



Organisational perspectives on digital storytelling in promoting healthy relationships and sexual health among diverse young people: a pilot study

Never Stand Still

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Background

With the support of a 2016 Collaborative Research Scheme Grant from UNSW Arts and Social Sciences, we convened a new team of researchers which drew together distinctive skill sets from the Centre for Social Research, the School of Social Sciences, and the School of Arts and Media. Our interest was in starting a conversation with organisations working with in NSW sexual health, migrant and refugee, health and youth health sectors, on the potential benefits of digital methods of storytelling for their work.

Research suggests that many organisations are interested in understanding more about media production based approaches to engaging young people in conversations about healthy relationships and sexual health. While the digital aspect of such methods can raise particular ethical or methodological issues, these questions have primarily been discussed within the disciplinary field of media studies, rather than sexual health. Further, many professionals in the field of sexual health report feeling overtaken by the pace at which digital technologies are evolving and shaping the social and sexual lives of young people.

Digital storytelling is a specific method within this field which aims to support the self-production of short, digital films that combine narrative (in the form of a voiceover by the storyteller) with digital content, usually images and short videos, to create a story with a particular purpose. Aligned with participatory action research methods such as 'photovoice', 'participatory media' and 'citizens media', digital storytelling asks individuals to create a unique story about their own life experiences, along with a specific and focused message.

Activities

The overarching aim of the collaborative activities was to inform the development of an application for funding to explore the role and value of digital methods of storytelling to promote the healthy relationships and sexual health among young people.

Critical to our pilot activities, therefore, was understanding the potential benefits and challenges of using storytelling methods from the perspective of the government and non-governmental organisations tasked with promoting health in Australia today.

Our collaboration focused on producing novel insights through the following activities:

1. Preparing a '**scoping review**' to identify key themes and gaps in the research on digital storytelling and other digital methods of self-expression, with particular relevance to promoting sexual health among young people from diverse backgrounds.
2. Delivering a free '**professional development workshop**' on the theory and practice of digital storytelling, to build capacity and share strategies regarding the use of these methods in health promotion contexts, and to increase our understanding of the perceived benefits and barriers to their application in practice.

Scoping review

A structured scoping review was undertaken to better understand what is known about opportunities to engage young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds with sexual health promotion through the use of digital stories, and to identify gaps in the literature.

The scoping review process comprised a systematic search of the literature and consultations with professionals working with young people in the area of sexual and reproductive health promotion and care. Twenty-eight papers were deemed eligible for inclusion.

A descriptive-analytical method was used to collate and code the included literature, and descriptive thematic analysis and narrative synthesis applied. Findings were presented as two analyses: what is known from the literature, and key gaps in the literature. These findings were presented to workshop participants to seek their feedback on whether and how they aligned with their own understandings and interests. Results will be published in a forthcoming article.

Whilst it appears from this review of the literature, and through discussions with professionals working in the youth, migrant and sexual health sectors, that digital storytelling has many potential applications in promoting healthy relationships and sexual health among young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, the conclusion of our analysis was that additional research is required to understand the particular ethical and contextual issues shaping engagement and maximizing value in the Australian context.

Professional development workshop

A one-day workshop was hosted at UNSW in July 2016, after consultation with peak organisations in the NSW sexual, migrant and refugee, and youth health sectors confirmed sufficient interest in this topic to commit the time of staff representatives to attend.

This workshop was aimed particularly at professionals who work with young people, including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and who seek to promote healthy relationships and sexual and reproductive health among this population.

The workshop aimed to provide a brief overview of current research on young people, cultural diversity, sexual health and relationships, and to introduce the purpose and processes involved in 'story seeking', including making digital stories.

An external trainer (Jennifer Thompson of Engaging Solutions) delivered three hours of training on the foundations (theoretical underpinnings) and Process Overview (steps involved) in digital storytelling/seeking, and also provided additional feedback during a final session on *Digital Stories Q&A* with the research team.

Jennifer Thompson proposed the term 'storyseeking' to better recognise the active role of organisations and individuals in supporting the production of stories among non-experts, in order to own and reflect on the ethical and emotional dimensions of facilitating others to tell their stories, particularly in working with marginalised groups or communities.

In addition to the training provided by Jennifer, members of the research team provided short presentations to frame the purpose of the day, propose and explicate the meaning of key concepts relating to the topic, and to discuss some of the complexities of key practices:

- *Listening to the voices of young people in sexuality education and health promotion* (Kath Albury)
- *Lessons from digital storytelling with women from refugee backgrounds* (Caroline Lenette)
- *Themes from a 'Scoping Review' of the literature: what are the areas of resonance with your work/organisation?* (Jessica Botfield).

Evaluation activities

Ethics approval was provided by the UNSW HREA Panel 7 (HC16266) for an evaluation of the workshop, and to permit consultation with participants to be reported in publications.

At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to complete a written 'post-workshop evaluation' focusing on what they learned, their perceptions of benefits and limits of storyseeking methods, and potential interest in collaborative research in this area. Four weeks after the workshop, a follow-up online 'reflective evaluation' was distributed via email to document longer term perspectives on these matters, particularly how the principles of storyseeking align or depart from organisational priorities, and to document potential opportunities in developing a shared research agenda with the research team.

Researchers recorded notes during and following the workshop (in the style of ethnographic fieldnotes), particularly during the scoping review presentation. No visual or audio recordings were made. All information documented was deidentified so there could be no linking between data and individual or organisational participants in this summary of outcomes.

Of the 11 participants in the workshop, 8 provided written consent to take part in evaluation activities, and completed a written survey. Two of those original participants also completed the follow up online reflection activity. Quotes (below) have been integrated from both sets of evaluation materials.

Participants identified their professional roles including health care providers (n=3), researcher in non-government organization (n=1), health promotion officer (n=2), clinical practice leader (n=1) and campaign producer (n=1). The main aim of the evaluation was to understand whether there were any perceived benefits of building skills in these areas in terms of future application within participants' employing organisations. Three participants said they were 'extremely likely' to apply these concepts and activities in their workplace, and five saw this as a 'maybe'. Below are some quotes from the evaluation materials which reveal both the possible benefits and values, as well as challenges, of pursuing digital approaches to community or client storytelling in both government and non-government organisations funded to promote the health of diverse populations.

Exploring the value of digital storytelling methods for health promoting organisations

“New way of doing/advocating [our] agenda”

“Potential ... to broaden the opportunities [for] representing and advocating for clients”

“A way of engaging our potential clients, as part of training and to enhance organisational recognition in the community”

“This is an area we are looking at utilising more in our health promotion activities/resources”

“We're exploring using this mode of client services with young people who are hard to engage”

Benefits of building new capacities and confidence in using digital methods

“I liked the presentations about reaching and giving voice to young people, but the most useful stuff was the 'how to do it'. The nuts and bolts”

“It raised my sense of confidence ... increased my motivation and allayed some of my fears, [and] helped me work out how I might advocate for the medium in the workplace”

“Learning [both the] theory and application of digital stories”

“Capacity building opportunities [are the most] attractive. The NGO sector is going through extensive change and 'topics' are less stable. But 'healthy relationships' robust as area of focus”

Challenges of implementing digital storytelling strategies in the workplace

“I think we can definitely include some aspects from this workshop in our workplace, it will just involve some conversations and thought around how and what this may look like”

“I'm not confident that my workplace would be receptive to planning and implementing a project around digital stories. They are hesitant to both try new mediums/formats and implement projects which may be uniquely difficult to evaluate for the benefit of funding bodies. This is one of the ongoing inherent challenges of trying to integrate new technologies and creative approaches into NGO work.”

“Need to better understand the ethical considerations and challenges when creating digital stories w/CALD people”

“Finding opportunities that do not overlap with current interventions, and finding funding are the current barriers”

“Potential future collaborations will depend on how such work is promoted as well as if they will enhance our work with priority populations. Explore!”

Next steps

Our research team is now developing two proposals for additional research in this area: one focused on understanding the uses and values ascribed to stories in health politics and policy-making; the other on ethical complexities in using arts-based methods in health research. The workshop and consultations during this pilot research have challenged our thinking and opened up new avenues for pursuing meaningful, topical research in this area. Continuing consultation will be undertaken in the coming year to progress these next steps.

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