

Representation Matters: Media Literacy for Inclusive Storytelling Practices

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Abstract:

This article looks back on digital storytelling and collaborative media practices as important resources to reconsider memory, challenge identity discourses, and reveal the cultural diversity of modern societies. The digital era makes possible an incessant re-reading and re-mediation of cultural archives on the part of ordinary citizens, i.e., younger generations, and the creation and diffusion of counter narratives regarding the present. They are key chances for post-colonial communities to break silences over painful memories that bar collective reappropriation of the past, to face some of the issues of ethnical diversity, and discrimination today and to reimagine a more united identity. But seizing this moment means fully acknowledging the function of media technology in constructing memory, social individuation and building networks, so that media literacy and media education become essential dimensions of cultural dialogue. Drawing on the experience of a citizenship project on the post-colonial condition and Afro-European interculturality, this essay discusses digital storytelling, and co-creative practices as useful literacy and education strategies to advance interculturality in today's societies. Media literacy includes other literacies like reading literacy, writing literacy, computer literacy, and information literacy but uses them for the analysis of media in a targeted manner. This research hopes to demonstrate the impact of media literacy on students' critical thinking of current events in a high school government class. Students engaged in a four-

lesson unit on various facets of media literacy as they pertain to current event media sources. The data were triangulated using three kinds of data: pre-test and post-test current event assignment, lesson activities, and informal conversation and observations.

Keywords: Media Education, media literacy, post-colonial societies, storytelling, media literacy, mixed-methods study, current events education, secondary, history, government.

Introduction:

This paper reflects on a set of questions about the literacy enabled by Digital Storytelling emanating from our extended experience as academics and practitioners. It doesn't aim to offer neat answers but does address matters of interest to those who want to know how new media demand, reveal and create new kinds of literacy; this article is a try at defining and then investigating the media literacy of Digital Storytelling. It is composed to initiate a literacy-based discourse on what is much unmapped territory and to take the consideration of the media literacy of Digital Storytelling practice out of the project-based discussion that dominates so many presentations and articles. We wished to apply the particulars of the digital storytelling approach (defined in the following section) to a wider setting in order to answer questions of media literacy for colleagues who would not necessarily be versed in the genre.

2. What do we mean by Digital Storytelling?

As a definition put forward by the Centre for Digital Storytelling, Berkeley, California: brief, first-person video-narrative produced by the integration of recorded voice, still and moving images and music or other sound. (Lambert, 2006).

The Digital Storytelling (DS) our research addresses, however, is the specific media practice, as the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California, defines it, 'a short, first-person video-narrative made by bringing together recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds.'. This work emerged over twenty years

ago, a product of people activism, its techniques influenced by radical theatre and media arts and its driving impulse a 'response to the exclusion of 'ordinary' people's stories in broadcast media' (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009). It is most concerned with 'story', rather than 'digital' and the approach is heavily based on the facilitation of 'Story Circle', workshop procedure whereby participants can tell (usually) personal stories which will be 'little nuggets of media called Digital Stories'.

Story Circle employs a series of activities and writing prompts to establish trust in the group, develop storytelling skills and visual literacy and, ultimately, 'find' that story (see below for more on the method and genre). Lambert's 'Seven Steps' offer a foundation set of principles and ingredients for story-making which, Lambert acknowledges, 'were never intended to be a prescribed 'catechism' of storytelling, simply rather a structure for the discussion of the aesthetic quality of this specific type.

Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling

1	Owning Your Insights	What is the story you want to tell? What do you think your story means?
2	Owning Your Emotions	How does the story feel?
3	Finding The Moment	Was there a moment when things changed? Were you aware of it at the time? If not, what waste moment you became aware that things had changed?
4	Seeing Your Story	What images come to mind when recalling the moment of change in the story? What images come to mind for other parts Of the story?
5	Hearing Your Story	How will you tell the story – how will you 'Perform' your voice over? Would the story been hanged by additional l a y e r s of sound–ambient sound or music?
6	Assembling Your Story	How will you structure your story? How will the layers of visual and audio narratives work together?

7	Sharing Your Story	Who is your audience? What was your purpose in creating the story? Has the purpose shifted during the process of creating the piece? In what presentation will your digital story be viewed? What life will the story have after its completion?
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Source: Lambert (2013:53-70)

3. Literature Review:

With technology more and more integrated into our society, education of media literacy skills is more and more necessary in the classroom. Literature review here is going to define media literacy and give some understanding as to how media literacy skills could influence students' critical thinking and civic participation. The research was accessed through university of Mary Washington's databases such as Educational Research Complete, ERIC, and JSTOR. The studies were limited to high school student or college freshmen government courses. The studies fall into three broad areas: Theoretical Framework of Media Literacy, Measuring Media Literacy Skills, and Current Events in the Classroom. The historical perspective and theoretical framework of media literacy are discussed in the first section. The second part consolidates a few media literacy studies to determine the ways of measuring skills in media literacy. The third section discusses studies about the use of contemporary events in classrooms.

Theoretical Framework of Media Literacy: Media is one of the most highlighted aspects of our society; it is almost impossible to do without its presence in our lives. Thus, media literacy scholarship is categorized into two theoretical frameworks, that of protectionist and empowerment (Hobbes, 2011). Hobbes (2011) makes a distinction between empowerment and protectionist approaches to media literacy, adding that while the protectionist approach focuses on "reducing negative effect of exposure to mass media," the empowerment approach is derived from a constructivist theory where

“media-making can be a means for building self-esteem and forming identity, developing critical thinking skills about media and technology, and promoting intercultural exchange” (Hobbes, 2011, p.422-3). Researchers (Potter, 2004) within the protectionist school of belief favor equipping students with the knowledge to counter the power of media in their lives. Empowerment researchers (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011) favor the teaching of the art of media manipulation in a bid to bring about social and political change. The following figure shows how both the protectionist and empowerment scholars inform the contemporary definition of media literacy.

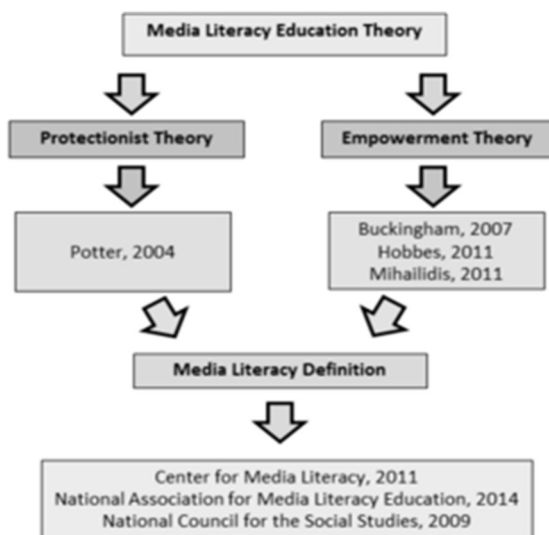


Figure 1: Media Literacy Theory

Potter (2004) is the foremost protectionist theory scholar (Hobbes, 2011). He recommends that academics and researchers tackle media literacy with cognitive theory. Cognitive theory focuses on the individual and holds that through making cognitions or thinking processes of people aware, they can alter their behavior (Potter, 2004, p.266). Potter concentrates on how a person makes or matches meaning to the sources being studied. By allowing them to understand the

way they think, Potter (2004) hopes they will be more buffered from media's potential negative influence. Protectionist theorists (Potter, 2004) focus on the agency of people in the interpretations of media. In pointing out the power of the people, Potter says the media reacts to people and that media is, "much more reactive than proactive" (Potter, 2004, p.267). This assertion notwithstanding the individualistic basis of cognitive theory makes reference to possibility that media can be changed by people. Although Potter's (2004) findings are more protectionist in nature, the application of cognitive theory overlaps empowerment theory because they both highlight increasing awareness towards effecting change.

Empowerment scholars (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011) adopt media literacy as a social phenomenon and not an individualistic technique. These authors are convinced of the need to analyze the social constructs through which media is produced, disseminated, and received. As Buckingham (2007) argues, "digital media represent the world, rather than reflect it," in the sense that media sources deliberately select to emphasize certain values and ideologies (p. 48). These authors are convinced that media producers aim at a specific meaning to portray to people. The advocates of this cultural approach to media literacy education highlight four areas of study: representation, language, production, and audience (Buckingham, 2007).

The representation skills involve recognizing authority, reliability, and bias of a source. Students' meta-cognitive and analytical skills are enhanced in language and production aspects of study. Hence, it is important to make students learn how to access, analyse, and evaluate multiple sources so that they can obtain a better representation of the world (Hobbes, 2011).

4. Defining Media Literacy: In defining media literacy and media literacy skills educational associations the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), Center for Media Literacy (CML, and the National Council for the Social Sciences (NCSS), turn primarily to empowerment theory. At the foundation of all their definitions is the skill to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media. Even more

important than these concrete skills is the ability for students to understand the implications of media on today's society such that

"Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy" (CML, "Media Literacy: A Definition and More", 2011). The educational system recognizes the power of media to shape public opinion. Media outlets become the centre of social and political change and, therefore, are a source of democratic participation. It becomes necessary for students to have media literacy skills in order to "critically participate as active citizens with the abilities to intelligently and compassionately shape democracy in this new millennium" (NCSS, "Rationale", 2009). Media literacy offers a framework to engage students not only in academia, but also in society.

The NAMLE outlines six guiding principles for media literacy education which include the political, social, and individual levels of media education. By including all three levels, the NAMLE borrows from both the empowerment and the protectionist perspectives. Much like the empowerment definitions set forth by the NCSS and CML, the NAMLE believes that media literacy education is an essential component for creating engaged citizens. Their position statement aligns itself with cultural theorists (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011 & Mihailidis, 2011) as they recognized that media is "part of culture and function as agents of socialization" (NAMLE, "Core Principles", 2014). However, the NAMLE incorporates some protectionist perspective, warning that media literacy "affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (NAMLE, "Core Principles", 2014). In this instance, the NAMLE aligns itself with cognitive theorists (Potter, 2004) who stress the individual's role in media interpretation. The NAMLE quiets the debate between empowering and protectionist perspective by demonstrating that these theories are not mutually exclusive. The NAMLE believes that by teaching students media literacy skills, students will be more critical of their own personal bias as well as empowered to

use these skills to reconstruct the media for a more culturally aware world.

Understanding stories as individual texts and collections-A major portion of Media Literacy: If Digital Storytelling is to gather its own momentum and to play a significant role in public culture, the next step is to move beyond the focus on production at the local level, however much participants benefit from being part of the workshops, and however much the cultural institutions benefit from engaging members of the community as co-creators. (Hartley 2008: 202) One criticism that Hartley has made consistently is the Digital Storytelling movement's focus on small-scale productions that are rarely shared beyond the specific communities that participated in the digital storytelling intervention i.e. family, friends, interest groups and funders. His view is that despite the term 'digital' in the practice, digital storytelling is only digital in production and not distribution or exhibition; it is not 'native' to the internet. The consequence is that there is in effect no significant audience beyond the immediate for many Digital Stories. Texts 'belong' to the storytellers and remain within their possession; they rarely, if ever, go viral. This is not necessarily an entirely new problem, for example, in the UK during the 1980s community media productions made through the Channel Four funded workshop movement rarely attracted an audience.

Digital Storytelling is distinguished from this earlier work in two ways; firstly, the stories are made and told by the storyteller rather than a third party filmmaker and secondly, the potential opened by the internet is radically removed from the world of 1980s TV. Shirky (2010) makes a related point when he argues that because we are increasingly producing and sharing media, we need to reconceptualise media and find ways in which new and different forms of media, such as Digital Storytelling, can reach an audience. Hartley returned to this theme in his article 'A Trojan Horse in the Citadel of Stories' (2013), in which he develops his earlier writings (2008, 2009) about the potential of Digital Storytelling to achieve accessibility and value to a larger group beyond those who have participated in a digital storytelling workshop

and their immediate viewers/listeners. The opposite model to the former mainstream media approach of scaling up audiences, Hartley talks about scaling up stories, grouping them so that they make sense to wider groups of people. He talks about shifting digital storytelling from self-expression, the individual, to something that can appeal to wider communities 'the 'we' communities (or 'demes').

He calls the Digital Storytellers to action: Given that digital media and social networks have already made what constitutes 'our' deme riskier, complex, open, uncertain and multivalent than ever before, it is urgent for progressive innovations like the digital storytelling movement to catch up. (Hartley 2013: 103)

The task now is to find new and different ways and means for digital stories to find and retain an audience. As Matthews and Sutherland (2013: 98) observe: Although personal digital life stories now abound, relatively little attention has been given to the parallel acts of listening across various and many contexts that need to occur if we are to hear, value and respond to people's self-documented lives and experiences.

They point out that there is little or no written evidence or academic research into the use of digital stories themselves. The emphasis has been on reflection and the reflective practitioner, rather than the storyteller(s) and the stories. In the same article, Matthews and Sunderland also highlight the lack of attention that has been given to the 'parallel acts of listening across various and many contexts – that need to occur if we are to hear, value, and respond to people's self-documented lives and experiences. Matthews and Sutherland (2013:98). This act of listening requires space to hear and understand stories individually and collectively. The arguments posed in this article, in a sense, represent the polar opposite of Lambert's focus on 'the movement' of digital storytelling the act itself. Matthews and Sunderland are interested in the each of digital life story narratives as data for academics, policy makers and practitioners. Lambert like many other practitioner accounts of digital storytelling focuses on the unique, the individual, personal experience. Matthews and Sunderland (2013: 97) view the stories as, potentially, 'large-

scale multimedia qualitative datasets', whilst acknowledging the shortcomings of, for example, using large-scale databases to make stories 'listenable' to policy makers.

Listening can often be taken for granted and is often relegated below telling, even though 'Listen Deeply, Tell Stories' is the mantra of the Centre for Digital Storytelling. Yet, as O'Donnell, Lloyd and Dreher (2009) point out, in the analysis of story-based practices within the field of cultural studies, listening is under-discussed in comparison to questions of voice. There is no shortage of observations, such as Rossiter and Garcia's (2010: 49) 'participant produced digital stories constitute a rich and relatively unexplored source of qualitative data'. There are pockets of evidence in the form of project evaluations and reports and localised examples of impact, such as the remarkable effect of the work of Patient Voices (www.patientvoices.org.uk), who in a recent project used digital stories they had produced with mental health service users to influence the trustees of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, who were addressing poor patient and staff satisfaction survey scores in relation to dignity, respect and communication. Two years into the project, stories are now shown at the beginning of every Board meeting and in staff recruitment and selection interviews 'to remind staff and Board why they are there' Hardy (2013).

Conclusions: Deferent forms of literacy are brought into being by deferent cultural forms, so in this way the literacy of digital storytelling is obviously deferent from that of say a feature film, a novel or even an oral history testimony. Not only does the brevity of the form place specific constraints on what can and cannot be said, but both the democratic and therapeutic components of the story circle shape the content in unpredictable ways. The processes involved in story circle provide rich opportunities to develop media literacies. Activities involving reading images, to encourage participants to squeeze the most meaning from the limited number of images the form demands, for example are rooted in classic media education approaches to 'denotation/ connotation' exercises. A word game involving the construction of a short narrative from a shared lexicon that has been constructed by the

group is an elective way to encounter questions of point-of-view. The act of construction within a set of formal constraints can lead to broader questions of form/content and genre. Questions of the authorial voice, the ownership of the story and the audiences for it provide an accessible springboard for opening wider discussions about ownership and control and ethical questions about distribution via the Internet, for example. As a practitioner, it is never possible to know what story is going to be told yet it is possible to envisage how it may be told. This tension between the restricted form and the unpredictable content makes Digital Storytelling an exciting, productive area for both practitioners and academics. The real difficulty is finding the appropriate route to an audience; this is both a question about reaching a larger number of people and about reaching the right audience for particular stories.

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