Not A Brown Paper Bag Or Shopping Trolley – Digital Media Storytelling With People Who Have Experienced Homelessness

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Abstract

This article considers how digital storytelling can be used to assist people who have experienced homelessness to tell their stories. As a medium embedded in social action/ human rights pedagogy, the authors conclude that it can be a useful technique when working with marginalised communities, wanting to effect change at a societal level. The layering of narrative with symbolic imagery can allow the owner of the story to find their voice whilst also placing aspects of their experiences into the public sphere. The process demands that the audience respond to what they see and hear, placing an onus on them to be part of the solution. However, this paper also considers some of the complexities of art making concerned with empowerment, and recognises the importance of seeing art making with vulnerable communities as an experience on a continuum.

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> *The arts touch people on a personal, emotional level and have the power to rebuild the fabric of our community where it has been torn apart by years of poverty and struggle. The arts can construct bridges across barriers of class, race, gender and age. The arts can interpret and celebrate the past, present and future of a community to replace despair and apathy with hope and creation (Lipka & McDaniel 2001).*

Introduction

Equal Service is a digital storytelling project which took place in Australia as an adjunct to a larger project that was initiated by the State Government in conjunction with the Homeless Persons Legal Clinic (HPLC) and the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP). The aim was to work cooperatively to address the discrimination that people experiencing homelessness experience whilst trying to participate in public life. Specifically, we wanted to see what could be done about the discrimination they experience when trying to access accommodation and when attempting to access goods and services from the hospitality industry.

Although this journal is dedicated to fostering and enlarging the discourse surrounding creative technologies, the thrust of this article is twofold. Our central concern is with social justice and whilst new technologies have a powerful role to play in this arena, we wish to make it clear we see them as secondary to our principle aim of empowering people who experience homelessness. To this end the paper is in two quite distinct sections. The second section is a hopefully useful discussion of the uses and implications of digital storytelling within our project context. The first, however, is dedicated to an explication of the situations of the homeless, and without this, or with a perfunctory imparting of it, the application of digital media would be at best antithetical to our aims, at worst, a continuation and propagation of approaches which cause the problem in the first place. Using digital media was a creative response to the realities of a world in which we are a part—this was not a digital media project that used the stories of the homeless to create art.

A survey undertaken by HPLC identified that 69% of their clients had experienced some form of discrimination whilst trying to access accommodation and 58% had experienced discrimination whilst trying access goods and services, in particular when trying to purchase food (PILCH 2007). As Lynch states:

> *Not surprisingly, examples of this are most common in the private rental and accommodation markets. The chronic shortage of affordable, appropriate accommodation, together with the obvious fact that homeless people need housing, creates a situation that is often exploited by unscrupulous landlords. It is not unusual, for example, for hostels and backpackers' inns to charge different rates for international travellers and itinerants. The Council to Homeless Persons reports that it is common for caravan park and boarding house operators to demand hefty (and illegal) bonds from people on social security payments. (2002, 19)*

The outcome of the project was to produce guidelines for business owners and operators that explained what they must do to ensure that they provide a service that is respectful of all clients, regardless of their social status. The project involved significant consultation with business owners and with individuals who had experienced homeless, and sought to tease out and build on how they had been treated in the public arena. The project sought also to create material that was consistent with the values and societal aspirations contained within the Victorian Charter of Human Rights, which had become law earlier that year. 'Human rights' refers to a set of principles which include:

• That everyone has the right to experience dignity in their lives;
• That everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect them;
• That everyone has the right to live free from discrimination; and
• That everyone has the right to have his or her culture respected.

A commitment to human rights principles drives the individual to engage in social action. Human rights and social action are inextricably linked, because social action refers to the way that a person demonstrates their commitment to human rights principles in their everyday lives. *Equal Service* was built on these principles, as it is well documented that people experiencing homelessness have their human rights violated on an almost daily basis, and in nearly every facet of their public life (Washington and Moxley 2008; Lynch 2010).

Homelessness – the bigger picture

Every night in Victoria 23,000 people will be homeless and nationwide more than 100,000 people will be homeless (Lynch 2010). When you think of the homeless, most people instantly have an image that comes to mind. Perhaps it is a dirty old man in a trench coat with bottle in a brown bag in his hand. Perhaps it is a woman, with a shopping trolley rummaging through bins. However, these stereotypical images of people sleeping rough, which are repeated and glamorised through the mass media (Reynalds 2006), account for only 14% of the real picture (Lynch 2010).

Chamberlain and MacKenzie identify three categories of homeless persons: primary – which means people without conventional accommodation, such as those living on the streets, in cars or in squats; secondary, which refers to people in temporary accommodation such as a boarding house, refuge or a crisis accommodation facility; and tertiary, which refers to people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis (Chamberlain and McKenzie 1992). Apart from those sleeping rough, 50% of those who are homeless tonight will be couch surfing, 14% will be in crisis accommodation and 22% will be in accommodation where they have no security of tenure (ABS 2003). Nearly half will be aged under 25, 40% are women; 25% are aged between 12 – 18 years of age and 10% will be indigenous, even though only 2% of the overall population identify as indigenous in Australia (ABS 2003).

The pathways into homelessness are complex and varied. They include a "lack of affordable housing, substance abuse and the lack of needed services, mental illness, domestic violence, family crisis, and poverty or insufficient income" (Foscarinis 1996). Fiscal, social and public policy contribute to homelessness as can cultural causes, such as the provision of inappropriate housing for migrants and indigenous communities (Lynch 2010).

Discrimination occurs when one person is treated less favourably than another person in same or similar circumstances. During the consultation stage of the project we heard numerous accounts of the discrimination this community experiences on a day to day basis; stories of having their belongings locked away or thrown out whilst out looking for work, and of being evicted from caravan parks during holiday periods when rentals are more lucrative. They spoke of illegal 'blacklists' which provide real estate agents with the opportunity to filter out potential tenants based on past rental experiences. The problem with the blacklists is that whilst they may contain

information about previous rental patterns, no one takes responsibility for removing names placed on the list once debts have been paid, so the stigma of poverty follows renters for the rest of their lives. They spoke of the hardship of trying to find secure permanent accommodation and how their inability to have a home affected their ability to hold down jobs.

When trying to purchase food, we heard stories of only being offered day old food that had gone cold, at marked up prices, of being refused entry into shops or being told that their food vouchers were unacceptable currency. They talked of being followed round supermarkets under the assumption that they would steal, of being denied tables at restaurants or being offered the one closest to the toilets in near empty venues. The discrimination this community experiences is extreme: it keeps them trapped in cycles of poverty that impact harshly on their health (Lynch 2002). The links between poverty and discrimination have been well documented (ESCOR 2001; Lynch 2010), as has the costly impact this behaviour burdens the entire community with (Stagoll and Lynch 2002). There is no doubt that homelessness and poverty are among the most serious socio-economic and health issues confronting Australia and the western world in the twenty first century (Lynch 2010; Washington and Moxley 2008).

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The most obvious fact that became apparent when working with this community was that the stigmatisation associated with having experienced homelessness was palpable. It affected every part of their being, including their self confidence and belief in their ability to participate in community life. As we listened to their stories, we became aware of how unique each of their stories was – there is no one pathway into homelessness or out of it. The common belief that homelessness only affects a certain sector of the community or that it is their fault that they ended up living on the streets are myths that need to be busted. We became aware of the structural and historical factors that contributed to their homelessness and how identifying these themes allowed us to imagine new and more creative solutions to increasing their ability to participate in society more fully. The idea of producing guidelines that businesses may be willing to abide by was going to be a very small drop in a very large ocean when it came to reducing discrimination. It became apparent that if we were going to make a difference, business owners would need to understand the stories of this community, to put a human face to the problem rather than just seeing a brown paper bag or shopping trolley. *Equal Service* was an attempt to address this issue. It was a collaborative digital storytelling project between people who had experienced homelessness and a team of artists which sought to represent the lived experiences and outcomes of having been homeless. By placing the stories side by side, the aim was to contextualise these experiences within a wider social setting that demonstrated why poverty, marginalisation and homelessness are the problems of the community – not the individual. The aim was to produce a DVD that communicated the lived experiences of the participants to an audience who may have little or no knowledge of homelessness in order to bring aspects of their experiences into public awareness. Washington & Moxley (2008) assert that using creative means (that can include digital storytelling) as a tool for social action provides the audience with new and sometimes disturbing knowledge, that may exceed their own experiences. It demands that the audience respond to what they see and hear, placing an onus on them to be part of the solution, rousing people to action (Woodruff 2005). Washington and Moxley (2008) suggest that:

> *From the standpoint of social action, the portrayal of the lived experience may be adept at stimulating public awareness, arousing public indignation, and fostering collaborative action to find ways of rectifying human tragedy.*

Artists, either individually or whilst working alongside communities often "tell and retell histories, some autobiographical, that attempt to depict historical stereotypes or assumptions that have shaped collective memory and identity" (Desai and Hamlin 2010). They do this to challenge and reframe how we have constructed history. Using lived experiences of individuals seeks to "disrupt and discredit the grand narrative by revealing its omissions and biases" (Milbrandt 2010). It allows artists to create work that is socially responsible as well as transformative and healing, or as Gablik writes, "to make art as if the world mattered" (Gablik 1991). This work is developed out of an instinctual belief that wherever there is affliction, suffering and human need, art will always contain a remedy (McNiff 1997).

Oral storytelling in the digital age

Oral storytelling is considered to be one of the oldest art forms in human history and until the invention of written language, was the primary method by which wisdom, knowledge and information was passed from generation to generation (Czarnecki 2009). It is the primary medium that people use to organise, and to make meaning of, their experiences (Polkinhorne 1988) and through which culture is transmitted (Little & Froggett 2009). Zipes asserts that the basic function of storytelling is to act as a form of political activism as it has the capacity to mediate the perceptions of others, challenging dominant value systems that seek to exclude (Little and Froggett 2009; Zipes 2006). He states:

> *(The function of storytelling) is to communicate the relevant values, norms and customary practices of a group of people, to conserve them and pass them on … to question, change and overthrow the dominant value system and to transform what has been preserved (Zipes 2006).*

It is argued that storytelling has always linked itself with the latest technologies available, whether it be through the support of prehistoric drawings carved into caves that illustrate the words spoken, through to the development of the printing press, or in more modern times through the use of film, television, DVDs, or the ever increasing multitude of platforms for communication contained on the internet (Skains 2010). The rapid succession of media technology from printed text, through to audio visual media and now into digital media has had a profound effect across all aspects of culture (Skains 2010). Describing the emergence of digital media as a critical epoch, Skains notes how, in terms of entertainment, online activities are overtaking film and television in much the same way as these visual media overtook the printed novel (2010). Klaebe & Bolland argue that new media technology has begun to change the very fabric of human society because it has not only changed the way we 'do' things, but has changed how we communicate (2007).

Digital storytelling is described as multimedia authoring projects combining texts, images and audio files to create a short film clip (Oppermann 2008; Klaebe and Bolland 2007). Emerging in the late 1980s as a method employed by community theatre workers (Lambert 2002), its original aim was to work against the messages being produced by the mass media and entertainment industries that sought to silence or ignore marginalised communities (Burgess 2006). Viewing the authors as 'creative consumers' it is argued that the power of digital technology lies in its ability to cause major potential disruption to the dominance of commercial media, through its ability to be socially inclusive (Lessig 2004; Warschauer 2003). The three distinguishing features that set it aside from other storytelling processes are, firstly, that it utilises emerging digital technologies to house the works produced; secondly, it utilises multiple media in its creation, starting with the written or spoken word and then moving into a visual and oral form of communication; and finally it focuses on personal narratives, which allows the maker to find their voice whilst also providing them with the opportunity to contextualise their experiences within wider discourses (Benmayor 2008). It is asserted that the multimedia process, which involves writing or telling stories about seminal moments in our lives, and then translating that story into a visual medium, provides us with the ability to situate our lived experiences. This provides us with the ability to construct new "social, cultural and historical understandings" (Benmayor 2008). Digital storytelling has the capacity not only to

shift how the maker understands themselves but when grouped with similarly themed stories provides us with the larger story—a meta view of the world and our place in it. This also provides us with the opportunity to challenge wider social and cultural discourses because we can see how and where we belong.

At its core, this layering process of attaching metaphor to symbols concerned with everyday life is interested in social change that builds on human rights principles, and is located in Freire's theories of empowerment through participation (Freire 1972; Benmayor 2008). This work seeks to address the structural and historical factors which impede "free, equal and uncoerced participation in society" (Jacobs 2011). It is seen as a collaborative social action process, where the personal experiences and values of communities play a crucial role in identifying themes and solutions alongside professionals and policy makers (Jacobs 2011; Broner et al. 2001). It is currently used in a wide range of educational and community settings (Hartley and McWilliam 2009), as a technique for community engagement and as a therapeutic medium (Clarke and Adam 2011).

Participatory art making, which focuses on lived experience is well known to have the capacity to shift how individuals understand themselves, which in turn changes how they see their ability to contribute to the wider community (Matarasso 1997; 1998; Popple and Scott 1999; Kay 2000). So too is art making that utilises multiple mediums. Theatre for example, which also starts with words and is then transformed into a visual performance has a long history of being used as a tool for social change whether it is as a form of social commentary or as a vehicle for direct political action (Sloman 2011; Hall and Thomson 2010; Abah 2007; Boeren 1992). Through his work with Latin American communities, Boal noted how participating in theatre making, the content of which was their lived experiences, provided a forum where participants could rehearse change (Conrad 2004; Boal 1998; Sloman 2011). By acting out their stories and their struggles, participants were able to re-author their stories, which affirmed their right to "apply power to the world and change it—however minutely" (Willis 1990). Digital storytelling acts in a similar fashion, as in each instance hearing the author's voice is central to the story's power, especially when it comes to working with marginalised communities (Benmayor 2008).

When thinking about how we could best respond to the stories we were hearing from people we met who had experienced homelessness, it became apparent that digital media offered us the best medium for disseminating our message. For some time both the HPLC and CHP had encouraged people experiencing homelessness to attend education sessions that they provided to the wider community. At these forums, these individuals would share their stories, and the effect this had on the audience was indeed powerful and was often the catalyst for levering increased resources for their services. However, some participants talked about being ready to move on from being identified or labelled as homeless. Whilst they were happy to share their stories if it would change how people felt and responded to issues of homelessness, they did not enjoy being the main exhibit at sessions. Instead they wanted to move to an emotional place where they could be as invisible as any other member of the community. Digital storytelling allowed for all these needs to be met. As a point of divergence from both participatory theatre making and story telling in educational forums, it allowed for personal anonymity whilst still providing the human

face of the issue. It also took advantage of new communication technologies that have the capacity to reach global audiences of thousands or even millions and can be viewed and modified on a mass scale (Czarnecki 2009). Digital media has an immediacy to it (Skains 2010) whereas traditional art making has in contemporary times more often than not been viewed as a means for exclusion (Bourdieu 1984) – where everyday people feel disconnected and see art and artists as "special and heightened, not everyday and ordinary" (Willis 1990). In comparison, the acceptance of digital technology is rapidly transforming society, culture and consciousness (Clarke and Adam 2011). As Lucas (2004) states, "Literacy in the twenty-first century is as much about being able to understand the language of sounds and images as it is about reading and writing". American educators suggest that digital story telling has become a signature pedagogy for the new humanities, as it provides a powerful medium for learning that traditional writing can no longer offer (Coventry 2008; Leon 2008; Benmayor 2008).

Digital storytelling as social action

Using art as a medium for social action is not in itself a new concept (Milbrandt 2010). Art making, including the use of storytelling is often used as a tool for community development because of its ability to facilitate participation and empowerment (Phillips 2004; Mayo 2000; Landry and Matarasso 1996). Empowerment essentially involves a shift from a top down approach, from experts to a participatory practice with either individuals or communities, aimed at strengthening their capacity for social action and change (Jacobs 2011; Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman 2000). It provides the individual with the ability to make decisions and have control over their personal life (Jacobs 2011).

When creating digital storytelling projects, the assumption is often that empowerment requires handing over as much of the art making process to the individual as is possible (Goldsworthy 2002; Benn 1976); as it allows them to develop their voice and exercise their liberties, affording them opportunities to build more productive and inclusive social relationships (Milbrandt 2010). The artist takes the role of the facilitator, transferring skills and knowledge to the participants. The artist seeks "to respect and affirm the individuals for their unique experiences, perspectives, needs, wants, abilities and struggles, and to support them in these endeavors" (Goldsworthy 2002). This is also consistent with the belief that every individual should have the right to be involved in the creation of culture rather than as a passive recipient devised by the elite (Adams and Goldbard 2001; Klaebe and Bolland 2007). However, asserting that community empowerment is only possible if professional disempowerment occurs is a common misconception (Jacobs 2011). Rather empowerment needs to be the result of co-creation by equal partners. As Labonte states, "Empowerment exists only as a relational act of power taken and given in the same instance" (Labonte 1994). With this in mind, the project was a collaboration that included both "collecting and filtering stories whilst also allowing the participants to tell their own story and find their own voice" (Klaebe and Bolland 2007). The success of this project was in its ability to find a balance between what Burgess might describe as "ethical democratic access for participants whilst maximizing relevance and impact" (Burgess 2006) for the intended audience. As Burgess states:

> *[The task is] not to speak heroically on behalf of ordinary voices, but to find ways to understand and practically engage with the full diversity of existing and emerging media contexts in which they are, or are not, being heard (Burgess 2006).*

In referencing Maslow's theories on the hierarchy of needs, the aim was to work within the social context of the participants' current realities (Maslow 1943). His theories revolve around five levels of human need, which start with physiological survival needs being the most basic needs that must be met, moving through to more complex needs such as safety, belonging, experiencing esteem and finally self actualisation, which includes being involved in challenging projects and being in touch with your innate creativity (Maslow 1943). Of prime importance were the physiological and safety needs of the participants, which for many were only in the process of becoming established. Belonging and experiencing esteem were developed through involvement in the project. As with most digital media storytelling projects, the process has the ability to instil confidence in participants, as they come to realise that their life story is unique and worth telling (Nielsen 2005). Self actualisation through creativity was in this case considerably less important. Creativity was seen as a continuum, on which participants could set their own goals for participation. In most instances participants, whilst willing to share their stories, were keenly aware of how out of touch they were with digital media techniques and in some cases their own innate creativity. It was also important to note that the traditional way of creating digital stories within community settings, which utilises "scrapbook aesthetics set to autobiographical narration" (Klaebe and Bolland 2007) was problematic. Preserving photographic memories is never a priority when trying to escape situations of domestic violence, or when choosing to sleep rough, or escape from painful childhood experiences. Many of the participants had no such artefacts on which to rely, so the visuals had to be constructed from scratch. Training participants to use equipment and software can be time consuming and the aesthetic quality of the finished product can vary immensely (Clarke and Adam 2011). In this case the process is not always validating, and can be counter-productive.

When working with marginalised communities, particularly those who identify themselves as victims or survivors, even finding a voice can be complicated (Hackett 2009). The fear of speaking out against the system that wounds can be significant. The fear of having benefits cut off, of being denied emergency accommodation, or of being labelled as difficult, were very real fears for some of the participants. There can be a "sense of shame and humiliation that they have allowed themselves to sink so low as to be begging for mercy … or simply be seen as less than heroic and courageous in the face of suffering" (Hackett 2009). Recalling traumatic moments in one's life needs to be handled carefully in order for the storyteller to make sense of the words they are speaking. There can be just as much a need for witnessing the spoken word as there is for witnessing the visual representation of the final product. Importantly, the aim of the project was to allow for voices to be heard in order to effect change at a societal level, without overwhelming or re-wounding participants.

Participants shared their stories, which were then edited and structured with the assistance of an arts therapist. The therapist and participant then worked together to ensure that the script accurately represented their voice. It also provided them with

an opportunity to debrief this stage of the experience, as for some of them this was the first time they had put into words what they had lived through. Once satisfied, the script was then handed over to a graphic designer who came up with a treatment for the story, which was again shared with the participant and their input sought. This degree of collaboration was powerful and crucially important to the process. The participants having sign-off at each stage of development ensured that they were in control of the final look and feel of the product. Once the stories had been animated, a private viewing was held for participants and their input sought again before the final product was locked down. A premiere was then organised, where participants, policy makers and other key stakeholders were invited to view the works.

Those who had experienced homelessness talked about what it felt like to have their lives honoured on film. The realisation that they had a story to tell and that it had been treated with respect was overwhelming. For so long now the message they had received from society was that they were worth nothing—this was the script that ran through their head on a daily basis. This project sought to challenge that script. Allowing for new ways of knowing themselves became possible. Participants talked about the importance of having been part of a project that gives something back to the world. It was an important way of building self esteem in a community that is constantly marginalised as a result of life experiences that many of them had no control over. Seeing their story side by side with others who had experienced similar tragedies acted to contextualise their lived experience within a wider cultural context. It was an example of Yalom's curative factors of group therapy at work; installation of hope, universality and altruism were all present (Ballinger and Yalom 1995). One participant said at the beginning of the process, "It was just my lot in life, and I was strong enough to take it". By the end of the process, when she was reminded of these comments, she said "But I shouldn't have had to have live through that—no child should be expected to be that strong".

The DVD is used regularly in training sessions by both government and community agencies. Primarily it is used to educate business owners and operators about the human face of homelessness, as a way of encouraging them to change their business practices. It has also been accepted into the permanent collection of digital storytelling projects located at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. At least one of the politicians who attended the launch now volunteers at a soup kitchen once a week before work.

Conclusion

Digital story telling can be a useful technique when working with marginalised communities and wanting to effect change at a societal level. The layering of narrative with symbolic imagery can allow the owner of the story to find their voice whilst also providing them with the opportunity to contextualise their experiences within wider discourses. This in turn provides the makers with the ability to construct new "social, cultural and historical understandings" (Benmayor 2008). However, the authors also recognise the importance of seeing art making with vulnerable communities as an experience on a continuum. There are many pathways that lead to empowerment and artists most certainly have a role and responsibility to facilitate this process. As Washington & Moxley (2008) note, "The arts capture aspects of

human existence that social science cannot, and the humanities remind us of the importance of placing a human face on what often times are seen publicly as faceless problems".

The stories can be accessed via the following link:

http://www.pilch.org.au/myths_memories_dvd/

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