

Capturing memories: An engaged research project using community digital storytelling

Martina Jordaan, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Nita Mennega, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract: This article reports on a community digital storytelling project and explores how a digital storytelling project with a local community creates an accessible repository of information about the previously unrecorded history of the community. The storytelling project encourages the community to tell their stories or discuss issues that are important to them. The program has been running for more than 12 months, with regular training in cloud-based video editing software. The storytelling videos are uploaded on the community organization's YouTube channel. After each training session, the participants complete a survey reflecting on their experience with creating the videos. Findings indicate that accessing technology is crucial for personal empowerment and community development. It allows individuals to express themselves, challenge dominant narratives and shape their own destinies. By creating digital stories, individuals can gain self-confidence and belief in their potential. This belief is a powerful tool for personal and community growth, enabling individuals to take risks, pursue their goals and make meaningful changes in their lives and society.

Keywords: *Community Digital Storytelling; Engaged Research; Mamelodi; Historical Society of Mamelodi*

Introduction

The ubiquitous presence of the cell phone enables contemporary societies worldwide to move toward society-wide communication, as social media and networking platforms attest. This communication increasingly includes user-generated media (Copeland and De Moor 2018). Digital storytelling provides the opportunity for community members to share their stories. This article discusses how a community organization, the Historical Society of Mamelodi, worked together with two researchers from the University of Pretoria to empower the local community to learn how to use cloud-based video editing software and start capturing their personal stories, the history of Mamelodi and the customs of the community. In the process, the community members developed personal agency and took responsibility for creating their own stories. The ultimate goal was to create a channel that would be accessible to everyone, including the community and broader society, to view these stories. The project aimed to preserve Mamelodi's local history and encourage the community to share their stories and experiences virtually. By documenting the local history of Mamelodi, the project aimed to create a broader understanding of the community's rich cultural heritage and traditions. The participants were encouraged to incorporate their personal experiences and perspectives into their digital stories, making them unique and authentic. The project also fostered a sense of community and collaboration among the participants as they worked together to share their stories and experiences.

Literature review

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is an offspring of traditional storytelling with variations on how the story is told (Conrad 2013). It refers to a two- to five-minute audio-visual, combining photographs, voice-over narration and other audio (De Jager et al. 2017). Digital storytelling involves utilizing affordable digital cameras, non-linear editing software and computers to create brief multimedia narratives. These narratives typically revolve around personal experiences and are intended for online publication (Meadows 2003). Because these stories are accessible via the internet, digital stories have better reach than traditional stories as they are available for everyone to access (Burgess 2006).

A clear difference between traditional and digital storytelling lies in the channel according to which the stories are told. Digital storytelling follows the root of its parent with the "additional role of an author". The author of the stories needs to research a particular subject and then use technology tools to incorporate images and music to make the story interesting (Choo, Abdullah and Nawi 2020, 47). Conrad (2013, 460) defines a digital story as a "story created in digital format using different types of digital media". Some of the technology tools refer to a camera used to capture visuals and a laptop to edit the visuals.

Digital storytelling is highly suitable for this purpose due to its various attributes, including its participatory nature, capacity to foster deeper connections with researchers and other participants, and the potential to generate alternative narratives. The importance of relationships in digital storytelling underscores a key consideration, as participants' readiness to delve into a particular topic through digital storytelling is likely influenced by the degree of safety and support they encounter in the research process (De Jager et al. 2017).

Digital storytelling serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it is commonly used as a tool for outreach and activism to influence public opinion. Secondly, it can be used in educational settings to teach students the art of storytelling and introduce them to new technologies. Thirdly, digital storytelling can be used to archive history, particularly local history, and generate micro-histories. Lastly, it is instrumental in preserving culture and documenting cultural heritage, as digital stories can be used to capture historical events and traditions. Digital storytelling is important as a means of archiving history and preserving culture. By documenting cultural practices and traditions, digital stories help create a record of a community's heritage, which can be passed down to future generations. Additionally, this can help promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, as people can learn about the cultural practices and traditions of other communities (Conrad 2013).

Digital storytelling is a research method that is well suited for participatory projects where the goal is to collaborate "with" participants rather than conduct research "on" them (Conrad and Sinner 2015). Digital storytelling involves self-representation, allowing participants to share their stories "from the inside out". This method is respectful and

appropriate for marginalized groups such as refugees, immigrants (De Jager et al. 2017; Lenette and Boddy 2013; McGinnis and Garcia 2012; Nascimento et al. 2024) and people with disabilities (Manning 2010; Rice et al. 2015; Siebelink et al. 2024). Digital storytelling is frequently employed for community development objectives (Iseke and Moore 2011; Jernigan et al. 2012; Kent 2015) and has the potential to bring about transformation for both participants and the wider community (Loe 2013). Participatory methods promote active participant engagement in determining the research question, as well as its execution and application. Furthermore, the visual aspect of digital storytelling enhances accessibility for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with restricted verbal and literacy abilities (Manning 2010).

Digital storytelling has immense potential for educating people about various cultural practices across different geographic locations. Besides serving as a tool for outreach, it can also act as a unifying force for community members. Storytelling can create a sense of involvement and facilitate dialogue within a community. Through digital storytelling, individual experiences and perspectives can be documented in a new and innovative way. Digital storytelling has the power to bring people closer together, promoting a sense of community and shared understanding. It is a valuable tool for documenting and preserving cultural heritage and fostering dialogue and engagement within and between communities (Conrad 2013). Sharing stories of the resilience, resistance and survival of people and cultures is crucial in promoting pride in identity and belonging and in cultural reclamation and renewal processes. Resilience is considered to be present in peoples' resources to tell their life stories (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Sonn and Fisher 1998).

Digital storytelling has the potential to promote media literacy in a novel manner (Drotner 2008). As a result of the essential need for proficiency in technology use, individuals creating a digital story can acquire practical technological skills throughout the course of a digital storytelling project. In the digital age, ordinary citizens have an ongoing opportunity to continuously reinterpret and rework cultural archives. These opportunities are crucial for post-colonial communities to tackle the omissions concerning difficult memories, which hinder the collective effort to revisit the past, confront current issues related to ethnic diversity and discrimination, and envision a more inclusive identity (Cruz and Miranda 2022). Digital storytelling has the capacity to enhance qualitative and narrative investigation, prioritizing community participation, capacity development, social justice and the decolonization of research, knowledge and methodology (Wiebe 2019).

Community digital storytelling

The community digital storytelling approach provides a means to tackle local community issues. It encompasses five key stages: preparation, storytelling, story digitization, sense-making, and digital story-sharing. This form of media expression is typically characterized

by its brief duration, minimal resources and a subjective account conveyed through the storyteller's own voice (Copeland and De Moor 2018).

Digital storytelling has the potential to safeguard cultural heritage and has been proposed as a contemporary version of traditional oral storytelling. It has been employed to gather and preserve the narratives of various community groups, thus safeguarding their cultural heritage. For example, it has been utilized in rural Argentina (Balestrini et al. 2014), northwestern Canada (Cunsolo Willox, Harper and Edge 2013) and New Zealand (Beltrán and Begun 2014). In a study investigating the impact of climate change on Inuit communities in Canada, digital storytelling was chosen as the research method due to the significance of storytelling within these communities (Cunsolo Willox et al. 2013). Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of these communities' cultural, mythological and historical tapestry of daily life. The use of digital storytelling was successful in preserving storytelling traditions and promoting new storytelling approaches within these communities. Digital media was employed to enhance engagement, providing context for the impact of climate change for the Inuit communities themselves and the broader global audience (De Jager et al. 2017).

Engaged scholarship

Engaged scholarship involves collaboration between scholars and community partners to address real-world problems and create positive social change, aiming to bridge the gap between academia and society (Beaulieu, Breton and Brousselle 2018). It aims to bridge the gap between academia and society by applying academic knowledge and expertise to practical issues and challenges faced by communities. Engaged scholarship emphasizes the importance of collaboration, the co-creation of knowledge, and mutual learning between scholars and community partners. It is grounded in the real-world context and aims to create positive social change (Eatman et al. 2018).

Background to the study

Mamelodi is one of seven townships surrounding the city of Pretoria in South Africa. It is located on the eastern side of Pretoria and houses more than a million people. Despite being home to a significant population, a large number of residents still live in makeshift homes without basic amenities like electricity and running water. The township grapples with several issues, such as crime, violence, HIV, educational disparity and high unemployment rates.

During the early 1900s, three Acts of Parliament supported and brought about spatial segregation in South Africa. The first of these was the Natives Land Act of 1913. It served as a basis for the later development of townships in the country. Black residents were designated specific ethnic 'homelands' or reserves in which to live. They were forbidden to

purchase or lease land outside these homelands. The second Act was the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified every South African by race: whites (of European descent), blacks (of African descent), coloureds (of mixed race) and Indians (South Asians). The last Act, the Group Areas Act, was also established in 1950 and was reinforced in 1966. It allocated residential and business zones in urban areas for each racial group. Members of races other than white were prohibited from residing in, conducting business or owning land in these areas (Breed 2012).

The Group Areas Act designated Mamelodi as a black-only area in 1953 (Mabin 1992). Black citizens were forcefully relocated from the suburb of Lady Selbourne in Pretoria to Mamelodi. The government constructed many four-roomed brick houses in Mamelodi in 1956 (Smith 2021).

Following the abolishment of apartheid, the majority of the Mamelodi community is still of black ethnic origin, mainly black South Africans, who are either unemployed or self-employed. The main language spoken is Northern Sotho (Strydom 2006). However, there are 11 official languages in South Africa, and a mixed language is spoken in the street, affectionately referred to as "Sepitori" by the speaker (Ditsele and Mann 2014).

The Historical Society of Mamelodi, a group of senior citizens from the community, is the community partner for this project. The organization was informally launched in 2011 with Rev Chris Nkomo as Chairperson. It was officially established as a community organization in November 2021. The members of the Historical Society have an in-depth understanding of Mamelodi's history and dynamics, and are passionate about preserving the community's stories. The members of the organization realized that not much information about Mamelodi's history is readily available, although local history is included in the primary school curriculum. They had initially envisioned capturing the history of Mamelodi in the form of a book or creating a museum, but both options proved to be very expensive. Therefore, they explored the possibility of sharing the history of Mamelodi on a digital platform to make it accessible to a larger audience with the assistance of the researchers.

The primary objective of the digital storytelling project is to collect and share local community stories in a more accessible way. The project focuses specifically on video-based stories that are recorded using WeVideo software and uploaded to YouTube. The researchers collaborated with the Historical Society of Mamelodi to suggest the use of cloud-based video editing software. This approach aims to enable community members to capture and edit their own visual stories to be uploaded onto a dedicated YouTube channel. The main goal of this stage is to archive as many stories as possible, as personal stories are closely intertwined with the history of Mamelodi.

The process of creating these digital stories provided an opportunity for community members to learn basic computer skills and desktop research methods. The ultimate goal was to create a channel that was accessible to all, including the community and broader society, so that they could view these stories. The University of Pretoria's computer laboratories on the Mamelodi Campus were used to train the community members and develop the digital stories.

Methodology

The engaged research project with the Historical Society of Mamelodi used community-based participatory research as its theoretical framework, involving community members as active partners in all aspects of the research process. The research received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education (Protocol No. EDU054/22).

The training sessions were open to anyone who was interested in attending them. The project involved teaching community members to use cloud-based video editing software, WeVideo, to capture their personal stories or stories about the history or customs of Mamelodi. The WeVideo software is extremely easy to use and requires a participant to be able to click and drag items onscreen. The training focussed on the different features of the software, how to create a storyboard and how to create a short video. The training provided detailed instructions on the various features of the software, the art of creating a storyboard, as well as the process of producing a quality short video. Participants were guided through each step, ensuring they gained a thorough understanding of the techniques and tools necessary to create engaging visual content.

The three-day training sessions were provided to 34 community members over six sessions. Eight of the attendees attended more than one of the training sessions. Even though the software is extremely easy to use, it was soon realized that some of the community members struggled with basic computer skills, and the training was extended to a fourth day. One four-day workshop was presented to 10 community members. However, the participants complained that they could not stay away from work for four days, and the follow-up training continued as a three-day training session.

Although structured, the approach aimed to enable individuals to produce their digital creations, guiding them through a process of initial expression and, subsequently, showcasing their crafted narrative. At the end of the training, the videos were shared and permission was requested for the videos to be shared on the Historical Society of Mamelodi's YouTube channel. Twenty-seven videos were shared on the YouTube channel. The process aimed to empower participants to produce their own digital creations. It supported them through a developmental journey, from the initial sharing of their stories to ultimately sharing their sculpted stories with others.

The workshop entailed the following. The workshop format links strongly to the StoryCentre model of Copeland and De Moore (2018).

Table 1: Format of the digital storytelling workshop

Day 1	What is storytelling?
	Tutorial on the software and its different features
Day 2	Reviewing the different features of the software
	Developing a storyboard
	Recording the voice-over
Day 3	Video editing
	Video editing
	Movie premier

Additional training in basic computer skills was also organized for the community. The skills training was presented by students enrolled in the Community-based Project Module of the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology at the University of Pretoria as part of the students' required 40 hours of community service. One of the researchers volunteered to present a half-day desktop research session for 26 community members. The desktop research concepts were included in the video editing training sessions. Copyright and intellectual property concerns were also addressed during the training.

A reflective questionnaire was completed by 32 community members after the training. The survey was uploaded on Qualtrics and shared with the community members who had attended the training at the end of each training session. The following questions were asked in the survey:

Table 2: Survey to the community upon completion of the training session

1.	Can you describe your experience creating a digital story?
2.	What topic did you choose for your story and why?
3.	How did it feel to share your story?
4.	Did the training adequately prepare you to create your own digital story?
5.	Is your audience an important factor to consider when creating a digital story?
6.	What decisions did you have to make when creating your digital story?
7.	What factors influenced your choices when creating your digital story?
8.	What were some challenges you faced while creating your digital story?
9.	Why do you consider these challenges?
10.	How did you overcome these challenges?
11.	What did you like about the digital story you created?
12.	To what extent does your digital story reflect your personal experience?
13.	Do you believe that digital storytelling provides a better means of expression compared to other methods?
14.	Based on your experience, what are the pros and cons of utilizing digital stories for storytelling?

A few senior citizens of Mamelodi also expressed their need to share their stories, but they felt unable to master the cloud-based video editing software. Therefore, one of the

researchers and a member of the Historical Society of Mamelodi visited the senior citizens at their homes, recorded their stories, edited the videos on the cloud-based video editing software, and shared them on the Historical Society of Mamelodi's YouTube channel. In this way, and during the first year of this research, six individuals were interviewed.

Findings

Initially, the quality of the videos created by the community was substandard, but as more examples were produced, their quality improved. The elders who were interviewed provided valuable insights and knowledge about the history of Mamelodi, which became the primary source of information. The videos created with this knowledge were then used as resources for new participants to produce informative content about the history of Mamelodi. As more people attended these sessions, they became more involved in sharing their knowledge and supporting new participants in refining their videos. The collaborative effort of these individuals played a vital role in enhancing the overall quality of the videos.

The researchers observed that a portion of the attendees joined the training program solely to acquire skills in using the software and did not intend to contribute to the video for the Historical Society of Mamelodi. Some of the participants expressed their reluctance to authorize the uploading of their videos on the YouTube channel.

The feedback on the questionnaire gave insight into the value the attendees attributed to the training, the difficulty they experienced in using the software, and their view on the value of their video. To analyze the open-ended questions, all responses for each question were isolated and the researchers employed a critical approach and used their experience to identify codes, ensuring an emic (insider's perspective) approach to the research. This approach allowed the researchers to bring their own understanding and expertise to the analysis rather than relying solely on quantitative measures.

Thirty community members completed the survey about their experiences in creating a digital story. The majority of respondents (73.34%) found the experience to be positive and reported positive feelings about the training they received (91.80%). They felt very good (86.21%) about telling their stories and were satisfied with the choice they had made. Overall, they were happy with their choices and appreciated the reactions of the other attendees to their videos.

The most popular topics identified for digital stories were life stories, the history of Mamelodi and life in Mamelodi. However, participants encountered some challenges, mainly related to managing the software, but also of shouldering responsibilities that prevented them from attending the course. They all reflected that the audience was an important factor to take into consideration when creating their own stories (mean: 87) and that the digital stories were an excellent option to tell their stories (mean: 8.33)

Interestingly, respondents rated their ability to express themselves through digital stories as moderate to high, with a mean score of 8.33. They reported making choices related to technical issues during the creation of their videos, such as maintaining picture and video quality, avoiding copyright issues, and ensuring a balance between voice-over and visuals. Non-technical factors, like the audience and the purpose behind the story, also played a role. Respondents highlighted key factors that influenced their choice of a digital story, such as relevance to the community and empowerment.

The challenges encountered were mainly technical issues, including "editing, voice recording" (Participant 26), "linking the voices" (participants 6, 11 and 14), "the voice balance with the background music" (Participant 12) and "recording and ensuring that my voice matches my pictures and videos" (Participant 30). However, some participants indicated that the stock material of the software was challenging, as it did not offer enough photo options for black people. Additionally, recording in English was difficult for some, as it was not their "mother tongue" (Participant 17). The participants reflected on why it was a challenge, including not having enough time to practice and that it was a new and different skill to master. To cope with the challenges, the researchers and assistants constantly provided help, and the Historical Society of Mamelodi members also assisted the participants.

An example is when a participant shared his story about how he and his family were forcefully removed from Lady Selbourne to Mamelodi. Even though he managed to record his story, he struggled to find applicable video footage. The researcher assisted him in enhancing his video by adding video footage from stock material. Another participant who struggled to record her story decided to create a video with text and background music only.

Overall, the value of digital stories lay in the "new skill that was required" (Participant 27) and that they had the option to share the "life that I was living" (Participant 24) and "telling an untold story" (Participant 16). Most of the respondents indicated that the digital story represented their real-life personal experience. For the participants, the value of the digital story was that "numerous people can relate to my story" (Participant 29) and that it was an opportunity to "express myself" (Participant 32). Most participants felt that the digital story reflected their personal experiences and "represented my journey to the extent I can share it with everyone" (Participant 32).

The participants reflected that the constraints to telling a story digitally included technological limitations, such as access to devices, data and electronic equipment, as well as the focus on the audience, who may have limited access to the internet, and digital and electronic devices. For some, the three days were too short to master the software and develop a story. They indicated that the "time is limited for one to create the best story" (Participant 17). Follow-up training is provided, as well as "open-lab" days where participants can refine their videos or create new videos.

As the participants became more proficient in using the software, they were willing and excited to use more advanced tools to create their digital stories. Within three days, the

participants went from being hesitant and uncertain to becoming confident and creative storytellers. As they experimented with different features and tools, they discovered new ways to enhance their stories and make them more engaging and impactful. They were able to incorporate a wide variety of multimedia elements such as images, videos and sound effects.

Discussion

The process of creating digital stories in the learning environment offered by the Historical Society of Mamelodi was not only empowering for participants, but also catalyzed community building. Sharing personal stories and experiences helped create a sense of connection and belonging among participants, fostering a sense of community that was not previously present. Through the process of creating digital stories, participants were able to engage in a collaborative process, working together to create a shared vision for their stories. This collaboration helped break down barriers between individuals and fostered a sense of mutual respect and understanding. Participants were able to learn from each other, share their knowledge and skills, and support each other in the creation process.

Some of the individuals who participated in the cloud-based video editing software training were not interested in completing the reflective questionnaire or sharing their videos with the Historical Society on YouTube. These participants primarily enrolled in the training to learn how to use the software. The training attracted participants from diverse backgrounds, including a school principal, a reverend, an artist and an early childhood development center principal and practitioner. As expected, their stories, as well as the quality of their videos, varied considerably. The younger generation seemed more interested in discussing contemporary life in Mamelodi, whereas the older generation preferred to develop videos on aspects of Mamelodi's history or share anecdotes of their life or their life history.

The creation of digital stories provided a platform for intergenerational dialogue and learning. Older members of the community could share their knowledge and stories with the younger generations, while younger members could offer new perspectives and ideas. This exchange of knowledge and ideas helped bridge the gap between generations and foster a greater sense of unity and understanding within the community.

The creation of digital stories in the learning environment offered by the Historical Society of Mamelodi was a powerful tool to promote community empowerment, social justice and intergenerational dialogue. Power imbalances within the community may be perpetuated or challenged through these narratives. Digital stories can shape power dynamics and provide valuable insights into their impact on community representation and social equity. By providing individuals with opportunities to express their agency and redefine themselves, the creation of digital stories helped cultivate a sense of autonomy and ownership over their own stories and foster a sense of community and understanding among participants.

The members of the Historical Society of Mamelodi remain actively engaged in digital storytelling. To support the project's sustainability and continuation, a number of laptops have been allocated to the Historical Society of Mamelodi's management. These laptops will facilitate the digital storytelling efforts and help expand the skills of active members, who are also part of the non-profit group in Mamelodi. By including non-profit organizations in Mamelodi in the training sessions, the project will be scaled, and the skills acquired through the training will benefit other organizations within the community.

Conclusion

Moving forward with our efforts to promote literacy, identity, digital technology, and community storytelling, we aim to investigate further ways to establish a learning environment that allows individuals and groups to express themselves through the creation of digital stories. Our focus will be on exploring the sociocultural aspects of development, which involve a continuous process of growth and evolution across different contexts. When we truly listen, we begin to appreciate the profoundness of the human experience that "ordinary" people express when given the chance to create content for public consumption (Burgess 2006).

The ability to influence one's life and society is critical to personal empowerment and community development. This is why access to tools and technology is so important. It allows individuals to express themselves and share their stories with others. By giving a voice to their experiences and perspectives, individuals can begin to challenge dominant narratives and shape their destinies. The act of creating digital stories can help individuals develop a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. Individuals can begin to believe in their present capabilities and potential by taking control of their narratives and imagining a better future for themselves and their communities. This belief in oneself is a powerful tool for personal and community development, as it allows individuals to take risks, pursue their goals and make meaningful changes in their lives and society. The ability to influence one's life and society is critical to personal empowerment and community development. Access to tools and technology is an important step towards achieving this goal, as it allows individuals to express themselves and share their stories with others. By believing in their present capabilities and imagined future, individuals can develop a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, which is essential for personal and community growth.

Our research underscores the revolutionary power of digital storytelling and the significance of recognizing and amplifying the voices of historically marginalized individuals. By creating platforms for individuals to share their stories and control their narratives, we can cultivate a sense of personal agency and enable people to make positive changes in their lives and communities.

Limitations

One of the challenges of the project was that the digital storytelling training was open to all community members, which meant that some individuals attended the training without the intention of contributing to the Historical Society's videos. In subsequent sessions, it became a requirement to contribute to the project to receive a certificate for completing the training. Another challenge was some attendees' low computer literacy levels since there was no screening process before the training and these individuals did not attend the basic computer training provided by the campus. This made it difficult for them to create high-quality videos. A few of the participants struggled to follow the researchers as they were not proficient in English. However, members of the Historical Society of Mamelodi assisted with translation. Despite being given the option of creating a video in their native language, their limited computer literacy skills prevented them from creating quality videos. Translation software could have been used to assist with the translation of the videos from their mother tongue to English. The challenge to balance authenticity and creativity in digital narratives is still a concern and needs to be addressed in future training and research.

Fortunately, community members began attending multiple sessions and assisting with the training, improving the videos' overall quality. The project is still ongoing. While a three-year license was purchased for the video editing software, the goal is for the Historical Society to eventually take full responsibility for the digital stories and continue to upload new stories. The researchers will continue to provide training for the next two years and assist with the creation of new digital stories.

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Informed consent

The authors obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Martina Jordaan: Head: Community-based Research and Postgraduate Studies, Mamelodi campus, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Corresponding Author's Email: martina.jordaan@up.ac.za

Nita Mennega: Lecturer, Department of Informatics, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Email: nita.mennega@up.ac.za