Digital storytelling: Capturing the stories of mentors in Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience

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Abstract

Digital stories are often considered in terms of artistic forms, as teaching and learning tools, and for their emancipatory capacity to capture the stories and experiences of marginalised social groups. This case joins the recent move to reconceptualise the digital story by positing it as a useful research method that generates rich multimodal narrative data. As a new method in social science research, it seems, at least so far, to raise more questions than it answers. Such methodological questions might include the following: What 'type' of digital story to use? How do you analyse, theorise and/or account for the overall effect of the multimodal text? Without offering definitive answers or providing a 'correct' account of how digital stories should be used as method, this case begins to offer some clarity by describing step by step how we responded to these questions, what we did, the difficulties encountered and the insights generated from this type of data and analysis. This case describes how digital stories were used as a method in one part of a larger research project that investigates the effectiveness, impact and model of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience mentoring programme. We will demonstrate how digital stories can be helpful in answering complex qualitative research questions.

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Digital storytelling: Capturing the stories of mentors in AIME

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Contributor biographies

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Dr Sarah O'Shea is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Wollongong and has experience in all three education sectors. Sarah completed her PhD in Education at University of Sydney in 2009 and her research focused on the higher education environment with particular reference to the transition, persistence and engagement of students who are first in the family to attend university. Sarah's research interests include equity in higher education and vocational education and training, and narrative enquiry situated in a social justice agenda.

Associate Professor Valerie Harwood is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the University of Wollongong. Her research interests are inclusion, critical

disability studies, the production of knowledge on child and youth psychopathology and youth exclusion. Valerie has experience teaching in schools and has also worked as a youth worker with disadvantaged young people in Adelaide, London and Sydney before completing her PhD in 2001. Her current research interests include AIME mentoring and her ARC Future Fellowship project aims to improve aspirations for educational futures in LSES early childhood settings.

Dr Samantha McMahon is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong. Her research interests include the medicalisation of child behaviour, pre-service teacher epistemology and teacher education. Samantha completed her PhD thesis in 2013, which was a study of pre-service teachers' knowledge of challenging behaviour. She is currently working in the UOW / AIME Mentoring Research Partnership project.

Relevant disciplines

Education, Media and Communications, Professional Studies

Academic level

Introductory undergraduate, intermediate undergraduate, advanced undergraduate, and post-graduate

Methods used

Digital story telling, semi-structured interviews, qualitative research, multimodal data, story, image, audiovisual

Keywords

Digital stories, qualitative research methods, mentoring, AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience)

Abstract

Digital stories are most often considered in terms of: artistic forms, teaching and learning tools, and for their emancipatory capacity to capture the stories and experiences of marginalised social groups. This case joins the very new move to reconceptualise the digital story by positing it as a useful research method that generates rich multimodal narrative data. As a new method in social science research it seems, at least so far, to raise more questions as it offers answers. These sorts of methodological questions might include: What 'type' of digital story to use? How do you analyse, theorise and/or account for the overall affect of the multimodal text? Without offering definitive answers to these questions or providing a 'correct' account of how digital stories should be used as method, this case begins to offer some clarity by describing step-by-step how we responded to these questions, what we did, the difficulties we encountered and the insights generated from this type of data and analysis.

This case provides an account of how digital stories were used as a method in one part of a larger research project that investigates the effectiveness, impact and model of the AIME mentoring program. We will demonstrate how, building on Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell's work on Artifactual Literacies, digital stories can be helpful in answering complex qualitative research questions.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the case students should:

- Know what a digital story is

- Understand the process of creating a digital story

- Consider ways to analyse the intricate interplay between image and script

Project overview and context: Investigating the AIME mentoring model

We contend that digital stories may prove a useful research method when a very complex something works and you don't know exactly why. Such was the experience of the research team investigating the AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience) program at an Australian university. The AIME program is designed to improve school completion rates of Australian Indigenous students and inspire them to engage with further studies and employment. AIME has experienced exponential growth and great success for its mentees since its inception, but its program does not neatly map against existing theories of mentoring and coaching. What, then, makes AIME mentoring work so effectively? This is a complex research problem that demands rich data to fuel new theorisation of mentoring and coaching.

To begin to address this research problem, in 2012 the research team investigated one element of the program, the university mentors. The investigation focused on garnering insights to the mentors' motivations and their perceptions of education and the role of mentoring for AIME. To this end, Indigenous and non-Indigenous university mentors were asked to engage in semi-structured interviews and create a digital story in response to the theme "My AIME: Education for all".

Introducing 'digital stories' and their connection to our research project

Digital Storytelling is referred to as an art form, a genre, a practice, and even a social movement. It most commonly refers to the creation of a multimodal, digital text that combines photos and voice (and sometimes moving images, sound effects, music, or text), which is created through the use of computer video-editing software. Bringing the art of storytelling into the digital era, the short narratives created are most often highly personal; they act as avenues for self-expression, allowing people to represent their thoughts, memories, opinions or ideas. It is this connection to the highly personal that positioned digital storytelling as an appropriate method of enquiry. The digital storytelling method provided a platform for the careful creation of personally authored accounts of the mentors' motivations for joining the AIME program and their experiences and conceptions and opinions of education.

Digital Storytelling is frequently conceived and deployed as a tool for working towards equity and social justice, providing space for *ordinary* and often marginalised people to be heard (who otherwise might not be heard) and enabling them to express their - often *extraordinary* - stories. For example, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image works in partnership with many marginalized groups, such as Alzheimer's Australia and women living with HIV. Daniel Meadows further argues that Digital Storytelling empowers the general public, rather than merely positioning them as passive consumers of media. The organizations and people who assist others in making Digital Stories are thus usually passionate about working in *partnership* with storytellers, rather than as the creative experts. In the spirit of such partnerships, the suite of workshops in which the mentors created their digital stories were

conducted with minimalistic traditional 'expert' instruction, relying instead on

facilitations that were responsive to each individual's participation (and respective

support needs). Moreover, the digital stories were not analysed or judged against any

content or aesthetic benchmark or other rubric of 'correctness'. Each was analysed on

its own terms.

Research practicalities

University of Wollongong has an ongoing research partnership with AIME mentoring,

that began in 2010. The purpose of this partnership is to investigate the impacts of the

AIME mentoring program on mentees and mentors and to provide a research base to

inform their program and professional practices and growth. Particularly, there is a

mutual desire to rigorously theorise, using empirical material, the AIME model of

mentoring. This is because, although it is a very successful mentoring program,

insofar as it positively impacts the Indigenous mentees' rates of school completion

and transition to further study and employment, it does not neatly map against

existing mentoring and coaching models.

The research reported here is nested within this research partnership. This part of the

research was funded by the University of Wollongong and took place immediately

prior to and proceeding the 2012 AIME mentoring program at one Australian

University campus. All the 190 volunteer university mentors for the 2012 program at

the campus were invited to participate in the study. Of these, twenty participated.

Immediately prior to the commencement of the 2012 mentoring program, the

participants were invited to create a digital story to the theme "My AIME: Education

for all" in a workshop trilogy and to participate in a semi-structured interview. The same participants were then invited to a second interview following the completion of their mentoring for the 2012 program.

Sampling and attrition: The participants were busy university students who were already volunteering their time to the AIME program as mentors, mentoring was extracurricular to their university workload. This study required participants to give an additional six hours of their time (3 x 2hr workshops to create their digital story and 2 x 30min interviews). Whilst all the participants indicated willingness to undertake all the proposed research activities, scheduling workshops and interviews to suit twenty individual's study timetable and paid work commitments proved challenging. This meant that, in the end, only four mentors participated in all three aspects of the research (the digital story workshops, the pre- and post- interview). Of the remaining 16 participants, 7 participated in one- and 9 participated in two-out-of-the-three aspects. A total of 12 digital stories were created. However, this was not as large a methodological issue as it may at first seem because (i) the purpose of this particular study was to understand mentor motivations for mentoring and their perceptions of education, and not to evaluate the impact of the program as an intervention and (ii) the resulting dataset (24 interview transcripts and 12 Digital Stories) was sufficiently large enough to offer opportunities for inductive analysis that generated consistent themes emergent from the data.

Defining digital stories: There are many variations in existing research that

purports to use digital stories. One fundamental concern is variations in understandings of what a digital story is. There are variations across all levels of the digital story production, publishing and analysis process. We have summarised these variations for you at Table 1.

<<INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE>>

What is important to note is that these variations, considered independently and together significantly impact the digital story product, or what Ashlee Willox and colleagues call the 'powerful data', for qualitative research and analysis. The Digital Story is powerful because it is, ever and always, more than the sum of its parts: this may be tested insofar as changing one of these elements potentially greatly alters the final product and its affect on the 'audience'. For example, simply being mindful of writing purpose, choosing whether or not to add music, or to write your story for a two-minute versus five-minute production, whether you use your own photographs, drawings, animations, images sourced externally or video has a potentially large affective impact for the audience and researcher. When you are deciding what digital stories are and how to use them in your research, these are variations and related questions and implications you will need to work through.

Whilst we are in no way suggesting ours is the best or only way to 'do' digital stories as method, we explicate our choice here. We chose to define digital stories in line with the parameters of: 250 word narration, 10-15 still images (preferably the creator's own photographs), and a final product lasting two to

three minutes (music optional). This structure was easy for the creators to remember and provided guidelines for the cohort to enable us to look across stories. To ensure consistency and comparativeness across story formats, we also elected to have participants create the stories in a series of three workshops that were facilitated by the lead author of this case (rather than have participants prepare the digital stories independently, at home).

Ethical issues around publishing and sharing the digital stories post-production: Ashlee Willox and colleagues, and also Nicole Matthews and Naomi Sunderland, present valuable, rare and careful outlines of the ethical considerations for creating, using and publishing digital stories in research (we would highly recommend these as readings to support ethical use of digital stories in your research project). For our project, key concerns were ensuring that participants respected copyright issues and sought permissions for images of persons in their personal photographs (this was facilitated and monitored via the workshops). To ensure ethical publication of participants' digital stories each story included a final slide that acknowledged the author, all sources, and participation in the research project.

How exactly did we do it?

Selecting a theme for the stories

To meet our research purpose we chose a theme for the digital stories. We asked each participant to think about this in terms of "My AIME: Education for all". Our intention was to capture the mentor's perspectives on why they had become involved with AIME and we wanted the stories to be personal reflections.

Participants making digital stories in three workshops

Participants attended three workshops that were facilitated by Lisa Kervin. The workshop environment ensured equity of access to technology for all participants (the workshops all took place at the university with iMovie software on a bank of 10 Apple laptop computers and access to microphones and digital cameras provided). Each workshop was 2 hours long and had a unique focus.

Workshop 1, supported participants in brainstorming ideas and writing the script for their digital stories. Support was provided via structured brainstorming activities such as 'a story circle' and 'story in a box', which rely on inspiration from artefacts relevant to the topic (for example, an AIME t-shirt or inspirational quote may be been drawn out of a box for discussion or participants may have brought a photograph that could stimulate discussion). After a lot of 'talk' about AIME and Indigenous education using artefacts as a stimulus to elicit personal connections, participants were asked to write. Each participant was invited to write 250 words. Ten of the twelve participants did this. An excerpt from one participant's 250 word script follows:

> *... Growing up in a country town in New South Wales, I have seen how hard it is for many of my peers, especially those who were from an Indigenous family, to continue through school with positive attitudes about the importance of education for their futures. I look at their lives now and compare it to my own and although I am grateful for the opportunities I have had, I wish that my peers were fortunate enough to receive the help of AIME... (Anne)*

For those who found that difficult they were invited to use a poetry stimulus, where they entered their own responses to line starters (entitled "I am"). For example, one participant used this poetry prompt to produce the following digital story script:

> *I am strong and smart, I hear voices all around, I want to disprove them all, I am strong and smart.*
>
> *I pretend I am alone, I feel the support of others, I worry of letting them down, I am strong and smart.*
>
> *I dream of futures far away, I try to reach my dreams, I hope you're ready for me, I am strong and smart. (Ivan)*

At Workshop 1, participants were also scaffolded to storyboard (literally sketch and map out what images will accompany what words) and edit their script as appropriate along the way to ensure coherence in the 'story's' structure.

Workshop 2 provided participants with the technology and assistance necessary to 'produce' their digital story. In this workshop the facilitator provided explicit instruction, 'tips and tricks' and advise on: accurate file management (clear file labelling and version control); appropriate software tool selection (our workshops used iMovie in our selected Apple platforms; MovieMaker could be used for PC platforms); how to ensure clarity of audio recording for voice narration; how to collect, create via new digital photograph and/or digitise images in the correct file format images that correspond to their storyboard from Workshop 1; and, how to create a 'credit slide' for copyrighted materials in PowerPoint, save it as a jpeg file and insert the credits into the digital story.

Workshop 3 focused on celebrating the achievements of the participants in creating their digital story and ensuring that these digital stories were appropriately shared and published. In preparation everyone 'exported' their video and archive projects to be QuickTime 'movie' files. Then each person burnt a copy of their movie file to a DVD that they may keep.

As a group we viewed each person's digital story in a darkened room, on a large screen with appropriate sound facilities. Bowls of popcorn were with the participants to create a movie atmosphere. Each participant introduced his or her story to the group and we viewed it together. Applause was heard at the end of each digital story. This process continued until all digital stories has been seen.

The participants all provided permission for their story to be shared with staff and AIME headquarters with the knowledge that it might be uploaded to the AIME website to be shared with a wider audience (and used as stimulus for future workshops).

How did we analyse this type of data?

A multimodal text lens was adopted for analysis (drawing upon Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull's *The Semiotic System of Still Images*). This approach afforded the examination of the visual data (the digital story images) in connection with the text (the audio version of the written script). The model was innovated upon to include analysis of the setting and content of each of the images and this was incorporated as part of the analysis framework. Each image in the digital story was analysed

according to five codes: colour, texture, line, shape and form. These codes are also, according to Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, known as the visual affordances of still visual images. In combination, we used these codes in ways similar to Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull to determine the balance, layout and vectorality of still images. The ways in which the codes are employed and combined through the conventions determines the representation of participants' sense of self and their understanding of the selected theme.

We used Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull's idea that underpinning the verbal and visual data are four foundational principles: the setting, content, codes and conventions of the image. Understanding of these provides a foundation to analyse the meaning afforded by the still visual image. Each of the four foundational principles were interrogated as is now described.

- Setting: the setting of the image was described as either recreational or academic/professional. The setting determined the context in which the content, codes and conventions were analysed.

- Content: the content of the images was classed as self, others, artefacts/objects or events. It was also described as recreational or academic/professional and either posed or natural.

- Codes: the visual affordances of colour, texture, line, shape and form were analysed for meaning. Together, the codes combined through the conventions of still visual images to convey further meaning

- Conventions: the conventions of the still visual images were also analysed. Balance was afforded by the dominant visual code, the layout was affected by

the combination of codes to focus attention and the vectorality was decided by

the codes and how they guided the viewer's eye

To provide example, an excerpt is provided from Susan's digital story (see Figure 1).

<<<<INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>>>>

In Susan's text she talks about her own professional experience working with young

children locally and Indigenous children in another Australian state. She has

accompanied this section of her script with an image of classroom artefacts taken

from her work with Indigenous children. In making this decision she is prioritising

her experiences with these children for the purposes of this task. The image itself is

professional in that it was taken from a classroom setting. The content of the image

depicts artefacts from this classroom, in this case a photograph of a display within this

space showcasing Creoles and an illustrative artwork. The image is labelled and

contains two worksamples (both artwork and teacher scribed script) and also contains

analysis conducted by the teacher demonstrating what the child is doing in response to

curriculum goals. There is a lot of information in the image and the layout of the

display captured in the image doesn't prioritise any section over another.

To demonstrate how different the digital stories were in content and image selection,

an excerpt is also provided from Lara in Figure 2.

<<<INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>>>

Lara shares her own personal family narrative to show how she has come to see a real need to become involved in AIME, to preserve and support a culture misunderstood by her own ancestors. The image itself is personal in that it presents her own family's farmland to accompany her text. The expanse of the land draws the eye with guidance offered from the lines offered by the horizon and the trees that mark out areas. The colours within the image are earthy tones reflective of the content within the image.

Digital stories: Practical and methodological lessons learned

Digital stories are incredibly personal. The twelve digital stories we collected through this process are all unique. Their personal nature means that the stories are different and we needed an openness of mind (and heart!) to view and respond to them.

Responses to a set theme can be surprisingly divergent. Thus, to avoid having the problem of having to 'compare apples with oranges' have an analytic lens that can cope with this diversity and treat each story as its own entity, as well as a means of comparison between others. For us, this was the Artifactual Literacies framework, but there is great scope for other theories to be applied.

The interplay between image and text is powerful. The text without the image and vice versa does not create the same impact. Text and image work together to give the story greater meaning and in the process demonstrates the deeper levels of understanding the creator has.

Creating digital stories and talking about them at interview is time intensive for participants. If at all possible, consider a research design that embeds the workshops / creation of the digital stories within existing, common times and events for participants (e.g. existing in-service programs for staff within organisations, existing and compulsory university subjects, groups of parents 'waiting' for children at a regular events like weekly sports training sessions etc.). If this is not possible, ensure the research design is appropriate for the data you expect to collect.

Analysis and reporting of digital stories in research is a methodological work in progress. As researchers, we need to proceed bravely and creatively but with great care. Most importantly, we need to continue to deeply think about how to methodologically 'deal with' digital story data, where we know 'the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts'. For instance, imagine in the above example of data analysis if we had only analysed the transcripts (and not offered screenshots of the images)? Can you tell from our presentation of the analysis what the music, or lack of it does to the final product? How could this be achieved?

This case offers a 'research in action' approach to positioning digital storytelling as a research method. However, there is still much work to be done. Digital storytelling is a new method in social science research that demands its researchers to go on explicating, replicating, developing and innovating its form, analytic frames, ethical dilemmas, strengths, limitations and products. We suggest there are exciting and as yet unexplored possibilities for multi-disciplinary research teams featuring people from fields of film studies, media production and communications, humanities and the arts who can pool theoretical resources to both consolidate and extend digital

storytelling as a valuable method in social science research.

Conclusions: Digital stories as rich, 'powerful' and generative qualitative data

At the beginning of this chapter we positioned digital stories as a powerful qualitative data collection tool. Through the digital storytelling process and the final artefacts that were created, we were able to collect data to help us understand why someone might want to be a mentor in the AIME program. We were able to capture excerpts of each participant's own personal narratives as well as their beliefs around Indigenous education. The very complex interplay of image and text worked to provide us with a pathway through some very complex understandings, which led us to identify emerging themes from the participants in our research. This has done much to inform later phases of our research in this area.

Digital stories have the potential to help us understand very complex phenomena from the perspective of those within its midst. In this case, what is it about the AIME program that attracts mentors, and what is it about those mentors that make the program so successful. We would like to conclude the chapter with a reminder - the Digital Story is powerful because it is, ever and always, more than the sum of its parts. The opportunity to write for a purpose, make decisions within the parameters of word count and image selection, and opportunity to share insights without judgement work together to create an affective experience for those who view it.

Exercises and discussion questions

1. Considering the variations outline in Table 1, what do you think makes a

'digital story'?

    a. What might be some of the implications of running with your preferred variation, in terms of data analysis?

    b. What might be some of the implications of running with your preferred variation, in terms of reporting research findings?

2. Work through the workshop process to create your own digital story

    a. Consider implications for each stage. How did you get an idea for a story? Reflect on the process of scripting the story. How did you make decisions about what images to use? Did these decisions result in changes to the script? What did you learn about the editing process? How did you share your story? How did this make you feel?

3. Work with a group of people and have them create a digital story in response to a common theme.

    a. Look across the stories for the similarities and differences.

    b. Examine the careful interplay between the images and the script

4. Consider ways that you could use digital stories in your own research work.

Further readings

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Tables

Table 1.1 Variations in Digital Story research methods

Format	*Writing purpose*	*Mode of creation*	*Mode of publication*	*Mode of analysis*
• Number of words in script? • Images – own or sourced from internet, still or moving, photographic or other forms of artworks, limited in number or not? • Duration? • Music or not? • Text or not?	• Written purposefully for research project. • Sourced for research post-production.	• Independently • Collaboratively • In a workshop with researchers • Different softwares used	• Remains unpublished • Shown when and to whom and to what effect	• Text only • Images and text • Multimodal analysis