

All the Good Stories:
Intergenerational Digital Storytelling as Process and Product

William Shewbridge
UMBC New Media Studio

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Used in intergenerational settings, digital storytelling presents a rich opportunity for collaboration, personal reflection and the sharing of experiences and memories. The Charlestown Digital Stories project brings together students from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and residents of the Charlestown Retirement Community to produce short digital movies for personal sharing and broadcast on the Retirement Living Television, a national cable network. As the digital stories are constructed, they are transformed from a one-to-one oral experience into a one-to-many fixed-format that is shared beyond the personal interaction of the production team. As stories move through this transformation, what is lost or gained in terms of the “me to you” experience of oral storytelling? How is the experience impacted for the listener and the teller as stories move from being a personal interaction to being a “product?” This paper will explore these aspects of the digital storytelling in a cross-generational and cross-cultural context.

At a recent digital storytelling workshop held at Charlestown retirement community, I overheard a conversation between a student and a resident. The senior was reminiscing about growing up on a farm in the 1930s as she described her everyday experiences. The student, showing genuine interest, remarked “your generation has all the

good stories.” Whether you believe that or not, it reinforced for me the power of storytelling to make connections across generations. The sharing of the seemingly mundane details of our lives can impact listeners in profound ways. Exchanges like this were common during the intergenerational workshop conducted as part of the Charlestown project. As students and seniors worked together to create digital stories, they also created relationships. This sharing of personal experiences went well beyond the digital stories themselves. Yet the stories retained elements of intimacy and personal connection as they made their way through the workshop process to a finished product.

Digital storytelling was chosen for the Charlestown project as a means of capturing and communicating the life experiences of seniors for broadcast on a national television network. The workshop process, developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling, allows those with no production skills to present a story in a concise, personal and effective way. The focus remains on the story itself. Experimentation with technology is subservient to communicating personal aspects such as narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence (Burgess).

Central to digital storytelling is the idea that the storyteller’s sense of individuality and ownership is enhanced when they are allowed to tell their own story in their own voice (EDUCAUSE). In the Charlestown project, maintaining this sense of ownership needed to be balanced with the challenges of creating a team product. The storytellers made compromises. By allowing their stories to be visually interpreted in part or in whole by other team members, the seniors in a sense ceded partial ownership of their story to others. In the Charlestown project, this appears to have been compensated for in part by the opportunities the workshop presented to interact with the students and other

seniors. The interviews presented here reveal a collective sense of pride in the work of the group as a whole and a recognition of each individual's contribution and value.

In the Charlestown project, the lines between traditional storytelling and mainstream media were blurred on several levels. Many students possessed advanced production skills allowing them to contribute professional touches uncommon in most digital stories. Secondly, it was a stated purpose of the workshop to produce works for possible broadcast on Retirement Living TV. It was apparent from the beginning that the stories were intended for a mass audience. Seniors and students alike set out knowing that their works would be seen in a commercial media context, and production choices such as visual style and voice reflected their understanding of this.

While producing digital stories for broadcast is not the typical goal of workshops such as this, the concept is not unique. Hundreds of stories were collected for broadcast and web viewing as part of the seminal BBC *Capture Wales* project (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/>). Creator of the project, Daniel Meadows, argued the value of digital stories as a collective whole, claiming they represent a “jigsaw that is the bigger story of our time and our country, the bigger story that gives another perspective on who we are is revealed. Light shines on an invisible nation (190).”

In the Charlestown project, the puzzle pieces came together to reveal interconnectedness between stories and generations. Commonalities between resident's life experiences and their relevance for students found for these in their own lives were revealed during the workshop. What was gained in sharing stories within the group and with a larger audience did much to challenge attitudes, build relationships and forge intergenerational connections.

The Charlestown Digital Story project grew out of a unique collaboration involving the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's New Media Studio (NMS) and the Retirement Living Television (RLTV). Retirement Living is a new cable network founded in 2006 by John Erickson of Erickson Retirement Communities. RLTV currently broadcasts on cable systems throughout the northeast and through DirecTV. RLTV has based its operations in the NMS television facility for a period of two years during which time RLTV will construct permanent broadcast facilities on the UMBC campus. In addition to significantly upgraded studio facilities, this partnership offers extensive internship and employment opportunities to UMBC students.

RLTV approached the NMS with the idea of developing a mechanism for collecting community-produced content for possible broadcast. They were particularly interested in exploring participatory opportunities for viewers by allowing them to submit content in a way similar to Current TV. This was an interesting challenge considering that RLTV's target audience of 55 and older is a group not usually thought of as active users of new media technologies.

For a number years, the NMS has been involved in digital story work, supporting several academic projects and hosting a faculty workshop in January 2006 with Joe Lambert and Daniel Wienshanker from the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS). Digital storytelling was suggested as a possible way to develop personal stories of seniors and bring them to air. The NMS proposed a pilot digital storytelling project involving UMBC students and residents of the nearby Charlestown retirement community. The CDS workshop process served as an initial model for the Charlestown project. RLTV agreed to fund an initial project during the summer of 2006 with a goal of this producing ten stories

drawn from the life experiences of Charlestown residents. It was planned that these stories would form the seeds for a “digital mailbag” segment within RLTV’s *The Voice*, a daily information and entertainment talk show.

As an initial step for the summer project, six UMBC students were recruited and trained in the digital storytelling process. Funding from RLTV made it possible to pay the students a small stipend for participation in the project. As part of their training each member of the student group produced their own story while learning the technology and digital storytelling process. Concurrent with this training, participants at Charlestown were recruited. Charlestown is home to approximately 2,500 residents, with an average age of 78-80. Due to the tight scheduling of the project, recruiting took place in the space of one week, beginning with the airing of a feature on Charlestown’s close-circuit network. The program explained digital storytelling and showed several examples drawn from UMBC class projects, CDS and the BBC *Capture Wales* project. Viewers were invited to an information session to learn more about the project. Special interest groups in the community, including those focused on creative writing, video production, journalism and family history were contacted directly while leaflets were widely posted throughout Charlestown. Approximately 20 residents attended the information session. While refreshments were served, the group viewed several digital stories and discussed the project. Ultimately, six residents chose to participate in the first workshop.

The workshop commenced the following week. The relatively small number of participants made it possible to pair each resident with a student to form a production team. Six weekly meetings of the full group were planned with the project pairs meeting at other times as needed.

The workshop was conducted with a few basic premises and assumptions:

- The residents were the authors and “art directors” of their stories. They had the right of approval at every stage of the process and were the owners of the finished product.
- The residents were involved with the actual production work to the degree they chose or were comfortable with. They could defer part or all of these tasks to their team member, however the decision to do so was ultimately theirs.
- The students acted primarily as technical assistants. Their creative input was encouraged but viewed as secondary to that of the residents.

The first session focused on a story circle conducted along the lines of those used in CDS workshops. While the students did not contribute stories of their own, they participated in the circle as listeners and were actively engaged in the conversation. The participants started from different places in terms of preparation. Two residents came with stories already written. A few came with no ideas at all, although through listening to the other stories, these participants quickly developed story concepts. By the end of the first session, each of the six had at least the germ of the story that they would work with. Each resident brought a story in written form to the second meeting. These were read aloud in the group and discussed. The majority of the stories were edited to some degree as a result of this round of feedback. The biggest challenge the participants faced was cutting their stories down to a manageable length. The residents were encouraged to key in on one idea that they could concisely relate within these constraints, however few were successful in meeting the goal of 250 words or less.

By session three, the group started production work. The residents recorded their voiceover and began working with their student partners to plan the visualization of their story. The resident-student production teams were to a large degree self-selected. During the story circle a few of the students developed an affinity for individual stories and brought forth ideas on how they could be visualized. Residents subsequently expressed an interest in working with these particular students.

Production work continued during the remainder of the six group workshop sessions. While participants worked in pairs, there was a rich interplay between the groups during these sessions. Portable production equipment was brought from UMBC including laptops, scanners, microphones and cameras. Production was not limited to high technology. One group used stop-action animation to tell a story from the point of view of a child's doll. This team spent much of the session time cutting out paper dolls and drawing images that were later shot with an animation camera.

Work continued on the projects beyond the six workshop sessions as the teams met informally at Charlestown. When the group reconvened for a final showing, the stories were enthusiastically received. Most residents expressed satisfaction with their individual efforts, while noting small changes they would have made given more time or more source material. Many inquired when another workshop would be held. Each received five copies of a DVD containing the six stories. In addition to the DVDs, the stories were posted online on both the RLTV and UMBC sites. Copies of the DVD were given to Charlestown's community cable station, channel 66. The station broadcast the stories as a series as part of the *Charlestown Today* program. Before each story, the

resident producer appeared in a short studio interview, introducing the story and describing the workshop experience.

RLTV viewed the outcome of the first workshop favorably and extended the project for a second round in the fall of 2006. In anticipation of using the stories as the basis of a broadcast feature, RLTV made the decision to follow the second workshop with a camera crew with the goal of developing a reality-based documentary on the digital storytelling experience. This introduced a new dynamic to the second workshop. Initially this proved somewhat disruptive to the workshop process. Eventually, however, as the participants grew used to the crew's presence, the sessions regained much of the intimacy that had characterized the first round.

The *Charlestown Today* broadcasts and word-of-mouth in the community led to a large turnout at the second recruiting information session. As a result, the second round group was significantly larger, ultimately producing eleven new stories. All six of the original group returned, although two dropped out as the holidays neared. In order to accommodate all who wished to participate, the workshop was divided into two groups, meeting Wednesday and Friday. The group structure was flexible, with many participants floating between the two days. One participant chose to be part of both groups, eventually producing two stories.

The eleven videos produced by the second workshop were equally well received by the participants, community and RLTV. A combined DVD containing all seventeen stories was produced. Also included on the DVD was a short documentary produced by the New Media Studio on the project featuring interviews with students and residents reflecting on the workshop experience. Interviews with resident participants were

collected during the second workshop. These were primarily videotaped for RLTV's planned documentary. The New Media Studio conducted interviews of student participants for a documentary featured on the *Digital Stories @ UMBC* website (<http://www.umbc.edu/stories>). The interviews present insight into how the participants viewed the experience as they reflected on the transformation of the resident's personal stories to a broadcast product. Common themes emerged regarding the value of the workshop process and the stories themselves. The importance of the relationships that were formed and the impact the experience had on attitudes towards aging were prominent in student responses. The seniors commented on the experience of sharing their ideas within the group and how important this interaction was in developing their stories. They also expressed their personal views on the value of sharing their stories with individuals, family and society as a whole.

As residents shared their ideas for the first time in the story circle, it was apparent that the stories were in various stages of development. A few participants already had written works completed that they planned to adapt for the project. Others used the circle to vet several rough ideas as they tried to choose one to focus on. Many of the participants commented on the impact that hearing the stories of others had on their own work. Resident Barbara Kurz remarked: "every time you hear a story it brings up memories of your own ...you think gee, there's another story to tell." The process acted as a trigger for forgotten memories that suddenly seemed relevant and interesting.

Barbara Walker of Charlestown commented:

It's just kind of a challenge to get those stories, to dredge them up from your head and your past. A lot of us have filed these stories away and

don't think about them unless we are encouraged to. It's a good experience.

It's a good experience to dredge up some of those personal stories and it's

a good experience for those who get to hear them. (Walker)

Barbara Kurz's initial motivation to attend the workshop was shared by many participants: "... I thought that it was a good way to get some of my stories on tape for my kids." However, as the workshop unfolded, she found additional value in the group experience: "Just sitting in on the planning of this and listening to the stories, everyone has a different story and it's all fascinating. Everyone's life is different, everyone has a different story."

Throughout the workshop, Jerri Mullinex showed a clear appreciation for the attention the resident's stories were receiving from the students. This was evident when she reflected on the project and expressed her view that this type of storytelling was in a sense a return to an earlier, simpler way of communicating:

Any time you can write a good story about your past, I think it's fascinating, especially when it's...good fun-loving kind of things it just brings something back about our past that we don't have. When you get back earlier than the 30s there wasn't a lot of TV storytelling ... I think this is fascinating to the younger generation. (Mullinex)

For many of the participating students, the project was a unique opportunity to interact with seniors outside of their families. Perceptions of aging were challenged as relationships were formed and barriers age were overcome. Students and residents alike commented on how much they found in common as they compared life experiences.

Student participant Cathryna Brown commented on how the experience challenged the perceptions of aging held by her peers and led to an appreciation for sharing stories:

When a lot of people would hear that I was working with a senior citizen they were like "what?" but its actually incredible because these seniors have so much life in them and they have so many stories to tell beyond the stories we're working on. There is so much you can learn from what they've experienced in their lives and it also makes me appreciate little things more now in my life. Little stories that I think "this would be great to pass on when I become a senior." I think a lot of it is getting to hear their stories and getting to know that there's more to getting old than gradually getting ill. There's still a lot of life left, even in old age. (Brown)

For Andrea Olivier, another student participant, the experience allowed reflection on the commonality of our lives, regardless of generation. The stories revealed the seniors as people who had encountered much in their lives that was familiar to her, and this enhanced her appreciation of the storytellers. She saw them not just as they were today, but as a sum total of their life experience:

It's a lot of fun to be working with people that are learning that their memories are special, that they are valuable to someone. They don't realize how important they are. Grandparents often tell stories to their grandchildren but I think it's hard for their children to understand that once upon a time my grandmother or my grandfather was little like me. My grandfather had a mommy too, and a daddy. You go through certain phases of your life and you have kids, your married or in love, and its hard

to realize that the seniors were there once. They did all the same things and it's helpful for you and me at the stage of life I'm at. As I work on the stories with the seniors I gain something, little bits of wisdom I can take with me, little pieces of information that help me in my life. (Olivier)

The conflict between the perception of later years as an active and natural stage of life, enriched by reflection, and society's preoccupation with youth was apparent to many of the students. For the students, working and relating with the seniors on a peer level fostered a sense of optimism about what later life has to offer. Cathryna Brown remarked on this and how the experience contrasted with her relationships with those of her own generation.

I think that people fail to realize that just because you are aging you are no more enjoying life, laughing and telling jokes. What I've learned is that growing old is not something that is to be dreaded. I think that in America they want you to hold on to this idea of youthfulness so much, it's as if they have completely lost sight of growing old as something graceful. There's something youthful about it even. In working with the residents you really get a sense of that. They're more fun than some of the friends I hang out with today to tell you the honest truth. The jokes and the memories they have are priceless because their not memories I can get from hanging out with my friends because this generation is so deprived of so many of the natural aspects of life and this has been a tremendous blessing for me. (Brown)

This reinforces the idea expressed by Jerri Mullinex that digital storytelling presents a return to an earlier, simpler, natural way of communicating missing in today's mass media. Burgess suggested that nostalgia and sentimentality help instill digital storytelling with a "power of social connectivity" and that the sense of authentic self-expression conveyed by these attributes "lowers the barriers to empathy" (210). The Charlestown experience reflected this time and again.

Working closely with their resident partner, the students focused intently on developing a joint interpretation as they worked to visualize the stories. This creative involvement intensified the student's identification with their partner and their story. The process became in effect an exercise in deep listening, contributing to an appreciation of the residents' willingness to share their experience:

I think that a lot of us are so quick to want to put our own voice out there that sometimes we don't take the time to really slow down and listen. You really learn more from listening than telling your own story every day.

There's something valuable and precious really in being able to just sit and listen. That's what this experience has really done for me...(Brown)

I form a relationship with someone and it's a timeless relationship. It's timeless because I feel that I knew that person as young woman, a young man, a child. That's a very special thing. I feel that we are friends in a very timeless way, an ageless way... it's something that will stay with me the rest of my life. (Olivier)

The technology is a wonderful gift but I think the more important gift is that they are willing to open up their lives, their families, their memories,

their most treasured tokens of life and to entrust us to take these things that are so sacred to them and to create for them. Its something more of them giving to us than anything we could ever provide for them. So that's a great blessing to be a part of something like that and to be part of a group that is so full of life. ... I get the bonus of not only gaining a friend and a mentor but really a role model. Because that's what these residents really are for us. They set the pace for not only the joy of aging but [also] the joy of living.... We are inspired to live because we get to see the joy that they've experienced in living themselves and that's huge, especially for someone my age now (Brown).

Residents found the response of a general audience gratifying, and in some cases surprising, as the product of the workshops began to circulate beyond the workshop. Following the broadcast of her story on the *Charlestown Today* cable program, one resident received a phone call from an unknown viewer thanking her for sharing her story and letting her know how she was moved by it. Other residents commented that they had similar reactions from friends and family members. One resident shared a DVD of the project with her grandchildren with the expectation that they would only be interested in her movie. She was surprised to discover her grandchildren engrossed in the stories of other participants as well. "It wasn't just my story they were intrigued with. They loved them all. It's wonderful that people are finally putting these stories down (Walker)". This sense of surprise that their personal stories are of interest and importance to total strangers is something that came up repeatedly in the workshop. For some of the students, however, the value of the resident's stories was much more apparent:

We watch movies today and we watch television today and we come away from our viewings wondering how much of it is going to be useful to us in our lives. How much of it is really going to last...we come away from our viewing experience wondering if we wasted a half-hour or two hours. You don't feel like that after watching a story from someone at Charlestown because there is a universal theme that it's very special. When I make a film for someone at Charlestown I feel like I'm getting a big hug. (Olivier)

I think there is so much to gain from watching the stories. I think that just listening to the story is beneficial but one thing that is important to remember is that the stories are from residents but they are not strictly for the residents. The stories are for everybody because your grandkids are going to benefit, I'm going to benefit, my mom's going to benefit...there is a benefit for everybody in listening to these kinds of stories. (Brown)

They don't realize how much they have to offer. That's part of the magic of digital storytelling with the Charlestown Retirement community is that you start with this little recollection and you come out with this work of art. It's something that will last along time and its something that people who don't know these people can watch and enjoy and feel part of the family. It makes us all a big human family. (Olivier)

Resident Barbara Walker shared this view that the process of making personal connections continued with the viewing of the finished stories. For her, the stories represented a form of dialog with her audience:

I think, maybe it's the technological age we live in but I think finally people are realizing that this is a part of everybody's history. It's really important. It's a good way to get it out and share it. Not only share it but it triggers memories in the listeners or the viewers eyes too so its kind of mutually simpatico how it evolves. (Walker)

The Charlestown project continues with a third workshop planned for the summer of 2007. Currently, RLTV is actively promoting the stories through local and national film festivals. RLTV is also planning to air the original 17 stories beginning in July as a regular feature on a new live variety show. The senior storytellers may also appear to introduce the stories and talk about their experiences as they did on *Charlestown Today*.

Retirement Living and the New Media Studio are also pursuing the idea of expanding the program to other regions of the country by identifying institutions willing to work with nearby retirement communities to conduct workshops similar to the Charlestown project. The shared hope of RLTV and NMS is that these efforts will go beyond providing periodic content for the network. The creation of a digital story network allowing online submission of content to a growing collection of stories will help forge better communications between generations and challenging conceptions of aging in our society. This has been the experience of the participants in the Charlestown project. Through the process of creating the stories to the sharing of the final product, the attitudes of students and to a degree the seniors themselves have been profoundly affected. Twenty-two year-old Cathryna Brown put it this way when reflecting on her workshop experience:

You know if you watch TV and you are into media it's imposed upon you that you are not supposed to want to get old, but I look forward to getting old. I look forward to having these experiences and some day having my digital story told. To someday passing it down to my grandkids and great-grandkids, because we are all aging and that doesn't have to be a scary thing, it's actually a beautiful thing if you really look at it and that's what these stories enable us to do. Is to really sit down and look at life and to really appreciate each breath, each day, each moment, each memory.

(Brown)

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