

Our Stories, Their Decisions: A Lesson in Voter Education

By Natasha Freidus

www.creativenarrations.net

“Finally somebody’s going to listen to what I’ve been thinking about!”

“It’s important for the government to see our stories and to know that people like us can vote! That way they’ll be behind us.” Adult Education Students, Tucson, Arizona

In Tucson, Arizona, a GED class huddles around the television. A Medicaid card, gas bills, a photo of a young man in a hospital bed flash on the screen, images conveying a story familiar to the fifteen low-income adults who make up the audience. As Stu¹, the narrator, tells how he was cut off Arizona’s Medicaid program despite his heart condition, despite the fact that his job at WalMart won’t provide benefits for another five months, the nods increase in intensity. Stu ends his piece with a simple yet powerful question for his audience, *“The choices the government makes effect us, how can we choose to effect them?”* Stories breed stories, and as the facilitator turns off the VCR, students clamor to discuss their own frustrations with health insurance, the questions posed by Stu, and the value of voting.

This chapter will discuss the power and purpose of digital storytelling as a means to foster active citizenship through a case study of ***Our Stories, Their Decisions***, a national voter education effort highlighting the personal impact of government decisions through story. Stu’s story was just one of eight on the compilation DVD ***Our Stories, Their Decisions***. These stories addressed experiences at the welfare office, with the public schools, at the housing authority-- all places where larger decisions impact people on a daily basis. ***Our Stories, Their Decisions*** was shown across the country in the fall

¹ All names have been changed to protect privacy.

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preceding the 2004 elections, helping traditional non-voters make the connection between government decision-making, the impact of those decisions, and the power of the vote.² Our discussion will begin with a brief explanation of digital storytelling and the context leading up to the project. We then explore the *making of the stories*, a grassroots media workshop where individuals have authorial control over the script, imagery, and editing of their videos; the *products*, powerful first person narratives that can be shown on DVD, VHS, CD, or the internet; and the *promotion of the stories*, the ways in which these stories are shared, distributed, and become part of larger organizing efforts to foster active citizenship.

Digital storytelling for active citizenship

In community technology centers, youth programs, and makeshift portable labs throughout the country, individuals are searching through photo albums, editing audio, and listening deeply to one another's stories. Weaving together voice, images, video, and music into brief personal videos, organizations use digital storytelling to document, reproduce, and communicate the stories of their lived experiences.

Since the birth of digital storytelling in the early nineties³, disenfranchised groups have recognized the potential of this methodology as a tool to allow communities to speak for themselves. In the past few years, community digital storytelling has become a strategy for labor organizing, domestic violence prevention, immigrant rights work, and many other organizing efforts. Despite the challenges of breaking silence and engaging with technology,

³ Lambert, Joe. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. (Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2002.)

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social justice efforts find digital storytelling to be an incredibly effective tool for outreach and advocacy.

The Better Questions, Better Decisions Voter Education Initiative:

In the year prior to the 2004 elections, groups representing disenfranchised voters were scurrying for new ways to foster voter engagement. While overall voter turnout has been at historical lows in recent years, low-income Americans, who are so directly affected by decisions made by elected officials, traditionally participate the least in elections.⁴ *Our Stories, Their Decisions* was developed as part of the *Better Questions, Better Decisions Voter Education Initiative (BQBD)*, a non-partisan, educational strategy engaging more low-income citizens as voters developed by The Right Question Project and Creative Narrations.⁵ As a complement to BQBD's training to help individuals understand the role of public decision making in their lives, eight adult education students in New Hampshire and Arizona created a set of digital stories. In these stories, individuals

- highlight the impact of government decisions on their lives.
- demonstrate their strength and resiliency in navigating complex systems.
- provide a “face” to issues including healthcare, immigration, education, drug treatment, and welfare.
- raise critical questions around equity, justice, and civic participation.

The digital storytelling component of *Better Questions, Better Decisions* was based on the premise that the process of sharing, listening to, producing, and viewing stories can play a central role to deepen understanding of issues, to create a sense of efficacy,

⁴ This training allowed low-income individuals to discover for themselves the value and urgency of having a voice in all kinds of decision-making processes that affect them and acquire at the same time key skills they can use immediately to advocate for themselves.

and to move people to action. We believed that stories could assist individuals in drawing connections between how elected officials make decisions, and the day-to-day impact of these decisions on marginalized communities. We anticipated that the stories we would document could serve as a powerful tool to resonate with other adults in the same situation. We also saw a need for the voice of people most impacted by government policy to form part of the campaign dialogue—an authentic and refreshing alternative to candidates “using” the stories of “regular people” in stump speeches and campaign ads. And, while voter education campaigns were in full swing throughout the country, nowhere in these campaigns did low-income citizens have the opportunity to speak to one another.

The Process: The Making of the Stories

In the tradition of digital storytelling, the workshop begins with a story circle. In this circle, participants share ideas and drafts for scripts, they pass treasured photos from hand to hand, and they brainstorm ideas for their media pieces. Frequently, participants are classmates, co-workers, and friends. Yet, more often than not, they have not heard one another’s stories. In a culture where we’ve learned to keep our stories to ourselves, the story circle becomes a sacred space, a space where we hear portions and patterns of our lives reflected in the voices of others. One by one, each participant speaks...

“When I came here I spoke only French, I took English classes to get my citizenship..I want to be a nurse assistant but I need to pass my GED first.”

“I’m worried that I’m not going to have enough money to pay my baby’s medical bills...”

“When I was a child, I didn’t say ‘I want to be a drug addict when I grow up...”⁶

The story circle is not, however, group therapy. Its goal is to support the storyteller in the drafting and crafting of the story. Facilitators and participants provided feedback—repeating back images and phrases that stood out, suggesting details to add or to eliminate. Ultimately, however, the editing power remains in the hands of each storyteller. It isn’t easy, yet more often than not, participants are clear on the importance of what they have to say, and have an eagerness to be heard.

Our work with the storytellers began in Concord, New Hampshire, asking women in Second Start’s job-training programs to focus on their experiences with public institutions and the connection to voting. Facilitators from The Right Question Project and Creative Narrations met with a small group of women who had expressed interest in creating their stories following the Better Questions, Better Decisions training. We encouraged participants to brainstorm decisions made by public officials that impacted their lives based on a series of prompts that had emerged during the first training. Lidia, Annie, Katherine, were all participants in a welfare to work transition program, and were subject to the whims and ever-shifting government policies on a daily basis. We began with a series of decisions made in government offices, and participants proceeded to identify others.

- A decision to cut funding for education by 10%
- A decision to cut welfare benefits
- A decision to cut funding for access to health care
- A decision to cut back on Section 8 certificates

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Lydia, who had just found out that after waiting for four years for her number to get to the top of the list for section 8 certificates, immediately jumped on the housing example. She explained that in New Hampshire the state government had eliminated the Section 8 program, putting her back at square zero. Katherine and Annie were exhausted by the multiple rules around the welfare system, the ways that their efforts to move ahead with their education were constantly being stymied as recent welfare reform laws limited what constituted “work hours”. Katherine told us...” *I wonder if the people who made the decisions for the forty required hours could come and live in my shoes for an hour. I wonder if they could do it.*”

The digital storytelling workshop was focused on bringing real faces to the impact of government actions. Participants, however, were *not* explicitly told to include a “voting message” in their stories. As workshop facilitators, we were looking for stories that could serve as prompts for dialogue around the impact of decision making on non-voters. As many non-voters feel that “*my vote doesn’t matter, politics has nothing to do with me,*” we wanted stories that would stimulate discussion around specific ways that decisions by elected officials impact our day to day lives, and what it means to have a voice. Katherine felt that her story was one common to many women in her position, doing their best to go back to school, work, and meet the new welfare regulations. Annie, her classmate, used her experience on welfare to also question if the decision makers had been through similar experiences. Yet, like many, they struggled with how to transform the experiences of being impacted by public decisions into a story with a beginning, middle and end.

Many participants in digital storytelling workshops do not come to the workshop with a strong “sense of story”. That sense is developed through activities, through affirmations from their peers, and from the discovery that others have experienced what they have gone through. For others, it is the visual elements that make their stories real. One participant reflected, “*When you start, you don’t know that you have a story, but then you look through your old photos and the pictures bring the story to life.*” In the ***Our Stories, Their Decisions*** workshop, participants searched for objects and images that could bring the stories to life. In Arizona, stories of drug abuse, health insurance and immigration issues were the prevalent issues facing low-income communities. Alba, who tells a compelling story of her baby’s health recalled her fear and panic when her son’s diarrhea went on for weeks. She decided to show the boxes and boxes of diapers she went through by scanning a diaper and visually generating a special effect to have them fly across the screen. Remy, whose story is about overcoming drug addiction, worried computer lab monitors momentarily with her Ziploc full of oregano. This moment of laughter helped alleviate her stress as she leafed through photos where she poses emaciated, hollow, still an addict. Esthela sat for hours laying out her photos in order, gazing at the sepia tinted photo marking her landing in the US, her certificate of naturalization, her family back in Nigeria.

For survivors, it can be extremely difficult to relive the experiences they choose to tell through these stories. While the multimedia aspect is a powerful tool, it also means that participants must listen to themselves tell the story over and over as they edit, view themselves in the past, and explore the extent to which they have put these stories behind them. Participants were motivated by the knowledge that their stories would go public

and could serve to motivate others. As one storyteller explained following the workshop, “*Even though it can be painful to remember our stories, it’s important because it’s a reminder of what we’ve been through, and that we know we can do it.*” Or in Alba’s words, “*Other students are going to say, “If they did it, why can’t we?”*”

The Products:

At every digital storytelling workshop, a series of miracles occur. Final media pieces are constructed and finished out of ideas, scrapbooks, photo-albums. We completed the ***Our Stories, Their Decisions*** workshop, as always, with a screening of the new stories for the storytellers and workshop leaders—then incorporated all eight stories onto a DVD, VHS and a website. The final pieces included two stories created in New Hampshire and six from Arizona.

Since the elections were looming large, post-production turnaround was quick, and DVD and VHS copies were duplicated, the website was disseminated, and within a few weeks of the workshop, adult educators throughout the states of New Hampshire and Arizona were showing copies of the stories in classrooms throughout the country. ***Our***

Stories, Their Decisions was intentionally

“There are some decisions in our lives that are made without our family being considered. They are made from Washington or state or local government, and that’s why I vote. So I have a say in who is making those decisions for me. I want to know that they see my face and the faces of many people like me...”
Annie

designed for adult educators and other facilitators of low-income groups to view and select stories that resonated with their constituencies. A downloadable discussion guide accompanied the stories, encouraging facilitators to help viewers hone in on the decisions that were made in the

stories, to allow viewers to explore how their lives were also impacted by elected officials, and to consider the role of voting as one way to have a voice in decisions that impact all of us.

The final stories expressed not only diverse topics, but also diverse attitudes towards voting. Some participants, like Annie, chose to explicitly call on their audience to vote. Other participants, like Alba, were non-voters, and chose to end their pieces with their own questions and struggles. Maria, who has not obtained citizenship and can therefore not vote yet, called for a broader definition of civic action.

By providing storytellers with the space to define and articulate their own questions, messages, and experiences, stories ring with an authenticity to which viewers could relate. The collection came to represent the full range of engagement, frustration, bewilderment, and apathy that disenfranchised citizens experience in elections and public decision making.

“I’ve been waiting for three years now to get permanent residency, I don’t know how much longer I’ll have to wait. There are a lot of people in my situation. Maybe they are afraid to use their voices. I can not vote, yet, but I am not afraid to use my voice and work in the community. . . to the people who can vote, don’t waste the opportunity to make a difference.” Maria

The Promotion: Spreading the Stories

In the spirit of new media dissemination, **Our Stories, Their Decisions** rested primarily on guerilla marketing and word of mouth. Within weeks of the products’ release, we had requests for DVD’s from adult education programs, immigrant organizing efforts, low-income housing advocacy groups, and other community organizations from across the country. Adult education teachers in particular were eager

for new ways to approach voter education, “*We are constantly seeking more effective content for helping people make their own connections between their lives and the act of voting*” explained Pat Nelson, Committee Chair of the New England Literacy Resource Center Voter Education, Registration and Action Campaign.

Facilitators consistently reported back the depth of conversations prompted by the ***Better Questions, Better Decisions*** work.⁷ We found that as people viewed the stories created by peers, stories told in language they could relate to and faces they recognized, they developed a deeper understanding of how their lives were impacted by public decision making, and their ability to influence those decisions.

Effective voter education must take place more than every four years, and we are searching for ways to build upon the lessons of ***Our Stories, Their Decisions***. Adult education efforts and other community groups continue to show the stories in the wake of the 2004 elections in Arizona and beyond for civic engagement. According to Pima College Adult Education Director of Civics, Ami Magisos, “*Overall, the project has been an essential tool for us . . . Teachers continue to share the digital stories with their classes as a starting point for students to consider how government decisions affect their lives and tell their own stories.*” Ami proceeded to relate a powerful story of the use of the DVD to teach about ballot propositions prior to the 2007 elections.

It was a youth class at a neighborhood center, a particularly tough group...The teacher had asked me to do a teaching piece on the propositions to help them understand what was going on, but when I arrived, I quickly saw that there was no way they would want to learn

⁷ In an evaluation conducted by Sarah Norman for the Kennedy School of Government, one third of respondents wrote (without prompting) that voting is important after participating in a workshop. 14 out of 15 participants said that the training made them “more prepared” to vote and 13 out of 15 felt “more interested” in voting after the training.⁷

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about that. Many weren't old enough to vote, the others hadn't registered, and all of them said they thought voting was a complete waste of time when I asked what they thought of it. About half just looked away and rolled their eyes. So, I set aside the junk I had brought and dug in my bag for the **Our Stories, Their Decisions** DVD, and got the teacher to bring in the screen. We brainstormed some examples of decisions that our governments get to make over our lives, and then categorized them by level of government. I asked what some of the most important ones were for them, and of course immigration came up. We watched Maria's story, and it immediately changed the tone of the group-- they were paying close attention, and were moved by her struggle and that of her son left behind in Guatemala. We talked about what government policies might affect people like Maria and their opinions about what should happen. We then talked about who gets to make decisions about immigration reform -- the federal government -- but that our state was trying to make laws to impact immigrants too. By the end of it, all of those who were eligible had filled out voter registration forms.

We can extract several lessons from Ami's story:

Voter education is more than filling out a form. Too often, voter education begins with a voter registration form. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the individual sees a need and a reason why s/he should vote. Yet, for many, the process of voter education must begin at the beginning, not just the "how" of voting, but the "why" they should care in the first place.

Nothing beats authenticity of voice. When Ami showed Maria's story, one or two of the students in the class actually recognized her, they had studied English with her in the past. While not everyone will recognize the storyteller, in order for the story to resonate with the audience, the voice must be believable. Too often we think that media

must be “polished” and “flashy” to be effective. Maria’s story did not have fancy special effects or high production values, what it did have was a true story, a believable story, a story that reflects the situation of many.

Stories can lead to action. Stories are not the only way to foster active citizenship, to support individuals in seeing not only that they are directly impacted by, and can in turn impact politics. Yet, they are a natural place to start the effort, to begin the story. As in the Tucson GED class, stories inevitably lead to other stories; we are now collecting new stories that emerge from discussions, stories that continue to connect and educate non-voters, and stories that raise critical questions for all of us.

“Why do the people that have money get insurance, and people who have no money have less chances of being insured? Who are the people that make the decisions about who has insurance? Have they ever experienced what it is to struggle with a sick baby when they don’t have any money? Shouldn’t we think about our babies when we pick the people who make decisions for their health care?”

Alba

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Personal Communication

Pat Nelson, Director, New Hampshire Adult Education Voter Education Program, Concord, New Hampshire.

Ami Magisos, Director, Pima College Adult Education Civic Education Program. Tucson, Arizona.