

Part IV

How Was That for You? The Healing Power of Digital Storytelling

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To remember requires language, to heal requires story. (Baldwin 2005)

Since the very first workshop, described by Monica Clarke in her tenth anniversary tribute, it was clear that making digital stories could be beneficial for storytellers. Although the original intention of the Patient Voices Programme was to make available an accessible resource that people could watch and learn from, anecdotal and, increasingly, statistical and theoretical evidence is building up that strongly suggests that although the Patient Voices workshops are not offered as therapy, they are intensive healing and therapeutic experiences in their own right. An early influence on Patient Voices *Intoxicated by My Illness* (Broyard 1992). This, Anatole Broyard's final book, justified the need for more personalised care from health professionals while also enabling Broyard to face his own imminent death from cancer.

It wasn't until a little later, thanks to Mark Shea, that we came across the ground-breaking work of James Pennebaker, an American psychologist who conducted a series of experiments designed to discover whether regular writing about emotional subjects (such as childhood trauma) might have therapeutic benefits. The results of his work pointed overwhelmingly to the positive outcomes from this kind of regular writing and have been replicated over the years with many different groups,

including patients affected by long-term chronic pain and students suffering from stress (Pennebaker 1997) (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). His work has helped us to understand why people so often find the process of creating a digital story so therapeutic, even cathartic.

It is, perhaps, stating the obvious to mention the growing recognition of the value of the ‘talking therapies’, particularly during the twentieth century. All of the talking therapies rely on one person talking—often telling stories about their lives—to another person who, through attentive listening and mindful attention, with the help of a body of knowledge developed over more than a century, may be able to help the first person see things differently. The particular brand of therapy known as *narrative therapy* recognises the importance of the stories we tell ourselves and offers the potential to reframe these stories and, consequently, our perceptions of ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. The work of Michael White and David Epstein (White and Epstein 1990) and Martin Payne (Payne 2005) is particularly relevant to this discussion.

The three chapters in this part examine this aspect of digital storytelling through first-hand experience, analytical psychological study and preparations for a team workshop.

In Chap. 13 ‘Healing Journeys: Digital Storytelling with Service User Educators’, occupational therapist and senior lecturer Julie Walters explores the healing, therapeutic nature of digital stories as she experienced it herself and then, following up a workshop at Sheffield Hallam University, through her awareness of its potential as a healing tool for mental health service users and carers. She highlights the importance of active listening and careful facilitation of the workshops and the unique transformative and cathartic role that digital media can play through ‘distillation and amplification’ of service users’ experiences, crucially giving a voice to those too often not heard.

In Chap. 14 ‘The Sheffield Carers’ Voices Project: Was It Therapeutic?’, Mark Shea used a range of theoretical psychological perspectives to analyse the process and impact of a Patient Voices workshop for carers in Sheffield for his MSc dissertation. He identified common themes, such as the impulse to help others, emotionally difficult revisiting of experience, group support and positive reframing. Though cautious about generalising, his

findings suggest the potential for the experience to be cathartic and of long-lasting benefit through creating new, integrated narratives that give meaning to experiences of trauma or loss and create positive changes to participants' sense of identity.

In Chap. 15 'Building Healthy Teams: Digital Storytelling in NHS Organisations', Amy Stabler discusses the central importance of storytelling and listening to building healthy, resilient and effective teams, essential for patient safety. Honestly appraising her own desire for outcomes and reluctance to make her own story, she assesses the essential and positive experience of pre-workshop preparation and discussion of fears, especially of blame and exposure, and ethical issues of control and consent, for bringing healing and closure to team difficulties.

References

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