

Moving stories, connecting cultures

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*Every community has a memory of itself.
Not a history, nor an archive, nor an authoritative record...
A living memory, an awareness of a collective identity woven of a thousand stories.*

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Abstract

This paper is about: **Storytelling** as a powerful means of remembering, reshaping identity and sharing cultural values
Digital storytelling, which is both a powerful process for reflection and a tool for sharing

Storytelling is rooted in our cultures. The stories we tell shape our lives and our cultures. They help us define who we are and craft our identity. Kineo (2006) says that stories ‘engage the heart before the mind’ and suggests we use stories in teaching and learning. Rossiter (2006) talks about the “developmental change as experienced through the ongoing construction and reconstruction of life narrative”. To be a person she says “is to have a story. More than that it is to be a story”. Attwood and Magowan (2001) discuss the power of stories and the different stories we tell according to our cultures. The power of storytelling is in who owns the story, who tells it and who hears it.

While digital storytelling uses technology to tell stories: the story remains the focus. Images audio and pacing add other sensory dimensions to the telling.

Depending on the type of story we tell, sorting through photos and trying to shape a story allows us to re-evaluate the memories of the past. We sort through images, remembering the events, deciding what our story is and who will hear it. We see things we may not have seen before—background images, trees, garden seats—cultural markers that sit in our memory and tell us how we got to be who we are.

This paper, using examples of digital stories, shares some ways that they may be beneficial for the individual, and the sharing may be useful for the group.

Introduction

This paper is about stories, how we use them, how important they are and how we can use them to cross cultural bridges. In particular I look at digital stories, using some examples to show how these can be used to share ideas about culture, but also how

they can help us identify our own cultural markers, and help us understand how our own identity has been shaped.

We are who we are because of the stories we listen to, know about and tell. There are several layers of stories: the master narratives, the big stories that legitimise our cultural views, the way we think and the way we see the world. These are stories about religion, whiteness or blackness, 'civilisation', the roles of women, our attitudes to children and landscape. These stories shape our identity but we participate in this shaping by continuing and sharing the stories. The problem with the master narratives is that they are mutually exclusive—belief in one negates the other. Edward Said (1978) in his seminal book *Orientalism* describes the kind of storytelling that portrays the "East" in a way that justifies the colonisation and subsequent invasions. This kind of storytelling I contend adds to the master narrative that divides east from west and shapes our ideas of the peoples of that region. Thomas King (2003) uses a chapter entitled "You're not the Indian I had in mind" to illustrate the ways that members of a dominant culture shape and reshape their images of indigeneity. In these ways stories reinforce the master narratives.

For (Lyotard, 1984) postmodernity is characterised by the end of master narratives and we organise our own worlds by creating several little narratives—localised stories that legitimate actions and roles. Lyotard uses 'paralogy' to describe the ways we as individuals search for meaning and question the master narratives. For Lyotard this search comes from conversations, or sharing irreverent attitudes to shake up and reframe ideas. Paralogists allow local definitions of words to stand, and encourage conversations and discussion in order to test master narratives.

Storytelling is a tool for questioning the master narratives; however it can have dual and opposing functions. It reinforces the master narratives, shoring up the values, ideals and world views, reinforcing the binary opposites inherent in them. Electronic media and newspapers help us tell and retell these stories. These are the ones that succeed when there is an enemy, an 'other'.

Storytelling can also tell the tale of the 'little person' against the giants, and place the individual in the centre of the story. Fairy stories, tales of bravery, comic acts and stories that have different structures or that undermine the status quo or the dominant culture can be powerful. They are techniques of struggles against the dominant 'one truth'. Billy T James used these to tell his stories about cultural identity and racism. Telling stories like this about what we did last night and, as Robery Fulford notes (1999) gossip and our 'life story' helps us understand ourselves and our place in the world. These kinds of stories do what Lyotard describes as shaking up and reframing ideas.

It can also offer the alternative view by helping us make sense of our world and by "comprehending or making the world interpretable it can become bearable" (Attwood and Magowan, 2001). Attwood and Magowan in *Telling Stories* (ibid) discuss the ways Australian and New Zealand indigenous people have always told stories of their experiences of colonialism. Stories they say are used to remember the past and to make sense of it. By constructing stories of freedom people "have been able to challenge their oppression". The most powerful histories they say are those that have

drawn into question the ‘commonly held historical accounts of the settlement of Australia and New Zealand’ (ibid p. xv).

Many of these stories they say are about land (who owns it, its history) and about personal family and tribal histories. They also challenge the dominant culture’s notion of time and place by their very structure, shifting viewpoints and content. Magowan says: “A story is, therefore, much more than a series of events to be told: it is a moment of expressive embodiment, the manifestation of personal attachment and past regret. To be located within the story-paths of memory is to be able to ‘know, to speak, act, invite, deny, share and ask’ as individuals and groups come to be situated in a complex of authorial relatives.....” (ibid: p.47).

Various writers advocate using storytelling in teaching: Kineo (n.d.) says they engage the heart, they stick and come back quickly, and they can inspire; Rossiter (2006) talks about the “developmental change as experienced through the ongoing construction and reconstruction of life narrative”. To be a person she says “is to have a story. More than that it is to be a story”. McDrury and Alterio use a five stage approach to suggest how storytelling can be used in teaching and learning. This process (finding, storytelling, story expanding, story processing and story reconstructing) allows the learner to move from focussing on the story to focussing on multiple perspectives. McKillop translates this model to the online world.

This is where digital storytelling can be powerful.

Digital stories are high impact short stories which use image, voice and music to create an effect. The stories are best when the voice of the teller is present and when the stories are personal in some way.

Their value in crossing cultural bridges is manifold:

They enable us to watch and hear the stories of others thus aiding our understanding. They enable us to tell our own stories, constructing a tale that shares who we are. The process of creating the story is a powerful aid to reflection about our own identity and culture.

Some examples may serve to illustrate this.

Capture Wales is a project sponsored by the BBC. Daniel Meadows holds workshops in different areas in Wales and the stories are put on the BBC Capture Wales website. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image also runs workshops and places many of these stories on their website. A workshop to capture memories of people with Alzheimer’s disease as part of the Telling Stories, Building Communities project has resulted in several digital stories being on the **acmi** website. Several stories from other cultures are on this website too.

Also in Australia the Gap Community group called the Deadly Mob and based in Alice Springs offers online opportunities to Aboriginal youth. One of the projects is to take a van into remote communities, teaching the children how to use digital cameras and to tell stories. Many of these stories are on the website and are at present an

amalgam of images, audio and music in various formats. The point is: they combine all these to tell stories in their own voice.

While these stories have the ability to move us and are very personal, they also help us understand the perspective of the storyteller, present another view, share memories, link us to the past and humanise the face of an the issue. They enable us to question the master narratives and to hear the 'other' voice.

The stories I tell and encourage people to tell, still follow the Western style of storytelling where an event is central and where there is some kind of denouement. But these stories need not follow this style—they can be whatever the storyteller wishes: whakapapa stories, stories about language, stories about place, snippets of information, stories about incidents, times and stories that follow their own chronology. A recent video on YouTube which at the time of writing had collected 3,919,949 hits is simply the 'story' of a young man collecting hugs. The back story is just as entertaining.

The third aspect of digital storytelling is the process. This cathartic process allows the storyteller in creating the story, to consider impact and audience response. While one part of the brain focuses on the technology, another rehearses the story, sifting and reshaping memories to construct a new event. This process bears a relationship to McDrury and Alterio's five stage model.

The story remains the focus but images, audio and pacing add to the process.

Part of the process of creating a digital story involves gathering together images, writing a story, recording the story and any other appropriate audio. Digital stories engage us because we use at least three senses to 'read' them: sight, sound and touch. In this way they are more involving.

But digital storytelling, using what is now accessible technology, democratises this process, makes it available to all of us, gives us the opportunity to reflect and to consider who we are, what we want to say and what and how we want to present our story and ourselves. Digital stories fall somewhere between the fixed story that exists in print and the constantly changing story that is an oral story. While on one hand the story is 'fixed' on the other we can amend and remake the story as often as we want and upload it to a website everyday should we wish. It offers greater agency.

The first part of the process as outlined by the Center for Digital Storytelling is to work the story. This is a group process so everyone in the group gets to hear everyone else's story and to 'workshop it'.

Then there is the task of sorting through images that help tell the story. This can be a powerful time: finding images, re-looking at these and reforming stories. Images that sat in photo albums and have been looked at in a certain way, share different stories once they are enlarged and placed on the computer screen. It's often a time to see other things in images. A photo that had sat in an old photograph album, turns out to be, I realise, a photo of my grandmother as a young girl. Photos of houses become significant when we reflect in what ways that the houses we live in today are similar

to those we lived in as a child. It gives us an opportunity to revisit the journey of how we came to be, how we developed these tastes and how our identity is shaped.

The final task is that of bricolage—as from the old we create the new. We consider the pace, which images tell the story better than words, cut out the extraneous words and add any music which may be appropriate. The editing process that blends the images, music and words gives a feeling of empowerment where we are actively rather than passively involved. It also allows us to add emphases and nuances that are not available to the storyteller who is face to face with the listener.

Once the story is shared via a website, or shown via a DVD an individual act becomes a shared act and the listener becomes included in the process. In various websites, YouTube for example, viewers are invited to respond to a video/movie by making a comment or with another video/movie. This dialogic process enables a new truth to be formed, and creates a new perspective that helps us cross bridges.

In this way digital stories become have a vital part to play in crossing cultural bridges: they enable us to share, they allow participation in that sharing and most importantly they tell the stories in a personal voice allowing the voice of the teller to be heard. By taking old skills and adding technology we add another dimension, another span to the bridge. We have another tool with which to question the master narratives and more importantly we find another way of crossing the bridge.

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