Digital Storytelling as a Reflective Practice Tool in a Community of Professionals

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Best Research Paper Award Winner

Abstract

This exploratory study is based on an ethnographic research about a group of food safety professionals (physicians, veterinarians, biologists, chemists, nutritionists and prevention technicians) that try to exchange information and solve critical work issues communicating their experiences in the form of digital stories. In fact they convey more detailed context than textual and verbal stories, facilitating tacit knowledge elicitation and *reflective practices*. The digital storytelling process helped the community to reach a higher level of awareness about their specific professional competencies and critical work issues, fostering high levels of commitment and motivation, transforming the community in a true Community of Practice.

Abstract in Italian

Le persone sembrano avere una abilità innata di rappresentare le loro esperienze attraverso una storia proprio perché esse facilitano la comunicazione rispetto a descrizioni puramente formali, veicolando emozionalità, un ricco contesto e una chiara descrizione di cause ed effetti. Questo studio esplorativo è basato su di un progetto formativo rivolto ad un gruppo di esperti di sicurezza alimentare (medici, veterinari, biologi, chimici, nutrizionisti e tecnici della prevenzione) della Regione Veneto. La formazione mirava a migliorare la cooperazione tra questi professionisti impegnati a gestire problemi di salute animale e di sicurezza alimentare e con scarse occasioni di scambiare informazioni durante le loro attività. A questo proposito è stata creata una Comunità di Pratica on-line: durante le attività è emerso come questi professionisti utilizzassero molto spesso modalità narrative per comunicare elementi di problem posing e problem solving. Per supportare questi processi, i partecipanti, suddivisi in gruppi, sono stati incoraggiati a realizzare dei Digital Storytelling sui temi problematici ritenuti più importanti ed in cui potevano raccontare le loro esperienze e le eventuali soluzioni. Il processo di creazione e condivisione dei Digital ha avuto due effetti principali: da un lato ha migliorato la consapevolezza delle proprie specifiche competenze professionali e dall'altro ha stimolato la motivazione a partecipare alle attività della comunità trasformando conoscenza personale narrativa in una conoscenza inter-soggettiva e negoziata.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Community of Practice, reflective practices.

Introduction: Storytelling as rich form of communication and knowledge sharing

People seem to have an innate ability to represent their experiences in a natural way in the form of stories (Bruner, 1993; Ong, 2002) because they facilitate communication, describe content in a rich context and require less effort than more formal methods. Stories are the "means which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions" (Polkinghorne, 1988). We can tell a story for personal reasons, or to explain and teach a specific topic, so the term story can refer to either fiction or non fiction, depending on the context. In this paper we will use the term story to refer to the narration of a workplace real *case based* experience: this kind of stories are often used in professional contexts such as medical, law, and business because the story format provides an efficient way to deal with and communicate complex context in a short period of time.

In the last few years many authors have recognized the importance of storytelling as part of the adult learning process. Schank (1995) suggest that all we have are experiences, but all we can effectively tell others are stories and learning from one's own experiences depend upon being able to communicate our experiences as stories to others. Stories usually contain a detailed explanation of the cause-and-effect relationship between actions and their consequences. People prefer organized knowledge: personal narratives provide a built-in structure with clear predictable plots, with authentic contexts that are easily recognizable.

Other researchers have studied the role of stories in knowledge sharing in organizations (Orr, 1996; Prusak et al., 2012), in transmitting norms, values and to spark action (Denning, 2002), to promote strategic leadership (Boal & Schultz, 2007), to promote explicit tacit knowledge (Linde, 2001), to describe a problem and to suggest a possible solution (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002).

Digital Storytelling: a new tool for an old practice

Since early times stories have been transmitted through different ways: orally, textually or through art, nowadays it's possible to create personal narratives using new digital media, and share it on-line, so *Digital* Storytelling is not a totally new concept, but it is only a new genre or new way of transmitting the stories. Digital Storytelling was originally developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling in the early 1990's mainly to support personal narratives (Lambert, 2013), but it evolved to apply to a variety of purposes and is now broadly used in many contexts such as education (Robin, 2006) (Sadik, 2008; Ohler, 2013) social (Lambert, 2013), health promotion (Gubrium, Hill & Flicker, 2014), etc. A typical Digital Storytelling artifact is a video or a slide-show just a few minutes long and its essential elements include a strong point of view, dramatic questions and emotional content that keeps the viewer's attention and speaks directly to the audience: indeed, a digital story is often viewed as a strong emotional experience.

Digital stories also convey a more detailed context than textual and verbal stories, facilitating tacit knowledge elicitation (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006; Whyte & Classen, 2012). The transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge is one of the most important processes inside an organization, so the better an organization is able to elicit tacit knowledge from its employees and share it inside, the more efficient it can be (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Storytelling, problem solving and War Stories

Very often in professional contexts narrative knowledge, explicited in form of stories, offer a mean to distribute experiential knowledge and an important way to communicate ill-structured problems. In fact in many ethnographic studies researchers found that on difficult or not usual problems, professionals produce *good stories*: if they are really memorable and the problem has been solved in a particular new way, they became *war stories* and contribute to create a *community memory* (Orr, 1996). People with a good memory of war stories can become an important resource for the entire community.

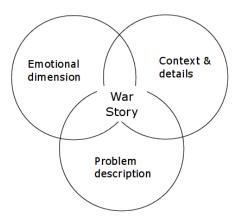


Figure 1. The main elements composing a war story: problem description without a rich context and without associating emotions, can't produce a good war story (Petrucco, 2013).

In a good *war story* you can find three important elements mixed together: the emotional and *dramatic* dimension, a rich description of a context, event or situation and the specification of solution (or failure) of a problem. Narrative seems to convey its message in an inherently human dimension that is lost in a formal schematic exposition (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p.66). So, a war story, from this point of view, is more than a simple report of facts, is an *entertaining* real knowledge-sharing process that facilitates the attainment of a vicarious experience (Bruner, 1990).

Storytelling to share professional practices

This exploratory study based on an ethnographic research (Ferranti, Nadin & Ravarotto, 2012), was carried out as a training project in 2012 and involved N=72 food safety professionals (physicians, veterinarians, biologists, chemists, nutritionists and prevention technicians) of the Veneto regional health system (North Eastern Italy). The training project was aimed at improving the cooperation between people belonging to different service industries that deal with animal health and food safety. For these professionals, during their everyday work, there are few opportunities to exchange information and talk about and solve critical issues.

To fill this gap, we experimented with the creation of an on-line Community of Practice (Wenger, 2006). Initially the study was supposed to focus mainly on the analysis of relational processes and the thinking practices of a community of professionals that used for the first time the support of a platform and on-line forums, subsequently, the analysis of the interactions in the forums highlighted an interesting

factor concerning the manner in which the various problems for discussion were presented: in fact, they always began from a true story of a professional incident that the narrator was protagonist of or that in turn he had heard about from others. One of the participants wrote the following:

"In the forum ... you see what other colleagues think about a particular problem, in particular if they have resolved it. Some cases are still unresolved. But you can find out about a case that you yourself have solved the issue, maybe even 10 years ago, so you may have a suggestion for the individual who asks for help"

Very often the reaction of other colleagues, besides commenting on the story, was to discuss in turn a story from their own professional experience that either confirmed the same issue in other contexts, or provided a suitable solution in a similar context. In order to better shed light on the problems, pictures and photos taken by the same members of the community were also posted. Seeing thus the relevance that the emergence of narrative modalities in the processes of problem-sharing and problem-solving had taken on in the on-line community, we decided to support their *reflective practices* encouraging participants to create Digital Storytelling artifacts about the problems they perceived to be the most important.

It is recognized that experience by itself does not always lead to improved professional practices, unless we reflect on it: so communicating our experiences as stories is not enough, reflection is recognized as an important process needed for real change. Kolb's (1975) Learning Cycle, Schön's (1987) concept of the *reflective practitioner* and Gibbs (1988) Structured Debriefing, provided important theoretical references for this topic.

As Schön (1991) notes, we need to capture those stories to make them objects of reflection and with the help of multimedia, these stories can be recorded. One of the purposes of the study was then to determine how a collaborative digital storytelling construction process could support reflection on professional practices. To this aim, the following research questions were explored:

 How can a digital storytelling activity support reflective process to improve and diffuse good professional practices? Our working hypothesis therefore provided for the use of Digital Storytelling in two successive stages: the first stage understood mainly as an internal process within the community, to encourage reflection on one's own professional practices told by the stories, and the second as a product to be utilized as a support for communicating best practices both inside and outside the community (Figure 2).

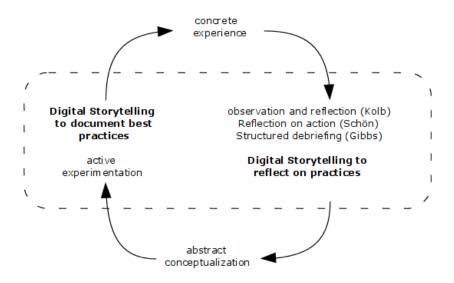


Figure 2. The implementation of a Digital Storytelling activity, inside a general model on reflective practice, based on the models of Kolb (1975), Schön (1978) and Gibbs (1988).

Creating a digital story as a reflective practice: the process

The stages of digital storytelling realizations

Prior to gathering in groups and telling their stories, we provided them with some *guidelines* in order to make them more aware of their role as storytellers and listeners, taking as a reference a number of conditions for encouraging participation in Mezirow's (1991) and (Tyler, 2009) *critical discourse*:

- The time spent for each story on storytelling and for possible requests for clarification and comments should not exceed 10 minutes;
- The story that was told had to have as a subject a non routine problem that required a creative or unusual solution or it had to be an issue that was not fully fixed by the protagonist;

Everyone had to make themselves available to answer without reluctance
questions for the purpose of making the issues clearer or expanding upon the
issues rose by the others, and had to be as open as possible to accept
comments, possible criticism and suggestions of potential alternative actions
from the others, that could come out during the discussion.

This stage of storytelling and collective discussion of the stories was considered very important: in fact, in this manner one can negotiate shared meaning, and the listener also becomes a co-author of the narrative through a process of inter-subjective participation (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 2000; Tsoukas, 2009). At the end, after hearing all the stories of their peers in each group, they chose to convert one into a Digital Story.

In order to facilitate the process of narration of the stories taken from the participants' professional experience and to save time, in our blended training program we decided to bring together all the participants on one day specifically dedicated to this activity. The participants worked in groups of 3-4 people telling each other stories taken from their work experience and then they chose which ones to discuss and elaborate.

This stage was very important because, from a cognitive point of view, they changed the story type: from a case-based story to a scenario-based/problem based story (Andrews, Hull & Donahue, 2009). In fact, analyzing each case-based story, they apply critical thinking setting up a typical scenario t problem hat can alter the original case to better suit the specific aim and improve the overall comprehension.

So, in a second step, they wrote the storyboards inside each group sparkling discussions about what to change and what to leave, and at what level of details. After completing the storyboard they realize the videos themselves, because before, in the training course, participants had already learned to use some simple software videoediting tools.

The storyboard writing stage and the creation of the video

Even in this second stage participants were provided with some precise directions for drawing the storyboard in which the following elements about the plot had to be clearly defined: the main character(s) (who); the context (where) and the events timeline (when); the content (what happened, what was the problem, how and why did it happen). These elements are defined as *story grammars*, and they are tied together in a *plot*. Plot transforms a list of facts into a real narrative and creates meaning between separate story components (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 2004).

In addition to having a clear representation of the problem to narrate, we requested participants to pay particular attention to the broad description of the context, in that at times details are of fundamental importance in the solution of a problem and they help in making *tacit knowledge* explicit. The typical structure of a story in order to be recognized as well made, like the narratology of Propp, Greimas, Campbell and others, had to contain at least four elements:

- 1. the existence of a problem or something that needs to be done and gives meaning to the story,
- 2. a set of conceptual resources or materials that are necessary for the task,
- 3. a set of established rules to be respected, and finally
- 4. the recognition of the resolution of the story.

These constrains are useful as it seems that more linear structured guidelines to write digital stories more support reflection processes (Callens & Elen, 2011). For the purpose of stimulating critical reflection, we advised against choosing necessarily stories with a "happy ending", and to also leave space for *cautionary tales* that in the context of work are often associated with "bad practices".

The other important aspects that we required participants to pay a lot of attention to were:

- maintain in the story a balanced level of emotional involvement;
- selection of the most suitable audience for viewing the digital product;
- aim or intention (why that particular story was chosen, the underpinning morals and values);

With Digital Storytelling, the need to stimulate reflection must be balanced: an excessive degree of emotion that emerges from the story can seriously damage cognitive performance, particularly in the process of problem-solving. This criticism is clearly depicted by the Yerkes-Dodson law (Figure 3). Often is through emotional connections, rather than reasoning, that a story is evaluated (Bowman et al., 2013).

The choice of the audience also implies a careful adjustment in the language, in the level of tacit knowledge to use in the drawing of the storyboard and in sharing the morals and the values that one wants to communicate. Telling a story to achieve a specific result is quite different from telling a story only for entertainment, so the way a story is performed its very important.

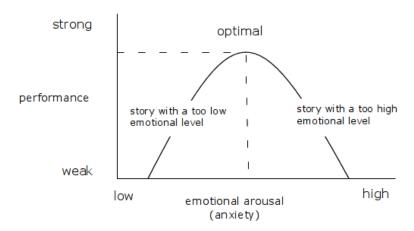


Figure 3. The Yerkes-Dodson law applied to the emotional content of a story (Broadhurst, 1957)

The reflective practices triggered

In order to stimulate reflective practices and to help to define the problematic moments of the stories, the groups were able to draw their *Visual Portrait of a Story* (Ohler, 2008): that is to think about the story more as a map of the critical moments and real *turning points*, rather than just a series of events presented in sequence. These moments, identified through a group discussion, were used as stimuli for reflection on the ways in which the problems were resolved, unresolved or resolved in an unsatisfactory manner by the protagonist or protagonists.

Topics of the digital storytelling

A total of 14 Digital Storytelling items were created on various topics of interest to the community of food safety professionals: for example, how to deal with cases of transporting a pet abroad, how to follow the proper procedures to ensure one cooks mushrooms collected personally without toxic risks, how to create samples that test for the presence of pesticide residues in agriculture, and the most effective methods for water inspection, etc. The participants identified four possible audiences for Digital Storytelling:

- their peers in the community,
- schools/students,
- institutions and food companies,
- consumers and citizens.

Of a total of 14 videos created, as many as 8 were addressed to a target audience of colleagues: this was considered a significant element, linked to the willingness to share experiences among members of the community about specific professional procedures which could be substantially different (for example procedures for water chemical control, in testing histamine in fish, in mushroom edibility, seafood sampling and so on). All videos were also classified according to the way they exposed the problem:

- most of them, 11, (79%) proposed a problem resolved in an effective manner,
- while 2 (14%) make explicit a problem solved but not in a completely satisfactory manner,
- only 1 (7%) showed a problem that has not been solved at all.

The preference for creating *problem solved* stories, was strongly related first to the will to help they peers and share effective solutions, and also to their need to compare with one another the quality of solutions adopted. In all cases, all types of videos were recognized by participants as valuable, real *shared artifacts* on which to discuss and refer to, inside and outside the on-line forums.

Digital stories to document best practices: between a willingness to share and privacy concerns

It's interesting to note that about half of the digital stories produced (58%) had targeted specific audiences, community members or outside co-workers. The intent of this approach was not only to provide immediate and concrete help to solving common problems, including that of wanting to keep the presentation of best practices in a coded and easily accessible form, different from other solely textual formal representations. Particular attention on the part of all participants was given to the problem of privacy: while sharing photos and pictures taken from real contexts within the closed forums of the community and used for the creation of digital stories did not raise any particular concerns, some problems emerged when we proposed to share some stories representing contexts and highly sensitive material, with a larger audience on specialized websites or simply on their corporate website. The solution proposed was not to give up the sharing, but as much as possible to rework the digital stories trying to eliminate any references considered sensitive.

Video creation

The actual creation stage of the video took place in part in person or in part it was carried out long distance, through the community forum, where participants continued to work on their digital story. The lack of experience with the use of

multimedia software on the part of some of the participants did not create particular difficulties because we originally provided for special training in their use in a series of laboratory meetings and we also had the help of more experienced colleagues. Interestingly, to confirm the fact that the images and videos used were actually derived from professional experiences, the majority of the material was obtained through the use of their mobile phones and not with professional video cameras or digital cameras.

Some preliminary findings

To gather feedback on their perceptions on the process of creating a Digital Storytelling artifact from their work experiences we submitted a simple questionnaire mainly to investigate:

- the possible use of the digital story in the workplace context
- the difficulty perceived in elaborating a story taken from a professional experience,
- the reflection on practices and competences stimulated by the digital story creation process

The participants' perception of the applicability of digital narratives in their workplace was very high (Figure 4): 49% said that it was highly applicable and 41% said it was applicable, for a total of 90%. They considered these digital narratives as shared knowledge artifacts, useful either in the workplace or in the on-line forums. In particular, the intentions of possible use are significant: most subjects think that digital storytelling is a good strategy for communicating content to the community (communicate with citizens, 25.4%) and this opinion is confirmed by the consideration that videos and images describe a situation better than words alone (20.1%).

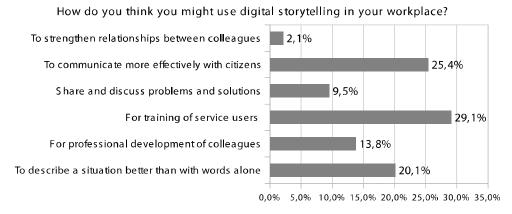


Figure 4. The perceived possible use of digital storytelling artifacts in workplace context

The answers to the question about the difficulty revealed a favourable bias: the average *complexity* of all the stories created was high, both with regard to the narrative aspect itself as well as the professional content. This was a sign that the process of recalling *good stories* taken from their workplace experience, writing a storyboard and translating it all into a audiovisual form, was a real deep reflective process. Most of the professionals (54%) did not seem to have particular trouble at this conceptual stage (Table 1) even though a total of 46% showed some problems in elaborating the story (14% difficult, 32% not too easy).

Table 5 The perceived difficulty in elaborating the stories from professional experience.

Question 1: How easy was it to elaborate stories taken from your professional experience?	
Very easy	7.30%
Easy	46.40%
Not too easy	31.90%
Difficult	46.40%

The many members said in personal interviews, that the difficulties encountered in the process of formalizing workplace experiences into digital narratives was mainly of two kinds: one, because they often had to elicit a lot of tacit knowledge *embedded* in their practices, and two, because they realized that, telling a story about a problem-solving incident, would have revealed necessarily to others a great deal about their professional competences on the subject.

50.0% 45,0% 43.4% 45.0% 40.0% 35,0% 30,0% 25,0% 20.0% 15,0% 10,2% 10.0% 5,0% 1,4% 0,0% -Not very useful Useful Not at all Very useful

Do you think that the Digital Storytelling creation process has helped you to reflect on your competences?

Figure 5. The perceived effect of the digital story creation process on reflective practices

Precisely this concern was taken into consideration by the question of how the process of creating a professional story and reworking the professional stories has made them reflect in depth on how to solve the problems proposed in the stories. Eighty-eight percent of participants said in this regard that the activity was perceived as very useful or useful and only 11% perceived it little or not at all useful (Figure 5).

Conclusions

The digital storytelling process helped the community to reach a higher level of awareness about their specific professional competencies and critical work issues, fostering high levels of commitment and motivation. This dialogic process can be a way to transform simple narrative knowledge into an inter-subjective, negotiated knowledge. In addition, digital storytelling became a real *transformative* tool for personal and professional development.

The apparent successful outcome of the narrative activity, creation and reflective processing of digital stories, encourages us to further test the method in this and other professional contexts, not only when it is necessary to stimulate *reflective practices*, but also when it is necessary to stimulate the emergence of a community of practice. In fact, during the collaborative creation of the digital story, the community can become a true community of practice because the Digital Storytelling realization process mediate relationships. When stories are shared, the trust and the relationships inside the community are strengthened.

In this respect then it becomes very important to mention the concept of *reification* of Wenger, this in fact implies that the production of concrete artifacts, and facilitating the negotiation of meanings, is an important element upon which the community is based on, but unlike traditional storytelling activities which often take place orally, the realization of a concrete digital artifact offers numerous advantages. Not only during the initial step of creation, as we have seen, but it has alternative uses even later, when it can be made available to others, for example to support the training of new employees, or remain as documentation of best professional practices of the community or made available in new contexts, where it can be negotiated and reinterpreted and where it can generate important feedback for the community.

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