Intergenerational digital storytelling: four racconti of a new approach

Digital Storytelling intergenerazionale: Quattro racconti per un nuovo approccio

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ABSTRACT
Digital storytelling has been slowly penetrating the world of education and social development since a while. Intergenerational learning seems a promising and somehow natural domain for digital storytelling, as it offers a perfect venue to bring together memory and wisdom with digital media skills and vibrant communication. This paper presents the efforts made by Associazione seed to transfer digital storytelling to intergenerational learning, based on its previous work with the Digital Storytelling for Development model in many fields.

Negli ultimi anni, il "Digital Storytelling" ha penetrato lentamente il mondo della formazione e dello sviluppo sociale. L'apprendimento intergenerazionale sembra un ambito promettente e in qualche modo naturale per lo sviluppo di esperienze di Digital Storytelling, in quanto offre il luogo ideale per riunire la memoria e la saggezza con abilità per l'uso dei media digitali e la capacità comunicativa. Questo documento presenta i risultati di lavoro dell'Associazione SEED per il trasferimento del Digital Storytelling nel campo dell'apprendimento intergenerazionale, sulla base di un precedente modello creato dallo stesso gruppo di lavoro SEED e testato in diversi campi, ovvero il Digital Storytelling per lo sviluppo.

KEYWORDS
Digital storytelling, narrative, digital media, intergenerational learning.
Digital storytelling, narrativa, media digitali, l'apprendimento intergenerazionale.

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Introduction

Telling a story means much more than reporting facts. It implies selecting relevant experiences and conveying a meaning that forms a consistent whole out of characters, events and locations. Telling a story is difficult, and learning to tell stories is a powerful way to learn to understand personal experiences and how to communicate it to others. Sharing a story also means connecting with others.

The evidence that our societies are rapidly aging raises new social, economical, education and ethical issues. Can we harvest the potential of storytelling to tackle them?

Associazione seed (seed), a Swiss NGO based in Lugano, invested in storytelling as an approach to create social change and generate meaningful learning and integration opportunities in development projects (seed, n.d.). Thanks to digital media, seed developed a novel approach to engage vulnerable children in the development of expressive competencies, and labelled this approach Digital Storytelling for Development (DSD; Botturi, Bramani & Corbino, 2014it). DSD was developed over three years of social and international development projects, and eventually refined through PINOKIO, a European project within the Comenius Lifelong Learning Program (PINOKIO, n.d.). In particular key projects for the development of DSD were conducted in special education and in international development work in Eastern Europe and Central America. The ALICE project (ALICE, n.d.), a more recent Lifelong Learning project (2011-2013), represented an additional challenge to bring this experience, including both classic and digital storytelling, to the benefit of intergenerational learning.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section offers a short overview of storytelling, also focusing on its encounter with digital media, and on its potential in intergenerational learning. The following section presents a few experiences in digital storytelling for intergenerational learning, and conclusions and outlooks close the paper.

1. Storytelling: an ancient practice meets digital media

1.1. *Storytelling and education*

Storytelling is a cornerstone of society, a basic form of sharing experiences and values (Farmer, 2004). Experiencing narratives, either as audience, author or teller, fosters the process of becoming part of the greater society and at the same time builds children's literacy and communication competencies (Engel, 1999). Pre-primary and primary school teachers use stories (for example, fairy tales or folk tales) to teach reading and writing skills, to convey grammar and math rules, or to present concepts. Dramatization, including the ability to embed information into a narrative setting, is also part of their skills.

In his seminal work *Teaching as Storytelling*, Egan (1986) claims that all teaching, included curricular topics from History to Science, could take the form of a story, thus constructing learning on narration and exploiting the engagement and motivational power of compelling stories. His line of argumentation moves from the recognition of stories as basic medium for communicating experience, and for making sense of an apparently disordered world (Bruner, 1990; McKee, 1997). Indeed, stories have been, and still are, a basic form of teaching (Pedersen, 1995; Bruner, 1990; Gils, 2005; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Cognition and Tech-

nology Group at Vanderbilt, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Young, 1993). The appeal and power of stories is widely acknowledged in the entertainment world, where many products are based on storytelling or exploit storytelling features (McCloud, 1994; Brathwaite & Schreiber, 2009), and such awareness is flowing back to the education domain.

1.2. *Storytelling and digital technologies*

While stories have always been part of the educator's toolbox, digital storytelling is a relatively recent trend in education (Meadows, 2003).

Digital storytelling can be defined as "*the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid colour to characters, situations, experiences, and insights*" (definition by Leslie Rule of Digital Storytelling Association; in Sadik, 2008, p. 490). In other words, digital media offer new instruments for revisiting storytelling, blending multimedia, interactivity and the web into traditional storytelling practices.

Digital storytelling has recently become a topic of its own in the education domain. The core idea is simple: digital technologies, and especially individual media production applications, allow teachers and students to create short digital narrations weaving images, movies, audio, text and music with virtually no infrastructure costs (Ohler, 2006).

The development of a story requires creative work, writing, drawing, technology skills, teamwork, etc. (Robin, McNeil & Yuksel, 2011). Moreover, there is no good story without research and learning key facts (McKee, 1997), which at school means working on the curriculum. Some studies indicate that digital storytelling can offer an opportunity to develop second language competences (Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006), to understand values and increase communication skills (Combs & Beach, 1994), to learn problem solving and algorithms (Schiro, 2004) and to acquire computer science and programming skills (Papadimitriou, 2003).

Educational researchers and practitioners engaged in digital storytelling projects have developed different storytelling approaches (a review is available in Robin, McNeil & Yuksel, 2011). Some of them have focused on technologies, indicating how to smoothen and make efficient the media development process involved in digital storytelling (cf., Robin, n.d.). However, most methods follow the principle of "story first, technology second", putting the development of the narrative structure in the foreground, and exploiting technologies to support the process. The steps provided by the Digital Clubhouse Network (quoted in Farmer, 2004) go in that direction, and so do also the guidelines presented by Ohler (2006; 2008). Following the same approach, the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS, n.d.) provides a reference method (Lambert, 2010), presented at workshops along with various tools, including the Digital Storytelling Cookbook, which is currently a key reference point in digital storytelling. More recently, Lambert has redefined this approach as the 7 steps of storytelling (Lambert, 2013).

Broadly, digital storytelling methodologies can also be grouped according to their usual type of story. The largest tradition in this domain works with biographical stories: storytellers are invited to give shape to their own stories (or their family's), narrating an important event, a place or object, etc. This process creates a space for meaning-making and for deep sharing, and has a deep transformative value. Another approach proposes the development of fictional stories, stimulat-

ing imagination and connecting with the fairy tale tradition. Such an approach creates a "safe space" in which difficult topics can be given voice through the projects on another world, thus achieving a new perspective.

2. Digital storytelling for development

Over the years, Associazione seed has developed an original DS model specifically tailored to social development, called Digital Storytelling for Development (DSD). At its core, DSD is a DS process embedded in a community learning setting, and is focused on the development of fictional stories: narrative discourse is not based on giving meaning to experiences, but on projecting difficult or "wordless" topics onto an imaginary story. This approach makes it possible, for example, to discuss family with the children of disrupted families, or friendship in a violent youth group, etc.

The actual storytelling activity in DSD is in line with Lambert's approach and consists in the following 5 steps: (a) writing the story; (b) developing the storyboard; (c) developing illustrations; (d) recording narration and mixing audio; and (e) editing the final video product. Such an activity, however, is only a step within a wider process that includes (Figure 1):

Teacher training, i.e., the empowerment of local people (teachers, educators, social workers, etc.) to manage the whole project with their own resources.

Co-design, i.e., the shared design of the activity with children, defining topic, schedule, techniques, resources, and setting particular expectations.

Listening to stories, i.e., activation exercises that connects the project to the narrative worlds and styles in the local culture.

Valorisation, i.e., sharing the outcomes of the project with the broader community through sharing the digital stories, for example during a public screening event.

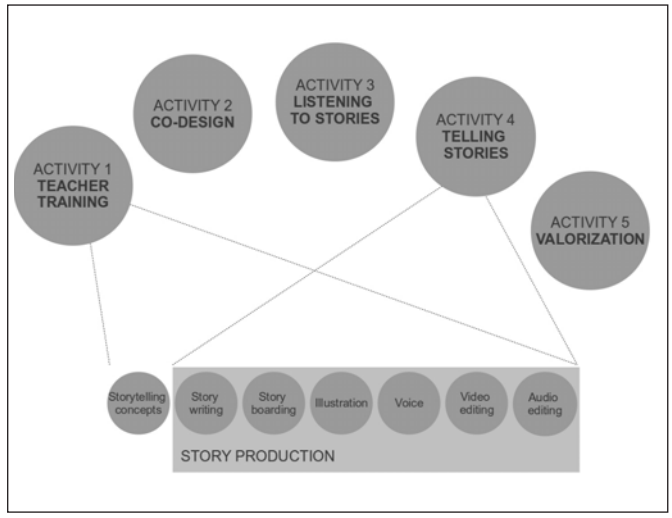


Figure 1 – The Digital Storytelling for Development approach

3. (Digital) storytelling, intergenerational learning and (inter)cultural encounters

In any culture, elderly people represent wisdom and memory of origins. Often, such wisdom is too deep and complex to be simply "transmitted", so that it is more often conveyed through effective stories. Telling stories around the fire, or looking to a picture album, or during holidays are the imaginative landmark of memory reliving through the elders. For this reason, intergenerational learning is somehow a natural domain for the development of storytelling projects, also exploiting digital media. Indeed, this is also a very promising research and experimentation field (Flottemesch, 2013).

First and foremost, connecting generations in a (digital) storytelling project means creating a space where value is given both to the elders – the source of memory and of wise stories – and to younger "natural born" digital artists. In fact, even if critiques have been raised against the very idea of digital natives (for the concept of digital native cf., Prensky 2001; 2006; for its critiques cf., Schulmeister, 2008; 2009; 2010; Bullen et al., 2009; Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008), young people are fascinated by digital technologies and see them as an attractive and powerful expressive means.

Second, the development of a digital story provides a setting in which the digital competences of elderly people are stimulated in a playful way, and, through the excitement for production with digital media, a meaningful experience of family connectedness can be carried out.

So far, intergenerational learning becomes the setting in which digital storytelling acts as a catalyst. But intergenerational learning can also be the topic of a digital storytelling project: reflecting on how children and young people perceive adults and elderly people is crucial to support educators and families in fostering and promoting an inclusive society.

On the other hand, the art of telling stories does not belong to a given culture or a particular continent; on the contrary, storytelling is, in every society around the world, the preferential way in which human beings transmit their culture to the next generation. This makes storytelling projects a great method also to create dialogue spaces among people coming from different cultures. The value of storytelling for fostering intercultural dialogue is twofold: first of all it allows the expression of one's own values and beliefs, encouraging a discussion on commonalities and differences; and secondly it allows, when two cultural groups work on the same story, the negotiation of a common ground, where each starting point of view is taken into consideration, adopted or modified in the creation of a homogeneous story.

4. Intergenerational digital storytelling in practice

This section presents four different ways – called *racconti*, one of the Italian words for story – in which both "classical" and digital storytelling can meet the challenges of intergenerational learning and intercultural dialogue. Each of them is illustrated through a sample project from the experience of associazione seed.

4.1. *Preserve and transmit a common past*

Elderly people are the owner of the treasure of memories – a treasure that can easily get lost if we overlook them. It is therefore important to teach little chil-

dren to recognize and give value to such memories. Digital storytelling can be used to transmit local legends and traditional stories, as well as historical facts experienced by elders. Instead of looking for stories in books, such a DS project leverages on the hearts and minds of those who lived them.

4.2. *Primo racconto: Ancient legends*

A class of 5th graders (10 years old) spent one day in Val Colla, a valley near Lugano, where they visited the medieval church and some of the surroundings. Although impressive, the stones alone do not convey their meaning. The meeting with a hundred-years-old man of the village (Figure 2) offered the opportunity to learn about the life of a schoolboy one century ago, and also to learn the hidden stories of the building thy visited. So, the church as discovered to be connected with the richness of the village, coming from the *Alpi* nearby (the high fields), who were donated by a Countess 300 years ago. Why? This was the subject of the story that the old men told, the legend of the *Fat Countess*.



Figure 6 – Intergenerational dialogue as telling stories

Back to school, the class wrote the story and developed drawings for it. They then met another element from their almost forgotten tradition: clay modelling (Figure 3). A local clay artist helped the children create the 3-D figures to illustrate the story. Digital pictures and voice recordings were taken, and the results was a DVD telling the story, while the original work of art remained on display in the school. During the process, three children form a special education school were also integrated in the class.



Figure 2 - Discovering traditions: children at work with clay modelling

In this project intergenerational dialogue was made vivid thanks to digital storytelling, which offered a perfect venue to connect the children with their tradition.

5. Intergenerational Learning meets Intercultural Issues

When we approach social issues, we tend to separate challenges and take them one by one, following the ancient "divide et impera" Roman motto. Actually, that motto might work well for warfare, but this does not imply adequacy to social development challenges. The following three experiences effectively tackle at the same time intercultural communicational and intergenerational communication.

5.1. *Secondo racconto: Cooking storytelling*

The concrete challenges at hand were (a) helping a family of Tibetan immigrants to develop community social bonds, and (b) creating an opportunity for children to experience diversity.

The idea followed a very common approach: encountering cultures through food, not only by tasting, but sharing the cooking itself. A 5 hours activity was then set up, involving 13 adults and 4 children, blended cooking, learning about ingredients, and of, course, telling the stories of the food, of the traditions and of the people (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – People preparing the intercultural dinner

All participants contributed according to their ability and children could cook, ask and learn while enjoying as in a sort of a game, thus becoming more involved in the activity. Under the pretext of explaining some recipes, what was actually passing was a set of cultural issues and stories linked to a way of cooking, of using particular tools or methods.

Digital media helped capturing the story of that evening, also engaging the little ones who were in charge, in some moments, to take pictures to be shared with their friends, and making it an event that could be reprised afterwards. In using the camera, they were, some cases, even more expert than adults, thus overturning the roles of teacher and learners.

5.2. *Terzo racconto: Children's tales?*

Storytelling is powerful in itself, even when digital media is kept aside, and when no story creation is at stake. Another, possibly less common, angle from which storytelling can be explored, is focusing on the simple narration of tales as an object of work.

This third experience was developed within a social integration program for a group of Muslim immigrant women, of different age (between 20 and 50), coming from different countries and with different mother languages; Most of them are married with children. One key goal of integration is of course language learning, and language best develops when played in realistic situations. In many integration programs, this is often translated in simulations of professional or daily life situations. While such an instructional choice is of value, other learning settings can open new spaces, especially when finding a job (or even deciding to find one) is not a realistic perspective for the near future. Consequently, women were first involved in socialisation activities in order to express themselves, to tell about their tradition and values and establish relationships with each other. Thanks to this context, it was much easier to make them feel ready to get language, cultural, and communication skills to actually encounter the local tradition. The storytelling activity was part of those socialisation activities.



Figure 4 – Muslim mothers act out a children's story

The idea was to spend an afternoon learning to tell a story in Italian to their own children (Figure5). One of the problems of immigrant women in fact is that their children go to school and so they get more easily and quickly integrated than their mothers. So mothers are more and more afraid not to keep pace with their children. The storytelling activity was an initiative to show to the children that their mothers have the desire to be part to the local reality that they live every day.

Telling a story has not "right or wrong", and is also an activity where deep affections and emotions are activated. Also, it brings everyone back to her infancy, thus connecting with deep meanings.

In 3 hours a collective narration brought to life a traditional tale – digital media being simply the activator of the process through the display of pictures and the recoding of voices.

Indeed, the result was stunning: the group of women, usually very shy and closed, revealed great energy and an incredible potential, both in expression and in language learning: one of the women told during the evaluation: "I've found that I can speak with someone and feeling confident"; an other one: "Interpreting the story allows us to show what was in ourselves". Moreover, not only women became aware of how they learn, but also of how pleasing collaborative work can be. Now they can share what they have learnt, they evaluate their experience and they are curious to look for opportunities to learn and applying what they have learnt.

5.3. *Quarto racconto: Brazil vs. Italy for a win-win twinning*

This last project investigates intergenerational learning as the topic of the story developed by two teams of children living on the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

A twinning project involving two classes of an Italian primary school (7-9 years old) and a group of children (8-10 years old) Brazilian Association working in a disadvantaged environment aimed at exploring the relationship between children and adults. The intergenerational topic was chosen by Brazilian educators and Italian teachers involved in the project, in order to let children explore how they perceive adults, and to express their feelings regarding this relationship.

The project, which lasted three months, was structured in three phases; the aim of the first phase was to build a mutual knowledge between Italian and Brazilian children and included a preparatory work to present to the other group the school/institution and the local environment. This phase ends with a Sykpe videoconference where children had the possibility to interact, to present themselves and their environment and to ask questions about the other group's presentation (Figure 6).

The second phase of the story was the actual digital storytelling activity, each group had to invent a sequence of the story, then the other group was in charge to draw the sequence invented by their colleagues overseas and to create the next sequence. At the end of this table tennis process the story was composed of 6 sequences. The collaboration between the two teams was excellent, so that it is almost impossible to notice which sequences Italian children have drawn and which by Brazilian ones. The output of this phase is a digital story translated in Italian and Portuguese. The story is about the friendship of a young girl and an old man (Figure 7).

The third and last phase of the project consisted in disseminating the experi-

ence among parents. Two events were organized, one in Brazil and one in Italy, presenting the methodology of the twinning and including a videoconference with children overseas.



Figure 5 – Italian young storytellers meet Brazilian colleagues



Figure 6 – Marisa and Mario, the main characters in the joint story

A transversal phase was the underground work done by Brazilian educators and Italian teachers to prepare the steps of the project and to reflect on how to prepare the intercultural encounter and how to tackle intergenerational issues after the creation of each sequence.

This twinning project allowed combining both intergenerational and intercultural issues: on one hand, the relationship between children and adults was the topic of the digital story, enabling teachers and educators investigating how children see adults and in particular to work on the issue of trust; on the other hand the project, developed as a twinning, enabled children have one of their very first intercultural experience, exploring how people of their age live on the other side of the ocean.

Conclusions

The four *racconti* presented in this paper highlighted four features or facets of classic and digital storytelling in intergenerational and intercultural learning.

First, storytelling creates a venue where connecting with traditions becomes easies, even funny, and rewarding. Each participant has something to share: the stories, the wisdom, the visual skills, etc. The tradition, far from being "dusty books" becomes the material that helps building something new and supports creativity. The first project clearly shows this, also thanks to the integration of digital technologies, but this is also a trademark of the two other projects.

Second, storytelling projects tend to be holistic: more issues can the tackled at the same time, without fear of making it too complex, or following the analytic need of "one job at a time". This is true especially in the second project, where intergenerational and intercultural issues are at stake at the same time.

Third, working on stories connects to our deep meaning, even when we work on already well-known fairy tales – because telling a story is an ancient activity that goes to our root, whatever culture, whatever generation.

Fourth, digital storytelling can be a powerful method to investigate how children perceive adults, allowing educators to work on intergenerational relations and on the issue of trust; while, at the same time, opening a window on other cultural perspectives.

All experiences have something in common: they stimulate the development of communication and – in the case of digital storytelling –media skills, they help us connect with our deep meaning and with our cultures, and they are fun for the participants. All of them are good reasons to continue exploring in this direction.

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