dismissing it, the workshop participants were learning a method for systematically representing their hopes and aspirations. Research shows that focus on future/possible selves is a key ingredient for bolstering resilience and perseverance (Carey & Martin, 2007). For oppressed communities, digital storytelling offers a site for unpacking and articulating their oppression, as well as resisting and challenging oppression; digital storytelling can also act as a vehicle...
The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research

for healing wounds caused by oppression through the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

In contrast to top-down approaches in which policy makers, academics, public health practitioners, and others seen as “experts” may generalize an experience for a targeted community, digital storytelling allows participants to construct and represent their own experiences. In the context of research, the story circle process may serve much the same role as a focus group, in that it allows participants to discuss issues of concern in a group setting. In contrast to the traditional focus-group method, however, story circles allow participants to guide the topic of discussion.

The final day’s airing of digital stories produced in the workshop often proves to be quite moving for participants, as they unveil their finished product to other participants in the group. For some participants, this may be the first time they have opened up about an important experience. Moreover, for many participants, this is the first time they have created a tangible media production to represent their experiences, which lead to new possibilities to see and be seen. Indeed, in our experience conducting digital storytelling workshops, we have seen how the digital storytelling process allows both researcher/facilitators and workshop participants to position themselves as participant observers in the research process, thereby allowing both parties new and varied perspectives on the social construction of meaning in everyday life.

Practicing conscientization (Freire, 1970), and as participant observers in this regard, workshop participants become more conscious of the ways they choose to represent their experiences. Over the course of the semester, Aline saw workshop participants become active agents in the construction of stories about their experiences. They made decisions about ways to position themselves and their experiences within the context of their written scripts, the ways they talked about and explained their experiences during the story circle, the ways they narrated their stories during the voiceover recording, the types of images they used to represent their experiences, and the soundtrack and sound effects they used to create a particular type of mood within their production. Participants’ digital stories clearly stood as an active portrayal of the ways that they chose to position themselves as certain kinds of people with particular kinds of experiences, depending on the story they wished to produce.

Within the context of the social justice course workshop, the discussions Aline held with graduate students and other workshop participants while encouraging them to craft their script narratives or while training them to use various applications to assemble their digital stories were illuminating for her as a researcher and teacher, and she gained a more nuanced perspective of their lived experiences. To be sure, she gained a much finer understanding of her students over the course of the digital storytelling process than she might have in a more traditional classroom setting. She also saw how workshop participants were emboldened by being given the reins to drive the meaning-making of their own experiences as they produced their digital stories. The digital story became a representation and a performance of how they preferred their experiences to be seen by others. As an emergent method for social research, especially research aimed at addressing social problems, digital stories serve to humanize people whose behaviors, attitudes, and experiences may otherwise be represented through a set of facts and figures. As one graduate student pointed out, “[digital stories] really have the potential to reach people in their hearts, and help them to understand that those they are serving are not just bodiless statistics or potential voters, but real people.…” (Clarkie).
Conclusion

We enumerate some of the challenges of digital storytelling in this chapter. From addressing IRB concerns in seeking approval to conduct research based on participant-produced movies, to the difficulties that may be encountered in running a digital storytelling workshop, to the “between a rock and a hard place” position the researcher may find himself or herself when attempting to negotiate the needs of participants with the fiduciary and professional demands of funding agencies and the academy, using digital storytelling as a method for social research is not without its difficulties.

One site for future research will be to reflect upon ethical issues related to digital storytelling and other visual methods used in social research project. Topics of discussion in this regard include the following: issues of presentation and self-representation and ways that digital stories may contribute to or challenge visual/multimedia stereotypes; the ethics of digital storytelling production in relation to the story circle process in ethnographic research and maintaining the original intent of reflective conversation, catharsis, and empowerment, as well as consent to participate in the process; the ethics of access to the digital storytelling product, especially related to the release and target audience for the distribution of the digital story as well as how the chosen display for the stories affects the story presentation and interfaces with issues of consent and release of materials; repercussions of using digital storytelling as a research method, including IRB concerns, publication of materials, ethical issues encountered during data analysis, and the potential for conflicting agendas based on digital storytelling as a research method versus method of intervention; various meanings of participation in the digital storytelling process, focusing on the CDS philosophy in which digital story production is driven by the participant to the way the process is actually practiced as guided by a predetermined research agenda; and how relationships of trust and rapport may or may not be established when incorporating digital storytelling into the social research process. Indeed, the very act of considering digital storytelling as a method for research may be antithetical to the philosophy of digital storytelling and establish a relationship of exploitation between researcher and participant.

However, despite challenges in carrying out the digital storytelling process, analyzing the digital storytelling product and maintaining fidelity to its original Freirian intent, we believe that the benefits of digital storytelling outweigh its drawbacks. Digital storytelling serves as a potentially fruitful method for social research and advocacy. The method’s innovative quality stems from its ability to serve, in true Freirian fashion, as a method for research, intervention, and community action. The nature of the digital storytelling process offers participants and researcher/facilitators the possibility to open up the social research process as an “active” and collaborative method in which both parties serve as virtual researchers in the meaning-making process.

In this respect, we see a future direction for digital stories to be incorporated as visual elicitation devices for interview and focus-group-based social research, similar to that of participant-produced photos in the Photovoice focused group discussion method (Wang & Burris, 1997). “Much of the creativity of the Freirian approach has been in the development of codes [also known as triggers] … that codify the generative themes [of discussion] into a physical form…so that participants can ‘see’ their reality with new eyes and consequently develop alternative ways of thinking and acting” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2002 p. 42). Digital stories mesh well with a Freirian-structured questioning approach in which group dialogue is facilitated through the use of visual elicitation triggers for discussion. However, not only
do participant and researcher/facilitator create meaning in this process, audiences viewing the digital story are also afforded a modicum of interpretive leverage. In this regard, digital storytelling goes one step further than what was deemed innovative for social research in the 1980s and 1990s by acknowledging the agency of participants in the research process and by casting novel agency upon digital storytelling audiences, thereby opening up the production of media as a popular form, to be consumed and produced by the masses.

Applying an ethnographic lens to the digital storytelling process allows for a sophisticated analysis of meaning-making endeavors, heralding the potential for digital storytelling as an innovative method for social research projects interrogating identity as a locus of concern. The digital storytelling process and product may be analyzed from multiple narrative vantage points. “What,” “how,” “why,” “when,” and “for whom” questions signal the narrative intent of the digital storyteller. Responses to these questions center on the collaborative and situated nature of the social construction of identity.

Analytical responses to “what” questions focus on the generative themes of the story and may be used by participant, researcher/facilitator, and audiences alike to assess community concerns and may serve as a launching point for a formative social research project. Analysis of “how” questions foreground the artistry of the storyteller, displaying a much more dynamic role for digital storytelling participant in the social research process than might be revealed in thematic/content analyses. “Why,” “when,” and “for whom” questions beckon a dialogic/performance analysis of digital stories as socially produced artifacts. From this analytical perspective, meaning is produced through a dense configuration of narrative intention and interpretation. Practiced and symbolic social interactions among storytellers, researcher/facilitators, and audience serve as sites for the transformation of identities of the social networks producing and viewing the digital story. Finally, the digital storytelling process is useful for a narrative inquiry of power relations and may be especially useful for social researchers seeking to understand phenomena from a particular sociocultural or historical juncture. From a Foucauldian perspective, digital stories may be seen as deriving from particular “discursive regimes.” Rhetorical and discursive practices within mirror a larger sociopolitical or economic calculus of the topic at hand (Foucault, 1995).

In terms of the practicalities of conducting a digital storytelling analysis, in this chapter we have spelled out one way for conceptualizing a transcript to capture the vicissitudes of the digital story product. The intertextual transcription method presented herein, that represents visual, chronological, aural and oral, emotional, gestural, and textual elements, points to the multiple modalities used to produce meaning in a digital story. This transcription method literally allows the researcher to chart the meanings participants attach to different elements of their media production and to illustrate, albeit rather statically, the dynamics of identity representation. Future research is needed to develop qualitative data analysis software that moves beyond a textual analysis approach to more faithfully represent conceptualizations of multimodal media production. Digital storytelling is one new way for researchers to engage and contribute to community, group, and individual efforts to use MMP to publicly document, comment upon, and shape the events around them. As these multimodal literacy practices expand, so will the need for social research methods that can account for the real economic and social changes that take place as a result.

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The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research


