

Organising a Digital Storytelling workshop in a HEI setting

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Abstract

Organising a Digital Storytelling (DST) workshop in a higher education institution (HEI) setting does not require specialised digital media labs or professional video editing software, but it does need careful planning and experienced workshop facilitators. Planning should start with defining the purpose of the workshop and, therefore, with the topic of the digital stories to be created. The workshop structure and schedule should be carefully planned, keeping in mind the learning facilities needed at various steps of the process. A DST workshop can be organised either on campus or as an online workshop, using students' own laptops or mobile devices to create digital stories. In either case, it is important to give students clear instructions, to provide sufficient support for creating the stories, and to ensure interaction between the group members at critical points of the process, namely when working on story drafts and when the digital stories are completed and ready to be shared with the group.

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1. *Introduction: defining the purpose of the workshop*

When using Digital Storytelling (DST) in higher education – or other educational – institutions, it is not recommended to merely give a digital story assignment to students and ask them to create it independently. DST should rather be a facilitated group process, in which the participants get support from the group and the instructor/facilitator. Therefore, DST activities always require careful planning and preparation.

It is important to start the planning of a DST workshop by clarifying the objectives: what purpose(s) should the DST process and the digital stories created in the workshop serve? Is the context of the storytelling activity that of media education, and are students expected to develop media literacy through the practical activity of creating media content in form of digital stories? Is the activity used for developing students' digital skills, through the use of various digital media equipment and software? Or is the purpose rather to engage in creative self-expression and develop creative skills?

If the digital stories focus on subject-specific contents, the purpose of the activity might be to form and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the topic, in a manner similar to traditional oral class presentations. Moreover, digital stories can be used for reflecting on subject-specific topics and for relating new knowledge and theoretical concepts and ideas to the everyday lives and experiences of the students.

Alternatively, the subject of reflection can be the students themselves: through digital stories students can engage in self-reflection that increases their self-awareness, enables transformative learning, and supports their professional growth, identity work and career planning¹. Naturally, DST can serve multiple purposes simultaneously: even if the main purpose of the activity is self-reflection, students still learn also technical and creative skills in the process.

Once the purpose of the workshop is clear, facilitators may decide a topic for the digital stories. The topic can be similar to those used in personal essays, such as “My career path”, “My future dream”, “Sustainable development”. Defining a topic for the digital stories facilitates the creative process and prevents writer's block – and a pre-defined topic may be necessary for achieving the specific goals of the DST workshop. When a topic is rather general, it allows the participants the freedom to choose their own personal angle and approach.

It is good to think, already in the planning phase, how the digital stories will be used – will they be shared only among the workshop participants, or

¹ See the chapter by Tanskanen (2023a) for discussion on transformative learning and the chapter by Juppi (2023) for discussion on using Digital Storytelling for identity and career construction.

will the participants be encouraged to publish their stories online or to show them to someone? Does the institution or project in charge of organising the workshop have an interest in publishing the digital stories on their website or social media channels?

Since digital stories are often very personal in nature – even when the focus is on professional or study-related topics –, it is highly recommended that the participants are able to freely choose whether they want to have their story published or not. It is also a good idea to leave that decision until the end of the workshop, when the participants know how their story turned out to be, and to use a consent form to ask for a written permission to publish the stories or to show them outside the workshop setting.

2. Structuring a workshop – two optional models

Creating a digital story requires a minimum of two working days. The classic model developed by the Story Center is based on a 3-day workshop². Since in educational settings the time available for the process is often limited, we have developed our workshop structure so that it allows stories to be completed in two days or in an equivalent time divided into several shorter sessions. Both structures require some homework by the participants – either before the workshop or between shorter workshop sessions.

A workshop organised over two consecutive days has more time pressure on participants, as they have to develop and finish their stories in this short timeframe. However, precisely the intensity of the experience can make it even more impactful for the participants, as the workshop group works closely together for two days and ends the process with the screening of the stories.

With several shorter workshop sessions it is difficult to achieve the same intensity of experience, but the advantage of this structure is that participants can use more time to create their digital stories, since they can work on them independently between the workshop sessions.

Table 1 presents the basic structure of these two optional workshop models. The number of participants in the workshop affects the required time to some extent since, for example, the community-building activity at the beginning of the workshop and watching the digital stories at the end require the more time the more participants there are. When only one facilitator is available, an ideal workshop group size would be around ten participants. It is also possible to have bigger workshop groups, provided that the participants have sufficient technical skills and/or there is more than one facilitator available.

² Lambert, Hessler 2018, pp. 71-85.

	<i>2-day workshop</i>	<i>4-session workshop</i>
<i>Duration</i>	2 full working days (14–16 hours)	4 × 3–4 hours sessions (total 12–16 hours)
<i>Pre-assignment (homework before the workshop)</i>	Finding and bringing one personally meaningful photo related to one’s career. Searching for and collecting 20–30 images related to one’s career that can be used in the digital story.	Finding and bringing one personally meaningful photo related to one’s career.
<i>Workshop activities</i> <i>N.B. It is important to leave enough time for shorter and longer breaks during the workshop day.</i>	<p>Day 1</p> <p>Icebreaker & community-building activity</p> <p>Introduction to Digital Storytelling & examples of digital stories</p> <p>Optional: Presentation on autobiographical and creative writing</p> <p>Structured freewriting (or other activity to facilitate the creative writing process)</p> <p>Instructions for writing the script for the digital story & writing the 1st draft</p> <p>Story circle: feedback on the drafts</p> <p>Instructions for recording the voice-over narration</p> <p>Finishing the script and recording the voice-over narration</p>	<p>Session 1</p> <p>Icebreaker & community-building activity</p> <p>Introduction to Digital Storytelling & examples of digital stories</p> <p>Optional: Presentation on autobiographical and creative writing</p> <p>Structured freewriting (or other activity to facilitate the creative writing process)</p> <p>Instructions for writing the script for the digital story & writing the 1st draft (or writing the 1st draft as homework)</p>
	<p>Day 2</p> <p>Instructions for editing the digital story (& written tutorial for the video editor to be used)</p> <p>Editing the digital story (and continuing with voice-over recording if needed)</p> <p>Finishing and exporting the digital story</p> <p>Watching the digital stories</p> <p>Feedback discussion, possible consent forms for publishing etc.</p>	<p>Session 2</p> <p>Story circle: feedback on the drafts</p> <p>Instructions for recording the voice-over narration</p> <p>Finishing the script & recording the voice-over narration</p> <p>Instructions for planning the visual narration and collecting images. Introducing a storyboard template as a planning tool (optional)</p> <p>Homework: Collecting 20-30 images for the story</p> <p>Session 3</p> <p>Instructions for editing the digital story (& written tutorial for the video editor to be used)</p> <p>Editing the digital story</p> <p>Homework (optional): Digital stories can be edited and even finished at home</p> <p>Session 4</p> <p>Finishing and exporting the digital story</p> <p>Watching the digital stories</p> <p>Feedback discussion, possible consent forms for publishing etc.</p>

Table 1. Two optional models for the structure of a DST workshop

3. Resources and facilities required for a DST workshop

Depending on the number of participants, a DST workshop requires one or more facilitators to instruct the workshop process and provide support and help to the participants. Support is needed in developing the story idea and in the creative and technical process of compiling the digital story using a video editor.

In the context of education, it is naturally often the teacher of the class or the course who acts as the facilitator of the DST process. It is vital that at least the lead facilitator is well grounded in the DST practice and has prior experience of workshop and group facilitation. Not only that, but sufficient technical skills are also required so that the facilitator can show participants how to use the video editing software and help them with any technical problems. One option is to work in pairs so that one of the facilitators is in charge of facilitating the creative storytelling process and the other is in charge of technical assistance with video editing.

The DST workshop can be organised either on campus or online. Both solutions have their benefits. Nowadays, digital media tools are easily available: most students have their own laptops, and it is possible to create digital stories even just by using mobile phones. In our workshops, however, we prefer using computers, and even recommend using a separate mouse to enhance fine motor precision in video editing. Participants also need headphones or headsets when editing their digital story.

When organising a workshop on campus, a suitable space is required for the workshop group to work either on their own laptops, or on desktop computers. Ideally the workshop space should be flexible, so that all the participants can sit in the same circle during the community-building activity, and they can move into small groups when sharing the drafts of the scripts during the Story Circle phase. The space should also have a big screen and speakers for the screening of the digital stories at the end of the workshop. If there is no sufficiently flexible space available, more than one space is needed for working.

Moreover, recording the voice-over narration requires one or more separate silent spaces, unless the participants are given the task of making the recording independently at home. To achieve good sound quality it is good to do the recording on the campus, using portable audio recorders. If the workshop group is big, this can be a rather challenging task within the short timeframe of the workshop.

When working online, the process is somewhat easier to manage, since there is no time required for moving from one location to another, and the participants make the audio recording at home on their own computers. However, this may result in poorer sound quality, unless the students have a good quality microphone available. Participants usually use the microphone of their headset. Helping students with their technical problems during the video editing phase is easy using the screen sharing tool in Zoom or Teams.

There are several free video editing software available, such as the web-based video editor WeVideo (which also provides a specific educational account for educational institutions, with more features than the free individual accounts), DaVinci Resolve, Open Shot, iMovie and Shotcut. When choosing the video editor, one should consider accessibility – the editor should be easy to use and preferably free to enable students to continue using it independently if they wish. Ease of use is important, also because there is a limited time available for learning the new software during the workshop. For these reasons, professional video editing software with paid licences may not be the best option – unless it is already available and familiar to the participating students.

In many cases, workshop participants can create their digital story using photos from their own photo archives. In the case of older participants, this may mean going through old photo albums, but for younger generations it mainly means going through their social media accounts, mobile phone gallery or other digital archives. In some cases, participants may need to search for additional materials from the stock photo websites that provide images licensed with a Creative Commons licence, or use the media collection available in the WeVideo application's media library. If the DST assignment requires taking new photos, participants can use their mobile phones for this purpose.

4. Process of DST – a case study

The activities of a DST workshop can be seen on a general level in table 1. It is, however, useful to describe the implementation and purpose of various activities in greater detail. I explain the workshop process using the DST workshops that we organise for the master in arts and culture students at the Turku University of Applied Sciences as an example.

For MA students, the DST workshop organised in the beginning of the study programme starts a longer process of self-reflection and professional identity work that we refer to as a professional autobiographical process³. The purpose of the DST workshop is for the student group to get to know each other and start community-building, and for each participant to reflect on their career path and professional identity at the professional transition point of starting their master's studies. In Finnish universities of applied sciences, applicants for master's programmes are required to have achieved at least two years of work experience in their own field after completing their bachelor's degree. Many of the MA students have already had a long career when they start their studies.

³ See also Tanskanen 2023a, 2023b.

The DST workshop is held during the very first contact days of the MA study programmes that are based on a blended learning approach, i.e. on a combination of monthly contact days and independent distance and online learning. We usually organise the workshops on campus, but during the Covid-19 pandemic we hosted two online workshops for master's students. We also have one online MA programme in which the DST workshop is implemented in a modified form, breaking the process into several shorter online sessions.

In case of a two-day-workshop, we always give a pre-assignment to the participating students: they prepare for the workshop by searching for and collecting photos or other images related to their own career path. Moreover, students are asked to find one personally and professionally meaningful image, which they will share with other group members at the beginning of the workshop. In case of several workshop sessions, looking for images can follow later in the process once the participants have first written the script for their stories.

We start our on-campus and online workshops with a community-building activity in which each participant in turn shares their meaningful photo – in case of an online workshop, using Zoom's screen sharing tool – and tells something related to the photo. This activity serves more than one purpose: it is both a community-building and a storytelling activity. Through the activity, the participants introduce themselves to their fellow students and teachers, start to get to know each other and feel comfortable with each other. Simultaneously, sharing recollections about a specific moment, event, person and/or place seen in the photo serves as the first storytelling activity and as a “warm-up” for creating the actual digital story.

Our experiences have shown that students often choose to share rather intimate and emotional memories and experiences, and this quickly creates an atmosphere of mutual trust and empathy within the group. Creation of a safe space for sharing is facilitated by making an oral confidentiality contract at the beginning of the workshop: the participants agree that what they hear and see during the workshop will not be spoken of outside the workshop group.

After the community-building activity, we introduce the DST practice to students, showing some example stories created by students in previous groups. Participants get general guidelines for the digital story to be created during the workshop: it should be a digital career story, which could focus either on their career path that has led to this moment (reflecting on the past), on their present work and professional identity (reflecting on the present), or on their professional future ambitions (reflecting on and anticipating the future). The recommended length of this digital career story is approximately 2 minutes, which means that the written script should be limited to around 200 words, while the visual narration of the story usually requires 20-30 images.

Example of a story assignment

Topic: “My Career Path”

Title: You can use the topic as a title or give your story a title that reflects its content.

Angle: You are free to choose the focus and angle of your story. You can focus on:

- 1) your career path up to this point (“How did I become who I am today?”),
- 2) your work and professional identity at this moment (“Who am I as a professional today?”), or
- 3) your hopes and aspirations for the future (“Who do I want to be in the future?”).

Length of the story:

Script should be ca. 200 words (max. 1 page).

You need ca. 20-30 images.

The edited digital story should be ca. 2-3 min long.

After the introduction phase, the first creative activity in our workshops is structured freewriting, in which the workshop facilitator gives writing prompts in form of initial words, and the students continue writing for 5-7 minutes on each prompt. Prompts direct students to explore meaningful choices and turning points in their career path, their competences and strengths, and their future aspirations. In this writing activity, workshop participants write quickly and spontaneously, only for themselves, and preferably by hand and not by a computer.

Writing prompts for a Digital Career Story

Below you see some examples of writing prompts that can be used to facilitate the process of writing the script for the digital story, when the story should deal with the career path of a person. Writing activity can be implemented as a structured freewriting session. The instructor reads the prompts one at a time and the participants continue writing for a given time, usually for 5-7 minutes for each prompt. 5 or 6 prompts is a suitable number for one writing session.

As a child, I dreamed I'd become...

My first memory of [something related to the field of study of the participants]...

During the school years, I realised...

I chose my career...

I felt I had made the right choice, when...

An important turning point in my career...

I'm at my best when...

I feel accomplished when...

My greatest passion...

It gives me hope to...

I would like to be seen as...

In the future I hope to...

At the next stage, students are given instructions for writing the script for their digital story. They are instructed to read through the passages produced during the freewriting sessions and to use them as raw material for writing the script, if they feel it serves their story. Once the students have written the first

draft of their digital story scripts, they share the drafts in small groups, following the idea and model of a Story Circle⁴. In online workshops, we divide participants into groups using Zoom's breakout rooms. Each group member has a chance to read their draft aloud and get supportive feedback from their fellow students. Participants are instructed to avoid any good/bad type of evaluations and to rather focus in their feedback on what they find touching and interesting, and what they would like to hear more of.

After the Story Circle phase, participants polish their scripts, so that they can be recorded into voice-over narrations of their digital stories. In online workshops, participants record their voice-overs independently at the end of the first workshop day, using WeVideo and a headset with a microphone. They are first given instruction on how to create a WeVideo account and how to do the recording. In our on-campus workshops voice-over recordings are made using digital field recorders and separate silent spaces.

The second workshop day starts with another WeVideo tutorial session, in which the students learn how to import images into WeVideo, how to organise them on the video timeline and combine them with the voice-over, how to adjust the duration of the images, how to use other elements available in WeVideo (such as music and transitions between images), and how to export the finished digital story. The participants then work mainly independently on editing their digital story, but the facilitators are available throughout the day to provide support and assistance with any questions or problems faced by students.

The DST workshop ends by viewing the digital stories created by the participants. The participants are instructed to show their appreciation for the stories shared by giving real or virtual applause (e.g., using applause or heart reactions in Zoom), instead of giving feedback on the technical or creative quality of the personal stories seen. The workshop ends with a discussion on the experience of creating and seeing digital stories and with a feedback activity.

References

- Juppi P. (2023), *Digital Storytelling as a narrative approach to identity and career construction*, Supplementi, n. 14, pp. 49-68.
- Lambert J. with Hessler B. (2018), *Digital Storytelling. Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, New York: Routledge.
- Tanskanen I. (2023a), *Professional autobiographical process including identity work in creative writing practices*, «Il capitale culturale. *Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*», Supplementi, n. 14, pp. 33-48.

⁴ See Lambert, Hessler 2018, pp. 78-80.

Tanskanen I. (2023b), *Creative writing practices and autobiographical process enabling professional identity work*, «Il capitale culturale. *Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*», Supplementi, n. 14, pp. 121-138.

Appendix: Materials for a DST workshop

Writing Tips for a Digital Story Script

- 1) Clarify the meaning of your story to yourself before writing the script. What is your story really about? What is the central theme or key message you want to convey? How can you communicate that effectively: is there or specific key moment, turning point or perhaps a metaphor that symbolises and condenses the theme of the story?
- 2) Think of the structure of your narrative: which order will you use to tell the events of your story? Will you use a linear, chronological structure or something else? One of the traditional structures is: (1) Once upon a time... (2) Every day... (3) One day... (4) This lead to... (5) And now. If you can recognise a key moment or turning point in your story, make effective use of that. Describe the moment as a scene in your life, using vivid imagery and detailed perceptions.
- 3) If you aim at creating a digital story that is 2-3 minutes long, the length of the text should be less than one A4 page, ca. 200 words. Write concisely, using short sentences. Eliminate unnecessary qualifiers and modifiers; avoid repetition (unless repetition is an intentional stylistic technique in your text); don't explain too much. Remember that you can also express things with images, animations, rhythm and pace, music and other sounds. Think right from the start how to use various media elements to create meanings together. Try reading your script aloud at your natural speech rate (the pace of speaking) before recording to see the duration of your story.
- 4) Remember that you are not writing a piece of literary text, but rather writing "for the ear"; your story will be heard, not read. Think of *telling* a story rather than writing it. Use clear, simple and direct sentences, and avoid any complex sentence structures. Try reading your text aloud to see if there are words or sentences which are difficult to articulate.
- 5) Pay attention to an effective beginning that arouses the interest of the listener. You can use a "hook", such as a question, a startling observation or statement, or an interesting anecdote. Introduce the listener/viewer to the topic of your story. Since the digital story is short, the introduction part needs to be short also, only 2-3 sentences.
- 6) Make the ending of the story emphatic and powerful. The ending could provide an answer or a resolution, or you may end with an open ending and leave the listener pondering how the story will end. You can make use of a circular structure in which a repeated visual or verbal element ties the ending with the beginning. Sometimes the ending summarises the key message of the story as the moral of the story, the lesson to be learned from it.

Storyboard Template for a Digital Story

STORYBOARD / Digital Story

Name of the participant: _____

Image 1	Image 2	Image 3	Image 4	Image 5
Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:
Music or other sounds:				
Text on picture:				

Image 6	Image 7	Image 8	Image 9	Image 10
Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:
Music or other sounds:				
Text on picture:				

STORYBOARD / Digital Story

Image 11	Image 12	Image 13	Image 14	Image 15
Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:
Music or other sounds:				
Text on picture:				

Image 16	Image 17	Image 18	Image 19	Image 20
Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:	Voice-over narration:
Music or other sounds:				
Text on picture:				

Steps of Editing a Digital Story

Regardless of the video editing software used for editing the digital story, the editing process generally includes the following steps:

- 1) Creating a new video project and saving it with a recognisable name (e.g., “Pirita’s Career Story”).
- 2) Importing the media files (image files of photographs, possible video files, and audio files of the voice-over narration and music) into the video editor. Alternatively, the voice-over can be recorded using the video editing software, and music can be selected from the audio library of the video editing software, if such is available.
- 3) Adding a title on the timeline, in the beginning of the digital story.
- 4) Organising the images (and possible video clips) in the right order on a video track of the timeline.
- 5) Adjusting the duration of each image so that the visual narration and verbal narration are in sync. Duration of images can vary from a couple of seconds to more than 10 seconds. The default duration of still images in video editors is often 5-6 seconds.
- 6) Adding possible texts (such as captions or quotes) or graphics on images, using another video track.
- 7) Adding transition effects, such as crossfade, between images (optional).
- 8) Adding motion, such as zoom in/out or pan, on still images using an animation tool (a technique commonly known as the “Ken Burns effect”). Animated motion is optional and should preferably be used when it helps to create meanings and convey a message.
- 9) Adding end credits on the timeline after the last image.
- 10) Exporting the digital story project file, i.e. saving it as a video file. Recommended video file format: MP4, with at least SD resolution (852 × 480 pixels), preferably HD or full HD resolution (1280 × 720 pixels / 1920 × 1080 pixels).