

Project guide

Digital Storytelling with under-represented student groups



Introduction

This guide sets out the process and lessons learned from a project to develop digital stories with students from under-represented groups in higher education. The project involved staff and students from the universities of Huddersfield, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam and York working with Yorkshire Universities and Jisc.

Contact the project team

If you would like to find out more about the project you can contact the project team members:

Contact	Institution	Email
Sitara Akram	University of Leeds	s.akram@leeds.ac.uk
Rob Allan	University of Huddersfield	r.allan@hud.ac.uk
Will Atkinson	Leeds Beckett University	w.atkinson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk
Liz Austen	Sheffield Hallam University	l.austen@shu.ac.uk
Jo Barham	Yorkshire Universities	j.barham@yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk
Nicola Brown	University of York	nicola.browne@york.ac.uk
Camilla Priede	University of Sheffield	c.priede@sheffield.ac.uk
Jack Smith	University of Sheffield	jack.smith@sheffield.ac.uk
Chris Thomson	Jisc	chris.thomson@jisc.ac.uk

Background to the project

The aim of the project was to showcase the experiences of students from under-represented groups in higher education. The stories aim to support retention and attainment of students focusing on the resilience developed by these groups during their time in higher education.

The starting point for the work was the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)¹ and its emphasis on engaging disadvantaged groups, focusing on the retention and attainment gap.

Research by HEFCE, has highlighted differential outcomes for Black Minority Ethnic (BME) students, students from lower socioeconomic groups, and disabled students. Outcomes are affected by four dimensions²:

- Curricula and learning
- Relationships between staff and students: belonging as a key determinant
- Social, cultural and economic capital
- Psychosocial and identify factors

Fostering a sense of belonging runs through the research as a route to reducing differential outcomes. How belonging is interpreted by students was identified by the project group as an important concept to be explored in the student stories.

The collection of stories developed in this project highlights the varied experiences of these students and includes the experiences of mature learners, care leavers, students with a disability, students from BME groups, and students living in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage.

You can view the digital stories made as part of the project here:

<http://www.yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk/digital-storytelling>

¹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/>

²Causes of Difference in Students Outcomes, Report to HEFCE by King's College London, ARC Network and The University of Manchester (2015):

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Causes_of_differences_in_student_outcomes/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf

About Digital Storytelling

Stories are told for many reasons, including making sense of a particular phenomenon, to preserve a memory, to share an experience, to learn lessons or to pass on a tradition. Stories provide an opportunity for representation and to express a particular point of view.

Digital storytelling is a widely used method that enables a story to be told in digital form, combining narrative with pictures. Digital stories can be created easily using relatively simple software which includes free-to-use programmes.

“Digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with a mixture of digital media, including text, pictures, record audio narration, music and video. These multimedia elements are blended together using computer software, to tell a story that usually revolves around a specific theme or topic and often contains a particular point of view³.”

Digital stories are personal accounts where the narrative is controlled by the storyteller. A recorded voice over is accompanied by selected images to represent the narrative. Digital stories can include music and sound effects which will also usually be chosen by the storyteller. Digital stories vary in length, but are generally around two or three minutes long. A written narrative is turned into a storyboard, with images selected to represent different parts of the story. The narrative is then recorded using specialist software and edited as appropriate.

There is a growing body of research⁴ highlighting the potential benefits of digital storytelling in supporting teaching and learning. As a method it can be effective in engaging and empowering students - including students from disadvantaged groups (Hopkins & Ryan 2014) and ‘reluctant learners’ (see Jefson & Niemeier, 2015; Meadows, 2003; Ohler, 2008; Rossieter and Garcia, 2010 cited-in Grant and Bolin 2016).

“Ultimately, digital storytelling allows individuals to express the uniqueness of their own and others’ lived experiences and brings voice the individual, group or community perspective⁵.”

Digital storytelling supports the development of skills both practical - such as researching and producing the story - and reflective, this can be an empowering experience for those involved.

To showcase the experiences of the group of students selected for this project, digital stories were chosen to allow the authentic voice of the student to emerge. The approach of digital storytelling differs from marketing, and is not an attempt to sell or promote an idealised view of the university experience. In this project, the digital story enabled the students to give their own account and context of how they experienced different aspects of their time in higher education. This was particularly important for the project where the aim was to showcase the voices and experiences of under-represented student groups using their own words.

³ Robin, B. (2016) The Power of Digital Storytelling to Support Teaching and Learning, Digital Education Review, (30), 17-29

⁴ A list of resources can be found at the end of this guide

⁵ Grant, N., & Bolin, B.L (2016) Digital Storytelling: A Method for Engaging Students and Increasing Cultural Competency, Journal of Effective Teaching 16(3), p48

Project development

A project group was formed and met to scope the project and agree the groups of students to work with; a project plan and timetable was developed to support delivery. Initially the group agreed that students would be taken from groups identified in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) priority groups including care leavers, BME students, and students from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. While these groups formed the basis for recruitment, students were also selected where it was felt that they had important stories to share which would be beneficial for other students and staff to hear.

Training

The group participated in a one day training course with a subject specialist from Jisc⁶. The training provided an introduction to the concept of digital storytelling and included tips and resources for the development of digital stories. The training course provided a basic overview of the process: more in-depth courses on digital storytelling are available.

The following areas of development were covered in the one day workshop:

- What is digital storytelling?
- The format of a digital story
- Writing a script for a digital story
- Storyboarding
- Finding and using images
- Digital story production

The software used to develop digital stories during the training was Adobe Spark⁷ a free programme which enables the production and sharing of digital stories. Adobe Spark comes with a bank of images which can be used without any restrictions on their copyright, a reference page is automatically generated attributing the image rights. The ease of use of the software makes Adobe Spark especially appropriate for the development of digital stories in a short space of time and for new users to develop appropriate skills quickly.

The workshop enabled staff to adapt the training and work with colleagues and students in their own institution. Feedback from the training session was also shared between staff who attended the workshop training to enable ideas and developments for the production of the stories.

Use of Images

The project group agreed that it would be sensible to only use unrestricted images not protected by copyright, including images in the Adobe Spark image bank and images covered by Creative Commons licensing such as those included in Pixabay⁸. In some instances, students used their own images and photographs to illustrate part of their story. This approach avoids ambiguity and any risk of infringement of copyright.

⁶ Jisc is a membership body providing digital solutions for UK education and research

⁷ <https://spark.adobe.com/>

⁸ <https://pixabay.com/>

Ethical approval

Digital storytelling raises a number of ethical issues for participants including recruitment, consent, confidentiality and use of the completed stories. An overview of the project was developed by the group for ethical approval. Each institution adapted the overview to ensure that it complied with their own institutions' guidelines. Key issues for consideration for ethical approval included:

- Consent and in particular consent to share the digital stories more widely. This included, once the stories were completed, allowing students withdrawing their consent for their use
- Information sheets were produced ensuring students were aware of what the project was seeking to achieve and their role within it
- Emphasising the voluntary nature of participation, this was especially important in cases where staff were working with students receiving support

A risk assessment ensured that staff could sign-post students to appropriate services if needed, for example if discussing a particularly distressing time in their education or disclosing a harmful experience.

Recruitment

Recruiting students to participate in the project was a challenge. Participation requires a time commitment and students are required to work independently on the digital story outside their existing academic and other commitments. This can be particularly difficult for students with caring responsibilities and jobs.

Different approaches were taken by staff to recruit students; some staff provided incentives, while others engaged students already involved with a department or service. Some staff selected students they recognised as having 'a story to tell', while others invited a wide cohort to participate leading to a 'self-selecting' sample of students creating a story.

Staff were clear that students were under no obligation to participate, and highlighted the benefits of creating a digital story and the skills associated with the process. Sharing examples of digital stories with students proved useful in being able to highlight what was expected of them, and what they would gain from participating.

Making the stories

Following the Jisc training session, staff worked with students at their institution to produce the digital stories. Staff shared the learning from the workshop with students and introduced the software. The aim of the digital stories was to showcase ways in which students from under-represented groups had overcome a particular challenge, how they felt about belonging to an institution, and how they engaged with the institution. This outline was presented to students as the purpose of the stories, and students were encouraged to interpret this themselves.

Staff approaches varied from group training sessions followed by one-to-one activity, to individual training with students and contact over email and phone. Sessions with students typically lasted between one to two hours, with students working independently on the stories outside the sessions.

Students were then encouraged to write their stories into a script, develop a storyboard, and select images to accompany each part of the story. The script was then recorded and the selected images uploaded. The stage was usually carried out with some staff supervision and technical support.

The process of digital storytelling is subjective and the approach taken varied by institution. In particular there was a challenge to find the balance between ensuring the students' voice are heard and engaging students in a story that is relevant to the themes of the project. An important part of the process is allowing students' time for reflection both during the creation of the stories and also afterwards once it has been produced.

Some questions that staff considered and made their own judgements on included the following:

- Is the staff role to provide technical advice such as use of the software and image rights, or should staff prompt on the content of the stories for example asking students to go into more details about a particular aspect?
- How far should staff go in advising students to remove or soften references, for example if discussing family members, or a personal situation?
- How much editing should students be expected to do on the story? Where is the balance in creating a powerful story, and the time commitments for students?

Staff relied on their own judgements, and ultimately ensuring that the student had produced a story which they were happy to share remained the priority.

Dissemination

The project was the result of collaboration between five institutions and Yorkshire Universities. The stories stand together as a collection, highlighting a series of different voices from a range of different types of institutions, these can be found on the Yorkshire Universities website: <http://www.yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk/digital-storytelling>

The individual story clips provide useful insight for institutions themselves and will be used as part of a process for raising awareness within their own institutions. Staff have identified a number of different ways in which they will be using the stories within their own institutions including working with widening participation and outreach helping students develop skills within the curriculum.

Further Reading

Causes of Difference in Students Outcomes, Report to HEFCE by King's College London, ARC Network and The University of Manchester (2015):

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Causes_of_differences_in_student_outcomes/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf

Grant, N., & Bolin, B. L. (2016). Digital storytelling: A method for engaging students and increasing cultural competency. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 16(3)

Robin, B. (2016). The power of digital storytelling to support teaching and learning. *Digital Education Review*, (30), 17-29.

Hopkins, S., & Ryan, N. (2014). Digital narratives, social connectivity and disadvantaged youth: Raising aspirations for rural and low socioeconomic young people. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 1(1), 28-42.

Nam, C. W. (2017). The effects of digital storytelling on student achievement, social presence, and attitude in online collaborative learning environments. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 25(3), 412-427.