Digital Storytelling as a Medium for Preserving and Promoting Indigenous Cultural Identity in Digital Age

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Abstract

Indigenous communities traditionally preserve their cultural knowledge and identity through oral storytelling. As the advancement of technology supports this traditional method and which results in new digital media practices. This research investigates the intersection of traditional narrative system with contemporary digital tools. Digital storytelling has emerged as a transformative tool for preserving Indigenous cultural identity in the digital age. This article examines how digital storytelling supports in preservation of Indigenous cultural identity, with particular focus on intergenerational knowledge transfer and community narratives power. The study also discusses important issues including the digital divide, the risks of cultural appropriation in digital settings, and ethical issues in knowledge representation. Digital storytelling not only enhances conventional techniques but also gives communities the ability to modify their stories for modern settings, guaranteeing their survival for upcoming generations. This study adds to the expanding body of research on Indigenous approaches and provides useful advice for implementing digital technology in a way that is culturally relevant.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Indigenous Cultural Identity, Oral Traditions, Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer, Cultural Preservation.

Introduction

Indigenous communities around the world have been taking up digital media in their broader struggles for decolonization, self-representation, and self-determination (Ginsburg; O'Sullivan). Their histories have long been excluded or misconstrued in institutionalized settings and have thus been taken to the grassroots, community level for autonomous documentation (Flinn et al.). Thus, through digital media projects, Indigenous peoples have fostered a sense of community resistance to and power against dominant colonial narratives, and a sense of control over collective memory (Flinn et al. 82). The histories shaped through these projects, even in their movement into the contemporary digital world, continue to be rooted in Indigenous traditions. Digital media projects enable social connections across

different and distant geographies (Hamel et al.; Hopkins; Scales et al.). Cook suggests we are entering into a new archiving paradigm where traditional practices of professionalized, expert-based archiving are being challenged by the multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and memories that are emerging in our society. What has resulted is a growth of community-based archives that have encouraged conversation, participation, and empowerment (Cook). In this way, there has been a trend amongst Indigenous digital platforms toward integrating storytelling practices for a more dynamic, holistic approach to memory and history-making. Beyond just opening up collections, Christen argues that these digital platforms are redefining traditional museum relationships with viewers, creators, and contributors (Christen 384). Therefore, this research focuses on the possibility for storytelling in digital platforms built for Indigenous communities offers the effective platform for Indigenous oral traditions.These technologies are bringing about a revolution in our society by enabling the preservation and promotion of indigenous knowledge through tangible objects created with innovative materials. As digital media technologies represent a major era characterized by profound technological advancements reshaping global societies and industries, it is vital to acknowledge their influence (Oosthuizen et al.).

Practice of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a kind of video production that has become popular with the advent of home-computer-based editing and production software and online venues such as YouTube and Vimeo. The product is generally short in length (3–5 minutes typically) and may be as simple as a montage of still photos and a voiceover (Palacios). Piner has found through the Northern Arizona University–based Intergenerational Digital Storytelling Project, A Basket Full of Stories, that digital storytelling can be a valuable tool for documenting and disseminating aspects of Indigenous history and culture (Piner).Joe Lambert and his colleagues founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (now the StoryCenter: www.storycenter.org) in the early 1990s. From the beginning, the Center was interested in subverting dominant notions of who ought to have the power to speak, make art, and be heard. Drawing on the legacies of participatory development (Chambers), Frierian education models of critical consciousness raising (Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed; Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness), and the feminist motto that the personal is political, the Center believed in the transformative power of everyday narratives. Lambert and colleagues were interested in supporting community members to find, speak, and share their truths. The Center's interests in amplifying voice coincided with an era of increasing accessibility to multi-media technologies.

Digital stories are short (3–5 minute) multi-media productions. They are layered pieces whereby a pastiche of still photos and video are overlaid with music and narrated first-person accounts to create an edited, polished narrative. Over time, the StoryCenter has developed a unique methodology (as codified in their CookBook) (Lambert). The approach brings groups of community members together in workshops to collectively 'find' and refine their individual stories, and then create compelling audio-visual montages. Over the past 25 years, the Center has worked directly with thousands of communities around the world to create digital stories and trained more than 15,000 facilitators to work in their own communities. The practice has proliferated and been used in countless education, arts, corporate, health, and social service settings around the world. The resulting stories have documented a wide range of experience, and have been used to spark dialogue and, in some cases, inspire social change (Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane; Gubrium and Harper).

The Digital Storytelling Process

One of the distinguishing characteristics of digital storytelling is the emphasis on a collective process to create individual stories. The methodology emphasizes careful attention to creating group

environments that are conducive to telling and sharing personal stories. The goal is not simply to create compelling final products; it is also to consciously create a community that has the skills and capacity to support individuals in story development. This requires attending to group dynamics in order to ensure that inter- and intra-group power inequities are regularly challenged and managed (Shaw). As practiced by the StoryCenter, the full process generally takes approximately 24 hours (split over several days or sessions) to complete. It usually involves seven key steps:

Step 1. Owning your insights: figuring out the story you want to tell and why.

Step 2. Owning your emotions: deciding the feelings (joy, sadness, fury) you want to convey to your audience and brainstorming strategies to evoke that mood.

Step 3. Finding the moment: developing your story into a narrative by focusing on an episode or point(s) in time.

Step 4. Seeing your story: gathering the visuals (video, photos, graphics, pictures) that will help depict or show your story.

Step 5. Hearing your story: recording or harvesting sounds to narrate your story. This may include pre-recorded sounds or music as well as audio generated for the project (for example voiceovers).

Step 6. Assembling your story: editing all the elements together to create a coherent final product.

Step 7. Sharing your story: screening the final product in a group setting and celebrating collective accomplishments; this is often followed by creating a plan regarding next steps.

Sometimes these steps are navigated sequentially, and sometimes they happen in tandem. Usually, a delicate balance is achieved between group sessions, individual working time, and one-to-one technical assistance/ support provided by facilitators or peers. This CookBook approach has also been modified over time as the StoryCenter has trained an increasing number of digital storytelling practitioners who have gone on to cultivate their own practice in different contexts around the world.

Indigenous Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling has been recognized as an important community and cultural practice since the 1990s, heavily revolving around the work of the Center for Digital Storytelling (https://www.storycenter.org/), known today as StoryCenter (Lambert). Digital storytelling stations were set up in public libraries across California to document marginalized histories of local communities. The key objectives of these digital storytelling projects were to facilitate training for new technologies, build relationships with community members, and strengthen the cultural heritage of the geography and communities (Lambert). In a continuation of these origins, the general process of digital storytelling today involves creating a personal narrative from a variety of media, such as images, audio, video, and text, in a workshop setting. These narratives are then shared in a public setting to demonstrate the similarities and diversity of these collective experiences (Willox et al.). Digital Stories Canada (https://digitalstories.ca/) is an oral history project that has expanded to include a Community Digital Storytelling Initiative (CDSI). The CDSI began by interviewing workshop facilitators and mentors, then made a series of resources to help design, support, and share digital storytelling. Their work focuses on the healing power of stories, creating and holding safe spaces, and community mentorship. In 2020, the CDSI started offering artistic and technical support for storytellers in areas such as using Zoom, creating metadata, keywords, and infographics, and offering strategies for engaging audiences with interactive content. The University of Alaska Fairbanks has established an oral history collection as a way to share collective experiences from around the state. Called Project Jukebox, it contains over 50 projects from throughout Alaska, each of which integrates oral history recordings with associated photographs, maps, and text.

Indigenous Digital Archive

The archival profession has been recognizing the place of memory, tradition, and evidence for Indigenous communities in building collections (Nakata). Withey notes how the archival imagination has taken on new forms that reevaluate the relationship between archives, official record keeping, and nation building, as the colonial archive played an essential role in the elimination of Indigenous peoples. This recent imagination recognizes the political manoeuvrability involved in deploying and building archives (Withey 118). These new archival forms challenge the open access and distribution of all digital materials, Western intellectual property systems, and the exclusivity of traditional archiving practices, enabling Indigenous people to organize and describe their own collections (Christen, "Does Information Really Want to Be Free?"). In this new trajectory, digital archives have been developing novel features that invite more interactivity and collaboration among users (Christen, "Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts"; Cook; Thorner; Webb).Crowdsourced transcription of archival documents is now common, taken up by academic and public libraries, museums, state archives, and cultural institutions, including the Smithsonian (https://transcription.si.edu/), US NationalArchives (https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist), Library of Virginia (https://www.virginiamemory.com/transcribe/), and New York Public Library (https://www.nypl.org/blog/2011/09/15/all-hands-deck-nypl-turns-crowd-develop-digital-collections). Many digital archives created from Omeka platforms (https://omeka.org/s/) offer users the option to submit content—including audio, images, videos, texts, and photographs—via contribution forms. For some archives, such as A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland (https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/), Documenting Ferguson (http://digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/), Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross Cultural Context (http://juliabrock.org/digital-history/identities/), and Katrina's Jewish Voices (https://jwa.org/communitystories/katrina), user submissions form the bulk of the content. For these archives, first-hand experiences are valuable sources of historical documentation. Administrators of the websites are responsible for selecting, editing, uploading, and contextualizing material from the submissions, so the archives remain curated while still privileging community-driven narratives. These practices blur the boundaries between official archival work and public memory-making, offering a more participatory and decentralized model of historical preservation. As a result, digital archives not only serve as repositories of information but also become dynamic spaces where marginalized voices are centered, traditional hierarchies of knowledge are challenged, and alternative histories are actively constructed and maintained.

Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Promoting and Preserving Indigenous Knowledge

Digital storytelling can trace its roots back to traditional narrative practices. Palacios states that "like its mother, traditional oral storytelling, digital storytelling can foster liberation from the dominant socio-cultural world that continues to marginalize the marginalized. By creating the digital story, the storyteller has control over what is important to tell" (47). Using visual storytelling to document local Indigenous knowledge brings oral traditions into the twenty-first century. Although the fixed nature of digital media formats may risk causing the knowledge within these stories to stagnate—unlike the interactive and adaptive nature of oral storytelling—the videos still serve as valuable reference points for observing how cultures have transformed over time, enabling informed viewers to compare and contrast contemporary experiences with those of the past (Lino). This modern form maintains a connection to ancient traditions while empowering storytellers to share their narratives with broader audiences, overcoming historical exclusions of Indigenous knowledge from the field of environmental studies.

Digital storytelling holds the potential to challenge the power imbalances that have historically upheld the dominance of prevailing societal forces. Couldry argues that digital storytelling disrupts the usual concentration of symbolic resources within the media so significantly that "it cannot be ignored because of the possibility that digital storytelling is part of a wider democratization, a reshaping of the hierarchies of voice and agency that characterize mediated democracies" (383–84). He draws attention to Lambert's vision, emphasizing that digital storytelling could foster a broader distribution of power within societies. As societies have become more mediated, they have also become increasingly unequal, making this potential shift even more crucial. Although digital storytelling often begins as a localized practice of creating, sharing, and preserving narratives, there is hope that it will evolve into wider networks and enduring habits. As a powerful method, digital storytelling offers significant possibilities for building bridges of understanding across divides such as generations and ethnicities, and serves as an important tool for activism and education.

The advantages of digital storytelling practices for minoritized students in educational settings have been demonstrated to be multifaceted. Benmayor observed that digital storytelling served as an empowering, collaborative process that engaged marginalized college students—primarily Latinos/Latinas, who often have Indigenous backgrounds, as well as students from other ethnicities—in ways she had not encountered in her 30 years of teaching. Rather than acting as a source of alienation, technology became a leveling tool, with most students sharing a similar skill level and supporting each other collaboratively throughout the creative process. By equipping students with the tools to theorize their own historical and cultural experiences, digital storytelling in educational contexts can foster cultural vitality through self-expression and reflection, while also nurturing a deeper sense of place. The social and spatial environments where students are situated become fertile ground for exploration and narrative exposition. Palacios also asserts that "the very nature of digital storytelling . . . lends itself to provoking deep reflection, which may lead to a transformative action" (48). Such transformative actions may occur within individuals or extend to broader social contexts. Similarly, Skouge and Rao's research highlights that reflection and action are driven not only by the intention to move audiences but also by the profound effects the storytelling process has on the creators and subjects of digital stories.

Beyond the classroom, audiovisual media have also been utilized as a collaborative, community-based research method for addressing health and environmental issues within Indigenous communities. For instance, a project at the Round Valley Indian Reservation in rural California employed digital storytelling to highlight challenges related to food security and access to healthy foods (Blue Bird Jernigan et al.). Similarly, Lino examined the use of filmmaking for health and environmental education in two Anishinabe communities-Batchewana First Nation and Pic River First Nation in Ontario. She found that film not only engages students' senses more effectively than reading but also visually conveys content and captures nonverbal expressions, fostering intergenerational connections as community adults share knowledge. The film produced served both as a means for academic ethnological study and, more importantly, as a tool to preserve traditional knowledge for future generations. Participants, identifying with their storytelling heritage, viewed filmmaking as a modern extension of their cultural practice and emphasized its role in history preservation and participatory learning. Likewise, Scott's study in a remote Native community in British Columbia revealed participants' enthusiasm for technology-driven, culturally relevant education, and showed links between involvement in multimedia projects and student health outcomes.

Digital storytelling–based research projects can create lasting positive effects within Indigenous communities when they are empowered to continue documenting and sharing their knowledge. Cunsolo Willox et al. observed that narrative and story-driven digital methods are particularly

effective and respectful for research in Indigenous contexts. Building on their collaborative project, the Rigolet Inuit Community Government in Newfoundland and Labrador founded the My Word: Storytelling and Digital Media Labthe first center dedicated to digital media and community-based research in the far north. Its mission is to support Inuit-led research initiatives. The project revealed that while Western narrative structures in digital storytelling often differ from Indigenous storytelling traditions, which may not follow a clear ending, participants across generations embraced the medium as a way to merge oral traditions with digital tools. They emphasized the importance of ensuring participants' comfort and informed consent regarding audio and video recordings. The spread of internet access even to remote communities like Rigolet shows the potential for digital stories to connect Indigenous communities with each other and the wider world, while also serving as a strong foundation for community-engaged research that aligns with Indigenous research principles described by Smith, prioritizing community-centered work, Indigenous leadership, culturally appropriate methods, and the advancement of community well-being.

Conclusion

Indigenous communities around the world are experimenting with digital technologies for educational, social, cultural, and linguistic purposes. What is essential in all these is the attention on oral forms of expression and the inclusion of audio and video as means of communication. In this way, the ample opportunities offered by new technologies today provide for the increasingly favourable practice of digital storytelling for Indigenous communities. Developing user-friendly, culturally sensitive, non- commercial digital platforms is thus imperative. While there may already be existing commercial platforms like YouTube or Vimeo that serve these needs, issues of ownership, intellectual property, privacy, and lack of control still prevail (Caspani et al. 118; Museum of Indian Arts and Culture 2). For this reason, it is essential to continue funnelling resources and dedicating efforts to creating user-friendly, accessible, and appropriate features that help maintain Indigenous traditions in the broader realm of knowledge management and communication technologies.

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