

**Digital Storytelling: A qualitative methodology for amplifying hidden voices in higher education**

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## **Digital Storytelling: a qualitative methodology for amplifying hidden voices in higher education**

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### Summary:

This paper provides an overview of how digital storytelling is being used in higher education research. A history of this approach will be provided, before a detailed discussion of how digital stories can become data. This qualitative approach is of particular use for amplifying, illuminating and empowering voices which are often marginalised in normalised institutional research methodologies. Those attending will be introduced to a range of resources which will allow them to explore and adopt this methodology in their own institutional context.

### Paper:

#### *Introduction*

The dominance of quantitative metrics in higher education, both across the sector and within institutions, is undoubtable. Such is this 'ethos of measurement' (Spence 2019) that qualitative data is often labelled as alternative, additional, creative or innovative. It has become increasingly important to draw attention to the ways in which qualitative data can be used as an authentic measure of student experience / engagement and to triangulate with, and add weight to, institutional metrics. This can be achieved through a critique of the bias inherent in quantitative data analysis, for example as Gilborn *et al.* (2018 p. 159) note "contrary to popular belief, and the assertions of many quantitative researchers, numbers are neither objective nor color-blind". In addition, researchers in higher education can foreground qualitative methodologies which have been used to amplify, illuminate and empower voices which are often marginalised. The focus of this paper is the exploration of a method which can reach those who may not usually participate in institutional data collection.

#### *Digital Storytelling*

Digital storytelling is a multimodal qualitative research method. Its foundation can be traced back to Berkley's Centre for Digital Storytelling (StoryCenter<sup>1</sup>), founded in 1993. Promoters of digital storytelling aim to cultivate a methodology which will empower and give voice to individuals or groups who are often marginalised. Digital storytelling involves developing personal narratives based on certain life experiences, and various approaches can be used to support storytellers with this process. Stories are curated and then produced using a combination of text, audio/narration recordings, images, music and animations to create short films, typically 2 to 5 minutes long.

The adoption of this approach in higher education is not new or uncommon. There are national and international examples of digital storytelling which explores hidden voices (Stewart & Ivala 2017, Matias & Grosland 2016, Darvin & Norton 2014, Hopkins & Ryan, 2014), provides inclusive and reflexive learning opportunities (Jenkins & Lonsdale 2007, Jenkins & Gravestock 2013, Sanders & Murray 2009), is used as a pedagogical tool (Grant & Bolin 2016, Owens *et al* 2016, Coventry 2008,) and is adopted to build relationships within learning communities (Jenkins & Gravestock 2014,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.storycenter.org/>

Lowenthal & Dunlap 2010). This paper argues that there is a need to re surface and champion this approach within HE policy and practice and re-examine it's potential to develop student agency within a complex data landscape.

#### *Application at Sheffield Hallam University and beyond*

Following an exploratory project with the Yorkshire Universities Consortium, Sheffield Hallam began to develop student digital storytelling, most recently with the support of the Widening Participation Team and their student Ambassadors. The collection of powerful student stories detailed complex journeys to enrolment and the barriers to engagement for some students - mental health, first generation access, care experience, care giving and disability were examples of some of the emotive content the students narrated. These student digital stories have since been viewed by senior leaders to add context to strategic discussions. A library of student digital stories<sup>2</sup> has been made available which includes a selection of these stories. All storytellers have given their consent for these stories to be publicly available. Some stories remain personal to the storyteller and are not to be shared. For these students, the process of storytelling is more important than the digital product.

More recently, digital storytelling has been explored as an institutional research methodology; a means of gathering data on student experiences which help move the institution towards its strategic aims. The analysis of student generated digital stories is described as a multimodal (Kim, 2016) qualitative method. The methodological consideration of adopting this approach have been outlined in a methodological discussion piece produced for the Social Research Association journal (Austen *et al.* 2019), and covers the practicalities of recruiting student samples, the use of digital images and considerations for ethical scrutiny. These considerations were recently applied to an institutional research project in which digital storytelling was implemented by a Module Leader on a Foundation Degree course. Stories were been created by the whole module cohort as a reflective assessment - transition, belonging, anxiety, and the importance of friendship were some of the emerging cohort themes, alongside reflections on course design and curriculum, pedagogy and student support. Once consent to analyse was obtained, these stories also served the dual purpose of providing rich evidence for module and course enhancement. Existing digital stories have also been used to facilitate conversations within focus groups, and produced as part of a focus group, highlighting the further utility of this approach to higher education research.

These stories do take an investment of time and energy to produce. They are valuable artefacts to be treated with care, often highly emotive and potentially triggering. However, they can challenge dominant metric driven narratives by raising awareness of the range of student experiences and particularly those that might not be heard through normalised institutional research practices i.e. the overused survey. It is important that these stories have impact and they are used to facilitate reflections, discussions and eventual change at local or organisational level. They are to be respected as complete stories, whilst also providing thematic evidence of collective voices.

#### *For discussion*

During the presentation of this paper, the author will discuss digital storytelling as a research methodology in higher education, drawing on their experiences of implementing this approach. The audience will also be introduced to a collection of resources which could help others to do the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/digital-storytelling-shu/studentvoices/>

same, in the way that Dr Richard Waller is applying this approach in his SRHE funded research with white working class males. These include a webinar recording and a 'How to Produce Digital Stories Guide' with an ethical checklist produced for the QAA Scotland, and a Digital Practice Guide, funded by an AdvanceHE small development grant. The (further) utility of digital storytelling in higher education will also be explored.

The content of this paper has been adapted from Austen, L. (2019) Once upon a time: hearing student stories, *WonkHE*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2019, available online at <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/once-upon-a-time-hearing-student-stories/>

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