



Media Education and Digital Storytelling: An Experience of University Teaching

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Abstract. The paper presents a university teaching experience using digital storytelling from the Service Learning perspective. A small group of students in their third year of the degree course in Communication Sciences was involved. The didactic activity included in preliminary research is part of a project agreed with other university sites. This research aimed to collect through a questionnaire the students' satisfaction, the difficulties they encountered and the perceived effectiveness concerning the positive impact from a social point of view on learning new skills and strengthening relational networks. Positive elements emerged as a high level of involvement, an acceptable level of digital skills and interest in social issues. There are also several critical issues related to the different kinds of interaction and social networks activated in the local context.

Keywords: Digital storytelling · Video · Media education · University teaching

1 Media Education, Video and Digital Storytelling

In Media-Education videos were and still are relevant tools in the research and teaching fields [1–3], particularly concerning their production, which is a key element in teacher's digital competencies. It is certainly relevant to be able to analyze videos, but this is only the first level of competence. To operate at the making is much more significant: it allows students to understand the mechanisms related to this type of communication, acquiring, in the perspective of Media education, higher levels of digital literacy. Video production also represents a fundamental element in teaching, including at universities, because it goes beyond transmissive approaches.

We need to highlight the link between video production, media education, and storytelling. Storytelling can use various digital tools, but undoubtedly video is the tool with the biggest potential. Video-based digital storytelling implies strong forms of engagement and seems effective in creating a narrative on such topics as social inequity, discrimination and injustice. Storytelling constitutes a peculiar way of thought that differs from a logical-scientific one [4]. In logical-scientific thinking, the present time prevails in storytelling times has a wide range. In this sense, the relationship between storytelling and digital culture becomes meaningful. Faced with the availability of an enormous amount of information offered by the internet, the traditional balance between oblivion and memory is lost. It becomes hard to find the balance that has allowed the construction

of narratives that imply an interpretation and selection of what happened. The feeling of «living an eternal present becomes widespread: past and future are flattened in a dimension of disheartening and almost anguished actuality, completely contrary to the natural propensity of the human being to live in a history» [5]. The more important is to find elements within the digital culture that can promote a narrative approach. The digital dimension adds the advantage of facilitating the making, editing, documenting, and sharing [6]; extensive experiences have been accumulated even in the educational field, both in the international context [7–12], and in the Italian one [13, 14]. A peculiar approach is that of digital storytelling in the perspective of Service Learning, as a method that combines forms of community volunteering with the learning of professional skills [15–17]. On the one hand video production is a popular activity among the new generations, one for all, the social network TikTok on the other hand, the challenge is to promote both a link with the territory and a careful approach to difficult situations, giving a voice to disadvantaged groups.

In the university context, making video storytelling gives an interesting perspective in identifying procedures and creating analysis tools, even more if linked to specific targets such as the people with disability, the elderly, the immigrants.

2 Proposed Research

The described research tries to match the narrative dimension by using digital tools, Media-Education, attention to the social context and university teaching. Given the small sample, this research is only at the preliminary stage and aims to test evaluation tools shared with other universities. The challenge is to promote both a link with the territory and a careful approach to disadvantaged social groups. More specifically, the idea is to test the realisation of videos to achieve three objectives: an aware use of digital products (Media-Education); promoting the practice of digital storytelling in the logic of Service Learning and thus with a focus on the social dimension; the promotion within university teaching of digital competences and civic sense (Civic Media).

In proposing the activity of the University of Molise, the methodological design has three phases.

The first is related to the definition of the task: an invitation to create digital storytelling in the logic of Learning Service. In addition to a brief presentation of the proposal, specifying its peculiarities, the link with other universities and other territories was emphasised, also showing examples of videos already realised. The activation or recovery of contacts with associations or persons in the regional context - a small region in southern Italy, with a predominantly mountainous territory, limited industrial development and an ageing population - was then requested. The specific Service Learning activities carried out ultimately fall into two main typologies: interviews with young people belonging to disadvantaged categories, mainly the disabled, and interviews with elder people living in small towns which are gradually becoming depopulated. The latter typology also indicates the main geographical and socio-economic context in which the students operated. To support the project was presented one of the most widely used and easy to use software for editing videos: most of the participants, however, had experience in making videos, but not in digital storytelling. For the first phase, after the presentation

and definition of the task, two months were left to make the videos. In a dedicated meeting, the students had: a) to present the video project, indicating the theme, the subjects involved, and the structure b) to show to the professor and other students, if they wished, either parts of the video or an early version of the video to receive suggestions on the technical aspects as well as the structure and content of the video. A second phase was the presentation of the final version of the videos in the classroom for a debriefing: the limited number of final products allowed adequate forms of analysis and discussion at the university. More specifically, for each video, indications were requested/given concerning: a) hardware and software; b) the involvement of people and associations in the area; c) length and editing. They spent approximately 15 h for this second phase, spread over a month. The final phase consisted of a survey aimed at assessing the levels of satisfaction and promoting the self-evaluation of the experience. Overall, all the activities starting from the initial presentation to the questionnaire administration took place over three months.

The survey, consisting of 19 questions, addresses three thematic issues:

1. the level of satisfaction and the reasons why it is satisfactory or not;
2. the difficulties in planning, involving the territory - the associations and institutions - and in the use of hardware and software;
3. perception of effectiveness in (I) the positive social impact in the context, (II) learning new skills and (III) strengthening relational networks.

The questionnaire used is part of a more wide project, which involves the University of Bologna and the University of Padua, the project leader. More specifically, the students of educational sciences used the questionnaire developed at the University of Padua. In a dedicated meeting, they adapted the questionnaire to make it suitable for different degree courses and usable in different Italian regions, leaving open the possibility of a national comparison.

As part of the teaching of Media Education and Digital Literacy, a small group of 13 students from the third year of the Communication Sciences course at the University of Molise were involved voluntarily.

3 Findings

The results of the questionnaire lead to five areas of interests: 1) the characteristics of the students who participated in the activity 2) their level of satisfaction, 3) the difficulties encountered, 4) the perception of the effects on the territory and the people involved, 5) the perception of the effects on the students who joined the research.

In terms of students' characteristics, the largest group (46.2%) felt that they were well informed about the local context (see Fig. 1). Concerning the belief that they can contribute to change, the prevailing view is that they can be more effective in their community than in wider contexts, and the two largest groups are at a medium/high level (see Fig. 2).

Concerning the second area, student satisfaction, the first positive result is the intention to use digital storytelling again: the most numerous groups are at medium-high levels (see Fig. 3). There are two types of reasons for this. The first is.

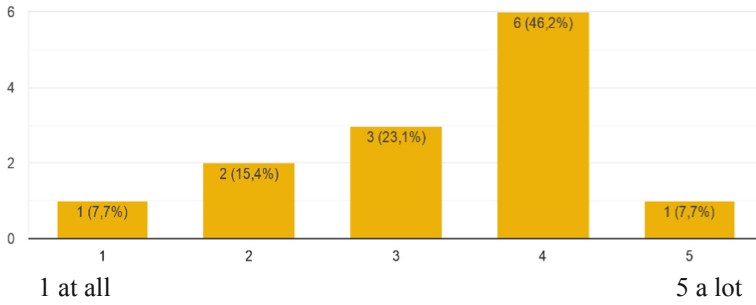


Fig. 1. I am informed about the most important issues in my local community.

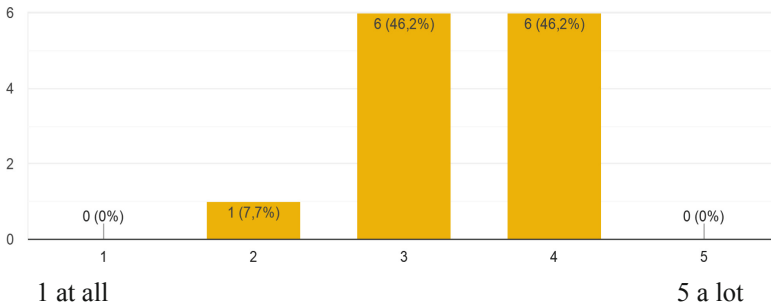


Fig. 2. I think my contribution could change something in my community.

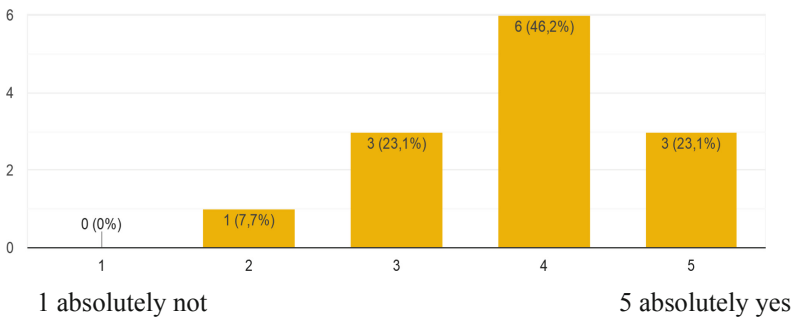


Fig. 3. After this experience, do you think you will use the digital storytelling with similar purpose in the future?

The first focus is on the characteristics of the video: it is a multimedia product that attracts attention, and it is persuasive and more effective. The second refers to the subjective experience of the video maker: interest in the local context, professional aspirations, the pleasure of narration, and the desire to meet other people and share their experiences. As a student stated: “It is nice to experience other people’s stories and empathize with them”. A further specific question (“What did you like the most?”) provides additional elements. They liked the making and editing of the video, followed

in order of preference by the pleasure of visiting/knowing the local contexts and the satisfaction of interviewing people. And it emerges as a final element of a taste for storytelling and the construction of stories. In short, the technical dimension linked to the design and making-of the video, and the relationship dimension, connected with meeting and interviewing people was ultimately the two most appreciated central aspects.

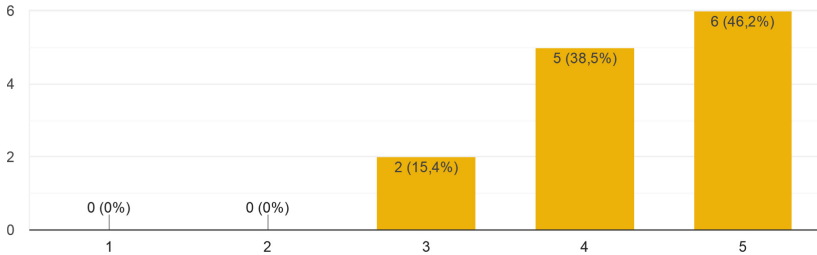


Fig. 4. How do you rate the experience? (1: very negative – 5: very positive)

The overall experience is evaluated by the majority of students as very positive (46.2%) or positive (38.5%), with only a 15.4% group at an intermediate level (see Fig. 4).

Concerning the third area, the difficulties encountered, only a 15.4% cluster encountered significant difficulties in managing relations with the people or institutions and associations involved. A large group was at an intermediate level (30.8%), while the majority (53.9%) reported little or no difficulties. Overall, the result shows a good relationship with the local context (see Fig. 5). Considering the technical realisation of the video, the majority group (76.9%) makes an intermediate evaluation between difficulty and ease (see Fig. 6). It is a sign that some skills are necessary and not strong enough among the video-makers sample. We should also consider that, ultimately, the technical making of the video seems to be both one of the most engaging elements and the cause of some difficulties.

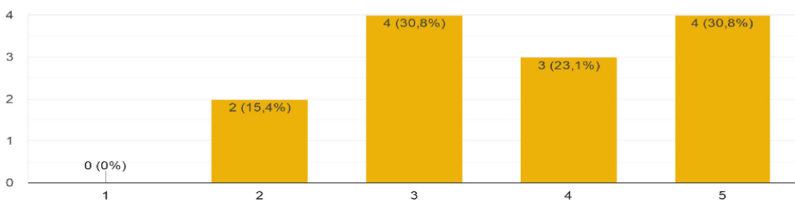


Fig. 5. Have you encountered issues with the people/organizations involved in the project? (1: no difficulties – 5: many difficulties)

With regard to the perception of the effects on the territory and the people involved, there is a gap between a general belief in digital storytelling and the perception of the effectiveness of its vision. On the one hand, the vast majority of students (84.6% are on the two highest levels) believe that digital storytelling is effective to improve people's

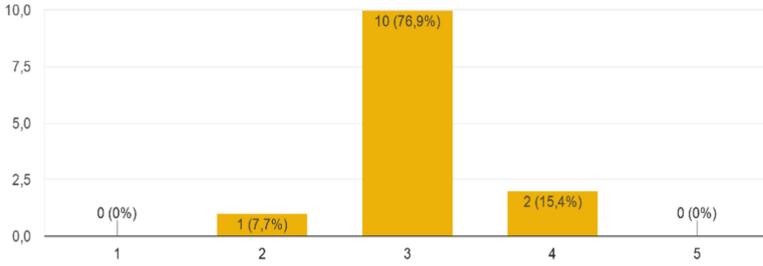


Fig. 6. From a technical point of view, how do you rate the work you had to do to realise the Digital Storytelling? (1: very difficult – 5: very easy)

attitudes (see Fig. 7). On the other hand, students believe that simply watching the digital storytelling video does not generate adequate changes: only one group (23.1%) goes beyond the intermediate level, the others are between the lowest and intermediate level (see Fig. 8). The gap is partly understandable: it is the process of making the video and the activation of the network of relationships that work in changing attitudes rather than simply watching the video.

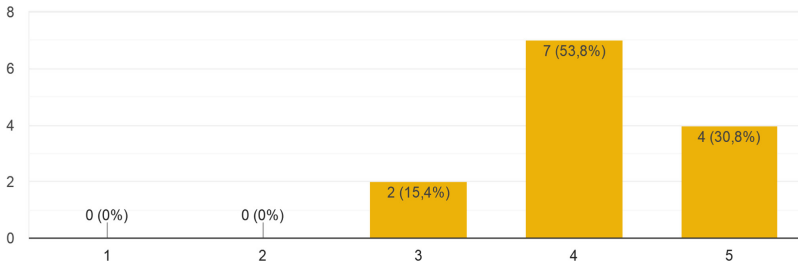


Fig. 7. How effective do you think is the use of digital storytelling in improving people’s attitudes? (1: at all – 5: a lot)

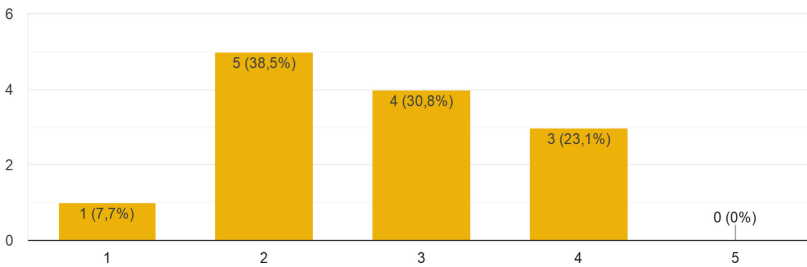


Fig. 8. How much did the project you realized changed the attitude of the people who have seen your digital storytelling? (1: at all – 5: a lot)

Concerning the fifth area, the perception of the effects on the students who participated in the research, we report an overall positive result but with a specific limitation.

In the first place, the project changed students' attitudes: although the main group is at the intermediate level (46.2%) the tendency is toward the higher levels (see Fig. 9). Similarly, the trust in the importance of active citizenship has increased (see Fig. 10). Even considering the increase of participation in social activities in their area, although the majority is positive (69.2%), a minority but substantial share (30.8%) is at an intermediate/low level (see Fig. 11). There is a clear issue about maintaining relations with the people and associations involved in the making of the digital storytelling: the majority declare that they will not maintain contact (61.6%) (see Fig. 12). This point needs additional investigation: although the search for a job is highly likely to take students out of the region, we still need to identify the reasons for this position. Finally, it is worth noting that students feel they have increased their digital skills, although the largest group (46.2%) is only at the intermediate level (see Fig. 13).

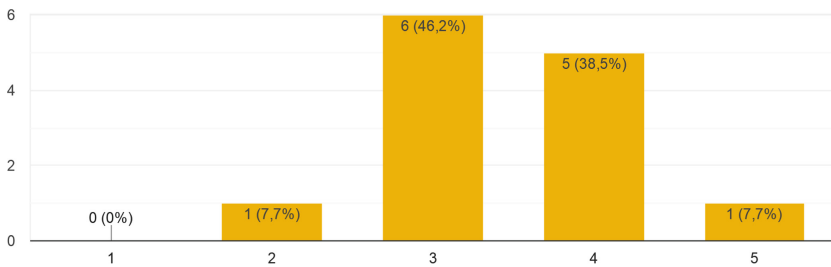


Fig. 9. How much do you think the project changed your attitude in promoting the knowledge of territory, people or associations? (1: at all – 5: a lot)

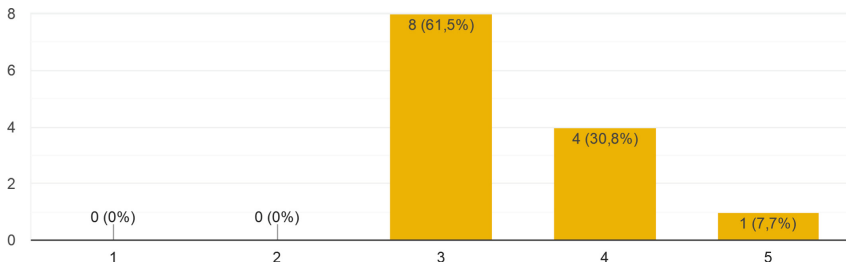


Fig. 10. After your experience, has your perception of the importance of having an active citizenship in the territory increased? (1: at all – 5: a lot)

Concluding, the fourth and fifth areas present oscillating indications regarding the effects on students and the territory: on the one hand, the experience perception is positive, and the method of intervention adequate; on the other, persists perplexity about the effectiveness emerge, and this is a matter for further investigation in the future. Both the characteristics of the area and the career prospects of the students, who often move to other regions, could play a role.

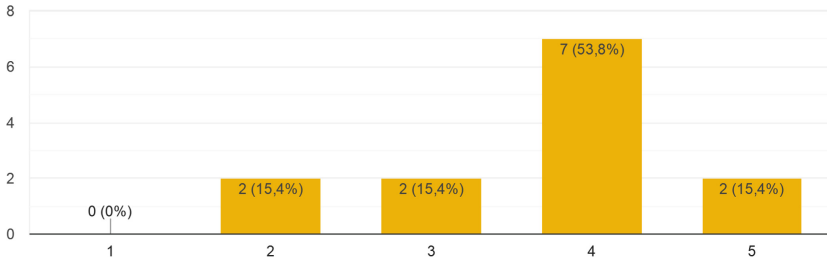


Fig. 11. After this experience, I think I will participate more in social activities in my area. (1: at all – 5: a lot)

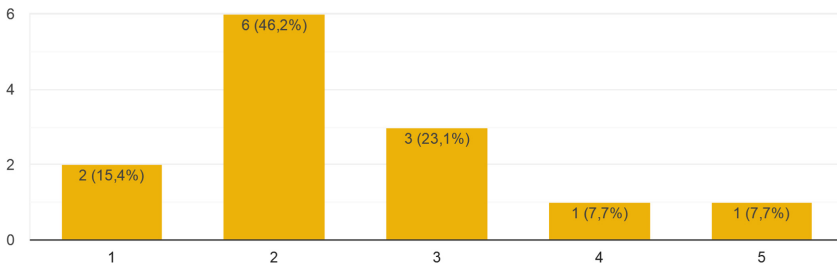


Fig. 12. Do you think you are going to keep contacts with people/associations involved in your digital storytelling? (1: absolutely no– 5: absolutely yes)

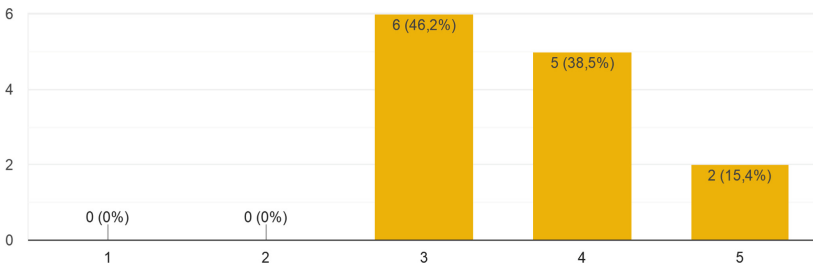


Fig. 13. After this experience, how much do you think your digital skills have improved? (1: at all – 5: a lot)

4 Conclusions

Recalling that the sample taken is not statistically significant and that this is only a preliminary survey to develop the management of a research project in collaboration with other universities, we could highlight the following points concerning the questionnaire and the analysis of the videos produced:

1. Limited difficulties related to video editing with a high variety of software used. Several digital skills, also linked to the specificity of the Communication Sciences course, are already acquired, but there is a lack of some skills.

2. An interest in social issues (immigration, disability, LGTB, youth,...) [18]. A partial but significant picture of the difficulties within the region emerges from the videos. There are also significant interests in the promotion of artistic heritage and craft activities.
3. Difficulties in focus on the social dimension, avoiding the documentary and promotional side. This difficulty probably stems from seeing the enhancement of the artistic heritage and the economic promotion of a specific area as the solution to problems of a social nature.
4. A marked differentiation about personal interaction in making videos: the approaches go from the use of the interview on the field - an indication of a strong involvement with people and associations - to a narrative dimension from a personal point of view. The journalist is one of the prospective careers for these students: this may be one of the elements that weighed in the production of the videos.
5. A high level of engagement and satisfaction among students. The degree course includes laboratory and works placement activities, but a significant part of the course delivers traditional lecture-based teaching: the production of videos, as other digital artifacts, is an innovative approach.

From a future perspective, we can point out two aspects.

The first is the need to build or improve tools that allow measuring the increase of learning levels beyond the emotional involvement of the students. Any activity that presents itself as innovative, especially if linked to the expressive dimension, generates attention, involvement and customer satisfaction. The use of digital technologies brings forms of innovation that are not automatically effective [19–21]. The point is to understand if these aspects last over time and if a better level of learning is achieved by developing specific assessment tools implemented with the students and to be made known before the start of the activities.

The second is the opportunity to develop forms of civic sense in an even more targeted and conscious way: on the one hand, positive aspects emerge, linked, for example, to a high level of knowledge of the local contexts (see Fig. 1) and confidence in the possibility of contributing to change (see Fig. 2); on the other hand, awareness of the limits to the effectiveness of the product realised (see Fig. 8) and the precariousness of the relationships established with people and associations (see Fig. 12). Problems related to immigration and interculturalism, the fight against poverty, gender education, discrimination, and social and economic hardship require new and effective approaches from an educational and didactic point of view, going beyond rhetorical and moralistic approaches. The challenge is to promote the use of media to foster civic engagement: digital culture can effectively support democratic participation [22]. Work linking civic education and media education is a challenging perspective [23]. And, deepening this perspective, it may be useful to use the notion of the third space [24]: between a private and personal space such as the home and the school or university space proper for formal learning, the third space allows, in a logic of continuity and not separation, to connect education to technologies, digital media and the culture of the learner. The third space is thus characterised as a place of negotiation and construction of meanings, bringing together formal and informal learning, university teaching and local contexts.

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