Digital storytelling as decision making process. An informal conversation between Helen Graham and Antonia Liguori about the power of a personal story and the public domain

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Helen Graham & Antonia Liguori
This is not a conventional paper. Instead it is the form of a conversation between Helen Graham and Antonia Liguori, reflecting on events they participated in for the Enkdist project. The first was a workshop facilitated by Helen Graham at the international conference of Digital Storytelling in Ankara (May 2013). The second was organised by Antonia Liguori in Rome (September 2013) where the Enkdist project involved - as a specific target group - people who work in museums and cultural institutions.

The informal conversation that you can read below is a dialogic reflection about the digital storytelling as a learning process, with the aim of pinpointing some desirable ways for the facilitator to interact with people involved in a workshop.

And the starting point – as sometimes happens in that kind of conversation, when one is in the shoes of the facilitator and the other one of the storyteller – is a clear provocation.

**Antonia**: I’m very worried about the role that you should have as a facilitator, because sometimes I feel that it could be a kind of violence. In particular when the facilitator asks for doing something very quickly, namely as an ice-breaker activity or a game during the story-circle session.

**Helen**: Have you experienced that?

**Antonia**: Yes, I did. What I can’t accept as a storyteller involved in a workshop is that the facilitator wants people to do something without explaining why. For instance if I have to write a short story of 100 words in few minutes and the facilitator tells me that is to stimulate my creativity, I don’t believe that is the right way to approach. I think is always necessary enabling people to have a proper reflection on the meaning of what they are doing.

Which is, in your opinion, the best way to approach people as facilitator?

**Helen**: Digital storytelling is fundamentally about the personal, and about
the power of a personal story, so a digital storytelling session is about how enable everyone to express themselves. Part of that is being-able to think through the consequences of telling that story. Consequences maybe for people they love or they know. Or what it might mean for it to be in the public domain.

But in the other side is also important how to make a story together, thinking through what might make a good story, by understanding the how other people respond. And then there are also some technical questions about how to choose the photographs or the quality of the audio.

The job of the digital storytelling is to open things up so everyone involved can think through the decisions they are making. It’s quite important that there are self-conscious decisions because is about a person entering in a public domain in some way. That is really crucial.

Antonia: I’d like to know something more about the learning experience: I think is not something that involves only people who are making a digital story, but also the facilitator. The storyteller has a chance to improve his/her story by listening to the opinions other people involved in the workshop because is not an individual process: a digital story is something that you need to do with other people. But in which terms the learning experience of the storyteller activates a social process?

Helen: Digital storytelling is a social process. So in the sense that if I tell a personal story then it comes that from relationships you have with other people. Even the context when you are making a story, the story-circle approach is to help you to develop the story socially, though the responses of other in the story circle.

And is quite importantly “social“ in another sense, that you are publishing your story on the web and in a wider dimension, there is also a kind of public broadcast to it.
Every learning experience is really powerful when everyone is bringing so-
mething and everybody is also drawing from this dynamic, including the facilitator as well. Learning from each other and learning about the world.

**Antonia:** So do you think, for instance, that the facilitator could improve how to organise the process for the next time every time that he/she meets other people, but more from a human point of view or a methodological point of view?

**Helen:** I think that everyone has got a different style, in terms of facilitation: some people are formally structured, some people are very personal. But everybody is different and every social dynamic is different, so there is something about being responsive to that. So as facilitator, you have to think about very practical things, how many computers, how many recorders… You need to have a sense of what you are doing, what you are aiming for. But more crucially than any of that you need a lot of responsiveness to the individuals in the group and the group dynamics and be adaptive during the process of the workshop.

**Antonia:** You have just told something very important to me about the "style": there is a style of the facilitator that could appear in the stories? With the same group, different facilitators with a different approach, a different style, might make something completely different?

**Helen:** Yes, I think so.

**Antonia:** Me too. For instance, we did a piloting in Estonia run by a group of facilitators who, the first time they experienced the digital storytelling during a “train the trainers”, they didn’t use the voice recording, making the story only with pictures, music and subtitles and then, when they have become facilitator, they didn’t ask to the storyteller to record their voice. So this is a tangible proof of a particular style in communication from an aesthetical perspective and also a human attitude to choose a natural language to share personal experiences.

And talking about different stories, do you think that each person could
make different stories about the same topics or events? Because you told that the result you can realize is something related to the people you are meeting, the context, the aims you have.

**Helen:** Yes, I think so. I don’t know what your experience is, but I think so. It’s something about conversation between people, the feeling in the room, if they want to share something and in what kind of way. It’s very different with different kind of group and different social dynamics.

And also I think that even if you’ve told a story lots of times, just in daily life, it’s never all exactly the same, depending on your relationship and dynamic with different person and the way you adjust the story to be the most interesting it can be for them. This is one of the social consequence of digital storytelling process that makes always something different from what people might expect.

**Antonia:** Do you think is always good to finish the production of the story during the workshop and not enable people to do this when they are back home and finalize the video on their own? Is this a social process even in the technical part of the workshop?

**Helen:** It’s so powerful at the end when you share all the stories. I remember when we were in Rome for the Enkdist workshop in September 2013, we did everything really fast so we could finish everything together but it was a really powerful day, really amazing stories shared and developed together. And one of the most meaningful thing was at the end to show all the stories, it’s a kind of sense of achievement and a kind of journey together.

**Antonia:** I totally agree with you, because I don’t like this way to give more emphasis to the product itself, the story as an object, I think is most important to have all the same time and the possibility to share with other people to focus on the meaning of the story and the potentiality of the process during the on day, three days or five days workshop.
But maybe there is one question more about the possibility to change something in the story. If the storyteller wants to change something, what is good to do, from the perspective of the facilitator? Is it right or not? Namely if their stories are in a collection of stories or in a project and are something that is a representation of a particular moment. Do you think is good to give to everyone a chance to change the story?

**Helen:** I think this is a really interesting debate, particularly when archives or museums collect or generate stories. It’s a kind of archivists’ mentality, if there is an object, it should be collected.

When there are official letters or records generated by politicians or people in power in society, they clearly should not to be allowed to go into the archive and change it. But it’s not exactly the same with personal digital story. It’s something that happened for Culture Shock, the project by Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, we did some research on this questions. One of the things that came up was that some people - after their story had been collected by the museum – something changed in their life, they split up with their partner or similar things, and they didn't want that their stories floating around the web or being in the collection for perpetuity...

If the value of digital story is that has to be personal and that its authored (not like a letter or video generated as part of daily life) then that does change the relationship between the individual and museum.

**Antonia:** But maybe in this case there are consequences for the collection if that story is part of that. You are changing something two years later, you are a different person, in a different context so there is not the same representation of the topics or the aims of the collection. Maybe is fine to give a chance to delete a story but not to change it.

**Helen:** For institutions there is an argument that the aim of the archive is
to capture a snapshot of that time. But if someone says “it is affecting my life to have that story out there’ the none of the flip sides of what is institutionally gained by collecting personal stories is that the museum now has a kind of personal relationship with that person...

You disagree? Your tendency is more to archive?

**Antonia:** I think that everything you are doing in your life is something that you should relate to the context when they happen. In my opinion, if you want to leave something of a particular moment is right that you collect what you have done in that particular moment and in that way; if you want to delete, is ok, it’s something related to you privacy, to your desire to don’t appear or don’t explain something that you don’t want to remember anymore. For instance, my first digital story was horrible from a technical point of view, it’s something made very fast, it’s on the web, maybe I don’t like to show it to other people, I might have a reason to delete it, but it’s something that represents my first approach to this methodology, so it’s something good to preserve. My approach is always to give more emphasis to the context so that you can understand why you did something in that way. So if there is something very personal that you don’t want to show anymore is ok if you want to delete from the web. It’s the same that is happening now with Google, now you can ask for deleting information about your past that are not good for your reputation: ok, you can delete, but not change. If I have on Google results my CV, uploaded in 2000 when I was just graduated, and people understand the context, that was 15 years ago, they know that now after 14 years from a professional point of view I’m a different person.

I believe in this stratification of experiences related to a particular context so it’s nice to have everything collected. If you have pictures, videos that are expression of a particular context, and you are able to explain the motivation of what you did, I think will be absolutely effective to see that after 10 years. The beauty of life is the change and the stratification of experiences. You have to improve not to delete experiences, but you have to
improve, by adding experiences. Because this is a process, in my approach is fundamental that you are always satisfied by what you are doing in that particular moment and the role of the facilitator is to enable people to be satisfied about what the storyteller are doing.

**Helen:** This is such a beautiful way to think about life – to place an emphasis on context – but one of the consequences of the web is that things are dis-contextualised all the time on YouTube or via social media, etc. So the problem is that is not so easy to create a context around digital stories.

**Antonia:** Maybe is more dangerous if you are talking about the web in general, I agree, because there is no chance to have a chronological and logical order in the search engine results if you are not in a specific blog or website. So you can’t represent the reason of your change and your adaptation to the events day by day, that is not something that is better but something that you change depending on different context. It’s impossible to have a proper context and an actual stratification of experiences on the web, but is different for museums and archives because – and you are the expert – their mission is to collect the stratification of experiences and to preserve the effects of the human lives. Isn’t it?

**Helen:** It’s completely different in public domain, you can’t change newspapers articles, minutes of meeting, official letters; there is something different going in relationship with personal life and museums and archives collections. But if there is something particular when you are working with digital storytelling, when there are people making things, in a form and with a purpose, it’s a constructive activity, activity for a specific purpose.

So I think that there are lots of things that museums and archives can do so to make sure that people are happy with the decisions they are making within the storytelling process, if they are conscious about the consequences of sharing the story with people they know, with people they don’t know. And that they thought through what might happen in 15 years and
about re-use.

The job of the facilitator is to make sure that people, are aware of all these things and those involved make decisions they are happy with. But sometimes people will change their minds – that honoring that is a fundamental ethical commitment that museums have to make when they ask people to share personal stories.

**Antonia:** So you are telling me that the “perfect” facilitator is able to reduce the risk that people want to change or delete their stories?

**Helen:** Yes, any decision making process needs to be informed by thinking through the consequences and options, so about how to tell a story or the story you are telling, yes, absolutely…

**Antonia:** So in your opinion is better to have one story less at the end of the workshop for the collection you are making, if you are making a collection of digital stories about a specific topic? For instance I have to collect in Italy 20 digital curricular stories about key competences acquired through informal learning, would be better to have 19 stories and not 20 stories and one person not satisfied about his outcome and one week later he might ask you for deleting the story and so would change your collection (if for “collection” we mean a representation of a social experience)?

**Helen:** I would say that in form of consent, in a research ethical context or in a decision making generally, is about making sure you have a chance, the best chance is possible to think through the different options. In a research context an ethical approach is also is about having a chance to change your mind. That you have not only to sign a form and that’s it. That is true in commercial terms as well, when you sign a contract for a and you have 20 or 30 days to change your mind… The principle of formal consent is that you have a chance to reflect on it and, through the distance of reflection, potentially change your mind.

**Antonia:** But sometimes I’m a bit worried about this too much “legal” ap-
proach that the facilitators have at the beginning of a workshop, when they want to explain all the potential dangers and people might say “no, I don’t want to do this anymore, it’s something scary”.

**Helen:** No, I agree, I don’t want to start with a consent form. I think it’s good to be a negotiated process, you can have a sense in why you are doing a story without having lots of very heavy warnings. It needs to be a conversational approach. I know what you mean: “right this is very difficult, very scary and you can’t change your mind when you have done it…”

**Antonia:** Yes, if you present something too prescriptive, is not easy to be happily done.

And what do you think about the re-use of a story in a different context?

**Helen:** This is something that I’d like to ask you. What do you think if someone decide to re-use your first story, the one that you don’t like, because they are collecting stories about the 21st Century Italian women? How do you feel about that?

**Antonia:** I think that is important to know that the only thing that you have to clarify at the beginning of a workshop is the aim of the workshop. I need to know that my story is part of the results of a specific workshop or project or collections, and that the institution in charge to organise the workshop can’t use my story for other aims without asking me.

**Helen:** Another thing came up with the research in Culture Shock project with TWAM – something really positive about the project. The project has been a social process, the stories are themselves social because are about personal lives and as a result the social relationship with the museum meant that the participants wanted the museum to extend to them the “courtesy” to be asked if the museum wants to use the story again and maybe to be involved in the interpretation of it and to be invited at the opening… So in the sense that there is a quite social process in the production
that carries on with the social process within the museum as well. Museums need to be social and dynamic spaces in order to thrive and develop.

**Antonia:** This process is more important to the facilitator or to the storyteller? I have the sensation that the focus of the storyteller is more on the outcome, the story itself, and the one of the facilitator is more on the process. So sometimes I feel that there is a different perception of the real meaning of a digital storytelling workshop in general. There is something more tangible related to the desire of people to make something at the end; and there is something that you can really appreciate or understand only if you are not involved with your feelings, with your emotions. So there is in my opinion from one side something that you can’t see if you are a storyteller and from the other side something that you can understand with a more rationale approach only when you are a facilitator.

**Helen:** Yes, it’s true, but the problem is – in terms of informed consent – if you are really focused on feeling of your story and on making it in the group you are part in, then are you thinking through what it will mean for it to be displayed on the web or become part of a collection. I think this is the job of the facilitator: make sure to help people in imagining how it will be circulated.

**Antonia:** So to reduce this gap between different ways to run the workshop, the most important moment might be the screening of all the stories? Maybe in that moment the facilitator could explain the general approach and the different ways to be part of the same process.

**Helen:** Maybe, but in that moment is too late to make changes, so… because people need to make just little adjustments all the way through. I think it need to have done quite gently during all the process at different stages.

**Antonia:** I have another question about the contents of a story to under-
stand if it’s really important that a story is “true”. From a point of view of as a facilitator, what do you expect from a storyteller, that his / her story is a real, an actual fact or is nice also if is something related to his/her fantasy? In my opinion even if the story is coming from my imagination is still “true” because is my way to give a meaning to that picture, is a message I want to share even if it’s something not actually happened in your life.

**Helen:** When is it true? I don’t know that. But you are speaking about a part of emotional truth…

**Antonia:** And this is the difference between a digital story and a document, that is a representation of an actual fact. In a digital story is more evident the way you want to show something than the way something was.

**Helen:** Definitely, it’s about communication.
Author Profiles

Helen Graham is University Research Fellow in Tangible and Intangible Heritage and Director, Centre for Critical Studies of Museums, Galleries and Heritage at the University of Leeds (UK). Coming from a background working in museum learning, access and community engagement, Helen’s research focuses on specific practices of access, inclusion and collaboration as a way of exploring the shifting public and democratic grounds of museums and ‘heritage’. Helen was part of a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council research project related to the conversation here ‘Partnership and Participation: Copyright and Informed Consent’. You can read the reports here: http://partnershipandparticipation.wordpress.com/

Antonia Liguori is a journalist, a teacher of Web content and a SEO copywriter for several websites and works at Luigi Sturzo Institute (a cultural institution based in Rome) as European Projects' Manager. After a PhD in History and Computer Science she worked as Coordinator of the Multimedia Department at a Consortium of Cultural Institutions. She current co-ordinates KVALUES, an EC-funded project focused on the use of the digital storytelling methodology as a tool for the self-evaluation of competencies acquired through the informal and non-formal learning.
ENKDIST (European Network for Knowledge diffusion of Digital Storytelling) is a European Project granted by the European Commission.

The Network meets the purposes of the Lifelong Learning programme with the intention of exchanging best practice at a European level, endorsing the vision of technology serving lifelong learning. Specifically the project wants to address the ICT's contribution considering digital storytelling as a means of Life Long Learning.

The project aims to transform and integrate national practice into a European procedure, whilst at the same time respecting local identities. The digital storytelling methodology is utilised to valorise Life Long Learning experiences across the network: hence the creation of a virtual community of practice on digital storytelling issues, proposing a European framework for users to follow.

The Network also provides advice and support on transversal issues related to the creative use of digital content and to the employment of basic software tools to create digital stories.