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# Teaching and Speaking to Social Change: A Digital Storytelling Approach Addressing Access to Higher Education

Aline C. Gubrium

Timothy Scott

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**Aline C. Gubrium**
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

**Timothy Scott**
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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**Abstract**
In this article, we briefly review neoliberal economic rationales used to inform educational reforms, juxtaposed with the function of public education as a public good. We then introduce a new participatory visual method grounded in a human rights education approach, digital storytelling. Digital storytelling can serve triple purposes: as a data collection technique used by social researchers to critically assess participants' experiences as they are affected by education reforms, as a collaborative method for political organizing, and as a tactic for building awareness to address these reforms. We review a digital storytelling workshop as it was carried out with graduate employees at a public university located in the Northeastern U.S. and conclude by offering implications for social research and human rights and social justice activism.

**Keywords**
Education reform, digital storytelling, social research, human rights and social justice approach

Education reform efforts in the U.S. are driven, in part, by a neoliberal doctrine woven into a dominant North American cultural narrative that posits capitalism as a common sense economic approach to organizing all aspects of society. Neoliberalism is marked by its critics as an aggressive free-market agenda that translates into the state relinquishing the responsibility of upholding the common good of all. A foremost goal of this agenda is to maximize the profits of private enterprise through privatization and deregulation of the economy. This entails the gradual eradication of public education, public social safety nets, progressive taxation, price controls, living wages and

other worker protections, environmental protections, as well as other essential public sector services and infrastructure (Lipman, 2000).

Neoliberal education reformers often root their support for increased privatization in a notion of progress, with the imposition of market-based reforms seen as the solution for the U.S. to 'keep up' in a global workforce competition and as a corrective measure for purported inflexibility and inefficiencies in the public sector. This logic is used to justify the shift of public funding to educational mechanisms, sponsored in large part by business interests (Lubienski, 2003). Mike Rose (2009) points out that school-business alliances may lead to 'enriched' internship and mentoring possibilities for marginalized youth who traditionally are not offered these opportunities. On the other hand, he also notes that businesses often have a direct financial interest in the programs they fund, which can lead to market-oriented values driving curriculum development, the hiring of teachers and administrators, and fundamentally, private financial say-so over public services (55).

As state and federal funding decreases for higher education, the financial burden to support public education is increasingly shifted to students. A hegemonic rationale situates students as 'consumers' with 'choices' to make (Apple, 2004, Gramsci, 1971). This university-as-business and student-as-shopper mentality reduces higher education to the bottom line. The most important virtue of 'earning' a higher education thus becomes the capacity to learn the right kind of knowledge in order to fulfill professional requirements and/or contribute to the future economy (Willis, 1977). Behind the scenes remains the mandate that as consumers, students are asked to cover the costs of their 'public' education through fee, tuition, and campus housing increases, which imposes additional financial barriers to education for low-income students.

Despite reforms in the area of civil rights and others initiatives to broaden access to education, a hegemonic myth also references 'meritocracy,' where the attainment of education is portrayed as a common vehicle towards equity. The thinking goes that the free-market system is best for advancing individual opportunities on a 'level playing field,' and to reward merit and hard work. Race, class, and gender inequities seemingly do not matter in a meritocratic worldview, as the market is seen as creating prosperous opportunities

for all (Lakes, 2008; Leyva, 2009).

Critical literacy praxis and human rights education (HRE) approaches inspired by Paulo Freire's work have been used to resist neoliberal education reforms, working to create alternative agendas for public education (Mayo, 1995; McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007; Sandlin et al, 2010a). We see critical literacy praxis taking place at three levels. Students (broadly conceived) must have the capacity for self-reflection about the world they live in and their position within a socially constructed world. At a structural level, students must be able to critically analyze the world around them and the intersection of larger systems of oppression - economic, social, cultural, and political - that are put in place to 'manufacture consent' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Finally, they must be able to imagine a new world, where power arrangements are shifted; a new vision for how society is organized that will allow for personal and social agency (see also Aronowitz, 2009).

An HRE approach provides overlapping aims: '…one of the core elements of HRE is to specifically refer to human rights standards and their broad meaning…if people are not able to state precisely their rights and those of others they will not be able to claim nor will they be able to fight for them' (Mihr, 2004, 2). HRE can be approached from three levels: (1) a cognitive level in which knowledge and information about human rights is transmitted; (2) an emotional and awareness level in which consciousness and sense of responsibility towards human rights violations is raised, provoking an emotional response in people; and (3) an active level in which those involved in the HRE process become activated to detect human rights injustices (2-3).

Digital storytelling takes these approaches to heart. The process centers upon the capacity of workshop participants to reflect on and name their own experiences in building group critical consciousness and analysis of a problem. As Gready (2010) remarks, one primary point of reference for human rights work is the story: 'you could define human rights practice as the craft of bringing together legal norms and human stories in the service of justice…Human stories provide [an] essential resource – attempting to spark the law into life, transcend cultural and political difference, and cement the solidarity of strangers' (178). The digital storytelling process 'moves from the global to the local, the political to the personal, the pedagogical to the per-

formative' (Denzin, 2010, 62), and affords participants the capacity to produce a tangible artifact that represents their own experiences and, as a group, to articulate a more hopeful future rooted in principles of human rights and social justice. In this paper we briefly review the digital storytelling process, then present a digital storytelling workshop as it was carried out with graduate employees at a university located in the Northeastern U.S., and conclude by offering suggestions for ways that digital storytelling can be employed in social research, especially research focused on human rights and social justice activism and aimed at critically interrogating access to public higher education.

**The Digital Storytelling Process**

Digital stories are constructed from participants' own subject positions and told as personal narratives. The aim of a digital storytelling workshop is for participants to tell a story that speaks to their own experiences. The workshop process, outcome of the workshop (a produced digital story), and audience reflections on the digital stories may be used to investigate individual, group or socio-cultural understandings of experience, while also increasing participants' input in addressing community concerns (Gubrium, 2009). Thus, the process can result in 'cultivating a pedagogy of humanity' (Sandlin et al, 2010b, 1) surrounding social problems, oft delineated through disengaged statistics.

The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) (www.storycenter.org) has played an integral part, both nationally and internationally, in training others to use digital storytelling as a method for community organizing and human rights and social justice activism, education, research, and public policy change. Their approach is

> grounded in the notion that personal stories can inspire, edu cate, and move people deeply, and that when it comes to con fronting complex social issues, the connections forged through storytelling can help people bridge the vast differ ences that often divide them and instead act with wisdom, compassion, and conscience      (Reed and Hill, 2010, 269)

In this context, produced digital stories are 'shared as tools for training, community mobilization, and policy advocacy to promote health,

gender equality, and human rights both locally and globally' (269).

CDS works in conjunction with oral and local history projects (Meadows, 2003; Tucker, 2006), K-12, higher education, and adult education programs to increase student access to alternative forms of literacy (DUSTY, n.d., Educause Learning Initiative, 2007; Kajder, 2006; Ohler, 2007), public health and youth services (Dupain and Maguire, 2005, 2007), domestic healthcare and international health and development programs (Silence Speaks, n.d.), and Spanish language projects in the United States (Contando Nuestras Historias, n.d.), and abroad (Hull et al, 2009; Lundby, 2008; U.C. Links, 2002). As an emergent method in social research, research efforts often center on identity as a locus of concern (de Leeuw and Rydin, 2007, Gubrium and Turner, forthcoming), knowledge production and intervention (Beeson and Miskelly, 2005; Burgess, 2006; Chavez et al, 2004; Marcuss, 2004; Meadows, 2003), and pedagogical processes, such as literacy and conceptual learning projects (Hull and Nelson, 2005; Mahiri, 1997; Morrell, 2004).

It is especially important to clarify the digital storytelling workshop process to readers, as the workshop itself can serve as much a site for analysis as the artifact produced. Workshop trainers ('facilitators') guide participants through a process that results in a three to five minute visual narrative, synthesizing image, audio recording of voice and music, and on screen text to create compelling stories (Lambert, 2010a). In the context of the workshop described in this article, the co-facilitators were trained in a CDS three-day workshop, in which they learned how to make their own digital story, and a CDS five-day workshop, in which they learned how to work with others to produce their own digital stories.

A train-the-trainer model is followed in workshops, in which facilitators work with participants to construct their own digital stories. Participants 'learn by doing,' producing a digital story over the course of twenty-four hours. Three-day workshops are the norm, with a concentrated period of time allowing for less disruption of the process.

The workshop is commonly organized into three phases. In the first phase of the workshop, facilitators introduce participants to the process by presenting digital story examples to the group in order to exemplify a final product. Facilitators then present a brief lecture

on the seven 'steps' of digital storytelling as conceptualized by the CDS: 'owning your insights,' 'owning your emotions,' 'finding the moment,' 'seeing your story,' 'hearing your story,' 'assembling your story,' and 'sharing your story' (Lambert, 2010b, 9-29). These steps represent a 'journey' toward creating a meaningful digital story, allowing participants to 'fully visualize their story as a finished piece before they begin to write their script' (Lambert, 2010b, 9). Participants are also asked to consider these steps when revising their own stories and when listening to and commenting on other participants' stories during collaborative discussion sessions.

The second phase of the workshop focuses on crafting a script for the digital story. Participants arrive at the first day's session with a one to two page draft of their story, or at the very least an idea for a story in mind. In terms of subject matter for stories, the process is largely driven by the topic of interest, while content derives from participant experiences. Participants are asked to bring along personal digital photos or print photos to be scanned, and/or video clips to incorporate into their stories. If appropriate, we encourage participants to use their own photos in their stories, rather than downloading photos from open source applications such as Creative Commons (www.creativecommons.org). Just as with stories they write for their piece, we hope that participants will see the digital storytelling process as an artistic endeavor in which their own creations—written, oral, and visual—fit together to craft their digital stories. However, the choice to include personal photos may also be affected by the story's topic matter. In workshops conducted around highly sensitive personal matters, such as those focusing on experiences with intimate partner violence, participants may be reluctant to include personal photos that could publicly 'implicate' themselves or others. They may instead choose to visually represent their experiences through implicit images collected from open access sources that symbolically represent the topic matter. In this regard, ethical considerations in the digital storytelling process are always a matter of concern and should be prioritized when constructing workshop activities.

After participating in written or spoken activities to 'break the ice' among participants and facilitators and to encourage creative juices to flow, the group participates in a story circle activity. The purpose of a story circle is to create a safe and comfortable space for partici-

pants to present a first draft or initial idea for a story and to allow for group collaboration in story construction. Story circles may also provide a first outlet for participants to acknowledge and create something positive from potentially troubling experiences presented in their stories.

All participants are given the same amount of time to present and discuss their drafts and ideas. Participants are encouraged to consider the seven steps of storytelling when reflecting on and discussing each other's stories. This provides a shared format for both story construction and supportive commentary. Out of the discussion of participants' stories, a sensitizing to the problem and a unity of mission can develop that forms a sense of collaborative accomplishment. Utilizing participants' 'collective intelligence,' the approach disrupts traditional notions of authorship that cast thinking and learning as individual in nature, instead rooting knowledge production in collaborative context (Levy, 1998). Attendant to multiple purposes, of story editing, consciousness-raising, and therapeutic concerns, story circles can serve as an initial point of critical consciousness for participants in the digital storytelling process.

After completing the story circle, facilitators present tutorials on working with a digital image editing application. Participants are taught to scan printed photos into their computers and to visually modify their digital photos and video clips for use in their stories. Facilitators may also present a separate tutorial focused on thinking critically about visual image representation. Participants then revise their story scripts in collaboration with facilitators and record a voiceover of their scripts, which is used as the audio portion of the digital story. While one participant records her voiceover, the others create storyboards to map out their digital stories in terms of the ways that story elements mesh with each other.

In the third phase of the workshop, facilitators provide another software tutorial, working with participants to incorporate digital story components (visual, oral, and textual) into a nonlinear video editing application. During the tutorial, participants learn how to import and work with their source materials within the application, beginning a rough edit of their story. By the end of the workshop, each participant has produced a digital story. As part of this collaborative effort, workshop closure is important in the digital storytelling pro-

cess. Screening each digital story at the end of the workshop is a way of celebrating the groups' collective accomplishments (Lambert, 2010a). The first showing of a digital story is usually restricted to workshop participants and facilitators, helping to sustain a safe space and group cohesion built over the course of the workshop.

In the following section, we present an example of a digital storytelling workshop that we conducted on the topic of accessing public higher education and highlight two digital stories produced in the workshop to indicate the uses of digital storytelling for social research and human rights and social justice activism purposes.

**Accessing Public Higher Education: A Digital Storytelling Workshop**

After helping to organize a photo-based (Wang and Burris, 1997) advocacy project protesting a large fee increase at his university, one of this paper's authors, a servicing representative for the university's graduate employee union, suggested to union staff and leadership that they might also utilize a digital storytelling approach to address the issue. Digital storytelling was seen as a 'human method of mobilization' (Barnard and Van Gerven, 2009) that could be used to counter 'commonplace' conceptions of education reform.

While people tell stories all the time and storytelling is a common way to explicate experience, unless they are part of a creative writing program or participating in a course that centers on creative writing as a mode of reflection, graduate students are not typically used to writing stories about their own experiences. Especially in a social science academic environment, students are asked to write in the third person, present scholarly analyses from an 'objective' standpoint, and to report on the events of other peoples' lives or other peoples' contributions to academia. Likewise, Mander (2010) states: 'It is often believed that social science research must be detached, impersonal and 'objective'' (252). Instead, he argues that social science research (and we argue additionally here, educational endeavors) need not be seen as 'an investigation into inert, static, external realities, but into the fluid subjective worlds of people's lives, as experienced, interpreted, recalled and mediated by them' (252).

However, with the exception of freshman writing and/or creative writing courses that might emphasize personal storytelling,

the digital storytelling process provides an alternative way for the graduate students to tell their stories and to represent personal historical experiences in tangible form. Indeed, one participant in the digital storytelling workshop described here, who herself was a graduate student in a creative writing program at the university, commented that she found the digital storytelling process to be especially evocative for representing her experiences, given its multi-media format that provided a different lens on her experiences than might have been relayed in solely written form. She also felt that a 'small movie' of her experiences might better reach others in reflecting on similar experiences in their own lives, from which a common consensus for action and change might occur. Again, Mander (2010) relates:

> [L]istening to the stories and 'words from the heart' of people – through which they reconstruct their own lived experiences, and their analysis, knowledge and aspirations – makes them partners in this research, democratizes knowledge, and is of significant epistemological validity and value. …The knowledge and insights derived from these processes can be invaluable… in efforts to secure the human rights of disadvantaged and oppressed people, and in the design and evaluation of public policy (252-253).

In collaboration with two digital storytelling facilitators, interested union staff participated in a workshop right before the beginning of the new school year. The co-authors held a pre-workshop meeting with the union president to incorporate long-term organizing goals into the workshop structure. In particular, we discussed ways the workshop might complement other organizing activities and designed the workshop with this in mind. Taking into account previous discussions held among union staff, we decided that the workshop should focus on barriers to accessing higher education in relation to existing education reform initiatives.

During the workshop orientation session, the co-facilitators especially emphasized the potentially public use of participants' digital stories for organizing purposes. Digital storytelling and other participatory visual approaches notably invoke an ethical tension between maintaining participant confidentiality and using produced materials

for organizing and advocacy purposes. Indeed, how could we promise confidentiality for participants if digital stories were to be used in an advocacy campaign, especially if stories contained recognizable images and voices of participants or others depicted in the story? With this in mind, we reviewed 'consent to release' forms with participants before beginning the digital storytelling workshop, asking participants to choose preferred options and sign the form only after they had completed the workshop. We wanted to make sure that participants had the chance to experience the digital storytelling process, as well as to know the sort of story they had produced, before providing consent to release. Release options included: airing the story within the confines of the workshop, allowing the digital story to be used in a public forum for advocacy, such as posted on a web site or presented at a public exhibition, and/or allowing the digital story to be used in a public forum for education and/or research purposes.

Five union staff members (two women and three men) participated in the workshop, which took place over the course of three, eight-hour days. All of the participants were over the age of 30, signaling their return to school after spending a number of years outside of the university setting. Possibly life experiences outside of academia allowed the participants to broaden their analysis of structural barriers faced in obtaining a higher education.

Digital story themes arising from the workshop included difficulties faced in finding a job and funding while a graduate student, experiencing the death of a loved one and the sense of loss at losing social supports, anxiety aroused by a decreasing state investment in the public education system, and a general sense of disenfranchisement from participating in a system that was built up in their minds as something that was supposed to be accessible to everyone, but which has turned out to be something only affordable to a select few.

Screening the stories at the end of the workshop served as a site for individual and group reflection on experiences depicted within the digital stories. To be able to choose how their experiences were represented to their comrades and to have produced a digital story as a concrete artifact of their experiences proved to be especially evocative for participants. Upon airing their stories at the end of the workshop, participants concluded that the digital storytelling process and outcomes would indeed be useful for campaign mobilization efforts.

Several months after completing the digital storytelling workshop, we interviewed participants to gather their impressions of the workshop. Below, we present two participants' stories (both of whom gave consent to present their stories in this article) and highlight key themes arising in each of their stories and their responses to the digital storytelling workshop process and outcomes.

**Mary's Story**

One participant, Mary, produced a digital story comparing her own experiences participating in a PhD program to her father's experiences getting a PhD fifteen years prior. Mary was a 37-year old, white woman, who grew up in the Central Canadian province of Saskatchewan. She began her higher education as an undergraduate at a local university, at the same time and institution that her father, at the age of 51, began a PhD program in education. Presently, Mary is a PhD student in management at a U.S. university. She introduces contrasting educational experiences between her and her father early in the story, continuing to employ this contrast as a framing mechanism throughout her entire story.

Mary begins the first half of her story tracing her parents' courtship in Ireland, her father's early education in post-war Ireland as a part of the working class, her parents' eventual immigration to Saskatchewan and the birth of their three daughters, and her own growing up experiences in Canada. Her commentary focuses especially on her father's experiences with schooling. She states: 'Dad loved school and excelled in every subject. He was the only one of his nine siblings to receive a university scholarship to study in Dublin.' Mary speaks of her father as 'an educated man,' especially as reflected through her mother's eyes. Her father's education was one of the things that her mother saw as especially attractive during their courtship. Mary also introduces a gendered critique of perceptions of the meaning of 'being educated.' While her mother was certified with a professional degree, Mary describes her mother's self-perception as being uneducated. To emphasize this point in her digital story, she links her mother's own self-impression with an on-screen photo of Eliza Doolittle. Mary concludes the first part of her story reviewing her mother's meritocratic dreams for her daughters. Her mother always hoped that her daughters would 'be different,' that they would work hard to receive a

'proper education' as had her husband, and would earn good careers as a result.

Mary then transitions to another time and place. It is thirty years later and she is now living in the United States, 'following in [her] dad's footsteps, and living out her mother's dream,' she says with a wry tone to her voice. Accompanying her voiceover is a digital image of a painting depicting young white adults congregating on a university campus, evoking the halcyon days of graceful existence on a co-ed campus, and seemingly meant to capture the educational experience that she envisions her father had. Mary's next voiceover line and visual image come quickly, utilizing a pacing technique to emphasize her contrasting experience. She begins with a close-up, digital image of a painting, depicting a student standing in front of a student union (a place where on her own university campus union protests often occur), accompanied by her voiceover statement, 'I doubt my grad school experience is anything like my father's. Being an older white male on full scholarship, I imagine that Dad was never told by his program director, 'if you can't afford it, you shouldn't be here." Mary juxtaposes this statement with a photo image of a woman's hands, cupped together and holding a pile of change (mostly pennies), used to signify financial need.

Mary then shifts to another photo image of a university paycheck and provides critical commentary on barriers to accessing and completing her education. She refers to the pursuit of academia as a luxury only to be afforded to the privileged. For Mary, '[p]art time jobs and expanding loans get in the way of deconstructing the principles of Taylorism to illustrate worker alienation.' Demonstrating a certain theoretical know-how as a student in critical management studies, she positions herself as an object to be studied, much like the 19th century garment workers depicted in an accompanying photograph, herself as much affected by principles of scientific management and feelings of worker alienation.

Finally, Mary ends her story, concluding with a blunt statement: 'Reality bears little resemblance to my mother's dream. A world where education is open and accessible to everyone.' This time she pans across the same photo used earlier to signify the dreamy world of her father's educational experience, focusing on a new character in the photo, positioned in the bottom corner—a young Black man who is

seemingly excluded from the ivory tower dream depicted in the rest of the photo.

Mary completes her contrastive story by describing a conversation she held with father a couple of years before about their mutual reasons for pursuing a higher education. 'I asked Dad why he wasn't using his doctorate. 'I prefer to study and to learn, the rest doesn't interest me,' he replied.' Mary concludes, 'for me, 'the rest' is all I deal with.'

Through the contrastive structure erected between her own experiences accessing higher education and that of her father, Mary situates herself as very much mired in the pursuit of higher education as a part of achieving meritocracy. In contrast, her father pursues a higher education for the sake of knowledge—what should be seen as basic human right. Mary deems her father's perspective as a mere privilege for the select few in this day and age; a privilege she could never afford. She employs temporal shifts throughout her story to signal contrasts, between the way things once might have been ('back in the good old days') and the way things are now, with decreasing state and federal support for public education and an increasing burden on students to finance their public education.

By highlighting and contrasting her father's philosophy of education (education for knowledge sake, based on the human rights notion that public education serves as an essential ingredient for building one's character to actively participate in civic society) with that of her mother (a meritocratic take on education), Mary's digital story references the notion that as a human right public higher education *should* function as more than a vocational endeavor for entering the labor market or increased professionalization. However, her story also illuminates the tension surrounding a critique of educational vocationalization, centering on the pragmatics of survival within a market-based system. Nevertheless, while her father's philosophy could be read as a privileged position, from a critical pedagogical perspective his statements can also be interpreted as antithetical to the orientation of market-based education reform and its dictates of meritocracy.

In a follow-up interview reflecting on the digital storytelling process and outcome, Mary elaborated on these concerns:

> I am…quite concerned as a graduate student who plans to go into academia, and the way that our education system is going, that our students are paying more and more, treating education like a commodity. Faculty are continually being subjected to corporate-inspired practices. Programs [are] being implemented based on corporate logic. I have talked to faculty about, for instance, how online teaching is just a big money maker. I am teaching an online course now, and I feel like I am more of a tech support person than an educator. It is just a big business. It is just another industry, no longer a public good. I am concerned, in this respect, that it is becoming more like the rest of corporate America. Where I went into education to get out of that!

Mary articulated the strategic political benefits of utilizing digital storytelling as an activist approach to counter this trend: 'One thing I found attractive [about digital storytelling] is that it was not just yelling and screaming, and protesting. It was something that had a more lasting effect; that could be shown to many different audiences over time in many different spaces, compared to just one demonstration in time…'

However, the political is not the only benefit to be realized from participating in a digital storytelling workshop. Channeling a 'personal is political' theme while discussing her take on the digital storytelling process, Mary noted:

> When I participated in the workshop, I was actually able to take my own personal biography and family history and…look at how education had shaped our lives, and how we had certain opportunities because education was there or was not… I was able to access the issue on a more personal level and see how important education is in shaping one's life… When I did the digital storytelling workshop, I was not intending to tell a story about education, it was focused on family, but I saw how the two threads came together through telling that story… I thought that I was going to tell a story that's personal to me, and in the end I ended up saying some pretty powerful things about education. It was almost an unintended effect. It got me

to focus inwards, to how education was really part of my history and future.

In retrospect, by personalizing a story that is often depicted in education research and policy as 'hard data' or 'statistics,' Mary relates that digital storytelling encourages an ethics of caring and accountability (Collins, 1998; Mander, 2010) that affords an innovative form of activism to address education reform, and a more humanistic and human rights driven basis for constructing educational policy. It is an approach that can draw multiple audiences into the story, allowing people to link their own experiences to those of the storyteller. Mary articulated this sentiment:

> Through my own story I realized that this issue seems to be this big overarching issue that almost seems so monstrous and so daunting to take on. I kind of feel helpless in big terms… For me, doing the [digital] story helped to translate the issue… to personalize it, to make it real for me, so that I can relate to it on a level where I could do something about it… I think when the issue seems so big, when there is no human side to it, it just feels overpowering. This process was able to put it down to a manageable size where you can see how this issue is lived in people's everyday lives…. I am just much more moved by the individual story than a statistic… To me, words, emotions, images, are much more powerful to me than numbers. It draws people in…. [Every] time I watch my own [story], the kinds of emotions it stirs up [in me], the way people can relate to it, it is so powerful, and I think that accessing those kinds of feelings is really important to get people committed to a cause. It is a way to get people personally invested in this issue, because they can relate to it.

**Kevin's story**

Another participant, Kevin, also produced a story focusing on his struggle with accessing public higher education. Kevin is a thirty-six year old white man, who was raised in Southern California, attended public schools all his life, and moved to Oregon for a job after completing his undergraduate degree. Kevin begins his story by going

back in time, reflecting on his experiences as a part-time worker at the job in Oregon, prior to attending graduate school. The viewer hears a background soundtrack fading in loudly, lending a mood of terror and anxiety, much like that of an Alfred Hitchcock film. Then, with the music slowing fading out to a background din and a black background displayed on screen, he states: 'I had seen the writing on the wall. I needed full time health insurance. But rather than classifying me as a fulltime employee, the radio station cut my schedule by one hour per week, solidifying my part time status. The only raise I got was when the minimum wage went up in Oregon.'

Due to low wages and a lack of healthcare benefits, Kevin explains, he made plans to return to school, a common choice among some due to a poor economy and lack of benefitted (or even part time) job opportunities, with a higher education seen as a path to a better job in the future. He subsequently spent the next three years in a master's program, mostly without funding, attending school as an unpaid, under-benefitted student. Kevin states, 'I felt lucky to work as a teaching assistant for only one quarter. I got a new pair of glasses that term.' He links this statement with a photo image of himself sporting a new pair of glasses to emphasize the slight depravity of the situation where, as a student, he finally is able to afford to see again.

Kevin's story pauses for several seconds, then transitions to a new scene. He has moved east to attend a PhD program at a public university, with the idea in mind that the university will financially support him as he progresses through his program, namely through graduate assistantships. He displays a photo image of his current university campus, where he in a PhD program in communications and states, 'being accepted to the PhD program at [university] was exhilarating! When they offered me three years of funding starting at $13,000 I was thrilled at the prospect of leaving part time, temporary work behind. [Pause] That was more than I had ever made in one year.'

Kevin then shifts to another photo image, beginning his focus at the top of the photo on a protest sign with the word 'strangulation' and a drawing of a fist painted in the middle of the sign. Panning down the photo image, the viewer next sees a protest held in front of the university student union, the same location as that in the painted image used by Mary to connote her negative experience

with funding in graduate school. Kevin continues, 'I could never have entered my PhD program without tuition and fee waivers.' Similar to Mary, Kevin not only highlights the oppression he has suffered as a result of being underpaid and under-benefitted in part-time jobs and teaching assistantships. He also fuses his personal experiences with a human rights critique to emphasize the personal losses he has experienced in the midst of increasing structural violence (Farmer, 2004) to the public education system.

Kevin then makes a temporal shift to the near past, telling a story of the loss of a loved one to explain his current financial predicament. Throughout the rest of his story, Kevin uses his cat, Bagheera (also the title of his digital story) to signify both the structural and personal violence that is wreaked on his (and her) life as a result of lack of financial support from the public education system. Kevin's plan was to drive himself and Bagheera from Oregon all the way to the east coast to attend the PhD program. When Bagheera becomes ill, he is instead forced to buy airplane tickets for their travels out east. While to some this may seem an extravagant measure, to Kevin and many others pets serve a significant role in life. That he has few finances to expend and uses them up on purchasing airline tickets emphasizes the important role she plays in his life and the desperation of the situation. Kevin highlights everyday life circumstances, such as the illness of a loved one, which can present barriers to affording higher education and link to oppression. Their situation goes from bad to worse: Bagheera's health takes a turn for the worse and Kevin is forced to choose between being able to afford her healthcare, or risk unpaid bills. He decides to pay for her healthcare.

Kevin also explains that before moving east for his PhD program he was not able to afford to search for housing in person. He states, 'I eventually agreed to live with an undergrad in her senior year who I had never met, in an apartment exactly double what it costs to live in Oregon because the landlord agreed to allow a cat.' Kevin continues optimistically: 'That summer I finished my thesis, moved across the country,' and then displays a photo of a drawing of a skull, and concludes with despair, '…and Bagheera, my cat, died.' Seemingly familiar circumstances for those in dire straits, Kevin relates a relatively common human rights plight for those struggling to afford healthcare for themselves and their loved ones in the midst of other

pressing financial concerns.

Increasing the volume on the angst ridden background soundtrack, Kevin signals the unfairness of the whole situation, stating that he was constantly reminded of his loss as he traveled out east, by ticket agents, a new roommate, and his new landlord; those with whom he had wrangled his very last finances to accommodate the needs of his now dead cat. He states, 'What I had saved up for my move all went toward x-rays, the vet, her cremation. I took out an emergency loan from the graduate school because I could not afford my rent that first month.' Kevin also took out loans to pay for school, as he had not been able to save up much money from his past part-time jobs. He continues solemnly, 'I brought this debt with me to Massachusetts, but not my cat.'

Kevin transitions to the final scene of his digital story. He begins the scene with a photo image depicting a U.S. Department of Education 'Direct Loan' bill. Continuing from his prior testimony of debt, Kevin states, 'The interest continues to grow. I do not know the exact amount I owe at this point because I'm afraid to open the statements that come in the mail.' A new image flashes on the screen, with loan bill envelopes piling up on the ground. The pulsing tones of the horns in the soundtrack begin to blare discordantly, with Kevin concluding, 'they sit unopened on the floor in my room.' A true film noire finale to Kevin's story of personal and structural violence, experienced at the hands of the public higher education system and a market-based economy.

Similar to Mary, in a follow-up interview, Kevin reflected on the 'personal is political' process realized through his participation in the digital storytelling workshop:

> While our ongoing campaign was about fees and access to education…much of [graduate employee] fees were getting waived. So, much of the specific campaign activities was about work being done on behalf of other people, people who are currently in school or would be entering school. I am a…white male in a PhD program, sitting in an extremely privileged position. The story I told was about my debt, and how many student loans I had taken out, and how it followed me around the country from one school to the next. I would say that it was not in the

moment [of participating in the campaign] that I realized I was talking about myself as well... [During the digital storytelling workshop] I remember realizing how much debt I have, and how much I have suppressed thinking about it because it is such a significant amount. It is so easy to put off. I don't have to pay until after I graduate, hopefully after I have a job, making it easy to not to have to think about it… My intention was to tell my story within this larger fees campaign, of how I am personally affected.

Kevin articulates the personal nature of digital storytelling, and how the workshop process brought home for him how much he, indeed if even indirectly in relation to fee increases, has suffered a human rights abuse as a result of a market-driven educational system that prioritizes the acquisition of capital over knowledge gained or student wellbeing. As Henry Giroux (2010a) succinctly puts it: 'private interests trump social needs, and economic growth becomes more important than social justice' (486).

In addition to it being a personally enlightening process, Kevin referenced the collaborative nature of the workshop, which allowed him to hone in on the topic of education reform. Collaboration is integral to building strength in unity of purpose during organizing campaigns. Kevin related: '…I could never have told that story without the feedback that I got from the group in the workshop. I was only able to come up with my own [story] within the group process, which involved five other people. ...[T]he feedback I received from [others] was so helpful in allowing me to stay true to my story...'

As a PhD student in communications, Kevin is well versed in a critique of dominant narratives often showcased in public media forms. As well as appreciating the collaborative nature of the digital storytelling process, Kevin referenced the potentially subversive power of new media forms, such as digital stories, to create alternative narratives:

A *Newsweek* cover a few weeks ago asked a question about how to 'save' American education, while showing images in the background of a chalk board saying things like 'close schools,' 'fire teachers,' I don't quite remember the details. …[This] is a

significant issue, the ubiquity of mass media outlets like *Newsweek*, especially compared to one digital story. [However] it is not just one digital story. Let me back up and say, digital storytelling is a form of intervention simply in the process of creating those stories. In my small group, it was transformative for those telling their stories…to connect it with the campaign [we were] working on. At the beginning of the workshop we saw digital stories published on a website, where Palestinian youth living under Israeli occupation have produced digital stories about their experiences. [The] stories [were] humanizing in a way that you do not see anywhere else in this country: in this country where most of our contact with Palestine is mediated through the mass media. And these are all available on the Internet. Although they are speaking in Arabic and subtitled, they are stories that most people can relate to because they arise from common human concerns. The effectiveness of the website is the volume and number of stories around the same theme, which at the very least they can influence attitudes by reframing an issue that is not very well known; or kept from many of us. [The] transformative process of making [our stories], and how they can then be used to provide counter narratives within the public realm when juxtaposed with the dominant narratives we are bombarded with everyday can provide us with one more powerful tool in our efforts to create a more just world.

In this way, digital storytelling workshops follow a key tenet of human rights education, allowing participants the space to serve as knowledge and media producers (Mander, 2010), rather than merely as public media consumers. Through this process they can explore the relationship between their individual position and their social, culture, and structural environments (de Leeuw and Rydin, 2007).

## Implications for Social Research and Human Rights and Social Justice Activism

The digital storytelling process serves as an innovative approach to investigating the social construction of identity for social research purposes. Digital stories may be viewed as sites for the pro-

duction and transformation of identities of the individuals and groups that produce them. In turn, the process and produced artifact (the digital story) holds implications for addressing issues of human rights and social justice. Digital stories produced by a group of community member participants (broadly conceived) may be seen as active representations of group concerns and strategically shared through a range of media; including print, online, and oral/discussion formats. As a critical performance (Denzin, 2010), digital storytelling enables participants and audience members to discuss issues of import and to build a group culture capable of mobilizing larger numbers of people to address issues at multiple policy levels (Yang, 2007).

Our take on digital storytelling as an innovative method for social research is inspired, in large part, by Catherine Riessman's perspective that personal narratives are largely about the telling of social worlds: 'An investigator cannot elicit an autobiographical story that is separable from wider conditions in which it is situated and constructed… [Visual narratives] are performances of 'selves,' crafted with an audience in mind—a 'staging of subjectivity' (Riessman, 2008, 177). This take on narrative allows for an analysis of power relations and human rights abuses. The social researcher can gain a deeper understanding of narrative constraints placed on meaning-making in relation to structures of power, such as race, class, and gender, by looking at the language used in a digital story, the ways that the narrator chooses to situate herself within her story, and reflecting upon what is possibly left unsaid in the story.

In contrast to top-down approaches in which policy makers, academics, public health practitioners, and others seen as 'experts' may generalize an experience for a targeted community, digital storytelling allows participants to construct and represent their own experiences. In our experience conducting the digital storytelling workshop, we witnessed how the process allowed both researcher/facilitators and workshop participants to position themselves as participant observers in the research process, thereby allowing both parties new and varied perspectives on the social construction of meaning in everyday life. Practicing conscientization (Freire, 1970), and as participant observers in this regard, workshop participants became more conscious of shared experiences and the ways they made meaning of these experiences.

Through a process of conscientization, the digital storytelling process can serve as a site for collective analysis of generative themes, and through group discussion as a site for articulating future selves and society. For marginalized communities, digital storytelling can offer a reflective space for unpacking, articulating, resisting, and challenging oppression and human rights abuses. The process can also act as a vehicle for healing wounds caused by oppression through the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). This might be accomplished by shifting the dominant narrative through a reframing of 'facts on the ground' (Saltman, 2007). In the context of the reviewed digital storytelling workshop, participants' stories were not meant for just doom and gloom. Together through discussion of the digital stories during the final airing of the workshop and discussion surrounding Mary and Kevin's stories during a follow-up conference presentation, storytellers and audience members were able to rework the facts on the ground, instead imagining a future in which public education is transformed into a human right and true *public* entity, accessible to all. To conference audience members, the stories exemplified the potential of digital storytelling to 'enter…into a critical dialogue with history and imagin[e] a future that [does] not merely reproduce the present' (Giroux, 2010b, online).

During discussions workshop participants and audience members elicited several themes related to the potential of digital storytelling as an approach for human rights and social justice activism. Reflective themes included:

- Hearing other people's stories enables people to think of their own story and helps people to better identify common threads in their lives, fostering empathy and an ethics of caring;
- A smaller scale application (personal narrative) helps people relate to larger scale (policy) or more universal (human rights) issues;
- People often do not get a chance to tell their story to strangers. Stories can humanize what are usually conceived of as distant social problems;
- The digital storytelling process is a reminder that things are not always what they appear to be. One digital story

can serve equally as rich a data point as thousands of surveys. A story's explanation and context of production, as well as the story told, provide valid and grounded knowledge [what Collins (1998) refers to as 'wisdom'] for creating sensitive social policies that value the lives of those affected;

- There is a sense of loss of personal and human connection in this digital age. Yet digital storytelling (even though the process is digitized) can allow for a more intimate and personal connection; and
- Traditional media represents power interests. New media forms, such as digital storytelling, give people the opportunity to create messages and represent their experiences regarding important issues from their own perspective.

The reflections highlight the potential for digital storytelling to facilitate critical consciousness in human rights and social justice campaigns, while also speaking to its potential to be utilized in very concrete ways as an organizing tool to raise public consciousness around issues that are of significant value to public interests, yet are often marginalized within a dominant narrative. While there is a growing body of research analyzing the dynamics of market-based education reform, there is still a dire need to move beyond dominant narratives. Digital storytelling serves as a process that affords participants the agency to tell their own stories, which can result in the production of alternative narratives bearing witness to the human rights abuses and social injustices experienced by people *on the ground* as a result of market-based reforms.

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**Aline Gubrium**, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Community Health Education in the School of Public Health and Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is a medical anthropologist conducting community-based participatory fieldwork focused on sexual and reproductive health experiences of marginalized youth and women. Her work meshes participatory visual methods, such as digital storytelling, Photovoice and body mapping, with more traditional ethnographic research methods to engage with health issues from a humanistic and narrative perspective. Gubrium has worked with the Center for Digital Storytelling for four years and currently serves as a research associate at the Center.

**Timothy Scott** is a PhD student in Community Health Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is a former organizer with the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW).