

## Digital Story Telling

**E**veryone has a story to tell, and sharing those stories is a powerful form of connection. Personal stories can be a key tool for education and advocacy; the authenticity of the first-person perspective can inform and move others in a unique, unfiltered way. Shaping one's personal narrative can also be therapeutic; reframing struggles with personal challenges—disability, illness, failure—as overcoming obstacles can make a person feel stronger and even be central to the therapeutic process.<sup>1</sup> Digital Storytelling (DST) is a process and a product that serves therapeutic, educational, and advocacy purposes. We present three linked pieces that share experiences with DST; a youth participant, her mentor, and a DST producer each share stories that highlight how this mechanism helps people better understand themselves and reach out to others.

### Marquita Jones

I found out about DST while I was a member of the Youth Task Force at our weekly meeting. When it was first introduced I knew I would want to be a part of it because of my love for hearing and telling stories, plus the \$150 stipend didn't sound too bad. I understood that I would use pictures and video to tell about an important time in my life, but I had no idea how the whole process of DST could help heal and educate me.

Digital Storytelling workshops are normally three to four days long and are set up in a way to make everybody feel safe and comfortable enough to share their personal life stories with complete strangers who are also brave enough to face their stories themselves. On the first day



of the workshop, ground rules are set, everyone introduces themselves, and the story circle begins. The story circle is an important part of making everyone feel comfortable with telling their stories to others and often bonds the group together when it's over. The circle is led by a facilitator whose main job is to make sure that everyone is respected while telling their stories and has the support needed to do it. Even though the ideal time for each person is no more than fifteen minutes, no one is rushed to finish because of how personal and emotional the stories can be. After people tell their stories, they have the option to hear feedback from the other participants about some visuals or strong points in their stories. When the story circle is over, the process of making the stories digital kicks off. People write their stories in about 250 words, look for pictures, record their voices, and go through tutorials to learn how to use Photoshop, Final Cut Pro or Sony Vegas so they can complete their story. After this, the youth have created their own stories in their own

words in the way they want them and have also learned new technology. We have a film screening festival on the last day of the workshop so everyone can see each other's stories.

DST for me was an empowering and healing process and I believe that it could be beneficial in some way to everyone. When I watched my story for the first time I felt proud of myself for overcoming the obstacles I talked about in my story and being able to share them with everyone. I've also been able to use my story to help educate providers at conferences about some of the issues youth are dealing with. I enjoyed the whole process so much I trained to be a facilitator and now I help facilitate DST groups. DST is truly a therapeutic and healing process and I hope that all youth have the chance to participate in this process.

### Victor Damien

There is nothing more powerful than hearing the stories of youth in their own words, in their own light, and in their own expression. Now imagine not only hearing these stories, but seeing them too. DST allows youth to capture their stories using visuals, photos, videos, and music, so that they and other people can watch and experience parts of the lives of our youth. Not only does DST help youth heal, express themselves, and build community; it also enables them to find the internal strength needed to move forward in life and transform themselves into something better. I have heard one therapist say that he learned more about his client in a three-minute digital story than he did in three years as his therapist. As a provider, I personally feel that the 24-hour workshop experience of cre-

ating a digital story has more impact than 24 sessions with a therapist and is more cost effective.

The young person actually gets a stipend for his or her time creating the story. What's more, the youth have the opportunity to be linked to other youth activities, jobs, or groups so that he or she can continue to be involved in creative and constructive outlets.

We use digital stories to help educate providers about youth issues, and to conduct workshops to get more youth to tell their stories. Some youth have used DST to help advocate for themselves in Juvenile Hall; the opportunities for this are endless. I believe in digital stories and the power they have to produce sustainable change. If you get a chance to see them you will realize this, too.

### Andrea Spagat

DST is a way of communicating that is particularly effective because it allows us to talk to the hearts and minds of people. It is particularly powerful for those whose voices are often marginalized or ignored. These people can come into our workshops and create thoughtful pieces that can be heard by others with whom they normally don't communicate. Their voices reach out beyond the dominant culture narrative. I was introduced to DST at a conference I attended when I was working with a violence prevention initiative. I saw the Center for Digital Storytelling's presentation, and immediately DST made sense to me from so many angles. As soon as I could, I applied for a grant and re-

ceived funding for training in DST.

More than anything, I really saw how effective creating a space for young people to tell their stories using this multi-media tech could be. The workshop process is a great way for youth to find their own voices. The goal of these workshops is to help youth find the resources within themselves to find their own voices. It's an opportunity young people don't have very often; it's very empowering and gives them perspective. It reminds them how they got through those difficult moments in their lives and lets them know that they are going to get through future difficult moments. The process is truly transformational for the storytellers.

DST is a healing experience because it allows people to talk about their experiences and to project their voices. Their stories come from psychological and spiritual spaces. What makes these stories so unique is that they use the participants' own words. There is no one in between to interpret them like a journalist or a filmmaker. There is no outsider perspective. These stories come from the people who have actually lived the experiences, sharing what they are like.

The Center for Digital Storytelling works with advocacy organizations and constituencies who want to get their voices heard—domestic violence survivors, foster youth—as well as general community health workers. I've done a lot of work with young people, but about 80-90% of my work is with adults. Some people want their stories simply to reflect their personal experiences; others want them to be transformational for

the viewers. Sometimes digital stories are created for educational purposes, or to spur community action. One group, No More Funerals, is using its stories as part of a curriculum for a peer-led youth violence prevention program. I believe DST is one of the most effective educational techniques because it connects people to people. DST shows how people respond to experiences in a deeper way than what is possible through documentaries, reporting, research—it combines a lot of elements to make it work on many different levels. It connects the storytellers to those who may not have a full appreciation of their experiences or even know about them.

DST also can be used for professional trainings. In one case, Youth Connection (a group of foster youth) documented their experiences using DST and shared them with social workers for trainings on transition-aged youth. They vividly illustrated what their experiences were like, and how they could be better supported.

DST also can be used to change policy. Youth Connection also showed their stories to key decision makers in Sacramento [California's state capitol]. There is a lot of legislation coming out of our state capitol to support these young people, and it's getting bipartisan support. I think the digital stories helped expedite this process.

### Authors

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### Reference

1. Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science*, 8, 162-166.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

*Sharing stories can lead to positive change. The process of supporting groups of people in making media is just the first step. Personal narratives in digital media format can touch viewers deeply, moving them to reflect on their own experiences, modify their behavior, treat others with greater compassion, speak out about injustice, and become involved in civic and political life. Whether online, in local communities, or at the institutional/policy level, the sharing of stories has the power to make a real difference.*

*From the Center for Digital Story Telling  
www.storycenter.org/principles.html*