

# Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues

## *No.4*

Digital storytelling with the Portuguese speaking community in Stockwell, London

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### Abstract

Digital Storytelling aims for the realization of a short audio-visual clip built from the recording of the workshop participants' voices, reading the story they scripted. The resulting digital story is a combination of still images complementing the recording of the participant's voice telling a story that has developed through a series of creative writing workshops. An important element of a digital story is 'the gift of your voice', enabled through a dynamic rapport of mutual support and co-production during the workshop aimed at helping participants to find their voice and tell a story which is important to them. Participants are also supported in transforming their story into an audio-visual clip that can be shared with the immediate group and disseminated further.

This paper draws on the creative and collaborative method of Digital Storytelling to look at the urban exclusion for the Portuguese speaking community in gentrifying Stockwell.

## **Introduction: definition and origin of Digital Storytelling**

This essay aims to discuss dialogic and creative research approaches, and uses a recent study of the Portuguese speaking community in Stockwell to illustrate this discussion.

There has recently been a proliferation of creative and participative methodologies across the social sciences (Manney 2015, Kara 2015) which could be classified in different ways. Some of these approaches stem more directly from a visual sociology tradition (Rose 2016), others go beyond the visual to include more sensorial and ‘embodied’ ways of producing knowledge (Lisiak 2018, Vacchelli 2018), harnessing personal experiences of the research participants often resulting into an artefact –be it tangible or digital- crafted with the help of a facilitator. Research approaches such as collage, body mapping, and participatory theatre are becoming increasingly established to study a variety of themes and have proved particularly effective for working with marginalised groups.

The term ‘digital storytelling’ stems from a grassroots movement that uses multimedia digital tools to help ordinary people tell their own life stories (Davis and Weinschenker 2012). DS is a relatively new cultural form drawing on a range of different roots, practices and interests. One consequence of this is that literature, research and practice is limited as practitioners and academics work their way towards a fuller, more rounded understanding (Dunford and Jenkins 2018). Digital Storytelling (DS) as an organised practice arose in 1993 from the collaboration of Dana Atchley and Jo Lambert in Berkeley, California (Lambert 2006) followed by the establishment of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), now Storycenter. Through intensive workshops the centre enables people who normally lack technical expertise and access to digital editing equipment to make digital stories (Davis and Weinschenker 2012).

DS has been described as a kind of content creation which is crucial to the democratic agenda and as contributing to an ongoing definition of citizenship (Burgess 2016). Burgess (2006) uses the concept of “vernacular creativity” to describe creative practices emerging from non-elite social contexts where the term vernacular points to the “native speech of a populace against the official language” and is used to distinguish the everyday language from institutional or official modes of expression (p. 206). This approach and its ethical positioning delineate a commitment and empathy with the ordinary and the cultural formations under study. The practice of DS holds a great potential as a data collection tool in qualitative research for its ability to address the materiality of living and for contributing to highlight identity and personal relationships as multiple, fluid, and layered (Gonick et al. 2011).

DS has so far been adopted as part of the training of practitioners/professionals in health or social work settings as well as an educational tool (see Alcantud-Diaz and Gregory-Signes, 2013; Dunford and Jenkins, 2018). It has more recently been built into academic research projects with the aim to cross academic boundaries (Otañez and



Guerrero 2015, Gubrium and DiFluvio 2011, Poletti 2011) looking specifically at community health and girlhood studies (Hill 2010), local health issues (Gubrium et al. 2014), as a way to influence approaches to health care (Hardy 2017) and as a means to preserving a community's identity and a form of oral history (Klaebe et al 2007). Educational researchers are interested in how DS can serve as a development resource (Gregori-Signes and Brigado-Corachàn 2014). Recent research has used DS in the field of migration studies (Alexandra 2015, Vacchelli and Peyrefitte 2018, Wheeler et al. 2018). Alexandra's work for instance consisted of a longitudinal and inquiry-based research using DS with refugee, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Ireland where participants 'produced their own media to explore and document their lives as workers, parents, cultural citizens' able to adapt and simultaneously transform their environment (2015:42).

### **Background to the project**

As part of a recent project in an area known as Little Portugal in Stockwell, situated in the London Borough of Lambeth, we used DS to engage some members of the Portuguese speaking community. DS aims for the realization of a short (2–5 min) audio-visual clip consisting of the recording of the workshop participants' voice reading the story they wrote. The resulting digital story is a combination of principally still images complementing the recording of the participant's voice telling a story that has developed through a series of creative writing type activities taking place in a series of workshops. An important element of a digital story has been identified by Lambert (2013) as 'the gift of your voice', for this reason the voice recording represents a starting point for building the imagery for the short video. DS is achieved through a dynamic rapport of mutual support and co-production during the workshop aimed at helping participants to find their voice and tell a story which is important to them. Participants are also supported in transforming their story into an audio-visual clip that can be shared with the immediate group and disseminated further (Vacchelli and Peyrefitte 2018). The Little Portugal project features in the research section migART (<https://migart.bard.berlin/category/research/>) a repository for creative and participatory research, activist and teaching projects involving migrant populations curated by Agata Lisiak and myself.

For the Little Portugal pilot, we deployed the creative and collaborative method of DS with the intention of exploring aspects of urban exclusion for the Portuguese speaking community in gentrifying Stockwell. The essay will firstly explain the context in which the workshop with the Portuguese community in London took place and show how the people involved and the stories they shared connect with the demographics of this area and the history of Portuguese speakers' migration in London. Secondly, the essay will offer a reflection on how the personal digital stories which were crafted during the workshops provide insights into specific aspects of this methodological approach.



## Context of the DS workshop

The pilot workshop with the Portuguese speaking community in London took place in June 2017. A group of 9 people took part in the workshop, including the DS facilitator, myself, two community leaders working at the Stockwell Partnership who also helped with translations, four community participants and the husband of one participant who preferred not to speak and just observe. The workshops took place in the basement of a busy Portuguese restaurant in the heart of Stockwell where Portuguese food and drinks were served throughout the day.

The background of our participants reflects the fact that the roughly 35,000 Portuguese speaking migrants in Stockwell span across different generations of migration and across diverse continents including Europe, Africa, South America and Asia, a reminder of Portugal's colonial past. Out of the migrants attending our workshop, three were from mainland Portugal, one participant was originally from Goa though naturalised in Portugal, one ethnically Portuguese participant was born in Angola and left during the 1975 civil war, and one from Brazil. Portuguese speakers are said to have arrived in the UK in three waves. The first wave stretched from the 1960s to the 1980s and whilst initially concentrated in west London, it was this generation that came to establish the grouping of shops and businesses known as Little Portugal. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a further significant migration flow occurred coinciding with a time of high unemployment rate in Portugal. This wave of migrants tended to be from poorer parts of Portugal (and notably Madeira), were more transient and less likely to have a good level of English. They were drawn to the existing community where they felt safe and could use informal support networks to access work and public services. The third wave was sparked by the 2008 global economic crisis which led to soaring youth unemployment and to emigration "at levels unknown since the 1960s, with more than 100,000 people leaving Portugal each year (Nogueira , Porteous and Guerreiro, 2015). Commenting on this movement, Wise (2015) notes that "Britain is a leading destination for Portuguese emigrants but unlike the previous generations of rural workers who fled, today the migrants include many skilled young graduates" who are less likely to settle in Little Portugal, not least because of gentrification and rising housing prices but also because they speak English well, have jobs across the London area, have a much looser affinity with longer standing Portuguese-speaking residents and tend to be more integrated within London's multicultural scene. Apart from people of Portuguese background, Stockwell is also home to many people of Caribbean and West African origin. They are also well represented in the local population, and cafes, grocers, barbers' shops and salons run by people from these communities are also scattered around Stockwell. Portuguese however is the second most commonly spoken language in Lambeth after English.

In preparation for the workshop, participants were asked to bring an object that is their favourite or that has a particular meaning or resonance for them in relation to their experience of migration and experiences of living in Stockwell. Alternatively, they were asked to bring personal photographs if they had them. Most participants



opted for pictures representing meaningful people in their lives, moments representing their migration experience, relatives they reunited with in the UK or they had left behind. Reciprocal trust among the participants was established through a series of guided exercises aimed at loosening out by re-connecting to ‘natural’ storytelling skills and getting to know each other. During the workshop the group was confronted with a shared experience of intimacy which helped to communicate personal journeys constituting individual trajectories of migration and living in Stockwell.

The type of activities proposed are exemplified in Figure 1. Participants were given a picture representing a fork in the road to visually elicit the moment when a choice was made to make a change in their lives and migrate. The questions under the image provided further help in thinking about this moment.

### Fork in the Road



At what moment in your life did you decide to change direction and relocate to the UK? What made you make that decision? Was it a person, an event, an opportunity? Was it external circumstances? What was the deciding moment?

A key specificity of DS is the way it is facilitated around the principle of the ‘Story Circle’ (Hartley and McWilliam 2009). The image of the circle refers to the act of sharing stories in the inclusive and intimate space created by people whilst sitting in a circle around a bonfire. By combining a range of activities, games and writing stimuli, DS aims at developing a relationship of trust which is central to its ethos.





### **The digital stories: an insight on personal experiences of Portuguese migration**

It is almost impossible to ascertain the exact size of the community because many people are not registered, pretend to be here but are in Portugal, do not answer the census, or hide. Freedom of movement within the European Union makes it very difficult to develop accurate figures. There are also many people who have Portuguese nationality but are not Portuguese in the cultural sense (Guerreiro 2009). A recent report (Nogueira, Porteous and Guerreiro 2015) identified key areas of concern affecting the Portuguese speaking community in London. These range from immigration status for extra-European Portuguese speaking migrants; poor English; unsuitable housing; isolated elderly people and poor mental health; substance misuse; domestic violence.

In the stories created by Maria and Irene, the lack of proficiency in English is evident from the fact that Irene preferred to narrate her story in Portuguese, while Maria decided to speak slowly making use of her available knowledge of the English language. Maria's story is rather factual and illustrates her choice to migrate because of her husband's choice to live in the UK. After the difficult decision of leaving her business in Portugal, her mum and her dog, the newly reunited couple hopes to move to Norfolk because of the inaccessible living costs in gentrifying Stockwell but eventually they settle for cheaper areas in London. Maria's story is entitled 'Deciding to come'. Maria made extensive use of personal pictures to illustrate the stages of her arrival and the imaginary of the video is focusses on the unity between her and her husband. Her narrative is centred around Stockwell despite the couple's decision not to live there. On the one hand, Stockwell is too expensive and, on the other hand, given the fact it is predominantly Portuguese speaking, it would be almost impossible to learn English. In the images Maria chose for her digital story, the central role the community organisation Stockwell Partnership plays in the local area is foregrounded towards the end where she states its important role in supporting Portuguese speaking migrants.





Irene's story, is entitled 'A hug when I needed'. The images Irene chose for her digital stories are also based on personal pictures of her arrival and her beloved ones at home. Copy-right free images on the internet, as well as images retrieved through the Photovoice method (Wang 2006) during the workshop, were used to illustrate the idea of home, or the library in South Lambeth Road which provides English language courses. Irene's, language course organised in the library in South Lambeth Rd feature a prominent role in Irene's need to overcome her language barriers. Irene's story is more descriptive of the difference between London and her country of origin, which she articulates through the beauty of architecture, parks with flowers, but also diversity of people and culinary traditions. Stockwell plays a central role in Irene's narrative as this is where she lives, in the midst of the Portuguese speaking community. London is also described by detraction, highlighting what she misses: the sun, Christmas, her home, her family. Interestingly, when Irene pronounces the last sentence of her story, her voice breaks suggesting her gratitude to the place that hugged her when she needed it, but also the fact that her love for the UK and her hardly won happiness came at a personal cost. Irene's is an emotional story where the storyteller exposes some personal facts, including her past depression, two miscarriages, the nostalgia (*saudade*) for parts of her family and her country of origin.

In both stories, emotional links pre-exist the decision to migrate. Stockwell is a port of arrival as migrants from Portugal have been there for decades creating an interconnected infrastructure of Portuguese speaking people. Both stories clearly suggests that Irene and Maria belong to the wave of Portuguese speaking migrants with few qualifications, little English, little integration with the wider community and working in low-paid, unskilled jobs.

## Conclusion

In summary, this paper has argued that DS is an effective way of working with migrant people (Alexandra 2015, Vacchelli and Peryerfitte 2018, Vacchelli 2018) and the stories presented here reveal there is a continuity between personal stories and the documented experiences of the Portuguese community in Stockwell. The digital story can be seen as qualitative data, as an artefact, as an intermediate space for the storyteller to contain what s/he knows. As Darcy Alexandra suggested, rather than asking 'is it true?'... a more useful question would be 'what does this story mean to the storyteller? ...and to the viewer? What does this story do?' In the case of the digital stories produced by the Portuguese speakers in Stockwell, the story creates a narrative that the speakers need to hold on to, in order to make sense of their own choice of migrating and living within the Portuguese speaking community in Stockwell for Irene, and outside of it for Maria.

The multi-media technologies involved in the method offer an opportunity for more multi-dimensional explorations of storytelling. This is in line with a growing methodological literature recognising the different ways in which people's experience of the social world. The digital stories do not reflect absolute truths; on the contrary, they depict partial and intersubjective truths which are a result of different layers of co-production: the researchers' agenda, the role of the DS external facilitator, the story-circle and its multifaceted



interpretations of the stories, the personal urge to produce a story rather than another, the role of the emotions that are mobilised in the telling of the story. Music, tone of voice, accents, utterances, pauses, images- they all contribute to creating a more rounded and embodied account of the participant's story and experience of migrating to the UK.

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*Suggested citation:*

Vacchelli, E. (2019) ‘Digital storytelling with the Portuguese speaking community in Stockwell, London’ in Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues, No. 4, [www.migrationresearch.com](http://www.migrationresearch.com)

