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## **Ghost and the Machine: Bringing Untold Personal Spiritual and Cultural Experiences to Life Through the Medium of Digital Storytelling**

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**Abstract:** This study examines learners’ perceptions of the experiences of transformation from the storytelling experience of digital stories within a graduate class on spirituality and culture in light of storytelling theory.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, transformative learning, storytelling theory, spirituality and culture

Stories have their own ghostly energy, existing in the ether, as it were, until they are spoken into life, remaining in a state of “neither being nor non-being; . . . a form of haunting.” (Boje, 2008, p. 260). Could that revitalization take place through storytelling by means of a machine such as a computer? This paper examines the role of a particular form of storytelling in transformative learning that makes use of a computer—*digital* storytelling. Digital storytelling was used in a graduate class entitled *Spirituality and Culture in the Health and Education Professions*.

A digital story (DS) in its creation makes use of photos/video, music, on-screen text and a short text of the story itself used as a voice over (Lambert, 2009; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). In three different years (2011, 2013, and 2015), 52 learners in the Spirituality and Culture graduate course mentioned above created a DS of what they perceived as a significant spiritual or cultural experience in their lives, as part of course requirements. Initial learner reactions to the announcement of the exercise varied, depending on individual levels of technical ability; at the end of the semester, once the DS is completed and shown to the group, learner course evaluations have consistently reported the exercise as the most rewarding part of the course.

With limited exception (Cueve et al., 2011; Prins, 2016) there has been relatively little formal research done in the field of adult education in regard to digital storytelling, though there has been some discussion of it in teaching (Baim, 2015; Cueva et al., 2011; Jamissen & Skou, 2010; Lambert, 2009; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Tisdell, Carrow-Boyd, Selveraj & Heiserman, 2012). There is also limited research of how the experience of creating and sharing the narratives of digital stories facilitates transformative learning from the perspective of those who create them. Thus, *the purpose of this study is to examine learners’ perceptions of the experiences of transformation from the digital storytelling experience within a graduate class on spirituality and culture.*

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

There are three key bodies of literature that inform this study. First, given the content of the course, the literature on spirituality and culture in relation to transformative learning that emphasizes spiritual cultural perspectives is key to understanding the work of the course (Charaniya, 2012; Dirks, 1997; Taylor, 2008; Tisdell, 2003) and the point of the digital stories themselves. In particular is the work of David Abalos (1997), who argues that in order for individuals to transform and develop their cultural and spiritual identity they need to re-claim four aspects or “faces” of their cultural being: the personal, the political, the historical, and the

sacred. All of these “faces” are related to cultural identity; his notion of the “sacred face” is related to spirituality and highlights that individuals need to consider the sacred stories, images, symbols, and ways of being from their home cultures and communities, and to reclaim them to refresh them with constantly new meaning.

The literature on digital story telling itself cited above is also key, particularly related to adult education. To a certain extent, this research study is an extension of an earlier paper presented at AERC 2012 by one of the authors of this 2016 paper along with participants in the 2011 course (Tisdell et al., 2012). That paper examined the extent to which both instrumental and emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1971) was constructed in the DS creation and telling process in the 2011 class, whereas this paper focuses on analysis of learners’ written comments about the experience of digital story telling. Both papers are grounded in the body of work focused on narrative learning in adult education (Rossiter, 1999; Rossiter & Clark, 2007).

David Boje (2001, 2008) and those who draw on his work (Boje & Tyler, 2009; Tyler, 2011) have developed a story telling theory that is the theoretical grounding of this study. They point out that storytelling is typically thought of as a social process, characterized by face-to-face, responsive interaction between individuals. Story telling is a living experience. Telling stories face to face has the advantage of the immediacy of body language, eye contact, of stops, starts, clarifications and interjections. The way that the story is told is responsive to the needs of the listeners in the process. Boje and his colleagues make a distinction between *narratives* (which are stories that are complete, unchanging and linear in structure - with a beginning, a middle and an end), and *stories*, which are shifting, responsive and energetic.

A created DS is a *narrative* in Boje’s sense in that it provides a momentary, linear narrative ‘freeze-frame’ through technology, which is saved and shown as a video file. But this *narrative* was created out of a living story that has an ongoing energy in its trajectory – in the way that it was created, in its continued development as it is shared with an audience, encounters the stories of others – and beyond. While the DS itself is an unchanging narrative, the process of the living story’s transformation in tellers and listeners is ongoing. The meaning-making process *before* the story is fixed into a narrative is examined as *antenarrative* (Boje 2001). This will be explained further in the findings section.

### Methodology

This is a basic interpretive qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and focuses on an analysis of students’ experiences of writing and presenting a DS in a graduate class on Spirituality and Culture in the Health and Education Professions class. Participants were required to create a DS of no longer than 4 minutes, using a combination of words and images, typically using visual text, music and voice-over. The text of the story was restricted to 350 words. A reflection paper of 2-3 pages was needed to provide a critical, theoretical underpinning of the process and to tie the DS into the course readings. The exercise was given at beginning of semester, and learners were informed that the digital stories would have to be presented on the last day of class. There were 52 participants in the *Spirituality and Culture in the Health and Education Professions* courses held in the years of 2011, 2013 and 2015.

Data collection methods in qualitative research include interviews, observations, and analysis of documents and artifacts related to the context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). In this study, the primary sources of data are the digital stories, the texts of the stories, online discussion posts about the most important learning in the course and the reflection papers specifically on the digital story telling process. There were 19 participants who consented to be

a part of the study. (All names used are pseudonyms.) A preliminary analysis of data has been conducted based on the constant comparative method of data analysis.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Rather than discussing the findings separately from the literature that informs this study, we have opted to discuss some of the findings in the context of the literature and theoretical framework. The findings that we discuss here are the process of moving from story to narrative and the role of symbols and technology in the process; the ongoing construction of spiritual and cultural identity and identity; and the role of community in the living story that continues.

#### **From Story to Narrative: Symbols and Technology**

The participants in this study clearly engaged in a story telling process in forming the *narrative* that became the DS. The process of DS creation moves us into the world of technology. Lambert (2009) details the technical skills that need to be mastered in order to venture into this new territory – but also the narrative roles played in its creation by emotion, by the auditory and visual aspects of the story as well as the structure and the pacing of the story. A few participants found the initial instrumental nature of the learning daunting at first. As Consuela, an international student explained, “I had to find software for making movies and learn how to use it. But, graciously, at the end, I found it very enjoyable creating and sharing our digital stories...we can express our spirituality in many different ways.”

Learners had to think about how to integrate the pictures, words, music, and symbols to tell the story, which they found quite powerful. Karen explained how moving the process of creating the story was while examining photographs and engaging with the material to create the story, and noted: “I enjoyed putting together the presentation once it ‘jelled’ in my mind what I would like to share and how to depict my ideas with photos that I currently own.” She goes on to hint at the ongoing meaning making of the story and the power of symbol when she says ‘It was very profound to me that when I looked at old photographs, I saw new things. The photos have not changed, but I am intrigued about how I may have changed in the interim since I last looked at them, causing my interpretations to be different.’”

There is an economy to this DS process, in relation to the integration of words with pictures and music. As Susan explained “a simple picture could portray years of heartache and that experiences could be brought to life by voicing a sentence or two.” Janet addressed the many dimensions of meaning available in a DS, “... just speaking the words of the experience will never seem to be enough to try to explain...” She continues, “It is all of the elements put together that make the story more powerful and gives people a closer glimpse into one of the most transformational spiritual experiences of my life”. Hence while these digital stories are narratives made possible by the power of multiple elements: words, music, and photos.

#### **The Ongoing Construction of Identity and Transformation**

A second major finding of the study is the role of digital storytelling in the ongoing construction of identity and transformation. As is evident in the course title of the course, the point of the course is to explore spirituality and culture in the health and education profession, not only by reading literature but also by analyzing one’s own experience. Many discussed the role of the readings for the course in informing their own digital storytelling process, and referred to Abalos’s four faces, or Tisdell’s (2003) discussion of spiraling back, along with the notion of reclaiming their voice, their sense of self, as related to spirituality, culture or the pursuit

of wisdom. For example, in reflecting on the memory shared in her digital story, Natalie referred to reclaiming her voice in deciding to leave her husband, as allowing her to make a deeper spiritual connection. She states: “I wore the face my husband expected me to wear and it was only when I challenged this expectation that I began to reclaim myself ...and journey toward becoming whole...It allowed me to develop a connection to the wise mind.”

Another participant Melissa, who is a respiratory therapist, also highlighted this notion of finding a voice that transformed the pain she felt when called names like “the Grim Reaper” for doing her job. She writes: “Allowing myself to feel my spiritual pain, creating my digital story, and reflecting on the experience have helped me to heal -- a type of healing that offers a spirit its wholeness. Creating my digital story was a transformation process for me. It offered healing to my silent spiritual pain through allowing my voice to be heard.”

Many learners felt they emerged from the class with a stronger sense of self, and spiritual and cultural identity that involved to some degree what Abalos (1997) would refer to as reclaiming their sacred face. One participant in the course reclaimed her name in the making of her digital story. She had been stripped of her unique birth name by a primary school teacher, who had corrected its spelling – and it had remained that way until the course. Through a process of “reflection, empowerment, and learning” (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010, p. 42), she made a powerful statement celebrating her name, her family history and culture in the digital story: I now accept who I am as a Black woman and I love who I am as a Black woman and I embrace who I am as a Black woman. ... Not only is my culture celebrated in my hair but in the way I honor my ancestors and in the way I pass stories down to my children and grandchildren. In re-claiming her true name and her true embodied cultural identity, she freed her sacred face.

### **The Ongoing Living Story and Role of Community**

A third primary finding is related to the role of community and the ongoing-ness of the meaning making process in digital story sharing. In the context of the course, the digital story was created as a narrative but a narrative to be shared in the community of the classroom. Students had to be willing to take a risk to some degree, while sharing only that with which they were comfortable. One woman felt that she had “experienced [her] history as both the protagonist and the viewer”. In being “taken outside of [their] own heads” (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010, p.43), students were challenged to explore who they were and how they had become that person. In facing that vulnerability lay the opportunity for making meaning. On the first day of the course, Susan had been deeply discomfited by the simple question “Who are you?” At the end of the course, she found answers through the digital story:

My digital story began with an uncomfortable, innocent question and ended with a peaceful, self-confident answer. The process of getting from beginning to end was a deeply gratifying learning experience. Without the question having been asked, the much-needed reflection might not have taken place. And without the requirement of creating a digital story, the opportunity to answer the question in such a liberating manner would have been missed. ... Although I was very nervous about whether this “revealing” was right or wrong, watching my classmates’ reactions as the video played reassured me that I had made the right decision.

Her insights speak to the importance of the community in the ongoing meaning-making of her story and experience.

By its nature, the intent of the course is to create a learning community that is aware of the richness of culture and of spiritual and symbolic ways of creating meaning. Students are encouraged to move outside of their comfort zones with dancing, singing and the sharing of

personal stories of spirituality and culture throughout the course. When they create their digital story they do so knowing it is to be shared in community where multiple ways of knowing are valued. Consuela noted: “I tried to be culturally responsive (including Islam and Christianity), I tried to be respectful of my classmates (accepting diversity) and I tried to be authentic in my work”.

The fact that the DS is shared in community contributes to the fact that further meaning is created as the stories are shared; hence these stories live on through continued meaning-making. Boje’s (2008) storytelling theory suggests that living story is organic and vital, on a trajectory from being spoken into life, and beyond that, in being heard. Living stories have an independent existence beyond the DS narratives, living on when the narratives are shared. Students began their digital storytelling exercise with the expectation of providing a coherent, acceptable project. They anticipated, perhaps, that the group of students would learn a little about them. Boje (2011) terms this pre-narrative authorial speculation before the story is fixed into a narrative, an *antenarrative*. Antenarratives tend to morph and change, sometimes in linear ways, sometimes cyclical, and also in chaotic, rhizomatic ways that can counter the main narrative.

What we found was that while students did indeed construct meaning and self-knowledge in the DS process as they had speculated in their antenarratives, there was also evidence of living story development taking place around the DS narratives themselves. This became evident in the online comments made by students after the class was over; the excitement was about the relational learning that had taken place as they viewed the DS narratives. Lambert says that “when you gather people in a room, and listen, deeply listen, to what they are saying, and also, by example, encourage others to listen, magic happens” (2009, p.86). The living stories of each participant continued in their trajectory beyond the DS narratives, and encountered the stories of the others, and new meaning and new learning was generated. Susan put it best: “Listening to my story in the company of women (and one man) I had grown fond of over the preceding month and speaking with them afterwards was the culmination of a liberating, enlightening experience”. She learned about the commonality of human experience: “Everyone has challenges and feels vulnerable and everyone took the same risk by putting their story together and sharing a piece of themselves with the group.” Others responded to her post: “I felt we were all connected at the core level of being humans” said one; and another, “this connection we lived was palpable. This was only possible because of the profound sense of acceptance and integration of our group.” Clearly the stories were alive and living on in this community

### **Conclusions**

Digital stories can be used extremely effectively in higher education classes in hopes of transformative learning. Participants told deeply personal stories that celebrated powerful spiritual or cultural moments, events or items of significance; stories of physical and emotional pilgrimage, of cultural or spiritual ceremony, of death and of loss. All of the stories were ultimately about growth and transformation, a transformation that continued in taking the risk of sharing it in the classroom community. While the DS itself is a narrative, the aliveness of the story from which it is shaped is ongoing. The importance of creative expression and the use of pictures, words, and symbols is at the heart of each DS which goes beyond cognition and critique to draw on a holistic understanding. In conclusion, in encountering and mastering the instrumental power of the computer, each learner was able to breathe life into the ‘ghost’ of each story, which emerged powerfully on screen, with significant transformative and narrative power.

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