EMPOWER
Digital Storytelling and Youth

Objectives:

- To learn what digital storytelling is and how it might be used.
- To explore the benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations of this work.
- To think through key questions for planning your digital storytelling project.

What is Digital Storytelling?

- Digital stories can be the combination of text, pictures and graphics, video, voice and music to create a 2-8 minute first person narrative used for research, health promotion, community development, policy change, etc.
- Digital stories revolve around a chosen theme (e.g. a snapshot of time) and often contain a particular viewpoint.
- Digital storytelling brings social media and firsthand experience together to educate and inform the public.

Why Digital Storytelling?

Digital storytelling...

- Represents the diversity of communities and bodies affected by HIV.
- Presents complex stories in accessible ways. Digital Stories can "widen the lens" on HIV by showing how social determinants of health can influence HIV risk (e.g. homelessness, homophobia, racism, etc.).
- Deconstructs the Expert. Marginalized communities have traditionally been viewed as 'consumers' of knowledge (or 'subjects' in research) and are rarely given credit for being the experts. Digital storytelling honours the lived experience of youth communities by asking youth to present what they know, experience, think, and feel.
- Encourages self-expression, communication, exploration, and social justice.
- Builds bridges between communities. Digital Storytelling can open our eyes to different forms of oppression and interrogate the notion that there is an 'us' vs. 'them.'
- Opens up the mind and the heart. Digital Storytelling provides an avenue for people to reflect upon and make meaning from their experiences. Participants have often noted that the process is therapeutic. However, it is important to note that while digital storytelling may be therapeutic for some, it is not a therapeutic process.[1]
- Creates change—digital stories can inform programming, policy change and research.
- Has the power to make knowledge (ideas, research, education) more accessible by reaching multiple audiences.

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[1] It may be possible for a licensed professional (counselor, social worker, mental health worker) to conduct digital storytelling with therapeutic aims. This however, is beyond the scope or purpose of this bulletin.

Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling

The following steps, as taken and adapted from the Centre for Digital Storytelling, were useful in guiding our digital storytelling process. Please consult the Centre for Digital Storytelling for more information on their process. Note that steps one through four take the most time.

STEP 1. **Owning your insights:**

- What's the story you want to tell? Why this story? Why now?
- Some stories are too fresh to tell. If it hurts too much to tell, you may want to tell another story instead.

STEP 2. **Owning your emotions:**

- Identifying, choosing, and conveying emotions in your story.
- Authenticity and emotional honesty.

STEP 3. **Finding the moment:**

- Finding the moment (e.g. a snapshot in time) that you want to represent.
- What was the moment when your situation/perspective changed? Is there more than one possible moment to choose from? Can you describe the moment in detail? (What do you see? What do you hear? What are your feelings?)
- Showing not telling (e.g. how do you show that you felt happy instead of saying "I felt happy.")

STEP 4. **Seeing your story:**

- Creating a visual narrative for your story.
- What images come to mind when recalling the moment of change in the story? What does the image convey? Implicit or explicit?

STEP 5. **Hearing your story:**

- Creating an audio narrative for your story.
- Voice-over, music, ambient sound, silence, etc.

STEP 6. **Assembling your story:**

- Storyboarding & story production.
- Editing

STEP 7. **Sharing your story:**

- Who is your audience? Where do you want to share your story?
- Reflecting on your process.
- Who owns and controls dissemination of your story?

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[2] Lamber, Joe (2010). Digital Storytelling Cookbook. Digital Diner Press, Berkeley, CA. www.storycenter.org

Our Project

The *Empower Youth Digital Stories* were created as part of an intensive eight-week capacity-building training. Youth participants and youth peer mentors met twice a week to take part in a series of trainings on HIV, harm reduction, sexual health, workshop development and facilitation as well as community arts mediums such as silk screening, spoken word and photography. This training gave youth the skills, support and time to develop arts-based and community specific workshops that they would deliver to their communities over the following months.

In addition to building workshops, youth participants created digital stories as way to explore their own experiences in relation to their new roles as HIV peer educators. We worked with a skilled community arts facilitator, Hisayo Horie, who led the group through an intensive 3.5 day digital storytelling process to produce 9 moving stories. These stories explore a variety of issues—homophobia and transphobia, homelessness, racism and identity, gender, issues of finding community, colonialism, violence, peer pressure and more. The full range of stories speak directly and indirectly to HIV by exploring the way social determinants of health impact an individual or community's ability to make choices about their lives, bodies, and sexualities.

Discussion Guide: Digital Storytelling in Practice

The way you structure your digital storytelling project depends on the community you are working with, the aim and scope of your project and the resources you have. The following questions may help you in planning your project so that you can create strong stories with strong impact for both audience members and participants. Here are the questions you will need to consider:

Technology

Digital Storytelling can be an expensive project to undertake. There are lots of different options for how to produce your digital stories. You may wish to buy your own equipment, or, work with another organization that specializes in digital storytelling or video production.

1. What kind of technology and editing software does your organization have access to?
2. How many computers do you have available for editing?
3. Is the community you're working with computer or media literate?
4. What kinds of training or supports will you need to provide participants?

"The space between the digital storytelling workshop gave me time to process, think and reflect."

—Empower Youth Participant

For the Empower project, we worked with Mac iPads. Video editing software can be up to $1000 per license and stand-alone computers may have limited access. While they were more expensive than a digital camera, the iPads provided a still camera; video camera; editing software (iMovie) and web access. This increased accessibility and economic access, as every participant could work independently on their videos.

Building in Supports

Storytelling can bring up a lot of raw emotions; some stories are "too fresh" to share. Similarly, sometimes people may get caught up in the moment, and share something they later regret.

1. How will you support participants during and after the digital storytelling process?

2. How will you help people select and represent stories that they are comfortable sharing?

3. How will you deal with issues of disclosure during the storytelling process?

For the Empower project, we worked with an experienced community artist, Hisayo Horie, in constructing the stories. We also brought in two of our youth staff (Empower Mentors) and trained participants in active listening so that the group could operate as a support for one another. The extra ears meant that the coordinator could play an active role in attending to programming logistics and individual / group's needs.

The Ethics of Production

While some people will want to be recognized for their story, others will want to remain anonymous.

1. How will you protect people's anonymity in the digital stories?

2. How will you obtain permission for using photos where other people may be present?

3. How will you handle issues around copyright?

4. In constructing the story, how do you balance youth film-makers' needs with the needs of the audience?

> "Digital Storytelling really built trust in the group and encouraged us to confront why we do this work."
>
> —Empower Youth Participant

In Empower, we provided several options for producing the stories. In the credits, people could choose to remain anonymous, adopt a pseudonym, or use their first name only. We also showed many examples of different ways to tell a story without using identifiable features like a voice, or showing a face. Because the stories would be shown at public events we chose not to use copyrighted music. Instead, participants could make their own music via garage band or select from free creative commons music online.

Dissemination and Ownership

1. Who owns the story?

2. Who benefits from the telling of your story?

3. How will you determine where (and how) the stories can be shown?

4. What are the benefits and risks of sharing your story at events, online, in public?

In Empower, the issue of where the story was shared was a continual process. From the beginning, we stressed that youth would decide where and how their story was shared. Each youth participant signed off on sharing their story at a public event at the end of the project; two months later, they signed off on sharing their story at future events and online. We built in this two month window as a way for participants to reflect on where they wanted their story shared, as well as whether they wanted their name attributed to it.

Need Some Inspiration?

For your viewing pleasure… Check out the following websites for some great digital storytelling projects. Many of these links contain stories on the subject of HIV.

- Empower: **www.empoweryouth.info**

- Center for Digital Storytelling: **www.storycenter.org**

- Silence Speaks: **www.silencespeaks.org**

- Sonke Gender Justice Network: **www.genderjustice.org.za**

- Youth Co Playing it Safe: **www.playing-it-safe.nfb.ca**

Ontario Trillium Foundation

Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario

GAAP

CENTRAL TORONTO
Community Health Centres