

The Central Role of Practice in Digital Storytelling

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Once upon a time, I was in a meeting in Vaxjo, Sweden, I am guessing 2005, when one of the participants, a Swedish academic, said something to the effect, “what we can learn from the Lambertian methodology of Digital Storytelling ...”. I remember holding back a laugh, but my colleague from the *Center for Digital Storytelling* (now StoryCenter), Emily Paulos, failed to contain her chuckling. This caused the speaker to look our way, and ask, “What did I say?” I suggested that we had never heard anyone refer to our work as the Lambertian Method, and it sounded funny to our ears. The speaker replied that if you write a book about what you do, you are a theorist. And I said, borrowing roughly from Groucho Marx, “I am not sure I would belong to a movement that had me as a theorist.”

In the many years of our work, in so many collaborations with media educators, health advocates, professional communicators, social change activists, every kind of institution from museums, churches, local schools and giant universities, government agencies, hospitals, commercial operations and international NGOs, we have deliberately avoided situating

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our work as addressing a singular theoretical framework, nor have we felt that this was necessary. We felt what we were doing was more or less obvious: assist people in working with the tool of video editing on a computer to create stories that mattered, a little, or a great deal, to each person making them. That you could draw lessons relevant to media literacy, technology education, writing and identity, multimodality in communication, citizen/participatory media, visual methods and the benefits of story sharing in physical and mental health maintenance, well, people have drawn those lessons and posited theories about them in the wake of our work and the work of our community of fellow practitioners. And of course, we have posited a few theories of our own, as much to situate our work in these various discourses, as to argue that the practice required a validating theoretical framework.

AN OPEN SOURCE SOCIAL CHANGE TECHNOLOGY

One way to understand the myriad approaches to our model, as described in this book, and as found in the growing literature about the movement, is to see our original approach as related to the early Free Software Movement, and later Open Source movement. Our work began in the early 1990s in a San Francisco milieu where cyber-utopianism was rampant. We thought of the Internet, new low cost digital media production tools, and the distribution opportunities of the web as major advances that could promote global democracy and liberation.

The hacker/GNU culture and free software advocates eventually gave us the Linux operating system and web-based open source technologies like Java and Mozilla's Firefox, were all the rage when we started. And we wanted our work, our methods to be free and available to a broad educational and non-profit world. Of course, like the open source movement, our aspirations ran smack into reality, and like many open source efforts, we relied on major technology companies, like Apple and Adobe, to fund our efforts at dissemination. For example, in 1996 Apple supported the writing of the first *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, and with this support we were able to distribute thousands of copies to people around the world, inspiring folk to explore the values and approach to our methods, as well as the specific workshop sequence and Seven Elements aesthetic framework.

By the late nineties, the practice had found its way to educators, activists, and social workers across the world, and we followed the interest not

only to offer workshops and training to spread our methods and practice, but also to learn from practitioners in the places to which we travelled, about how they sought to adapt our model to their contexts and constituencies.

THE EVOLUTION OF NEW PRACTICES

Almost immediately we found ourselves surrounded with interpretations of our practice, from as a form of creative personal expression to a discussion about educational implementations in various formal and informal settings. The media design component—a multimedia slideshow produced in a non-linear digital video editor, with voiceover and music—became a road to curricula which emphasised a new kind of multimedia authorship. The explorations of a writing voice, and a process of exploring expressive self-awareness, became a secondary consideration to how this authorship could engage students in their efforts across the social sciences and humanities. Technical, media and visual literacy were emphasised in these practices more than storytelling. In the United States, media literacy in particular was a highly encouraged new area of concern. So, projects and processes that helped students discover the way media were used to influence their perspectives were welcomed: if you make a short video, you begin to see how videos work. Digital Storytelling was also seen as a doorway to consideration of more serious, and professional media production, as a first step to stimulate students' understanding of the essential conventions and grammar of film.

Behind the innumerable educational uses was the development of a rich amount of work related to a growing movement of media justice and media activism. In 2000, one of our staff, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, joined with other local activists to form Third World Majority, and they, alongside other activists around the country evolved “Community Digital Storytelling” as a distinct practice deeply focused on the politics and ethics of engaging people of colour, women and LGBTQ communities in the practice.

In crossing the ocean and initiating training with Daniel Meadows and the crew of BBC Wales, we encountered another branching out, as a group of highly skilled media professionals and community educators sought to create an approach that optimised the elegance of the audio-visual creation. Many of the BBC Wales stories stand out as the most beautifully conceived, deeply felt and simultaneously original and

authentic expressions in the form. The aspect of personal discovery was emphasised, but some aspects of emotional self-examination inherent in our early practices were downplayed.

One of the Third World Majority activists, Amy Hill, evolved her work in social service and public health with her *Silence Speaks* project, which focused on the prevention of gender-based violence. She brought her own sensibility as a human rights documentary filmmaker, grassroots activist, and deeply trained and highly experienced public health professional into the practice. As she integrated with our organisation in 2005, our work began to look more deeply at the ethics of engagement with storytellers and communities dealing with trauma. She also amended the “classic” do-it-yourself model with a range of practices borrowing from other participatory media experiences in documentary, photo-voice, third world film and somatic and therapeutic group processes.

Our Centre continues to integrate the practices of others, and to expand the “brand” of our work to include broader efforts of participatory media, media education, multimodal authorship as a new kind of literacy, and certainly the further integration of community arts, documentary film/radio and oral history practices that inspired our original efforts. Just as the larger community has improvised from the model of our work, we have also continued to amend and adjust what we consider the essential components of our practice, creating an array of engagement processes we now amalgamate under the wider umbrella that we now call Story Work.

PRACTICE ALONG A CONTINUUM

The first section of this book exemplifies many of the stories about the practice of Digital Storytelling; tales told by committed facilitators working diligently to put their own sets of values, principles and ethics to best effect. These case studies address the ways that power, access, literacy, place, gender, racial and sexual identity, cultural competencies, emotional vulnerability and the role of cultural and intellectual humility all have meaning precisely in the doing of Digital Storytelling. Intention meets the harsh reality of implementation and the laboratory of story making is rife with lessons about how to, and how not to, carry oneself as a facilitating professional.

Both academics and practitioners represented in this book draw on experience to reflect on concerns in implementation that have shaped

improvisations in our practices. The most obvious are: the availability of financial and trained professional resource; the time needed to engage meaningfully with storytellers; the familiarity or unfamiliarity with storytellers; the influence of sponsoring organisations or larger community on participatory digital media practices; relative commonality of culture between the facilitators and the participants; the perceived tension between process-centric experiences and high production quality products; and the relative authenticity of personal storytelling in contrast to other more distanced forms of communication.

Most of the hardest lessons we have learned are about mis-calibrating one or more of these factors in a specific project, or not finding creative ways of amending or adjusting the programme of training to meet the emergent needs of specific storytellers. In our work, the detailed planning and communication from beginning to end of a project helps to mitigate our mistakes, yet this has to sit alongside pragmatic flexibility. It means we have developed highly tuned perspectives about how to assess the contexts of implementation.

All of our facilitators have experienced engaging participants with low literacy in writing or working with an acquired language, or who felt encouraged to participate in something they knew little about, or who were part of a “captive audience”, like a classroom or programme where they really had not self-selected to work on a story, and for whom our traditional “do-it-yourself with support in a hurry” model required major adjustment.

We also learned that, at another end of the spectrum, in which participants might be highly literate (including media literate) and confident, different challenges for facilitators could emerge, such as refusing facilitator help or over-styling at the expense of content.

As Alex Henry found in her *History in Our Hands* work, adjustments can also include addressing the nature of the collaboration with an organisation and artists, as well as how to work sensitively with unique disability concerns. Carol Misorelli’s account of The Museum of the Person’s effort to work with a large cross section of young people describes how they moved the process away from media production to the approach of training large numbers of participants in how to facilitate Story Circles effectively.

Our work has entered many social and cultural contexts where the ideas inherent to Digital Storytelling had little precedent. In Angeline Koh’s description of bringing the practice to Singapore, and trying to

find the right way to integrate with the *Singapore Memory Project* and the 50th anniversary project, the larger culture was not as familiar with broad participatory media engagement. Having people make their own media, as opposed to having experts make their media for them, was a perhaps a new idea, one that blossomed through Angeline's efforts. Camelia Crisan's work in Romania integrated Digital Storytelling into the National Library services and took storytelling in a new direction.

Like all practices, mastery requires reflection and attention to detail. Practitioners and theorists need constantly to challenge presumptions about the what, the how, and the why, of each and every component of the process. We are fortunate to have a community deeply dedicated to reflecting in action, constantly examining practice, and the assumptions behind the practices. In this way, we're not dependent on established ways of doing things, but open to developing new modes of practice, of stretching the boundaries and this restless, constant experimentation is the essence of successful Digital Storytelling.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joe Lambert founded StoryCenter (formerly Center for Digital Storytelling) in 1994, with Nina Mullen and colleague Dana Atchley. Together they developed a computer training and arts program that became known as The Digital Storytelling Workshop. Since then, Joe has authored and produced curricula in many contexts, including the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, the principal manual for the workshop process, and *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*.



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