Civil Participation through Digital Storytelling to Enhance Lifelong Learning

Federica Pesce, Antonia Silvaggi,
Patrizia Braga, Ludovica De Angelis, Maura Romano
Melting Pro Laboratorio per la Cultura (Italy)
info@meltingpro.org

Abstract

This paper aims to argue how active participation triggered through Digital Storytelling can become one of the cornerstones of social innovation. Besides enabling people to structure society in an alternative way, it encourages the development of competencies and commitment to foster the growing of better citizens.

Melting Pro. Laboratorio per la cultura, a cultural organization based in Rome (IT), interprets active participation as a fundamental part of its own line of research by declining it in its project activities, according to several themes: training and learning, valorisation and preservations of heritage, enlargement and diversification of audiences (audience development).

In this paper the starting point of the discussion are two projects run by the association, where digital storytelling is used as a main tool for civil participation as a means to foster lifelong learning: Diamond – Dialoguing Museums For A New Cultural Democracy and Intus- Intelligenza ambientale, Narratività, Tagging delle risorse Urbane e Sensoristica diffusa (environmental Intelligence, Narration, Tagging of urban resources and diffuse sensoristic).

1. Innovation, Participation and Lifelong Learning

To achieve *smart*, *sustainable* and *inclusive* growth, as stressed in Europe 2020 strategy [1], compelling evidence tell us that a key factor is to include civil participation as a fundamental step to develop activities that rely on co-design approaches and philosophy. One aspect around innovation is that it is rooted in solutions that strengthen the capacity of citizens to act from the early stages of a process. In other words, ideas enable innovative and structural impact on society because they are based on the active role of citizens that are therefore not just carrier but *makers* of their own rights.

Going beyond the idea of innovation as a result of striking discoveries, Melting Pro intends innovation as a process that can be managed, promoted, enhanced by the contribution of each. Not far from the approach expressed in the Open Book [2], (social) innovation can be seen as those ideas, models, services and products that meet the needs of society in a new and more incisive way, multiplying collaborations and strengthening ties.

Lifelong learning dimension is here essential to the development of the society and its individuals, to be promoted as a tool for active citizenship with regards to individual's needs in terms of growth, personal satisfaction and self-management.

A powerful approach to lifelong learning and civil participation is represented by Digital Storytelling (DS), a method that combines the tradition of oral narration with modern technical tools. Digital stories allow individuals, regardless their social or economical background, to give others an insight into their everyday lives, engaging participants and the entire community by having a cognitive and emotional impact.

In this paper two case studies on DS, two projects in which by Melting Pro. Laboratorio per la cultura is involved, are valued as a boot to trigger a discussion around lifelong learning and civil participation.

2. The EU case study

2.1. When museums meet DST

Diamond -Dialoguing Museums For A New Cultural Democracy [3], is a two-year LLP- Grundtvig funded project - ending in October 2014- aimed at realizing museum activities addressed to marginalized groups. It intends to do so by exploiting the enormous potential of museums as tools of empowerment and social inclusion and that of Digital Storytelling (DS) within the cultural and social domain by training museum professionals in the DS methodology and by using it in the implementation and evaluation of the project's activities. The consortium is composed by three scientific museums and two training research centres based in Italy, Spain and Romania which are committed to providing learning opportunities for adult people (using also ICT).

The Digital storytelling methodology has been tested in the project to develop project addressed to engage marginalised groups, due to the fact that it is a flexible tool suitable to be used by all people regardless their age, background, level of digital or literally skills. As Joe Lambert states [4] "It privileges self – expression and self – awareness over concerns of publication and audience. Process over product. […] The storyteller ideally owns the stories, in every sense (Lambert, pg. 108). The important concept behind is the power of telling a story, giving voice to people who never had a chance to express themselves. Telling stories is indeed an activity embedded in human being's way of making sense of reality, shared by all cultures no matter where they come from and what sort of environment they live in. The digital device is a tool that helps the story to be heard and visible to others. To have a tangible output to use as one wishes: share it online, keep it in a draw, leave it in a museum or share it with family, friends only or, why not, strangers. The digital part, software and hardware, innovate and change rapidly, but the stories are what we are left with.

DS in a workshop setting, helps people to create their own story by using a participatory approach and media tools, where the central part of the process is finding a "own" personal story and sharing throughout. A sense of ownership and empowerment is build all along.

Evidence is showing that the use of DS is a powerful tool in terms of individual empowerment in order to learn (new knowledge), to learn how to do (new competences) and to learn how to be (self-development, creativity, self expression, social skills). In addition DS can enhance the role of museum as learning places. To build better, informed citizens multiplying opportunities for learning is vital: learning on the job, through participation in cultural activities, learning in family set ups. Providing suitable and truly accessible learning pathways tailored to the people's needs aimed at improving their competences and ensuring opportunities to develop social skills, ultimately is the challenge for a more sustainable, smart and inclusive society.

Culture is used as a tool to improve self-esteem, self–consciousness and sense of citizenship, supporting at the same time processes of lifelong learning and of intercultural dialogue.

The innovation of the project lies also in the idea of using DS as tool to provide a deep analysis of tools and methodologies addressed to measure the educational-cognitive impact of museums activities within society. It aims at identifying and developing qualitative indicators appropriate to measure the social and cultural/educational impact of this kind of museum activities; DS will be/has been used also as a tool of qualitative evaluation in itself, since it helps participants to express their feelings and new knowledge about the activities realized within the museums [5].

3. The IT case study

3.1. A new model for cultural tourism

Cultural tourism has been based mainly upon a traditional model of fruition where the visitors were conceived as passive individuals, willing to read some given information eventually. Only recently the model has been replaced by a more interactive approach, thanks certainly to a cultural shift in the understanding of public participation and to the use of multimedia technologies that has led to a conception of cultural tourism closer to the informal learning dimension based on amusement.

Far from the traditional concept of entertainment, cultural heritage is a fluid [6] solution able to transform itself interactively through the involvement and participation of people. Museums, archives,

landmarks, squares, streets are places that keep together past memories and experiences and, at the same time, trigger learning experiences through a continuous dialogue between past, present and future. Are places where people can live unique experience, just like a story, versatile and emotional, coloured by the languages and the virtual culture of contemporaneity [7].

From this new model of cultural tourism - which endorse a broad vision of spaces together with technology, informal learning, narration and culture - stems the project Intus, supported by the Ministry of Education and Research (MIUR) under the National Operational Programme " Research and Competitiveness 2007-2013" - Smart Cities and Communities and Social Innovation – Social innovation Projects.

Intus stands for Environmental Intelligence, Narratives, Tagging of Urban Resources and Extensive Sensors and is promoted by seven Italian youngsters from Corleone (Sicily) together with Melting Pro. Laboratorio per la cultura, Space SRL, Rete Iter and il Germoglio.

The project offers innovative and technological solutions for the creation of cultural tourism services based on experiential and personalized fruition of the places. The aim is to reveal the hidden level of identity specific to each site, to engage visitors into a participatory storytelling adventure.

While the project is intended to be a replicable system devoted to the valorisation of heritage, Intus is tested on the towns of Corleone (Sicily, IT) using material coming from the CIDMA archive (Centre for Documentation on the Mafia and Anti-Mafia Movement) a city archives that contains the proceedings of the maxi-trial Falcone and Borsellino.

The first step is indeed to obtain extract from archival sources and libraries to use afterwards within the cultural and touristic service.

After the reorganization, inventory and digitization of the most significant documents, narrative paths related to the city are produced by retracing the history of the territory through the stories of its citizens, the re- discovery of its traditions, the unveiling of the rich but still unknown tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The aim here is to return a different image of the territory of Corleone, giving back a different perception from that one conveyed in time from the stereotypes and clichés.

The territory will be told through stories drawn up by listening to the citizens of Corleone through a *participatory process*. Memories, suggestions, stories about the city squares and monuments are collected and filtered eventually by the attentive eyes of the young people who live the city today, owners of that liquid thought that brings the narratives in the unexplored dimension of contemporary life.

Stories are then enriched by multimedia content (music, videos, sounds, photos, archive materials) and made available on-site, to be enjoyed with the aid of a tablet, and via the web.

It is the city now that speaks to the his visitors, offering its own stories, thanks to a diffuse system of sensors for *places of interest* defined in the urban space.This choice enhances the fruition of cultural heritage in Corleone, widening the offer to a different audience.

The understanding of cultural heritage as an informal learning environment it is enhanced by a concept of tourism culturally participated where new values for knowledge, memory and spaces are promoted, as well as the need to interrelate to an extended public.

The culture puts itself at the service of the territory, reinterpreting it and giving back a project able to address a specific need, conveying new values and generating, at the same time, new needs and expectations that are crucial to reconstruct social maps and textures and to boost processes of learning, innovation and change.

4. Conclusions

Participation through digital storytelling implies tight involvement, allowing participants to have a say in the way questions and projects are shaped. The results typically better reflects customer needs, generating useful information and creating a feeling of involvement and ownership that is often felt lacking in traditional approaches to civic engagement. In this context, stories told and recorded become essential tools to stay alive and to give continuity to the past, giving the chance to keep

memories and to grow individually and as community at the same time, providing answers to the major challenges of the world on the one hand, and to individual needs on the other.

In these projects participation implies necessarily an audience development strategy- a process of strategic and dynamic involvement, extension and diversification of the public – that is a necessary component of culture in terms of access, social inclusion and knowledge. Working for a greater awareness with the public about the processes taking place in the society and about their role and their potential with respect to these, it is possible by taking the path of active participation.

Providing suitable and truly accessible learning pathways tailored to the people's needs aimed at improving their competences and ensuring opportunities to develop social skills ultimately is the challenge for a more sustainable, smart and inclusive society.

Culture is used as a tool to improve self-esteem, self–consciousness and sense of citizenship, supporting at the same time processes of lifelong learning and of intercultural dialogue.

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[2] Caulier Grice J, Mulgan G, Murray R , The Open Book Of Social Innovation, Nesta, UK 2010

[3] http://www.diamondmuseums.eu

[4] Lambert J., Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community, 2013

[5] This aspect is currently an on-going research developed by Elisabetta Falchetti, Civic Zoological Museum of Rome and Cristina Da Milano, Eccom - European Centre for Cultural Organization and Management, the relevant findings and a complete analysis of the project's results will be part of a publication in four languages available at the end of the project itself.

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