

Digital Storytelling in Bangladesh: Experiences, Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract This article reflects on a digital storytelling project undertaken for research, communication, and advocacy purposes in Bangladesh. The project trained young women from different regions of the country to make digital stories about their everyday struggles and journeys of personal growth. Excerpts from selected digital stories are shared to highlight how these short films can be used to understand struggles against class and gender hierarchies, sexual harassment, and the need to establish full citizenship rights for minority groups. The article makes a case for digital stories as a new methodology for doing and communicating research. It also sheds light on the nature of the technology itself and confronts the limitations and dilemmas that were faced, particularly with regard to authenticity and representation.

1 Introduction

I was first introduced to digital storytelling when I saw a friend's digital story in late 2007. His film *Just Feeling*,¹ recollected an incident from school highlighting how violence is enacted and sustained as part of masculinity, and his ruminations about gender were powerfully moving. I was struck by how potent his three-minute video was, how profoundly it was able to touch one's soul and convey a personal message. I thought it would be wonderful if others too could share their experiences and perspectives on life by creating a personal artefact like a digital story.

It was very exciting therefore when I heard of the Feminist Technology Exchange (FTX), which was being held in conjunction with the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum in South Africa in 2008. At the FTX, I was one of about 12 people in the digital storytelling track. Over three days of the intensive workshop, we listened and shared in story-circles, learnt technical skills to piece our stories creatively on a computer, assisted each other, and managed to make short videos about some part of our lives. The workshop culminated in a group screening of all our stories. I felt sick in my stomach at the thought of having a film about myself be shown in public and worried that

my relationship with peers at the workshop would change because of what I revealed. It was painful to hear my voice echoing in the room when my film was screened. But the fears I had harboured of people judging me harshly did not materialise; rather, people at the workshop commented that the film was very moving and lovely. I was emotionally drained afterwards but also felt so light and validated. That my story was no longer ephemeral but tangible to sight and hearing and had an impact, somehow made my life different to myself. It gave me ground beneath my feet and made me feel that I had made my mark on this world. I couldn't help wondering if there could be a way for women in Bangladesh to share their journeys too through digital stories.

2 Adopting digital storytelling into our programme

The opportunity to propose digital storytelling workshops fortunately came soon enough as the South Asia Hub of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium at BRAC Development Institute (BDI),² where I worked, was planning its activities for the second phase of the programme. Pathways sought to understand the daily struggles in lives of ordinary women and the

different ways in which empowerment/disempowerment is experienced by them. The programme was also committed to fostering diversity – in terms of the voices heard and the experiences had – in order to broaden representations of women from the stereotypes that are commonly seen. Since BDI encourages the use of innovative tools for research, incorporating digital storytelling into our programming presented an interesting way to conduct and complement our research.

Digital stories are two to three-minute multimedia presentations where individuals compose a short script about some aspect of their own life, which they narrate and illustrate visually with personal photographs and drawings. Digital stories are different from other mediums of storytelling (documentaries, film, radio) in that it is the storytellers themselves who are in charge of the editing process – participants themselves choose what to include, what to leave out and how exactly to represent themselves. This control over one's own story is what makes digital stories so unique and compelling both to the individual who has made the story and to the viewer who generally does not get to experience such personal productions.

3 About the digital storytelling workshops

BDI organised three digital storytelling workshops between November 2009 and April 2010 and 10–12 women took part in each. Participants created their digital story from start to finish over the course of the workshop, which lasted between three and five days. At first they gathered in a story-circle to share ideas about their own story, get feedback and listen to other people's stories. This was often an emotional process for many, as talking about incidents of personal struggle was often wrought with pain. A brief period of writing produced drafts of their story scripts, which ideally had to be around 200 words. This was shared again in the story-circle for feedback before finalisation, after which facilitators recorded participants narrating their own stories aloud. Participants then scanned in their photographs and documents, taking pictures of themselves and others to appropriately illustrate parts of their story. Given the deeply personal nature of the workshop, participants were encouraged to work together to learn from one another – either through feedback on scripts, or in practical ways.

Once the narration and images were digitised, participants were taught – with the aid of overhead projectors and demonstrations – to use computer software to combine them and create their own digital story. This process was new to all participants, as no one had any experience using video-editing software before, and there was tense anticipation at seeing one's own film take shape. Finally, participants added music and titles to their digital story. At the end of the workshop, all the participants' films were screened and every participant mentioned this as the best part of the workshop in the workshop evaluations.

The first workshop was held with researchers from among BDI. This was to make them familiar with a new technology and have them reflect on their own lives, in the hope that they may consider this audiovisual medium as a tool for their own research. The second workshop brought together university students and members from local government in Bangladesh. The three Vice-Chairwomen of *Upazila Parishads* came from three different districts of Bangladesh. The one piece of consistent feedback that we got in our post-workshop evaluations was that three days was not enough, and this was a learning which we tried to implement when working later with a mixed group. The third workshop was held in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and engaged women's rights and peace activists, staff at local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), university students and performers of music and dance. All the participants belonged to minority communities, albeit from different ethnic groups and backgrounds.

4 Use of technology being empowering

One of the most satisfying things about organising the digital storytelling workshops was hearing from the participants about the exhilaration they felt at having created a story about themselves. Almost everyone said that it made them view their lives differently and value themselves more, and from what we could gather, made them feel much more special. Most participants said that they couldn't believe that they themselves had sat at a computer and used video-editing software to produce their film. They were thrilled not only at having produced a personal artefact, but also felt tremendous confidence in having learnt new technical skills. For us, it was important to link technology to experiences of empowerment in a context where

technology is often intimidating. We wanted to encourage women's use of technology, as in Bangladesh it still tends to be male-dominated. These workshops presented one way for us to give back to the community – by endowing participants with technical skills and the ability to creatively express their own lives and enabling them to leave with a personal product that they could keep.

5 Negotiating ideas around storytelling and empowerment

When we started off our workshops, we found ourselves encountering challenges that we had not read about in any of the digital storytelling literature or guides. One of the dilemmas we faced was that when participants initially drafted their stories, the scripts were extremely simplified and ended on a very high and almost unrealistically hopeful note. Participants had abridged their experiences to juxtapose their journey from not having power to feeling powerful. Heard together, all the stories seemed to follow a similar pattern – of struggles/obstacles the participants had faced, and how they had triumphed or challenged them and the good things that they will do henceforth. We realised that there is something about the grand narrative that exists with telling stories – which has a beginning, some drama in the middle, and ends with a satisfactory resolution – that is at work when people are given a chance to document their lives for the first time.

The issues regarding storytelling that have been highlighted by Lara Worcester in this *IDS Bulletin* mention that the digital stories at our workshops were 'encouraged to be explicit and have closure, rather than open-ended statements' – which seems to be the opposite of what we were trying to do. Our suggestions during the story-circles were to select certain moments or experiences that have influenced the course of participants' lives, as otherwise their scripts tended to greatly exceed the three-minute time frame. Our facilitation had to involve a delicate balancing act of enabling participants to focus on select experiences or reflections while encouraging open endings. We found that there was an automatic tendency to adhere to the grand narrative of telling personal stories even though we were keen to hear stories that reflected the more ambivalent circumstances of negotiating everyday life.

We also realised that the Bangla word for empowerment, *khomotayon*, was associated with certain notions of materialism and power. Participants had understandings of empowerment that were linear and closely linked with the goals of development work (not surprising given the tremendous reach of NGOs in Bangladesh) – that receiving education, microcredit, training, etc. will necessarily and substantially improve the quality of women's lives and set them on the path towards empowerment. We had to ask ourselves, 'Are these linear stories of people's lives really what we want to represent? Don't we want to illustrate that even in times of obstacles there are moments of growth and strength, and that when great obstacles have been overcome one can often find oneself encountering heavier responsibilities and more daunting challenges?'

Our discussions revealed that there were differences amongst us in our ideas of having power. To some participants, being empowered meant having power *over*, rather than power *with* or power *for*.³ One participant revealed how she used her authority to have an opponent arrested for something he did not do. This made her feel very empowered, although many of us felt uncomfortable about the participant's misuse of her authority.

Worcester's claim that the workshop is a site of struggle over meaning and the stories as results of that co-creativity rings very true for us. The workshop process involved, among other things, interrogation of one's life and negotiation over its meaning to create a three-minute presentation, and as facilitators we encouraged thinking critically by dispelling the stereotypes and expanding ideas of empowerment. We attempted to dismantle the myth of empowerment as a destination to be reached by discussing how our lives take us on journeys full of ups and downs, twists and turns, and how moments of empowerment and disempowerment are experienced throughout. We clarified that it is okay to tell stories that have no resolution at the end, in case participants were feeling compelled to do so for some reason. The 'co-production' of digital stories that Worcester tries to underscore can be observed during the story-circles with their group feedback and the ways in which participants support each other to create their individual stories. These are important

aspects to keep in mind as we read digital stories for their personal and community histories.

6 Digital storytelling as a way of healing

One of the strengths of digital storytelling is that it encourages the participant to tell stories that are deeply personal. Very often, participants choose to share experiences they have not had the courage, space or opportunity to tell previously. One participant's digital story revealed the sexual harassment she had faced at university. In *Amar Protibadh* [My Revolt], she narrates how she was given poor marks in her university exams and made to attend an improvement course. One day a professor requested her to come to his office, upon which he took the opportunity to make sexual advances. She was disgusted by him and also herself because of the advantage this man, old enough to be her father, took of her. Enraged, she wanted to complain about the professor's behaviour to someone. But she feared that no one would believe a *Pahari*⁴ student lodging such serious allegations about a successful and well-respected Bengali professor. She also feared that the Bengali students on campus might turn against the *Pahari* students. Therefore she remained silent. Viewers of her digital story can palpably feel the double burden she carried which prevented her from registering complaints about the professor's behaviour – not only was she a woman who experienced violation but she was also a member of a minority community, whose precarious political position could be further eroded. After a while, she decided to overcome the hurt by challenging herself to perform well academically. After finishing her Honours degree, she went on to earn a Masters, and then pursued an MBA. She is now a rights activist, standing up against injustices in society and supporting movements for women's rights.

The participant said that this was the first time in her life that she had talked about what she had gone through at university. To have been able to document it and to have a whole roomful of strangers witness it was incredibly cathartic. It allowed her to put behind the immense anger, disgust and shame that had consumed her for many years and finally move forward. Her emotion-ridden speech at the end of the screening alludes to the power of digital storytelling – how it heals, how it can allow us to remember incidents in our own light and the way it deeply validates our experiences.

7 Digital stories as a means of understanding experiences of struggle in everyday lives

Other stories disclosed the difficulties with which people cope with circumstances that do not fit into the ideals delineated by society. Many of the digital stories produced at our workshop concerned the struggles involved in breaking gender norms and creating space for one's own identity. One participant used humour to craft a riposte to the all the comments she has had to endure that tried to impose on her what a Bangladeshi woman should be like. Her story follows a certain rhythm where she describes a personal situation and people's response to it, followed by a drawing of an indignant woman exclaiming 'What!!!' and then the author's response to people's comments. When she is told not to smoke openly, because 'What will people think of you?', she shoots back, 'What?! What do people think of the boys?'. When told that she is overweight and needs to lose weight in order to get married, she mutters, 'Fat men have wives'. By relating these incidents, which must have been painful at the time, in an amusing way, the narrator breaks a host of gender stereotypes and creates space for the validation of her choices. Digital stories such as these allow us to rupture the dominant representations of women and challenge preconceived notions about women's behaviour and lifestyle choices.

8 Digital storytelling as a means of communicating research findings/insights

One of the reasons why we utilised digital storytelling in our programme is that its personal nature communicates insights from research in a very convincing way. A limited number of stakeholders read research papers whereas many more people can easily engage with, and relate to, a three-minute audiovisual clip. Digital stories also offer an interesting alternative to doing lengthy interviews to find out about important life experiences, and are a far more appealing way to share people's stories. Pathways conducted research on women engaged in local government, and the digital stories of the three Vice-Chairwomen of *Upazila Parishads* were poignant testimonies of the struggles they faced in their personal lives and communities to take up positions in politics and administration. One of them spoke about being poor and the courage it took to run for public office with little financial or social resources. She is constantly reminded of the fact that she comes from a poor family, and



Drawing by Lopita Huq from her digital story, *WHAT!!!*

asked why she behaves in such a cocky manner. But she ignores all the taunts and comments and forges ahead with her political work. Such digital stories easily convey to viewers the class and gender hierarchies that women politicians have to battle daily to establish their ground.

When my friend, who loves me, said, 'Lopita, you have to live in this society. You can't be who you are, to fit into your society', I said 'What?!!! If I can't be who I want to be in my own society, where else will I be me?' (*WHAT!!!*, digital story by Lopita Huq, researcher, Dhaka)

'Oh, they in the Parishad say 'Why does a poor woman have such a loud voice? Who is she?' and I remind them, I was elected directly by people in three wards. I am there to represent their views. I have as much right to speak as they do.' (*I Can Do it Too!* digital story by Joyanti Rani Sardar, Union Parishad Vice-Chairwoman, Khulna)

Digital stories have proved to be a highly successful way to convey the lived realities of women's lives in an emotionally appealing way. At the various places that the stories have been shown – in classrooms, workshops, trainings and conferences – audiences have readily engaged with the material and responded to the issues it raises. Viewers have requested copies of the stories on DVD, so that they can share them with their organisations and use them as part of their work. These stories are potent advocacy tools because of their short duration and personal content. Audiences easily relate to the sociopolitical issues they raise, which don't seem at all pedantic, but rather can be understood because of the deeply personal experiences of the storyteller's life.

9 Truth value and authenticity in digital storytelling

Digital storytelling workshops have been carried out across the world featuring a host of issues, and most of the literature available emphasises the first-person narratives that supposedly share extremely personal 'truths'. The focus on 'in your own words, in your voices, using your own images and put together with your editing control' makes it seem that the stories are authentic and as close to the truth of real life as possible. Worcester (this *IDS Bulletin*) accurately interrogates this claim of authenticity in her article and dispels these myths by indicating that stories are created through processes of co-production, institutional framing of issues, and the interactions between hierarchies of power. Her point that stories are made through mediations in production, circulation and interpretation and that the contexts we occupy shape the stories we can tell is a critical one.

We found in our workshops that in politically charged situations and when alternative narratives are too risky to present, storytellers may structure their stories however they can make it acceptable. One participant made a digital story about her elder brother's murder in January 1998, after the signing of the peace accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts,⁹ by Bengalis who killed him after wrongly presuming him to be opposed to the treaty. In her digital story, she shows photographs of the wounded corpse of her brother and talks about the enormous weight and vacuum her brother's death has left in her family. Informal conversations with the participant about the events leading up to her brother's death seemed to indicate flaws in the factual basis of her story. It seemed to us that contrary to what she tells in her digital story, her brother may have been killed by a rival minority group who were supporting the treaty.

We began to conclude that digital stories are no more authentic than any other text that one might pen, and that stories are mediated by the circumstance we inhabit. The dominant narrative in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is that Bengalis are the aggressors and the Hill people are the helpless victims. To say that a *Chakma* group might have carried out the killing of another *Chakma* places the traditional victims, who are still seeking full citizenship rights, in a harsh light. Additionally, it leaves open the possibility of encouraging Bengalis to commit violence against Hill people and

conveniently attribute it to the *Chakmas* themselves. Given that the treaty was finally signed, those who had committed themselves to resisting it – which possibly includes her brother – may be perceived to have died fighting the wrong cause. Perhaps one way of coping with this is to say that the Bengalis murdered him, thus making him a victim who elicits both the Bengalis' and ethnic groups' sympathy.

We were reminded that however liberating digital stories might be as a space to challenge hierarchies, defy norms and share untold stories, even then, the contexts we live in sometimes limit what can be told.

10 Conclusion

Almost all participants of our workshops mentioned that the process of making a digital story about one's life was itself a transformative experience. It seems that there is something about working creatively around personal issues that makes the experience especially profound and makes one especially vulnerable; not just in terms of the private story that is shared but also because of the creative dispositions on view which make the story come alive. One's script, intonation during the narration, choice of images, style in which they appear and disappear, the way the pictures transition from one to another – everything that combines to make a

digital story – has varying values and causes vulnerability. But it is precisely this creative exercise which enables one to hold one's personal story up to others and the vulnerability that accompanies it, that makes creating digital stories a visceral experience for the storyteller. This might also explain why viewing of the stories by others is also moving and immediate.

Digital stories can help to alter the world in a small way, even if it is in our own perception, by giving individuals the rare opportunity to tell their story from their own perspectives and by providing the space to articulate unshared/alternative narratives and be defiant. While storytelling in itself is a mediated act and may be circumscribed by the contexts we live in, digital stories still offer a potent means for healing, and a instrument to speak up against oppression and discrimination. Its audiovisual features make it an attractive medium for research and communications to enable people to understand the complicated realities and vicissitudes of individual lives. We have found that the process of telling deeply personal stories through digital storytelling workshops can itself be a strategy for empowerment, and that the diversity of experiences and contexts that digital stories convey add to our conceptualisations of empowerment.

Notes

- 1 See www.alangreig.net/video/just-feeling (accessed 14 June 2012).
- 2 BRAC Development Institute (BDI) is a research and teaching institute located at BRAC University in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- 3 For explanations of the terms 'power for', 'power with' and 'power over', see Kabeer (1994) and Lukes (1974).
- 4 *Pahari* refers to the minority communities living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an area

that had for a long time led a separatist movement for independence and fought with the Bangladesh Government.

- 5 The peace treaty was signed in December 1997 to bring to an end decades of armed insurgency between the Hill people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Bangladesh Government. As in the case of any treaty, there were people for and against the treaty, especially among the Hill people and a lot of violence took place between various groups pre- and post-treaty.

References

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