

Creating Community Engagements between People with Disability and the Local Community through Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

The International Federation of Social Workers adopted a new global definition of social work in 2014. Although promotion of social cohesion and respect for diversities was included in the new definition, social work practices for promoting cultural citizenship were still under developed in Japan. Since the 1990s, community arts organizations in Australia have developed community engagement projects for people with disabilities through digital media production, such as digital storytelling, film making etc. It is important to develop collaborative methods between social workers and artists to promote cultural citizenship as social inclusion for minority groups such as immigrants and people with disabilities.

With the aid of social workers and artists working in disability care fields, iPad digital storytelling workshops for people with intellectual disabilities were organized in Fukui, Japan from 2013 to 2014. The digital media training programs for human service professionals and social work students were organized in Sydney, Australia and Fukui, Japan prior to these workshops. During this research project, we conducted interviews with participants to understand the ways in which people with disabilities and the local community interact with each other through digital storytelling. This paper explores two key questions. Firstly, we examine how digital storytelling can be employed for community engagement between people with disabilities and the local community and how it can help them achieve cultural citizenship. Secondly, we investigate how we can develop social work practices for people with disabilities through digital storytelling.

Keywords: People with disabilities, digital storytelling, social work, digital media.

Introduction

A new global definition of social work was adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 2014. IFSW is a global organization for social work professionals, which comprises 116 national associations. IFSW was granted Special Consultative Status by the United Nations¹. Although promotion of social cohesion and respect for diversities in terms of cultural citizenship was additionally included in the new definition, social work studies on a practical level in terms of cultural citizenship are still in a developing area. Since the 1990s, community arts organisations in Western countries such as the UK, Canada and Australia have developed community engagement projects for migrants and people with disabilities through digital media projects. It is important to develop every aspect of the collaboration methods used between artists and social workers to promote notions of cultural citizenship for social minority groups.

This paper discusses the practice-based research methods for community cultural development projects carried out in Fukui, located in northwest Japan. Fukui prefecture is a regional area quite important to Japan because of its textile and mechanical industries, rice production and agriculture. Funaki, the onsite researcher, organized: 1) a visits to community arts organisations in Sydney, Australia; 2) the iPad Digital Storytelling (DST) workshops for people with autism spectrum disorder and their family in Japan. This research focuses mainly on two areas: First of all, the analysis of the effectiveness of community arts and cultural development through digital storytelling, promoting community engagement and community participation with people of disability in Japan; Secondly, this study examines how use is made of digital storytelling for social work practices with people of disability and their families to enhance their cultural citizenship.

Research Methods

For our research project, in 2012 and 2013 we conducted a week's visit to community arts organizations in Sydney, Australia. Funaki, with the financial support from the Unveil foundation, was the research coordinator for visits with social workers in Fukui. Japanese social workers received DST training by community artists in Sydney. An intensive DST training workshop was coordinated by the researcher in order to give social workers a chance to learn how to facilitate DST workshops for social minority groups. Secondly, with the aid of disability social workers in Japan, iPad digital storytelling workshops were organized for people with autism. Two DST's were created in August and October 2013. Finally, the exploratory research included interviews with the participants, this included a person with autism and his mother, and these were conducted by a social worker in 2013. The coordinator conducted the interview with the social worker. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow informants to speak freely, not only about their impression of the workshops but also their subjective values and the perceptions of community engagements between people with disabilities and the local community. The interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted in Japanese. They were filmed and edited by the coordinator.

¹<http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> accessed 22nd April, 2015.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically. Participants were fully briefed at an information session about this project and were able to watch the interviews and read the analysis documents of the researchers before the presentation. Written consent was obtained from the participant and his mother before the project commenced. I also conducted participant observation as a coordinator for the showcase event and interviews. This observation gave me valuable exposure to the communities sentiments as well as informal information that was shared among the participants, this proved to be invaluable as a foil to the more structured research.

This paper will not represent the perception of community engagement between people with disabilities and the local community through the use of digital media in Japan. The aim of this exploratory study is to bring about a new conceptual basis for social work practices with people with disabilities through the use of digital storytelling (Harrison, 2007:74).

A New Global Definition of Social Work

In this new definition, one will see two major changes from previous definitions. First of all, the social work profession's core mandates did not recognize problem solving in human relationships, but focused on the promotion of social change, and social development. Therefore, the participatory and person-centered approach is reflected in the study, with an emphasis on "social work that engages with people and structures to address life's challenges and enhance wellbeing." In this definition, social workers are encouraged to promote community-based practices as collaborators and facilitators by working with people rather than for people.

Secondly, promotion of social cohesion and respect for diversities was included in the new definition in terms of creating cultural citizenship. Social work in Western discourses respects the rights of people including civil and political rights, socio-economic and cultural rights, especially the conceptualization of social justice as a distributive justice that focuses unconsciously on the class division of societies (Hölscher 2012). Theories of the recognition for inclusive classless justice of people with disabilities criticize such a limited understanding of distributive justice (Young 1990). Frazer (2008) argued that the aim of social justice is for everybody to be able to participate equitably and equally as full partners, interacting with others and as fully recognized members of society in participatory parity. In order to achieve this participatory parity, it will be important to require a just distribution of rights, opportunities and resources, as well as equal recognition of status that is fair, while allowing people with disabilities a political voice (Hölscher, D. & Bozalek 2012). The internal status of the hierarchies among race, ethnicity, gender, disability etc., has been underestimated in the discussion of the revised global definition of social work. In this sense, the promotion of cultural rights and citizenship will be a significant issue in social work studies within the recognition of equal rights for the disabled and minority communities.

Community Arts and Community Cultural Development (CCD) in Australia

I have been researching social work and community development practices with social minority communities, such as migrants and refugees, or people with disabilities in Australia since 2005. I visited many ethnically diverse organizations and non-government organizations in NSW and Victoria, which engage in community rights and social services for these communities. Since the 1990s, community arts organisations in Western countries such as UK, Canada and Australia have developed community based cultural development projects for

migrants and people with disabilities, promoting the idea of cultural citizenship. It is important to develop the collaborative methods between artists and social workers, promoting the notion of cultural citizenship for social minorities. These projects are often referred to as Community Arts or Community Cultural Development (CCD) projects. The chief funding body for these outreach initiatives in Australia are the Australian Council of the Arts. The program is currently called the Community Partnerships program. Badham (2010) analyzed the characteristics of Community Partnership programs. She argues that CP promotes collaboration with non-arts organizations (such as health, welfare, education, and housing). Community Partnerships focuses its support in a number of specific areas, which include regional Australia, disabilities, young people, cultural diversity, emerging communities, indigenous people, remote Indigenous communities, and specific critical social and cultural issues requiring attention. Secondly, CP recommends an entrepreneurial model with self-generated revenue sources. Artists in CP are expected to be at the service of a community and become a CD practitioner. Practices are more about community building rather than creative outcomes (Badham 2010: 93-94). This model attempts to build long-term projects promoting self-reliant inclusive and resilient communities.

Another recent trend in Community Arts and CCD practices in Australia is the use of digital media. In the 1990s, notions of community arts and culture expanded to include practices in new media using the Internet as a tool for social inclusion. Since 2000, community arts and cultural development organizations in Australia have promoted community engagement with the use of digital media such as Digital storytelling, short filmmaking, and theatre production. Shea (2011) argues that this movement towards digital technologies welcomed the initial phase of a merger between community arts and media arts. Scholars in media studies argued that the use of ICT and new media (digital media) in the everyday life of citizens enables unconventional expressions of participatory culture and promote a cultural citizenship in a globalized society (Burgess, J. et al 2006; Mouri 2011).

For example, from 2011 and under Creative Director Alison Richardson's leadership, the Beyond the Square project, based in Western Sydney, NSW Australia organized a number of community arts and cultural development programs, with digital media for people with disabilities. Beyond the Square provides a chance for people with disabilities to create their own short movies or digital arts productions, not only as a way to learn digital literacy, but also as a way to speak up and be heard in Australian society. These initiatives contributed to breaking the stereo-typed image of diverse or disadvantaged communities among local people. This digital media project attempted to develop new cultures and promote social change by people with disabilities and underrepresented groups, and was called Community Cultural Development. Digital storytelling which often includes the personal narratives of people, can provide opportunities not only for people with disabilities but also for socially marginalized groups such as pensioners, women, indigenous people, victims of gender and racial abuse, and can effectively reconstruct a community engagement with disenfranchised groups (Hartley and McWilliam 2009). Also, several showcase events of digital media production within the local community created a space for listening and dialogue with the more mainstream aspects of Australian society.

Another example of this are the digital media projects by CuriousWorks in Western Sydney, which have attempted to focus not only on ethnic minorities, but on diverse minority communities including Indigenous people, people with disabilities and disadvantaged young people. CuriousWorks' mission is to enable communities to tell their own stories powerfully and sustainably and reshape the systems of cultural production in Australia through innovation

at the intersection of art, education and technology. More importantly, CuriousWorks tries to establish long-term, multi-faceted partnerships with communities rather than short-term, ad hoc relationships (Funaki, 2011). These case studies showed that ICT and the use of digital media had great potential to empower social minorities and promote community engagement between cultural minorities and the mainstream majorities. These insights inspired me to consider the ways in which both social minorities and the mainstream majorities are able to grow together through an interactive and inclusive use of digital and emerging social media.

In Japan, there have also been digital media projects to facilitate a community engagement between migrants and the local community, examples are the Hyogo, Shizuoka, and Kanagawa prefectures (Shiobara 2011; Yoshitomi 2008). A number of digital media projects using digital storytelling have also been started for migrant youth and people with disabilities in the Mie and Gifu prefectures (Ogawa et al 2009). However, these digital media projects have not been implemented as standard social work practices in Japan yet.

Digital Storytelling Workshops with a Person with Autism Spectrum Disorder

As there are a number of usages of Digital Storytelling, what does it mean in the context of this project? Digital storytelling (DST) here means is a two to three minute video clip, which combines photo images, and sounds with a storyteller's voiceover. Typically during these intensive workshops, each participant speaks freely and addresses their personal stories, in so called 'story circles' before creating a DST in the computer, or a tablet-type device like an iPad. This kind of digital media program was started in the USA in 1994. The Center for Digital Storytelling in California directed by Joe Lambert was the primary leading organizational force. DST is currently practiced around the world in many different contexts, such as community cultural development with migrant youth, health research with cancer patients, as well as social work and education in the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and India (Burgess 2006; Hartley and McWilliam 2009; Lenette 2013; Ogawa and Tsuchiya 2014; Salazar 2011).

In August of 2013 a Digital Storytelling (DST) workshop was organized with a person with autism in Fukui by Mr. Shoichi Fujita, a social worker from Fukui. Funaki (the researcher) was the coordinator for this program. The participant's name is Ken (a fictitious name), a 19 year old with autism. He graduated from a special needs high school in Fukui in 2012. At the time he was looking for a job in the local community. This workshop was organized in August and October 2013 at his house, and under the facilitation of the social worker. He used iMovie on an iPad with the aid of the social worker. He spent about several hours discussing the topic he would like to create with the social worker before creating his DST. Ken wrote down the script and chose the pictures himself. They created two digital stories using the iPad. Ken said in the interview after the DST workshop that it took so long for him to think about creating his story and choosing his pictures and music (especially in the first DST), but was happy with the results. The title of his DST was 'My Dream' (a 6:30" production) about his favorite things and hobbies. However, with the second DST, Ken got used to the process and finished far earlier than the first production. The title of the second DST production was 'Fukui Marathon Running Tournament Story' (a 2 minute production), which expressed his motivation and passion about marathon running. Showcase events were organized for his group work sessions among self-help groups and care groups in December 2013.

The Positive benefits of DST were expressed by the participants. First of all, the process of DST promoted a self-representation for the participant and created self-empowering narratives about his own life.

Ken (the person with autism), said:

I was very happy to express my favorite things in this movie. Very good expression. This is a cool movie like a movie preview. I would like to create this kind of movie again.

His mother, Mariko, said;

I was very surprised to know his motivation and expression to enjoy his life for the first time though DST.

According to his mother's interview, his motivations to practice running became much stronger after deciding to participate in the DST workshop.

Secondly, the participant became far more positive and active especially with family and friends, after experiencing the showcase event.

Ken said;

Though I was a little embarrassed when I heard my friends laughing during my showcase. It made me very happy because I am a comedian. I would like to show this movie to other friends and friends' family.'

At the showcase event among his friends and the self-help group, he was so confident about his DST that his friends and their parents were very proud of his achievements.

Mariko said;

He was very happy not only to show this production to his friends but also to see their positive attitudes. I believe it brought him more confidence in his life. After participating in DST, I realized he changed his attitude towards his self-help group meetings. He tries to express his own feelings and opinions very positively and actively now, and his confidence has grown.

She additionally said;

His digital stories are just like small documentaries. His documentary is very small and amateur, not like a professional TV one, but I believe it has a powerful message and the possibility to empower other people with disabilities to explore digital media production.

Thirdly, community arts and cultural development through digital storytelling was very effective at promoting community engagement and community participation for people with disabilities from a social work perspective.

Shoichi, the Social Worker said;

After facilitating DST with Ken, I felt our relationship has changed positively. For example, when Ken is participating in group work meetings for social skills training, it is becoming far easier for both of us to communicate. Moreover, after he finished the showcase event among other young people with disabilities he was able to enhance his self-expression and narratives, not only to me but also to other friends with disabilities.

Additionally, Ken's self-expression in this showcase event influenced the attitudes of other people with disabilities. The other participants in the self-help group felt more confidence in expressing their feelings and ideas as well.

Shoichi recognized the effectiveness of DST as self-expression and confidence building not only in the process of group work settings, but also in boosting Ken's confidence and daily life. Ken started a FaceBook page with the aid of his sister after creating his DST and updates his hobbies, such as painting and family events regularly on it. He makes use of FaceBook as an engagement tool with his friends and the greater community.

Mariko said;

I feel like making my DST as well after seeing my son's DST. I would like to give my advice and ideas for raising a child with a disability to the parents who are worrying about parenting a young child with a disability. I have discussed parenting with the childcare professionals and felt achievement for it. I want to create my DST with messages to other parents who have a child with a disability.

Her words led to a new project for iPad DST workshops, helping professionals and careers learn the necessary skills in October 2014. Mariko created her own DST and also learned how to facilitate DST workshops. Our project shows that showcase events among friends give an opportunity to celebrate the success of a person with a disability. However, in our case study, it is fair to say that the effectiveness of community engagements between people with disabilities and the local community was very limited because of the ethical concerns and possible prejudices in society at large.

Shoichi, Social Worker, said;

DST would be a great tool for promoting self-expression, confidence and personal narratives for people with disabilities in society. However, it is just as important to create a space for people to accept the thoughts, feelings and values of the participants in a tolerant atmosphere beyond the DST projects.

Ochiai (2012) analysed the three stages of intercultural literacy through a case study of a digital media project with young migrants in Kobe, and argues that young migrants need a comfortable place/space (called 'Ibasho' in Japanese) outside of school to be accepted as new comers through a dialogue with those who understand them. To facilitate an expression of their messages and concerns with their new home and host society. The process of making DST's and the showcases would create comfortable places 'Ibasho' for people with disabilities. It is important to explore how to create this comfortable space/place for participants in Japanese society, through alternative models of digital storytelling that fit with Japanese culture.

In Japan one of the leading research projects in the field is called 'Media Conte' organized by Professors Ogawa Akiko and Yuko Tsuchiya (Ogawa and Tsuchiya 2014). Media Conte is a collaborative workshop specifically for digital storytelling, targeting the marginal voices of society. However, in their workshops vulnerable participants such as people with disabilities seemed unable to voice what they desired to say in their individual situations and were not encouraged to voice their own stories.

Conclusion and Future Issues

In the field of social work, Lenette (2013) discusses the benefit of DST for the support of women from refugee backgrounds in Australia and argues that self-representation through DST has the potential to produce positive and enabling counter-narratives, both on an individual level and in the broader community. She also discusses the ethical concerns and limitations in the use of DST. Practitioners need to very carefully consider the full realm of implications in terms of privacy, be respectful in the use of recorded narratives, and be open to the needs of the story tellers. As Lenette pointed out there are many ethical concerns. Other studies in Japan looking at social minority issues, such as migrants or people with disabilities have shown that there are risks in showing personal stories among local audiences, who may express conflicting views, show little empathy, or are not interested in digital media production (Funaki 2014). Dreher, an Australian scholar in media studies, talks of the politics of speaking, saying that representation is necessary, but that there is a limited strategy framework for multicultural media. She also argues that the politics of listening across cultural differences is an under-explored but important area (Dreher 2008). We have to be especially concerned about the question whether and how showcase events can create a safer space for community engagement between people with disabilities and the local community at large and be aware of the need to promote a cultural citizenship for people with disabilities in the community.¹

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