



Digital Storytelling: Paving a Pathway of Hope

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses findings from the digital storytelling that clients from a domestic violence shelter engaged in with aid from a Freshman Learning Community (FLC) class of undergraduate students engaged in during spring semesters at a local domestic violence shelter. The work involved freshmen education students, presenting their own digital stories they had created in the class (Using Computers in Education), to teach digital storytelling to clients using their own stories as springboards, and to help clients create digital stories. This article provides discussion of clients' digital stories in the contexts of the learning process, themes that emerged in clients' stories, and digital storytelling as a teaching/learning method. The research was longitudinal in nature, involving digital storytelling from 2020-2025 spring semesters. The research study was grounded in the FLC learning objectives of helping students set goals for their future careers through the practice of teaching digital storytelling. The digital storytelling work with clients at the domestic violence shelter directly related to shelter program goals and clients' learning outcomes of exiting the shelter and becoming independent citizens in their communities.

KEYWORDS: Digital storytelling, Freshman Learning Community (FLC), Learning process, Teaching.

BACKGROUND

In 2020, while teaching the pre-teacher education course, Using Computers in Education, one professor and her Freshman Learning Community (FLC) students began engaging with clients at a local domestic violence shelter by teaching digital storytelling. The work involved freshman education students first learning about digital storytelling through instruction and course modules. Students then created digital stories based upon crucial events, events that are highly significant and have such an impact as they shift lives.¹ Students presented their digital stories to individual clients at the domestic violence shelter and helped the clients create digital stories based upon crucial events from lived experiences. From this work with domestic violence shelter clients, ideas emerged for expanding research of digital storytelling in other settings, and a partnership with the University of Dundee School of Education and Social work and a small community in southeastern New Mexico were grown. The research and work for Scotland and New Mexico involved the researcher teaching digital storytelling workshops, providing activities for participants and collecting interview and journaling data with participants.

This article focuses and provides discussion on digital storytelling work completed within a local domestic violence shelter, which was one site in a multisite research study that included settings of Scotland, New Mexico, and Indiana. The discussion in this article includes findings from clients' digital storytelling work in the domestic violence shelter

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and focuses on the digital storytelling learning process, themes that emerged in clients' stories, and digital storytelling as a teaching/learning method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Storytelling

Tokgoz-Sahoglu (2019)² states that “digital storytelling has transformative influences on our worlds of meaning and social relations.” (p. 100). It has been used and researched as a method that helps survivors understand their traumatic experiences related to domestic and sexual violence.³⁻⁵ It has also served as a way for survivors to share the stories of their traumatic experiences with others.² Largely, digital storytelling offers a way for individuals to understand issues in their lives and to shed light on larger societal issues.⁶

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Storytelling as a Sacred Literacy

Individuals engage in literacy practices – actions and behaviors that involve reading, writing, and/or speaking – that are sacred or highly significant. A common practice they engage in is storytelling. Storytelling can be understood as a sacred literacy because it involves the remembering of crucial events – events that make such an impact that they cause a shift in thinking and/or being¹ in lives. As a sacred literacy, storytelling reveals the teller's identities, ways of being, and ways of knowing.^{6,7} The model below shows the process of digital storytelling as a sacred literacy, beginning with an individual's remembering of a crucial event and storying it (framing it into verbal/written words) through the uses of physical (tangible) or remembered (intangible) artifact(s). The artifact(s) is conceptualized as sacred because it is connected to the crucial event and the storytelling of the crucial event. This process (storytelling) is encapsulated as a sacred literacy.

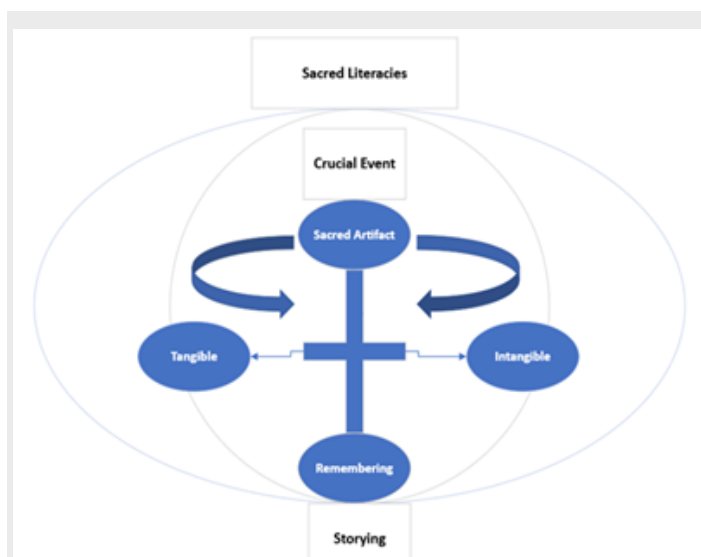


Figure 1. Sacred Literacies model.⁸

RESEARCH GAP

Research has richly delved into digital storytelling related to survivors, traumatic experiences, and motives for restoring their experiences. It has not yet unearthed survivors' stories connected to crucial experiences, especially related to remembering embedded artifacts. Even more so, research has not recognized storytelling (and specifically digital storytelling) as a sacred literacy.⁸ The uniqueness of the research discussed in this article also relates to undergraduate education students' work as digital storytelling teachers.

This article hopes to bridge this gap as it seeks to highlight survivors' experiences in the context of crucial events in their lives. It also defines sacred literacies and how storytelling is conceptualized as a sacred literacy.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the larger research study was to understand how digital storytelling takes place. Within the context of this article which focuses on the domestic violence shelter digital storytelling work, the research questions of *What does the digital storytelling process look like?* and *What does the teaching of digital storytelling look like?* Are posited in this article and are discussed in the literature review and expanded upon in the findings section. Observations, interviews, digital storytelling activities that students and clients engaged in, and clients' digital stories themselves all helped to answer the research questions.

The purpose of this article is to provide a deeper understanding of storytelling, and specifically, digital storytelling, beyond just the practice of storying (framing a story and conveying it to a reader or listener) of a crucial event. The purpose of this writing is to familiarize the reader with what intentional digital storytelling can reveal in the context of its ability to uncover larger societal issues that relate to circumstances from lived experiences. The discussion will demonstrate digital storytelling's ability to provide a multimodal space in which thoughts and emotions emerge, and resilience becomes visible to pave a pathway to hope.

STUDY DESIGN

The overall research study was a qualitative narrative design based on the sacred literacies theory⁸ and was longitudinal in nature, involving digital storytelling teaching/learning at a local domestic violence shelter in K-town (pseudonym) from 2020-2025 spring semesters. Grounded in the FLC learning objectives of goal setting, reflecting on resiliency, and building global empathy, the digital storytelling work at the shelter also directly related to shelter clients' objectives of goal setting, building resilience, and exiting the domestic violence shelter program to become stable, independent citizens in their communities.

Ethics

The study was carefully designed to create a safe and manageable teaching/learning experience in which shelter clients and students could freely share stories about their lives with one another. Prior to engaging with clients, students progressed through a Canvas module that trained them in how to interact with trauma survivors

and provided information and resources, which included campus on-site counseling for secondary trauma care. At the shelter, students and clients were provided an annex room to go to if they needed to step away when working with clients became overwhelming. Shelter clients were provided with mental health support within the shelter. All study participants were provided with a study information sheet that outlined the purpose, research questions, study procedures, risks, and benefits. and the opportunity to step away from teaching/learning at their leisure, as well as the choice to leave the study.

University Students as Digital Storytelling Teachers

Between the years 2020 and 2025, six cohorts of university pre-elementary and pre-secondary teacher education students, aged young adult through mid-adult worked with the instructor to teach digital storytelling to domestic violence clients. Students’ ethnicities included African American, Latino, Asian, biracial, and Caucasian. Ages spanned from 18 to mid-40s.

Shelter Clients as Digital Storytellers

The Indiana research portion of the overall study took place at a local domestic violence shelter that houses women, children, and men who survive different kinds of sexual and/or domestic violence. Clients included women and men who voluntarily chose to work with university students to create their own digital story. Clients’ ethnicities included African American, Latino, biracial, and Caucasian, and ages spanned from young to senior adulthood.

Study Participants

This article focuses on four clients’ digital stories. Clients’ ethnicities included African American, Latina, and Caucasian. Antonia’s, Ashton’s, Carissa’s, and Kelly’s (all pseudonyms) digital storytelling work are presented to honor the women who

courageously and multimodally shared their lived experiences, to demonstrate the power of resilience, and to ultimately show what digital storytelling can do.

Setting

The Indiana research took place at a local domestic violence shelter located in the central part of K-town in the state of Indiana. The shelter offers various programs, including Shelter Care that provides individuals with 45 days of crisis intervention and has helped hundreds of individuals. For example, in 2023, the shelter served 369 adults and 140 children.⁹

Digital storytelling teaching/learning took place February through April for one hour each week and served as students’ field placement for the semester. The instructor paired (and in some instances, grouped) shelter clients with students. Students and clients used laptops provided by the shelter, as well as students’ laptops to create digital stories.

METHODS

Digital Storytelling Teaching & Learning

The digital storytelling work that took place in the spring semesters, 2020-2025, that also continues to this day, was a core part of clients’ programming as they prepared for exiting the shelter and reintegrating into society. The shelter digital storytelling teaching and learning process began with each university student presenting their own digital story to clients to introduce clients to the digital storytelling process. Then, students worked with clients to fill out the digital storytelling planning guide (see sample student template below Table 1), which helped clients to purposefully and intentionally focus on crucial events from their lives.

Table 1. Digital Storytelling Planning Guide.¹⁰

Category	Description	How my digital story demonstrates this
1. Purpose of Story	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains a clear focus throughout.	I plan on telling the story on my brother’s fight through school and how hard it was for him to make it through with his learning disability. Genuinely one of the proudest moments of my life is watching him graduate with a diploma (rather than the certificate of completion). I want my story to convey the message that even if your obstacles do beat you down, there is always a way to overcome them, but it won’t be easy. You have to advocate for yourself and push against the boundaries as much as you can.
2. Point of View	The point of view is well developed and contributes to the overall meaning of the story.	I feel like my story would be best told in the first-person point of view, that way it’s firmly cemented in the one narrative I know best (my own). My brother, Cameron, never talked to me about his struggles through school (why would he, I’m his annoying little sister), so I don’t feel comfortable writing in third person and speculating his thought process.
3. Dramatic Question	A meaningful dramatic question is asked and answered within the context of the story.	How does it feel to watch a family member who struggles with a learning disability complete his ultimate academic goal, and what were the struggles along the way?

Category	Description	How my digital story demonstrates this
4. Choice of Content	Contents create a distinct atmosphere or tone that matches different parts of the story. The images may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors.	Obviously I want to set up a serious tone, but it has to be playful in parts because Cameron's really a pretty funny guy and a totally serious story wouldn't do him justice.
5. Clarity of Voice	Voice quality is clear and consistently audible throughout the presentation.	I plan on recording myself and putting the audio into the presentation. I feel like this will help me be able to craft my word choice and tone of voice to portray my story as accurately as possible (also, if I get choked up, I can start/stop the recording and get a hold of myself).
6. Pacing of Narrative	The pace (rhythm and voice punctuation) fits the story line and helps the audience really "get into" the story.	Overview of Main Points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The crushing talk we had with his fourth grade teacher about how he wasn't expected to graduate high school (that early in the game was a little shocking to hear) · Every teacher he's ever had always talked about how he was the nicest kid that they've ever had the pleasure of teaching and they "wish they could have gotten through to him" · His inability to pass the ECA and the hoops we jumped through to get him a waiver and not knowing if it went through and was approved until the week before he was supposed to walk · When we were told he might get a certificate rather than a diploma · His ability to talk your ear off in literally any subject not related to academics (as this boy about the extended Star Wars universe and buckle up for your three-hour lecture). · The absolute genuine elation I felt when I heard his name being cwalled · How he got to feel a similar pride when I graduated
7. Meaningful Audio Soundtrack	Music stirs a rich emotional response that matches the story line well. Images coordinated with the music.	Obviously, somber and slow music mixed in with tense feeling music where we didn't know if he would graduate, transitioning to joyful music (maybe even pomp and circumstance) when we reach the topic of graduation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Photos of Cameron's graduation
8. Quality of Images	Images create a distinct atmosphere or tone that matches different parts of the story. The images may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Photos of mine, illustrating the talk that he had with me about how proud he was of us · Photos of his schoolwork (truly, his handwriting tells a whole story in itself) · Photos of us in the same daycare and bio classes (because I was advanced, and he was held behind)
9. Economy of Story Detail	The story is told with exactly the right amount of detail throughout. It does not seem too short nor does it seem too long	I plan on mostly moving through the buildup to all of Cameron's setbacks slow enough to create tension, but not so slow that it's boring. I really want to spend some time on his actual graduation day and explore the five senses. For example: I was a member of the band, so I got to play Pomp and Circumstance as he walked out, and I remember how wonderfully included that made me feel, but also annoyed because then I couldn't devote my full attention to him. Really focusing on small details like that will give the story length, and also emotion.
10. Grammar and Language Usage	Grammar and usage were correct (for the dialect chosen) and contributed to clarity, style and character development.	For help on this box I definitely plan on visiting the writing center, as creative writing and dialogue was never my strong suit.

From there, students helped clients to begin presentations (which would be converted to movies) through Google Slides, PowerPoint, or whatever digital platform each client chose to use. Throughout slide creation, the 7 elements of digital Storytelling were closely kept in mind: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, gift of voice, power of the soundtrack, economy of story, and story pacing.¹¹ Digital artifacts such as photographs, drawings, favorite quotations, and newspaper headlines were used and helped to enrich digital stories.

Interviews

Each participant engaged in one audio-recorded interview. The recordings were then simultaneously uploaded to the researcher's OneDrive and Kaltura accounts. Kaltura (a digital audio and video processing tool) aided in extracting language from the interview data, and for each interview, a typed transcript was created. All identifiable information was blackened.

Digital Storytelling Planning Guides

Each participant worked with university students to complete a digital storytelling planning guide, which focused on the 7 elements of digital storytelling.¹¹ All identifiable information was blackened.

Digital Stories

After presenting their own digital stories to their paired/grouped clients, university students helped clients create digital stories based upon crucial events from their lives. Clients created digital stories based upon their choice of crucial events they wished to re-story. Clients leveraged story length, story capacity, images, soundtrack and/or voiceover according to their own comfort levels.

ANALYSIS

Coding: AI and Hand Coding

Google Gemini and ChatGPT (licensed by the researcher's university campus for faculty use) were used as multimodal tools to aid in first layer coding and analysis. Interview transcripts, without personally identifiable information, were first loaded in Google Gemini to be coded. For the digital storytelling planning guides' coding, each guide was loaded into ChatGPT and coded by AI. For second layer coding, each AI coded piece of data (the interviews in corpus and individual digital storytelling planning guides) was then hand coded, using participants' language in the digital storytelling planning guide and in the interviews with a different color code for overall crucial events, tangible artifacts, intangible artifacts, and remembering (as examples).

First Layer Analysis

When coding, clients' digital storytelling planning guides and interviews, the *elements of digital storytelling were used as a framework, as first layer coding of participants' in vivo language excerpts revealed story habitus.^{7,8,11} Categories of crucial events, as well as tangible and intangible artifacts and remembering (Sacred Literacies) were created from responses to the point of view, choice

of content (*emotional content), clarity of voice (*gift of voice), meaningful audio soundtrack (*power of the soundtrack), *quality of images, economy of story detail (*economy of story), and pacing of narrative (*story pacing) digital storytelling planning guide sections and were located in the clients' interview responses. The in vivo codes were appropriately categorized in separate data sets: digital storytelling planning guide data tables and interview data tables.

Second Layer Intersectional Analysis

The researcher reviewed the AI summaries for the digital storytelling planning guide and interview transcript analyses and then hand coded participants' language (in vivo) for words and phrases that related to *identity*. Words and phrases were then categorized by identities that emerged through participants' language. The categories of identities were then placed alongside the first layer analyzed themes, and meaning was congruently made.

Third Layer Narrative Analysis

After completing second layer analysis, the digital story planning guides and interview transcripts were hand coded for story process elements: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. In vivo codes that were related to each story element were categorized in each story element category. Previous analyses from first- and second-layer coding relating to emerging identities, crucial events, and tangible and intangible artifacts were then placed alongside each category of story process elements. The remembering of crucial events, identities, and tangible and intangible artifacts (and their purposes/meanings within the storytelling) were triangulated, and from these, meaning was made.

FINDINGS

Below are tables of sample first, second-, and third-layer digital storytelling planning guides and analyses that were completed. The discussion that follows will use these to enrich understanding and will be used for reference.

Intersectional Identities

As themes began emerging in the clients' storytellings, various identities also emerged. In Antonia's storytelling, for example, themes of mental health, family impact of drug addiction, and trauma recovery all related to the emerging themes of mother and drug addict survivor. At the beginning of Antonia's story, a mother and drug addict who were also suicidal emerged. These emerging identities were impactful in different ways: Antonia's children noticed her changing personality and her emotional instability. Her emerging identity as a drug addict intersected with her suicide attempt and then entering a drug recovery program. The ending of Antonia's story showed healing with her decision to live for herself and her children by ending drug use. This resilient healed self, the ending intersectional identity, also connected to Antonia's concern and care for her daughter by her monitoring her daughter's depression and cautiously monitoring danger signs.

Table 2. First layer Coding & Analysis of Antonia's Digital Storytelling Planning Guide

Themes	In Vivo Codes	Crucial Event	Imbedded Artifact(s)	Analysis
Family and new beginnings	POV: know when you are ready to go to the hospital DQ: water broke or peed	Having a baby	New carpet (remembered)	Milestones like childbirth and preparing for new roles
Humor in serious situations	COC: just got new carpet and we worried about it getting ruined lol	Having a baby		Lighthearted moments even in tense or important events
Emotional struggles and reflection		Falling in love; having a baby		Questions of meaning and emotional processing often tied to music

POS: Purpose of Story, DQ: Dramatic Question, COC: Choice of Content, POV: Point of View

Table 3. First layer Coding & Analysis of Antonia's Digital Storytelling Planning Guide

Participants	Themes	In Vivo Codes	Identities
Ashton	Recovery;	I became addicted to methamphetamines, heroin, and crack	-Female -Drug addict survivor
Carissa	Faith and healing; parenting	Faith (church) broken heart pictures of me and the kids	-Female -Christian -Mother
Kelly	Barrier & separation; truth vs. Perception; emotional transformation; conflict between ideal & reality; self-reflection & identity	I wasn't a strong woman as I am now; If I can do something for someone else to listen to, I do	-Female -Youth -Divorcee -Secondary trauma survivor
Antonia	First time having a baby	my first time having a baby	-Female -First-time mother

Table 4. Second layer Intersectional Coding & Analysis

Story Process Elements	Story Process Codes	Emerging Identities	Crucial Event Analysis	Tangible & Intangible Artifacts
Exposition	How I fell in love with T____ M____	Youth in love	Falling in love, heartbreak, lingering emotions	<u>Intangible</u> : "How to Love" (Lil Wayne) --DS soundtrack
Rising Action	I became addicted to methamphetamines, heroin, and crack	Drug addict	Feeling anxious, alone	
Climax	I almost died and had to go to rehab	Female, drug addict survivor	Reality crashing down	
Falling Action	She got with someone else while I was in rehab		Betrayal, opportunity at love lost	
Resolution	How our relationship fell apart but still there's love		Resilience, the permanency of love	

Artifacts & The Story Process

In each of the client's storytelling, artifacts mediated⁷ emotions, behaviors, and motives in the re-storying of crucial events. For example, Ashton's re-storying included the Lil Wayne song, "How to Love", which encapsulated Ashton's emotions and experiences related to her relationship and loss of it. Words like, "You had a lot of crooks try to steal your heart, never really had luck, couldn't never figure out how to love, how to love" related to Ashton's challenges in her relationship with striving to find love, capturing it, and then losing it through drug addiction. Her experience of going into drug recovery and healing related to Wayne's lyrics of, "But now you're grown up, so fly it's like a blessing".

As artifacts connected to different emotions and behaviors in storytelling, they also helped to mediate different phases of the crucial event within storytelling. In Ashton's storytelling of her crucial event of love found and then lost, the Lil Wayne song mediated the exposition by its talk of love found after not knowing how to love and then feeling love slip away, as Ashton began using drugs. At the climax of her story, as reality came crashing down and Ashton went into a drug recovery program, Wayne's lyrics mediated the beginning of loss. The falling action of love betrayal was mediated through the lyrics of, "See, you had a lot of moments that didn't last forever... now you in this corner tryna put it together how to love, how to love". The resolution of Ashton's story was healing and permanence of love, which was mediated through Wayne's lyrics that showed the release of a love: "See, I just want you to know that you deserve the best".

DISCUSSION

Stone (2004) states, "Story becomes the vehicle through which we organize the things that happen to us." The stories represented in the data and analyses that emerged in this research study helped the researcher understand exactly what digital storytelling is and does in the context of female clients' who were domestic violence and sexual assault survivors in a local domestic violence shelter. Storytelling, which became multimodal in the context of digital storytelling, offered a way for clients to think about crucial events from their lives that highly impacted themselves and loved ones. Digital storytelling became a useful tool that allowed them to express different phases of crucial events and to story their resilience through the experiences. The storytelling evidenced identities that intersected in meaningful ways. The storytelling offered identities to emerge and to testify to the women's resilience. Story-imbedded artifacts (artifacts that emerge in storytelling of crucial events) helped to mediate emotions and behaviors, and furthermore, helped to mediate different phases of the re-storying of crucial events. The sacredness of each woman's storytelling was evidenced in the impactful nature of each crucial event and the meaning and change it brought to each client's experience. Digital storytelling involves reading, writing, speaking, and listening – all practices that take place as the digital story is created by the storyteller and viewed by them (as a reader of another's digital story).

CONCLUSION

From digital storytelling, agency and resilience are testified, connections are formed,⁸ and beautiful stories of lives and crucial

experiences unfold. In the interviews, clients noted that digital storytelling was therapeutic. Antonia, for example, noted that it was "healing for me". I end the writing with this: "Telling personal stories is also a bequest, a deeply meaningful and intimate legacy. Unfortunately, we sometimes fail to recognize these heartfelt gifts and listen with only one ear." The hopes for this research and article are that others will be able to glean knowledge about digital storytelling from those who experientially have voiced their experiences in this research. Ultimately, the hope is to continue to research what digital storytelling can do and to implement it into teaching and learning settings and practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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