

## **Telling Stories to Narrate Futures: Engaging Storytelling as Research Practice with High School Females**

Amanda Hill, St. Mary's University, USA

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses “Exploring Our Information Diets,” a yearlong project that gave female high school students an opportunity to use creative engagement as a research platform to explore their information diets and media consumption. The project was created in partnership with an urban high school and a theatre for families and young audiences in Orlando, Florida. The author explores the methodology behind the project, examines the process undertaken, investigates the opportunities the project offered students, and studies how this creative engagement shaped the presentation and dissemination of the students’ research. During the course of the project, students constructed live and digital performance pieces that organized their findings related to patterns and expectations of gender construction. The author worked with students to identify the images and messages they encountered in the media they frequently used. The author employed methodologies of participatory action research, live performance, and digital storytelling in order to ensure the students were engaged research collaborators, ensuring their participation in collecting data and formulating conclusions. Using this methodology, the author asked students to interrogate their media intake and use their observations to reach a larger audience in two storytelling mediums: live performance and digital video.

*Keywords:* digital storytelling, information diets, participatory action research; identity, gender

## ***Exploring Our Information Diets: An Overview***

This paper explores the methodology and process of a residency I facilitated entitled *Exploring Our Information Diets* aimed to honor female students' voices and experiences in a process of reflection and artistic creation around topics of gender performance. In so doing, the residency helped students envision their roles as community leaders capable of making change. The students conducted research using their information diets to write and devise a live performance and a digital story that explained their research and call for action. In the process of generating knowledge, the students learned creative methods by which they could relay messages to community members and help shape the changes they wished to see in their society, granting them authority in a society that often rejects their experiences as invaluable.

The residency took place at a large and diverse Orlando high school in a class geared toward fostering leadership among high school females during the 2014-2015 academic year. In total, there were 16 participants, aged 14-19, of varying ethnicities and backgrounds. Twenty class sessions took place over the course of one academic year, and each session allowed the students and me to work together for approximately 50 minutes. The project consisted of two segments: a live performance and a digital story. In the fall semester, students devised a short performance piece to share at Valencia College's Women Empowerment Summit. Devising is a process of collaborative creation where the script comes from shared embodied experiences such as improvisation and tableaux. Like digital storytelling, the devising methodology draws its power by making an art form accessible to people who do not generally consider themselves performers. In the spring semester, students created a digital story using footage from the performance and new audio/visual and written content generated that semester. Both works focused on ideas of gender performance, what it means to be a woman, and empowering women for their character rather than their appearance.

Combining creative research practices with performative research dissemination gave students a new approach to examining their approaches to scholarship and research, providing them the opportunity to connect to their collected data in new ways. Working collaboratively, the students contended with creative approaches to reaching their audience, curating collaborative research findings, and conveying those findings through diverse mediums including writing, performance, and digital media. The creative approach to research allowed students to engage audiences emotionally and rationally. At the end of each performative work, the students provided their audiences with a call to action, sharing with them the vision of the future they hope to create. Their creative research practices provided an opportunity to share their research findings through storytelling, engaging themselves and their audiences in unique and innovative ways. Further, the project helped shed light on the way students encounter images and messages of gender and how they use those images to create their own sense of selves.

## **Vygotsky and the Creative Imagination: An Entry Point for Creative Collaboration in an Educational Environment**

Although lesser known than his works on teacher training, Russian developmental psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotsky spent a significant amount of time considering the role of creativity in the processes of learning (see: *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, *Imagination and Creativity in the Adolescent*, and *Imagination and Its Development in Childhood*). Francine Smolucha (1992) found in review of all of these works that Vygotsky's theory of creative imagination has four main features:

1. Imagination develops out of children's play.
2. Imagination becomes a higher mental function and as such is a consciously directed thought process.
3. In adolescence, creative imagination is characterized by the collaboration of imagination and thinking in concepts.
4. The collaboration between imagination and thinking in concepts matures in the artistic and scientific creativity of adulthood. (p. 49–50)

For Vygotsky then, a combination of thought and imagination form the basis of creative practices, practices that are developed naturally out of play practices. Vygotsky argued, "The child's play activity is not simply a recollection of past experience but a creative reworking that combines impressions and constructs from them new realities addressing the needs of the child" (Smolucha, 1992, p. 51). Thus, the creative imagination assumes direction, making it goal-oriented in its nature.

Of specific interest in Vygotsky's reflections on creativity is his theory of combinatory imagination, which employed the collaboration of imagination and thinking in concepts and took place in "all cultural life, including artistic, scientific, and technical creativity" (Smolucha, 1992, p. 52). For Vygotsky, combinatory imagination was a nuanced form of imagination, which he distinguishes from what he calls reproductive imagination. He wrote, "If human activity were limited to the reproductions of the old, a person would, in essence, be attending only to the past and would be able to adapt the future only to the extent that it reproduces the past. The creativity activity of an individual does this essentially; it attends to the future, creating it, and changing the view of the present" (Smolucha, 1992, p. 52).

The ability to attend to the future through creative practices is key to the methodology behind "Exploring Our Information Diets," because it enabled the students to take part in active learning practices. A practice of combinatory imagination, involving the collaboration of thought and creativity, invited the students to create works of art that established the current landscape of the society based on the students' research to help shape the future they wanted to see at their school and in the world. Simon Nicholson (1971), an English architect and artist, understood creativity as a natural part of every individual, rather than a trait embodied by a select few. He suggested a theory of "loose parts" where, "in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness, creativity and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (p. 6). For Nicholson, schools typically "do not meet the 'loose parts' requirement" as it is "clean, static and impossible to play around with" (p. 5). "Exploring Our Information Diets" aimed to create in the school environment a "loose parts" landscape where students were capable of compiling, what Nicholson would call variables, into new compositions. For the students involved with this residency, the variables included interactions with other people, sound, music, motion, images, words, concepts, and ideas. These materials constitute the "loose parts" from which students were tasked with creating meaning.

Paulo Freire (1992) once wrote, "A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship...reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character" (p. 71). Here narrative references the author-reader dichotomy and suggests a hierarchical understanding of classroom dynamics that puts the student in the passive role of *listener* and the teacher in the role of *orator*, the one who imparts knowledge. Freire argued this classroom scheme leaves little room for students to share their experiences and knowledge in a way that honors its value and insight. Omitting students from participating in the knowledge creation process disenfranchises them; the teacher, viewed as the single source of knowledge in the room, becomes dominant and powerful. Classrooms such as these alienate students and distance them from their educator. Freire warned this kind of classroom turns students into "'receptacles' to be 'filled,'" an idea he later defined as the *banking concept of education* (p. 72). He cautioned, "The more students

work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p. 73). Digital storytelling gives students the chance to author their own stories, stories only they can tell. As authors of their own stories, students become the experts and convey knowledge within the classroom as such, upsetting the traditional role of educator as knowledge giver.

### **Combining Creative Media: A Performative Methodology**

With a mind to envision a learning environment where students are part of the research and sense-making processes, I turned to Participatory Action Research (PAR). Scholars such as Freire (1988) and McTarget (1997) have shown how PAR can engage participants in a process of sense-making and knowledge generation, which is then shared through an active means. The roots of PAR stem from an interest in self-reflexivity and action and values participants as active members in knowledge building. It values the experience of participants of all ages and backgrounds. bell hooks (1994) suggested the importance of respecting student input cannot be undervalued, “There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes” (p. 8).

A large part of participatory methodologies relies on the experiences and experiential knowledge of those conducting the research, and in so doing, gives authority to these experiences and their tellers. “Exploring Our Information Diets” was no different. The author created a series of lessons utilizing a participatory methodology to work with a group of 16 high-school females to become aware of and evaluate examples of gender performance found in their everyday *information diets*. An *information diet* is “how we consume information *individually*” and references a variety of media that deliver information to us on a daily basis, much of which, today, is digital (Stefik, 2011, p. 39). Mark Stefik (2011) suggested digital sense-making is still primarily an individual act, though he noted that social media yields the power to make this act networked. Since the consumption of information is typically identified as a passive act, I wanted to create a sense of “networked” knowledge to discover what these young women saw in their information diets and to what extent were they aware of gender performances, expectations, and stereotypes they consumed.

The residency relied first on Popular Theatre to engage participants in meaningful discussions and exercises of such digital gender identity markers. Popular Theatre is “a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied” (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p. 8). The goal of this first stage of the project was to create collectively a short performance piece and engaged students in discussions of issues relevant to their lives. Through discussion, critique, reflection, and analysis, the student-researchers had the opportunity to evaluate their culture and society in an effort to propose solutions to affect change for problems they found oppressive or demeaning. Their collective research culminated in an act of social action, which they defined and made as a way to highlight the change they wish to see and invite dialogue. In the creation process, the authors underwent a period of reflexivity, pausing to reflect on their current understandings of the society around them, in a way that makes it possible for them to see and evaluate possible changes they see or would like to see in themselves, their community, and society. In their residency, the students created a short live performance piece that was later incorporated into a larger digital story, which, by its virtual nature, had the ability to be shared with a broader audience, potentially affecting a greater social change.

In his book *The New Digital Storytelling*, Bryan Alexander (2011) addresses the differences perceived between combining the *digital* with *storytelling*. He noted the first is still a relatively new field and medium, while the latter is an age-old practice, “connected to a bardic or Homeric tradition.” He noted

that when he asked participants in his digital storytelling residencies “what stories are *not*” they often gave answers “associated with the digital world: data, especially data without meaningful patterns” (p. 4). Raw data needs an author to connect the information into a story, creating meaning in the relationships by which they combine the data. Digital storytelling thus becomes a combination of the new and the old, bridging time and space to create a new method of storytelling and a new vehicle by which to share knowledge. In addition, I chose to create and use a digital storytelling-based lesson plan because I saw an opportunity to demystify media production for several young women who might be able to pursue media production in the future in their personal and professional lives. In my role as project facilitator, I wanted to create a space where students could guide the project’s research and product creation, while I maintained a distance from the actual project.

The combination of these two mediums creates a heightened access to created stories. Digital media allows for the easy creation and dissemination of works. Digital storytelling becomes an important medium for advocacy because of its practicality and efficiency. Digital storytelling as a broad term can encompass a range of stories told using digital media and media-based storytelling methods. Inside this large umbrella is a form of storytelling stemming from the work of StoryCenter (previously the Center for Digital Storytelling) also identified as “digital storytelling.” The StoryCenter style of digital storytelling makes use of off-the-shelf software to allow the authors to create short, personal narratives, usually ranging between three to five minutes in length by “creatively using and recombining easy-to-access elements of ‘traditional’ or common media such as photographs, films, music, or text” from found digital objects and personal archives (Helff & Woletz, 2009, p. 135). This paper will use the term “digital storytelling” to identify this latter meaning.

Joe Lambert (2009), one of the founders of what was then the Center for Digital Storytelling in the 1990s suggests

By bringing people together to share stories and make artifact out of transformative narratives, we are able to stop and take stock, and find ways to insert these snapshots of existence into our daily dialogues. This is why digital storytelling workshops never get old. Like all healthy practices, storytelling renews and changes everyone involved in the process. (p. xv)

The narrative style of telling personal stories emerged “from a diverse lineage of cultural production” that includes “home video” and “photo essays” among other things (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009, p. 114). Digital storytelling serves to allow citizen to voice their own personal stories using off-the-shelf technologies like iMovie or Window’s Movie Maker. These technologies are used for two main reasons: first, because they are generally easy to get material access to, and second, because they have low requirements for gaining functional access, meaning they are relatively easy for participants of varied technological backgrounds to use. For the project with the high school youth, I used an online cloud-based editor called WeVideo, which allows access to editing from anywhere with internet access.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Due to technological and time constraints, I edited the digital story outside of the classroom, and I was concerned this would remove the response-ability of the students. To ensure their voices still influenced the final video, I sought their advice on the progression of words and images before beginning to edit and throughout the editing process. We held several pre-screenings, which allowed the students to see the progress on the digital story and offer feedback. I enabled them to take the lead in the critique process, thereby allowing them to discuss amongst themselves the order and montage of the digital story. I used their decisions to edit the digital story in a way that represented and respected their collective vision and did not make any changes without the approval of the students.

Like PAR, digital storytelling values citizen knowledge and authorship, making this a powerful tool when working in a traditional classroom setting like those described by Freire. In the classroom, digital storytelling gives students the chance to author their own story, a story only they can tell. As authors of their own stories, students become the conveyors of knowledge within the classroom, upsetting the traditional role of educator as knowledge giver. By entering into the creative process as a facilitator, I created a space where students could allow their voices to guide the direction of the project's research and creation, while maintaining a distance from the actual project that would allow me to help the students brainstorm and work their creation challenges. Their classroom teacher additionally took on the role of observer and guide, again providing them with the authority to create meaning.

### From Loose Parts to Storytelling

As a means of giving the students guiding material and inspiration for their research, I began the residency with a campaign from UN Women titled *The Auto-Complete Truth*. The video and advertisements from the campaign highlighted results from Google's auto-complete search feature. The campaign took real searches to show that the auto-complete feature suggested searching for offensive and oppressive. For example, a search beginning "women should" would return results such as "women should not speak in church," "women should be in the kitchen," and "women should be slaves" (UN Women, 2013). It should be noted that in a survey completed by the students, all 16 of them noted Google as being their primary search engine. One student additionally mentioned using Yahoo to search and another additionally mentioned using "Research Database 'PROQUEST'." At the end of the residency, I asked students to remind me of something they saw in *The Auto-Complete Truth* on the first day. Ten of the 16 students highlighted a negative comment or moment of the film. Only two students highlighted positive comments or moments. Five students specifically mentioned the line "women should be slaves."

To create the live performance piece, students brainstormed how they see women being portrayed, what women are capable of doing, and what they envisioned for the future of womanhood. They used their information diets to compile examples of gender performance from sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their brainstorms transformed into tableaux (still images they created using their bodies) and over time coalesced into a short piece that used embodied images, movement, and speech to share their findings and push for change. From their research, they concluded that society often asks women to wear masks, which in their words meant society asked women to "be perfect," "to hide their feelings," "to be sociable, funny, and smart," and "not to be anything less than a work of art." They further defined this problem noting, "When we wear masks we focus on what others think about us instead of what we think about ourselves" (Orlando Repertory Theatre, 2014). The lines from their performance, titled "I am A Woman," resonated with the college audience at the Valencia College's Women Empowerment Summit, who asked for an encore performance so they could record and share their words.

Unlike the performance, the students' first task in creating the digital story was to create the story's script. Brainstorming on the same subjects used to create the performance piece, the students found creative ways to expand those arguments into new ideas and avenues of research. They brought in new material to share, which they collected from a follow-up assessment of their information diets. Students brought in memes, social media postings by celebrities, news articles, and inspirational messages. They shared their found pieces with the class and together brainstormed new directions for their digital story script. As the students discussed, one student typed the comments into a digital document. At the

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Acting as a puppet in this way, I hoped to retain a sense of their authorship throughout the entirety of the creation process.

next class session, I brought three copies of their comments into the classroom. After cutting up the comments line by line, the students, divided into three groups, created poems that used at least 75% of randomly divided comments. In this first round, students were not allowed to change the comments in any way. Students could add up to two lines to help the flow of their piece. After five minutes, the groups rotated. They evaluated their peer's poems and made changes as they saw fit. While the groups needed to respect the intentions of the original group's poem, they were allowed to alter the text of the comments by removing, adding, or changing words. They were additionally allowed to add two more lines if they choose. We rotated twice more until the groups ended back at their original poem. The students evaluated the changes made to their pieces and had time to edit their poem free from constraints before we shared the poems as a group. After group feedback, students had another chance to edit their poems. The three poems, "Gender Isn't Real," "Only She Can" and "Beauty is Subjective" became chapters in the digital story.

I brought typed copies of their poems with me to our next session as well as my computer so I could audio record the students' performing their poems. Before recording began, students were instructed to divide the poem into presentable lines, identify moments of single and multi-voicedness, pitch and tone. We discussed the ways words take on meaning when spoken and the ways in which the same words can mean different things depending on how they are voiced. We practiced saying words and phrases using different intonations, pitch, timbre, and tone. Students then rehearsed the voicing of their poems before beginning the recording process.

In addition to scripting and recording the oral text of the digital story, each student completed a set of six self-portraits that reflected their research and thoughts about the ways they personally perform gender. To frame the collection of portraits they took, I asked students to think about their six pictures collection as an expanding narrative. That is, the first image would focus on a small area, the next might be have a slightly wider focus, and so on until they reached the final portrait, which could be either a head shot or full body portrait. In each picture, the student had to capture the ways she did or did not perform gender. To capture the images, students were paired in groups of two. Close-up images collected included pictures of jewelry such as necklaces or bracelets, painted nails, clothing and shoes. Some students chose to take the same picture six times, moving from a narrow area of focus to a broad area, thereby building the image slowly. Other students captured close-ups of several different body parts before taking their final full frame self-portrait. One student photographed herself slowly removing her hands from her face so that each frame revealed a little more. In editing the video, these pictures were juxtaposed with the students' collaborative poems and added another dimension of research to the digital story.

The students titled the edited digital story "You Are Who You Are." The digital story begins with the brief introduction where students address issues of fear and discomfort that might accompany students who feel as though they "don't fit in" at their high school. It opens with an image of the hallway directly outside the classroom where we worked with a voice over that says, "Walking down the hallways...do you ever feel scared, lonely, out of place, insecure, not welcome, judged, different, unique?" Then, an image of the high school's bathroom appears, and students ask, "Looking in the bathroom mirror do you ever try to fix your hair, your make-up, the way you dress, your attitude, your running tears, your appearance?" A final image of the school shows the outside courtyard, and here students ask, "Passing through the courtyard do you ever try to hide you're your feelings, your loneliness, your fears, the real you, from others?" The video then cuts to an image of the title card before displaying the three poems (Orlando Repertory Theatre, 2015).

The students do not ever directly answer their introductory questions. Instead, they allow their poems to speak for themselves and add an instructive list of things students can do today to curb some of the judgment associated with appearance:

Today, try to be more open-minded. Don't judge people based on their looks or failures. Everyone is fighting their own battles. Start a conversation with a stranger and actively listen. Give something nice to someone. Spread love around our school. Make someone's day. (Orlando Repertory Theatre, 2015)

When the instructions, the text of which scrolled upwards across the screen as the students narrated, ended, a video of their performance piece, "I am a woman" plays. In it, students address notions of performing gender on a daily basis, opening their piece with the statement, "In society, in the media, at home, at school, I am expected to wear a mask." As we discussed the ways people perform gender, the students continued to revisit this idea of the mask, which served as the metaphorical costume piece necessary for the performance. Credits run at the end of the film.

Due to technological and time constraints, I edited the digital story outside of the classroom. To ensure their voices still affected the final video, I sought their advice on the progression of works and images before beginning to edit and throughout the editing process. We held several pre-screenings, which allowed the students to see the progress on the digital story and offer feedback. I enabled them to take the lead in the critique process, thereby allowing them to discuss amongst themselves the order and montage of the digital story. I used their decisions to edit the digital story in a way that represented and respected their collective vision. In this way, I hoped to retain a sense of their authorship throughout the entirety of the creation process.

On our final day together, we viewed the completed digital story and reflected back on the process of its creation and the creation and performances of their live theatre piece. In addition to the Women's Empowerment Summit, they had conducted their live performance piece for an enthusiastic crowd at a youth advocacy summit, and now they sought avenues to present their digital story. The students and I discussed places where we felt the digital story could be shown, in order to further the reach of their message. The students suggested showcasing all or some of it on the morning announcements for the entire school, sharing it with local faith and community groups, and sharing it with the class's counterpart – the boy's leadership class. Of all the possibilities discussed, the students seemed especially keen to share it with this group of young males. As one student said in our final meeting, "They are the ones who might never have heard this story before." Time constraints in my schedule didn't allow me to stay with the students long enough to share their video with other students or community members, so the decision to share fell to them and their classroom teacher. With the remainder of our time in that last class period, students reflected on their personal growth throughout the creation process and completed post-residency surveys.

### **Creative Action and Creating Change: Reflections and Outcomes**

In their post-residency surveys, 11 students of the total 16 noted they "strongly agree" with the statement, "I want to make a change." Another four selected "agree" and two selected "neither agree nor disagree." Six students selected "strongly agree" for the sentence, "I believe I am capable of making change in my society," six choose "agree" and four chose "neither agree nor disagree." When asked if they "believe that performance<sup>2</sup> can be used as a tool for social change," eight students selected "strongly agree," four students selected "agree" and two students selected "neither agree nor disagree."

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<sup>2</sup> Performance here should be understood as both theatrical and digital performance.



Additional student comments help clarify their ongoing connection to ideas of women's empowerment. Six students at the end of the semester questioned the ways they can continue this research personally and academically.

Students' closing remarks further express the depth of their connection to this project and the project's effect at helping students see themselves as agents of change within their society. In a pre-survey questionnaire, one student asked herself, "Am I fit to be a leader? Can I really make a difference in this community?" When I asked her to answer this question at the end of the residency, she replied, "At first I was unsure, but now I am extremely confident that I am powerful." Another student, when asked what she learned by participating in this project responded, "I learned there are issues going on in our society that we cannot contribute to unless we make ourselves aware. We cannot adopt the mindset that someone else will fight the battles because there will be no change. If you think something is wrong, then do something about it."

The residency ultimately aimed to give the students a place to create a work that helped them envision their roles as leaders in their community by giving voice to a topic they viewed as important. In the process, they conducted research that they then turned into written thought and ultimately a final multi-modal work of art that used digital storytelling and performance as a basis by which to structure and analyze their findings. Students were asked to analyze patterns of media-driven understandings of femininity and gender performance and then to generate new content and knowledge from unique perspectives. They needed to determine their views on the subject to be able to decide how best to advocate for their beliefs. Ultimately, I believe the residency was a success. Students created a performance and digital story that covered a broad range of topics within understandings of gender performance and identity.

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**Corresponding Author:** Amanda Hill  
**Contact email:** [ahill5@stmarytx.edu](mailto:ahill5@stmarytx.edu)