




Transforming the Field  
Education Landscape

# DIGITAL STORYTELLING GUIDEBOOK





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# INTRODUCTION

This Digital Storytelling Guidebook is a resource created by the Transforming the Field Education Landscape Project (TFEL) to support social work students, field educators, and faculty members in creating a digital story rooted in reflexivity.<sup>1</sup>

The Guidebook is meant to assist students and faculty members to integrate digital storytelling in social work field education. The resource provides an entry into expressing one's personal narratives through a storytelling process that is recorded digitally and shared with an audience. Practicum students may engage with technology to creatively portray their thoughts and feelings of the field experience.

The Guidebook traces the history of digital storytelling and explores the benefits to practicum students, field educators, and faculty members by outlining the process of creating a digital story.





# WHAT IS DIGITAL STORYTELLING?

*Digital storytelling is a method of sharing stories using digital technology that came into use in the early 1990s for the purpose of organizing digital media production.*

This medium utilizes technology to enhance communication, language arts, and literacy skills. The stories can be fictional or reportage and are usually short in length.

Digital storytelling is immensely popular in many diverse settings including classrooms, political campaigns, business initiatives, therapy advertising, public health, social work, and social media. It is a form of storytelling that professionals can use to work with beginners at all levels.

Digital storytelling is composed of multiple media which integrate multiple semiotic modes that include text, speech, visuals, and sound in the process of planning, writing, and recording to the final production and participants can choose based on individual preference expertise. This is an extremely flexible approach and can be tailored to any subject or theme with a particular message.<sup>2</sup>

Digital storytelling allows students to construct their own learning and engages them in an inquiry-based, active learning process. Plus, it is fun and exciting! It can also bridge language barriers because the stories are often more easily translatable than other mediums. This is because they can be presented in a variety of ways, such as through pictures, videos, and podcasts. Even posting photos and videos on social media may be considered a form of digital storytelling.<sup>3</sup> Practicum students may utilize this medium to showcase different aspects of their placement learning activities, particularly around themes identified in their learning objectives.<sup>4</sup>





## HISTORY OF STORYTELLING

While the exact origin of human narratives and storytelling is unknown, Sugiyama (1996) notes that through storytelling, human narratives reveal how humans utilize language and culture to navigate their social environment.<sup>5</sup> One of the oldest forms of storytelling is an oral history that highlights the marriage of imagination and creativity, with shared experiences in the narrative.<sup>6</sup> Throughout history, there is evidence of oral history and storytelling being transformational and used to communicate culture, beliefs, values, and traditions across generations and throughout the world's civilizations.

Storytelling is a fundamental component in the knowledge-building process and creates meaning from abstract concepts, which can be helpful in breaking barriers in communication.<sup>7</sup> Storytelling is also a powerful tool for teaching and encourages genuine inquisitiveness, which may be particularly relevant in social work field education. In recent decades, there have been significant technological advances in personal expression. Pairing these tools with digital storytelling can provide content creators with a creative platform to tell their stories.<sup>8</sup>

# ACKNOWLEDGING CULTURE

Stories have been used by people all over the world, as well as Indigenous traditions, to form connections with others, convey comparable experiences and promote healing. The following quote by an Indigenous field education student illustrates this special cultural signifier:

“*Something that my Elders have passed on to me is 'nothing is for nothing.' That means that there is always a greater purpose to any activity we partake in. When I created my own digital storytelling, I was happy to share elements of my Métis and Cree heritage. We have such a rich and beautiful culture, and I was excited at the chance to showcase how I use these traditional teachings to support my well-being. For me, the larger purpose was educating my peers about the positive and resilient aspects of our communities. I incorporated images of water throughout to symbolize cleansing and healing.*”

– *Andrea Rosenberger-Deieeuw*

In Japanese culture, the 'Mono-No-Aware' method of sharing narratives was passed down through generations so that people could learn and use the shared traditional knowledge to work as one united community.<sup>9</sup> In many African communities, the elders passed knowledge or wisdom to the young generations using narratives that were shared during special ceremonies, for example, during initiations, or simply to pass an evening around the campfire.<sup>10</sup>



# BENEFITS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

There are several benefits associated with digital storytelling that highlight the intimate connections that are drawn from sharing one's personal narrative or experience in a creative process. Heo (2009) suggests that digital storytelling has shown that there is increased alliance-building among storytellers as they engage in the process of creating digital stories, which helps to improve self-confidence, self-efficacy, and personal achievement.<sup>11</sup>

## A RELATABLE LEARNING TOOL

Digital storytelling is an art-informed method that encourages all people to engage and to share their dialogue in both a visual and oral format.<sup>12</sup>

Rossiter and Garcia (2010) share that this method of practice presents a relatable form of learning, and can be adapted for use in field<sup>3</sup> education, where practicum students develop and continually learn and practice new skills. De Vecchi et al. (2017) suggest that through digital storytelling, students develop digital literacy and communication skills, as well as a newfound understanding of other cultures and lived experiences.<sup>12</sup> The authors add that digital storytelling celebrates differences, emotions, shared stories, and developing trust and empathy. This process is inclusive for those involved because there is no one 'correct' way to tell a story. Therefore, it is an important aspect to consider where diversity and creativity are encouraged and celebrated by both educators and students.

## TRANSFORMATION ACROSS LANDSCAPES

Transformation of both structural and cultural aspects of the educational context is achievable through digital storytelling. For instance, social work education and the profession itself is about working with individuals, groups, and society who, with the help of social workers, may work towards influencing policy-making and advocating for changes to meet the needs of service users. The message in a digital story can convey what is needed for transformation to occur. Note, while storytelling is an effective tool for emotional regulation, it can also be an emotionally taxing process, especially when conveying an intimate experience such as a personal encounter of racism.<sup>13</sup>

# BENEFITS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

## CHALLENGING THE NORMS

By challenging stereotypical and stigmatizing narratives, digital storytelling has been found to prompt viewers to question their assumptions about particular groups of people and transform their thinking.

For example, in a research study where Eisenhauer (2012)<sup>14</sup> shared her

experience living with mental illness through a digital story, she reclaimed the stigmatizing discourse in the media that mental illness equates to violence, instability, and bad parenting. By normalizing her experience, Eisenhauer prompted others living with mental illness to seek help.

In another study, students used digital storytelling to discuss topics related to sexual health, such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV, pregnancy, and contraception. Findings revealed that listening to these stories fostered a safe space where students could openly share their experiences and feel validated.<sup>15</sup>

While high-speed internet connectivity makes sharing digital stories easy and convenient, consideration may also be given to situations where populations residing in remote locations do not have access or have limited access, to Internet connection. Research studies have shown that in the process of digital storytelling, as students share amongst themselves, they build social connections that could lead to decreased anxiety, loneliness and depression.<sup>16</sup>



# BENEFITS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

## CHALLENGING THE NORMS

Digital storytelling can also be used as a form of narrative therapy - a guiding framework that helps individuals, including practicum students, understand themselves and their environment by reflecting on, constructing, and expressing their life experiences as stories.<sup>13</sup> For example, an Indigenous student who has experienced the death of close kin, can use their cultural practice of connecting to the natural elements (wind, water, land) for healing, and construct a relational story digitally to communicate the process.



Digital storytelling opens space for counter-storytelling, used through the theoretical framework of critical race theory. This can be a platform for racialized students to present the stories of their experiences that are often dismissed or overlooked because of educational marginalization and majoritarian storytelling. This is an opportunity for the social work field education profession to centralize and recognize the legitimate knowledge of racialized students.<sup>16</sup> As one practicum student observed:

*“Counter-storytelling ... It was a liberating process for me to share private words and stories that were tied to my coloured being in ways that I could control. It was my story, told by me. And no one else.”*

*– Cindy Nguyen*



# BENEFITS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

## CHALLENGING THE NORMS

Individuals can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's centre by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems and societal taboos. Storytellers can offer those on the fringes of society new perspectives, new forms of wisdom, as well as social bonds – a reminder that they are not alone. These storytellers can teach their audience that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. Challenging stereotypes is encouraged through digital storytelling since educators encourage students to use narrative to question their assumptions, errant beliefs, and stigmas. Students therefore can embed their authentic voice in their narrative to explain and highlight their precious learnings. A social work field education student commented:

“Even though I don't have a lot of experience with digital stories, I can see the wonderful benefits that digital storytelling can give to students in practica. It can be used as an educational tool in practicum settings, to helping students understand social issues from a personal perspective.”

- Ellen Mi

## MAKING A DIGITAL STORY

TFEL students are encouraged to use digital storytelling as part of their learning process during their practicum as well as in their future careers as social workers, educators, and scholars. The benefits accrued from the process of creating digital stories are both involving and educative, an experience that can help students work to perfect their skills in creating digital stories and become more effective learners, academics, and professionals. As experiences continue changing with new encounters and life adventures, so too is digital storytelling fluid and constantly enriching.<sup>17</sup>

# STEPS TO CREATE A DIGITAL STORY

**Getting Started**

**Plan**

**Outline / Script**

**Storyboard**

**Recording**

**Finish / Complete**

**Publish / Share**

# STEPS TO CREATE A DIGITAL STORY

## GETTING STARTED

**The first step involves generating an idea for the story one would like to tell.**

Within this step, one may engage in self-reflection to determine readiness to share a story that may reveal intimate aspects of one's life. This can be done by brainstorming, researching topics, scanning lists, looking at photos and images, thinking about your personal knowledge, experience and asking for guidance from your field supervisor, family, teachers, friends, or co-workers. Once the idea has been developed, the storyteller has to ask if they have a close connection, or can relate, to the topic; if the topic ties with their learning objectives as well as it being educative and motivating to an audience; how long it would take to tell the story; the work needed to be done to tell the story; and the supporting available materials such as photos, data, videos, letters, poems, artwork, and more. For the collection of supporting artifacts, the storyteller may consider securing the necessary informed consent from the respective owners, as well as seeking copyright approval, if necessary.

For example, a practicum student who has recently migrated to Canada and may want to capture the journey of their early settlement experience can gather a variety of artifacts including family photos, journal excerpts of interactions with service providers, information pamphlets, souvenirs, videos, and even music. These considerations challenge the idea of linear learning because a connection can be formed between concepts and moments of time before, during and after the practicum. After gathering relevant information about digital storytelling, students have to constantly remember its history, rationale, and benefits, and suggestions they may have been offered during the creation process; all of which will help keep them on track with their creation and remain motivated to finish their digital story successfully.

## PLAN

When the idea has been formulated, the next step is to develop a plan to help organize the storyteller's resources. Students can share the plan with their field instructors, fellow students, and friends who could provide constructive feedback. Heo (2009) advises that the plan can also reflect the details of students' learning goals and related activities which would help to ensure they meet those specified goals and objectives.<sup>1</sup> This step also provides the opportunity for practicum students who may wish to set goals or a timeline for their practicum activities, to craft and align their learning agreement accordingly. Planning the digital story will also require vision and articulation of the script, creation of the storyboard, production of the visuals, recording, and finally, publishing as detailed below.



# STEPS TO CREATE A DIGITAL STORY

## OUTLINE/SCRIPT

**Developing an outline/script is a key part of the digital storytelling process.** The outline/script details activities that will support both students and instructors in building a storytelling structure. This section provides a list of relevant tools and resources that students and educators may wish to utilize in the creation of their digital stories. Developing outlines assists with goal alignment, determining the need for an interviewer, crafting a script, and framing the story, paying attention to the key details (and their uniqueness) to be included in the story. This is to be followed by the actual writing of the story using personal ideas and experiences that emerge genuinely from within. Since digital storytelling is built on creative reflection, stories that promote hope or a call to action, combined with background music and photos, all work together to engage audiences. For example, a practicum student can draft on a board everything that will appear in the digital story such as videos, images, text, music as well as arranging these elements in the order in which they will appear in the recording.

## STORYBOARD

**This storyboard section organizes all the resources that will be used in the digital story**, including music, pictures, words, text, photos, and videos. The storyboard allows the presenter to provide a complete setting of the whole story from start to finish. This is a necessary stage since it may be an inspiration for more ideas, help identify gaps, and improve the overall quality of the digital story. The storyboarding stage also allows time to explore the layers of personal and professional learning. This is a stage that affords the presenter the opportunity to self-reflect on their own identity, and any influences affecting their relationship to, and perception of, the environment. During this stage, self-care is important, as students with busy practicum schedules may find this work demanding, and the tasks overwhelming.<sup>18</sup> This is evident in the following quote provided by a social work student:

“When creating a digital story about my experience working in a group home for at-risk youth, I first reflected on my opinions about the youth, and how these opinions might be conveyed through the language I used in the story script and consequently the portrayal of the youth. I also considered how my identity as an educated, middle-class person is detached from the youth I worked with. This self-reflection prompted me to be more intentional in the depiction of my story's characters and helped me articulate the message that I am an expert in my experience, not the experience of the story's characters.”

– Heather Holdsworth



## RECORDING

**Digital storytelling can be recorded in different ways**, and filming is one such method. Recording by film requires the use of a camera, a microphone, smartphone, or tablet. Use of this type of equipment may require the digital storyteller to have some prior knowledge/experience with the process to ensure, for example, adequate lighting, good quality sound, and proper camera positioning. It is recommended that students film 'brief test shots' and repeat the recording steps until the desired quality of the digital story is attained.

## FINISH/COMPLETE

In this step, **students will edit the recording**. In the case of filming, this involves using the appropriate tools, software, and apps. For audio recording and editing, the use of Audacity and Sound Cloud gives high-quality sound and large data storage.

### Photo editing software:

- Aviary
- Photo Editor
- Paint.net
- Pixier
- Powtoon
- Pixton E. Edu
- Stroybird
- Gloster
- E.Thinglink
- H.Sway-Sway clips and stock Pexels.

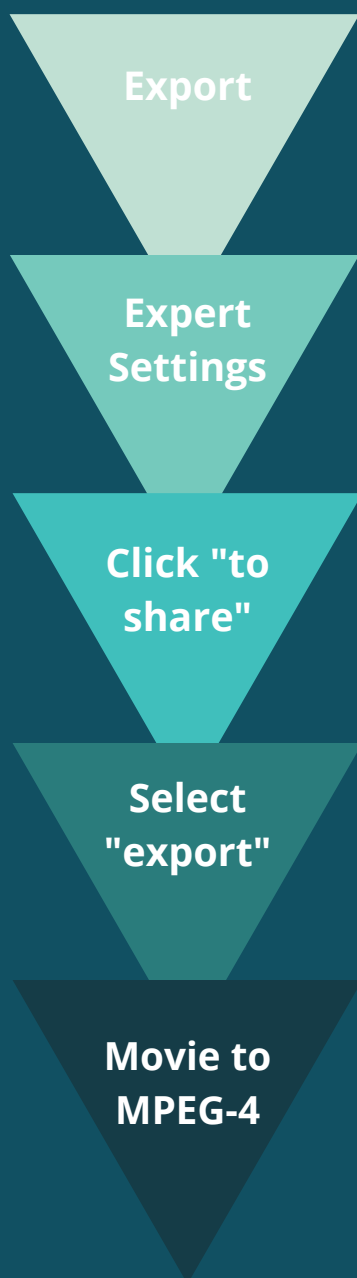
### Video editing software:

- iMovie
- Windows Movie Maker
- Animoto
- Blender

Additional online digital tools that can be used to enhance the quality of a digital storytelling production include Mind Maps, Coggle, Wordcloud, and Lucid chart.<sup>19</sup>

# PUBLISH & SHARE

*In this final stage, the video is complete, and if it is to be published to the web in iMovie or Final Cut, students may follow these steps:*



For high-quality video, students can choose to export in the H.264 codec and encode at a bitrate of 3800 kbps. Since the video has been compressed, **the next step is to publish to a video hosting site** like YouTube, Vimeo or Wistia, online website or a blog, and social media pages. A home base for the video may be maintained while established digital storytelling links are readily accessible to a wide audience. Before publishing the digital story, the storyteller may consider any potential risk to self, and others (including communities), based on the content shared in the digital story. Depending on the amount of content, and to support manageability, the storyteller may decide to organize a small or large portion of the material daily, as they see fit.

After sharing the digital story with the audience, the narrator may need to engage in some reflection on the whole experience - how they felt about sharing their story, how they felt about the audience's responses and their future aspirations.

Through such reflections, student storytellers can gather more resources and suggestions from the audience to enrich their practicum experience. When students and educators work together in the creation of digital storytelling, the time and work they share through the exchange of ideas and materials will create bonding relationships that are beneficial for both learning and creativity.





# DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION

Currently, it appears that digital stories are underused as educational tools. Research suggests that digital storytelling is more favoured by niche groups, largely because educators and students are often unfamiliar with the technology and/or process of creating digital media. While this guidebook points to the advantages of using digital storytelling, more work needs to be done to increase awareness of its benefits as a storytelling medium. Notably, digital storytelling could be promoted as an instructional and learning resource in social work education, both in the classroom and in the field. Digital storytelling may be particularly beneficial in social work education and social work field education. As students gain new experiences and skills that advance their personal and professional growth in response to the changing needs and demands of service users, they may showcase these experiences as stories in digital form.

Viewers have been found to be more receptive to new information presented in digital stories because hearing about a personal story humanizes and contextualizes the experience.<sup>20</sup>

Gray et al. (2015) suggest that digital storytelling focuses on people being vulnerable in sharing their experiences, and the process can be quite emotional, yet storytelling events attract large audiences who readily relate and connect to these stories.<sup>20</sup> Enhanced with digital media, digital storytelling can be an engaging process for students who can create deeper insights and understanding of their practicum experiences.

Digital storytelling may be effectively utilized in specific settings such as second language classrooms, as the combination of audio and visuals is conducive to language learning.<sup>21</sup> This may be applicable to partnerships and projects like TFEL in which diverse groups of social work field education students, supervisors, coordinators, and faculty collaborate on multiple practice research endeavours.

In social work field education, digital storytelling opens interactions between students and their instructors and supervisors as they share narratives together. In the process of sharing digital stories, presenters can hear and listen to their own stories, which may be seen as an empowering experience, and may be an affirmation of one's own identity and creativity. In addition to its application to empowerment theory, students become the experts of their own stories and experiences and will be an encouragement for others to do the same.

Through digital storytelling, field education students can use the critiques provided by their field supervisors and other educators to build and improve their learning and experiences and be better prepared for their future careers. Rossiter and Garcia (2010) assert that multimedia learning is rounded and encompasses the mind, body, and spirit, so that student-produced digital stories feature and foster creativity as a focus of narrative meaning-making.<sup>3</sup> The authors further explain that through digital storytelling, the rich stories shared present as avenues to abundant, unexplored sources for research in field education. They also suggest that recognizing and acknowledging the contributions of individuals, groups, and communities in the creation of digital stories are in alignment with ethical practice.



This is an important aspect in social work field education as students learn by engaging with individuals, groups and communities during their field education placements. When digital storytellers are given tutorials and clear instructions on the purpose, methods, and process of digital storytelling, they have the potential to foster a more engaged and comprehensive understanding of the material that can help them reflect and create their own digital storytelling. As one practicum student explains:

“My practicum in part has been to work on the final process of co-creating the Digital Storytelling Guidebook. Digital storytelling is new to me and when I was approached in the summer of 2020 by other practicum students to create my own, I was skeptical. But having watched the presentations of digital storytelling pieces done by other students, and taking part in co-creating the guidebook, I am confident I can now create and share my own digital story using one of the platforms.”

- Joan Bosire





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# CONCLUSION

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Digital storytelling has been in use since the early 1990s, yet remains a little-known and underutilized method, particularly in social work field education by field educators and students, both in the classroom and field placement settings.

As a practice resource, this Digital Storytelling Guidebook can assist educators and students in the creation of their own digital stories. The introduction of the Digital Storytelling Guidebook in social work field education will expose educators and students to intentionally use the platform as an integral component in articulating and achieving learning outcomes.

While further research on digital storytelling development may be required, emerging digital storytellers could reference this Guidebook as an informative resource that details the steps for creating digital stories.

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