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Digital Storytelling: A Comparative Case Study
in Three Northern California Communities

By

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THESIS

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Community Participation in Media Production	7
<i>Participation in Film, Video, and Photography</i>	7
<i>Digital Storytelling</i>	10
<i>Foundation Funding</i>	14
Chapter 3: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Empowerment	16
<i>Participation and Power in the Production of Knowledge and Decision-Making</i>	16
<i>Empowerment</i>	22
Chapter 4: Overview of Method and Study Design	26
<i>Case Studies</i>	27
<i>Methods</i>	28
<i>Data Collection and Analysis</i>	30
Chapter 5: REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops	33
<i>Background</i>	33
<i>Project Activities</i>	35
<i>Project Outcomes</i>	38
Chapter 6: Up from the UnderStory	45
<i>Background</i>	45

<i>Project Activities</i>	47
<i>Project Outcomes</i>	51
Chapter 7: Abriendo las Cajas (Opening Boxes)	55
<i>Background</i>	55
<i>Project Activities</i>	59
<i>Project Outcomes</i>	61
Chapter 8: Findings	65
Chapter 9: Conclusion	76
Bibliography	79
Appendix A	84

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The average American could not view the rundown company towns from the highways he traveled, and there were no shacks in the national parks where he roamed. Nor did he really see the urban slums as he commuted to and from his suburban home and downtown office on new freeways or rapid transit...the poor continued as a hidden subculture.” Walter Trattner (1999)

Documentary photography and video have been used for decades to draw attention to the stories of underserved and marginalized populations, using images to record social inequities and isolation in rural and urban communities. Beginning in the 1960s, filmmakers, nonprofit and educational institutions, government agencies, and foundations began experimenting with participatory processes in film and video as a strategy to lift up the issues faced by these populations to the larger public. In *Turn on the Power: Using Media for Social Change* (González and Goodman 2000), the authors write that film and video:

“has been used to bring grievances from ‘regular folks’ to the powers that be, to sway public opinion and in some cases, to simply bear witness of injustice that has been consistently ignored or denied by those in power”(p.5).

These early experiments included community members as subjects of films and used a range of participatory approaches to include them: community members were asked to watch and discuss films made about them; filmmakers solicited feedback about the extent to which the film represented community members’ viewpoints; community members were provided with basic media instruction and asked to make films based on

a subject selected by an outside researcher; and community members initiated their own films to address subjects they chose (Elder 1995; Worth and Adair 1997).

In the early 1990s digital storytelling emerged. It has been propagated by the widespread availability to consumers of inexpensive communication and technology tools (Miller 2004) and its use is growing in health and community education practice. Using point-and-shoot cameras, video equipment, and computers, researchers and practitioners work with community members to capture different visual and oral data to construct narratives about their communities (Mitchell 2008). Using their own images and language, community members reflect on, discuss, and present their knowledge through these user-generated digital stories to inform research, practice, and policymaking on issues that impact them. As a result, an increasing number of community-based organizations and foundations working with underserved populations are organizing digital storytelling projects.

My interest in user-generated media grew as a result of my work at a foundation and a public access channel. In 2000, I worked for the Benton Foundation on a project that supported partnerships between public broadcasting stations and community-based health organizations. The objective was to produce programming that would increase information and awareness about health issues. I later worked at a public access channel, where I directed youth programming and managed the station.

My first experience with digital storytelling was through my position as a graduate student researcher with the California Communities Program (CCP) at the University of California, Davis. While working with CCP, I provided technical assistance

during digital storytelling workshops conducted as part of a multi-year evaluation of a youth development initiative. I also provided technical assistance and assessed a digital storytelling project aimed at documenting the community and economic development in a Sierra Foothills community. I noticed that both of these projects leveraged technology in communities where participants may have otherwise not had access. This exposure was important because it created opportunities for community members to learn how to use technology, including computers and software. This is connected to my second observation that, through the process of telling and sharing their stories in facilitated groups, community members gained an increased sense of self-confidence. My work with these projects increased my interest in how and to what effect digital storytelling was being used in communities.

I conducted an extensive review of digital storytelling programs in the popular and academic literature. Research about digital storytelling is still in its early stages and there are very few studies that have explored the outcomes of digital stories for individuals and communities. I found that the literature that does exist frequently alluded to the possibility or promoted the promise of the production of these stories to 'empower' individuals and, in doing so, create conditions for organization and community change. However, my review found much less discussion about how, where, and when the stories might be used to achieve that change. The digital storytelling literature, which is growing, placed less emphasis on organizing for change, a lengthy and multifaceted process, than on community participation in media production, a shorter and less complex practice. This gap raised a number of questions for me. How

and to what extent are digital stories amplifying underserved voices? How does one know if the stories increase knowledge about issues impacting underrepresented communities? How are digital stories creating spaces for public discussion and action? I was interested in learning more about how participants in digital storytelling projects were using and understanding digital stories, specifically the extent to which they identified individual, organizational, or community transformation as an outcome of the stories' production.

This study did not attempt to measure empowerment per se, though I believe investigations of that sort are critical next steps for this emerging field. Instead, this study is an exploration into the practices and attitudes of participants in digital storytelling projects. Specifically, it questions whether and how digital storytelling promotes different aspects of individual, organizational, and community empowerment as it is understood *by* participants in digital storytelling projects. To do this, I used a comparative case study approach supported by theory and research about citizen participation and empowerment as discussed in disciplines such as community development, political science, and public health. I also documented and compared three digital storytelling projects in northern California. The first project engaged youth in seven different communities in the Sacramento metropolitan region; the second project paired youth with adult community leaders and university researchers in a sparsely-populated rural community in the Sierra Foothills; and the third project brought together youth and adults living in a dense urban core in the Bay Area. Though the projects varied in planning, design, and implementation, they shared a common

element espoused by project funders and facilitators: the possibility or promise for empowerment and change.

The digital stories produced as part of the first case study, the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops, were to be used to record youth viewpoints about the issues facing them in their neighborhoods and communities. In the second case study, *Up from the UnderStory*, project goals included creating media to inform future community change projects and promoting support for community change efforts. In the third case study, *Abriendo las Cajas* sought to increase awareness and reduce incidences of domestic violence in their community.

Through interviews with community members, nonprofit and foundation staff, and review of digital stories and documents, this study draws some generalizations about the actors, processes, and outcomes of digital stories in several community initiatives. It begins with an historical overview of collaborative filmmaking, which shares many theoretical and applied characteristics with digital storytelling. This chapter also includes an overview of digital storytelling, in particular the methods used by the Center for Digital Storytelling and Photovoice. In Chapter 3, I summarize some of the academic literature that has contributed to the academy's understanding about empowerment and the role of participation and power in this process. My methods and study design are detailed in Chapter 4. I also provide an outline of the three projects that contribute to the comparative case study. These projects are described in more detail in the subsequent three chapters, including the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops (Chapter 5), *Up from the UnderStory* (Chapter 6), and *Abriendo las Cajas*

(Chapter 7). The findings that emerged in this study are presented in Chapter 8, which are discussed and summarized in Chapter 9.

Chapter 2: Community Participation in Media Production

Participation in Film, Video, and Photography

Traditional electronic media disseminates information over some geographic scale via radio and television. Media can “raise or diminish issues in the public eye, and therefore affect the distribution of benefits in society” (Islam 2002, 4-5). In the United States, media takes two forms: commercial (such as ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and their local affiliates) and noncommercial (such as NPR, PBS and their affiliate stations).

Information distributed through media channels, commercial or noncommercial, is generally communicated in a top-down, one-way vertical process. It is controlled by a series of gatekeepers who make decisions about media content that controls the information (agenda setting) and shapes the knowledge (framing) audiences have access to (Hubbard et al. 1975; Jernigan and Wright 1996; Rojas et al. 2005; Wallack 1994). These gatekeepers also control the form of media production, representation, and distribution. Feedback is limited. The access to this information is variable and unequal. Marginalized populations are often disconnected from one another in this process (Gaventa 1980, 1993; Marchessault 1995).

Information distributed through community-produced media, which tends to take place on a smaller scale confined to a neighborhood, city, or suburb (Jankowski 2002), comes more frequently from personal sources and encourages interpersonal communication through a two-way horizontal process where both receiver and sender

participate (Berrigan 1979). People's participation in media production has the potential to increase the relevance of media content because people with local expertise and understanding inform it. It also has the potential to increase understanding by decision-makers isolated from these issues but with the power to effect policy (Israel et al. 1998; Wang and Burris 1997; Wang, Yuan, Feng 1996; Lopez et al. 2005).

Today's practice and understanding about the participation of community members in visual media production can be traced back to two influential film projects. In the 1960s Sol Worth, a professor of visual communication at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, began teaching youth who had dropped out of school how to use video cameras to produce their own films. Worth called this a bio-documentary (Worth and Adair 1997), a film made by a person who did not have to be a professional filmmaker that communicates that person's experiences to broader audiences. In 1966, Worth traveled to Pine Springs, Arizona with John Adair, an anthropology professor. They worked collaboratively with six Navajos to produce a film, training participants how to use tape recorders, cameras, frame shots, and edit footage. As visual anthropologists, Worth and Adair were interested in understanding communication in particular cultural settings, specifically why a particular person within a specific cultural context interprets an image in the way that s/he did and what could be generalized about this process to the larger population (Worth and Adair 1997, 15).

Around this time, filmmakers were also experimenting with ways film could be used to include people in decision-making about policy issues that impacted them. In 1967, as part of its "war on poverty," the Canadian government supported an initiative

to use film, video, and cable television to increase information, understanding, and action about social issues, particularly poverty. The initiative, 'Challenge for Change,' was conceived by its program staff as a strategy to integrate the voices of the poor into the larger mainstream dialogue (Marchessault 1995; Williamson 1990).

Filmmaker Colin Low and extension workers Don Snowden and Fred Earle piloted the initiative's participatory process with the residents of Fogo Island, a small island off the coast of Newfoundland. Most of this rural island's 5,000 residents were isolated from one another and decision-makers because of poor infrastructure. This infrastructure included a lack of information sources like telephones, newspapers, radio, and television (Williamson 1990). Residents were resisting efforts by the Canadian government to relocate them to "growth areas" so that the island could be redeveloped (Williamson 1990). Low used what he called "vertical" films to capture residents' issues and concerns (Williamson 1990). These films included a community event, an everyday activity, or an interview with a resident discussing a topic of their choice. Residents reviewed the films through a series of community screenings, editing out scenes that weren't accurate representations of their experiences.

This process, which came to be known as the Fogo Process (Marchessault 1995; Williamson 1990), was used in future 'Challenge for Change' projects. It was intended to remove, to the greatest extent possible, any interpretation of the residents' experiences by Low and his crew (Marchessault 1995; Williamson 1990). The screenings were also used as launching pads for discussion among residents, which were facilitated by a staff member or extension worker. Through this process, Fogo residents developed a new

understanding about the knowledge and expertise housed within their community. They began to organize around their common interests and create strategies to change their situation. The films were eventually screened for Newfoundland government officials who came to understand that resettlement was not the only option for the island and engaged in discussion with residents about alternatives (Williamson 1990).

“The Challenge for Change film enabled communities to ‘view themselves, discover their strengths, and bring their ideas to better order.’ Thus what came to matter was not so much the final product but the use of media as a ‘sparkplug for process’” (Marchessault 1995, 136-137).¹

Digital Storytelling

People have been telling stories for thousands of years. *Digital* storytelling allows people to share their narratives using digital technology and media. The production and purpose of this user-generated content is interpreted in a variety of ways, but many practitioners emphasize inclusive or participatory teaching methods that facilitate first person or ‘first voice’ narratives. Two of the more frequently cited methods for facilitating the production of digital stories include the process developed and taught through the Center for Digital Storytelling and a method called Photovoice.²

The first method is more commonly cited in the popular literature. Joe Lambert, Dana Atchley, and Nina Mullen developed it in 1993. Their method is taught through workshops at the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), a nonprofit training and research

¹ Over its short lifespan the program produced hundreds of films. It began to lose government funding in the mid 70s because of fiscal constraints (Marchessault 1995).

² To my knowledge, each of the projects featured in this study designed their own process, but they may have borrowed from or adapted their design based either on one or both of the methods.

organization (Paull 2002). They describe their approach to digital storytelling as an “emphasis on first-person narrative, meaningful workshop processes, and participatory production methods.”³ Their workshops are offered in two formats. “Open workshops” are offered monthly out of their offices in Berkeley, CA and periodically in cities across the United States, Canada, and Europe. These three-day work sessions, and a companion handbook, introduce individuals to storytelling, storyboarding, interviewing, and digital production. Their staff works with participants to tell a story that is meaningful to the participant, such as an important person, place, or event. CDS also offers workshops to and develops large-scale projects for organizations and businesses. These services are customized. They include an assessment of the organization’s needs (with attention to education, advocacy, and research and evaluation), program planning, curriculum development, and implementation.⁴

The other method, ‘Photovoice,’ appears more frequently in the academic literature. It aims to empower individuals to tell stories that contribute to the development and transformation of communities (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice gained popularity by *Born into Brothels*, an award-winning documentary about seven children living in Calcutta’s red light district. The film’s director, Zana Briski, who was in Calcutta photographing prostitutes, developed relationships with the women’s children.

³ “About Us.” Center for Digital Storytelling. Retrieved from <http://www.storycenter.org/index1.html> May 12, 2009.

⁴ “Customized Program Development.” Center for Digital Storytelling. Retrieved from <http://www.storycenter.org/custom.html> May 12, 2009.

She taught the children how to use cameras and gave each of them their own. Their pictures are featured in the movie.⁵

Photovoice was developed in 1992 by Caroline Wang, Mary Ann Burris, and their colleagues. The method is used to train participants in the use of point-and-shoot cameras in community photography projects (Mitchell 2008). Its three main goals are to enable people, through photographs, to 1) record and reflect on their community's opportunities and challenges; 2) increase information and dialogue about community issues; and 3) reach policymakers and decision-makers through public forums and exhibits (Wang and Burris 1997; Lopez et al. 2005).

Wang, Burris, and their colleagues first used the method in the early 90s when working with rural women in China. The women, who had had no access to policy and decision-makers, used photo novellas to capture their living conditions. The photographs were later exhibited and interpreted through public exhibits. The project is credited with influencing decision-makers in the community to provide educational scholarships for rural girls and construct day-care facilities and a water storage tank (Wang and Burris 1994).

Stories created using the Photovoice method have played different roles in community initiatives, including needs assessments (Wang and Burris 1997), participatory evaluation (Foster-Fishman et al 2005), reaching policymakers (Wang and Burris 1994), and as a component of health campaigns (Wang et al. 1998). Photovoice

⁵ "Calcutta." Kids with Cameras. Retrieved from <http://www.kids-with-cameras.org/calcutta/> May 11, 2009.

projects have also been used to bring attention to youth and adult perspectives on community health issues (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell, and Pestronk 2004) and with African American breast cancer survivors to promote understanding of issues facing survivors (Lopez et al. 2005).

These studies show that planning, program design, and implementation, along with the social context which the project is being conducted, play important roles in helping these projects achieve their goals. These projects also take considerable time and effort on the part of community members and it helps for them to see tangible results. The quality of the group's facilitation is critical in helping community members identify and understand the subject of their digital stories. Inadequate attention to this process will fail to lead to deeper thinking and action (Wilson et al., 2007).

Interestingly, though there is emphasis on the potential of the method to reach policymakers, little discussion appears in academic publications about how the stories were used in organizing around a community-based issue that resulted in some kind of change. Many of the studies that used Photovoice organized their discussion around the participation and production process, including problem identification, project implementation, digital story production, and public screenings. The discussion tends to end there, with little information about the mechanism and social networks by which the stories were distributed and what, if any, change in attitudes or policy occurred as a result. Photovoice's creators acknowledge that reaching policymakers is "ambitious (Wang and Burris 1994, 183)." They conclude that policymakers themselves must be open to the process. Lacking a receptive response from this specialized audience,

Photovoice is singly a tool to facilitate the participation of community members in local issues. Further, they warn, it may become “window dressing, raising questions about its role in preserving the status quo (Wang and Burris 1994, 183).”

Foundation Funding

There are often several actors involved in community media production, including a community, education, or government-based organization, community members, and funders. In 1968, the Council on Foundations first screened films and videos as part of their annual conference. According to one of the early organizers – who worked at a foundation that funded films as a way to “communicate ideas, particularly related to civil rights” – a “handful” of foundations underwrote the screenings, which were housed in a closet and attracted 3-4 viewers per film.⁶ Today, the interest in funding film and video has grown. More than 45 foundations are now members of Grantmakers in Film and Electronic Media (GFEM), an affinity group of the Council on Foundations comprised of foundations that fund media content, infrastructure, and policy as well as foundations interested in learning more about media.⁷ This funding includes digital storytelling. For example, the Ford Foundation funded Wang and Burris’ work in China (Wang and Burris 1997); The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, through its initiative to improve economic and educational outcomes in a Michigan community, supported the use of Photovoice in program evaluation (Nowell et al. 2006; Foster-Fishman et al. 2005) and

⁶ Pyle, Kathryn (August 19, 2008). “‘Traces of the Trade’ and Philanthropy, Part 1.” Retrieved from PhilanTopic (<http://pndblog.typepad.com/pndblog/2008/08/traces-of-the-t.html>) on January 7, 2009.

⁷ Retrieved from Grantmakers in Film and Electronic Media website (<http://gfem.org/>) on January 6, 2009.

to document the impact of immigration on Latino youth (Streng et al. 2004). In addition, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supported a Photovoice project about homelessness in Flint, MI (Wang et al. 2004).

Though digital storytelling is associated with empowerment in popular and academic literature, less attention has been given to defining and measuring the extent to which the process facilitates individual, organizational, and community empowerment. The discussion in the following chapter explores empowerment and proposes a framework for which it can be understood in digital storytelling efforts.

Chapter 3: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Empowerment

Empowerment is a frequently used term in the popular and academic literature to describe the potential benefits for community members participating in digital storytelling projects. However, there are few resources currently available to practitioners that support assessments of the extent to which digital storytelling has facilitated the empowerment process and achieved this outcome. The following discussion provides a general overview of empowerment theory and includes contributions from the fields of community development, political science, community psychology, and public health. This chapter begins with a summary of citizen participation and power. These two theoretical constructs share a number of characteristics, perhaps foremost that they both claim empowerment as an outcome.

Participation and Power in the Production of Knowledge and Decision-Making

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it’s good for you.” Sherry Arnstein (1969)

Citizen participation is a process by which public institutions provide opportunities for individuals to participate in the decisions affecting them (Arnstein 1969; Florin and Wandersman 1990). Participation in decision-making processes in the United States has traditionally been limited to those that, through credentialing, certification, or election, are recognized as an expert. Their knowledge, grounded in

technical and scientific training, is acknowledged as objective and valid. Knowledge produced subjectively and un-scientifically, by 'non-experts,' is viewed as deficient. Because of this experts control the production and dissemination of knowledge. This control over knowledge production builds and maintains power by experts, giving experts the power to define issues and make decisions about those issues affecting non-experts (Boyte and Kari 1996; Gaventa 1980, 1993; Lukes 1974; Wallerstein and Duran 2003). Empowerment is associated with ownership gained through access to and participation in decision-making (Peterman 1999).

A growing interest in 'citizen participation' and 'citizen empowerment,' including the participation of low-income, underserved, or marginalized populations, emerged in the 1960s in response to President Johnson's "War on Poverty" programs. In 1964, during his inaugural speech, President Johnson proposed a "war on poverty," launching a decade of policy programs aimed at improving the health and economic welfare of the poor. A signature piece of this legislation was the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA). Passed by Congress in August 1964, the EOA called for "maximum feasible participation" (Haveman 1977, p. 241) by community residents and low-income populations served by public and private social service agencies through Community Action Programs (CAPs) and Model Cities programs that provided skill-building opportunities (Arnstein 1969; Boyte and Kari 1996; Haveman 1977; Rocha 1997).

This federal mandate was controversial. It launched a national debate about how to address the inclusion of citizens in influencing social policy. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein constructed a "citizen's ladder of participation" (Fig. 1) to address the irregular

interpretation of the Johnson Administration's mandate. Arnstein's ladder illustrates the extent to which citizen input and involvement amounts to power and control along eight rungs of a ladder. The bottom rungs of the ladder offer little to no participation in decision-making and, therefore, little control or influence over decisions. Influence and control over decisions by citizens increase along the middle and higher rungs (Arnstein 1969; Peterman 1999).

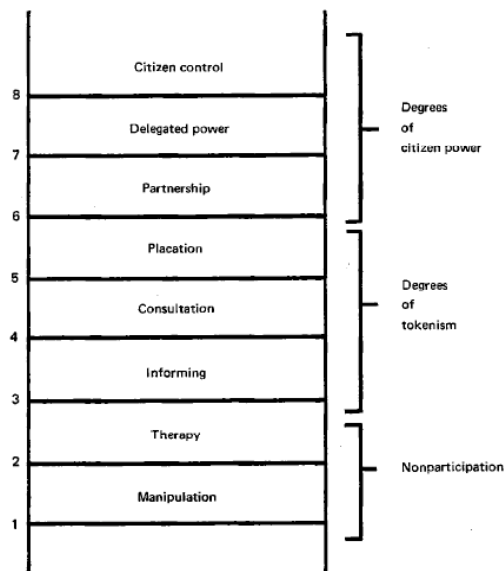


Fig. 1. Participation is illustrated hierarchically in relationship to decision-making power. The bottom two rungs – manipulation and therapy – illustrate non-participation. They are designed to help, inform, or educate the powerless by the powerful, not the inverse. The middle three rungs – informing, consultation, and placation – illustrate tokenistic forms of participation. These might include surveys or public meetings. The top three rungs – partnership, delegated power, and citizen control – are the only three rungs of the ladder that offer genuine opportunities for public participation and power (Arnstein 1969).

Decades after Arnstein's ladder, criticism and debate about her typology rages on (Craig 2002), as does the debate about the value of community participation. But there does seem to be general agreement across the literature to suggest that participation linked to decision-making power – from planning to implementation – is the most important form of participation (Craig 2002).

A research method has emerged over the past few decades that challenges traditional views of knowledge production and the authenticity of citizen participation. The method, participatory action research (PAR), questions by whom, for whom, and for what purpose knowledge is generated. This method emphasizes a more pluralistic approach to knowledge production that involves the collaboration of researchers with

traditionally marginalized groups, including minorities, women, youth, workers, and the poor (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Gaventa 1993; Minkler and Hancock 2003; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003; Lee, Kruase and Goetchius 2003; Wallerstein and Duran 2003). What distinguishes this method from other frameworks is that research is conducted with and by people across different stages of the research (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). The community's co-participation in planning and decision-making may increase the potential for a project to succeed because of knowledge, experience, and expertise housed within the community that specialists might lack (Berrigan 1979, Rodriguez 2000).

PAR includes a number of stages: defining the research question and collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data. It is the community's responsibility to determine the stages of the research that will be guided by the community and the stages of the research that will be guided by the researcher. The success of PAR projects is determined by the extent to which community members, traditionally the non-experts, become dependent on the experiences, resources, and tools of the researcher, traditionally the expert. PAR projects are successful when community members have gained control of the process and no longer rely on the researcher (Gaventa 1993; Stoecker 2003). Empowerment is the result of citizen participation that leads to this control – or citizen power (Arnstein 1969; Craig 2002; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Florin and Wandersman 1990; Israel et al. 1994; Peterman 1999; Wallerstein and Duran 2003).

The classic definition of power was proposed by Dahl (1957) who defined it as the ability of an individual or a group of individuals to affect one another in a significant way. That is:

“A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that otherwise B would not do” (p. 202-203).

Bachrach and Baratz (1963) expanded Dahl’s definition to include the absence of open conflict – that is, the power of power holders to limit, through their own influence and authority, the consideration of issues in the public process. Lukes (1974) argued that these two views missed what he called ‘the three dimensional view,’ focusing on power that is ‘silent.’ He argued that power holders shape the very preferences of the powerless by influencing what issues they think about and how they think about them. This influence privileges the real interests of those in power over those not in power:

“A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (p. 27).

In his investigations about powerlessness and power, Gaventa (1980) used all three views of power to explain the lack of participation by the powerless in community life. He argued that power accumulates over time and through its reinforcement, power structures and relationships develop that act to suppress participation, maintaining the silence of the powerless. Transforming these structures are “inevitably difficult” (Gaventa 1980, p. 23).

Two community activists have made important and distinctly different contributions to transforming power structures. Saul Alinsky, credited with mobilizing poor and minority communities around the United States, founded the Industrial Areas

Foundation (IAF) to teach his organizing strategies and tools to gain power that form the foundation for many grassroots advocacy campaigns today (Boyte 2004; Peterman 1999). Alinsky believed that social and economic benefits for poor and minority communities could only be achieved through contentious and direct confrontation of power holders. He founded the IAF to train organizers in 'warfare' against the 'Haves,' calling them the 'enemy' and advocating adversarial tactics to get their attention. In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky suggests that organizers "rub raw the resentments of the people of the community," that s/he must "stir up the dissatisfaction and discontent" (Alinsky 1989, 116-117).

His contemporary, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, argued that the powerless could learn to re-engage in community life through the co-production of knowledge. Like American authors Freire believed that through the objectification of the powerless by power holders, the powerless had withdrawn from community life. He wrote that through consciousness, "the learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 2007, 35),⁸ people would gain a deeper understanding of their situation. This understanding would increase people's participation in transforming their situations, thereby improving their livelihoods. Freire's model challenged the banking concept of education in which teachers deposit their knowledge in students, reinforcing traditional power structures and encouraging passivity of students. He advocated a new model,

⁸ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in 1970. The 30th Anniversary edition of this work was used for this paper.

problem-posing education, that allowed teachers and students to re-create and co-produce knowledge through a series of stages. Without this co-production between teacher and student, he argued, students are “filled” by the teacher with the teacher’s reality. The student accepts that reality, does not develop consciousness, and, therefore, does not develop the knowledge needed to transform their situation (Freire 2007, p. 71-73). This process, which Friere termed ‘conscientization,’ is also known as empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment is frequently constructed as both process and outcome whereby individuals gain control over their own affairs in some dimension. This dimension might be personal, social, political, or economic. The idea of empowerment grew out of social activism in the 1960s and the self-help movement of the 1970s. It is often used across different academic and professional disciplines to describe an increase in an individual’s self-efficacy, confidence, self-sufficiency, competence, or coping skills facilitated by external support or personal motivation (Israel et al. 1994; Kieffer 1984; Florin and Wandersman 1990; Pigg 2002; Schulz et al. 1995). Empowerment is also conceptualized across organization and community-wide levels. I suggest all three are important for understanding the potential role of digital storytelling in community-based initiatives.

At the individual level, empowerment is characterized as increased self-efficacy resulting from individual action and ability to influence decisions. It is linked with organization and community empowerment whereby individuals develop skills and have

access to resources (Schulz et al. 1995). At the organizational level, organizations are said to be ‘empowering’ and/or ‘empowered.’ In empowering organizations, access to and participation in decision-making facilitates mutual empowerment resulting from relationships with others. These relationships may ‘empower’ the organization to influence community-wide decisions. At the community level, empowerment results from the collective participation of individuals and organizations in the elimination of social, economic, and political barriers (Israel et al. 1994; Florin and Wandersman 1990; Pigg 2005; Rappaport 1984; Schulz et al. 1995; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Social, cultural, and political contexts, including environmental or organizational influences, are important considerations in the analysis of empowerment (Zimmerman 1990).

One explanation of the empowerment process at the individual level is the power orientation typology developed by McClelland (1975) (Fig. 2). He constructed power as a relationship between the source and object of power that shifts

		SOURCE of POWER	
		OTHER	SELF
OBJECT of POWR	SELF	1. "It" (God, my mother, my leader, food) strengthens me	2. I strengthen, control, direct myself
	OTHER	4. It (religion, laws, my group) moves to serve me, influence others	3. I have an impact (influence) on others

Fig. 2: Power Orientations Classification, McClelland (1975).

over an individual’s development. This may be either internal or external to the self. The experience of power moves sequentially through four stages and is dependent on the rate of an individual’s development, maturing in the fourth stage.

Rocha (1997) borrowed from Arnstein's ladder and McClelland's typology to illustrate the relationship between individual and community level empowerment. Her 'ladder of empowerment' (Fig. 3) moves from the individual's experience of power to the community's experience of power. The fourth rung on the ladder, socio-political empowerment, best illustrates the potential for digital storytelling in community-based projects. This is conceptualized as stages of knowledge acquisition and collaboration that

begins with community members (who share their stories) and shifts focus to physical, social, and economic structures (the potential of stories to effect change). Individuals, organizations, and communities move across the four stages of power as described in McClelland's typology at different times and settings. These three levels support the other in expanding understanding and participation in transforming communities. The organization in this model plays a critical role in facilitating the individual and community's experience of power. It serves as a source of initial support for the individual that leads to community change (Rocha 1997).

Kieffer (1984) constructed citizen empowerment as a process by which individuals "transition from a sense of self as helpless victim to acceptance of self as

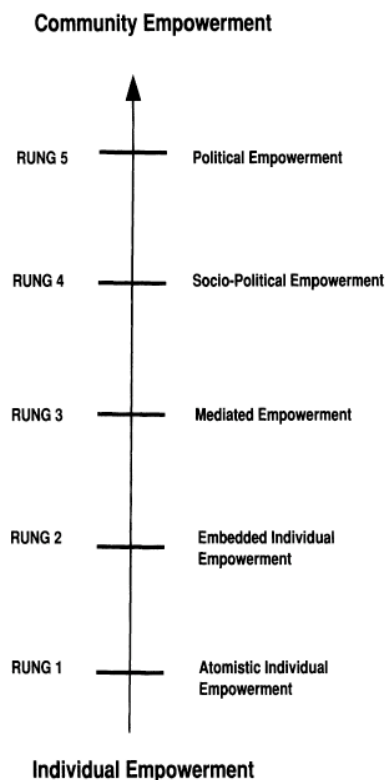


Fig. 3. A ladder of empowerment (Rocha 1997).

assertive and efficacious citizen” (p. 32). This process extends beyond the acquisition of new skills (such as the technical and social skills gained by community members in digital storytelling projects). Empowerment is really a new understanding of and participation in an individual’s social, economic, and political situation. Through this process, individuals, organizations, and communities emerge from an experience of powerlessness, energized with a new sense of control.

In my review of the literature, I found just one study (Foster-Fishman 2005) that assessed the extent to which digital storytelling projects were achieving goals related to empowerment. Kieffer’s understanding of empowerment emerged in this study and was used to evaluate outcomes. Through interviews with community members, the authors found that participants were affected by their experience in the digital storytelling project. The authors reported among participants an “increased self-competence, emergent critical awareness of one’s environment, and the cultivation of resources for social and political action” (Foster-Fishman 2005, 281). The authors also suggest that digital storytelling itself serves as a catalyst for empowerment. The community within which the study took place had seen an increase in resources and visibility that may have impacted the perception of the study’s respondents. In light of this, it is not clear that digital storytelling alone is a tool for empowerment (Foster-Fishman 2005).⁹

⁹ In the late stages of my research, I discovered a framework for understanding empowerment in digital storytelling. Though it did not inform my discussion, it should be used towards understanding empowerment in this field. The citation is “Towards a Conceptual Framework for Participation and Empowerment in Participatory Video and Digital Storytelling” by Ying Li.

Chapter 4: Overview of Method and Study Design

The objective of this study was to systematically examine how participants in digital storytelling projects, including community members, nonprofit staff, and foundation staff, use and understand digital stories. I was particularly interested in the potential benefits and outcomes they identified as a result of participating in the process and producing the stories. Given that little research existed to guide this investigation, I chose to pursue these questions using a multiple-case design that allowed me to compare three digital storytelling projects. The rationale was to open up a field of inquiry rather than seek definitive answers. Howard Becker (1998) wrote that scientific inquiry can be likened to a story, in that the explanations or descriptions of the questions social scientists try to construct meaning from “can almost always be understood as some kind of narrative about how something happened in the past, happens now, and will happen in the future (17).” Using observation and semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe for answers and construct meanings as a result of conversations with respondents and direct interactions with participants in digital storytelling projects and the data itself.

Each of the cases were chosen because of my familiarity with the projects and access to key participants, the projects’ focus on community-based issues, and their geographical proximity. Research methods included direct and participant observation, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, digital story review, and document review.

This study was also guided by my previous professional experience within a foundation and public access channel, and participation as a graduate student researcher in two of the digital storytelling projects included in this study. The settings of the case studies and the methods used in each are described in more detail below.

Case Studies

Though each of the digital storytelling projects presented in this study varied, all three include similar practices and attitudes about the potential of digital stories to empower individuals, organizations, and communities. Their expectation was that the production and public screening of the digital stories would foster an increased understanding within and beyond their communities about a range of social issues.

The first case study, the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops, is situated in the greater Sacramento metropolitan area. Three two-day digital storytelling workshops were conducted as part of a multi-year evaluation of a foundation-funded initiative to improve positive outcomes for youth. The evaluation team expected that two sets of digital stories would be produced, one at the beginning of the grant period and the second at the end of the grant period. This story set would be compared to assess any perceived changes in supports and opportunities for the youth involved in the funded communities.

The second case study, *Up from the Understory*, is set in a sparsely-populated rural community southeast of Sacramento. A research center housed at the University of California, Davis initiated the project as a way to build relationships between the

university and communities that allows the region to draw on the knowledge and resources available through the academy. The project activities cultivated relationships between youth and adults living in the community and built links to university researchers who lived and worked outside of the area.

The third case study, *Abriendo las Cajas*, is located in the Fruitvale district in Oakland. The project is a partnership between a community foundation, health clinic, and media training center to bring attention to domestic violence in the Latino communities in the area. Youth and adults participated in the project.

Methods

The methods used in this study vary across each of the projects and are described in detail below. Selection criteria across all three cases included age, gender, type of role and responsibilities (e.g., as community participant, project coordinator or facilitator, and funder), and the length of time spent with the project. Before entering the field, I created an interview guide, the purpose of which was to capture the narratives or accounts of people in their own words. This guide provided me with an approximate outline for the interview and is what I used to log my data. (The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix). To encourage candor, respondents were promised that their comments would remain anonymous and confidential. Though attempts were made to gain qualitative data from community members participating in the process, particularly youth, this was not achieved with the exception of Up from the

UnderStory. Future research could focus more closely at community members' experiences before and after their participation in these projects.

REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops. Data collection for the REACH Youth Development Initiative began in September 2007 and ended in April 2009. I provided support and technical assistance in my role as a graduate research assistant during the first day of each of the three two-day digital storytelling workshops. Research methods include participant observation; semi-structured interviews with adult participants, evaluation team staff, and foundation staff; document review; and review of the digital stories. Six interviews were conducted in person or by phone between March and April 2009, including two with foundation staff, one with the project facilitator, and three with adult participants.

Up from the UnderStory. Up from the UnderStory draws from field research and a project evaluation report I prepared in collaboration with the California Communities Program. As a graduate student researcher, I provided some programmatic support over the duration of the project, including curriculum and outreach material development and participation in one Saturday digital storytelling workshop and three public events. Data collection began January 1, 2008 and ended April 2009. Research methods included participant observation; semi-structured phone interviews with program participants and advisors; a focus group with youth participants; document review; and review of the digital stories. Eight interviews were conducted in May and June 2008, four with adult community members, two with youth participants, and two with UC Davis faculty. A focus group with nine youth was conducted following the screening of

the digital stories at UC Davis in June 2008. Three additional interviews were conducted in March 2009 to follow-up on any activities that had occurred since the screening of the digital stories in June 2008.

Abriendo las Cajas. Data collection for *Abriendo las Cajas* began in February 2009 and ended in April 2009. Though I was not directly involved in this project, I was a staff member of the program from which the project received funding. Research methods included observation; semi-structured interviews; document review; and review of digital stories. Between March and April 2009, I conducted four interviews, three with project staff and one with foundation staff. Because of the sensitivity of this project's topic, domestic violence, I did not talk with any of the community participants. However, I did transcribe, review, and analyze feedback from youth and adult participants captured in a 10-minute video produced by an evaluator hired by the project's organizations. The video includes feedback from nine of the adult participants and seven of the youth participants. I also attended a two-day national conference in March 2009 where the project staff presented on their project.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected from the case study interviews and observations revealed the history and nature of the individual's involvement; the implementation, production, and dissemination processes for the digital stories; and the perceived benefits for participants and the greater community. To better understand the extent to which adult and youth participants were involved in the design and implementation of the digital

storytelling projects, respondents were asked to recall how they came to be involved in the project, describe the mechanism for which story topics were chosen, and explain how the tasks and activities needed to produce the digital stories were accomplished. I was also interested in understanding what respondents hoped would be accomplished as a result of the production of these stories and the extent to which their expectations had been met. Respondents were also asked to describe how the digital stories were distributed after their production (through community screenings, film festivals, board meetings, conferences, etc.), the kinds of benefits they thought the project had for individual participants and the viewing audience, and the extent to which the respondent learned something new from the process. Additional questions were asked in order to discover the major accomplishments and challenges within the projects. These questions asked respondents to reflect on the most exciting and frustrating parts of the project and what changes, if any, they suggested for future digital storytelling projects.

To analyze the data for this study, I transcribed audio from the semi-structured interviews, audio from the digital stories, and observations in the field. These transcripts, in addition to project documents and other researchers' field notes, were analyzed using a coding scheme based on the main categories from the interview protocol: motivation for involvement; issue recognition, stakeholder involvement, and decision-making; and dissemination, empowerment, and action.

There are several limitations to this study. These include the small number of projects I documented and compared, the number of participants I spoke with, and the

limited ability to measure empowerment. For those reasons, not all the findings can be generalized to the larger field. This study is best seen, rather, as contributing to the field's understanding of the meaning people make of their participation in these efforts and their hopes for how the stories will be used by individuals, organizations, and their communities. More importantly, it generates questions about the capacity of digital stories themselves as vehicles for social change.

Chapter 5: REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops

Background

South of Sacramento, off of California Highway 99, lies the small town of Galt, a community of about 20,000 people. It was a sunny Saturday morning in February 2008 and a group of 10-15-year-olds and adults, no more than 20 in total, gathered in the computer lab at the middle school for the first of two all-day weekend work sessions on youth-led research and digital storytelling. Most of the morning was spent sharing stories about an experience in their community. Stories focused on how participants spent their time, an important person or place in their life, or an issue in their community. The workshop facilitators charted the stories on paper, categorizing different parts of the stories according to the structural components of the story arc, including the main character, the point of conflict, and the resolution or lesson learned. The group talked about how to use these different elements to tell a compelling story.

After a short break, the group reconvened in the computer lab, where they found the room full of toys for infants and toddlers. The facilitator asked the participants who had brought the toys into the room. They looked around at each other, laughed, and shrugged their shoulders. The facilitator asked them to pair up in small groups to identify who had brought the toys into the room. She had earlier assigned her staff, and some of the adult participants, a role in this simulated exercise intended to

give youth real-world research experience in a safe space where they could practice asking questions and reflecting on what they did and didn't ask, who they did and didn't approach, and why.

This workshop was one of three two-day workshops held throughout the Sacramento region as part of the external evaluation of the REACH Youth Development Initiative, a four-year, \$5 million program launched in 2006 by the Sierra Health Foundation, a private foundation in northern California. The foundation was interested in improving positive youth developmental outcomes by increasing access to emotional and physical supports and creating opportunities for youth to learn about and participate in their community.¹⁰ The foundation distributed grants of nearly \$700,000 to seven community coalitions comprised of youth and adults to develop and implement strategies aimed at youth ages 10-15 years old.¹¹ Along with grant funds to support services and activities, a high level of technical assistance (TA) was built-in to strengthen the capacity of grantees to achieve the goals of the grant.

The external evaluation was coordinated through the California Communities Program (CCP) at the University of California, Davis. Using a logic model, CCP used the following questions to guide their assessment of the program, including the following:

¹⁰ REACH adopted a particular concept and framework of youth development as presented by Michelle Gambone and James Connell in "Finding Out What Matters." Gambone and Connell suggest that young people with access to 1) particular emotional and physical supports and 2) opportunities to learn about and participate in their community are more likely to achieve positive developmental outcomes. Supports and opportunities include adequate nutrition, health, and shelter; multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers; meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership; challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences; and safety (Gambone, Klem, and Connell 2002).

¹¹ Communities receiving initial REACH funding included El Dorado Hills, Galt, Meadowview, Rancho Cordova, South Sacramento, West Sacramento, and Woodland. A year later, the foundation extended the reach of the program, funding the communities of Vacaville and Sutter-Yuba.

- Does the foundation initiative build community capacity and conditions for change?
- Do the local coalitions implement strategies designed to enhance supports and opportunities for youth?
- What evidence is there that the coalitions have increased the community's level of support for youth development?

CCP complemented more traditional evaluation methods, such as interviewing, observations, and document review, by planning to facilitate two digital storytelling workshops with youth, one at the beginning of the grant (Time 1) and the other at the end of the grant (Time 2). These youth-produced digital stories would be used as data points, collected at two different points in time, to measure the extent to which youth's perception of their community, and the supports and opportunities available to them, had changed over the period of the grant.

Project Activities

Within the first year of the program, the evaluation team held three workshops held on consecutive Saturdays. The workshops were held in West Sacramento, Galt, and South Sacramento between September 2007 and March 2008. Participation in the project was a requirement of the grant. A member of the evaluation team contacted the project coordinator of each of the coalitions. They requested that an adult member of the coalition attend one of the three workshops, along with 3-5 youth, ideally of mixed

age, gender, and ethnicity likely to follow-through with the project and commit to the time requirement.

Before the workshop, each of the coalitions was sent an information packet that included an overview of the digital storytelling process and a copy of the software, Photo Story 3,¹² that would be used to produce the digital stories. This overview described digital storytelling as a *process*, one that “can build skills in reflection and critical thinking, oral, written, and visual storytelling, and multimedia production.” This process was also characterized as having the potential to create conditions for change in the communities. This is based on the theory that community members’ sense of themselves and their communities evolve when their relationship with media, from consumer to producer, changes. Digital storytelling was also described in these materials as a *product*, one that could be used in “outreach and organizing, fundraising, documentation and reflection.” Grantees were told that upon completion, the digital stories would be screened at the foundation.¹³

Digital storytelling was a new investment for the foundation and a new activity for most of the coalitions. Their expectations for this youth-produced media varied.

When asked about their hopes for the digital stories, respondents said:

“...That each of the coalitions would have a DVD that they could use to tell their story about who they were, in terms of marketing or just trying to build relationships with key stakeholders and recruit people, partners to their coalitions and to their work.”

¹² Photo Story 3 is free software and, at the time of this writing, is only available for Windows machines.

¹³ Digital Storytelling FAQ.

“We definitely wanted something we could share around the community.”

“My hope was for the youth to learn how to do it so then they could teach other youth and have multiple digital stories created in [our community].”

“I thought we were going to have a product.”

On the first day of the workshop, held between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. in a lab with multiple computers, members of the evaluation team explained their role and how the digital stories would inform the external evaluation. They introduced the participants to storytelling concepts, elements of basic research design, and instruction in how to use the digital storytelling software. Time was allocated at the end of the day for each of the coalitions to decide on what story they wanted to tell and what images, sound, and text would best tell it. The stories participants wanted to tell varied across the communities. In West Sacramento, youth talked about police officers profiling young people, stopping them on their way to and from school without justification. In Woodland, youth wanted to talk with current and former gang members about why they joined gangs and explore alternative activities. In Galt, youth wanted to focus on the impact school budget cuts would have on their friends and families. The adults I spoke with said their role in this process was minimal, for the most part providing transportation and supervision. One of the adult participants said:

“This project is more youth-led, where the youth were actually the editors and the producers and, you know, they were the camera guys because they were taking the pictures. So, really this was them, this was strictly them. The only thing I told them was they couldn’t have any bad language or stuff like that.”

Between the two Saturday workshops, youth were assigned to take still photos, work on a draft of their script, select music, and work on their storyboards. The second Saturday, which also took place between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., was designed to support production time of their stories. At the end of this second day, most coalitions had completed a rough cut of their digital story. Most of the respondents I spoke with talked about how engaged youth were in the process, “huddled” around the computer selecting photos and re-recording their voiceovers until they got it just right.

“They talked about [the photos]. They actually laid them out and then put them in order in the sequence they wanted...And then they added the narration, and the music as well...It was them who decided what it was going to look like, which was the beginning, which was the end.”

“[The youth] were all really jazzed. I remember those Saturdays, they were so excited. This wasn’t just some other assignment or project that they had to go do, that they were just going through the motions on, they were really into it.”

Project Outcomes

All seven of the coalitions finished a rough cut of their stories, although only five were completed. Computer equipment and lack of time were cited as the reasons for the two unfinished stories. Members of the evaluation team, technical assistance providers, and foundation staff viewed all seven of the stories. They were also screened for REACH grantees at the Sierra Health Foundation and many of the grantees screened the stories at their coalition meetings.

“I was impressed with the depth of the images and, you know, it was what the youth wanted to convey. There are images, maybe, that I don’t typically get exposed to on a day in, day out basis. So I was really impressed with what I can imagine was a pretty time intensive process.”

“Just watching them grow, learning these new skills, seeing their reaction when people commented, you know, after we did the viewings. They felt proud of what they’d put together, they put a lot of work and energy into it.”

“I was really excited about that project and very proud of everyone for having it put it together...It really tells a story about what it’s like living in [this community], and you know, there’s a lot of people we interact with that don’t know that, and I’ve been involved in that way, so to see that story is a constant reminder for me that these kids are dealing with levels of diversity just to get through high school, that I never had. The opportunities that I had were much greater and the environment that I had them was so much more, so much more healthier.”

For the most part, audiences more peripheral to the project did not see the digital stories. For this reason, the digital stories did not provoke discussion about the issues youth raised outside of the coalitions. Respondents suggested a number of contributing factors for the lack of distribution and discussion: a lack of leadership after the products were completed, staff turnover, and no link between the digital stories to their overall REACH work plans. Moreover, it doesn’t appear that distribution was a requirement of the grant or that there was financial or technical support to distribute the digital stories. Even so, some respondents expressed disappointment.

“I really thought there would be an avenue for getting it out more and what it came down to, it seemed like to me, was something for Sierra Health, their board to see – but it never went anywhere.”

“It would have been good to have more of an accountability component, to make sure it continued, maybe a follow-up...There were a lot of resources invested in this: time, money, energy, from everyone. We have so many things on our plate, but having that accountability, and having somebody – just the timeline, give us a timeline of what your ideas are for putting this out in the community, you know, maybe since we were inexperienced, having some suggestions of OK, here’s what some other communities have done to get this out.”

At least one of the grantees, a grassroots community organization called Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), used the digital story and the issues it raised as a tool to facilitate discussion and inspire volunteers working in the community. The story is posted on ACT's website. It was also shown multiple times in different community settings within a year of its production. The story is a composite of the youth's experiences that produced the story. They wanted to illustrate a typical day in the life of a teenager living in Meadowview, a neighborhood in South Sacramento. The photographs were taken over a period of several hours with a digital camera provided by the adult coordinator. Youth selected the photographs that appear based on the narrative they developed, lifting up some Meadowview 'landmarks,' including liquor stores, neighborhood markets, vacant lots, foreclosure signs, graffiti, and squad cars. Their story links a lack of adult role models, safe activities, and safe places available to them and in their neighborhoods, along with racial and socio-economic stigmas, as barriers to youths' transition to healthy adulthood.

In an excerpt from their digital story, *The Things I Go Around to Get Where I'm Going*, the viewer sees photos of liquor stores, food marts, and police cars accompanied by the following voiceover of a female high school student:



When I look around my classes, a lot of faces are missing. A couple got shot, some had to drop out 'cuz they got pregnant, and some just stopped coming. They're probably out there hustling.

Once the school day is over my journey home begins. Friends are making plans to kick it, pushin' their product...today rival cliques got into it so people are rowdy. I chose to stay out of the drama, at least today.

On my way home, I pass the liquor store. I see familiar faces standing out there, just posted up. Now and then I'll stop by and say 'was up?' But the police are up there today – I wonder who's going to jail? I just keep it movin.' I don't need them harassing me.

Source: *The Things I Go Around to Get Where I'm Going* (2008).

Though their story captures the poor conditions of their community, it ends on a hopeful note, fading to black on a photo of a banner hung over an overpass that reads, "If you dream it, you can do it." The story was used during a youth leadership conference organized by ACT to facilitate a discussion about what it's like to be a young person growing up in Meadowview. Audience members were asked to comment on whether they agreed or disagreed with the story's content. It was also screened at the organization's board retreat as a reminder of the challenges facing the constituency they serve and in an ethics course at a private high school to illustrate and talk about urban poverty in Sacramento.

Though the expectations of respondents weren't entirely realized, most thought that the workshops were valuable and had benefited the participants, particularly the

youth. Most of the respondents talked about the production of the stories as an opportunity for youth to be heard, if not in the wider community, in the small groups they worked in and by the other REACH coalitions.

“The primary benefit for youth is that they have media to have their voice be heard, which is often very difficult for youth. It’s a way for them to be intentional about what they’re conveying and structured, and edit it and have it be in the package that it’s going to be accepted by whatever the audience will be.”

Respondents also thought that youth had gained many valuable skills that could be transferred to other activities they were involved in, including leadership development and technical skills. One respondent talked about the impact of one of the youth in their coalition, who, through the storytelling process and leadership in the script’s development, found confidence in their writing ability and became a spokesperson for the community. Another respondent said:

“I think it was a great way to show young people a different technology to tell their story. And, you know, it may be that for some young people it created more of an interest in pursuing this as something they could do, either in their school or as a career.”

After the first round of digital storytelling workshops, the evaluation team discussed the value of this method in their research. They reached a number of conclusions about the extent to which the digital stories were authentic representations of youth voice. Foremost among these conclusions were that the content and production value of the stories had been influenced by a number of variables. These variables included 1) the adults who participated in the workshops; 2) the age of youth that participated (the older the youth, the more sophisticated the story); and 3) the

number of youth that participated (too few youth were unrepresentative of the community and too many youth were challenged by time constraints).

They also identified flaws in the research design, primarily that changes in the content of the digital stories could be attributed to factors other than the investment by the foundation, including the maturation and development of youth and the unlikely probability that the same youth would be involved with the project over the length of the grant. Some of these issues may be resolved by using repeat photography. This methodology allows the researcher to compare photographs taken from the same place at different times to assess a change or lack of change. The development of a shooting script and written documentation from Time 1 helps to facilitate the repeat photography during Time 2. Shooting scripts are based on the identification of indicators of change based on the focus of the research (Rieger 1996). This shooting script could be developed from and linked back to the grantee's work plans. Ultimately, the research team found that other data collection methods, such as interviews with youth and observations between youth and adults at coalition meetings, would satisfactorily include youth voices in the evaluation.

In Summer 2008, based on interest by youth and members of the TA team, the Sierra Health Foundation funded a subset of the TA team to work with youth from each of the coalitions on a yearlong youth media documentary project. The extent to which this project developed because of the digital storytelling workshops facilitated by CCP is unclear. Some of the youth that were involved in the CCP digital storytelling projects were also involved in the TA team-facilitated media projects. Just four of the seven

coalitions participated in these media workshops. Some of the topics youth chose stayed the same – Meadowview is picking up where they left off, exploring how the lack of leadership and positive role models impacts youth decision-making. Other communities shifted their focus. In Woodland, for example, youth are exploring teen pregnancy and in Galt youth are looking at the lack of safe places and activities. The stories will be celebrated at a public screening and there has been discussion about getting the stories viewed more widely. It wasn't clear, however, that the stories are tied to the grantee work plans, but participants still have hope that they will affect change.

“I think the power in these stories are really putting faces and images to the issues the coalitions would like to see impacted by their work, and you know, if they can share that information, share these digital media stories with policymakers or people that may have some influence in the community, I think there's some power there. Hopefully, we're asking them to really do that so they don't sit on a shelf somewhere.”

Chapter 6: Up from the UnderStory

Background

More than 80 residents from West Point and nearby communities had assembled in the elementary school's multipurpose room for a potluck dinner and the premiere of *Up from the UnderStory*, an intergenerational media project that took place here in the Sierra Foothills region of California. I shared dinner with two of the community's 750 residents, who spoke about the region's high unemployment and poverty. They were among the friends and families who had turned out to support the project's participants, a mix of middle and high school-aged youth and adult community advocates, environmentalists, business owners, and public officials.

Around 6:00 p.m., a number of staff and faculty from the University of California, Davis, which provided project oversight, facilitation, and media instruction for the project, introduced the contributors. The lights were dimmed and a video about the area's history filled the large screen, followed by nine individual digital stories about some of the revitalization efforts in the region. After the 30-minute screening, the audience posed questions to the youth participants and university staff for close to an hour. They asked youth how they had changed, what thoughts they had about improving the community, and what the "best parts" and "biggest struggles" of the project were. Youth said they gained new technical skills, made new friends, and learned about "everything everyone is trying to do to make it a better place." They said the biggest challenge was the production process, putting the whole story together.

Questions asked of university staff were directed at future collaborations. Parents were interested in working with the university to expand opportunities for higher education for their youth. A local elected official, after light-heartedly thanking the university from emerging from its “ivory tower,” shared a number of pressing regional needs, education being one of them, and proposed the university and community enter into a partnership for local youth. University staff made no commitments. They said they would play a role if there were one, but indicated that the project was intended as catalyst for future community-based projects. The presentation ended with a standing ovation and a number of ideas about how to use the relationships and the stories created through Up from the UnderStory as a vehicle for creating change in their community.

Almost a year later, I spoke with two community members who had been involved with the project about any outcomes that had occurred since the 2008 screening. Neither thought that much had happened. Respondents said:

“They never had a single follow-up meeting to ask what could be done to get it out, who should we contact, who should do it. The last [screening] just kind of ended the whole thing. It would have taken some leadership on somebody's part.”

“The whole concept of UnderStory was something people didn't understand. It was a complex project and people outside of the project don't really understand what it was.”

In December 2008, Up from the UnderStory was officially launched. University faculty and staff met with community residents in West Point, a nearly four-hour roundtrip drive by car from Davis. The project was a pilot for the Art for Regional Change (ARC), a new research center based at UC Davis that facilitates community-

media projects between university researchers, students, artists, and community members “that generate outcomes that have an impact in university and community settings.” The project details were coordinated in partnership with a county supervisor, whose district’s residents had seen decades of underemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and other social issues.

Up from the UnderStory featured three components, including two community boards (who helped university staff better understand the social and cultural context of the area and the historical relationships between community leaders, local organizations, and tribes); a media storytelling team partnering youth and adults responsible for story development and production; and UC Davis faculty from the humanities, social, and environmental sciences interested in better understanding regional change. The project was funded in part by the California Council for the Humanities (CCH) *California Stories* initiative, a multiyear effort of CCH to increase connections and understanding about the people and stories that make up California.

Project Activities

During the first meeting between university staff and community residents, the group decided to create the two advisory boards, one charged with the adult storyteller component and the other with the youth media component. The community advisory board was comprised of 11 community leaders who would meet in West Point with the project coordinator, a UC Davis staff member, to brainstorm potential community renewal projects for the youth media team to investigate and reach out to potential

adults to solicit their involvement as storytellers in the project. The youth advisory board was comprised of seven adults who were currently working with or had worked with youth. This board would work with the project coordinator to develop selection criteria for the youth media team, develop outreach materials to recruit youth, and nominate youth participants based on submitted applications.

Both boards met regularly between December 2007 and June 2008, meeting separately for the first few months and reconvening as a large group to promote the culminating media screenings in the final month. The local elected official recruited many of the advisors. Most were highly engaged in volunteer and community-based activities, serving within their schools, on boards, or volunteering through different community-based organizations. Most were also active politically and some had been involved in local political campaigns. Because of their other obligations, many of the advisory board members had multiple weekly commitments that limited their ability to attend project meetings, but were generally very available to the project coordinator by phone or email.

Application materials for the youth media team were available beginning in late January and were due back for review in early February. Project leaders hoped to receive at least 20 applications by the deadline, ten of which would be selected for participation based on youths' level of interest and commitment to the project as expressed in their application and their fit with the established selection criteria generated by the youth advisory board. The day of the deadline, a total of six applications had been submitted. Project leaders decided to extend the deadline by a

week, asking members of the advisory board to personally recruit youth to participate.

A week later, four more youth had been recruited. All ten youth between the ages of 13 and 20 were invited to join the media team. One dropped out within a few weeks of the launch of the trainings. In discussions with the project coordinator, in a focus group, and in personal interviews, young people reported a number of reasons why they had been motivated to participate in the project, including:

- An adult had personally asked them;
- Interest in learning photography skills and being exposed to technology;
- Interest in learning more about their community;
- Interest in being involved in a UC Davis-sponsored project; and
- It was “something to do.”

Youth began meeting with the project coordinator in late February 2008. They met once a week after school for three hours, and one Saturday a month for five hours, over three and a half months. Youth learned photographic techniques and interview skills, and contributed to a project blog. Midway through the project, youth were paired with the adults in their community involved in community renewal efforts. They met with their adult counterpart over a series of three weeks to take photos and conduct informal interviews. Adults then wrote their scripts and chose personal photos to complement those taken by youth. Scripts were recorded during a one-day “story collection day.” The last few weeks of the project were spent editing the digital stories. Youth imported digital photos and audio in iMovie to create a two-three minute digital story.

Nine digital stories were produced in total. Stories featured a community garden project, local parks and recreational opportunities, community planning processes, and a watershed project. In one story the proprietor of the local live community theatre worked in collaboration with a high school student to create *Entertaining the Community*. The adult storyteller wrote and recorded the script. The youth editor overlaid the digital recording of his voice with photos of the theater and performers, including inside and outside shots of the venue, performances, and costumes.



Perhaps running a theater is a selfish pursuit



I think it is. Hello, my name is John Pelletti. I've lived in West Point for 30 years. I've been associated with many volunteer activities and today I'm very proud to present my association with Blue Mountain Players.



Blue Mountain Players began 14 years ago when a group of like-minded West Pointers...assembled to provide live theater for the people living of this area.

Source: *Entertaining the Community* (2008).

The third component of Up from the UnderStory was the participation of UC Davis faculty as ARC scholars. In January, a call was distributed to UC Davis faculty seeking members for an interdisciplinary working group. Four faculty received honorariums in the amount of \$1,500 to support their participation in a series of faculty discussions on the development of ARC and Up from the UnderStory. One faculty member's project was integral to Up from the UnderStory. It was designed as a service learning video component as part of a spring graduate course she was teaching. The

faculty member and a small group of students, with the project coordinator as a community liaison, produced a short video that highlighted the area and introduced the youth-produced digital stories at the screenings. Two of the faculty facilitated a community mapping workshop in West Point, helping build further connections with the local community. The fourth faculty project was unrelated; it supported a photographic exhibition of women leaders in the environmental justice movement in the Central Valley.

Project Outcomes

Over the course of the project youth were periodically asked by the project coordinator to share what they most liked about the media workshops, which was asked again in the focus group and interviews. Youth consistently reported that they most enjoyed hands-on activities, activities that involved computers, learning photography techniques, and exercises that took place outside. Midway through the project, the coordinator asked youth about personal impacts. Here they reported an increased sense of self-awareness, greater confidence, new skills, and new friendships. They also noted that the experience would look good on resumes or college applications. Young people also seemed more open to attending college, in particular UC Davis, as a result of the project.

When asked what they least liked, youth expressed disappointment with the equipment (older laptops used for training were slow and crashed periodically) and the amount of time allocated to blogging (made worse by a slow and sometimes unreliable

Internet connection). They also expressed frustration with the amount of time allocated for activities (too much) and the repetition of some of the exercises. Because some were able to complete the activities more quickly, but were encouraged to keep working, youth said they grew bored and lost focus. Youth also felt it was difficult to stay focused and concentrate for longer periods of time and recommended more group activities. Feedback from youth about working with adult storytellers was mixed. Some found the relationships respectful and supportive, while others thought their partners had high expectations and placed demands on them that were unattainable.

Advisors believed the project was a positive and successful experience for the youth participants. They were especially excited to see an increased curiosity and awareness about post-secondary education by youth. There was also a sense from people that the image of the youth themselves had been transformed, and that adults involved with and external to the project had expressed a new interest in working with youth in the community.

“Probably its greatest value was on an individual level for the kids that participated, to see a final product that they had a hand.”

“The biggest impact was on the kids because they got to know people in the community and learn things about the community they didn’t know before. They learned more about the problems up here.”

Adult respondents also felt the project had been successful in enhancing community pride. Stereotypes and misperceptions among the students at the county’s only high school had left county youth with a negative image about West Point and its three neighboring towns. One respondent said “people had gotten into the habit of feeling bad” about the town’s reputation. They believed the video and digital stories

had created a higher level of respect about the town among the students at the high school, that it could be of some value in fighting stereotypes, and they hoped more work would be done to increase its visibility countywide.

Plans to disseminate the video and digital stories included the two public screenings, distribution on the area's public access channel, and copies placed at the public library. At the West Point screening in June 2008, audience members suggested the media product also be shown at public schools and at the county supervisors' meeting. When I interviewed respondents in Spring 2009, they were unaware of any places, other than the public access channel, library, and the project website, where the stories may have been screened or stored.

When asked what they had hoped would be accomplished as a result of the project in its early phases, advisors anticipated it would promote the community's local services; introduce and build on different skill-sets for youth; decrease the stigma about the community in the rest of the county; and develop an ongoing connection between the university and the community. Though people had been excited about the project, particularly the final product, the adult respondents I spoke with afterwards suggested confusion about the project's goals (generated by university staff) and what they had hoped to accomplish. Respondents said:

"If there had been some model of what the [project coordinator] was shooting for, it would have more likely hit the target...we didn't understand what [the project coordinator] wanted...if there had been some way to show a product, that would have saved some time."

"...was a tussle at the beginning, felt like there were a lot of people pushing agendas, trying to figure out what was happening, didn't have [the project coordinator's] vision yet."

“When the project was going on, I didn’t really know what to hope for. We all know this area has had economic and social problems for a long time so anything we can do to bring awareness to that is helpful in our quest to make things better around here...I was looking at the project as something that would make it easy for people to understand the problems up here.”

Though the two screenings were well attended, some respondents felt that it had been unsuccessful in attracting people that were not involved in some way with the project, either as a participant or a friend or family member of a participant. There was also no sense from respondents that I spoke with in 2009 that the project had fostered new partnerships, particularly any partnership between the community and the university. One respondent said:

“It was a great project and a great production but I guess the big problem was that there wasn’t enough buy-in from the community itself...Most of the people that came into it did it as a favor to an outside person and weren’t looking to build something.”

ARC is currently engaged in two digital storytelling projects, one documenting the neighborhood conditions for youth living in West Sacramento, the other a partnership with cooperative extension and Sierra Valley ranchers. Both project descriptions list ‘helping policy makers’ as a goal. The final post from the UnderStory blog site, update December 2008 by ARC staff, reads:

Working with Blue Mountain residents set the bar for the continuing work we will do to create and implement meaningful and useful media arts projects that bring together scholars, students and communities to advance positive social change.

Chapter 7: Abriendo las Cajas (Opening Boxes)

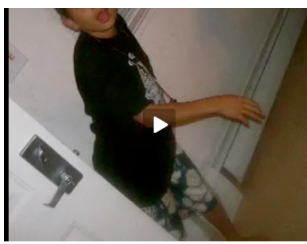
Background

“It was so invigorating to see them...how happy they were when they could finally finish one part of the goal or when they were recording, using the microphones, and going over and over again until they felt they had it. Those were the parts where it makes you feel, gosh, this is powerful; people are really inviting themselves in this process. They really own it.”

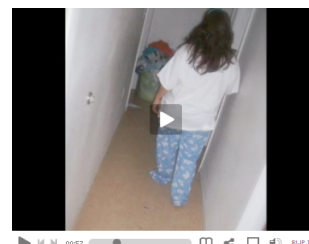
Siclalix (Tali) is 15-years old. She lives in the Fruitvale neighborhood in Oakland, California, a low-income community home to a large Latino population. Her family, including her mother, father, and two siblings, were happy, she said, until her father began staying out late and drinking, coming home and arguing with his wife and striking his children for the smallest of missteps. Tali remembers clearly the details from the evening her mother asked her father to leave their home. She recounts this story, using personal family photos and reenactment. She includes photographs of the call placed to 911 and a copy of the restraining order against her father.



It was about 10pm...



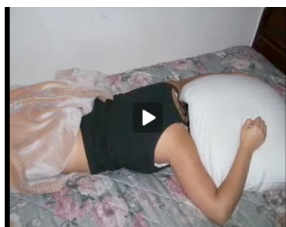
when all of a sudden my younger brother came rushing in to tell my mom that my dad was coming.



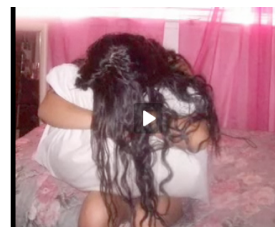
My mom immediately went to her room



and locked the door and so did me and my sister.



...my sister went to her bed and put a pillow on her head



so she wouldn't hear what was happening.

Source: *Tali's Story* (2008).

Tali's story is one of twenty stories produced as a part of *Abriendo las Cajas* (Opening Boxes), a multi-year digital storytelling campaign focused on violence recovery and prevention designed to decrease domestic violence in the Fruitvale neighborhood. The project's name comes from an activity used by the project's violence prevention educator, who believes that "the gender box" men and women are taught to live and work in perpetuates violence.

The project has three components, including an education program for youth, community-based education targeting adults, and Promotora training focusing on IPV (intimate partner violence) prevention. Three Bay Area organizations facilitated the project, including La Clínica de Raza (a health clinic serving the low income Latino population in Oakland), the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC, a media center providing access to technology and training to underserved populations), and ZeroDivide (formerly the Community Technology Foundation, which makes grants supporting communications technologies in low-income communities). BAVC first approached La Clínica and ZeroDivide about a digital story partnership in 2007 in response to a funding opportunity from the Robert Wood Johnson and Benton Foundations. The foundation-

funded initiative, New Routes to Community Health, provided up to \$229,000 over three years to partnerships between immigrant organizations, media production centers, and organizations focused on improving the health outcomes of immigrants. The organizations developed Abriendo las Cajas in partnership with one another. ZeroDivide managed the fiscal and reporting responsibilities to the foundations, BAVC led the media training and distribution, and La Clínica promoted and organized participation by community members.

The relationship between the three organizations predates their collaboration with Abriendo las Cajas. In 2004, BAVC and ZeroDivide launched the Digital Storytelling Institute (DSI). DSI promoted the telling of stories by underserved populations using video technology as a tool that could lead to individual and community change. Through DSI, BAVC staff traveled around the state of California to nonprofit organizations. Using a train-the-trainer model, staff facilitated intensive workshops where participants learned how to produce short digital stories.

Staff from La Clínica attended one of these workshops. The community-based health clinic, founded in 1971 by a group of community volunteers concerned about the lack of health services in East Oakland, operates 26 sites across three northern California counties, providing health care and other services to their patients. Most of the people they serve are Latino (71%); have incomes at or below the federal poverty level (66%); and are uninsured or have public health insurance (94%).

The staff completed a series of three digital stories related to masculinity and violence. In one of the stories, Grupo de Hombres, the male members of a men's

support group started by La Clínica talk about the pressures they feel as men and how these are transferred to their families, often through anger and violence. Their digital story shares how the group work has helped them. One community member said:

“...my take on this is that everyone’s problems are like a movie. You need to see the movie and realize that you are making the movie, you are in charge.”

Respondents said the New Routes funding was appealing for a number of reasons. They had enjoyed the initial experience of helping community members tell their stories and had been using the stories in classes, presentations, and conferences. Moreover, La Clínica had received additional grant funds to address domestic violence issues. The New Routes funding then allowed for them to continue and expand their work on this issue, a topic that community residents had pointed to as a priority. Based on the organization’s intake records, support group work, and reports back from the Promotoras (members of the community trained to educate their neighbors around health issues), the agency discovered an alarmingly high number of reports about domestic violence from youth, women, and men. One respondent said:

“We have issues we have to deal with, but one of them, without a doubt, will be violence. Gang-related violence, domestic violence – it’s something that is very, very in our faces all the time.”

The foundation and project staff involved with Abriendo las Cajas had expectations that the digital stories would bring attention and discussion to this issue, hopes that the stories themselves might lead to the transformation of long-held social constructs about male and female relationships and the immigrant community.

Respondents said:

“...to give communities within the community who don’t have access to technology a chance to express their ideas and experiences and maybe find solutions to violence.”

“Really to break the boundaries between immigrants and non-immigrants, the ‘us’ and the ‘them.’”

“...to break through the barrier of silence around domestic violence in this particular neighborhood and community because it’s not something that’s talked about but it’s clearly something that’s a problem.”

“To give people voice, to make them comfortable to talk about issues, to get their voices out and heard to increase community, beyond just the local neighborhood. Also, just the health care issue, being able to get those out and share them with other health organizations.”

Project Activities

BAVC and La Clínica staff began developing the curriculum for Abriendo las Cajas in the Fall of 2007, merging BAVC’s media training curriculum with La Clínica’s health education curriculum. Because most of the workshop participants would be Spanish-speakers, the BAVC curriculum was translated into Spanish and the La Clínica curriculum into English. Concurrently, La Clínica staff promoted participation in the program, handing out fliers and talking with adults that had participated in past workshops. Community members were motivated to participate for a number of reasons, but most of their comments allude to their hope that their story will help someone, reduce their isolation, and encourage them to seek support.

“I want my story to be like, to communicate to different teenagers to not fall for those stereotypes and follow their own path.”

“I loved the idea that many people can see that I am not the only one living like this, with all these problems and no matter what happens we always have to move on in life.”

“I want to tell this story because I want people who are in an abusive relationship to know there are many people suffering from the same problem. But there are resources. You have to look for them. There are many venues and you can pull through.”

Because the topic was related to violence between male and female partners, staff from the organizations believed it was important to have a male and female co-facilitate the workshops. Many of the people participating in the program were Spanish speakers, and so it was also necessary that both facilitators were bilingual. The female facilitator was hired by BAVC to provide media instruction, but she also had experience facilitating groups around health issues. The male facilitator was a La Clínica staff member with years of experience as a violence prevention educator. Some of the participants had worked with him in the past and knew and trusted him. He had also participated in the digital storytelling workshop offered through the Digital Storytelling Institute, and so had some media skills and knowledge about the digital storytelling process.

The adult workshops were held weekly for 3-4 hours in the morning over a five-month period beginning in Fall 2008. Participants would meet at La Clínica and then travel by public transit to BAVC’s new facility in Oakland where the workshops were conducted. During the first part of the workshop, the male facilitator introduced activities to encourage participants to talk about and share their own personal experiences with violence. Midway through the workshop the female facilitator provided instruction about the digital storytelling process, where participants would learn the skills to tell, edit, and produce their story through the computer. The stories they shared are very personal. One participant talked about losing his family as a

teenager and his experience as a refugee in the United States. A woman shared her story with domestic violence. Another lost their cousin in a car accident. One respondent said:

“People were really putting out their hearts, and it was a really heavy process.”

Youth workshops were also held for 3-4 hours in the mornings, which took place during the summer when youth were not in school. They reported a number of reasons for getting involved, from being with friends to learning new skills to having something to do.

“I wanted people to know my story and like what struggles do I go through living in Oakland and obstacles that I have to overcome.”

“I think it’s going to help me a lot. I really enjoyed it, getting to know about digital stories, how to make one. It might help me later on.”

“It really interested me because I really didn’t have anything to do during my summers, so I was like, I’ll go right there, and I really thought it because I like to do videos and everything.”

Project Outcomes

For many of the adult participants, the workshops were too time intensive and their participation created a financial hardship for themselves and their families. Many of them earned low wages, some were the sole breadwinner for their families, and some were unemployed and looking for a job. Even though the grant provided a \$200 stipend for completing the program and provided public transit fares, nearly half of the adults had dropped out by the end of the project. Respondents said:

“People got tired, people got really tired and thought they were wasting their time because of the editing and being in front the computer.”

“All the members couldn't keep coming, because they didn't have money to come...I mean, we, even though we were giving them BART fares so they could come, they were in the need for a job, they need to pay the rent, they need to do stuff, so they couldn't continue to come to the training.”

Of the adults that completed the workshops, half completed digital stories that included audio and visual components. The other half were voice recordings, which were easier for participants to produce. These recordings will be used as stand-alone audio pieces, distributed to radio programs along with the audio tracks of the other stories. Their hope is that some of the stories will be broadcast and that participants may be invited to talk about their stories on the radio programs. All the youth finished their stories.

Respondents thought the first phase of the project, focused on the storytelling process and production, had facilitated opportunities to build new skill-sets for youth and adults and help assist in the healing process.

“What I have learned is how to use a computer, because I honestly had never touched a computer. At home the only person that uses one is my daughter. I have always been very reserved but I would also like them to learn a little bit from me. “

“I find that it hasn't only been a learning experience in terms of the technical aspects but it has also been quite a bit of a healing experience for a lot of them who are working on stories that are very difficult situations, things that they, obstacles that they have overcome.”

“I think all the people who come here have supported each other a lot. I like it very much here and I want to thank you for the opportunity of having this place to express ourselves, a place we would have never imagined having.”

Some of the respondents reported a different dynamic between the youth and adult groups. The youth participants, who had prior access to computers and were

familiar with web navigation, email, and digital photography, did not require as much technical support as the adults, some of whom had never touched a computer. However, it was much easier for the adults to talk about their experiences with violence, more so than the youth, who found it much more difficult.

At the time of this writing, staff and participants were beginning to create the strategy for distributing the stories. The hopes respondents articulated about the project's first phase become more prominent as they enter the second phase. One respondent said:

"I was thinking [there] will be a little bit more...you know, solutions to the violence problems. I mean, I think we get to the point where we tell our stories at an individual level, but through this process that's where it stayed. I mean, who knows, maybe this is what's coming in the second phase of this."

BAVC is taking a lead role in the dissemination process, with a list of more than 50 different film festivals, community events, and conferences they hope to screen the stories at. They also plan to distribute them online with accompanying profiles of the storytellers and a behind-the-scenes account of the production process. In partnership with La Clínica, they were planning a community-wide event for May 2009 to celebrate the stories with participants and their friends and families, but also promote them to community leaders and the media. One respondent said:

"We hope that they'll go stand up on the stage and be proud to show their work, and I think they will."

La Clínica will continue to use these stories as they have used others in the past, presenting them at conferences, during community events and health promotion activities, and in their own fundraising. They will also be distributed to a network of

more than 40 health educators around the state of California, along with discussion guides that health educators will be able to use in small group settings and activities.

This concludes the presentation of the three case studies. On the surface, there are variations about how the projects were designed and implemented. Taken together, they reveal some important lessons about digital story telling. The following chapter proposes some of these lessons in more detail.

Chapter 8: Findings

The purpose of this research was to explore how participants in digital storytelling projects used and understood digital stories as part of community-based projects. More specifically, I probed the extent to which respondents identified project outcomes related to individual, organizational, and community empowerment. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their expectations for the production of the digital stories and the extent to which these expectations were met. Particular attention was paid to the role of the respondent in story development, production, and distribution.

In general, respondents shared a common set of expectations about the role of the digital stories produced, namely, that these stories had the potential to ‘empower’ individuals. In some instances the stories could also lead to discussions facilitated by organizations that created conditions for ‘change’ across particular social groups or in the greater community. Somewhat surprisingly, little variation was found in this set of expectations across the cases and between the individuals I spoke with, regardless of their different roles and responsibilities across the projects.

In analyzing the findings, I considered three levels of analysis: individual, organizational, and community empowerment. Empowerment is a process and an outcome whereby individuals have access to resources through organizations. These organizations provide opportunities for individuals to participate in decision-making that

the organizations can then use to influence community-wide decisions. With this understanding of empowerment guiding my analysis, five major themes surfaced:

- First, respondents' expectations for digital stories to influence individual, organizational, and community change were largely unrealized.
- Second, project coordinators and facilitators failed to distribute the digital stories (with the exception of Abriendo las Cajas). Without sustained and wider distribution to audiences outside of digital storytelling projects, certain opportunities for community empowerment are unlikely to be achieved.
- Third, foundations, universities, and community-based organizations influenced the authorship, production, and distribution of digital stories to varying degrees. Organizations need to carefully consider the role they play in the production and dissemination of digital stories in relation to the roles played by community participants.
- Fourth, community members participating in projects had access to technology, were introduced to new skills, and had opportunities for personal development; and
- Fifth, digital storytelling projects required considerable time and resources for the multiple actors involved; to realize objectives fully, projects may require more time than many participants are able or willing to spend.

1. Respondents' expectations for digital stories to influence individual, organizational, and community change were largely unrealized. Respondents were

asked at the beginning of each interview to talk about what they had hoped would be accomplished as a result of the production of their group's digital story. They were also asked if these expectations had been met. Respondents talked specifically about how they hoped their stories might reach people and systems outside of the projects themselves. Some hoped that through the sharing of their stories, they would help reduce the isolation experienced by people dealing with similar issues. This hope was particularly true in Abriendo las Cajas, where youth and adults from the community shared intimate details about their experiences with violence. Because this project is ongoing, and the stories have not yet been distributed, it is difficult to know at the time of this writing the extent to which these stories will have the intended impact.

Respondents also talked about their hope that the sharing of these stories would increase awareness and understanding about a social or economic issue facing their community. This hope was present in all three cases. Again with Abriendo las Cajas the stories have not yet been distributed. However, for the most part, in both Up from the UnderStory and the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops, people outside of these projects did not see the stories. Based on interviews with respondents, this expectation was largely unrealized.

Finally, some respondents talked about their hope to reach decision-makers with the power to change the conditions in their communities. These respondents felt that the visual exposure to the real life conditions of underserved and marginalized populations – who are underrepresented in mainstream media – would provoke a visceral reaction that decision-makers would not be able to turn away from.

“After just talking about numbers, it's easier for a public official to say, well this just isn't going to work out, there's no way to rearrange things, there's no way to make this policy fit. But when the stories are there, in the foreground, and ... you put a face to a problem, there's a lot more motivation, there's a lot more will to succeed, to make changes happen.”

Unfortunately, these expectations were also mostly unrealized. By and large, respondents across the projects were not able to offer evidence that stories had reached individuals or affected systems beyond those immediately or peripherally involved in the projects.

2. Project coordinators and facilitators failed to distribute the digital stories, impacting the extent to which certain aspects of empowerment were likely to be realized. Respondents were asked to share where the digital stories had been screened or distributed. Many respondents said that the stories had at least one public screening, which was attended by the community members' immediate family, friends, or others involved in the project. However, many respondents said that stories were not distributed to other audiences. These hopes to impact others then were mostly unrealized. Some expressed disappointment that the stories “didn't go anywhere.”

“And that was the saddest part - it seemed like we did a great documentary and the kids' voices are there but it never went any further, it was frozen in time”.

“I would say unfortunately that they have not reached their full potential, because they - aside from turning them in and utilizing it beyond the life of the project - I don't think its gone further than actually producing the project.”

Interestingly, though many respondents believed their participation in and production of the digital stories would result in the distribution of the stories, there was little focus on how and where the stories would be distributed. Based on my interviews

with project coordinators and community members, organizations did not have a model for using digital stories to facilitate community-wide distribution or discussion. In addition, funders did not see it as their role to distribute the stories. With the exception of Abriendo las Cajas (which rolls out distribution beginning in May 2009), neither Up from the UnderStory nor the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops were designed to be distributed widely. Both of these projects emphasized the creation of the media product by or in partnership with community members, and not the distribution and dissemination of the stories to the broader public. The stories produced as part of Up from the UnderStory were screened at two public events, one in West Point and the second at UC Davis and primarily to an audience of friends and family. The digital stories produced as part of the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops were to be used to further understanding by the evaluation team and the funders about changes in the community. The stories were also available for groups to disseminate, but with one exception (Sacramento ACT), this was not achieved.

Respondents largely attributed this failure to one or two reasons. These included that the project had not been designed with distribution in mind and that grantees had neither the capacity nor the know-how to distribute the stories. That said, without sustained and wider distribution to audiences outside of digital storytelling projects, certain opportunities for empowerment are unlikely to be achieved.

3. Organizations, including foundations, universities, and community-based organizations, influenced the authorship, production, and distribution of the stories to varying degrees. Respondents were asked a series of questions about the extent to

which they were active participants in different stages of the digital story projects. They were asked to describe 1) how they came to be involved with the project; 2) what issue their digital story focused on and how and why the issue was chosen; and 3) which tasks and activities happened in order to produce the digital stories. Respondents' answers varied across the projects that reveal the extent to which organizations were empowering (they provided opportunities for personal development and access to decision-making) and empowered (they have influence to affect decisions in their communities).

In Up from the UnderStory, the project was in large part generated and facilitated outside of the community and in discussion with the community's county supervisor. University researchers defined the theme of the digital stories – community and economic development. With the support of the county supervisor, adult participants were recruited to submit story ideas around this theme. Youth participants then selected from these stories one that they would produce in partnership with the adult storyteller. There was a sense from respondents that the project's outcomes may have been more successful, or sustained more activity after the screening of the stories, had the community members had 1) a greater understanding of the purpose of the project; 2) a greater role in decision-making in early stages of the project; and 3) an internal motivation to participate.

"I think a project would be far more successful if it came from the community and there was a person like [the coordinator] who could come in and do a project together that would then help unite the various groups and see a thread. It would work better and it would be used more and it would be more successful."

The REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops and Abriendo las Cajas relied much more on the expertise of a community organization that was already working within the community. These community organizations helped promote the project and gain access to people with experience with the issue. The community organization in each of the projects coordinated the community components and facilitators trained participants in storytelling and media production. In the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops, an adult more or less facilitated the formation of a small team of youth who identified, through brainstorming, an issue confronting youth in their community. The stories themselves were then generated through a group decision-making process led by youth. In the Abriendo las Cajas project, staff from La Clínica, based on records and data they had collected from the community through their clinic and health education work, determined that there was a need for more information about violence. Staff promoted the project across their different programs. They facilitated discussion in small groups of adults and youth based on their own expertise about the community and the subject.

Foundations also had some influence over the course of the projects. Traditionally, the funding process includes conditions and restrictions that may push applicants to pursue activities they may have otherwise not. This includes funding projects aligned with a particular issue area. In the REACH Digital Storytelling Workshops, the funder was interested in supporting projects focused around increasing youth supports and opportunities; in Abriendo las Cajas, the funder was interested in improving the health of new immigrants. Of course, this kind of influence by

foundations is not unique to these three projects or to digital storytelling. But it raises questions about the role of foundations in projects that emphasize community participation and access to decision-making: what kind of influence should foundations have? How do foundation criteria affect the stories that are being told? How does the relationship between the grantee and the funder affect the extent to which the stories are distributed? Organizations play important roles in digital storytelling projects that create or frustrate empowerment and should be self-conscious in pursuing these roles.

4. Digital storytelling created opportunities for knowledge gain, skill-building, and personal development amongst community members participating in the projects.

Respondents were asked to talk about the benefits of digital storytelling projects. They were also asked to talk about what most excited them about the project. Many respondents spoke of the effects the project had had for the community members who participated. Respondents identified a number of outcomes, including:

- a new degree of understanding about community-based issues;
- access to resources and technology that allowed community members to expand skill-sets; and
- through sharing their story in small group settings, a greater sense of ownership about their experiences and participation in future decisions about their experiences.

In the REACH digital storytelling workshops, youth participated in brainstorming sessions and facilitated discussion about the issues affecting themselves and their peers in their neighborhoods and communities. As part of the project, they talked with other

community members, including youth, parents, and public officials, about these issues.

They were also introduced to new software that allowed them to import digital image files and record voiceovers. Each youth team was given a disposable digital camera.

Some of the youth participants had never used a camera before.

“I think they had positive benefits for the kids involved, I think that they learned new technology skills, and got even more opportunities to be hands on with computers and play around with technology.”

In Up from the UnderStory, youth gained a greater understanding about the efforts of adults in their community. It also seemed to generate a curiosity about post-secondary education, particularly college and university. After the project, many of the youth participants expressed an interest in having had more contact with the faculty members involved in the project and broader exposure to information about college. They felt that learning about the campus and the faculty earlier in the project would have helped alleviate fears about working with the university and give them more time to talk with faculty and university students about their college experience. They also mentioned that the skills they developed as a result of their participation would look good on college applications.

“College is a scary word. But this project has really opened my mind about the possibility of going to college.”

In Abriendo las Cajas, both youth and adults gained access to computers and received media instruction. This may have been more significant in some ways for some of the adult participants, who had less experience with computers and other digital equipment than youth participants. One adult participant said,

“What I have learned is how to use a computer, because I honestly had never touched a computer. At home the only person that uses one is my daughter. I have always been reserved but I would also like them to learn a little bit from me.”

Along with gain in knowledge about their communities and the acquisition of new skill-sets was the potential for personal development through individuals sharing their stories in group settings and “being heard.”

“I think really we were looking to...give people an outlet for what could have been a pretty intense personal experience that they had, to empower them just through the process of sharing that experience with others...I think that's the really empowering part of digital storytelling.”

“I think that what they got out of that was an opportunity to have that meta level of cognition and reflection about their communities ... I am who I am, I live in this community, I have the experiences that I have, and I can critique those experiences, and speak back to authority in some way. Or I can use my voice to let people know how I feel, and I think that that's a very empowering experience for a kid that age and probably most of the kids had that experience.”

Clearly, digital storytelling can and does contribute to an individual's sense of empowerment. In addition to new skill-sets, many said that having a space for people to dialogue and discuss stories amongst those in the group they were working was extremely important. This is because the group paid attention and responded to the individual sharing the story, a unique experience for many.

5. Telling digital stories requires sufficient allocation of resources. Throughout the interviews, respondents talked about resources. It became clear that over the duration of the projects, a tension developed regarding the considerable amount of time people needed to learn the technology and the access they needed to instructors to complete their stories. Though people wanted more time to work on their projects,

they did not necessarily have more time to give to the projects. The time-intensive nature of this work was challenging for participants because it competed with other activities and responsibilities, including school, jobs, extracurricular activities, and friends and family. Some respondents suggested spreading workshops over longer periods of time, other suggested collapsing them.

“The reality of our adult community is that they cannot spend five months putting the amount of money a digital story asks, to develop one, because they have jobs, they need jobs...the process of developing the piece is really tedious and people just drop the ball.”

“The people who have helped us are excellent at what they do. But we are a group that maybe is demanding more time with each one of us.”

“I think the process was slower than what [the trainer] wanted it to be. It seemed like we only had two Saturdays so our finished project - we had a problem, there was equipment that was not there or was not compatible with the [school’s] computer and so we had an issue there and we never got any follow-up.”

Funders and organizations need to carefully consider the time and resources necessary and available to facilitate the production of stories produced by community members who have little to no experience with technology and multiple demands, and few resources, outside of the projects. Even though two of the projects (Up from the UnderStory and Abriendo las Cajas) provided incentives for participation, motivating community members to attend workshops was still challenging. It is important for community members to see tangible benefits for their participation and any breakdown in the infrastructure – such as staff and technology – can have significant impacts on a community member’s willingness to participate.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This exploratory study investigated the extent to which digital storytelling projects achieved outcomes around multiple levels of empowerment as understood by the projects' participants. A number of lessons emerged from the case studies that are relevant for community members, practitioners, and funders about how the planning and implementation of these projects affects the extent to which empowerment outcomes are likely to be achieved. As communication technology becomes more ubiquitous, and the use of digital storytelling more widespread, it becomes even more essential that researchers pursue similar investigations that evaluate the true outcomes of digital storytelling projects.

One of the key findings to emerge in this study was the failure to disseminate and distribute the digital stories and a failure to distribute them strategically. If the intent of a digital storytelling project is to facilitate a participatory process, then the culmination of the project with production of the stories might be satisfactory. This intent should be clearly articulated to all the actors involved. But if the goal of the digital storytelling project is to increase awareness or bring communities together, funders and project facilitators must be more strategic about organizing the dissemination of the stories and facilitating face-to-face discussions with key actors. The culmination of the project cannot end with the production of the stories. If community change is a goal, digital stories should be integrated into more coordinated and organized change efforts

that include (depending on the nature of the project) education, issue advocacy, and community mobilization. That said, we do not yet know how or to what extent digital stories will actually influence audiences and communities. Evidence for digital stories' integration as an organizing tool might be gained by looking more closely at the use of projects like Sacramento ACT highlighted in Chapter 5 and *Abriendo las Cajas*.

It is also important for foundations to consider the capacity of the organizations they are funding to organize and mobilize around social issues using communications tools. Foundations might consider supporting this capacity in addition to or as an integrated part of a change strategy. To affect community-level change, foundations and organizations can play a number of roles. This change might begin with a foundation funding an organization to provide community members with access to resources and participation in decision-making. Then the organization and the foundation, in turn, could seek to influence community-wide decisions by facilitating the distribution of the stories. The potential for digital stories to reach more specialized audiences, such as policymakers, is much more likely if distribution is facilitated in some part by organizations, and particularly foundations. More so, foundations themselves might be and should feel empowered to recognize their unique position within communities to ensure that these stories are distributed to wider audiences. These three levels of empowerment – individual, organizational, and community – support one another in transforming communities.

In addition, this study did not use a set of defined metrics to measure the extent to which empowerment occurred. Instead, it was a qualitative inquiry into how

participants described their use and understanding of digital storytelling. Additional review of empowerment literature that contributes to the development of metrics will help practitioners and funders assess the extent to which individual projects are or have the potential in achieving empowerment outcomes. Late in my fieldwork, I came across a communications assessment tool that future investigations exploring empowerment outcomes in these kinds of efforts could draw from or adapt to their own tools. The Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication has created metrics to evaluate the process and outcomes of communications activities focused on social change. Their tool includes a set of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods that look at outcomes characteristic of empowerment, including leadership, participation, collective self-efficacy, and a sense of ownership (Figueroa et al. 2002).

In conclusion, what the themes that emerged in this study tell us about how digital storytelling is being used and understood reveals the high and largely unrealized expectations people involved in these projects have for digitally-produced user-generated content. Any one of the themes identified in this study could and should be explored further with additional research. These studies will help facilitate and further the field's understanding of how to use these stories as tools for individual, organizational, and community empowerment. Until that time, funders and practitioners should exercise caution and share realistic expectations with community members about their participation in these projects. This will help prevent disappointment by community members if more macro project outcomes are not immediately realized.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Hi, my name is Whitney Wilcox and I'm a graduate student at UC Davis. I am writing a case study on {insert project name here} for my master's thesis and would like to ask you about your experience with the project. Everything you say will be confidential, so nothing you say will be attributed to you in my report. Your insights and opinions on this subject are very important, so please be as honest as you feel you can. There is no right or wrong answer, and you might not have answers for all of the questions I ask. I'd like to record our conversation, if that's ok with you, just so I don't miss anything you have to say. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Involvement

1. For the purpose of the recording, can you say your name, if you have an affiliation with an organization, and your role in the organization?
2. How did you come to be involved with the digital storytelling project?

Issue Recognition, Stakeholder Involvement, and Decision-Making

3. What do you think are the important issues in your community?
4. What issue did your digital story focus on and how and why was this issue chosen? (*probe: who was involved in the identification of the issue? what was the mechanism you used to identify different options? was their conflict or disagreement about the topic? if so, what was done to include the voices of these participants?*)
5. Describe the tasks and activities that needed to happen in order to produce your digital story and how those tasks/activities were accomplished. (*probe: What was your role in this process? Who else was involved and what were their roles - the instructors, youth, other nonprofits, other grantees, the foundation? what was the hardest part, the easiest part? What did you learn?*)
6. If you can remember back to the conclusion of the workshop, what had you hoped would be accomplished as a result of the production of your group's digital story? (*probe: how did you plan to use them? did you feel like you learned something new from working with your group?*)
7. Were your expectations met? (*probe: If expectations were not met, why do you think this happened? If expectations were met, why do you think this happened? Were your expectations too low? Were your expectations too high?*)

Dissemination, Empowerment, and Action

8. How was your project distributed?
9. One of the goals of this project was to increase information and action around an issue. Do you think this goal was met? If so, what factors facilitated that? If not, what factors may have acted as barriers?

10. What kinds of benefits do you think the digital stories had for you and do you have an example?
11. Had you been involved in other community projects before this one? If so, what kinds of activities have you taken part in and what was your role?
12. Have you been involved in community projects since this one?
13. Did your involvement with this project change your attitudes or feelings about the issue? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Reflection

14. What was the most exciting part of being involved with this project?
15. What was the most frustrating part of this project?
16. If this project were going to happen again, what changes would you make?
17. Overall, did you find the project valuable?

Recommended Interviews

18. Is there anyone else with whom you think I should speak with about the project (service providers, elected officials, residents)? Do you have their contact information? Would it be alright to say that you recommended I get in touch with them?

Additional Information

19. Those are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you again for taking the time out to talk with me today. If you think of anything else you'd like to share, please feel free to get in touch with me.