

# Digital storytelling and wellbeing: investigating the transformative potential of digital storytelling and its contribution to health and wellbeing

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## Our approach to digital storytelling

- ‘Classical’ CDS/Story Center model
- usually takes place over three days
- Online version = six x 2-hour sessions + individual support between sessions

Digital stories are a *distillation* – they move us from the narrative to the *essential* story.



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## Digital storytelling involves...

- Deep reflection
- Creative writing
- Photography, painting, drawing
- Image and video editing
- Groupwork
- Peer support & review
- Voicework & performance
- Music
- Meaning-making






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## Digital storytelling is....

- Creative
- Reflective
- Contemplative
- Collaborative
- Emancipatory
- Democratic
- Participatory
- Validating
- Transformative
- Universal






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## What people have said over the years....

*‘Since making my digital story, I feel like I’ve grown wings.’*  
*‘A truly cathartic experience.’*  
*‘I felt that it was like 10 years’ worth of therapy in 3 days.’*  
*‘It moved me on seismically – it released me.’*  
*‘It felt like an almost spiritual journey.’*  
*‘It was quite transformative in that way of actually viewing myself and my situation through quite a different lens...’*  
*‘I feel like it has been the best reflective practice I have undertaken throughout my career and that it has also provided me with clinical supervision that I have never achieved in the same way within work.’*






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## Stories

*‘Stories can change lives if we’re not careful. They will come in and take the shirts off our backs. Tell the right stories and we live better lives.’*

Ali Smith, *The Guardian*, 2005, interviewed by Louise France.






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## Well-being, relational and pluralist

Relational; listening better is a relational act  
 Conceptual pluralism; **'multiple competing concepts of well-being which are appropriately invoked in different contexts'**  
 (Mitchell and Alexandrova, 2020)



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## Wellbeing and therapy

*'Well, I feel there's something about the link between doing it and almost things like mindfulness, where they've shown, haven't they, that **time out to stop and reflect and slow down and think** has a positive health benefit, there is no doubt. **So that's health as in physical and mental, definitely.** And in the ability to help you articulate things that are concepts of elements going on around you, that you probably haven't pulled all together and distilled into one thing.'*

*So some of my stories, they bring your personal life with your working life and even if lots of people aren't doing that, we compartmentalize life. **So, giving you an opportunity to see yourself as a whole is incredibly healthy and a good thing to do.'***

*'I suppose, yeah, it has been, for me, it has been **self-therapy and group therapy and friendship and insight...**'*



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## Critiques of storytelling

- Critique of individual focus – atomizing society  
*'The storytelling industry thrives on sympathy but fails to create empathy or understanding'* (Freund, 2015)
- Narrator as the protagonist that overcomes structural ills through a recovery narrative (Woods, 2011)
- Conflating history – as general – with individual memory
- Narcissism and democracy and therapeutic culture (Furedi, 2006; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009)



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## Storytelling as dialogue

- *The generic thought processes of humanity incline toward perceiving the world in a fragmentary way, "breaking things up which are not really separate."*
- *One primary intent of Bohm's dialogue, then, is to shed light on the activity of this fragmentation – not only as theoretical analysis, but also as a concrete, experiential process.*
- *As Bohm himself emphasized, however, dialogue is a process of **direct, face-to-face encounter**, not to be confused with endless theorizing and speculation. In a time of accelerating abstractions and seamless digital representations, it is this insistence on facing the inconvenient messiness of daily, corporeal experience that is perhaps most radical of all.*

(Nichol, 1995 in Bohm, 1996)



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## Having a voice, connection and being heard

*'I'd kind of learned to articulate things more crisply and honestly, somehow. It had **given me a voice** and a way to condense what I needed to say. I think it made me less conciliatory in my job.'*

*'I think being in a story circle and **experiencing the trust and the genuine commitment** and **how people really listen and give feedback**, it's just a fantastic experience. I think everybody should be able to have that experience.'*

*'I felt **emotionally connected** to the others in the room every single time. I think we all share that vulnerability and anxiety.'*

*'I think storytelling actually **allowed me to find my voice** and articulate my experience.'*

*'And quite often, the day after finishing a story, like today, I wake up with a clearer mind, more energy and a need to tidy round, gather up the dangling threads and write something more. The story of the story.'*



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## Having a voice, connection and being heard

*'And it's made me realize that, when I'm talking to friends or I'm talking to people who are sort of telling me things that are problems for them, digital stories made me realize I can't fix it. **I can't fix everybody and not everybody wants to be fixed. They just want to be heard.** I just need to listen. That's all I need to do. So I think the fact that I am a better listener, is probably the most obvious one for definite.'*

*'I think it's just opened me up more, it's a way of being able to **use your voice** to support someone, to feel less alone and that their experience, isn't some alien one that they need to feel this guilt and shame for. And **if you can, like your story, if you can help one person with that to ease that, then that's amazing.**'*



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## Critical reflection and transformative learning

*'To make 'meaning' means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation of it.'*

*Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built.' (Mezirow, 1990)*

- Communicative learning – understanding the meaning of what others communicate; interpreting in context



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## Transformation and change

*'I just think it is **part of an ever-evolving transformation**. Definitely. I just think the whole... it takes your level of understanding of **compassion and empathy** and all those other things to a whole other level through this experience. And you massively learn to not judge and what's important in life and acceptance and losing expectations. It is **completely life changing**. I don't think there's probably one aspect of my life that hasn't been changed by it.'*

*'I'm **hugely more compassionate to myself now**. And massively just would like to enable anybody to be more compassionate to themselves. I think it is genuine acceptance that I don't always feel good. I don't have to always feel good.'*

*'But **you're changed by the change you see in other people as well**. And just for me, it gives me a lot more confidence that storytelling is the way.'*

*'So actually, it's not just I'm what I was before. It's, well, I'm what I was before, but there's all these things that I've learned. So **I feel completely different** to how I did back in July.'*



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## Transformation and change

*'It changed my life, actually.'*

*'Again, to the first story that was **a lasting change**. It changed my professional career. And it's changed my attitude to work, to my commitment to work.'*

*'I don't think it was transformative in the way I would use it, but it was certainly, I want to say an improvement, but I don't know if that's the right word either. It was certainly an adjustment, a positive adjustment that actually made me think, "Oh yeah, I'm doing this better."*

*'...it changed me in as much as **it made me ask questions I hadn't asked before** about my work and what I valued in my work. I think the change is self-analytical. It's a change for yourself, a deeper look, a deeper understanding.'*

*'The only way you get through a story is to tell the story of that time. And then **the story changes because of the storytelling**.'*



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## Thank you!

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Stories can be seen at:

[www.patientvoices.org.uk/stories.htm](http://www.patientvoices.org.uk/stories.htm)

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