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Digital visual skills education for digital inclusion of elder women in the community

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of Digital Storytelling workshop practices for the basic digital visual skill education of elderly women. The DST workshop that was run by the authors provided the environment to experiment with the conventional DST workshop practice for developing the digital visual skills of elder community members in a three-day-workshop, which was originally planned as a one-day-city walk experience. The reasons of such a change are discussed in relation to concepts such as gender, age and digital inclusion.

Keywords: digital visual skills, digital inclusion, gender, digital storytelling.

1. Introduction:

Digital Storytelling as a workshop experience is a new phenomenon in Turkey. The unique first project in Turkey was run by the Digital Storytelling workshop team led by Burcu Simsek in Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication in 2009-2010 in cooperation with a woman's NGO, Amargi Women's Academy and Queensland University of Technology. From that date onward the team in Hacettepe University has enlarged and organizes different workshops with different groups in the community in order to contribute to the digital skill development as well as the participation of the community members in social and political life with their digital content creation in DST workshops. In such a workshop context, the digital literacy level of the participants of the workshop develops in a co-creative collaborative environment where the ordinary people find the opportunity to work with facilitators and media professionals in order to create a digital story.

In this paper, we discuss how a DST workshop with three elderly women, in varying ages between 60 to 70, come together in a semi-structured workshop environment to tell a story about a park in Ankara, which is important for their community. In this paper, we briefly describe the components of the conventional DST workshop practice, explain the workshop process we ran with elderly women, reporting significant moments that we observed in the workshop, comparing it with the conventional practice. In the discussion, we aim to answer the question whether basic digital visual skills can be developed in the scope of Digital Storytelling workshops.

2. Digital Storytelling: A-Do-It-With-Others Practice

Digital Storytelling is a workshop based practice that facilitates the production of digital stories with each participant's personal narrative using his/her voice-over, adding fourteen to sixteen visuals to form a unified piece of

video clip which is limited to two to three minutes. According to Burgess it is a process "by which 'ordinary people' can create their own short autobiographical films that can be streamed on the Web or broadcast media" (Burgess 2006, 207). Digital Storytelling practice has been around in many countries for a number of years and has been used for different purposes with different age groups and diverse backgrounds since it flourished out of a festival practice in California, introduced by Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert in late 1990s[*] and transformed from its more individualistic nature into a more collective frame with Daniel Meadows' 'Capture Wales' project in cooperation with the BBC[†]. In the core of the practice is the story. Digital storytelling derives its sources from the conversational storytelling practices that open in the first stage of the workshops in the story circle, where non-hierarchal, equal turn based connections are formed. Digital storytelling workshop "prioritizes the "storytelling" over the "digital" (Hartley 2009a, 33). In the book 'Story Circle' Hartley and McWilliam describes the process as: "Everyone loves a story. Not everyone loves a computer. "Digital storytelling" is a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives" (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, 3).
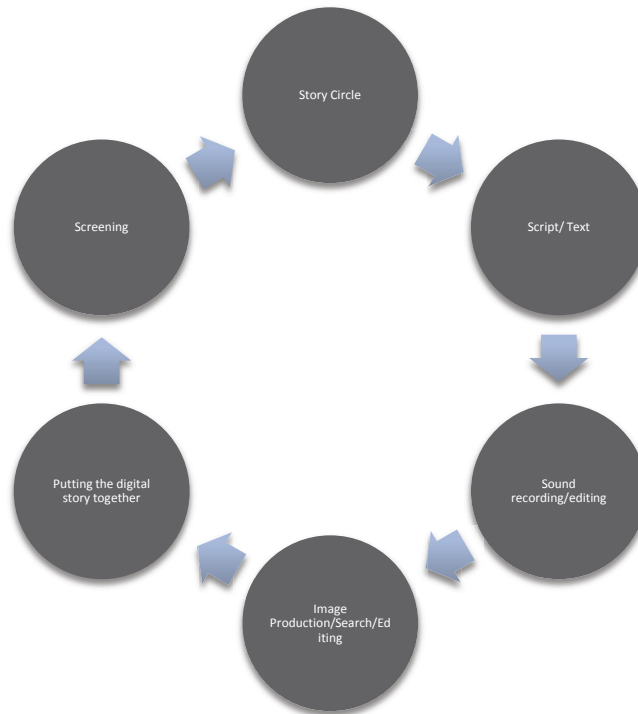
The stories from everyday experiences vary when they are told in different contexts with the participation of people on site following with responses, asking questions about details about the narrative and sometimes getting connected to that story with their own experiences and turning that storytelling activity into dialogue. Digital storytelling "universalizes the individual voice. It employs an aesthetic that seeks to balance democratic access (to both production and viewing) with communicative impact" (Hartley 2009b, 125) and it " fills the gap between everyday cultural practice and professional media that was never adequately bridged during the broadcast era (cited from Carpentier 2003, in Hartley 2009b, 122) The important aspect of bridging the gap between the media professional and the ordinary individual in the digital content creation process is central in this DST project, as the digital inclusion of elderly women could be enhanced through their digital skills development and their motivation for producing and using their own images. In the conventional Digital Storytelling workshop, there are six significant stages. The digital story circle opens with the story circle, followed by more technical processes such as the script-text writing, voice over recording and sound editing, image search and editing, putting the digital story together using the available software. This technical workload is relived with another dialogic stage in the screening session where participants see each other's digital stories as finished digital pieces. In this final stage, participants share comments on each other's digital story.

In a digital storytelling workshop practice, from the beginning until the end, the process is ran by a facilitator, who is trained to mind the necessary pedagogical and communicative strategies in such an intimate environment, while enhancing the progress on the way to produce a personal digital narrative. The story circle is a key stage where the facilitator helps the group to get to know each other and with different exercises the participants move on into the actual storytelling practice where each participant has a equal turn, receives and delivers feedback. With the text writing stage the technical stages of the process starts followed by the sound recording and image editing where the media professionals get included to the group. This inclusion process may get tricky depending on the group dynamics just like in the case of this workshop with elderly women.

During the three technical stages mentioned, the participants are encouraged to experiment with the programs that they had used up to an extant or didn't use at all. These stages are more likely to be the phases where participants gain some digital skills that they didn't have. It is important to note here that the teaching process for these digital skills are never didactical rather through creating a co-learning environment where the facilitators position themselves as amateur creative content producers just like the participants rather than positing as media experts,

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[*] http://www.storycenter.org/history.html
[†] http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/queries/capturewales.shtml.

Graph 1: The functioning of the DST workshops as a circular practice [‡]

receiving the necessary help from the media professionals in the team only where necessary. We strongly support the idea that this positioning and continuous negotiating this positioning in different stages of this technical process is necessary in the DST workshop context.

Once the participants gain the necessary confidence and the motivation to produce their digital stories, the process runs smoother but tightened only by the deadline for the in-group screening until which the digital stories should be completed.

3.　Kuğulu Park Digital Stories: Women telling stories in/for a park

When we decided to run a workshop where we could experiment with Digital Storytelling workshop experience focusing more on the digital visual skill development aspect, another experimental DST workshop in Istanbul, that was organized by Simsek with Joe Lambert from Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkley, US, was the main inspiration. Erdener was one of the participants in that workshop and his engagement with DST workshop practice started as a media professional and a PhD candidate in visual media area. The idea of running a workshop in Ankara, where both researchers are natives, had a personal point of interest. The idea emerged as a city walk where the digital stories would be created using smart devices while moving around the city. However, in the implementation level, when we first met with the participant women, we realized that they moved the focus to a specific location, Kuğulu Park, as our first meeting point was that park. Kuğulu Park is one of the important features of the urban landscape in Ankara in the recent three decades. It was originally organized as part first in 1958, but

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[‡] Graph from Simsek's presentation 'The Perfect Circle' in ANZCA Conference, Canberra, 2010.

gained its popularity after the arrangements made between 1973-1977. In the center of the park is the pool with white swans, which were presented as a gift by the Vienna Municipal in those years and gave the park its name.

The park hosts a playground, a café-restaurant and in addition to swans several other types of local birds. In different periods of the year, organization of public events for the community is very common in this location. When we met with the three women who decided to participate in the workshop that we started in the café in this park, they immediately started talking about the location and how important the park is in their lives. The other two women could not participated due to their everyday responsibilities such as caretaking of their family and children. So the workshop was completed with the three women who participated. These three women were neighbors, living in the same apartment for the past two decades and were local in Kavaklıdere area, in downtown Ankara, nearly from their youth. So Kuğulu Park is central in their everyday life for the past four decades. All of these women have graduate degrees, worked as professionals, retired, and have children and even grandchildren now. They have basic digital literacy, they are active on the internet through email chains, commonly. In addition, one of them was very active in Facebook, sharing posts, writing posts that are shared by online friends. None of these women had a DST workshop experience before or were familiar with the form and the idea of producing their own digital narrative was very interesting for them, but challenging at the same time.

4. Progress of the workshop and findings

A conventional DST workshop is usually scheduled as a five-day-event[§] and mostly there is a set location for the workshop. In this case, although we aimed to run the workshop on a single day, scheduling the event as a single day event was not possible. In the decision level, all women agreed to devote a day, however as the time get closer, they had other issues that they needed to handle. So our time was limited with three days in our meeting day. During the first meeting, we completed the story circle stage in a non-conventional manner. Because as these women had known each other for a long time, storytelling in equal turns was not very possible. Rather they reminded each other some moments that they shared, remembering stories they had told each other, all centered in this park. In that sense, being very familiar with each other changed the conventional practice of story circle and transformed it into a more chat like mode.

[§] "Digital Stories from Amargi Women" project was run according to the conventional DST practice with the insights carried from feminist pedagogy. (Simsek 2012).
[**] Lambert, in the introduction of his book 'Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community' (2006) points to the importance of listening deeply each other's stories. (p.xxi)
[††] quoted from the participant's story circle narrative, 24.12.2011 .

In such an environment, the facilitator needs to fully devote her attention to story catching[**] as the stories of each participant got mixed up with the others. However, we solved that conflict through discussing story details that were introduced uniquely by each participant. One of the participants, for example, mentioned about the significance of the park in her life through a narrative starting from today and going back. Another participant got connected to this detail with a major moment in the history of the park. In 2007, the road construction process was just about to destroy the park. However, the community and the local municipality raised voices against the destruction. That participant mentioned and built her story around how a group of people including herself protected by guarding around the park, building 'a flesh wall'[††]. The third participant on the other hand, recalled a moment with her daughter on a snowy day and built her story around that moment. Following the story circle stage, the participants were asked to come to the next meeting having their stories written on a page as two of the participants already had their story notes as amateur writers. In a way, the conventional writing stage in the workshop environment was skipped. However, the written texts were read and comments were shared in the following meeting.

In that second meeting, the storyboarding was introduced by media professional. In his general attitude he first asked questions to the participants about the mood of their story and gave general information about image production and how ideas can be expressed visually. This process was the major focus of this workshop, as we aimed to experiment with the methodology for digital visual skills in a co-learning environment. He encouraged each participant to frame a particular item and move around framing different features. However, when we moved on with the actual image production stage in the park, one of the participants, who aimed to tell a story about the significance of the park in her life around her friendships, got anxious and took only few photos. Then she asked the media professional to produce the photos of some scenes for her. The media professional tried to show her how she can frame images. However, the participant started auditing the media professional to produce images she wanted. Although the media professional, in a calm manner refused to produce images for that particular participant, she insisted on him producing some images, attempting to legitimize her request stating that she could understand better if she saw how it was done.

Another participant shared her idea of using a video shot she already had and decided to use few other photos she produced during the workshop. She also searched for images on the Internet that showed the protests against the destruction of the park. The third participant, on the other hand, took her digital camera and walked around the park on her own and took photos. Then she showed her set of photos to the media professional and she asked for his professional approval before deciding on which ones to use. In the image production stage, that participant wanted to be on her own rather than producing her images by the help of the media professional. Once she was satisfied with the amount of photos she took, she asked for the opinion of the media professional. All through the process, the evaluation of the photographer/media professional was respected. The participants took mostly his leading remarks into consideration. The statements addressing him started with introductions such as 'you know better, this is your job but' or statements such as 'I took this photo, you may think it is not good but'[‡‡]

All of the participants, in between lines in their interactions with both the facilitator and the media professional, referred to the generation gap as an excuse for their limited digital literacy level, especially during the image production stage. A related feature in the interactions between the participants and the facilitators was the age hierarchy. The participants, who tried to enforce the media professional to take photos for her story, used a symmetrical language in which she referred to her age as a reference point for respect.

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[‡‡] quoted from workshop interactions during the image production stage, 27.12.2011.

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Once the image production stage was over, voice-recording and putting the digital story together stages followed one another, both of which were completed in one of the participant's house due to mobility and technical restrictions in the café location in Kuğulu Park. Participants asked whether the location could be changed and one of them even invited us to complete the stories in her house. The other two approved this invitation, so the workshop was completed in one of the houses. In a way, this suggestion coming from the participants was also significant for showing their attitude towards a mobile DST workshop experience. These elderly women could tolerate a mobile workshop experience up to a limit when compared with our experience of Iphone workshop in Istanbul with Joe Lambert, in October, 2011.

5. Concluding Remarks

The experimenting with DST as a mobile workshop practice for enhancing digital inclusion of elderly women, focusing on the digital visual skills education component as a research field was important to see the mechanisms that function in co-learning processes in an elder age. All through the workshop, the motivation of the women to learn more about digital media was dominant. However, in practice level, although each of them produced unique digital narratives, creating the visual components has been the major challenge. The show-and-tell aspect for introducing basic photography principles functioned less than our research expectations.

In addition to this component, the set schedule as a one-day mobile event was not practical with this group of women, who had known each other for a long time and had a tradition of casual interaction in daily basis. The story circle in this workshop did not function in the conventional sense, as these women used the ground as an everyday socializing event, rather than a semi-structured workshop experience. Besides, the familiarity of the researchers, with these women in theır social lives was a significant determinant of the relationship they carried during this informal learning experience. Especially during the digital visual skill development stage, the media professionals positioning as an expert was challenged with a positioning due to age hierarchy, in order to achieve dominance. In this sense, it is likely to say that the flexible nature of a mobile DST workshop was succeeded up to a limit, although it was an important step to finish off in the kitchen of a participant's house.[§§]

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