

Voices Beyond Walls: The Role of Digital Storytelling for Empowering Marginalized Youth in Refugee Camps

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we consider the role of digital storytelling for creative empowerment of marginalized youth, through a three-year program of workshops conducted in the context of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. We highlight the current situation regarding arts education and cultural production, and the challenging environment experienced by the youth there. We then describe the Voices Beyond Walls program and key lessons learned to suggest novel tools and practices that may support broader adoption of digital storytelling programs for marginalized youth in diverse global settings.

Keywords

Participatory media, marginalized youth, storytelling, digital video, refugee camps, creative expression, cultural agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth everywhere have stories to tell that reveal a great deal about their identity, heritage, environment, and lived experiences. Many of these stories are passed down from generations, while others emerge as creative expressions that are unique and meaningful to the context of their lives. Marginalized youth living in disenfranchised inner cities, slums, disaster zones or conditions of geo-political conflict, often draw their narratives from violent experiences of loss and displacement or hidden psychological trauma. Sharing these narratives is important not only for their sense of identity, understanding and recognition by others, but as a form of creative expression and advocacy of issues in their lives. Many of these youth are often able to move beyond their everyday lived experiences to reveal poetic and imaginative renderings of an inner voice expressed through a medium they can access such as drawing, writing, dance or drama. The youth in effect act as “cultural agents” interpreting, reflecting, and artfully re-engaging in their world [1]. How does one tap into the latent creative potential of marginalized youth in ways that improves their fluency in expression through different forms of media? What tools, techniques and process should be developed to support an environment of creative production, especially for collaborative development of digital media narratives? In this paper we examine experiences from the Voices Beyond Walls initiative, a novel program for digital storytelling, in addressing such issues.

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2. EAST JERUSALEM: DIMINISHING CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND ARTS EDUCATION FOR YOUTH

Jerusalem has in recent years seen a resurgence of arts and cultural revival however this resurgence has mainly been associated with the dominant Jewish sector of the population (66% as of 2007), mostly in the modern suburbs of West Jerusalem and in the newly created settlements. On the other hand, cultural activity and educational opportunities among the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem has greatly suffered, while it is much worse in outlying Palestinian neighborhoods disenfranchised by the construction of the Wall, with the severe lack of municipal services provided to these residents by the city.

Even a decade ago, Rania Elias described the diminishing role of Jerusalem as a Palestinian cultural center [2]. “Not too long ago, East Jerusalem was a bustling center for all Palestinians. Since the closure imposed on the West Bank and Gaza (1993), cutting East Jerusalem from its Palestinian hinterland, the city has started to gradually lose its status as an economic, educational and cultural center for Palestinians. By night, its streets are deserted and its cultural life has all but vanished.”

Institutions and initiatives promoting cultural exchange and understanding among the various identities of the city (Jewish, Muslim and Christian) are rare and not well supported. It would seem that the city’s current cultural fabric lacks the infrastructure or perhaps political will to promote the distinct identities and social cohesion among neighborhoods in Jerusalem.

The problem is exacerbated by a stark dearth of investment or provision of facilities, resources and programs to support arts education in the schools primarily attended by Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. According to the Palestinian Human Rights Monitor, the conditions for arts education in predominantly Palestinian schools in East Jerusalem are quite dismal [3]. “As many as 21 schools, 60 percent, report having absolutely no facilities for the arts. Hence, 62.6 percent of the student population receives no art, music, or drama instruction at all. Only 43 percent of the schools have libraries, and only 31 percent have computer laboratories. Of all the other facilities listed, no more than 9 schools, or 25.7 percent of all schools, have any of them (e.g. music, fine arts, etc).”

2.1 Shu’fat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem

The situation is even worse in the refugee camps of East Jerusalem and the West Bank. One example is the Shu’fat Refugee Camp (RC), which is unique for its geo-political character in Jerusalem – an “extraterritorial Palestinian island” whose residents defy Israeli control while retaining legal residence in the city. Shu’fat RC was the last Palestinian refugee

camp established in the West Bank in 1965-1966, and the only one located inside the municipal borders of Jerusalem. Today the camp finds itself surrounded on nearly three sides by Israeli settlements and bordered on the east by the Palestinian neighborhood of Shu'fat, which is now being separated from the camp by the construction of the Wall.

The increasingly poor yet growing demographic of the camp is described in a report by the Israeli organization Ir Amim [4]: "Originally established to house around 1500 refugees, Shu'fat RC today is home to more than 20,000 people, of which around 50-60% are registered refugees. The remaining population consists of Palestinians who moved to the camp for economic reasons. As a result, the camp is home to the poorest segment of Jerusalem's Palestinian population." While the camp is located inside Jerusalem, virtually all services including schools and healthcare are provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), rather than the Israeli authorities.

Clearly state institutions, which may not have sufficient resources or the political will to improve the conditions, will not easily address the lack of arts education or creative empowerment for youth in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. This creates opportunities for the civil sector to engage students in creative arts and cultural programs, perhaps outside the formal mechanism or facilities of the school system. The development of after-school and summer arts programs are a step in the right direction, in addition to seeking the cooperation of the state, educational ministry and UNRWA in supporting greater arts education for disenfranchised schools, particularly in refugee camps.

2.2 Case Study: The Computer Clubhouse

An innovative example of an after-school program for creative learning among youth is the Computer Clubhouse¹. The program was conceived and developed in collaboration with the MIT Media Lab and the Computer Museum (now part of the Boston Museum of Science) as a test-bed for creative learning and expression through cutting-edge technologies [5]. The first center was established at the Computer Museum in downtown Boston for underserved youth in 1993. The Clubhouse promoted mentoring and learning in the social context of youth; informal interaction and peer-to-peer learning was encouraged. Like the Montessori schools, the Clubhouse established an open environment without pre-defined curricula, while promoting a freedom of spontaneous interaction and learning, supported by mentoring from volunteers and often by other youth.

Unlike typical classrooms, the Clubhouse environment arranged computers in clusters and movable furniture to support free-form collaboration and informal learning. The youth are provided design tools for creating a range of computer-based projects including 3D virtual worlds, online/interactive works, digital media and Lego-based programming projects. The youth are encouraged to create, share and reflect on their work with peers and mentors, enriching a shared learning experience while promoting greater self-esteem and a collaborative community. The informal learning approach at the centers also promotes social inclusion in the underserved communities of the Clubhouse; youth develop a sense of ownership and belonging to the place, many continuing to engage actively in the Clubhouse activities over time and later serving as mentors for other youth there.

¹ <http://www.ComputerClubhouse.org>

In the past few years, through private sector partnerships including support from Intel Corporation, the Clubhouse Network has expanded to over 100 affiliated centers in the US and 20 countries worldwide. One such Computer Clubhouse was established in Ramallah, West Bank and has been successful in engaging local youth in the community with creative projects, while retaining an independent voice in the global network.

3. DIGITAL STORYTELLING: CREATIVE EXPRESSON AND EMPOWERMENT

While centers like the Computer Clubhouse provide an open environment for creative engagement and technological fluency, we believe they should be complemented with well-devised media arts programs that can encourage youth to create individual and collaborative projects. This may allow them to better express and relate to challenges and aspirations in the context of their own lives and communities. Such programs may include a range of workshops related to creative writing, digital photography, film/video, sound and theatre performance, providing youth with an enriching medium for creative expression and engagement with their communities. There are several programs worldwide that use a form of digital photography or participatory video with marginalized youth and adults, such as PhotoVoice, Contrast Project, and Witness (a full bibliography is available [6]). Here we describe a novel three-year program focused on digital storytelling and youth media shorts through collaborative summer workshops conducted with community centers in Palestinian refugee camps.

3.1 Voices Beyond Walls: Digital Storytelling Workshops in Refugee Camps

Voices Beyond Walls² (VBW) is a nonprofit participatory media initiative that supports creative expression and advocacy among Palestinian youth in refugee camps, through digital storytelling workshops, new media production, and global dissemination of their work. It was founded by the author (and continues to be developed by an international team) as a model for digital media expression among underserved youth in refugee camps in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It is envisioned as a broader initiative that could be adapted to support marginalized youth among inner-cities and impoverished settings anywhere.

The program is currently organized by a volunteer collective of independent Palestinian and international media technologists, filmmakers, photographers, educators, and activists. Since 2006, VBW has conducted nearly a dozen workshops with 6-7 different refugee camps in the West Bank and Jordan in collaboration with youth centers, volunteer facilitators, and young participants aged 10-16. In each 10-day workshop a team of trainers works closely with 20-25 youth in small groups to produce digital media shorts (the key stages are highlighted in figure 1). Weaving together original stories, drama, poetry, photography, music, and digital video these youth express their own perspectives on Palestinian history, culture and everyday life in the refugee camps, as well as their dreams and aspirations. The following learning objectives guide the design and evaluation of the workshops conducted:

1. Conceptualizing personal narratives through storytelling in small groups
2. Creating scripts, storyboards and production plans for digital media projects

² <http://www.VoicesBeyondWalls.org>

3. Developing greater media literacy and visual aesthetics for creative expression
4. Learning photography, sound, video editing and digital media production techniques
5. Producing extended media projects in the field

The initiative has partnered closely with Palestinian youth community centers including The Freedom Theater in Jenin Camp (Jenin), the Yafa Cultural Center in Balata Camp (Nablus), the Computer Clubhouse in Ramallah, the Lajee Center in Aida Camp (Bethlehem), and the Women and Child Centers in Shu'fat Camp (East Jerusalem). Intensive pre-workshop training sessions (usually 2-3 days long) are conducted with adult volunteers at the centers, while seeking their feedback in tailoring the curricula and program to suit the needs of the youth in their local community. The core team also conducts follow-up site visits for evaluation.

Over the past three years from 2006-2008, the workshops have trained dozens of adult facilitators and engaged hundreds of youth in producing their own digital video shorts. Nearly 60 shorts have been created by teams of youth in workshops conducted thus far (a selection of shorts is available on the VBW website). Most workshops are gradually run by the facilitators and youth trained in previous years, ensuring greater ownership, transfer of skills, and a path to sustainability over time. As the individual centers become more independent they create new learning and production techniques in their own workshops, while sharing and contributing to the overall Voices Beyond Walls network of digital storytelling programs and participating community centers.

A key outcome of the program is showcasing the youth media shorts in screenings among the youth and their families in the respective refugee camps as well as at film festivals and universities everywhere. The goal is to improve wider awareness of the issues experienced by the youth and to amplify their voices within their own communities and audiences worldwide. In that regard, the work emerging from workshops each summer is screened at a youth media festival, organized by VBW and held in Ramallah, for the participants and general public. Selected digital video shorts are submitted to numerous international film festivals and screened at universities and community centers in the US and abroad each year to disseminate the work widely.

4. EVALUATION & LESSONS LEARNED

We have conducted evaluations with each of the youth centers involved with the program over the past three years, through debriefing sessions before/after the workshops, interviews with the trainers and several youth, and assessing the overall process and outcomes. Below we summarize key issues and lessons learned:

1. Designing an effective pre-workshop Training of Trainers (ToT) program is crucial for the success of the workshops. While trainers are generally adept at learning technical skills, greater emphasis must be placed on pedagogical techniques for media literacy, visual aesthetics, narrative structure, and group facilitation. Trainers serve as role models for youth.
2. The most challenging part of all youth workshops is the story development phase, which needs greater focus by trainers and more effective tools and processes to be successful.
3. There is a need for novel tools and cross-sensory exercises that stimulate creativity using role-play, dance/movement, photo montage, storyboarding etc, to spur the imagination of youth to create original stories that go beyond existing themes and narratives they experience everyday.



Figure 1: Stages of the youth media workshops: storytelling circles, storyboarding review, photo/video camera shooting, and digital media production (clockwise from top-left). Photos taken in Shu'fat refugee camp in August 2008, courtesy of Anne Paq.

4. There is a need for a complementary media literacy program to allow youth to gain a stronger appreciation for the medium and aesthetics of film, while developing their own innovative techniques using dance, drama, photo and sketched mixed-media works. Regularly screening and discussing good examples of films and youth media is essential for learning.
5. It has been observed that youth working in mixed-age groups are able to take on distinct roles for production, learning video, sound, and photo techniques easily, however teaching story development and non-linear video editing skills requires more intensive collaboration and some technical background. Hence, the workshops must balance the ways in which conceptual vs. technical skills are introduced to youth ensuring greater attention, retention, and iterative learning.
6. While trainers are asked to work in collaboration with each youth group, there is a genuine concern about the extent to which they should influence the narrative and the emerging edited video shorts, to ensure authenticity and ownership while providing the necessary guidance and demanding high aesthetic and technical standards. In addition, the trainers themselves need regular guidance and supervision to alleviate the inevitable stress of the intensive workshops and environment (particularly while working in refugee camps).
7. A key challenge of working with marginalized youth in refugee camps is dealing with the often hidden psychological trauma pertaining to violence or loss in their own lives or that of their families and community. This is often revealed in the stories they write or the aesthetic choices they make in the production of their work. This must be acknowledged in advance and handled with care throughout the workshops with the support of local child counselors, youth center staff, families, and trained dance/drama therapists.
8. The workshop sessions are very long intense days, which are often exhausting for both the youth and trainers; the program should be extended to span 3-4 weeks with sufficient time for story writing, theater, shooting and editing, but also to better support group dynamics and trust-building throughout.
9. A program running throughout the year is essential to engage youth and trainers to continue developing extended narrative or documentary shorts after completion of the workshops. A

coordinated network of youth centers can share resources and conduct more effective cross training between centers.

10. The completion of digital media shorts by youth provides them an immense sense of shared satisfaction, identity, and confidence, as well as recognition among their peers, family and community. This is especially true among the younger participants, disaffected youth (who often seem to excel in a new medium), and young woman expressing their voice within a conservative society.

5. FUTURE WORK AND CONCLUSIONS

The success of digital storytelling workshops requires close partnerships with local youth centers and organizations, a motivated volunteer staff, cooperatively developed curriculum and training programs, and well-equipped facilities for media learning and production. Many existing community centers in refugee camps, with functioning computer labs and qualified staff, can host such workshops with the provision of additional resources such as donated computers and cameras. However, a sustained program requires access to production-quality studios, AV equipment, broadband access, theater performance spaces, and screening facilities in the neighborhood. Availability of such resources would better support local efforts for ongoing development of creative media projects with youth, while promoting greater media literacy, technology skills, and civic engagement among participants and the community.

In the future, we seek to establish a Summer New Media Institute in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in partnership with several collaborating organizations. The 6-8 week residential institute (perhaps hosted by a university) would offer an intensive new media training program to qualified young adults from marginalized communities to develop specialized skills in youth education, media aesthetics, storytelling, screen-writing, audio/visual production, and dissemination. Participants would complete their own digital video shorts, and serve as facilitators for youth media workshops planned in refugee camps or schools in the region thereafter. Some participants with sufficient expertise may be offered internships with local broadcast media firms or with film/video productions underway. In preparation for the summer institute, we would work closely with collaborating organizations to create well-defined training curricula, technical resources, selection process, and engage with domain experts and practitioners to help develop and co-teach the program.

We believe that with suitable tools, resources and pedagogical support, such programs for training and digital storytelling can be adapted to other critical international settings and inner-city neighborhoods in partnership with local youth organizations. There are several novel areas for developing new design tools to support such youth media programs:

1. Collecting and disseminating best practices for digital storytelling workshops and participatory media programs with youth. Establishing a collaborative online repository of video-based curricula and shared multi-lingual resources submitted by participating youth centers and practitioners in the field. Content should be peer-reviewed and open to all.
2. Designing intuitive digital media tools that seamlessly support the creative life cycle of concept development, script writing, storyboarding, and media production; such tools must grow with the young learner offering more complex possibilities and guidance as the user advances.

3. Facilitating “spatial video narratives” with youth as a means for exploring their local neighborhoods and creating new non-linear story possibilities using cognitive mapping approaches, in conjunction with simplified geo-tagged photo/video and digital map mash-up technologies.
4. Creating collaborative online media production tools to support linking, re-purposing, and cooperative editing of digital narratives produced by youth in different locales.
5. Establishing new online media distribution sites (beyond YouTube) that are youth and issue focused, allowing thematic linkages among video narratives (submitted by youth worldwide) and providing greater context for the complex issues emerging from their video narratives. The site should be moderated by both regional domain practitioners as well as the youth themselves.

While such tools by themselves are not sufficient, they may complement (and should be developed in the context of) best practices disseminated by a network of partner organizations and a community of youth media and educational practitioners. This combination of generalized tools, practices, and pedagogical approaches would support broader adoption of digital storytelling programs for marginalized youth in diverse global settings.

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