

Digital storytelling as a site for intergenerational learning

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Introduction

Developing confidence in the use of digital technology such as tablets (small, touch-screen computers) has the potential for a wide range of learners to access other platforms of e-learning. As with other mobile-learning (or m-learning) devices – notably mobile phones – tablets offer another dimension to the digital teaching and learning toolkit available to learners. This form of upskilling has the added potential of increasing the uptake of learners on accredited courses through their engagement in open supported and distance teaching and learning methodologies and programmes. Such flexible routes may be the first steps towards a longer-term path of educational achievement for adult learners, particularly women.

Perhaps less recognised or understood is how these technologies for education can build on cultural oral traditions of learning passed on by communities – many of whom have traditionally had limited access to mainstream education – and thereby reinvigorate education at the level of families and peer groups. Research suggests that early engagement with children by parents is essential to support their language development. Accordingly, provision for family learning experiences that encourage story making and telling can play a part in reducing longer-term educational disadvantage.

This article discusses an action-led research project in which parents, carers and children engaged in the creative use of digital technology methodologies as a site for joint learning. 'Brilliant Stories: Family Learning through Digital Technology' was part of the Community Learning Innovation Fund managed by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). It was launched in 2012 in line with the UK Government's objectives for community learning, particularly for disadvantaged people.

Intergenerational learning: the national and local context

The Independent Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales led by NIACE was launched in October 2012 and attended by its patron, HRH the Princess Royal. Its remit is to review current policy and practice with a view to repositioning family learning at the centre of educational and social policy, and research and development. Notwithstanding the review outcomes, there has been an increasing imperative at governmental level to rethink teaching and learning environments, and how the provision and methods of collaboration meet the needs of adult learners, particularly those for whom English is a second language and who suffer isolation and social exclusion as a result.

The rationale for this review is based on several factors, including:

- Shifting economic landscapes
- High levels of unemployment
- Changes in demographics at national and global levels
- Competing global educational markets
- Developing a highly skilled labour force and knowledge-based economy
- Responding to the rise of digital technologies as an accepted form of global communication and information exchange

According to the 2013 OECD 'Education at a Glance' report, in the UK there are one million young people not in education, training or employment. The UK has one of the lowest percentages of 15 to 19-year-olds in education among OECD countries, with a 40 per cent drop-out rate for 16 to 18-year-olds.

The Brilliant Stories project was based in the London borough of Haringey, which ranks 13th out of 326 most socio-economically deprived English authorities. It is also the fourth most deprived London borough with 48.7 per cent of the Haringey population of non-white British origin, which is higher than the London figure of 40.5 per cent. The borough's educational achievement levels in the most deprived areas are well below the national average with children struggling to meet minimum national benchmarks in reading, writing and maths, due in part to parents and carers' own lack of basic skills.

Brilliant Stories: the goals and process

This project was aimed to upskill disadvantaged parents and carers to become more actively and confidently involved in their children's education and social development, thereby helping to reduce the risk of social and educational exclusion.

There were several interrelated objectives:

- Engaging disadvantaged parents, carers and children in family learning through the creative use of digital technology and supported learning activities
- Improving the skills and literacy in digital technology of local adult learning tutors and community educators
- Increasing access to further learning and development opportunities for parents and carers
- Developing a pool of parent/carer learning champions committed to promoting intergenerational learning to other parents, carers and children



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Developing ideas for story making on a tablet device

The project adopted a community partnership approach to engage adult learners, the majority of whom were women previously excluded from educational opportunities due to social and economic disadvantage. The project lead partner, Family Learning, part of Haringey Adult Learning Service, has a track record in promoting educational equality through providing intergenerational learning programmes. The pedagogical approach was to make the learning experience holistic, accessible, enjoyable and empowering.

The project consisted of two distinct components. Firstly, local adult education tutors and parent community educators underwent a three-day intensive Training the Trainers Programme (TTP) led by the project team. They were also inducted into the use of tablet technology and apps for storytelling supported by interactive learning activities. Through differentiated 'learning by doing' small-group activities, the adult learning tutors and community educators then actively engaged parents, carers and children to take part in specifically designed family learning courses.

Parents first received guidance on storytelling and communication skills through the familiarisation of story-making processes, including using storyboards, timelines, spider diagrams, and creating and recounting stories. They were subsequently introduced to the multi-purpose functions of a tablet device, using apps for audio-recording, taking and editing photo images and, in particular, using the Open University 'Our Story' app (see below) before working jointly with their children to develop digital stories. This process enabled parents, carers and children to take ownership of their learning through creating their own stories based on their lived experiences. These learning experiences were documented by

tutors, community educators and their mentors using the tablet photo and video functions and subsequently presented during the 2013 national Adult Learners' Week celebration events.

Technologies

Central to the delivery of learning was the use of digital technology. The project team adapted an application for mobile devices – the 'Our Story' app. This was developed by the Open University as an open access digital teaching and learning tool to provide a personalised platform to create stories and picture books for use with parents, carers and their children.

The use of 'Our Story' was modified by the project team by transferring the app from a mobile device to a tablet – a format more conducive to group learning. The app complemented the tradition of oral storytelling commonly used within the diverse communities. A resource bank of interactive storytelling learning activities was also generated to provide additional differentiated

Paramjit's story

Paramjit lost her school place in London when she was 15 due to illness. She started working a year later, got married and had two children. She moved into the area two years ago with her husband who originates from India. Paramjit decided to return to education as she felt left out and believed that, as a parent, she needed to better support her children's education. She met the adult learning tutor at her children's primary school and was encouraged to join literacy and numeracy courses. Soon afterwards she became a volunteer helper at school.

When the adult learning tutor informed Paramjit and another parent volunteer about the Brilliant Stories project, Paramjit volunteered to undergo the Brilliant Stories Training the Trainers Programme (TTP). She is now a community educator on the Brilliant Stories course.

Before Brilliant Stories I didn't read enough with my children and didn't know about tablets. Kids these days all want gadgets. This was a brilliant opportunity for us all as it provided parents and children with some excitement. I remember thinking, oh yes, it's on a tablet and we'll get to go on it. I was really happy as since the Brilliant Stories course started, parents and children have made stories every week using the tablets.

Paramjit has enjoyed being involved in Brilliant Stories. She meets parents who ask for resources to help their children learn and seek her guidance about what to do, such as deciding the best stories for different ages. Once the pilot course ended, Paramjit was still advising parents, showing them how they could communicate with their children. She also offered one-to-one support to parents.

Paramjit has facilitated two further Brilliant Stories courses for parents, carers and their children. In the future, Paramjit wants to continue running courses as a community educator. In her view, Brilliant Stories has enabled her to communicate with parents and children. She sees it as a lifetime journey and hopes to continue to teach. As a result of her increased confidence she now serves as a school governor.

learning opportunities for group-based settings as well as for home activities. The tablet device was used to record and document various forms of evidence gathered during the project. Collectively, evaluation of these methods demonstrated increased levels of literacy, oral and written skills, and engagement.

By using the Open University 'Our Story' app on a tablet there was no need for wi-fi connection once the app had been initially downloaded as it is a stand-alone app. This enabled adult learners with limited or no access to the internet to utilise this tool at no extra cost and without any cause for concern about e-safety as their children would be also using the tablet. Although the stories generated from the app using a tablet cannot readily be shared across other m-devices, the

Kaafiyo's story

Kaafiyo came to the UK from Somalia and speaks Somali, some Swahili and English. She went to high school in England but as she did not speak good English she struggled. She subsequently went to college for three years, after which she got married, moved to the United States to join her husband, and had three children before returning to the UK with her children to look after her mother.

Kaafiyo became involved with Brilliant Stories as she was volunteering at her children's primary school. Kaafiyo was helping out by translating English into Somali for the adult learning tutor and by helping Somali parents get more involved with their children's education. When the adult learning tutor suggested she and another parent volunteer attend the TTP for the Brilliant Stories course, Kaafiyo was keen as she was already working with the community.

To be honest, at the beginning I didn't know what it was going to involve, but it turned out to be so good because of the parents that we were helping. They wanted the course more and more and kept coming back. It's become so successful in the school and everyone's talking about it! Even the head teacher mentioned it to the governors, and when Ofsted came we mentioned it to them.

Kaafiyo has been using a tablet at home to create stories and to take pictures. She encourages her children to write about what they did each day. For example, her son went swimming recently and wrote a story about it. Kaafiyo thinks their reading and writing levels have gone up at school and at home. She thinks they have succeeded at school where she was not able to as she did not speak or write English.

It's good to feel that you're helping someone else. I want to do more; even if it's voluntary work I'll keep doing it. I'd advise others not to judge this kind of project before you get to know it. Just go ahead and get involved! It's a beautiful thing to create stories with families and to show them how to do it for themselves.

Kaafiyo plans to continue in her role as teaching assistant, since Brilliant Stories has given her greater confidence. Recently, Kaafiyo has jointly set up a charitable organisation in southern Somalia and intends to use the learning gained on the Brilliant Stories project to open up educational opportunities for girls and young women in her homeland.



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Communication brings confidence

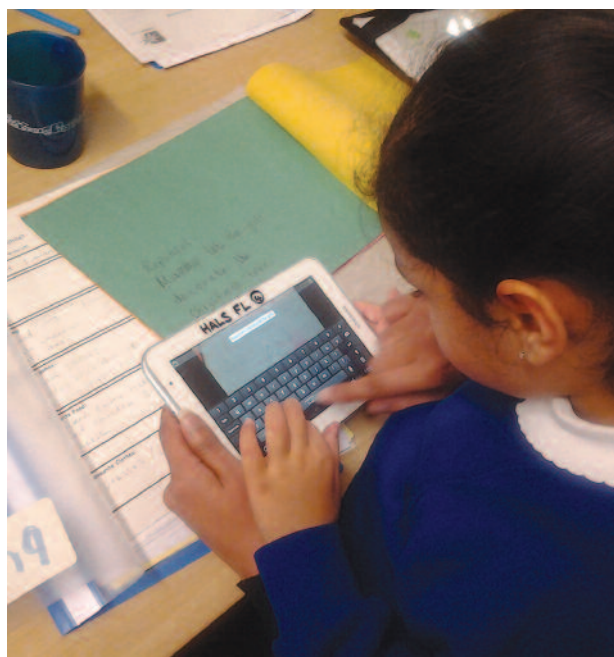
project team has provided feedback to the Open University developers who are currently remodelling the app.

Impact

Using Freirian principles of co-creation of knowledge and by building on their strengths, skills and experiences during the TTP and on the courses, parents and carers engaged more interactively with each other and their children. As a result, barriers to learning resulting from factors of culture, language and class were significantly reduced. Participants of the Brilliant Stories project, many of whom have English as a second language, felt empowered by this learning experience.

Some integral design features of the project were the methods used to capture the learning experiences gained during this process and co-ordinated and collated by the action research training partner, RAISING Voices. Reflection-in-action interviews and photographic records using the tablet device, focus groups, ongoing mentoring support, learning journals and evaluations were conducted during the project's lifetime and reveal the following impacts on families:

- Parents were more confident in storytelling, finding different ways of using stories and sharing stories with their children
- The immediacy and visual aspect of using a tablet device and the 'Our Story' app were appealing to parents and children
- Problem-solving skills were developed with parents and children working together through discovering how to use a tablet device
- Different nationalities worked together. This helped to break down misconceptions and avoid isolation, leading to greater appreciation of cultural diversity
- Schools reported more parents willing to act as volunteers and as community ambassadors as a result of learners taking part in the project



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Literacy and numeracy: springboards for inclusion

- Teachers reported children communicated more with teachers, and school reading levels rose as a result of children reading more often at home
- Children enjoyed taking part in the supported learning activities: drawing stories, taking photographs, making their own story, seeing their story on a tablet, listening to each other's stories, playing story games

In the case of the 'Our Story' app, children, parents and carers reported listening attentively to each other, co-operating in the process of story building, using their imagination and visual creativity, and engaging in an enjoyable shared learning journey. In some cases, there was a role reversal as eager 'digi-savvy' children demonstrated their newly acquired skills of using a tablet to their parents and carers.

Intergenerational learning as evidenced by this project proved to be a three-way process: the community educators and adult learning tutors who acted as facilitators, helping learners to help themselves; the children who engaged readily with new technologies and who in turn assisted their parents and carers to share their skills and, in some instances, helped them develop their use of the English language; and the parents who provided encouragement, care and support for their children to flourish.

Conclusion

The use of digital teaching and supported learning methods within a family learning context provides an opportunity to improve the educational attainment of both children and adults in terms of increased social skills, confidence, literacy, and oral and written skills. It is also a particularly effective way of responding to diverse groups of learners. In carrying out the research project, several interconnected discussion themes emerged that could assist in shaping future dialogue, policy and practice.

With increasing interest and greater access to e-learning, educational policy-makers and providers can more readily adapt the teaching and learning approaches used in this project to their specific educational settings. The project team's findings identified key factors that contributed to the successful implementation of this community-empowerment initiative.

- Involvement, willingness and sustained commitment of all key stakeholders from an early start and at all stages of the project implementation
- Recruitment and training of community educators and adult learning tutors in the use of digital technology and the use of supported interactive learning resources
- Careful planning of the design and delivery of the TTP and the Parent/Carer Learning Champions Programme
- Dedicated mentoring support to community educators and adult learning tutors
- Ongoing reflection and review using participatory feedback methods

It is clear that harnessing new technologies can contribute to equality and diversity agendas at local and global levels as debated previously in Community Education Partnership volumes (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012). Education providers who are currently in a position to free up open access educational resources can help realise the 2015 Millennium Development Goals agenda. Service deliverers committed to investing in tablet technology as part of their e-teaching and learning policy and practices could scale up pilots such as the Brilliant Stories project thereby reducing many of the educational obstacles facing marginalised communities.

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Endnote

- 1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author in a personal capacity.

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