# Press Record: Our (Digital) Stories Matter

Rachel Raimist

Storytelling made digital, in the form commonly known as digital storytelling, can be transformative. Digital storytelling in its "traditional" form is a five minute or less first person narrative scripted and crafted by the storyteller. This is one of the most powerful forms of personal storytelling in the digital age. The storyteller's voice is used as the scripted structuring track for the thoughtfully crafted and edited videos where the textured, layered and real voice is recorded as voice-over and is intercut with curated visuals: photographs, short video clips, graphics, art, animation, titles and any digital assets compiled by the storyteller. These digital stories often dig at the everyday, personal, and community stories that are too often absent from the media landscapes we consume, landscapes with narratives we don't get to craft, and representations we don't always recognize.

This type of personal narrative, shared through digital storytelling, was developed by Joe Lambert and a team of collaborative storytellers, creatives, and workshop facilitators at the Story Center in the 1990s.[1] Story Center's tagline asks you to, "Listen Deeply," and "Tell Stories," and their work with storytellers, college students, teachers, non-profit organizations, local libraries, colleges, medical facilities, business professionals, activists and global citizens is unparalleled in this field of work. They help to develop confidence, power and technical skills by intentionally co-facilitating digital storytelling workshops with members of the communities in which they work.

I came to Story Center's methods of digital storytelling through a few online searches where I found Lambert's "Digital Storytelling Cookbook," a free pdf that was made accessible with one click and a download.[2] This is particularly important as an intervention into an elitist industry of media makers where only those with the means, access to equipment, and knowledge of production can make films and become filmmakers. Thankfully now smartphone technology, computers, and the internet offer free tools for anyone with a story to tell and the time to film, edit and post. During the early years of these technological shifts, which made the means of production more accessible, Lambert recognized that there is an important shift in power that happens when access to storytelling is made available in historically marginalized communities.

In his "cookbook," Lambert shares his philosophy and storytelling approaches, which are developed out of theater and video-making. He helped community-based storytelling possible by making his curriculum and technical tutorials visible and available. He developed a methodology that encouraged storytellers to dig into their memory banks, conjure their family stories through old photographs, and if the written word was overwhelming, or because of illiteracy, he recommends interviews. Lambert designed flexible practices and steps that make the task of telling and recording manageable. He also breaks stories into a few categories: character stories, memorial stories, adventure stories, accomplishment stories, recovery stories, love stories and discovery stories about people, places, and almost anything, to help spark ideas for new digital storytellers.

As a filmmaker and production professor, I teach screenwriting, cinematography, editing and many facets of media production in places where there are often many barriers to entry. Students have to apply to programs and film schools with an essay and sometimes already a developed portfolio of work. This means that aspiring filmmakers must have access to cameras, computers, and the confidence to create art without training. In communities where being an artist is seen as impractical because it "won't pay the bills or feed hungry children," it is a lot to ask of an aspiring media student.

There are a lot of reasons why someone chooses to attend college or do training, or not to. The education system is costly and only allows entry to storytellers who can afford school, or who are willing to live under the burden of debt. Too often these storytellers are trained to reproduce middle-class and privileged narratives. The type of filmmakers and storytellers I train most often are formal students, primarily those with access to college, meaning they have tuition paid or know how to navigate the financial aid complex. I know firsthand that the disciplining of the discipline encourages creativity, but often limits the kinds of stories told and the kinds of storytellers produced.

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[1] https://www.storycenter.org

[2] https://wrd.as.uky.edu/sites/default/files/cookbook.pdf

At the time I found digital storytelling I was a doctoral student in Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota. I was an accomplished filmmaker and struggling single Mom looking for a critical lens to help me understand the sexism, racism, and misogyny I had survived as one of the only women in a prestigious film school. I had also survived a career filming live music, music videos and what I fondly call #RapLife. The academic life I found myself in was sadly fraught with the same -isms I had endured in the larger world, and I felt the creative walls closing in on me. When I considered quitting school, a friend in the grad program suggested I learn "their" terminology of oppression and develop tools to talk "their" talk. More importantly, she urged me to bring what I know - storytelling and filmmaking, to the campus.

I followed my colleague's advice and learned the tools and language of theory and sought out opportunities to teach filmmaking in the local community. I was hired to teach "Shooting the Short Film" at the non-profit organization, IFP Center for Media Arts (now Film North) in St. Paul, Minnesota.[5] This course filled consistently, but always with eager men who often worked well-paying day jobs. Many of them dreamed of attending film schools, but chose to follow more "practical" paths to careers with financial stability. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with creative, smart and eager men, but why all men, where were the women?

The coordinator of the educational programs at the non-profit where I taught asked why each of my course offerings in "Shooting the Short Film" enrolled only one or two women. I shared a bit of my experience being the only woman on a film production crew, and how in film school there were only a handful of women. He asked me why I thought that was. It occured to me that I had not considered why many women avoided film school, or why those who graduated dropped out of the marketplace and even less made films. I also thought about my own coming of age narrative, where my brothers were deemed the smart and technical ones. I had to sneak to fix broken electronics in our house and show that I was capable of correctly programming my mother's VCR remote, set to tape every single episode of *Days of Our Lives.* I loved watching TV and films and knew that even my mother's stories (albeit daytime soaps) had the power to make me laugh, cry and yell at the screen. I understood the power of a story early on.

I learned that I was technically capable, confident and creative in high school when my teacher, Fred, put a camera in my hands. He didn't see, or rather center my gender, he simply recognized my ability to write and film, and he taught me to edit. It is because of Fred that I braved film school and put on blinders to the fact that I was the sole woman in my production group in both undergraduate and graduate studies—both very privileged spaces.

A decade after finishing film school, my film courses were replicating those same models of only one or two women in each course so I decided to develop a course using the same crafts of storytelling and the same technical tools - a basic camera and a non-linear editing system-- but I wanted to find a way to attract storytellers who didn't see film school or making a film as possible for them. I was interested in people who were artsy, crafty, or creative, and maybe saw themselves as artists, but not filmmakers. In this spirit, I created a two-day workshop, "Digital Storytelling for Women," that advertised "no technical skills are necessary," and was marketed to creative writers and artists. It filled with five students.

In "Digital Storytelling for Women" I asked each storyteller to bring their photographs, artwork, music, objects and things that inspired them. I developed a "Photo Exercise" that asked participants to consider the context, content and form of an image.[4] This writing generated personal stories about family memories, people in their community, significant places and really, any and all the things that mattered to them. We read the first drafts of their stories aloud, in story circles, like Lambert encourages. We read, we listened, we offered supportive feedback, and then we revised our writing into a page or so. Then we recorded short narratives, each storyteller sharing her story in her own voice. I did hear a lot of "I hate the sound of my voice," comments and saw that with encouragement they took the leap of faith, trusted in the process, and pressed record.

These single page first-person stories, recorded in the real voice of the storyteller were then imported into the editing system (we used Premiere and Final Cut Pro). This happened with technical tutorials that guided the storytellers step by step. Showing them that editing is more about creative, narrative and representational decision-making and less about the buttons helped them develop confidence and get over fears of "hard" technology. With a few clicks and hold and drags they laid their voice-over narration into the timeline. Their voices became their main audio track, the thing that everything else was cut to.

Each woman gathered photographs or took original ones on their phones. They filmed short videos, filmed and made visual artwork, gathered Creative Commons music and learned how to edit. Step by Step. First, we laid the voice-over (VO), then we laid out photographs and arranged them in order like storyboards. We learned to do slow digital zooms in and out. Each storyteller edited, usually with just a little assistance, and added layers of visuals, music, sound fx, titles and whatever they thought helped their three- to five-minute story best represent their story. In the end we told stories with clear beginnings, middles and endings and others stories moved in circular narratives. And that was the point: each storyteller became the agent of crafting her own digital story.

It didn't take me long to figure out that the Story Center's method of using the storyteller's recorded voice-over as the center of the story, and as a structuring track for the video was a way to shift the power of representation for storytellers who don't traditionally hold the mic or share their private lives publically. After the success of this first IFP workshop, I developed courses for college students at UMN, partnered with Dr. Walt Jacobs, then Chair of African-American Studies, and together we developed a course called, "Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color." He trained with Lambert, we taught and trained students, and then trained community members and the work traveled.[5] We emphasized creating private spaces for women and communities of color who may not traditionally have access to technology, or those who don't necessarily come into the room believing that they have an important story, worthy of making into a video.

In the process of digital storytelling a shift occurs and storytellers often get excited and take ownership of their story and the crafting of it. I've learned that the methodologies of digital storytelling has become a way to push back when well-meaning folks talk about wanting to democratize media-making. It offers a creative and collaborative space, an environment that is supportive to work through fears and notions that too many of us believe "I'm not technical," or "I'm not a filmmaker," or "I can't edit" because it looks too complicated. Digital storytelling workshops and classes shift the power of production, and push back on the idea that anyone is truly voiceless. Being voiceless erroneously implies that a person or community that doesn't have the means of amplification doesn't have a voice (or a story). Given the access, technology, space, and time to focus on the craft of making digital stories, no one is voiceless or without the power to amplify, distribute and represent. Digital storytelling can be a powerful weapon, with guidance, support and training, it can amplify many voices.

Communities of color have always centered storytellers, passed down oral traditions, archived their family history, and curated their lives and community histories on the walls of their homes.[6] Everyone has a way, even if it's nonverbal, to share their story and leave something of their life behind as evidence that they existed. The idea of voicelessness focuses on the fact that not all voices have access to a platform, a stage, or a microphone, which is why the work of digital storytelling is used in public libraries, classrooms, prisons, and refugee camps. The act of pressing record, telling a (digital) story, then sharing it online, in private spaces, or preserving it on a drive allows our stories to travel as far as we want them to go. Digital storytelling shows us that we have the power to shape our stories. We

can give voice to what *we* think is most important, to how we feel, and to what really matters in our lives.

That's the power of story and the power *in* a story.

Bringing digital tools and methodology to a community of Black women in the deep south, as Dr. Robin Boylorn and Veralyn Williams did with The Storyteller Project, creates important spaces where Black women's voices are raw, real, not always polished, but powerful. This space centered women naming who they are, what they have survived, and that their stories matter. This workshop showed that when Black women write, press record, edit and make stories digital that get shared online and in this journal, words, stories and lives become permanent. That's the thing about digital stories, they can be duplicated without losing quality, distributed without barriers, and over time the voices of these women will never lose their power. Our digital stories remind us that it is important that we are here, that we all have a story to share, and our stories matter.

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[5] https://journals.hioa.no/index.php/seminar/article/view/2448
[6] see hooks, bell. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life." Art of My Mind: Visual Politics. New York: The New Press, 1995. 54-64