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► To cite this version:

Evika Karamagioli, Arnaud Laborderie, Michael Meimaris. Discussing civic values and concerns: Digital Storytelling as a powerful media technique and practice. Digital Storytelling Conference “Current Trends in Digital Storytelling: Research & Practices”, Sep 2018, Zakynthos, Greece. hal-01891053

HAL Id: hal-01891053

<https://bnf.hal.science/hal-01891053v1>

Submitted on 9 Oct 2018

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Discussing civic values and concerns: Digital Storytelling as a powerful media technique and practice

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Abstract

This article discusses the potential of the Digital Storytelling as a way to question the civil society and the social innovation, and to express civic values. It focus on a specific case study, a one-week Digital Storytelling workshop organized in April 2018 in Athens by the Laboratory of New Technologies in Communication, Education and the Mass Media, of the University of Athens, and IDEFI-CréaTIC, University Paris 8.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, civic values, social innovation, citizen expression

To quote this article: Karamagioli, E., Laborderie, A., Meimaris, M. (2018), “Discussing civic values and concerns: Digital Storytelling as a powerful media technique and practice”, *Proceedings of the International Digital Storytelling Conference “Current Trends in Digital Storytelling: Research & Practices”*, 21-23 September 2018, Zakynthos: UNESCO Club, Greece.

1. INTRODUCCION

In this article, we discuss the potential of the Digital Storytelling to enhance meaningful civic dialogue through a specific case study, a one-week Digital Storytelling workshop organized in April 2018 in Athens by the Laboratory of New Technologies in Communication, Education and the Mass Media, of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Athens, and IDEFI-CréaTIC, University Paris 8 (Master Digital Creation and Editing).

Themes of the workshop were: solidarity, transformation, social innovation, transition. Athens was considered as the ideal inspirational testbed for such themes taking into consideration the fact that social innovation and social change are starting to flourish after more than 10 years of recession and social crisis.

For one week 8 French MSc students have participated to a series of lectures and group discussions on theoretical and practical aspects of digital storytelling. They performed a series of “inspirational meeting” with key social players in Athens, namely Municipality of Athens, the Bodossaki Foundation, the National Library of Greece, the civic organizations Dianeosis and Solomon. They were asked to document their personal story – narration in a digital format on one of the four themes of the workshop.

The authors were directly involved in the design of the workshop, to present the theoretical parts, to manage the students to the sensitization visits and to act as instructors and story circle facilitators into the participatory parts of the workshop.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this action research project, a qualitative analysis was performed by French students that experience digital storytelling both as media technique and media practice. They were asked in several occasions throughout the one week workshop in Athens to express by themselves a) what was their feeling and attitude towards the production process, b) their proper evaluation with regards to what each of them created through a 2-3 minutes digital story, c) on the collaborative part, they were encouraged to share and discuss openly about their key ideas and their proper message, d) the reasons why they choose them and e) finally, after 24 hours intensive work as an hackathon, to present their own digital stories (based on the Lambert criteria).

These works were collectively discussed to be analyzed and improved. Then students gave their feedback regarding the different stages of digital stories process (ie story circle etc.) and their feeling about this workshop.

3. RESULTS

Our findings suggest that the digital storytelling workshop gave powerful and personal insights into the students’ civic attitudes, social needs and behavioural patterns. It was an opportunity to reflect, to learn and to discuss issues what concerned them, even if they were coming from different socio-political and cultural backgrounds and they shared probably very different life experiences. Digital storytelling has proved to be a technological enabler for constructive dialogue, unleashing students’ creativity and developing their self-expression.

Important skills were acquired or improved: the technical and artistic skills of how to produce a digital story; the cultural and social abilities of how to understand ourselves and the world around us, to act and to react within it; the civic awareness of how to use story for community change initiatives (Meimaris *et al.*, 2017).

However, we have observed that the students had some initial difficulties in “understanding” the meaning of this methodology, especially to find the key message and to link it with their personal life and experience.

All student’s subjective viewpoint was that the digital story experience helped them advance their self-reflection skills. They also highlighted that it was a strong team bonding and sharing exercise. In parallel they recognized that it enabled them to build their own communication aptitudes such as learning about crafting messages, constructing narratives and articulating viewpoints.

The 3 elements they all mentioned to comment the whole workshop experience were “motivation, encouragement, sharing”. It also came across comments and reasoning such as:

- ‘I wasn’t ready to talk about it. I feel very good that I did’
- “I was a very introvert person and could not express myself to the audience up to now”
- “I found again the activist part of me that I thought I have lost.”
- How can you tell the difference between a Greek and French?

Creating their digital stories and developing new skills along the process, was clearly an empowering and liberating experience for the students. It is interesting that they all were open and felt secured to discuss about sensitive personal issues and experiences (the inspiration source of the digital stories that they are created) and also to show their stories not only in the group but also to the public. This experience of telling its own story to other people is an important motivational factor and underlined the strong social, communicative (Khebbaz, 2016) and even therapeutic (Sawyer & Willis, 2011) potential of digital storytelling.

4. DISCUSSION

Digital Storytelling has proved to be an effective pedagogical tool and instructional technology (Juppi, 2015). But it can be much more than that. It can be a powerful mean of communicating and connecting each other in an effective and meaningful way.

Generator of constructive user experiences it is defined as “conversational media” (Couldry, 2008) In the sense that it is both a technique to increase understanding across generations, ethnicities and other divides, and at the same time a tool to promote civic commitment, education, professional reflection and corporate communication (Lambert, 2006).

Digital Storytelling under this angle is not only about creating stories as multimodal multimedia narratives. It is to be involved in a facilitated discussion and participatory group process during their creation and last but not least is about sharing them. It provides a virtual space for individuals to reflect past and present by looking at their own lives and their interactions with people through a critical eye. Therefore, they strengthen their social and emotional intelligence, they place

themselves in the civic affairs sphere. They understood that they are more or less an active part of it, their attitudes and action have a positive or negative impact and they have the potential to act rather than to endure social change

Thus, even if Digital Storytelling activities are usually short-term interventions, they may have long-term impacts for the individuals social (Juppi, 2015) and psychological evolution of those involved (Meimaris *et al.*, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

Digital storytelling has a strong potential both as a dialectic tool (Meimaris *et al.*, 2017) but also as a civic engagement activity (in the sense of sensitising and mobilising). According to Warschauer (2004) the best way to develop the multiple literacies required in the information age and to benefit from ICT, is to use them for tackling real problems and for engaging in new communities. However, although a skill building collaborative activity of self-expression, its generalization remains sporadic and short-term. It needs to be incorporated in civic affairs and formal pedagogic processes in a systematic way as it can work both ways, bottom up and top down.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Municipality of Athens, the Bodossaki Foundation, the National Library of Greece, the civic organizations Dianeosis and Solomon for their support in the implementation of the project.

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