

Book Review: Digital Storytelling: Form and Content edited by Mark Dunford & Tricia Jenkins

In Digital Storytelling: Form and Content, Mark Dunford and Tricia Jenkins offer an edited collection which explores digital storytelling as a technique and research method centred around making and disseminating digital stories, with an emphasis on the voices of the underrepresented and marginalised. While this is more of a reflection on practice than a how-to practical guide for beginners, the case studies serve to push our understandings of the boundaries of digital storytelling and effectively showcase its utility for qualitative researchers and activists alike, finds Lavinia Marin.

Digital Storytelling: Form and Content. Mark Dunford and Tricia Jenkins (eds). Palgrave Macmillan. 2018.

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Everybody likes a good story. Humanity has been telling stories for millennia; long before writing or painting were invented, stories were the most important form for sharing experiences and passing memories on to the next generation. From the nineteenth century onwards, the novel as a text-based form thrived and overshadowed the oral mode of storytelling ([Benjamin and Zohn, 1963](#)). However, with the advent of digital media, a new form of orality has appeared: a 'secondary orality' ([McLuhan, 1962](#)), in which videos take on the former role of the human voice. Nowadays, stories are made as movies, games, as simulated environments. This shift can mean that only the tech-savvy have the privilege to tell complex stories digitally. The digital stories of our times are primarily told by those with the financial and technical means to make and spread their stories to wider audiences. Simultaneously, there are many stories which will never be heard, the marginalised voices of those that see the world differently. This is where digital storytelling (DS) enters the picture.



As *Digital Storytelling: Form and Content* describes, DS 'is a simple, creative process whereby people with little or no experience of computers, gain the skills needed to tell a personal story as a two-minute video using predominantly still images combined with recorded voice-over, and often including music and/or other sounds' (3). DS involves workshops of 'intensive' creativity where strangers gather together, tell each other their stories, negotiate and refine them through common discussion and then individually craft their stories digitally. The actual workshop consists of a common phase – the story circle – and an individual phase, in which participants make video montages to tell their stories, positioning DS as a technique of self-disclosure. While DS can be used to research just about any topic under the traditional umbrella of qualitative inquiry, it has been used mostly for activism by NGOs and community workers to give a voice to those who are underrepresented and marginalised. DS is therefore a technique for making digital stories and spreading them; at the same time, it is also a 'reflective learning process', 'a research field' and 'a research tool' (5).

The practice of DS started in 1994 when Joe Lambert founded the Digital Media Centre in San Francisco; since then, several other centres have emerged around the world promoting this technique. *Digital Storytelling* offers a compilation of the contributions of some of the participants at the Conference of Digital Storytelling in 2013, producing a heterogenous collection of case studies and theoretical reflections. The book starts with an introductory essay by the editors in which the reader is briefly introduced to the method of DS. The collection is then structured into four parts – 'Practice', 'Content', 'Form' and 'Understanding' – which are the umbrella themes of the three-five essays that comprise each section. *Digital Storytelling* does not aim to reconceptualise what DS is; rather, it seeks to slowly push its boundaries by showing that DS works in many ways and with multiple scopes.



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The majority of the contributions are descriptions of case studies, outlining the difficulties and the lessons learned, before typically ending with a reflection. Some of the essays quote from the participants' stories or give examples of photographs, mind-maps and drawings, which makes for an enjoyable read. However, the greatest asset of the book is showing in just how many ways DS can be used and in what kinds of environments. Most of the essays are written from an activist perspective, the aim being to promote unheard voices, to make public what was previously hidden. Who are those without a voice needing to tell their own stories? The collection includes chapters on street children in Kenya (Chapter Three); Brazilian youth (Chapter Four); elderly people in a community centre in Newcastle (Chapter Five); religious feminists in Turkey (Chapter Eight) and sexual minorities in Malaysia (Chapter Nine).

Digital stories are not just about raising awareness, but they also do something for those who tell them. Chapter Seven, by Pip Hardy and Tony Summer, explores the therapeutic use of DS with current users and survivors of the UK mental health system. The authors developed 'Patient Voices', a series of workshops for the Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust (MMHSCT) between 2010 and the present. The aim was to 'inject humanity and compassion into healthcare dominated by targets, numbers, graphs and statistics' (58). Medical students are taught that they do not treat diseases but people, yet in daily clinical practice this principle is often forgotten, leading to feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness and even a loss of dignity for the patient. 'Patient Voices' was integrated into the daily practices of MMHSCT as a powerful way to elicit empathy. However, the process of building stories also had some therapeutic and 'cathartic' (65) effect on the patients. The very act of working together on stories, of crafting and finishing them, empowered many. For example, one patient with depression confesses the inability to work on a story, but after three days, he crafted his, which showed to him that depression does not necessarily define or limit oneself. 'Patient Voices' shows that there is more to telling stories than just communicating to others: self-healing may also be at stake.

The therapeutic potential of DS is also explored in Chapter Five by Alex Henry describing the two-year project 'History in our Lives', which focused on elderly members of the Grange Day Centre in Newcastle. Eliciting stories from older generations required the challenging and continuous adaptation of methods and techniques. Instead of providing the standard three-day DS workshop, the facilitators worked for months with the elderly, establishing trust before and during the story-making process. This project highlighted one of the potential disadvantages of DS: namely, the intangible nature of digital stories. While Darcy Alexandra argues in Chapter Fourteen that digital objects have sensory properties and can be understood as embodied stories, for the elderly users, this was not tangible enough. The elderly therefore worked in parallel with a ceramics artist to arrive at an artefact which could physically express the gist of their stories. The outcomes of the project were not just ceramic objects and video stories, but also a sense of well-being and feeling cared for, together with a strengthening of relations between the elderly people and their caretakers.

Several essays in the book also deal with theoretical problems. Since we all have stories to tell, it is assumed that DS should work for all educational levels and cultural backgrounds. However, Akiko Ogawa and Yuko Tsuchiya show in Chapter Twelve that certain cultural backgrounds make it more difficult to engage with DS. For example, in Japanese culture, self-disclosure and publicising one's opinions are discouraged, hence the story circle with strangers is more likely to fail. Ogawa and Tsuchiya have therefore developed an original approach to DS by asking participants to first take photos and explore the places about which they wanted to tell stories, before gathering the photos, writing haikus and commonly selecting the stories from these photographic 'seeds'.

Other issues may arise when trying to make the stories public, such as the intellectual property questions explored in Chapter Eleven by Christina Spurgeon: since stories are generated in a collective workshop and may be considered co-created, who owns the copyright de facto? Since the aim of DS is not just to generate stories but also to broadcast them to a wider audience, which sometimes includes showing them on television (for instance, the BBC made a series from the 'Capture Wales' project, as discussed in Chapter Ten) or putting them online, sensitive issues of privacy and anonymity must also be negotiated between storytellers, workshop facilitators and broadcasters. In Chapter Fifteen, Brushwood Rose argues that the social life of a story – how relevant it is for others – depends on the emotional world disclosed and its complexity: the more genuine the emotion, the more potential for connecting with others, yet, at the same time, the more vulnerability involved for participants.

Digital Storytelling is relevant for diverse audiences. Above all, it will interest practitioners as the book showcases a number of usage scenarios and applications, while also fostering deeper reflection on practice. For NGOs and social activists who are not yet practising DS, the variety of cases in the book will help them decide if DS could work for promoting their cause. For educators involved with qualitative methodologies as well as in the creative studies fields, DS might offer an interesting outlet to explore new ways of working with students to make stories together.

However, it must be clarified that for newcomers to DS, this book is not enough to get them started. Beginners will need to first consult more explanatory works such as those by [Knut Lundby \(2008\)](#), [John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam \(2008\)](#) and [Joe Lambert \(2013\)](#). After reading the fundamental works and learning the practical 'how-to', *Digital Storytelling* can provide further cases and reflections on the practice. Nonetheless, its stories and insights are diverse and interesting enough to make someone want to dive deeper into this new method, which seems to have a lot of potential not just for activism, but also for qualitative inquiry in the social sciences.

Lavinia Marin is a doctoral researcher at the Education, Culture and Society research centre at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her work focuses on the specifics of thinking at the university and on the media technologies which make thinking possible, such as textual and digital technologies. [Her latest published article](#) argues for the fundamental role played by technologies of the text in the foundation of the first universities, inspired by the work of Ivan Illich.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.