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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue “Selected Papers from 11th International Digital Storytelling Conference 2023: Radical Listening: Story Work for a Just Future”

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Introduction

Digital storytelling (DS) is a term that has come to mean different things in different contexts. Broadly, it is used to refer to creating narratives using digital media in fields as varied as marketing, journalism, entertainment, and education. Our community of practice primarily takes our meaning from the pioneering work carried out by StoryCenter, formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS). StoryCenter promotes healing, growth, and social change by creating spaces for listening to and sharing stories. In the mid-1990s, CDS developed a three-day workshop in which participants create 3-to-5-min digital movies from photographs and personal artifacts. These stories typically take the form of personal narratives in which the author reflects on a life experience. The techniques of digital storytelling have been applied in classroom, community, and clinical settings as a means of self-expression and for developing digital literacy skills. In addition, digital storytelling can foster relationships in communities and help to address issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice (Lambert and Hessler 2018). Within the social sciences, digital storytelling is an increasingly adopted tool and methodology for qualitative, arts-based, and participatory research (de Jager et al. 2017; Fish and Syed 2020; Wu and Chen 2020).

Over the past two decades, a diverse international community of digital storytelling practitioners has flowered, in part through a series of international conferences. Interacting with this broader community of practice has enabled these groups to share their innovative works and explore inter-institutional collaborations. These gatherings have also become an important way to invite new practitioners and researchers into this ever-evolving work. An important aspect of the DS community is its diversity, united by a common intention: helping people to tell their stories in a co-creative, collaborative workshop environment to cause change concerning issues with their voices. Most of the time, we are among the people we help to tell stories. We navigate with the stories of others, amplifying their roles as agents of change or as allies when needed and when possible.

In June 2023, the 11th International Digital Storytelling Conference (DST 2023) was held in the Baltimore/Washington DC region. *DST 2023: Radical Listening: Story Work for a Just Future* explored how story work can help strengthen our communities and build understanding across divides. The conference was organized by Loughborough University (UK), Montgomery College (US), Patient Voices (UK), the Smithsonian Office of Educational Technology (US), StoryCenter (US), and the University of Maryland Baltimore County—UMBC (US).

Conference papers and presentations focused on context, content, purpose, and practice through a variety of lenses. The papers presented in this Special Issue represent the diverse, interdisciplinary range of interests of the DS community, including the exploration



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of DS as a research methodology; the ethics of participatory research; radical listening for amplifying voices; equity and access; and building and cultivating communities. They are a small sample of the works presented during the conference, chosen for their relevance to the social sciences. Additional papers from DST 2023 also appear in other journals ([Wurfel 2024](#)).

Whether digital storytelling is a research method, a pedagogy, or a discipline is a question that frequently comes up when we think about our work, and this is reflected in these papers. Indeed, one way to read this collection is as a sample of critically reflective teacher-scholars examining how digital storytelling becomes both a source of personal meaning making and a form of social or institutional intervention. The authors direct our attention to the interactions that arise through the *process* of story work and raise important considerations about inclusiveness and access.

Many of the papers presented here employ DS as a form of action research. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on story work is also mentioned in several of these papers, and it was a prevalent topic of discussion at DST 2023. In addition to being a force of disruption, the pandemic has also prompted innovative adaptations of methodologies.

In “What Digital Storytelling Means to the New Generation of Researchers”, the authors consider DS as a research methodology in the disciplines of illustration, animation, and the creative arts in education. Building on Peter [Dallow’s \(2003\)](#) work on practice-based approaches to research in the creative arts, these three interdisciplinary case studies show the pliability of DS as a research method. DS has long been employed in this regard in a wide range of social research contexts. [Gubrium and Turner \(2011\)](#) and [Otañez and Guerrero \(2015\)](#) present DS as an emergent methodology in identity formation, gender and gender justice, policy making, and the ethics of participatory visual research. The three case studies presented by the authors here expand on this base going forward and show DS to be a flexible form open to modification in the arts as well, presenting “a co-designed research practice always open to future disruptions” ([Liguori et al. 2023](#)).

“Gathering Stories: Creating Spaces for Young Women to Connect and Build Community through Multimodal Storytelling” presents a case study employing the methods developed at the Rochester Institute of Technology’s Center for Storycraft. The authors relate lessons learned in conducting a workshop focusing on high school students’ social, emotional, and affective experiences during the pandemic. They reflect on how narrative informs one’s sense of self. Of particular interest is their consideration on the possible ethical problems of publishing stories online in the post-AI and Chat-GPT world. While acknowledging the potential of AI as a tool in the creation process, publishing student’s work online has implications for the author’s sense of ownership and self.

“Reflections on the Impact of an Intergenerational Digital Storytelling Program on Changing Attitudes and Fostering Dialogue and Understanding across the Generations” presents a case study of the Positive Ageing Digital Storytelling Intergenerational Program (PADSIP). Beginning in 2007, this long-term program continues to bring Australian high school students and seniors in community and residential care settings together to co-create stories of shared experiences and interests. Similar projects have brought together students and seniors ([Meimaris 2017](#); [Shewbridge 2011](#)). While varying in formats and methodologies, these programs have been successful in building bonds across generations and establishing a sense of shared life experience through the co-creation of digital stories. As with other projects described in this issue, PADSIP underwent modifications as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of moving to online facilitation, the group was still able to build intergenerational connections and understanding.

“Building Learning Communities through Digital Storytelling” is a preliminary report on a large on-going action research study in which DS is used to foster learning communities in media literacies involving 50 Greek primary and secondary teachers and about 900 students. DS has long been used to promote the development of learning communities and communities of practice for teachers and students alike ([Meimaris 2017](#)). This program involved a range of disciplines including language, history, social science, and

art education. The authors address an important question in considering the dynamic between student individuality expressed in their stories and the collaborative nature of the learning community.

In “Power and Precarity: First Generation Students Compose Digital Stories of Class Mobility”, Jane Van Galen reports on a six-year project with 78 first- and former first-generation college students across the United States, who participated in digital storytelling workshops that surfaced how structural inequalities are manifested in their daily lives in and beyond the college campus. Grounded within sociological analyses of student “struggle”, this project scaffolded a series of case studies that illustrates how digital storytelling can become both a qualitative research tool for researchers and a source of co-creative agency or self-authorship for participants. As Van Galen explains, “in sharing their stories, the participants acted as ‘lay sociologists’, locating themselves within institutions ‘that both enable and constrain action’ (Ewick and Silbey 2003)”.

“Towards a Co-Creative Immersive Digital Storytelling Methodology to Explore Experiences of Homelessness in Loughborough” examines the potential of virtual reality in exploring the place-based stories of homelessness. While acknowledging the role of the researcher in the story, the project preserves and strengthens the sense of empathy and co-creation in participants. The potential of the DS workshop experience to promote empathy, agency, and empowerment has been realized in a wide range of projects and contexts (Bliss 2017; Bickel et al. 2017). Many of us in the DS community consider empathy to be a learning outcome in some of our work, and this paper explores important critical questions concerning the ethics and methodologies of this approach.

Connecting to this movement has been a transformative experience for many members of our community of practice, as it allowed us to meet great people, learn from great people, and connect great people to other great people who would not have been connected to each other if we had not co-facilitated a particular digital storytelling workshop. We are a group of lucky people from the academy and community that collaborate and learn from one another, blurring the boundaries between academy and society in our own contexts. We hope that you find this spirit of collaboration and community reflected in the works presented here.

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