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Digital Storytelling to Engage and Support Toitū te Tangata | The Whole Person

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Abstract

This paper proposes the adoption of digital storytelling (DS) by Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) as an effective pedagogical tool for the support of toitū te tangata | the whole person of tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand. It explains the DS process and discusses how it provides a means to address issues of equity for these ākonga | students, helps them to develop a sense of identity in what may be a challenging or unfamiliar environment, and provides them with a form of "digital empowerment", all of which are essential for wellbeing in the 21st century. It closes by arguing that TLAs are well-placed to establish and sustain this valuable practice within the context of embedded teaching.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, embedded teaching, wellbeing, equity, identity, stories, indigenous storywork, participatory media

Digital storytelling (DS), as developed by the StoryCenter in Berkeley, California, is a form of participatory media that emerged in the 1990s in the context of social activism and community theatre (Lambert, 2020). It initially involved ordinary people creating short and often personal analogue videos, but since the widespread adoption of smart phones and cloud-based applications in the last two decades, this version of DS now typically involves the creation of videos using digital devices within fully digital spaces. While DS has a well-established presence as an effective reflective tool (Anderson & Kinnair, 2018; Jamissen et al., 2017), this paper will focus specifically on how it can support ākonga | student wellbeing and toitū te

tangata | the whole person in the context of tertiary education. It will briefly explain the DS process and then investigate how storytelling as participatory media supports equity, which is a key element of wellbeing. It will then canvass DS as a means of developing professional and personal identities as well as 21st century digital literacies. It closes by arguing that Learning Advisors (LAs) are well-placed to facilitate DS's dissemination across multiple disciplines and types of tertiary institutions and to sustain its institutional presence over time.

The process of using DS as assessment generally involves individual ākonga producing a carefully considered video in response to a story prompt that is relevant to a specific course. They begin by producing a script and then, in the most efficacious version of DS, meet with other students in a facilitated "Story Circle" (Lambert, 2010, 2020) in which they share scripts or story ideas to help each other refine their stories. Next steps include collecting appropriate still images and/or short video clips, and a digital audio track that will enhance their story. Ākonga are then tasked with creating a short video of 1-4 minutes using a cloud-based video editor such as WeVideo (n.d.) or another digital video editor of their choice such as iMovie or CapCut (n.d.). Throughout this process, emphasis is placed on creating videos that effectively communicate each student's story rather than on high-quality video production. Finally, ākonga meet again through a group screening of student videos for those who wish to participate.

This creation and sharing of stories has the potential to make a significant contribution to both toitū te tangata and to academic culture by enabling ākonga to make sense of the world. They provide context and meaning in a way that unadulterated data or information cannot due to their ability to "bring some kind of coherence to the chaos of experience that bombards us daily" (Clark, 2010, p. 3). They also support whakawhanaungatanga | relationship-building through creating a sense of belonging and active engagement, whether it be around a campfire, in online forums, or, most significantly for the purposes of this paper, within educational settings (Gillespie, 2022; Shirazi, 2022).

Story is also a vehicle of cultural and individual wholeness, especially for indigenous people. In her discussion of pūrākau, the Māori storytelling tradition, Lee-Morgan (2019) writes that "[it is] as fundamental to our sustenance and growth, as

soil and water are to trees" (p. 151). Similarly, Jo-ann Archibald | Q'um Q'um Xiiem (n.d.), who is a member of the Stó:lō nation in what is now known as British Columbia, Canada, explains how storytelling functions as a central means of sharing intergenerational knowledge from elders to younger generations in a process characterised by "respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, inter-relatedness, and synergy" (n.d.). The concept of "holism" contained within this storytelling framework is shared by many indigenous peoples, and refers to the interdependent realms of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical that are engaged through storytelling and that "form a whole healthy person" (Archibald, 2008, p. 11) thus supporting toitū te tangata.

But not all stories have equal visibility, and some are actively misrepresented or suppressed, a phenomenon that undermines the toitū te tangata of individuals or collectives who occupy this position within the narratives of more powerful actors and institutions. Plummer (2019) coins the term "story-power dialogue" to capture these dynamics that inhere in story. Who tells stories, for what purpose, how widely they are disseminated, and with what authority they 'speak', frame the lives of each of us. Broad systems of domination such as white supremacy, colonisation, patriarchy, ableism, and heteronormativity construct what it means to be white or black, 'civilised' or 'savage', or 'normal' or 'crippled/queer/untouchable' through what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) refer to as monovocal 'master narratives' or 'majoritarian stories' and Adichie (2009) eloquently renders as "the danger of a single story" in a widely viewed TED talk. These narratives spin tales of superiority and entitlement to justify the violence and disenfranchisement that they perpetuate on marginalised groups and to "[make] current social arrangements seem fair and natural" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413).

These naturalised dominant narratives appear to persist within the Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary sector. As part of a recent report on equity at a prominent university in this country, a 2021 student survey (Russell et al., 2022) revealed that 41% of ākonga reported experiencing some form of discrimination. At the same time, one respondent to the concomitant staff survey stated "[t]his is Aotearoa. We have *a* culture, we have *a* way of life already and need to be respected just as much as it is important to make EVERYONE feel welcome" [italics added] (Russell et al., 2022).

Perhaps this could be considered anecdotal evidence because it was just one person who uttered this sentence. Yet, that approach misses the point. In the context of what remain predominantly Eurocentric tertiary institutions in terms of structure, language, and both academic and social norms and culture, there is no question that a broadly European "culture" and "way of life" was being referred to by the staff member quoted above. The fact that a label is not required to identify it confirms its status as "normal" and part of a majoritarian story that is easily recognisable. There is also powerful irony contained within the notion that Māori, as tangata whenua | people of this land, require a 'welcome' in order to become part of an institution located within Aotearoa.

Where there is narrative, however, there is always the possibility of counter-narrative or intentional "counter-stories" (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and DS provides a powerful vehicle for the creation of precisely these stories. One of its key purposes, especially in the StoryCenter model, is to deploy storytelling as a strategy for personal empowerment through the promulgation of diverse voices through the carefully considered videos of storytellers. Access to this means of expression can help individuals "[sustain] a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" by virtue of the opportunity it provides them to frame their own experiences (Jackson, 2002, p. 15), but it is also explicitly directed at issues of social justice through its ability to unleash potent counter-narratives to "the single story" (Adichie, 2009). For those students that comprised the 41% who had experienced discrimination, for example, adding their counter-narratives, individually and collectively, to a level at which they become normalised would add a solid foundation from which to "open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414).

DS is also a powerful means for individual ākonga to develop a sense of voice and identity (Benmayor, 2008, 2012), a key aspect of toitū te tangata. This factor is especially important for groups where university in Aotearoa is not an assumed pathway, for example, "first in family", Māori, Pasifika, 20+, ESOL, disabled, LGBTQ+, and refugee students. If these ākonga are given the opportunity to work collectively within Story Circles or other group dialogues and produce a digital story about an experience that is highly significant to them as a person, they are engaging in

the kind of personal and/or professional identity formation that begins to perform their journey from passivity to active learning and meaning making (Hardy, 2017; Jamissen & Skou, 2010; Kim et al., 2021). Benmayor (2008, 2012) makes this phenomenon explicit by referring to her DS work with Latin@[1] students as “identity stories” or testimonios, and actively directs her students to link their experiences to the broader social and political world around them through collective dialogue, the theorizing of their experience through engagement with course texts, and public performances of their videos as “a compelling way to discuss and understand social identities, positionalities, and inequalities” (2012, p. 508).

These benefits of DS to toitū te tangata | the whole person are well-established; digital storytelling has been successfully deployed in tertiary settings for over 20 years (Jamissen et al., 2017) in numerous countries including Aotearoa New Zealand (Bliss, 2017) the United States (Benmayor, 2008; Kim et al., 2021; Robin, 2006; Schrum et al., 2021), South Africa (Gachago et al., 2015), the United Kingdom (Hardy, 2017), Chile (Salazar & Barticevic, 2015), Norway (Jamissen & Haug, 2014), and the Philippines (Peñalba et al., 2020). Yet as Jamissen and Haug (2014) argue, it often is not sustained within specific tertiary institutions, primarily because it is reliant on individual academics or small groups whose circumstances, interests, and institutional affiliations are subject to change over time. They go on to suggest that institutional support and ongoing communities of practice are required to enable wider and more sustainable proliferation of DS as an effective pedagogical tool.

This paper therefore proposes that Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs), as a continuing workforce with a well-defined institutional role, could provide the ongoing and sustained institutional support required to further develop and sustain DS as a timely and effective pedagogical tool in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are well-placed to do this because in recent decades, particularly through what is recognised as the effective practice of embedded teaching (Thies, 2012; Wingate, 2006; Wingate et al., 2011), TLAs have become established as ‘literacy specialists’ (Lea & Street, 2006; McWilliams & Allan, 2014). However, although we might be well-placed with respect to traditional literacies focused on written texts, the technological changes of the 21st century, particularly in the digital realm, require that we expand our range of

[1] A term used to refer to both Latina (female) and Latino (male) students.

literacy specialisation to include, for example, multimedia and visual literacies that will further support the success of our ākonga, both during their studies and into the future (Churchill, 2020). Mark Simpson refers to this as “digital empowerment” and goes on to comment that while Gen Z students may be adept with social media, “applying what they know in a work setting is more difficult” (as cited in McVitty, 2020, November 30). Helping our ākonga develop these empowering literacies will provide them with the means to operate knowledgeably and skilfully in digital spaces, thereby enabling them to protect and enrich themselves and others. These are key elements of toitū te tangata, and integrating DS into coursework is one means of supporting ākonga on this path.

For TLAs, assisting interested academics with the implementation of DS within embedded teaching involves familiarising both them and their students with the DS process, providing technical advice and support with what have become user-friendly recording and editing applications, and assisting with the facilitation of Story Circles. Integrating DS into our practice in this way will require professional development on the part of TLAs but it is important for us to remain relevant and equipped to assist our ākonga in the context of the profound changes that will continue to take place in coming decades.[2]

Of these skills, engaging with story is likely to be the most challenging aspect of taking up this tool, for academics, students, and TLAs, because of the emotion and, thus, perceived vulnerability that lies within the processes of story creation and story sharing. However, while tertiary education is often thought of as “bookish” and a place “where distant and disengaged ‘reason’ rules” (Nordkvelle, 2017, p. 2), emotions and engagement have been a key component in helping students develop their voice since early in the first millennium in nascent Western universities in Bologna and Paris (Nordkvelle, 2017). More recently, emotion has also been recognised as a key component of the model of critical reflection that was applied to education by John Dewey (1998 [1933]) in the early 20th century and has been widely implemented in tertiary settings since the 1980s (Rogers, 2001). Emotion often arises as part of reflective work due to the imperative to examine one’s own personal or

[2] Artificial intelligence is an obvious omission from this discussion, but AI literacy lies beyond the scope of this article.

professional experiences as an integral component of learning, a process that will generally evoke some kind of emotional response.

Creating a digital story is a similar reflective process that sometimes evokes strong emotions because, to create an effective story, storytellers must address something that is meaningful to them. As Joe Lambert (2020) of the StoryCenter explains, “I tend to engage with story based on how closely I feel that story carries genuine meaning for the author” (p. 68). Anything less is likely to be experienced as a protracted list of events that occurred and may fail to forge a connection between teller and listener/viewer. The StoryCenter model of DS, however, provides a structure that is protective for both students and facilitators in the small group Story Circles that are part of the DS process. The StoryCenter (n.d.) provides ethical guidelines that focus, for example, on storyteller wellbeing, agency, ongoing consent from storytellers, and full ownership of stories by their creators: “the storyteller ideally owns the stories, in every sense” (Lambert, 2020, p. 41). In addition, within Story Circles, a positive collaborative environment is created which allows each storyteller to retain maximum agency throughout the process and supports whakawhanaungatanga | relationship-building amongst the group as a whole. To achieve this, each storyteller indicates whether they wish to receive feedback or not on their story idea, and comments from other participants are limited to constructive and respectful suggestions on how the storyteller might strengthen the story they have chosen to share rather than suggesting how the storyteller might alter the story itself. This element of the Story Circle is crucial in empowering storytellers to retain ownership of the story, in keeping with the StoryCenter’s central objective. The role of facilitators is to maintain these fairly straightforward principles, which is not unlike maintaining a respectful and constructive environment in a classroom, albeit in the context of a novel process. Familiarity with the Story Circle, and ideally the opportunity to observe a more experienced facilitator, are also helpful in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the process.

Overall, introducing and facilitating the DS process within embedded teaching provides a viable means for TLAs to support te toitū te tangata of our ākonga. DS can help to address issues of equity through the manifestation of marginalised narratives in contexts still dominated by ‘majoritarian stories’ and enable ākonga to construct

and voice their emerging voices and identities. It also provides an engaging way to strengthen their digital literacies and a structured setting for whakawhanaungatanga | relationship building through the deployment of the Story Circle. TLAs, presuming a modicum of professional development, are both well-trained and well-placed within tertiary institutions to provide this support due to our status as a continuing workforce of literacy specialists.

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