


The New Community

Anthology:



Digital Storytelling

as a Community
Development Strategy

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Across a black screen the words “poetic justice” appear, and a voice begins to sing softly. Soon that same voice is speaking, telling a story in rich tones as images begin to come and go on the screen: a prom photo, a sunset, a skydiver, family snapshots, bubble lettered text stating “fight the hate.” The music slides into a track by India Arie, building momentum as the visions and the voice weave together the story of one young woman’s experience of healing her depression through poetry and the pen. This is Kiarra’s digital story.

An electronic memoir, a digital story is a mini autobiographical movie that spins its tale through a combination of digital media. Blending photos, images, and artwork with sound bites and video clips, the digital storyteller multiplies the effect of each medium as a form of self-expression. These short films not only describe the individual’s experience, but also attempt to convey their voice, emotions, and perspective. A sneak peek into the soul, a digital story gives its audience a brief glimpse of the world as seen through the eyes of the storyteller.

First conceptualized by Bay Area artists and activists in the 1990s, digital stories have graced the screens of small theaters, galleries, and classrooms for over a decade. Over the years, new applications for the films have emerged, including their use as marketing and





Natasha Freidus works with TEACHBoston students to develop their digital stories.

training tools for corporations as large as Coca-Cola. Today, this trend continues as the recent fall in computer equipment prices and the introduction of easy to use digital-editing software have made digital storytelling an affordable reality for anyone with access to a personal computer.

Nationwide, a small group of community development workers have capitalized on this opportunity and are inventing a future for digital storytelling as an innovative community development strategy. In New England, the Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Creative Narrations, a small Massachusetts consulting firm, are at the forefront of this movement.

For three years, CRCP and Creative Narrations have been training nonprofit groups to produce and use digital stories in support of the nonprofit's mission. Founder of Creative Narrations and on staff at CRCP, Natasha Friedus began to pursue this concept after witnessing community members testify in front of city councils.

"They would pull crumpled scraps of paper from their pockets," recalls Freidus, from which they would recite stories that proved to be instrumental in

shaping city decision making. "I got the idea that it was important not to throw away these stories but to document them somehow." Drawing on her prior knowledge of digital storytelling from her work as a graduate student at MIT, Freidus decided to preserve these tales as digital stories that could be strategically employed to advance a group's goals.

To date, Creative Narrations and the CRCP have worked with over ten area nonprofits, and digital stories have become important aspects of each of these programs. Some groups have used the stories as part of their awareness campaigns. Others have found them to be effective fund-raising or training tools. A few organizations have even used their stories to initiate dialogues on topics ranging from domestic violence to AIDS.

This article takes a deeper look at the digital storytelling experience of three of Friedus' clients in the community development field. In all three cases, the concept is helping to articulate and promote a community's values. In the Boston public school district, digital storytelling is fostering the value of education while boosting the literacy and technology skills of a set of future teachers. In the Roxbury area of Boston, digital stories are helping a small neighborhood devel-

op a sense of community across generations. In the distressed North End section of Springfield, Massachusetts, neighbors are using digital stories to reach out to those challenged by the tough issues facing this community.

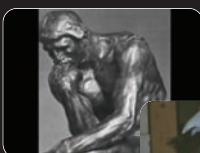
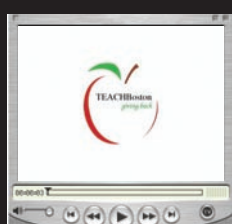
Inspiring Learning: Boston Public Schools

By nature, digital storytelling provides a burst of human capital. According to Freidus, the creation of any digital story demands that authors flex their literacy, computer, and oratorical skills. Like many of Creative Narrations' clients, participants in the TEACHBoston digital storytelling project became skilled in these arts almost unwittingly.

Aiming to inspire and motivate students to become educators, TEACHBoston is a program of the Boston Public Schools. Last year, a team of TEACHBoston students and teachers were invited to participate in an intensive digital storytelling experience. Working with Creative Narrations for an entire school year, these ten participants spent the first semester learning how to create their own digital stories and in the spring, taught the process to a group of six others. The result was a collection of stories entitled *Why Learn, Why Teach?* that reflected on the teachers' professional experiences and the students' summer work as teaching assistants at the Trotter Elementary School.

In the first step of the training, participants contemplated the story they wanted to tell. These reflections were then transformed into a written narrative—the center of every digital story. The students and teachers shared their writings with one another in a "story circle," where fellow participants provided commentary and constructive criticism. Then all went back to the drawing board and reworked their stories, taking the group's suggestions into account. With eighty percent of the process now finished, the group was ready to begin working with the digital technology.

TEACHBoston: A Student's Story



Clips from the digital story of a student in TEACHBoston, a program of the Boston public schools that introduces students to the teaching career path.

First, each storyteller read their story aloud and recorded their voice. Seemingly simple, TEACHBoston director Ceronne Daly was impressed at how much this exercise taught students about public speaking. Students learned to mitigate their use of the unnecessary “ummm,” “like,” and “uhhh” and improved their intonation, speed, and diction.

Next, it was time to inject the stories with visual and audio components. Students and teachers brought in photos and music that reinforced their stories’ messages. Trainers showed them how to use digital cameras, scanners, and other hardware to weave these elements into their tales. In the last stage, participants learned to use Adobe PhotoShop and Adobe Premiere video-editing software to mesh all of the pieces together to create their digital masterpieces.

As they advanced through each stage of the process, the TEACHBoston students became intimately acquainted with their own personal challenges as communicators. Some suffered in spelling. A few struggled with public speaking. For others, it was accurately conveying their feelings in the written word. And for still another set, mastering the new technology led to hours of frustration. Inspired by the parallel struggles of their Trotter Elementary School pupils, the TEACHBoston students pushed themselves to perfect their stories. By the end of the process, they each had mastered the full range of literacy, oratorical, and technological skills and had developed a new appreciation for the learning process.

Now complete, the stories have become a source of inspiration for many in the Boston Public School District. Last spring, all of the students presented their digital stories to their homeroom classes, and each was received with awe and praise. Talents were recognized, and peers have been clamoring the budding directors to make more mini movies and share their knowledge. In September, the voices of these future and present teachers also moved many seasoned veterans; the superintendent showcased several of the stories during the school year’s inspirational kick-off, reminding school leaders “why learn, why teach.” Most importantly, the stories have energized their student producers. “These stories are intensely personal,” says Daly, “and hearing their voices, talking about their goals,

thoughts, and reflections is very meaningful for them. They have experienced the power of creating their own media.”

Leaving a Legacy: Roxbury, Massachusetts

In 1992, the residents of Camfield Gardens in Roxbury, Massachusetts, orchestrated a neighborhood turnaround after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced its intention to foreclose and auction off the 136-unit residential complex. Residents rallied together to save their homes and were able to convince HUD not to sell the property. Encouraged by this victory, they organized the Camfield Tenants Association (CTA) to represent their interests in the fate of the housing complex. CTA reviewed city regulations and conducted a needs assessment to determine the best course of action. Eventually, their work led to a resident-ownership agreement with the city of Boston and HUD.

During this process, inspection of the property revealed that the buildings were uninhabitable and that the entire development would have to be razed and rebuilt. To accommodate this reconstruction, residents were relocated and scattered throughout Boston and remained organized for two years through the sole leadership of CTA. Finally, in 1999, former residents of the dilapidated Camfield Gardens moved into the brand new Camfield Estates.

The story is a defining one for the Camfield neighborhood, and residents wanted to preserve it for future generations. Camfield Estates joined forces with the CRCP to create a series of digital stories to capture the epic. Their work culminated in a centerpiece film, *Moving Forward: A Community’s Story*. Besides relating the seven years’ events, this digital story relays the value the community places on recognizing and using its strengths and talents to meet the challenges of urban life. Today, all incoming Camfield residents are asked to watch this story. The community hopes to inspire each individual to invest in their surroundings and to continue to work for “safe, decent, affordable housing for all.”

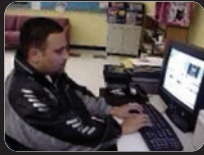
After this initial digital storytelling experience, Creative Narrations was



Camfield Estates: “Moving Forward”

Clips from the digital story chronicling the development of Camfield Estates, Roxbury, Massachusetts.

A Thanks to My Mother: Edwin's Story



brought in to pilot a “train the trainer” program, and residents soon became equipped to run their own digital storytelling workshops. Since then, digital storytelling has expanded as a community building tool at Camfield Estates. For example, in the past two years, community youths and elderly residents have come together in a digital storytelling summer program. Combining a wealth of narrative from the seniors and the technological know-how of the kids, members of the program have created a library of over 40 stories. While the youngsters express their fresh perspectives on the world, grandparents are preserving wisdom for the next generation of citizens. Head of this project, Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency’s director of public safety, Thaddeus Miles, was amazed at how these stories “really bridged the gap between the generations . . . bringing some new respect.”

While internally, the digital stories are connecting residents, they are also an important communication outlet to the world beyond Camfield. As expressed by Miles, “Many urban communities are struggling for an identity, and too often, they are sensationalized in the news for violence and crime.” Digital stories are demonstrating all of the chapters of life in this Roxbury community. This past April, several of Camfield’s digital stories were shown at the Boston Cyberarts Festival. “I was surprised at the effect they had,” remembers Miles. “These stories got people to begin thinking critically about their decisions and the consequences of their actions.”

Neighborhood Outreach: Springfield, Massachusetts

In the North End neighborhood of Springfield, Massachusetts, nearly one-half of households live in poverty. The community struggles with drug addiction, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and high instances of AIDS, asthma, and diabetes. Here, the North End Outreach Network (NEON) is working to improve daily life in this largely Puerto Rican community. Knocking door to door, NEON’s community health advocates regularly canvas the neighborhood to ensure that every resident is receiving quality health care and the resources that they need. In 2002,

employing this outreach mentality, NEON teamed up with MIT to create digital stories that documented the neighborhood’s challenges and highlighted solutions, signs of hope, and the growing strengths of the community.

Beginning with the personal stories of several community health advocates, the group inaugurated a series of digital tales that relate the storyteller’s own confrontation with issues such as gang violence, single parenthood, and assimilation into New England culture. These private stories strive to console those with similar struggles and provide insight into the range of solutions that exist. These digital stories are now bombarding the neighborhood, being shown everywhere from drop-in centers and clinics to classrooms and community centers.

Maira Velez’s story, *No Te Detengas, Don’t Hold Back*, ran for several weeks at a neighborhood drop-in center. A single mother of three, Velez revealed her battle with depression and her successful struggle to get her family off welfare. A visitor to the center, coping with addiction, happened to see her story. As he later told NEON employees, the video helped him realize that he needed to stop making excuses for himself; if she could turn her life around with three kids in tow, so could he.

Edwin Camacho’s story, *A Thanks to My Mother*, relates his challenge of raising a son as a single dad. It illuminates the wisdom he receives from his own single mother’s story of rearing five children. His tale has reverberated with many of the neighborhood’s single parents and freed many mothers from believing that women alone face single parenthood.

Jeri Gardiner’s digital story, *I Am Jazz, and Jazz Is Me*, has recently infused many North End classrooms, educating a new generation about the influence of jazz in African American culture. “Jazz is my passion,” says Gardiner, “and it is a story that affects our story. It is a part of our history, and should not be forgotten.”

Beyond the neighborhood impact of NEON’s stories, digital storytelling is changing the lives of many of the storytellers, in part, by addressing the digital divide (see sidebar). Edwin Camacho had never worked with a computer prior to attending his first digital storytelling workshop 18 months ago. But while using the digital technology to

Clips from Edwin Camacho’s story, *A Thanks to My Mother*, prepared at the North End Outreach Network (NEON) in Springfield, Massachusetts.

The Digital Divide

With many Americans basking in a fluorescent glow of Internet shopping, online libraries, and digital tax forms, it is often forgotten that much of the country still remains without access to digital technology. The “digital divide” describes the relative lack of access to computer, Internet, and digital technology that exists for many low income, elderly, minority, and central city populations.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s 2002 study, *A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*, 43.5 percent of U.S. households do not have a computer in their home and 49.5 percent are without home Internet access. These rates vary dramatically with income. While more than 89 percent of households with incomes over \$75,000 own a computer, only 32 percent of households with incomes between \$15,000 and \$20,000 have one.

Education, race, and location are also factors. Householders with a college degree are more than twice as likely to use the Internet as those without a high school degree. Relative to the national average, black and Hispanic populations are between 16 to 20 percent less likely to have home access to computers and the Internet, while geographically, central city populations trail their rural and suburban counterparts.

Many public and private entities are successfully working together to bridge this divide. Most prominently, public schools and libraries have emerged as the major equalizers for computer and Internet access. Thanks in large part to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and its E-rate funds for schools and libraries, by 2001, 99 percent of all public schools and 87 percent of instructional classrooms were equipped with Internet access.

Community technology centers (CTCs) have also been a vital element in closing the digital divide. These non-profit organizations give local communities access to information technology, with services ranging from after-school youth programs to workforce development training. While CTCs have existed since the 1980s, recently they have become part of a greater community building effort. By providing community members with a place and a reason to gather, CTCs are helping communities empower themselves through technology.

create his story, “I fell in love with it, and now I can’t get enough,” he says. Switching career paths, he is now the head of NEON’s marketing department and the group’s database manager, and he uses his new skills everyday.

Community health advocate Marisol Jimenez, similarly, has been inspired to improve her technological know-how. She has added computer classes to her college course load so that she can fulfill her vision of helping terminally ill patients produce digital stories. “Everybody leaves wills, property, and other material things,” she says. “I also want people to leave their stories, because everybody has a story.”

NEON’s digital story library is continuing to grow. The original storytellers are now training other community members in the art. It has been a positive experience for trainers and trainees alike. Says Gardiner, “The best part about being a trainer is exposing somebody to something they didn’t know before. They start off saying that they can’t do it, and then they see that they can. In the end, they have created a finished product of which they are very proud.”

A New Anthology of Community

While each of these three communities is using digital storytelling in a unique way, they all are building on their community’s core values. Reflecting an educator’s mindset, the TEACHBoston digital storytelling program was a learning tool that instilled a larger lesson while teaching concrete skills. Camfield’s digital stories have created a united voice to fight for what the community values, mirroring the Camfield Tenants Association’s goals when it first took on HUD. Likewise, the personal stories being shared in the North End enhance the person-to-person

outreach that has always had NEON knocking on doors.

In digital storytelling, these communities have found an innovative way to voice their values by harnessing the power of digital media. Their successes are filling computer hard drives with a digital library of the sights, sounds, and voices of communities in action. It is a new anthology of community.

Please visit the web to learn more about digital storytelling, Creative Narrations, and MIT’s Center for Reflective Practice:
www.storycenter.com
www.creativenarrations.net
web.mit.edu/crcp



TEACHBoston students fine-tune their digital stories. Photo here and on page 10 provided by TEACHBoston.