

Digital Storytelling with Different People: A Collaborative Method beyond the Digital Divide

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1. Background and objectives

Online communication tools such as social networking services and Twitter have assisted people in raising their voices, connect with others who share similar interests, and create new communities without geographical borders. Although social media have provided great opportunities for citizens' activities, certain challenges remain. First, homogeneous groups tend to be formed¹⁾. Such communities often exclude heterogeneous people and reinforce a lack of understanding of them. Second, people who do not have IT skills miss opportunities to join those communities. According to a poll by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication in Japan, while Internet utilization in 2012 was over 90% for people aged 13–49, it was considerably lower for people over 60²⁾. The digital divide appears to be widening. Internet environments can stimulate the formation of many small communities and generate new borders demarcating “us and them.” This can create a tendency for people to see and hear only what they like, isolating themselves from people who are different.

We regard collaborative Digital Storytelling (DST) as a key attempt to overcome these

divisive issues. Since 2008, we have engaged in a collaborative DST project called “Media Conte” that includes such diverse people as: university students, the elderly, the disabled, and local foreign residents. DST is a workshop-based media expression practice involving laypeople's thoughts, memories, everyday lives, and family histories; John Hartley describes the DST as sonnets or haiku for the digital age (Hartley, 2009). Generally, the storytellers make a two-to three-minute video clip called a “Digital Story,” which combine photo images with their voiceover. DST started in the 1990s in California of the United States inspired by the performances of media artist D. Atchley. The California-based Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) has continued and developed Atchley's practices (Lambart, 2013). These practices have spread around the world in fields such as education, museum archiving, civic journalism, therapy, advertising, and local oral history (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Tsuchiya, 2013). Taking into consideration the difficulties of telling stories for diverse individuals in Japan, we designed a new DST workshop, Media Conte, which uses collaborative processes (Ogawa & Ito, 2010). In the workshop, we establish the concept of “pre-story spaces” and stress activities to find story seeds through playful programs such as games. University students participated as facilitators to identify these seeds and weave them into stories. On the one hand, storytellers

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who are too shy to express themselves or are unfamiliar with computers can create stories with students. On the other hand, the students get the opportunity to meet people who are very different from them, thus deepening their understanding of the lives and thoughts of real people in society. In fact, the students' understanding seems to have been deepened beyond our expectations. In the workshops, they have not only learned about the lives of different people but have also developed strong empathy with them.

In this study, by reviewing our collaborative DST programs, we would like to show how participants, both facilitators and storytellers, deepen their mutual understanding. After explaining the collaborative design of the Media Conte program, we examine how the programs worked and what the participants were aware of in two workshop cases. One was for children of Japanese-Brazilians and Filipinos, and the other was for disabled people. Lastly, we will discuss the possibilities for understanding different people. Understanding others can enrich people's expression and foster transformation and growth in ourselves.

2. Media Conte workshop design for collaboration

In 2008, we launched the Media Conte project to discover marginal voices and explore new forms of media expression. As of June 2014, we have had 20 workshops. In the early phases, we conducted workshops in the Nagoya area; later, we worked in areas such as Tohoku, Tokyo, and Hiroshima³⁾. Diverse groups have participated in the workshops: children of Japanese-Brazilians and Filipinos, international university students, elderly local residents, victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and disabled people and their

families (Ogawa, Abe, Ito, & Mizojiri, 2010; Ogawa, Ito, Mizojiri, & Tsuchiya, 2012). Generally, a Media Conte program has four stages: pre-workshop, story-generation workshop, video production, and screening. In most cases, after the workshop, we broadcast the Digital Stories on community cable television and archive them on our website (<http://mediaconte.net/>).

The main feature that distinguishes Media Conte from other DST practices is its collaborative creation process, especially as it occurs between young people and people from diverse social groups. For the collaboration, we specially arranged the number and roles of facilitators, developed programs, and prepared tools. These workshop designs were revised and improved after a workshop was completed, especially during the early stages.

In the basic California model, there are several facilitators for all storytellers in a workshop. In Media Conte, however, one or two facilitators are assigned for each storyteller. We also allocate a couple people as meta-facilitators who oversee the whole procedure and help individual facilitators. Usually, university students take the role of facilitators, and researchers and university staff function as meta-facilitators. Figure 1 shows the Media Conte model. This allocation design allows facilitators to oversee the whole process of digital story making through dialogic interaction with storytellers. For a facilitators, the story created by a participant who is his or her partner is no longer somebody else's story, but a story they made together.

In the basic CDS workshop, programs mainly consist of two activities: story generation and video production⁴⁾. During story generation, storytellers are asked to write a script. In this

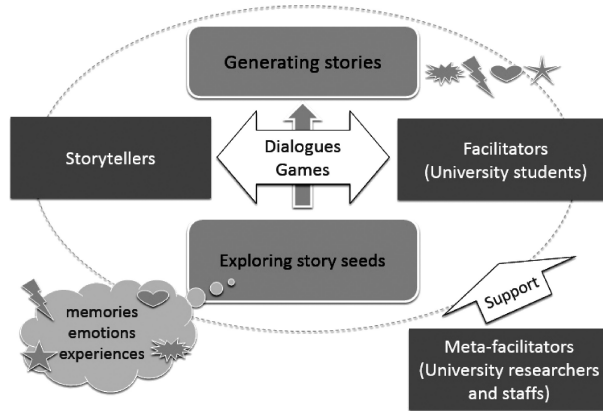


Figure 1 The design of Media Conte

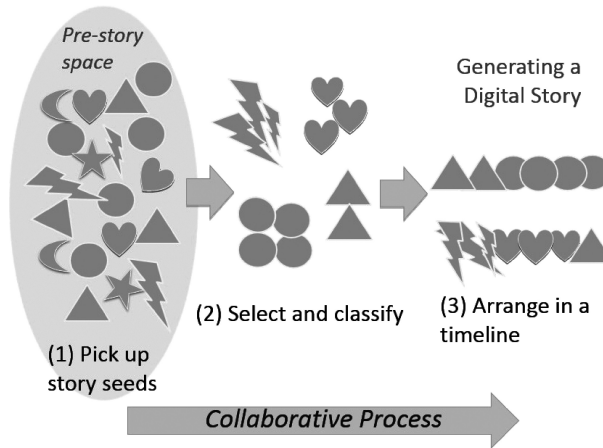


Figure 2 The Model of Story Generation in Media Conte

process, the participants gather in a circle to tell their ideas, read scripts, and exchange comments. After that, based on the script, storytellers prepare photos, record narrations, and edit them into a digital story using video editing software on PC and tablets. During the workshop, the main role of a facilitator is to advise on how to write scripts and provide support for using digital devices. In the Media Conte workshop, we focus a great deal on the process of story generation. We assumed that diverse individuals would not always be able to easily write coherent scripts and would sometimes have difficulty expressing their thoughts and experiences clearly. There-

fore, we reconsidered the process of generating stories and set up the concept of “pre-story space.” In the pre-story space, only small fragments of ideas, experiences, complaints, laughter, and simple questions so-called “story seeds” are jumbled together, prior to their verbalization (Ogawa & Ito, 2010). In the Media Conte workshop, storytellers and facilitators begin by looking together for story seeds in the pre-story space. Figure 2 shows the model for generating a story from the pre-story place. This process can be divided into three steps: (1) picking up the story seeds, (2) selecting and classifying them, and (3) arranging them in a timeline. Through these

process, fragmented story seeds are combined into a linear story. In the Media Conte program, the stories are not told individually but constructed and weaved together with facilitators as partners in all steps.

Besides creating pre-story spaces, we design tools and playful programs to assist participants in generating stories with facilitators. Unlike the basic DST workshop, storytellers do not write a script in our workshop. Instead, our programs are based on dialogue and playful game-like programs that use sticky notes, cards, and photo storyboards. We use the story-making theory proposed by Ohtsuka (2003) as a reference for designing our programs. His postmodern story-making theory uses card games to deconstruct experiences and impressions and combine them into stories. We designed the “combining-photos-into-stories game” as an icebreaker and storytelling practice that uses photographic images. “Interview time” is a kind of word-association game used to pick up story seeds. A facilitator places a question card in the middle of a sheet and asks questions related to the subject on the card. Responses to the questions, and the ideas and images associated with them, are written on sticky notes and attached around the card to identify motifs and episodes that could serve as the seeds of a story. “Storytelling using five picture cards” is a format for creating the outline of a story. On each card, there is a square for attaching sticky notes and some dots for the main ideas. Participants and facilitators put their notes with keywords on the card, and write down keywords for each scene. After the outlines of the stories are presented, all participants and facilitators exchange questions, comments, and advice about what kinds of photo images would

be effective to use in the stories. These designed tools and interactive game-like programs evoke the memories and internal voices of the storytellers, deepening the facilitators’ understanding of them. In Figure 2, the “interview time” activity is part of (1), and “storytelling using five picture cards” is part of (2).

3. Workshop review: Awareness of participants

In the previous section, we explained our design for collaborative DST. In this section, by reviewing two workshops, we examine how the programs worked and what participants were aware of based on their dialogues and workshop observation.

3.1 Two example workshops

3.1.1 Media Conte Kani

Since the 1990s, Japan has been accepting many workers of Japanese descent as factory workers, and the Tokai region has been home to a large number of Brazilian and Filipino workers. However, the lives and thoughts of these families are rarely covered in local media, and they are not sufficiently understood by local residents. For this reason, university students studying media production were expected to listen carefully to the children, to retrieve the buried seeds of the stories and help them produce Digital Stories to be shown on cable TV. Our first workshop was held in summer 2008, with nine teenage children of foreign workers of Japanese descent and nine university students, in association with the Kani international exchange association and Cable Television Kani.

3.1.2 The Media Conte Happy Map

The second workshop example was con-

ducted in partnership with the Nisshin Happy Map, a group of disabled persons and their family members who work to remove impediments in public spaces. According to Yoshii (2011), although disabled people are sometimes covered by mass media, they tend to be represented or stereotyped in three ways: as people with an incredible ability to overcome disability, as people who exert themselves to fight against discrimination and harsh surroundings, or as ordinary people with disabilities who have difficulties in everyday life. The members of Happy Map wanted to present a new perspective on the relationship between disabled and unimpaired people by creating Digital Stories. In particular, the mothers of small children with disabilities had strong opinions regarding subsidies for their children.

3.2 Workshop process

3.2.1 Gaining insights into others' surroundings: Interview time

Since the Kani participants were in their teens, it could not be assumed that each was already conscious of his or her own story. Therefore, the facilitators had to start from the pre-story space, searching for story seeds to connect with other seeds into a story line.

In the cases of two young male participants who were partnered with female university student facilitators in the interview session, the facilitators started by showing question cards (interview time). These contained questions such as "What is your treasure?" and "What is your nuisance?" The dialogues were originally in Japanese and translated in English by the authors.

Facilitator A: (showing a card) "What's your nuisance?"

Participant A: "What do you mean by 'nuisance'?"

Facilitator A: "Are there any troublesome matters around you?"

Participant A: "Troublesome...nuisance.... My younger brother, I guess."

Participant B: "Me too! My younger brother." (Laughing together.)

The facilitators asked further questions, trying to probe from multiple directions.

Facilitator A: "Why do you think so?"

Participant A: "My brother and I are in the same room, and he always leaves his toys untidy. I'm always cleaning our room instead of him, but he doesn't appreciate it at all. And he always contradicts me when I warn him not to make our room messy."

Facilitator A: "What does your mother say?"

Participant A: "Nothing. I'm wondering why my mother doesn't tell him to help me out. Do you know why?"

Facilitator A: "Well, I don't know...but she wants you to be patient because you are older, I suppose."

Participant B: "Because we are older?"

Facilitator B: "Yeah...I deeply understand what you feel."

Facilitator A: "But I'm a younger sister of my brother; I didn't notice his kindness at all." (Laughs.)

Participant A: "Oh, you were like my younger brother! Goodness!" (Laughs.)

Participant B: "Yep. I can imagine it! My younger brother is also very

rebellious against me. He's very irritating, you know. In order to provide energy to my little brother, I hesitate to eat too much meat, and I'm trying to eat more vegetables. But he doesn't notice my feeling at all."

Facilitator B: "Oh, you are such good boys! I think your brothers must be too small to understand your kindness."

Relying on their own experiences with families and friends, facilitators continuously tried to understand the participants' situations. They tried to develop images of the foreign teenagers' backgrounds and inner worlds through diligent questioning, mobilizing the frameworks of their own interpretations, reflecting on their past experiences, taking notes on anything that came up, and coaxing the children, who would sometimes become excited or wander off topic. The facilitators always tried use praise: "You are such a good boy!" or "I deeply understand what you feel!" During the sessions, we found that the facilitators'/listeners' nods also encouraged participants to be candid about their feelings and complaints. The facilitators closely followed what the teenag-

ers said, nodding deeply and repeatedly as they listened to the sometimes disorganized utterances. The participants seemed excited and lighthearted about their "big sister" facilitators listening to their complaints and hidden efforts within the lively and playful workshop atmosphere.

Facilitator A: "So, what do you do if your brothers want to quarrel or have a fight with you?"

Participant B: "Of course, as you said, we must be patient."

Facilitator B: "Why do you guys think so? You work hard, take care of your brothers, so you don't have to be so patient like that."

Participant A: "I have no idea. But I think we are older, so it can't be helped."

Facilitator A: "Oh, I deeply sympathize with you."

Participant A: "Thank you. I wish I were my little brother."

Participant B: "Yeah. I wish I were my little brother." (Laughs.)

During the interview sessions, most of the story seeds were discovered in seemingly unimportant chats about certain people or topics, such



Photo 1 Interview time: story seeds (keywords) written on sticky notes.

as chores, family members, or friends. The facilitators and the participants intersubjectively discovered the story seeds—which usually remained unexpressed—as well as aspects of everyday life and the future, of which the participants themselves were usually not very conscious. In this case, the two boys were explaining their chores, and they gradually started complaining about their younger brothers, who were not very helpful to them or conscious of their older brothers' consideration. The facilitator thought she had finally found the key concept for the participants' stories when the boy said he wished he had been his younger brother.

3.2.2 Understanding facilitators as potential audience: Interview time

In the Happy Map workshop, the mothers were at first a little frustrated by being asked during interview time, “Why do you worry about the situation?” or “Should wheelchairs really be automatic?” Such questions arose because the student facilitators did not know very much about disabled people or the social welfare system. However, in the process of answering these simple and fundamental questions, the mothers had to reexamine how they should explain their claims to the public, which does not know their background very well. One mother answered our questionnaire as follows: “Once, I felt a bit irritated with an innocent student facilitator, but I found that she was sincere, and I came to feel that she's innocent just because she did not have opportunities to get to know the information about us. So, I came to think about how to persuade innocent ordinary people and not just insist on our claim.” For their part, the students were at first overwhelmed by the extraordinariness of the everyday lives of disabled people. However,

as they tried to get images of daily life by visiting the participants' homes and discussing problems concerning disabilities and the care system, they came to understand the background of their claims. In fact, after the workshop students reflected, “I think I came to feel more comfortable with disabled people than before. At first, I didn't even know how to start the conversation,” and “I found there are prejudices against them, and to be honest, I might have been someone who harbored such prejudices. But after the workshop, when they need help I'm sure I will be able to help them on the street.”

In this way, the participants and facilitators were gradually striving to overcome the divide between them.

3.2.3 The effect of narrativization: Storytelling using five picture cards

Next, back to the Kani workshop, the female facilitators guided the teenage boys in the creation of a single story within the video. They gave the boys numerous examples of how to combine and express the story seeds, asking them which ones they thought were best while watching their reactions and expressions.

After sorting, mobilizing, and organizing the sticky notes into five picture cards, together they arranged the story cards into the outline of the story. This collaborative narrativization helped the participants and facilitators understand the participants' unorganized experiences and emotions in context. In this case, the facilitator sorted the seeds into five categories: (1) his family's efforts, (2) the participant's complaints, (3) his brother's innocence, (4) what the participant does for his family members, and (5) his love for his brother. Then, the facilitator and the participant unscrambled these and came up with the story

line from the five cards: every family member, including the participant, did his or her best for the others, except for the little brother, who did not do anything for the family members. Through the process of emplotment, the facilitator and participant both made sense of the participant's vague surroundings and became aware of what the participant wanted to say. The facilitator's role went above and beyond simple cooperation in story production; she was a supporter of and co-writer for the partner participant.

3.2.4 Photos as catalysts: Editing

In the process of matching the photos with a story, photographs and other images functioned as catalysts for story generation in two ways.

First, during the interview time, the facilitator had to develop an image of the participant's everyday life and his inner world only through his utterances. However, pictures of family members, rooms, or belongings taken by the participant helped the facilitator clearly comprehend the participant's everyday life. By deciphering these photos, facilitators were invited to see and feel the world from their partner participant's first-person perspective. In the case of Kani, the facilitators were invited to say, "Is she your

mother? Oh, she's beautiful!" or "So, he is your little brother! Oh, he looks so cute and smart!" Participants would reply, "No, she seems a good mother, but very very very strict!" "Yes, usually he's cute." These acts seem fundamentally dialogical when they adopt the position of the photographer/storyteller.

Second, an interesting point of Digital Storytelling is found in the enabling of expression by trusting fragments of thought—such as irritations and joys, which are difficult to express textually—to some other form of representation. For example, disappointment can be expressed using a photo of a drooping sunflower, or the experience of being helped by the words of a cartoon character can be expressed using a photo of an outstretched hand. Sometimes, participants were supposed to appear in the photos, reproducing past events or representing feelings at that time. The freedom and enjoyment of visually expressing the scenery in one's mind stimulated storytelling for both participant and facilitator. In this collaborative process, they sometimes became absorbed in the playful task of applying images to the story line. A so-called group flow seemed to emerge when they collaboratively came up with a suitable metaphor or visual image for the story line.

In the story generation for the mother of a disabled boy in the Happy Map workshop, the mother's belief that having a disabled child was not because of divine grace but simply a matter of probabilities was portrayed impressively by a red-painted grain of rice surrounded thousands of white grains. In looking for suitable metaphors, facilitator and participant search together for common images to create a new visual meaning for the story.

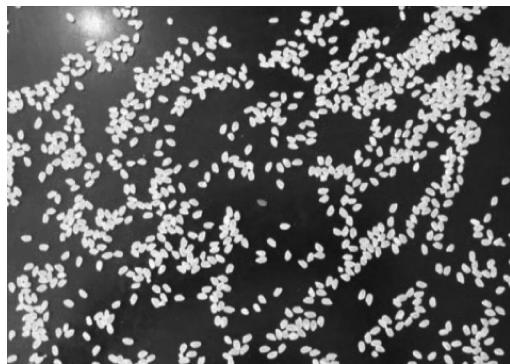


Photo 2 The photo explaining the probability of the disease, 1 in 40,000, using rice grains, gradually closed up.

In these sessions, the photos were printed out as opposed to being viewed on a small screen. There was a marked phenomenon in which new questions arose about the photos, and the stories themselves were rewritten based on these new ideas. What the participants talked about was depicted visually through images such as scenery and motifs, which could be shared with others as well. In the process of developing a storyboard while holding the photos and contemplating different arrangements, the initial story structure was revised again and transformed into a more appealing, more coherent story.

3.2.5 Sharing perspectives of others: Preview

Since the Digital Stories in Media Conte are generated through a process using card games, sometimes the story is not completely persuasive, and movies are made using slow transitions of photos; they require the audience to imagine the background of the storyteller. In other words, these stories are open to interpretation. Also, the Digital Stories are depicted using first-person narrative from the storyteller's perspective; audiences are invited to not only watch the movies but also to experience the storyteller's inner world and his or her situation. Watching the stories in this way, facilitators and audiences both try to imagine the person's feelings with empathy. On the other hand, participants were satisfied with their accomplishment of creating the new self-story with the facilitator's deep comprehension. Although narrative theories suggest that self-stories lacking the consent of the other are not stable, the stories made in our workshops can be considered stable since they were collaboratively woven by different people. In addition, that kind of experience tends to help participants feel

less alone.

Story formats encourage the audience to understand others. In the workshop with the disabled, a blind participant who had worked for the rights of disabled people first reacted negatively when we explained the storytelling method, which was designed playfully as a card game. For him, storytelling did not seem a proper way to explain their rights to the public, since he had been attempting to persuade logically using data, facts, and legal arguments. At first, he refused to attend our workshops because we did not seem serious with our "stories." However, the coordinator persuaded him to stay for a while, and he eventually completed his story with facilitators about his excitement at being treated without prejudice in the United States.

After the preview, he told the workshop director he was moved by the stories of mothers with disabled children. He confessed that through the process of generating a story and watching (or listening) the others' Digital Stories, he came to see the significance of showing his own emotions and opinions through the storytelling format, and he wanted to revise his initial opinion. This episode reminds us how restricted we are by conventional expression methods that are objective, impartial, and logical, conveyed through individual reporting or speech.

4. Conclusion

As discussed in the previous section, in our collaborative DST, facilitators and storytellers deepened their understanding by doing several programs together, especially narrativizing the participants' unorganized experiences and thoughts. As the facilitators tried to draw story seeds from their partner storytellers, they lis-

tened to and captured each other's feelings, thoughts, memories, and everyday lives as much as possible by reflecting their knowledge and past experiences. They explored different people's inner worlds and tried to make sense of realities they had never experienced or imagined, as seen in the Kani workshop. Many imagined themselves in the other's position through empathy and felt a responsibility to complete the stories. The storytellers together with their facilitators reconstructed and represented their lives using a form of Digital Story. The story was not merely that of the storyteller but could be considered "their story"—a collaboration between storyteller and facilitator using the participant's life as its theme. Through the collaborative storytelling process, they successfully developed images of their partners' lives beyond the stereotypes. The role of the facilitator went beyond supporting video creation and become that of a collaborative co-creator of the Digital Story. It is evident that this is a new way to form people's personal narratives.

Further, the Happy Map episodes show that the storytellers also understood others through the activities with facilitators. The mother of a disabled boy came to understand what knowledge other people—those who do not know disabled people—lack regarding the disabled and their environment. A blind man reconsidered how the disabled ought to express themselves by having the opportunity to use a new form of media—a Digital Story. Storytellers gained a new perspective by working with university students who are different from them. These are the fruits of dialogues and collaborations between different people.

In this digital age, there are many online

communities with easy access where people can communicate with others, respond to someone else's words, and exchange ideas and knowledge. Also, there are video-sharing websites for exchanging various people's interests and pleasures. However, in these sharing communities, interaction among users might be weak, thin, and sometimes superficial. In collaborative Digital Storytelling, on the other hand, participants share others' perspectives and life stories. Interaction among participants is strong and thick. Although they may not completely understand each other, they become much more comfortable with different people and feel more empathy than they had before the workshop. This can transform stereotypes and conventions. Collaborative Digital Storytelling workshops remind us that meeting and being involved with others can present valuable opportunities for transformation and progress.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- 1) Hamano points out that in Japanese web communication, "unlinkability" and "segmentation" rather than openness, are preferred (Hamano, 2010=2008, pp. 154).
- 2) Internet utilization was 71.8% for people aged 60–64, 62.7% for 65–29, 48.7% for 70–79, and 25.7% for over 80 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2013).
- 3) Most stories are archived on our website (<http://mediaconte.net/>). See the "Theater" page.
- 4) The program of the standard CDS workshop is shown on its website (<http://storycenter.org/standard-workshop/>). Tsuchiya participated in in February 24–26, 2006.

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