

Participatory Digital Storytelling for Data Collection and Research Communication

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Abstract: This study examines the application of digital storytelling as an innovative, emerging participatory data-collection technique and communication medium in research. Digital storytelling combines narrative with multimedia elements—such as images, audio, and video—to convey complex information in a relatable, emotionally engaging way, thereby translating research into compelling, human-centred narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. Several studies have examined the use of digital storytelling. The main focus of what is available has been on its applications in teaching practice and the production of digital stories as a means to archive knowledge for later access by unknown users or to capture tacit knowledge for future use. Few studies focus on conceptualising digital storytelling as a robust research methodology to attain specific outcomes. Digital storytelling can help address the problem of knowledge gaps that frequently arise in research and is positioned here as a means of knowledge brokering (or knowledge transfer and exchange, KTE) and engaged research. KTE has traditionally sought to address knowledge gaps that arise when applying research outputs to inform policy and improve practice. The development of Integrated Knowledge Transfer and Exchange (iTKE) as an alternative to traditional KTE increasingly involves people as research participants throughout the research process, promoting two-way exchange. Engaged Research is presented as a progressive alternative to KTE and iTKE, which values and can incorporate local and indigenous knowledge. In this paper, digital storytelling is explored as a data collection technique that facilitates participatory research, promotes inclusion, values and promotes indigenous knowledge, and improves communication and awareness of issues within communities. Two case studies, the One Ocean Hub initiative with the South African National Parks, and the Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Ecological Economies (IMISEE) project, illustrate its use. Key characteristics and challenges of digital storytelling are identified and discussed. The paper concludes with suggestions for using digital storytelling for knowledge transfer and exchange.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Knowledge Transfer and Exchange, Communication in Research, Knowledge Gaps, Knowledge Brokering

1. Introduction

Research knowledge can potentially be used for instrumental, conceptual, or symbolic ends. That is, “instrumental use [of] research knowledge ... directly shapes policies and results in action; a conceptual use refers to a change in awareness or understanding of certain issues; and a symbolic use merely legitimises existing policies or positions” (Mitton *et al.*, 2007, p. 741). Solutions to complex social and organisational challenges require collaboration among diverse stakeholders (Leydesdorff, 2012), who use knowledge instrumentally. Through research, emerging risks are identified, mitigation and adaptation strategies evaluated, and new, research-informed approaches and technologies developed to support the implementation of sustainable solutions (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019). However, gaps frequently arise between the production of research knowledge and its potential to inform policy and practice, because of a disconnect between the knowledge generated and its real-world application (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012; Khatri *et al.*, 2025). Knowledge brokering, which can be described as “an iterative and bidirectional process of translation, tailoring of information for specific contexts, feedback, and integration” (Hering, 2016, p. 364), ensures knowledge is adopted and used to inform policy and practice. This paper primarily illustrates how digital storytelling can support the knowledge-brokering process.

The next section explores the evolution of approaches to knowledge brokering, followed by a review of the digital storytelling literature. Thereafter, the use of digital storytelling is illustrated, followed by a discussion of selected key characteristics and challenges observed. Finally, this paper concludes with recommendations for the use of digital storytelling in research.

2. Literature Review

The literature review begins by exploring how knowledge brokering in the form of knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE) has traditionally sought to address knowledge gaps. Thereafter, the development of Integrated Knowledge Transfer and Exchange (iTKE) as an alternative to KTE is outlined. Engaged Research is then introduced as an alternative to KTE and iTKE, and digital storytelling is offered as an effective and appropriate medium for knowledge creation and communication.

2.1 Knowledge Brokering, Translation, Transfer and Exchange

In the literature, a wide array of terms is used to refer to various forms of knowledge brokering. Knowledge brokering (Hering, 2016) has also been referred to as knowledge translation (Hering, 2016). In turn, knowledge transfer and exchange are also referred to as knowledge translation, knowledge transfer, and knowledge exchange (Van Eerd and Saunders, 2017). All these concepts are used to address the gap between the knowledge created and its use. In this paper, the term “knowledge transfer and exchange” (KTE) will be used. KTE has its origins in Health Sciences, acknowledging the inability to translate research findings into practice or to inform policy (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012). KTE was therefore proposed as an approach to address this situation.

An increasing number of studies have applied KTE, with the work of Lavis and colleagues providing guidance on its implementation (Lavis *et al.*, 2009). Five key questions shape these guidelines, which highlight communication elements of (1) the content of the message, (2) the messenger who conveys it, (3) to which target audience, (4) how it is conveyed (i.e. what transfer process and supporting communication infrastructure), and (5) with what effect? (Lavis *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, the primary interest of KTE has been four target audience groups: the general public as users of health services, service providers, managerial decision-makers, and policy decision-makers (Lavis *et al.*, 2003).

Integrated Knowledge Transfer and Exchange (iKTE) has developed from KTE, and is characterised by a “two-way exchange between researchers and diverse stakeholders across all phases of the research process, including study design and implementation, analysis and synthesis and dissemination” (Jetha *et al.*, 2022, p. 4). That is, rather than adopting a “push” or “pull” approach to communicating research results, an equitable exchange is promoted (Yonas *et al.*, 2013). It is viewed as a superior approach, in viewing the knowledge user as an equal partner and sometimes co-creator (Van Eerd and Saunders, 2017). This co-creation is to increase the relevance of the research and its adoption (Jetha *et al.*, 2022). In addition, research results are communicated in accessible language and through accessible channels (Van Eerd and Saunders, 2017). While the vast majority of research has been medical-health related, there have also been studies applying iKTE in user-centred design (Guay *et al.*, 2020), agricultural catchment programmes (Mellander *et al.*, 2022), and occupational health and safety (Van Eerd and Saunders, 2017).

Engaged research refers to a range of methodological approaches that encourage collaborative research design and participatory engagement with research participants (Barkin *et al.*, 2013; Mikesell *et al.*, 2013). For example, in community-based participatory research (CBPR), community participation is encouraged throughout the research process, including determining a research question, collecting and analysing data, disseminating the findings, and designing action (Collins *et al.*, 2018). Like iKTE, engaged research approaches are concerned with the inclusion of non-expert communities in the research process, but they also draw on diverse knowledge to inform the research. That is, community-engaged research acknowledges that community-based groups and organisations hold credible and intimate insights into the prevailing assets, challenges, and lived experiences of their communities and constituencies (Pasick *et al.*, 2010). It recognises that some of this knowledge is tacit and that knowledge gaps arise when tacit knowledge is ignored, and only explicit and formal scientific knowledge is valued and used (Boersema, 2024). Therefore, engaged research aims to include community voices, indigenous knowledge, and indigenous knowledge systems (Kanu and Ndubisi, 2020) in policy and formal decision-making, as well as to inform the actions to address the social issues experienced by participating communities.

Central to the KTE, iKTE and engaged research processes is communication. Mitton *et al.* (2007) identify a range of communication related strategies available for knowledge transfer and exchange, including (1) face-to-face exchanges between decision makers and researchers, (2) education sessions for decision makers, (3) networks and communities of practice, (4) facilitated meetings between decision makers and researchers, (5) interactive, multidisciplinary workshops, (6) capacity building within organisations, (7) web-based information, electronic communications, and (8) steering committees that include local experts in the design, conduct, and interpretation of research. However, engaged research approaches require a commitment to participatory methods to ensure genuine engagement, and digital storytelling can address this requirement.

2.2 Digital Storytelling

In research, a digital story is described as “a 2 to 5 minute audio-visual clip combining photographs with voice-over narration (and other audio if desired)” created by research participants (De Jager *et al.*, 2017, p. 2549). Digital storytelling combines narrative with multimedia elements—such as images, audio, and video—to convey complex information in a relatable, emotionally engaging way (Sarica, 2023). Cinematography techniques are

used to further imply meaning through visuals and audio. Couldry (2009, p.15) describes digital storytelling as having “the ability to represent the world around us using a shared infrastructure.”

While storytelling has been used extensively for educational purposes (Wu and Chen, 2020), it is also emerging as a qualitative research methodology (Davey and Benjaminsen, 2021). Researchers have explored using storytelling to uncover people’s implicit, experience-based knowledge, but it remains unclear which kinds of tacit knowledge can or cannot be effectively shared through digital stories (Petrucchio, 2022). The narratives of digital stories are often inspired by the storyteller’s lived experiences. Digital storytelling creates an archive of people’s lived experiences (Nordin *et al.*, 2023), and can be used as a tool for data interpretation and communication (Davey and Benjaminsen, 2021). There has also been some application of digital storytelling in business and management studies, in areas such as public relations (Allagui and Breslow, 2016), hospitality and tourism (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2024; Li *et al.*, 2024), crowdfunding (Kim and Hall, 2020), and consumer behaviour (Lisboa *et al.*, 2025; Pera and Viglia, 2016).

While research can benefit from employing digital storytelling, there are additional benefits for research participants as well. Firstly, video can facilitate the inclusion of multiple languages and translations, which contributes to the recognition and legitimisation of indigenous languages (Ambala, 2016). Secondly, community members, though not necessarily experts in filmmaking, possess invaluable knowledge about their personal and communal lives and experiences (Chávez *et al.*, 2004), and sharing this knowledge can be important for catharsis or healing for individuals or groups (Ferrari *et al.*, 2015). Thirdly, storytelling facilitates a deeper understanding of participants’ situations and their approaches to social change in the first instance (Hull and Katz, 2006). Fourthly, storytelling provides a means of collective reflection (Yan *et al.*, 2021).

3. Using Digital Storytelling in Research

Two cases of digital storytelling are illustrated next. These are the “One Ocean Hub” initiative with the South African National Parks, and the Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Ecological Economies (IMISEE) project.

3.1 South African National Parks

Digital storytelling was used as a method for trans-sector and transdisciplinary research, facilitated by three South African universities - Rhodes University, Nelson Mandela University, and the University of Pretoria - and involving researchers from the South African National Parks (SANParks) (South African National Parks, 2026), and funded by the One Ocean Hub. The One Ocean Hub is an international research programme for sustainable development that aims to promote fair and inclusive decision-making in ocean management, enabling people and the planet to flourish (One Ocean Hub, 2026). SANParks is a public entity that falls under the national Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, 2026). It is mandated to facilitate the inclusive conservation of over 20 protected national parks. The research project aimed to explore the cultural heritage of the Tsitsikamma coastal region in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (Eastern Cape Parks & Tourism Agency, 2026). Cultural heritage describes the physical objects or places, as well as intangible aspects such as language or cultural behaviour, that are passed on from generation to generation (Bortolotto, 2007). The project produced maps and other findings that help to keep physical spaces dynamic and actively engaged, rather than fixed or static. It aimed to make visible the multilayered cultural assets, meanings, and identities of Tsitsikamma, while foregrounding diverse local knowledges and perspectives. To do so, researchers used a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews, paper-based participatory geographic Information Systems (PGIS), Direct-to-Digital (D2D) mapping, and digital storytelling.

A digital storytelling workshop was conducted with SANParks employees who were residents of the area. The project draws on indigenous knowledge systems, creating and sharing knowledge through processes that are integrated with contemporary digital tools. Using workshop-based, collective engagement that supports individual expression, participants produced short, two-minute narrative multimedia video compilations exploring the theme of cultural heritage in Tsitsikamma. Digital storytelling was approached as a fluid, participant-led process in which contributors guided the direction the research should take, acting as creators of data rather than purely sources from whom information was extracted. Story work took place through story circles, where participants shared their stories with others. Language use throughout the workshops was flexible, with translators available to support participants where needed. Most stories were completed and ready to share within the workshop timeframe, although participants worked at varying paces—some required

step-by-step guidance while others progressed more independently. The completed stories were shared at the end of the process, creating a sense of collective accomplishment.

Many participants created stories that focused more on their personal experiences and that were unrelated to Tsitsikamma's cultural heritage. In doing so, they articulated understandings of the landscape as deeply interconnected with other natural environments and broader social conditions. At the same time, the participants' stories did not directly address the research question initially posed. Therefore, as a research project, however, the material gathered did not always align neatly with the initial focus on ocean narratives, as participants often expanded the themes beyond the original scope.

3.2 Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Ecological Economies (IMISEE) project

The second case illustrates how digital storytelling was used in the Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Environmental Economies (IMISEE) research project. The project involved university-based researchers from the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB) and Rhodes University's Music and Musicology Department, as well as community-based researchers from the Keiskamma Arts Project, a non-profit organisation based in the coastal town of Hamburg. Through collaborative engagement and story work, the project sought to develop nature-based solutions to human development challenges in marine environments. Digital storytelling was introduced as a shared-narrative method through which the natural sciences, the humanities, and Indigenous knowledge systems could be brought into dialogue (Cunsolo Willox *et al.*, 2013). The study explored how this method could shape participants' understanding of the project and of coastal degradation associated with climate change. Both digital storytelling workshops and interviews were conducted. Four workshops were held with 12 researchers, all responding to a common prompt: What is your role in the IMISEE project, and what do you understand about the impact of climate change on the ocean?

Early findings suggest that digital storytelling functioned as both a capacity-building and knowledge-integration tool. Participants developed practical skills in producing short, narrative multimedia outputs that could communicate their work to non-academic audiences. More significantly, the process contributed to deeper mutual understanding among co-researchers, making visible the diverse interests, epistemological orientations, and positionalities within the project. The stories served as an internal mechanism for knowledge exchange and as resources for science communication and public engagement. This communicative dimension proved valuable as the project entered a phase requiring external funding and broader dissemination to support scaling and implementation.

4. Discussion

This paper has illustrated the use of digital storytelling for research purposes, and particularly as a communication strategy for knowledge transfer and exchange in engaged research (Mitton *et al.*, 2007). As an emerging research method, there are no established procedures for digital storytelling (Davey and Benjaminsen, 2021). However, the two illustrative cases highlight key characteristics of digital storytelling: a participatory premise balanced by peer feedback.

Firstly, the cases illustrate the participatory approach to designing digital storytelling workshops (Ambala, 2016; Cunsolo Willox *et al.*, 2013). That is, research participants get to lead and direct the narratives, thereby retaining ownership of their stories and maintaining the authenticity of their experiences (Nordin *et al.*, 2023) when sharing them as a communication strategy for knowledge transfer and exchange. By implication, external communication content for knowledge transfer and exchange purposes is already available, and no further interpretation of the data is needed. As a result, research knowledge becomes more accessible and actionable for community members (Van Eerd and Saunders, 2017).

Secondly, story work (Gachago and Sykes, 2017) facilitates a dialogical conversation amongst peers and other stakeholders. This provides an opportunity to test how the story is communicated and to receive peer feedback. This collaboration ensures more robust stories are produced. However, the cases also illustrate how this validation of stories can create tension between a research participant's personal objectives for participating in the research and the agreed-upon research objectives at the start of the research. This may leave researchers with research outputs that do not fully align with the research problems they had in mind from the outset and do not adequately address the research mandate set by funders.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, digital storytelling has been showcased as a communication method for knowledge transfer and exchange. It has described how direct and authentic communication outputs are produced, which are accessible and open forms of communication. It is therefore recommended that, when acting as knowledge brokers (Hering, 2016), researchers adopt digital storytelling as a method to more effectively inform policy and practice in addressing complex social challenges, particularly when confronting research problems that require the generation of instrumental knowledge and community support and action. It is also recommended that researchers carefully manage expectations when adopting digital storytelling as a participatory approach, balancing the needs and expectations of research participants and communities with those of researchers and funders, and other stakeholders.

Ethics Declaration

Permission was granted by Rhodes University's Human Research Ethics Committee for the two case studies referred to in the paper, which involved human participants. The Ethics approval reference numbers are IMISEE: 2022-4951-7185 and SANParks: 2021-2790-5991

AI Declaration

Grammarly was used to check and edit the spelling and grammar during the paper's development.

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