

Before and After: Digital storytelling with social work students in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This article is developed from a presentation given at the 12th International practice teaching conference in Oxford (2018). The authors share their experiences as academics and practice educators of using digital storytelling with social work students in Northern Ireland. Storytelling took place at two distinct points of the students' learning journey before and after placement. Undergraduate social work students ($n=40$) in their first semester of year one teaching participated in classroom based digital storytelling with the first author. Placement students created digital stories at two key points during their placements, at the beginning (first to third week of placement) and at the end (16th to 18th week of placement). Several themes emerged including; self-evaluation and reflection, producing and receiving feedback and team work. This collaborative article offers a basis for practice development and professional discussions across disciplines on the use of digital storytelling with students studying for a professional qualification.

Keywords: social work education; digital storytelling; practice learning; peer assessment and feedback

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Introduction

This article includes reflections from social work students from Northern Ireland on their experience of using technology in the classroom and their ability to share placement experiences with students and service users. The authors identify their rationale for the use of digital storytelling with social work students at two specific points in their learning journey, a) in the first semester of professional training and b) their first experience of placement (85 days). The article outlines the methods used for digital storytelling in classroom based teaching and within the placement setting to create resources which enabled students to develop empathy and greater understanding of their own experiences and that of others.

A distance travelled: Social work education in Northern Ireland

Social work education in Northern Ireland is regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) which is responsible for approval, review, annual monitoring and inspection of the Degree. The BSc (Hons) Degree was introduced across the United Kingdom in 2004 and marked the beginning of significant changes to the context and delivery of social work education, learning and development in Northern Ireland. The Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work (2006) revised (2009a) established a high quality regional approach to social work placement allocation and monitoring across Northern Ireland. One of the core elements within the Standards was the Designated Practice Learning Provider Scheme (DPLP) which is unique to Northern Ireland whereby an agency must have DPLP status to offer a social work placement.

The introduction of the new Degree included the requirement to conduct periodic reviews every five years to ensure the Degree was 'fit for purpose' and responsive to the needs of key stakeholders including service users, students and employers. The first periodic review (NISCC, 2009b) identified an adequate supply of placements although the quality was variable. In response to this review the Regional Strategy for Practice Learning Provision in Northern Ireland (2010-2015) was published, the Strategy set out the vision for practice learning and the relationship with

workforce planning and development.

In 2013 the 'Readiness to Practise Report' (NISCC, 2013) identified areas for review and consideration within the second periodic review of the degree in social work which included increased service user and carer involvement in social work education, recruitment and selection processes for the degree and increased student access to comprehensive information on employability and post qualifying frameworks. The second periodic review (NISCC, 2014a) identified the need to continue to work on an action plan for increased service users and carers involvement in social work education. This coincided with the publication of the revised Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2014b) and the revised Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers (2015a). At the time of writing, consultations for the third periodic review are commencing with key stakeholders.

The Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers (DoH, 2019-2027) is the fourth strategy for the training, learning and development of the social work and social care workforce in Northern Ireland. This is the result of extensive consultations with stakeholders and revisions to earlier drafts and is informed by a raft of existing legislation and policy documents which clearly set out the direction of travel for health and social care in Northern Ireland. For example, the Social Work Strategy: Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing (2012-2020) a core aspect of this was the development of a leadership strategy creating organisational cultures which promote collaboration and quality improvement. To this end, in 2017 the Health and Social Care (HSC) 'Collective Leadership Strategy' was launched. These are aligned to 'Quality 2020' a ten year strategy designed to improve the overall quality in health and social care in Northern Ireland and 'Making Life Better': A Whole System Strategic Framework for Public Health (2013-2023).

A theme throughout all of these policy documents and strategies is the recognition that the professional landscape of health and social care, and within that, social work in Northern Ireland, is evolving and changing with technology recognised as an increasingly important part in the provision of care and support. The Department of Health (2019) conclude

Working practices are changing, and social workers and social care workers are expected to use up-to-date technology to help them to provide the most effective and efficient services. (p. 28)

There is a similar picture within the wider UK context acknowledged within Skills for Care and Development (2016) which identified common themes throughout the UK including 'a huge shift to a more digital society reflected in changes to the way public services, including social care, are delivered.' (p.4)

Digital storytelling

Storytelling is one of the oldest ways to share information and experiences. In Northern Ireland, it is a method of sharing knowledge that transcends cultures and communities as citizens try to reconcile their contested histories and build a shared understanding of the future. Northern Ireland is an emerging post conflict society with a contested past. Kelly (2005) completed an audit of storytelling initiatives related to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and produced a definition of storytelling within this context as

a project or process which allows reflection, expression, listening and possible collection of personal, communal and institutional stories related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. (p. 12)

Kilpatrick et al., (1997) define storytelling as 'the individual account of an event to create a memorable picture in the mind of the listener'. (p. 38) Digital stories also use spoken word, providing a recorded account of an individual or groups' experience by integrating photographs, music, video and text throughout the story to produce a visually rich narrative in a format that is portable and reaches a wider audience. Digital storytelling gained traction and became established as a movement through the pioneering work of Lambert and Atchley and their Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2018:34). Honneth (2007) recognises the significance of digital storytelling as a vehicle for narrative exchange and knowledge production and posits the principle of digital storytelling is as a tool for enabling and developing mutual recognition. Vivienne's (2016) definition goes further describing digital storytelling as a form of 'everyday activism'.

Storytelling can be beneficial in providing a platform for voices that are underrepresented in dominant narratives about identity and place informed by White, Eurocentric, middle class norms. For example, care experienced

young people, LGBTQI+, refugees, ethnic groups, Irish travellers, young people not in education, employment or training. According to Drum (2013) there are also limitations to using digital storytelling for example the issue of subjectivity when presenting a 'collective' opinion on a story or social issue there is a risk of excluding 'other' voices within the narrative. This view resonates with the earlier research by Hardy (2007) in relation to the potential coercive nature of storytelling in healthcare education.

Digital storytelling in the classroom

All undergraduate social work students are required to evidence their understanding of service user's perspectives prior to commencing their first placement of 85 days (NISCC, 2014a). At Ulster University part of this learning experience is accessed through the 'Working with service users, carers and survivors: Integrating Values and Reflective Practice' module in semester one of their professional training. This module is co-facilitated by a range of service users and carers who participate in lectures as individuals or within an agency context. For many of the social work students it is their first experience of listening to the narratives of service users to get a sense of what having social work involvement meant to them. Lenette et al., (2013) conclude 'Listening is a critical starting point and a key aspect of relationship building irrespective of fields of practice'. (p. 4)

50% of the module assessment requires students to create their own digital story inspired by listening to the inputs from service users and carers. The students work in self-managed teams (five students in each team) and choose their topic from either the direct teaching or a specific area of social work they were interested in to complete a digital story. The rationale for working in small teams was to help students to develop autonomy and a sense of ownership over their final story. In order to help develop confidence it was agreed with students that two weeks before the stories were submitted each team could avail of 'no risk peer and lecturer feedback'. Each team was required to submit their story to receive feedback from two other teams on their work, this formative mark did not count towards their final module mark. Student teams then had two weeks until their final summative submission. The 'no risk peer and lecturer feedback' provided opportunities for students to act on feedback and close any gap between current and desired performance through complementary and integrated curriculum design and pedagogic practice. This approach

removed the finality of submitting the digital story without any chance to improve and provided students with increased opportunities to evaluate their own work with a clear understanding of ways in which they can achieve an improved mark. It was informed by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) Engagement Survey (2016) which identified working with other students alongside the opportunity for students to make significant changes to their work based on feedback within the top five areas which impact on the development of active learning skills.

Getting started

The methodology employed was loosely based on the creative tools processes (Kelly 2005) using creative arts and multimedia resources to facilitate the telling of stories. As a starting point the first author shared some examples of digital stories including her own. This provided students with an opportunity to discuss the stories and what meaning they had taken from them. Smith & Chipley (2015) posit

the use of digital technology for social interaction, personal expression, community engagement, and in acknowledging the importance of one's individual contribution within a larger dynamic, provides critical opportunities for peer to peer learning as well as workplace skill development. (p. 231)

The digital storytelling process with first year students had six key stages:

- Stage 1. 'Whose story is it?' Working collectively the students spent time discussing and identifying a story they wanted to tell.
- Stage 2. Completing a storyboard. Student teams used a storyboard template (Lambert,2018) to map out what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it.
- Stage 3. Audio recording, narration, video clips, music, animation and photographs adding the depth to the story and collecting materials they wanted to include.
- Stage 4. 'Joining the dots'. Assembling and editing the story.
- Stage 5. Receiving 'no risk' feedback from peers and lecturer.
- Stage 6. Final submission of digital stories.

An overarching challenge within this process was recognising the polarising dynamic of ‘them and us’ and ‘othering’ in relation to service users and carers involvement in social work education. Whilst the students were encouraged to explore, discuss and reflect on the stories they had respectfully listened to from service users, what was unknown was how many students had similar experiences or were accessing services themselves. Goldingay et al., (2018) suggest ‘Care is especially needed when the subject matter is confronting, controversial and likely to elicit emotional responses from students’. (p. 800) Fox (2016) has written extensively about her own experiences in the dual role of service user and academic commenting ‘I remind students of the importance of understanding experience through authentic reflection and underline the impact of their power on service users’ lives’. (p. 967) Docherty & McColl (2003) question whether sometimes these types of situations are avoided in preparing social work students for practice as they ‘touch a chord that is personal rather than professional’. (p. 36) In their experience of using digital storytelling with vulnerable young people Heron & Stickley (2018) identified the use of a fictional character as a useful mechanism to practise storytelling and for sharing small pieces of personal information.

What’s in it for me? Making the connections to signature pedagogies

Goldingay et al., (2018) posit that understanding the experience of service users is important in helping students towards the goal of developing a commitment to social and economic justice. The first author worked with a class of 40 social work students completing the degree in two years (Relevant Graduate Route). This class comprised of eight student teams which was manageable and enabled relationships to be developed and sustained throughout the 12 weeks of teaching. Preston & Aslett (2014) argue that without access to smaller class sizes where students can form and build relationships with teaching staff and peers, ‘there exists the potential for generating depoliticised students’. (p. 505) Smaller class sizes were also significant for service user and carer involvement especially in creating a comfortable and safe space to share personal histories, oppressions, coping strategies, values and perspectives.

Digital storytelling is an ‘activist pedagogy’ located somewhere between

creativity and critical analysis as both the process and the effect can contribute to complex, deep learning. Preston & Aslett (2014) define 'activist pedagogy' as

a complicating approach to education that exposes, acknowledges and unpacks social injustices, implicates personal and structural histories and currencies, and is founded in a commitment to personal and social change both inside and outside the classroom. (p. 514)

The learning outcomes for first year social work students engaged within digital storytelling assessments are identified below.

1. *Self-review*

This focused on triggering self-explanations, involving students to evaluate work they have produced. In the social work profession, feedback rarely comes from a single source. As individual practitioners, the task/skill is to reconcile, evaluate and respond to sometimes conflicting feedback.

2. *Students as producers and consumers of feedback*

Students are producers and consumers of feedback. In social work practice students will be required to evaluate and comment on the work of others. Working in self-managed teams enables students to get an alternative perspective on their own activity and how they build relationships with others. Often in social work practice, we are required to make judgements in multi-disciplinary teams, which have no association with academic grades and marking/positive feedback.

3. *Transformative experiential learning*

Students commented on how the digital storytelling experience helped them to consider service user, carer and survivor perspectives. This encouraged most students towards deeper, critical, thinking skills, moving away from surface learning to learning that is essentially a transformative experience in which the students made or constructed new personal meaning out of the shared meanings available.

4. *Making connections with people at an interpersonal level*

Provided students with the opportunities to learn through respectful listening and engaging in dialogue about what they understand and how they can convey this understanding within their stories.

Student reflections on participating in classroom based digital storytelling

As part of the overall module review students were asked to complete Teaching and Assessment Questionnaires. These open ended questions enabled students to share their views on their experience. Students were also provided with a blank A4 page on which to 'free write' any comments. Some of these responses are captured below.

SWS1 I learned about my own values and the importance of respecting and acknowledging difference. The storyboard process brought the team together and helped us to focus our story whilst respecting individuals' views.

SWS2 I loved this whole experience. It was a creative way to engage us as a student group. From early on in the process we agreed to use animation and a made up character to tell our story about Looked After Children. This gave us greater freedom to tell the story we wanted to.

SWS3 The digital storytelling process challenged me and my value base, I realised that people cope in different ways. It helped me to consider my own journey to get where I am.

SWS4 Being able to come together collectively to produce the one piece of work (our video) has been really useful. I feel this will benefit me in working collaboratively with other professionals when I am on placement.

SWS5 This was the first time I have given feedback on another student's work. I was unsure at first. I have developed skills in critiquing the work of my peers and working collaboratively to produce a digital story I am proud of. This experience has increased my confidence for starting placement and working in a team especially in voicing my views.

This much I know ... Let's talk about placement

Bryson Care Practice Learning Centre is a voluntary sector agency which offers 24 student placements at level two (85 days) and level three (100 days) across the sector each year in Northern Ireland. In total, the voluntary (NGO) sector currently provides 18% of student placements in Northern Ireland (NISCC, 2015b). Bryson Care Practice Learning Centre has an

established history in contributing to social work education, learning and development. In 2018 and 2019 they won the prestigious Ulster University Placement Employer Impact Excellence Award for their contribution to practice learning and graduate employability.

The Practice Learning Centre uses digital storytelling to support increased involvement, participation and co-production with students completing their placement experience. Docherty & McColl (2003) comment 'the reciprocal nature of storytelling meets both internal and social needs, and provides a meaning-making mechanism of benefit to teller and listener.'(p. 20) One of the ways students are involved in digital storytelling is sharing their experiences from their placement journey so it can be viewed by other social work students who are about to commence their placements across the voluntary sector. This resonates with Bolin & Fog (2006) who suggest that storytelling narratives

can provide powerful ways for students to convey experience in that they provide the student with the opportunity to voice the meanings they construct from experienced events encountered in the context of the practice learning opportunity. (p. 23)

This message can also be found in the earlier work of Kolb (1984) who posits that having the experience (in isolation) is not enough, the learning impact is enhanced when time is spent reflecting on the experience. In line with Stacey & Hardy (2011) the use of digital storytelling has had a significant impact by contributing to minimising student anxiety about commencing placement, and providing a unique opportunity for incoming students to walk in the shoes of the storytellers. Moreover, Labonte & Feather (1996) comment that

Stories or narratives, are powerful ways to convey experience because only the narrator can give voice to the particularities and meanings that make up their lives. (p. 6)

Students completed digital stories at two key points during their placements, at the beginning (1st – 3rd week of placement) and at the end (16th – 18th week of placement). The rationale of completing two digital stories throughout placement was to help students engage in a process of self- review of their individual learning needs including the identification of specific learning relevant to the placement. Furthermore, to articulate

the ways in which they were engaging in relationship based practice working with service users across a range of settings. Goldingay et al., (2018) comment that ‘modern social work requires the maintenance of a client centred anti oppressive approach even when this is not the dominant ideology of the workplace’. (p. 79)

Drawing on previous placement student’s feedback and from engaging with students during their pre-placement programme teaching days at Ulster University, the authors loosely based the end of placement digital story on the ‘interview technique’ style (Lambert, 2010). This approach created a bank of sufficient voice over material for each student to scaffold their digital story about their first experience of social work placement.

‘Setting the Scene’: Interview prompts

1. Provide a synopsis of the work completed during the placement.
2. What has been the best part of the placement?
3. Why was this experience key to your learning?
4. How will your experience on placement shape your professional practice?
5. What would have helped prepare you better for this placement setting?
6. Looking back, what advice would you give to a new student starting their placement journey?

Completing the digital stories at two distinct points also served as a reflective lens for students to view their progress. The authors observed that this process supported reflectivity and helped students to identify their own views and perceptions whilst understanding the influence of self on others. The interview prompts provided the student storyteller with the opportunity to reflect on their practice learning experience considering ‘the what’ (description), ‘the why’ (explanation) ‘the how factor’ (synthesis) and ‘what next?’ (future learning). Sometimes the stories shared were emotional and thought provoking in line with Boler (1999) who urges students not to view sharing their emotional responses as a ‘private problem’ but rather a sign that something is wrong with the outside world.

Moreover, the end of placement digital stories helped the students to articulate their learning and knowledge of intersectionality and the structural causes of violence, poverty, homelessness, mental ill health

and gender inequality. Most of the students were able to articulate the ways in which institutions can create barriers within service users lived experiences and acknowledged that intervention must meaningfully reflect the structural issues impacting on service users lives. Lenette et al., (2015) concur ‘Digital storytelling can allow a deeper understanding of individual as well as collective narratives, to better inform relationship based practice aiming to enhance wellbeing.’ (p993)

Student reflections of digital storytelling on placement

The digital storytelling experience was mutually beneficial to both the storyteller and the audience. Gaydos (2005) comments ‘when memories are told and really heard, they become the experience of two people, the narrator and the listener’ (p. 256). The student storyteller shared their unique placement experiences and communicated their learning and understanding through a personalised reflective story. The audience of incoming students have access to an authentic story and the opportunity to observe the storytellers reflecting in action. Marin et al., (2018) posit

The construction of identity is a reflective task, and the reflective nature of digital storytelling makes it suitable to carry out tasks involving the reflection on the professional self (p.407)

The authors used agency feedback evaluation questionnaires to gather students views on the use of digital storytelling. The students were clear in articulating the benefits of engaging in digital storytelling and/or listening and watching individual digital stories. For many, having the story as a record that can be revisited helped them to reflect on their own learning journey and to integrate their knowledge of theoretical concepts within their experiences of practice. Below the authors have included some of the student’s comments on their experience as either ‘storytellers’ or ‘listeners’.

Placement student 1 *The digital stories aspect of our induction reminded me of why I wanted to be a social worker in the first place. It made the material come alive. It was accessible and relatable’.*

Placement student 2. *Whilst the learning covered so many areas, the real life situations encouraged me to feel more comfortable in sharing my thoughts.*

Placement student 3. The personal stories that were shared enabled me to learn and feel more comfortable with my surroundings.

Placement student 4. The experience of telling my placement story has helped me to reflect on my learning journey and see what worked well for me and the areas I still need to work on in my final placement.

Placement student 5. The story was personal to me. I realised that my starting point for placement was basic. I hadn't really thought about the multiple levels of oppression that exist for women experiencing domestic violence. On placement, I realised that the system is flawed, and I want to do something about that'

The library of digital stories continues to grow and evolve. From the authors observations and the students' feedback there was significant value in using digital storytelling as a transformative learning tool for social work students on placement. This resonates with McDrury & Aterio (2003) assertion that 'it does seem that sharing stories encourages a reflective process, especially when storytelling is accompanied by dialogue and occurs in a formalised setting'. (p. 111) The shared learning process connected storytellers seeking to be understood and an audience reaching to understand. All of which resonates with the work of Healy et al., (2014) and their concept of a 'partnership pedagogy' considering students as co-producers in an active rather than passive role as partners in their professional learning journey.

Conclusion

The authors assert that digital storytelling supports social work students to critically interrogate the topic of study, express and listen to multiple voices and points of view and create new personal meaning from the shared meanings available. Gray et al. (2015) support this view

Digital storytelling is an effective method for communicating important information because it does not rely on one method for telling the story ... They not only tell us *what* happened but also *how* it happened. (p. 636)

Peer education is an integral part of helping social work students to understand the intersectionality ever present when working with

service users and within communities. The authors' experiences of using digital storytelling in the classroom and within the context of placement encouraged student interaction and dialogue which impacted meaningfully on their learning and professional practice. This resonates with Kearney's (2011) assertion that digital storytelling supports an authentic learning experience, promotes student autonomy and ownership alongside meaningful student interaction. In the classroom based example, the audience were the other students in the class and the lecturer and the digital storytelling experience opened up the first year classroom into a transformational space. There was an emphasis on maximising active student participation and acknowledging the potential of collaborative team work and peer support to promote intersubjective understanding. Gherardi et al., (1998) acknowledge this 'learning, in short, takes place among and through other people'. (p. 274)

The use of self managed teams for the classroom based digital storytelling replicated group work which involved the sharing of experiences, perceptions, values and sometimes conflicts. The first author noted that some students initially felt overwhelmed by the task of creating a digital story, anxious about their digital competency. These anxieties were managed by providing help with technical issues and encouraging more digitally savvy students to mentor their peers to help increase their confidence. In some ways, this mirrors the realities of social work practice, in that, problem solving, self management, team work and engaging in a continuum of learning are some of the demands faced by frontline practitioners.

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