

Assessing the Applicability of Digital Storytelling in a Pakistani Context

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Abstract

Digital storytelling is a pioneering technique that allows people to share stories from unique, personal perspectives. It is being used across the world, to heal, empower and create awareness. Some initiatives have been taken to bring digital storytelling into use in Pakistan as well. So far however, these have catered to the privileged and educated sector of society. Digital storytelling remains unexplored in the context of the majority of the Pakistani population, which has limited access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and is in many cases, semi- or non-literate. This paper presents a research project conducted to develop a framework within which Pakistani women at the grassroots level can create digital stories and to investigate whether the digital storytelling process is applicable and beneficial for Pakistani women survivors of violence at the grassroots level. These questions were investigated by designing and conducting a digital storytelling workshop, titled Subh-e-Nau (an Urdu word for "a new dawn"), for Pakistani women survivors of violence. This paper presents the workshop design and the participatory process through which it was designed. It also qualitatively assesses whether the participants and other stakeholders found the workshop to be beneficial.

Key Words

Women, Pakistan, Literacy, ICT

Introduction

The ancient art of storytelling has evolved over the ages, taking different forms over time. Starting with the basic oral form, it moved on to pictures and symbols, to paper and books, and then to the stage and the film and television screens. Each stage in the evolution of storytelling is linked to some form of advancement in technology. With the current state of technology and the web people able to create and share original content much more conveniently than ever before. This has given rise to many new forms of storytelling including digital storytelling. The Center for Digital Storytelling defines digital storytelling as "a short, first person video-narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds".

Digital storytelling is being put to use for education, creating awareness, social mobilization and as an agent of healing. It is an art form with a lot of potential and with many possibilities for application. However, as this is an art that is reliant on technology, it is easier to use where there is convenient access to technology and education. This paper analyzes the applicability of digital storytelling in a Pakistani context, by

presenting a digital storytelling project in Lahore, Pakistan, for women survivors of violence, as a case study.

The objectives of Project Subh-e-Nauwere to:

1. Develop a framework, using a participatory process, within which Pakistani women at the grassroots level could create and share digital stories
2. Investigate whether the digital storytelling process is applicable and beneficial for the average Pakistani women survivors of violence

This paper will present a brief review of digital storytelling in Pakistan, the project methodology and qualitative results of the two research questions. It will then conclude with a discussion on the results.

Background

This section presents the previous work done on digital storytelling in Pakistan.

The Gawahi Project started in late 2010 and its mission is to work toward empowering women and upholding democratic values. The project focuses on producing multimedia films in short and long format. Several digital stories created through this initiative can be viewed on the Gawahi website.

The Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) Pakistan digital storytelling workshop was held for violence against women activists in 2010. A number of digital stories were created through this workshop and some can be viewed at the Take Back The Tech! website.

The 16 Days 16 Women initiative was held towards the end of 2011, which culminated in 16 digital stories by women in the tribal areas of Pakistan. At the time of writing however, none of these stories were available for viewing on the web.

With the exception of this last initiative, all other digital storytelling efforts within Pakistan have been geared towards the privileged sector, which has access to education and technology. This paper in contrast aims to look at the applicability of digital storytelling across a broader spectrum of the Pakistani population.

Digital Storytelling Framework Design Process

This section details the participatory process through which the Subh-e-Nau digital storytelling workshop was designed.

Identification of Workshop Participants

A group of women survivors of violence was identified through the All Pakistan Women's Association Headquarters, Punjab (APWA Punjab). These women were in various stages of litigation for their respective issues through the support of the organization.

Preliminary Workshop Design

With some basic ideas already in mind and the constraints known to be faced by the intended women participants, a preliminary workshop design was developed. The three constraints that were already known are listed below.

1. Lack of literacy/education (Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan)
2. Lack of access to ICTs (International Telecommunication Union, 2011)
3. Negative view of women in the media in general (Qureshi, 2010)

The basic workshop design adopted was the standard that is used in various digital storytelling workshops and is found in most digital storytelling literature. One such design is presented in (Lambert 2007), which includes the identification of stories, scripting, storyboarding, digitization of story elements, and then compilation of the elements into video form. The story circle approach, as used in many workshops was also included in the preliminary design.

The APWA Punjab headquarters office was selected as the location for conducting the training, as that was a location participants were already familiar with. The organization is a well reputed, pioneer organization working for women since 1949, and is considered a safe environment for women. This selection was given special attention, as a location had to be identified which would be convenient and also acceptable for participating women to commute to on a daily basis.

For this purpose, a small computer lab with eight desktop computers was set up in the library section of the headquarters.

The team conducting the training included three workshop facilitators with experience in digital storytelling, one person for technical support and one person to monitor and evaluate the entire workshop, including its inception, design and execution.

It was also noted at this point that because the women being invited to participate were from low-income households and struggling with financial and litigation issues, some type of monetary compensation would have to be integrated into the workshop to ensure that the women would be able to attend the workshop regularly with a fair amount of ease and convenience. To encourage enthusiastic participation, a prize for the best digital stories, to be selected by a panel of judges, was also envisioned.

With these basic elements of the workshop in place, a need assessment meeting with the intended participants was arranged to see if they would be compatible with the requirements of the participants, and whether any additional measures would be required to successfully run the workshop.

Need Assessment

A meeting was set up with seven women who were interested in participating in the workshop. Through this meeting, the idea of the workshop was described to the women. Individual, structured interviews were also conducted with each of the women, where any queries they had were resolved. The team also took this time to assess each of the participants in terms of the following aspects.

1. Age: To assess what age range of participants the facilitators would be working with, as with older participants, hesitation in adapting to new technology was anticipated. The age range of the participants was therefore assessed so that the workshop could be designed as per the requirements of each participant as far as possible.
2. General literacy: The workshop had to be designed with the exact literacy levels of participants in mind, as it was anticipated that some might not even be able to read and write. Also, the language that most participants were comfortable in had to be determined so it could be used as the language medium during the workshop. Even though Urdu is the national language of Pakistan, up to 60 other languages are spoken in the region, with Punjabi being dominant in the Punjab region, where the workshop was to be conducted.
3. ICT competency: This was needed to determine the level of assistance and training the participants would need during the workshop. The assessment was used to determine whether the participants had prior access to computers and mobile phones and what their levels of competency were
4. Availability: To determine the optimum schedule for the women, and to also estimate their expenditure on the commute so they could be compensated accordingly

The result of this assessment as relevant to this paper is summarized below in Table 1. The detailed results can be viewed at Subh-e-Nau project website.

Table 1. Workshop Need Assessment Summary

Participant ID	Age	Literacy level	Previous exposure to computers	Language preference
1	28	Middle school level	No	Urdu
2	23	Middle school level	No	Urdu
3	25	Middle school	No	Urdu
4	60	Unable to read and write	No	Punjabi
5	30	Unable to read and write	No	Urdu

6	37	High school level	No	Urdu
7	28	High school level	Yes	Urdu

Results: Framework Design

The findings of the needs assessments helped in fine-tuning various aspects of the workshop design. Decisions made after the need assessment exercise are listed below.

1. The use of only audio visual material to conduct the workshop, as some of the participants could not read or write. This included the viewing of digital stories and discussions on them throughout the workshop, so that participants would get a true feel for what they were attempting to achieve.
2. Inclusion of multiple ice breaker activities at regular intervals, to ease the participants into the process of the workshop.
3. To stretch the workshop over three weeks, asking participants to come in for about four hours, three days per week. This was as per the scheduling constraints described by many of the women. This arrangement would also give the facilitators time to assess the participant's progress for the week and modify their strategies if needed.
4. To arrange coordination between facilitators such that one would always be available for those of the participants who could not read or write, as they would need additional support, especially when crafting a script and then narrating the script.
5. Pre-designating some steps of the process to be completed by facilitators for the participants, as it was anticipated that some aspects would be too hard to grasp for people using computers for the first time. The selected task was the recording of the narration being done by the digital storyteller and the editing of the narration and any audio components that had to be integrated with the narration.
6. To include specific segments during the workshop to ensure that the participants were aware of the implications of making their digital stories available on the web, as it was apparent that it would not be easy for most of the participants to grasp this concept.
7. Due to the sensitive nature of the participants digital stories, to strongly recommend to participants that they maintain anonymity in their digital stories (whether or not they decided to publish them on the web), and also to explicitly point out measures that they could take to ensure that they remained anonymous.

Keeping these decisions in mind, the workshop designed was finalized as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: SubheNau Digital Storytelling Workshop Schedule

Workshop Session ID	Date	Timings	Brief description of activities
1	Monday 4 th April 2011	9:00 AM - 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction to workshop ▪ Example digital story ▪ Ice breaker activity (drawing postcards)

2	Tuesday 5 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying stories ▪ Example digital story ▪ Story circle
3	Wednesday 6 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Example digital story ▪ Script writing
4	Monday 11 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Example digital story ▪ Development of storyboards
5	Tuesday 12 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Example digital story ▪ Introduction to web search ▪ Development of visual and audio material for the digital story
6	Wednesday 13 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Example digital story ▪ Audio recording of narrated script ▪ Completion of previous activities
7	Monday 18 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tutorial on using film editing software
8	Tuesday 19 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ice breaker (a computer game competition) ▪ Film development and editing
9	Wednesday 20 th April 2011	9:00 AM – 2:00 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Completion of digital story ▪ Viewing of digital story with all participants

Using this plan as the basic structure for the workshop, ten women were invited to participate and create ten stories.

Results: Key Findings of the Workshop

The workshop went largely as per the plan as detailed in Table 1. Most participants took part in the process very keenly and became more enthusiastic as the workshop progressed. Ten digital stories were produced at the end of the workshop. All participants were visibly proud of their accomplishments and stated categorically that they were very pleased with their participation and by the production of the digital stories. All the produced stories can be viewed at the project website. A digital story viewing and prize distribution ceremony with an invited audience, including several dignitaries was also conducted to further boost the confidence of the workshop participants. The two main results of the entire process are discussed below.

Social Issues

Any issues that could have prevented the participants from being able to attend the workshops were already considered during the design, so all participants were able to attend the workshop regularly. These measures included the selection of a suitable

location, scheduling as per the participants convenience, and also apparently minor issues such as the name of the workshop. While selecting the translation for digital storytelling, several options were considered, and only those were opted for which had no negative connotations in the community. For example, the word “video” was on one hand a good option for a translation, as it has been adopted into the Urdu language, however, it is associated with some negative connotations, so there was a possibility that women would not be encouraged, or even allowed by their households to participate in a “video-making” workshop. So, the word “video” was not used anywhere throughout the process, and most notably, not in the posters and invitations for the workshop. Also, as precautions to maintain anonymity in the digital stories had been taken for all participants, no issues have risen to date, eight months after the workshop, even after the digital stories have been available on the project website.

Barriers of Non-Literacy and Lack of ICT Exposure

Digital storytelling was found to be very applicable even in the context of the general Pakistani population, with little or no access to education and technology. One of the most powerful stories, as noted by the panel who selected the winning stories, was created by a non-literate participant, who had never had an opportunity to use computers. Although she needed intensive support from facilitators, especially while crafting her script, storyboarding and using the web to find images for her story, she had a firm grasp of the concept of digital storytelling from the first day of the workshop, and was able to formulate her story on her own, with minimal feedback on the content of the story. The script had to be written down by a facilitator but was narrated entirely in her own words. During the recording, she had the script almost memorized, so was able to narrate it with minimal prompting and was able to make good use of improvisation as well. Intense facilitator support was also required during storyboarding and when selecting images from the web, in particular to type in search terms and in determining whether a particular image was available for free use. However, as noted by the facilitator who worked with her during this process, she had a clear idea of exactly which image she wanted for each portion of her narration, and was very decisive about selecting images.

Another participant, who was semi-literate and had to work with a facilitator to collect images from the web, was notably very particular about the consistency of the images being selected for her digital story. She started out with selecting pencil sketched images and then made sure that the rest of the images used in her story were pencil sketched as well, or as close as possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been observed that digital storytelling is a very relevant and applicable art in the context of the average Pakistani population. Perceived social, literacy and technological barriers can be surmounted if the process is carried out with careful planning and sensitivity to social and moral issues faced by the target participants. The enthusiasm and motivation levels of the participants at the end of the workshop and during the viewing and prize distribution ceremony showed that process had at least contributed to the

wellbeing of the participants. By making the digital stories available on the web, the participants have also taken the first step in creating awareness from a grassroots level about violence against women.

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