

7-27-2022

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Recommended Citation

Carlos Jimenez, Yolanda Anyon, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Heather Kennedy. "The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Community-Engaged Research: Insights From a Study of Digital Storytelling With Marginalized Youth" *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.54656/jces.v14i2.42>

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The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Community-Engaged Research: Insights From a Study of Digital Storytelling With Marginalized Youth

Carlos Jimenez, Yolanda Anyon,
Lynn Schofield Clark, and Heather Kennedy

Abstract

This article draws on qualitative data from a long-term partnership to exemplify the unique advantages of interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches in community-engaged research. We demonstrate how the differing foci and intersecting concerns of our scholarly fields, social work and media studies, benefited our work with marginalized communities to promote youth voice through digital storytelling. This effort was grounded in the shared view that digital storytelling offers an excellent opportunity to engage creatively with young people's memories and experiences and that such storytelling can support young people in their healing, identity formation, agency development, and engagement with the public. By working together across disciplines, we were able to surface and address concerns related to vulnerability, privacy, and advocacy among young people experiencing marginalization in ways that would not have been possible in a project involving only social work or media studies. We illustrate this process by describing three critical incidents that exposed our disciplinary overlaps and differences in ways that helped us navigate complex issues related to young people shared their stories with the public. Our findings therefore have implications for others working with vulnerable communities to amplify counternarratives with the goal of bringing about positive systemic change.

The scholarly fields of social work and media studies have differing foci but intersecting concerns. Both fields draw upon theories of social systems and human behavior to consider how just systems of governance can be fostered and maintained so that individuals can thrive. Media studies scholars who focus on justice and equality have examined the specific roles of media industries, practices, and narratives that support or undermine equitable systems. Social work research is oriented by a person-in-environment perspective that considers how power, privilege, and oppression contributes to disparate outcomes for members of marginalized communities. Both fields theorize that narratives play a significant role in change: social work focuses on the ways individuals are influenced by and reshape dominant narratives, while a subsection of media studies focuses on how mediated narratives reproduce stereotypes and examines personal narratives that draw upon, reinforce, or challenge them (Báez, 2006, 2017; Costanza-Chock, 2011). In both fields, digital storytelling has been used as an approach to community-engaged research that centers the lived experiences of participants through a creative process of crafting personal narratives (K.M. Anderson & Mack, 2019; Wargo & Clayton, 2018).

Although multiple forms of expertise are necessary to engage participants in creating powerful and impactful digital stories, published scholarship on digital storytelling is remarkably siloed. Though the extant literature on community-engaged research in this area tends to be interdisciplinary, it is primarily focused on the value of the collaboration for the academic enterprise in terms of pedagogy, student learning, and the university mission (Cistrunk et al., 2019; Fretz et al., 2009; Yu et al., 2020). Community-engaged research is defined as reciprocal and mutually beneficial (Fretz et al., 2009), but scholars have written far less about the benefits of interdisciplinary digital storytelling research for community participants and their sustained involvement in university-community partnerships. Moreover, these interdisciplinary projects tend to involve time-limited classes rather than longer-term partnerships (Cistrunk et al., 2019; Klemm, 2015; Stone et al., 2008; Yu et al., 2020). Such short-term projects limit the depth of interactions between researchers and participants, thereby constraining "the credibility and validity" of community-engaged scholarship as distinct from dominant methods of academic inquiry (Halquist & Musanti, 2010).

In this article, we argue that interdisciplinary collaboration amplifies the rewards of digital storytelling in community-engaged research, especially when participants are young people who experience multiple forms of marginalization. Utilizing a critical incident analysis and drawing on examples from a multiyear partnership between social work and media studies faculty and an after-school program, we illustrate the value that each partner offered and the synergy we created beyond the sum of our parts. We initially envisioned that our collaboration would leverage the complementary strengths of each discipline—that is, media studies' expertise in technology and production and social work's expertise in youth development and empowerment. Over time, however, we learned that our collaboration offered even greater value in terms of mitigating the risk of harm to participants and the likelihood of their disengagement from our partnership. Braiding our different disciplinary traditions, values, skills, and perspectives created a hybrid experience that humanized youth participants, enabled their artistic expression, sustained their involvement, and maximized their sense of agency.

The Promise of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Digital Storytelling With Youth

Digital storytelling is typically a “form of short narrative, usually personal narrative told in the first person, presented as a short movie for display on a television or computer monitor or projected onto a screen” (Davis, 2005, p. 1). Although approaches to creating digital stories vary by disciplinary and professional training, they generally follow a process of selecting a subject and related theme, crafting a narrative, selecting still or moving images, adding sound, and sharing the final product with others. In some community-engaged work, digital storytelling is used to motivate youth to write and be creative, and in others it is used to center and elevate marginalized voices (Leurs et al., 2018; Ohler, 2006). When the approach is embedded in structured programs or projects, it often culminates in some form of exhibition where participants share their work with the public or an invited audience. Scholarship from several disciplines suggests that digital storytelling can facilitate personal growth, acquisition of technological and literacy skills, improved cultural and social awareness (Hull & James, 2007), increased sense of agency, and positive sense of self (K.M. Anderson & Mack, 2019; DeGennaro, 2008; Hull & Katz, 2006).

Identifying a meaningful story and sharing it with others using technology is at the heart of media production (Lambert, 2010). Because digital storytelling focuses on crafting a personal narrative and sharing it using communication technologies, the approach falls squarely within the purview of media scholars and production professionals. In the media studies literature, participants in digital storytelling projects typically begin by exploring topics, engaging in self-reflection, and connecting initial ideas to modes of self-expression (Buckingham, 2007; Lundby, 2008). Digital storytellers search for personal meaning, consider audiences, and integrate music, visuals, and narration to convey tone and emotion (Lambert, 2010). They are encouraged to identify catalytic moments that are dramatic; represent a key conflict, injustice, or transformation; and generate insight. As participants get closer to sharing their digital stories and as their platform, audience, and style become clearer, they rethink elements of story and form (sound, editing, visuals, etc.) one last time. Broadly speaking, the media studies literature on digital storytelling tends to focus on the production process and pays less attention to the conditions that support participant engagement. Social and emotional processes are generally considered after the fact and through analysis of digital stories (Blum-Ross, 2017; Chan, 2006; Dahya & Jenson, 2015; Reed & Hill, 2010).

In contrast, social work research and practice related to digital storytelling often foregrounds social and emotional processes and power dynamics that drive participant engagement. In clinical settings, digital storytelling is used to process harm, identify sources of strength, and facilitate healing (Wexler et al., 2013). In the context of community organizing and advocacy, digital stories humanize broad patterns of injustice, highlight cultural resources, and motivate others to take action (Anyon, Bender, et al., 2018; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013; Kennedy, DeChants, et al., 2019). Drawing on a person-in-environment perspective, social workers also emphasize the specific developmental stage and community context of participants. With adolescents, trust and caring youth–adult relationships are central. Young people are unlikely to share their stories unless they trust the adults asking them to do so, a dynamic that is salient among youth who face multiple forms of marginalization. As a result, digital storytelling in this field often involves activities that are not immediately connected to telling one's story but

are essential to breaking down affective walls and developing intergenerational bonds, such as icebreakers and team-based games. Once a foundation of trust is established, young people are more likely to feel the safety and support that is usually necessary for disclosure of personal narratives. Self-determination and agency are core values in social work (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017), so another aspect of digital storytelling in this field is that adults engage youth in a process characterized by egalitarian power dynamics and elevated opportunities for choice and voice. Stanfield and Beddoe (2013) observed that expertise in empowerment practices and “knowledge of the ‘social’ nature of people’s problems” (Smith & Anderson, 2008, p. 774, as cited in Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013) are central contributions that social work can make to interdisciplinary collaborations with media scholars and practitioners.

Media and social work’s distinct areas of expertise are clearly complementary, suggesting that there are likely benefits to interdisciplinary collaboration in community-engaged research involving digital storytelling with youth. Moreover, the fields of media and social work share key values that may enable successful partnership, including promoting democracy, disseminating knowledge, and improving society (National Communication Association [NCA], 2017; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). Despite this promise, there is scant extant literature on collaboration between these two fields (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013).

Aims and Significance

The purpose of this article is to consider the value of interdisciplinary collaboration between media and social work when conducting community-engaged research that entails digital storytelling with young people. To do so, we draw on three cases from a multiyear partnership between an after-school program, the Bridge Project, and University of Denver faculty in the Department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies and the Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW).

Methods

The data discussed here come from a mixed-methods, community-engaged research study of a multiyear summer youth media mentoring project. The summer youth media mentoring project was one component of a community-university partnership established in 1991 between the University of Denver and the Bridge Project. The

Bridge Project was a youth-serving organization that offered academic enrichment programs in four public housing neighborhoods. Historically, the partnership involved GSSW faculty supporting the Bridge Project with program evaluation, fundraising, and grant reporting. In turn, the Bridge Project hosted student interns or volunteers and assisted GSSW faculty members with research projects involving youth participants.

We collected data for the current study as part of a community-engaged research initiative focused on youth voice and leadership that began in 2013 with approvals from the institutional review board at the University of Denver and the research committee at the Bridge Project. GSSW faculty and graduate students collaborated with the Bridge Project to build organizational capacity to implement and study the impact of youth participatory action research (Anyon, Kennedy, et al., 2018; Kennedy, Matyasic, et al., 2019). In 2016, faculty and students from the Department of Media, Film, and Journalism joined the research team and supported young people’s use of videos in their youth participatory action research projects (Jimenez et al., 2021).

In 2017, we began the summer youth media mentoring project, that paired youth participants with young adult mentors to produce a digital story about the young people’s lived experiences and changes they wanted to see in their lives and communities (Clark & Jimenez, 2020). Each summer, participants produced digital stories over eight 3-hour meetings. At each meeting, we engaged in team-building activities and sat side-by-side at computers to produce stories. At the end of each summer, youth planned and executed opportunities to share their stories with decision-makers, including politicians and members of the public. Through our interdisciplinary collaboration, we garnered additional external funding for the community-engaged research initiative, built our capacity to collect and analyze in-depth qualitative data, and published articles on the process and outcomes of digital storytelling.

Participants

This article focuses specifically on 20 young people and 18 adults who were involved in youth media mentoring projects during the summers of 2017 and 2018. Approximately one third of youth participants identified as male, with the rest of the group identifying as female. Fifteen of the youth identified as African refugees, three as Latinx, two

as Vietnamese, and one as White. More than half of the adult researchers and mentors identified as White women. Among those who identified as men, two were White, two were Latino, and one was Black.

Data Collection

Our mixed-methods, qualitative study included observations, focus groups, interviews, and program artifacts (e.g., scripts and visuals created by youth and adult mentors over the course of creating digital stories). A social work doctoral student observed youth and adult interactions during program meetings and took detailed field notes. We conducted semistructured focus groups with youth participants and interviews with adult mentors at the conclusion of each summer. For this article, we also analyzed notes from interdisciplinary team meetings, during which we discussed project plans and the unique circumstances of specific youth participants' digital stories. When reporting our findings, we used pseudonyms for all individuals to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis

We conducted a critical incident analysis to consider whether and how a partnership between social work and media studies added unique value to our summer youth media mentoring project. Using this technique, developed in the early 1950s by industrial psychologists, researchers analyze observational, interview, and archival data to create profiles of participant activities and to assess the degree to which the incidents profiled fulfill specific organizational objectives (Butterfield et al., 2005). The approach is characterized by specifying the nature of the phenomenon that will be evaluated, identifying relevant incidents, and inductively creating categories that are grouped into themes (Butterfield et al., 2005). More recent applications of this method have involved the selection of "turning points for knowing" that allow for "an uncovering of practices, positionality, and perspectives ... that had been going on without detection or acknowledgement" (Halquist & Musanti, 2010, p. 453). Scholars in several fields now recognize critical incident analysis as a valuable approach to exploratory research and model building (Butterfield et al., 2005).

To identify critical incidents, we followed Halquist and Musanti's (2010) model of revisiting our data and brainstorming a list of relevant incidents that revealed the need for

and benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration in our community-engaged research. We focused on the challenges faced by adult mentors when working with young people to develop their digital stories, the nature of the conflict or tension that spurred greater reflection or problem-solving by the interdisciplinary team, and the results or consequences for the youth involved. Based on our discussion, we selected three cases that were representative of themes across all of the critical incidents we identified and that exemplified patterns shown in prior analysis of our data (e.g., Jimenez et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2021; Kennedy, Matyasich et al., 2019). We interpreted the significance of these three cases "through a systematic critique of the incident and its criticality" (Halquist & Musanti, 2010, p. 448). To do so, we compiled data about each case from all our sources (field notes, focus groups, interviews, and meeting notes) and used it to create summaries outlining the process of developing a digital story with each participant. We then wrote memos about how these cases illustrated our key themes.

Results

Angelica Had to Revise

Of all the youth participants across both years, Angelica was the only one who was asked to make significant revisions to her story. Angelica was a Latina seventh grader who lived in an economically precarious neighborhood and wanted to tell a personal story about gang life and love that involved her parents. After hearing Angelica's idea, Raquel, a White, middle-class, high school-age mentor, brought up Angelica's story in the group conference call held regularly between the researchers, community partners, and university students involved in the program. These calls were designed so that everyone could learn from each other and engage in real-time problem-solving as the summer progressed.

On the call, Raquel said that Angelica described the story she wanted to tell as "kind of like Romeo and Juliet," which was the story of her parents. Her mother and father were from two rival gangs, and they had met and fallen in love. Angelica wanted to illustrate how difficult it was to have two groups of people in one's family who didn't get along. Raquel was initially troubled by the story because Angelica selected violent images for her video and seemed to gloss over this violence by focusing on the positive, romantic story of her parents. "She also wanted to talk about how important it is to have homies instead of friends," Raquel explained.

The adults interpreted this as a rationale for gang participation, which is understood as rooted in the need for neighborhood and family protection in economically precarious communities (Peterson et al., 2004). Team members from social work and media studies then raised different solutions and possible implications. Judy, an AmeriCorps volunteer with some video experience, observed that between home, school, and Angelica's media choices, violence was part of Angelica's everyday life. She noted that "taking control of the narrative about violence" might give Angelica a greater sense of agency. Judy suggested that Raquel have a conversation with Angelica:

Like, hey, there's violence in here, but let's also think about the responsibility you have to portray things accurately and not romanticize it. She's responsible, so it's not going to be irresponsible. But it may need to be edited out, because it can be too graphic.

Raquel became concerned that the adults on the conference call might want to censor Angelica's story too much. Vince, the most experienced video storyteller in the group, was excited about the story's potential. "It's an opportunity to tell an amazing story, seeing as where it's coming from," he said, noting that he had not previously had students tell stories from a "dangerous area" of the city. Elaine and Glen, each of whom had extensive experience as youth social workers, wanted to ensure that Angelica was given the tools to evaluate the pros and cons of gang life. Cristina, who had worked with young people on several media projects, noted that telling the story could be a way for Angelica to work through her experiences with violence. But Glen observed that Angelica "seems to be telling her parents' story, not her own story," and Raquel agreed, noting that "it didn't go into her own story." Elaine offered to "to learn more about the story behind the story" by reaching out to Casey, a social worker at the partnering after-school program who was also Angelica's cousin. Casey was familiar with Angelica's family life and the prevalence of gang violence in the community.

In a follow-up conversation between Elaine and Casey, Casey explained that Angelica's family was in the process of moving out of the neighborhood because of heightened gang tensions. While she wanted to encourage Angelica to tell the story she wanted to tell, she also cautioned that it would be a

good idea to "make up a bunch of fake names" and to describe the story as fictional to keep Angelica and her family free from danger and to limit risks to their public benefits. Elaine then spoke with Angelica about this possibility, suggesting that sometimes when adults want to distance themselves from a situation, they will ask for advice "for a friend" instead of for themselves. In the same way, Elaine noted, Angelica could tell the story as if it was based on something that happened to a friend of hers. Angelica agreed to use this approach to create distance.

Unlike the two following case studies, the critical incidents related to Angelica primarily took place in behind-the-scenes conversations between the social workers and media studies collaborators. Angelica ultimately decided to tell the story of her parents and gang life, but she fictionalized it. She didn't include any images of her family and instead used a variety of animations to tell her "Romeo and Juliet" story.

Asha Shared Personal Trauma

Asha, a young adolescent immigrant refugee from East Africa, struggled to choose a story idea. She decided rather late in our 2017 summer program that she wanted to tell a story about being bullied at school for being Black and Muslim. In her video, Asha shared that she was called a "monkey" and told to take off her "little hat" and to go "back to her country." During the video creation process, Asha took several breaks and was tearful at times. She told the social workers and her mentor Lisa that she felt like her school hadn't done enough to stop the explicit racism. Most participants that summer focused on positive stories of resilience, personal support, or humor, such as appreciating their parent's work ethic, praising an academic mentor, or getting chased by a dog. Comparatively, Asha's story dealt head-on with personal trauma and the racism she experienced from peers. In her postsummer interview, Lisa described how vulnerable and eye-opening Asha's story was:

She had to deal with things like bullying, racism, and oppression because she's Muslim ... stuff that I never had to deal with. And so I found that a little bit difficult at first probably emotionally more than anything...but I think that it taught me a lot about the kinds of real-life struggles that somebody who is Black and Muslim and, like, inner-city Denver has to deal with at her age.

Initially, Lisa reached out to the social workers on the team to see if the bullying was something that had to be reported and whether she was the best person to work with Asha given her privileged background. Asha was also asked if she wanted to stay with Lisa, and Asha said that she did. Ultimately, Lisa continued to be Asha's mentor, buoyed by the social workers' assurance that a report was not necessary and that her mentorship could still be trauma-informed despite their racial, class, and religious differences. Still, Lisa recalled worrying about how open Asha was about her personal life and struggles in the video:

I got the impression that she had told some of the other leaders about [the bullying] before in the program she was in. But she really came to me with all of it. You know I...I kept expecting her to hold back when she didn't [small laugh]. And she just, I don't know if she wanted to get it off her chest. Like I said, I don't know how much she had confided in other people before about the stuff she was dealing with. But she is very open, very willing to lay it all out there and I think maybe that could've come from a place of her just wanting to be able to express, like, "Hey this has been happening to me and it really stinks, and I just want somebody to know about it" kind of a thing.

When Asha's story was first shown internally to peers at the end of the summer program, Lisa remembered feeling a lot of admiration for Asha and was happy that the screening went positively from Asha's perspective.

I definitely [felt] a lot of gratitude to her peers for being such a supportive community in the moment. I felt, I definitely felt pride for having been able to help her tell that story. ... After it was over I took a big breath and was like, "Ah we did it OK" [small laugh].

In a postsummer focus group, Asha's video also stood out to her peers. They talked about her immense strength and vulnerability:

Participant 3 (P3): For me, like, you know I wanted to do something else. But, like you know, like, I could, it's hard for me. Like I hate when I get personal, like, keep it real. Interviewer (I): Mm. P3: 'Cause you

don't know what could happen if I keep it real. So I just, like, wanted to just make it, you know, chill. Make a chill story. But if I really, if I had the confidence to keep it real, I woulda talked about a lot of stuff that's, like, real my life. How, like, people get shot and everything. I: Yeah, yeah, so you decided to do something not too personal? Participant 1 (P1): But Asha she really put it out huh? She put, like, something really personal. Her life. I: Yeah, what did you guys think about that? Participant 2 (P2): It was kinda cool. Participant 4 (P4): It's cool how she's, like, how to get into that personal business. I: Yeah. P1: It was hard for me. P2: Share it out to everyone. P4: That was pretty, that was probably pretty hard for her. Like just, like, oh dang, wished I talked about when I was bullied when I just came to America.

With all of the inspiration and positivity surrounding Asha's story, what followed was unexpected. While audiences, peers, and her mentor experienced her story positively, Asha did not feel good about sharing it. After screening the video with her peers, Asha screened it publicly just once more, but she left the room just as her digital story was shown and covered her face with her hijab when she returned. She later declined the program facilitators' request to show her video to the next summer's cohort. In Sandra's notes from the postsummer interview, she said that Asha felt very exposed for having told her story so openly. Asha told observers that she wished she had shared less.

In a debriefing conference call among the adult collaborators, we wondered if the presence of a social worker with whom Asha already had a relationship, along with the summer program's focus on building trust and community, had made her initially more comfortable sharing such a personal story. Perhaps Asha's media-savvy mentor had focused on translating the story into a strong narrative that Asha had liked and that others appreciated, but we did not adequately help Asha consider how she would feel when the story was shared with others. We wondered if we were witnessing something about the contrasting purposes of storytelling as embraced in media production and in social work settings. Despite our best efforts, there was a gap in our awareness.

When young people share stories, there is often little emotional distance between the traumatic event and the present moment. Through our collaboration, we realized that none of us had factored in the role and importance of youth sharing their stories publicly.

Rosa Found Her Voice

The following summer, in 2018, Rosa, a Latina eighth grader, was working on a story about her experience being bullied at school, coping through art, and ultimately finding friends. The story bore many similarities to Asha's. Rosa worked on developing the script with her mentor, Julia, who had not been involved in program the prior summer when Asha and Angelica were participants. Julia asked Rosa probing questions to draw out Rosa's emotions related to her story. Julia encouraged Rosa to be vulnerable and to tell something "true" about her life, believing that this would be healing. As a social worker, Julia wasn't focused on the reality of Rosa showing her video and being vulnerable with her peers or a public audience. Julia took a therapeutic tone or stance when generating ideas for Rosa's story, focusing more on the serious emotions rather than the joy and triumph Rosa felt as she reframed these emotions and moved forward in her life. Julia recalls taking the therapeutic approach for a few reasons:

In our planning and grant applications there was a focus on the therapeutic aspect of storytelling. Also, the digital stories that youth had created in our [participatory action research program during the school year] were documentary-style and pretty advocacy-oriented. Most of those stories addressed social issues like abuse, xenophobia, and the foster care system. They had a pretty somber tone.

Well into the development of the script, Julia called over Hector to get a second perspective and to help fine-tune the narrative. After reading through the script, Hector instantly remembered Asha's story from the previous year, which also involved bullying, and how Asha had wished she had shared less. With this in mind, Hector identified three issues with the script. The first was that the story was potentially too personal and risky. The most worrisome was Rosa's honesty about being bullied for looking like a boy, which made her cry and eventually seek therapy. She was transparent

about her trauma and the resources she needed to feel better. Hector wanted to focus on sections of Rosa's story that were compelling but that could help refocus the narrative on resilience.

When Rosa came to the sentences "Sometimes it would get to me. I used to be fragile and would cry" and "It got so bad that I had to go to therapy," Hector stopped Rosa and asked her a few questions: "Is this information that you want people to know publicly? Is this information that is crucial to the story?" Rosa's initial script showed immense vulnerability, so Hector questioned how much detail was necessary and how much she was comfortable sharing. After reviewing the script and being directly asked about an unknown audience viewing her digital story, Rosa ultimately decided that this information was indeed more than the story needed and more than she felt comfortable sharing publicly.

Hector also shifted the focus from the traumatic moments in Rosa's narrative to what had helped her overcome them: drawing, a friend that took an interest in her art, and the process of rebuilding her self-confidence through creative expression and friendship. Rosa wrote, "During that time, I really didn't do anything except sit around and draw." Hector asked her to think about how drawing made her feel. After workshopping her response, Rosa wrote, "When I would draw it would distract me from everything around me. It would take me where I wanted to go. My own world!" A similar conversation took place around Rosa's description of the friend that took notice of her art: "But in 5th grade things kind of changed. I made a new friend! He saw me drawing and said that I draw good." Again, Hector asked Rosa how she felt. Her response was perfect: "I was so shook!"

When Hector helped make the edits to the script, he and Rosa each took turns reading. Hector read by adding inflections and varying volume and speed so as to perform the script. Each time it was Rosa's turn to read, she increasingly took cues from Hector and read with more performativity. When Hector read her script aloud using different voices, she played with tones and characters. For example, she used a nasal, annoying voice when she read lines of her story that quoted the youth who were teasing her. She used a joking tone when saying, "I did *not* see that coming."

As Rosa honed her performance, it inspired changes to the script to fit the way she spoke and felt. Looking at the tracked changes in the Google document with her script, it is clear that Rosa's conversations with Hector freed her up to be

silly—not just serious and emotional, as Julia had initially encouraged. During the end of her time with Hector, Rosa added a line about other girls thinking she was trying to take their boyfriends: “Now that I think of it, they were 5 years old. And they wanted a *novio*, OMG. Anyways.” Her use of Spanish, terms like “OMG” and “anyways,” and youthful expressions like “I-did-not-care” and “shook” show that she used her own language—rather than therapeutic terms or the language of mentors—to describe her experience. In revising, she also added three statements that ended with exclamation points, conveying her excitement with the story she was now telling.

Rosa continued to play with her voice performance, and the end of her story even includes an organic laugh that conveys her sense of strength and ownership of the narrative. The end of the story went from a formal conclusion to one where Rosa raises her voice and playfully adds, “Just kidding!” By embracing storytelling and not just telling the story, Rosa was freed to laugh about some of her painful experiences, a telling sign of healing.

Discussion

Social work is anchored in the person telling their story, and media studies is anchored in the craft of storytelling. Both fields view storytelling as an opportunity to creatively engage with memories and personal experiences. While at times this can be traumatic, it can also offer opportunities for reflection that permit healing and growth. Media production collaborators in a digital storytelling project bring technical expertise and attention to narrative. They focus on the quality of the narrative structure, performance, and visuals and consider whether those elements are in harmony with the medium and/or audience. When facilitated by social workers, digital storytelling with young people tends to emphasize social and emotional attunement, awareness of injustice, or social change. In our project, we saw that the developmental framework introduced by the social workers ensured that the digital storytelling program promoted safety, trusting relationships, and power-sharing between and among youth and adults. Social work professionals are trained to recognize and intervene when a young person makes a decision that would cause significant harm to themselves or others. Despite the complementary strengths of social work and media studies, our digital storytelling approach had several gaps that only became evident because

of the long-term nature of our interdisciplinary collaboration.

Through working together across multiple years and iterations of our digital storytelling programming, we were able to expand our capacity to navigate challenges related to young people and the sharing of their stories with the public. We selected Angelica, Asha, and Rosa’s cases because their stories are critical incidents that reveal the benefits of interdisciplinary community-engaged research above and beyond simply merging the unique skills of media studies and social work. By intentionally creating space for collaborative discussions about issues in youth digital storytelling without easy solutions, we became aware of the multifaceted risks involved in the exhibition of their videos. Over the course of the partnership, we were able to apply these lessons and strengthen our approach to digital storytelling in ways that reduced the potential harms of publicly sharing youth participants’ work, kept participants engaged, and still respected their self-determination in creative expression. While we have primarily focused on the collaboration between two academic fields, our inclusion of nonacademic stakeholders, such as program facilitators at our host sites and an after-school social worker external to the project, added a transdisciplinary element that provided a layer of impartial, grounded input. The external social worker as third collaborator was connected to the community and participants in ways that researchers could not be. This highlights the importance of being fluid and open in interdisciplinary community-engaged research.

In this article, we emphasize the benefits of our interdisciplinary collaboration for community members, in this case young people, as this has less often been the focus of scholarly publications. But we also recognize our collaboration’s value for research and teaching. When youth stayed involved in digital storytelling, they also sustained participation in our data collection, and university students had greater opportunities for in-depth skill development. Thus, our community-engaged research on digital storytelling was reciprocal and mutually beneficial.

No Easy Solutions: Prioritizing Interdisciplinary Problem-Solving and Reflection

Regularly scheduled conference calls among social work and media studies faculty, students, and community partners gave voice to different perspectives that generated nuanced approaches to the complex issues that arose in our work with

young people. These calls were distinct from those held among just the research or program teams, which were focused on specific tasks and delegation according to each collaborator's professional training. On the more inclusive calls, our conversations often focused on how to balance youth independence with risks related to telling their stories publicly. We also held quarterly dinners (including researchers, program facilitators, and mentors) at which we built rapport and trust that allowed for vulnerability and deeper shared reflection. These reflexive spaces were essential to our disciplinary cross-fertilization and have become a central component of our ongoing community-engaged research.

For those with experience in creating and recognizing mediated narratives with strong audience appeal and a unique perspective, Angelica's video initially seemed to offer compelling insights into the allure of gang membership among adults and their children. Yet concern for Angelica as a person and family member shifted the conversation toward the video's glamorization of violence and, further, to the fact that a public screening of Angelica's story might put her family at risk. Due to their deep contextual knowledge of Angelica's family and neighborhood, those on the social work side were able to recognize and mitigate these dangers in ways that the media partners may not have been able to on their own. At the same time, the media studies collaborators recognized that Angelica's story was compelling, authentic, and important to Angelica. They cautioned that concerns about risk should not completely supersede our shared commitment to youth self-determination, and they advised that adults should not ask Angelica to fundamentally change her narrative. Together, the group arrived at the solution of suggesting that Angelica tell the story as if it were fictional. Our collaboration allowed us to address concerns sensitively and with restraint to preserve as much of Angelica's original story as possible while keeping her family safe.

In contrast, Asha and Rosa decided to create videos about their painful experiences with bullying. In these cases, the social workers did not foresee the risks in sharing these types of stories and focused instead on the young women's self-determination in topic selection, the healing potential of processing their emotions, and the benefits of building public awareness about bullying. The interdisciplinary team deemed Asha's story important as a tool for raising awareness of the impact of bullying and for communicating to

youth who have been bullied that they are not alone. We hoped that Asha would experience a boost in confidence and agency by taking ownership of her story. Research on participatory media and youth tends to echo the positive outcomes of sharing a story, such as improved agency and healing, but these studies are limited in understanding the costs and risks for youth from marginalized communities (Anyon, Bender, et al., 2018; Chan, 2006; Hull & Katz, 2006; Nelson et al., 2016). The trauma-informed training focused on cultivating trusting youth-adult relationships that would help youth feel safe in sharing their experiences and vulnerabilities, but we did not anticipate how challenging this would make it for youth to share their stories with an unknown public audience.

When screening the story in front of her peers, Asha may have recognized that she, with her mentor's support, had crafted a public identity of herself as a victim. While the experience was authentic and hers, she came to realize that her story shared too much. Other youth understood the strength it took to tell a story like Asha's—so much so that they talked about choosing a topic that didn't "keep it real" as a way to avoid people in your business. Asha's negative reaction to exhibiting her video revealed that some young people, while comfortable sharing within a therapeutic and empowering context, might not be prepared to consider how they may feel differently when their story is shared in a more public context. Thus, although the storytelling promoted Asha's sense of agency and empowerment in one context, it could undermine or even harm her confidence in another.

During conference calls among university students, community partners, and faculty, we reevaluated why we didn't step in to help Asha think through the implications of sharing her story publicly. What had we missed ethically? What did we need to do differently? Publics are imagined until they become real (B. Anderson, 1983). Audiences serve an important and powerful role in the development of agency and civic engagement. We therefore had assumed that once young people knew their stories would be shared with audiences, they would be able to think differently about how their stories might affect or even spur enhanced understanding and empathy among these audiences. We learned instead that while sharing one's story can be a moment of profound understanding and growth, it also risks the opposite if young people are not ready to face a public audience or their personal traumas.

Due to existing codes of ethics in social work and media production, we were prepared to intervene if stories revealed abuse (NASW, 2017; NCA, 2017). And indeed, social workers had prepared the team to support participants if they experienced distress when revisiting traumatic memories. Asha's story, however, did not rise to the level of requiring a report, alerting our interdisciplinary team to an oversight in the code of ethics: It didn't fully account for the risks that sharing could pose to young people's identity and social-emotional health. Our interdisciplinary team only realized the subtler harm of sharing stories of victimization with a public audience by reflecting together on Asha's case.

For some young people, the public version of themselves that they create through their stories can be jarring: Youth learn that their public and mediated self is different from the self they experience every day. The mediated self is a fragment of themselves that can never truly encompass their entire being. How that mediated self comes to be is an important lesson of communication competence (Shah et al., 2009). Through storytelling, young people learn to participate meaningfully in public life, to control their public image by strategically sharing select parts of themselves, and to weave their lived experiences into a coherent story. Knowing what and how much to share is a process that takes time to master and involves mistakes (Jimenez et al., 2021). Early adolescents' sense of identity is changing rapidly alongside their developing capacity for abstract "what if" reasoning. Therefore, our program needed to develop early adolescents' communication competence and capacity to mediate their stories. Our collective code of ethics evolved to consider the risks to early adolescents' developing sense of identity introduced by sharing stories publicly. Working through these issues together, we found value in collaboration that stretched beyond our professional skills and orientations.

Wisdom in Longevity: Increasing Impact Through Sustained Collaboration

Because our interdisciplinary community-engaged research extended over multiple years, we were able to apply what we learned from Asha's and Angelica's cases to Rosa's experience the following summer and with other youth later on (Clark & Jimenez, 2020). Noting that Rosa's script dealt with personal traumas, Hector was attentive to content that she might not want to share publicly,

especially with strangers or her peers. He discussed the context of a future audience to help her think about the sensitive parts of her story, and, based on the earlier analysis of the mismatch between Asha's self-image and the victim image projected in her story, he also encouraged Rosa to incorporate joy, triumph, and humor into her narrative about victimization. Hector encouraged her to shift her focus away from painful experiences toward positive emotions and to take control through narrative, performativity, and drama—including making fun of her bullies, dramatizing her feelings, and using youthful language.

In the production of her digital story, Rosa initially crafted a narrative that had emotional resonance, vulnerability, and cohesion. With Hector's focus on drawing out the story's insights, the narrative shifted from one focused on trauma to one of resilience and gave Rosa increased confidence knowing that she intentionally selected what to share with an audience. In her case, performative storytelling was just as potent as authentic storytelling as a way to experience agency. More specifically, Rosa took pride not only in writing her story using principles of narrative but also in controlling technical and performative elements with newfound mastery.

These lessons and subsequent successes would not have occurred if our collaboration was a one-time program. There is immense value to long-term partnerships between researchers and community partners in digital storytelling projects, particularly those that involve young people who have experienced multiple forms of marginalization. Working together year after year gave us a compass to navigate different types of challenges, including recognizing the risks of sharing personal stories. The fact that Asha came back the following year and refused to share her story with the new cohort initiated an internal conversation among facilitators and researchers to understand why the young storyteller had experienced such a powerful story so negatively. If Asha hadn't come back, we would never have known about her experience. Sadly, Angelica did not return after her family moved to a different part of the city, and therefore we do not know how her own story unfolded. However, we now recognize that youth who want to express lower-level personal challenges and traumas in their stories need staff/mentors to help them recognize the public nature and associated risks of their storytelling.

Implications

In our community-engaged research on digital storytelling, social workers and media studies collaborators benefited from sharing complementary skill sets and collectively reflecting on the experiences of participating youth. In creating a shared community of learners, we leveraged a range of strengths, ethical orientations, and disciplinary perspectives in our program design and decision-making. Collective problem-solving among students, faculty, and community partners from two different disciplines created multiple checks and balances that engendered a greater sense of confidence about determining the best interests of participating youth. Our long-term commitment to working with our community partner meant that our insights from one summer could inform our work in subsequent years. Taken together, these experiences, as reflected in the critical incidents with Angelica, Asha, and Rosa, suggest several implications for conducting community-engaged interdisciplinary research with marginalized populations.

Regularly Create Space for Reflecting on Best Interests of Community Members

Our experience reveals the value in creating a distinct and dynamic space for interdisciplinary collaborators to reflect on the best interests of community members. Ensuring that community-engaged research is mutually beneficial requires conscientiousness, sensitivity, and awareness of complex risks of harm. In the context of research on digital storytelling, participants risk being exploited for creating stories that are salacious, perpetuate stereotypes, or involve victimization. Such dynamics may exist in any type of research that involves community members in the dissemination of project outcomes, products, results, or findings. In these cases, scholars need to consider and make participants aware of complex risks that are beyond the purview of institutional review boards. Cahill (2007) acknowledged that in participatory work, there may be multiple “unfolding layers of risk” (p. 366) and that ethical commitments must attend to the “entanglements of representation and audience” (p. 367). Interdisciplinary collaborations may be a powerful way to mitigate harm if they are not solely focused on the practical aspects of research design or implementation and if they entail responsiveness and ongoing critical reflection.

Include Faculty, University Students, and Community Partners Who Represent a Range of Roles

Just as important as creating a shared space for critical reflection among interdisciplinary collaborators is including people with diverse roles, perspectives, and skills in the project team. To reduce the likelihood of harm to community members, sustain the project team’s engagement in research, and ensure benefits to their own development, the project team’s interests must be considered from multiple dimensions. This can be accomplished through collective reflection and problem-solving among interdisciplinary collaborators with different professional training, levels of authority, and responsibilities. For example, our conference calls included the principal investigators, doctoral and master’s level research assistants, youth mentors, and program coordinators. Each member shared their unique expertise with the group—whether in media production, storytelling, youth development, trust-building, trauma-informed care, or community organizing—while simultaneously gaining new knowledge and skills.

Research with student learners affirms that these types of conversations help participants learn the important skill of critical reflection (Kornbluh et al., 2020). Having a large multidisciplinary team meant that leadership of the project’s components could be distributed widely. Some members attended to nuances within the project while others structured spaces for reflection. Holding reflective conversations by phone or video conference can maximize the participation of university students, faculty, and practitioners with complex schedules who are not all located in the same place. These calls provided greater opportunities for students to participate not only in data collection and site navigation but also in critical incident analysis, thus expanding their skill development.

Long-Term Partnerships

The critical incidents from two summers of digital storytelling with early adolescents suggest that multiyear collaborations are necessary to maximize the benefits of community-engaged interdisciplinary research. Scholars need to commit to partnerships that extend beyond a single study or project, and funders need to reward and incentivize longer-term collaborations. Sustained relationships and learning over time maximize the benefits to study participants and community partners and enhance the quality of the research

(Anyon, Kennedy, et al., 2018; Kennedy, DeChants, et al., 2019). In our interdisciplinary collaboration, faculty and students from media studies joined an existing partnership between GSSW and a community youth program. The partnerships took many years to build. A year prior to the summer media project, media studies partners supported social workers who were guiding youth in participatory research projects. This led us to better understand the community context, build trust, and establish relationships. That cautious process allowed the interdisciplinary collaborators to identify and acknowledge their unique strengths, potential contributions, and project ideas, which ultimately led to our multiyear study of digital storytelling. More recently, faculty from media studies led a study with the community partner focused on youth using social media for advocacy. This turn-taking and distributed leadership in community-engaged research sustained the collaboration over the long term.

Conclusion

It is not easy to find an approach to digital storytelling with marginalized youth that allows personal narrative to be both healing for participants and capable of catalyzing empathy and understanding among audiences. Yet interdisciplinary collaboration in community-engaged research can begin to address the dilemmas that emerge in these endeavors, as such projects can become more than the sum of the complementary skills and strengths across two fields. Our study illustrates the potential to create synergy through shared reflection, problem-solving, distributed leadership, and learning in a long-term partnership. In particular, a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to community-engaged research offers advantages in understanding and addressing the best interests of community members. Our research team was able to contend with issues of vulnerability, privacy, and self-advocacy in youth participants' creation of digital self-narratives that, in turn, were satisfying and meaningful both for the young creators and for the public audiences who later saw them. As such, long-term interdisciplinary collaborations may be an important way to ensure that community-engaged research fulfills its promise of being mutually beneficial for participants, researchers, and publics.

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