Sites of possibility: applied theatre and digital storytelling with youth

Megan Alrutz

To cite this article: Megan Alrutz (2013) Sites of possibility: applied theatre and digital storytelling with youth, Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 18:1, 44-57, DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2012.756169

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2012.756169

Published online: 20 Feb 2013.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 718

View related articles
Sites of possibility: applied theatre and digital storytelling with youth

Megan Alrutz*

Department of Theatre & Dance, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

As a process for engaging marginalised voices in the social/cultural economy of the media, digital storytelling has garnered much attention from media artists, community organisers and scholars since the early 1990s. The practice of digital storytelling, or the making and sharing of personal narratives through recorded voice-overs, digital photography and video, music and/or digitally composed multi-media collages, parallels many aspects of applied drama/theatre; and yet, little scholarship exists around how digital storytelling can and does function as an intentionally facilitated, critical performance practice with young people. This article argues that digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis can revision the ways we represent and engage young people in society. The author draws on practical examples from an applied theatre project to examine how digital storytelling, as both a creative process and a performance product, functions as a political act of cultural production. She demonstrates how, together, live and mediated performance practices offer young people an opportunity to reflect and archive – (re)vision and (re)construct – complex notions of identity, culture and community.

Introduction: a personal narrative

My office phone rang and a concerned citizen was yelling at me from the other end of the line. ‘How dare you. How dare you!’ she said:

I can’t believe that you have the nerve to spend my tax dollars on theatre and media programmes for those kids – those kids whose parents are prostitutes and liars and drug addicts. Why should they get special treatment – special arts programmes? There are a lot of other kids, good kids, that deserve that platform.

And the caller was right – lots of other kids also deserve that platform, and applied theatre and digital media programmes can and should offer many communities of youth the opportunity to participate in something valuable, something powerful, in our society.

The anonymous caller eventually hung up on me. And although listening to her ranting monologue proved challenging, and in many ways disheartening, her narrative pushed me to revisit how and why performing one’s personal story can and does constitute the making and disruption of systems of power. To tell your story for a public, to share your (perhaps marginalised, new, unpopular or uncomfortable) narratives, has the potential to affect how each of us sees the past, participates in the present and imagines the future.

*Email: malrutz@austin.utexas.edu

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
In this particular instance, the youth participants referred to by the caller were involved in a community-based digital storytelling programme that engaged applied theatre and digital media to support youth in creating digital stories – or short, personally narrated movies and digital performance collages. The process and the products of this embodied and mediated performance programme intentionally worked to disrupt hegemonic narratives about youth identity, and more specifically, ideologies such as that of the irate caller. Every so often, the politics of applied theatre become amplified for the public. In this particular moment, the tensions raised around the foregrounding of marginalised youth voices made me reflect more fully on the value of critical representational practices, as well as the messy relationships between youth, performance and power.

Media education, specifically media literacy programmes designed for youth, has been criticised for promoting a protectionist agenda narrowly focused on developing educated consumers (Goodman 2003; Hill and Vasudevan 2008), rather than ‘agentive selves’ (Hull and Katz 2006) who also act as critical producers of their own media. With this article, I examine how digital storytelling, when situated as an applied theatre praxis, offers youth participants new ways of seeing, constructing and responding to the world around us. The theory and practice of this interdisciplinary performance work challenge traditional boundaries between youth as consumers and youth as producers. Together, applied theatre and digital storytelling encourage young people and the artists who work with them to become critically engaged ‘prosumers’,1 or individuals who create products, ideas and culture that they wish to consume. Digital storytelling, as both a devising process and a performance product, functions as a political act of cultural production. It offers young people an opportunity to reflect and archive – (re)vision and (re)construct – complex notions of (their) identity, culture and community. Drawing on examples from my own digital storytelling and applied performance work, I offer teaching artists, theatre educators and applied theatre makers an examination of applied theatre as a theoretical and practical framework for facilitating culturally, socially and aesthetically engaged digital storytelling practices with youth.

Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis

Digital storytelling has garnered much attention from media artists, community organisers and scholars since the early 1990s, as a process for engaging marginalised voices in the social/cultural economy of the media. Various forms of digital media and technology have become more accessible to ‘ordinary people’ and rapid advances in technology continue to offer applied theatre artists new ways of engaging youth and communities in applied performance practices. In some ways, the practice of digital storytelling parallels key aspects of applied drama/theatre; and yet, little scholarship exists around how digital storytelling can and does function as an intentionally facilitated, critically engaged performance practice with young people. With the increasing popularity of media in our everyday lives, how can applied theatre artists harness the potential of digital media and invite youth to contribute to and critique systems of power in and through the performance of their own stories? What challenges does digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis present?

In a broad sense, the term digital storytelling encompasses a wide range of self-produced media – such as blogs and podcasts – that employ story and digital
technologies for personal expression. In a strict sense though, and more to the topic of my research and creative activity, digital storytelling refers to the creation of two to three minute personal stories performed through a combination of first person, narrated voice-overs, still and/or moving images and music or sound. This specific genre of digital storytelling was formally developed by media/performance artists Joe Lambert and the late Dana Atchley with the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkley, California (Center for Digital Storytelling) and has been well documented by Lambert (2010, 2009), Hartley and McWilliams (2009), and others. The Center’s globally implemented digital storytelling process aims to democratise media production by guiding non-professionals to produce (rather than simply consume) mediatised stories about their own lives. As demonstrated by Hartley and McWilliams (2009); Hill and Vasudevan (2008); and Lundby (2008), digital storytelling has now become an international movement of sorts utilised by libraries, schools, museums and other cultural and business institutions to engage and interact with their constituents.

According to Lambert (2010), digital storytelling grows out of efforts to situate digital media production in community-based settings and to engage the general public in representational practices traditionally reserved for elite groups of highly-trained media specialists. Despite its success in achieving these ends, digital storytelling (and information technology in general) has suffered criticism for its focus on the individual user and sometimes isolated expression of personal concerns and perspectives. Social and participatory media scholars Jerry Watkins and Angelina Russo point to a need for interactive digital practices that intentionally ‘respond to an ongoing debate’ in society and focus on furthering human relationships (Watkins and Russo 2009, 271).

In many ways, applied theatre is uniquely situated to respond to these challenges. Applied theatre scholar Helen Nicholson argues that in theatre, knowledge – or meaning making – is inherently ‘embodied, culturally located and socially distributed’ (2005, 39). In other words, the collaborative and interactive nature of theatre works to construct and perform relationships between self, others and society. While applied theatre draws on individual experiences and cultures, it also relies on group participation and the building of an intentional community of collaborators; applied theatre works to increase understanding and build dialogue, if not alliances, specifically among its collaborators. Applied theatre scholar Bethany Nelson further suggests that ‘The community-rich environment of [ADT] is uniquely well-positioned to facilitate the development of a sense of power in students and a capacity to act on and change their world’ (2011, 166). In ADT settings, participants are invited to engage as creators, decision-makers and leaders. Youth experience how their choices, their actions, can affect themselves and others and ultimately shape outcomes – including the creative process, the group dialogues and the performance products.

Moreover, situating digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis, or an ‘embodied synthesis of theory and practice’ (Nicholson 2005, 56), speaks to Watkins and Russo’s concerns by placing youth’s personal narratives in conversation with larger community and societal questions and debates – both during the process of devising and performing, and through the intentionally facilitated dissemination of, and reflection on, the product. Nicholson further describes applied theatre praxis as ‘a cyclical process in which practice generates new insights and where, reciprocally, theoretical ideas are interrogated, created and embodied in practice’ (2005, 39). Locating digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis, then, requires youth participants to practice collaboration, and critical reflection on self, others and
society. This pairing of disciplines also shifts the focus of what could be a traditional (product-centred or director-driven) creative process to include embodied activities with an often self-reflective, interactive and critically conscious lens.

The merging of applied theatre and digital storytelling allows me to integrate critical drama-based pedagogy (i.e., embodied and performative activities that give attention to power hierarchies and inequities), theatre and performance techniques (e.g., devising, improvisation, image work and storytelling), and digital media practices (e.g., digital photography/videography, voice-overs and digital editing) within a single performance project. While the methods for combining these elements vary with each group and context, the underlying form, approach and function of the work remain the same. Namely, the form is both embodied and mediated; the approach is critically engaged; and the function is to value the experiences and wisdom of young people (Alrutz 2011, Forthcoming, 18). To this end, I often begin an applied theatre and digital storytelling process with theatre games that invite youth to participate at their own comfort level within a tightly structured group process. Well-known performance warm-ups such as Zip, Zap, Zop (see Teampedia) or Cover the Space (see Cahnmann-Taylor) set the stage for equitable and reliable participation among group members, as well as embodied ways of communicating with one another. Following these ensemble-building exercises, I might facilitate a small-group challenge designed to engage participants more directly with each other as they cooperate to solve a problem or complete a task together. For example, I sometimes invite youth to engage in a digital scavenger hunt in which small groups capture a series of digital photographs around an open-ended question, such as ‘what do you wish people paid more attention to?’ The digital images might then be interpreted or translated into lines of dialogue, titles, scenes, stories or other performative formats. Group challenges such as this one invite participants to reflect on an open-ended question or theme and to cooperatively generate visual, written and performative representations of the ideas and experiences of the group. As youth begin to work as an ensemble, I emphasise more critically engaged applied theatre activities. Exercises such as The Great Game of Power (Boal 1992, 150) offer metaphors and other entry points for examining the depiction and performance of power in our lives, and more specifically within the photographs, stories and creative representations produced by the youth. Creating and reading images as a collective can produce themes and questions relevant to the group, and this reflective and generative process ultimately shapes the direction of the performance-making process. Drawing on the images, words and ideas generated from these interactive practices, youth begin devising personal narratives, or scripts, for a digital story. Additional embodied and mediated activities, such as capturing digital self-portraits, improvising personal stories within a story circle and creating images or movement sequences with the body, can produce a variety of assets (story, narrative, pictures, vocal track or voice-over) needed to produce a digital story. While this process produces performative material and introduces young people to theatre and digital storytelling conventions (McGeoch and Hughes 2009, 125), it also offers a variety of creative structures for reflecting on personal stories and examining larger meta-narratives that grow out of our lived experiences.

Through his work with the Center for Digital Storytelling, Joe Lambert offers seven key steps (formally detailed as ‘elements’ in earlier publications) that guide the digital storytelling process: owning your insights; owning your emotions; finding the
moment; seeing your story; hearing your story; assembling your story and sharing your story (Lambert 2010, 29–48). Despite my emphasis on an applied theatre ethos, digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis remains underpinned by these seven steps. The seven steps guide participants’ attention to critical steps in digital storytelling (and storytelling in general), while applied theatre offers a complementary arsenal of collaborative, reflective and embodied structures for moving through these steps. Embodied and mediated performance practices support youth in communicating personal insights and emotions, as well as naming dramatic conflict and moments of personal change (or Lambert’s ‘moment’). Together, these practices also offer young people a collaborative space to create, share and reflect on experiences, stories and realities from their own lives.

Rather than simply working towards a highly polished digital or embodied performance product though, this interdisciplinary praxis employs elements of theatre and performance as tools to explore questions of power, privilege and identity. Digital video and photography become creative modes for expressing and interrogating one’s experiences and perspectives – for seeing one’s self, others and the world reflected in a framed and valued space/screen. Drawing on constructivist and liberatory pedagogies put forth by Lev Vygotsky (1978), Paolo Freire (1969), bell hooks (1994), Clar Doyle (1993) and others, this creative process is co-constructed by youth participants in collaboration with an adult teaching artist. Ideally, youth practice theatre and digital media-making with intention around, and attention to, critical consciousness around identity-based politics and inequities. Moreover, the expertise and wisdom of the youth become central to the project. Within applied theatre praxis, the politics of representation, identity and performance are often made visible to participants within the process and the products of the work. Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis can help locate a traditional digital storytelling process within a collaborative, critical pedagogical framework.

As an applied theatre artist engaged with digital media, my focus lies in devising and performing personal stories and community narratives with young people. The collaborative applied theatre process works to activate personal stories of the group, as well as possibilities for dialogue and justice envisioned by youth participants. I am interested in how digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis invites youth to critically reflect on and (re)imagine metanarratives about their lives. In the examples that follow, I offer some of the ways that this interdisciplinary praxis can prompt youth (and the teaching artists who work with them) to reflect on, create and contribute to their wider cultural landscapes.

Identifying and re-visioning personal identity and community narratives

Digital storytelling, as a performance process and medium, invites participants to reflect and archive, as well as (re)vision and construct, complex notions of who they are in the world. Framing digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis alerts young people to the ways that their media-making can become intentional, political acts of cultural production – a process from which youth are often excluded. Moreover, digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis offers a performance process and product that critically examines and acts on systems of power and oppression that directly shape our lives. Devising story and performance in this way challenges and supports youth to (re)assemble, literally re-member, experiences and narratives in their lives.
Several years ago, I worked with a group of youth who collectively devised and performed 'We Come From Parramore', a digital story examining their urban US American neighbourhood. While the neighbourhood of Parramore is sometimes touted by city officials for its ‘rich cultural history’, the current city Mayor also describes this once prospering African-American neighbourhood as the city’s ‘most blighted community […],’ citing high rates of child poverty, as well as disproportionate juvenile drop-out and arrest rates (Pathways). In 2005, city officials, non-profit organisations and Parramore residents began significant dialogues, partnerships and operations aimed at ‘reducing crime and maintaining livable neighborhoods’ in the city (National Network). Around this same time, I had the privilege of working as an applied theatre artist for over two years with various groups of youth living in the Parramore neighbourhood, which bordered our university campus. Together, we devised individual and group digital stories about a range of topics from neighbourhood violence to family legacy. The youth shared/performed some of the digital stories in public spaces, such as local community centres, churches, schools and the city council’s chamber, while other pieces were played for more select groups of friends and family. While we did not explicitly measure individual or community change specific to these applied performance projects, I analyse elements of our creative process in order to share frameworks and questions for facilitating digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis.

‘We Come From Parramore’, the digital story that I unpack below, was created as part of a larger project exploring the assumptions that we make about people and places. The youth and I developed two overarching questions that guided our creative process: where do I come from? and what kind of a place do I call home? ‘We come from Parramore’ was one of the first digital stories devised for this project. This performance piece served as the group’s performative response to some negative media about the Parramore neighbourhood, and more generally to racist and classist perceptions of minority youth living and attending school in Parramore. Throughout our creative process, the young participants who devised this digital story raised and explored questions and issues around identity- and place-based stereotypes (our own and others’), as well as what it means to be part of any simultaneously real and imagined place/space defined as a neighbourhood.

Below is a descriptive storyboard that outlines two tracks of the group’s collective digital story, specifically what you hear and what you see when viewing the digital story. The left hand column includes the scripted narrative that is performed through a recorded voice-over, which includes the voices of many different youth. The right-hand column briefly describes the digital images the viewer sees in conjunction with each line of the voice-over.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript of the voice-over</th>
<th>Description of the visual image(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I come from Parramore.</td>
<td>Close-up of the green street sign that reads Parramore Ave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place full of black people, so I identify myself as the majority.</td>
<td>Large jar filled with black jellybeans and a sprinkling of a few brightly coloured jellybeans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circle of black people’s outstretched hands warming around a small fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place where my family is very close, where my heart comes first, and you must dream for hope.</td>
<td>Image of a large family, kids with award certificates, a celebration in a house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place where you have to have the heart of a lion to be at the top of the food chain,</td>
<td>Series of three images that depict big, male lions chasing, killing and devouring an animal of prey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where dying is not a surprise, but we still care for each other.</td>
<td>Desolate, rocky desert landscape. People walking past corpse of man in the foreground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place where you see the police more than you see your own family</td>
<td>Crowded street. Young black woman being put into police car by white police officer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where the life span is shorter than my haircut,</td>
<td>Close-up of a black person’s hands gripping jail cell bars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where temptation can live on your doorstep,</td>
<td>An EKG screen charting various vital signs, the image shows coloured lines charted horizontally across a black background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place where money was hard to find, but love was still shared.</td>
<td>Boarded up house with ‘Parramore’ and ‘Keep Out’ spray painted on the front.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place where kids are hungry for success,</td>
<td>Large group of African-American youth jovially posing on the blacktop at school for the picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where going to college is like winning the lottery.</td>
<td>A collage of three photos: Youth marching in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Youth holding a plaque/award. Youth smiling in a science lab with the governor at the table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come from a place where people are cold hearted, because they think kindness is a weakness,</td>
<td>Young man walking across the stage in graduation gown with diploma in hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place where if you can’t fly, you can’t reach the sky.</td>
<td>Lottery tickets with two red die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A series of three photos: Two hands shaking in solidarity. The hands begin to slip apart. The hands let go of one another.</td>
<td>Close-up on a crane standing in shallow still water as the golden sun rises and reflects across the water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-up of a crane standing in shallow still water as the golden sun rises and reflects across the water.</td>
<td>Image of sun rising over the water and the crane flying high into the sky.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To perform/tell our stories is to refashion existing ideology, identity and truth. Nicholson suggests that in and through the act of re-telling stories ‘the speaker does not “relive” events, but “rewrites” them’ (2005, 90). In ‘We Come from Parramore’, the process and product of digital storytelling operated as sites of possibility; these sites afforded youth an opportunity to name and re-vision (real and imagined) narratives about themselves and their communities. Situating digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis offered participants a framework from which to critique discourses and systems of power that affect them daily, such as institutionalised racism, generational poverty and state-sanctioned policing. In and through the production of their own embodied and mediatised (re)presentations, the youth identified and then complicated internal and external assumptions around their various identity-markers. Through the production of their own media products about their own lives, they challenged their assigned role as passive consumers of media culture. By intentionally naming and representing their lived experiences (not simply accepting those created by professional media producers), the youth began to revision narrowly conceived ideas about their personal identity and their community.

Working from Nicholson’s premise that ‘theatrical experiments in rewriting local stories’ can begin to ‘dismantle [. . .] fixed ideas of community’ (2005, 90), we played with the use of poetic devising and narrative collage to create this digital story. While this particular piece contains only a handful of images and lines of narrative, the process of devising this story involved several days of creative writing, as well as sharing and reflecting on personal narratives and the life experiences that prompted them. For this project, I guided the group to reflect on the phrase ‘I come from a place’, considering their relationship to the prompt in both a broad and a specific sense. Each participant developed 10 to 20 lines of text about their own remembered ‘places’, exploring where they had (and will continue to) come from at various times, moments and places in their lives. Drawing on embodied and dialogic theatre structures, the youth negotiated the visual and verbal texts of the group’s story. They performed images and dialogue with their voice and body to explore layers of meaning within their writing and within their experiences. The group also experimented with creating and capturing still images and video, as well as downloading digital photography to offer realistic and metaphorical representations of their ideas. And throughout the process, the youth engaged in discussion, reflection and debate around issues of identity, power and community.

Each participant contributed at least one line of their personal writing to the group’s collective poem, moving their individual pieces of text (and thus elements of their personal identity) into the group’s collaged (and communal) narrative. They also
collaborated to create the digital representation of the group’s story. The youth performed and reflected on each other’s lines of text through physical and vocal performance choices, and collectively decided what digital imagery would accompany each section of the group narrative. This collaborative devising process invited the participants to negotiate decisions about how to represent themselves and their community. In performing their own and each other’s narratives and perspectives, they explored a variety of individual experiences in isolation and in relation to one another.

As the youth reflected on personal identity and issues of power, I too began to reflect on and share some of my own identity-markers, perspectives, questions and motivations with the participants. I brought a desire for reciprocity to our project, and as the youth shared personal stories and experiences with the group, I intentionally brought stories from my own life into the room. I shared my personal motivations and perspectives fairly openly, and worked to take risks in our explorations of difficult topics. I came to our ensemble with a desire to share with and learn from the group. The youth knew that I came to this project as an applied theatre practitioner and a university professor interested in the ways that youth participate in and contribute to society through performance. As a recent transplant to the city, I also was interested in how our university campus could better engage with young people in our surrounding neighbourhood; the voices of our local community members were rarely present in our university classrooms. Despite Parramore’s close proximity to the university campus, few relationships existed between the neighbourhood residents and the university faculty, staff and students. In moving through this project, I offered transparency around my white, liberal and (recently) highly educated and middle-class identities. I openly named my desire to engage youth – an often-marginalised population in US American society – in dialogue and arts-based activism around power and identity-based inequities. Throughout this process, my desire to work in and with the local community bore a commitment to building alliances with people and organisations in Parramore, and creating structures and spaces for youth to voice and perform their experiences, as well as their hopes and desires. In this applied theatre project, my commitment manifested in the co-creation of a space where youth of colour could take on leadership roles and exercise control over the narratives that shape their lives and communities. The naming and disrupting of identity politics (the youths’ and my own) played a central role in the development of our collaborative community and our performance work.

Our theatre process ultimately invited the youth to identify current, popular and stereotypical narratives about their communities and themselves. It also offered creative and embodied structures for examining, and possibly remaking, those very narratives and identities. As a result, the product – the digital story itself – ultimately presented critiques of larger systems of power that shape the youths’ lives, coupled with new ways of seeing or knowing. An early line in the digital story states, ‘I come from a place full of black people, so I identify myself as the majority’. Two images accompany the spoken words: the first image shows a large jar full of black jellybeans and just a few brightly coloured ones. The second image shows a series of hands, with outstretched fingers seemingly warming over a small fire. From all four edges of the photograph, the hands form a symmetric and aesthetically engaging, circular image of unity. By showing black peoples’ hands together – enacting an image of self-empowered community, the youth challenge assumptions about what it means to be black and/or a minority in Parramore. Black people are the majority in this
neighbourhood and through words and images, the youth de-centre the expected minority/majority binary that marginalises people of colour and normalises the white majority. The renaming, reimagining and celebrating of race-based identity-markers in this digital performance interrupts hegemonic narratives around black identity that are both specific to the Parramore youth and their neighbourhood, and contribute to larger dialogues about identity in the USA.

Further using the performance of words and images to work against racist and classist assumptions about Parramore, the youth problematised narrow ideas about youth support and family in their neighbourhood. They performed multilayered contexts and meanings, describing the neighbourhood as a place ‘Where my family is close’, where ‘dying is not a surprise, but we still care for each other’ and ‘a place where money was hard to find, but love was still shared’. While the story acknowledges the challenging realities of life in Parramore, the youth complicate these ‘expected’ experiences by claiming equal importance for caring and supportive narratives of Parramore youth and families. Of their own accord, the participants juxtaposed difficult realities of poverty, drugs and violence with narratives of an optimistic and driven generation of youth. For me, the visual and voiced narratives disrupt problematic, and yet not uncommon, perceptions about an apathetic or hopeless generation of marginalised urban youth and youth of colour. Drawing on embodied and mediated representations, the youth aim to complicate the viewers’ ideas about Parramore and about themselves.

While elements of this digital story work to resist identity-based assumptions and oppression, some of the narrative and visual choices also raise questions for me around the reification of identity-based stereotypes in digital storytelling. For example, a poetic line in this piece states, ‘You have to have the heart of a lion to be at the top of the food chain’. The series of images that accompany this line of narrative show two male lions capturing, killing and devouring another animal; the image lays out a grassy (exotic?) landscape and presents a graphic depiction of the animals feeding on their freshly killed prey. These metaphorical images, coupled with the verbal narrative, suggest a parallel between people and wild animals – a metaphor and meaning that troubles me as we work to disrupt identity-based oppression and inequities facing youth of colour. Moreover, the images suggest an aggressive and violent mentality around survival in Parramore. For some of the youth, this idea of survival is a truth, a reality in their everyday lives. When I questioned the choice and meaning of these images, the youth pushed back. The metaphor, they told me, is honest. As an applied theatre facilitator, I struggled – and continue to struggle – with questions around the performance of (even possibly) negative or exoticised representations of already marginalised youth. My conversation with the youth around the wild animal metaphor occurred fairly early on in our process and I did not further challenge the youths’ decision. After all, the group of youth was in agreement about the ‘truth’ of the image, even as we explored the representation of power at play between the words and images. And as a white, middle-class woman who has never lived in Parramore, I was clearly marked as an outsider to their neighbourhood and to the experiences they sought to represent.

Moments such as this force me to grapple with tensions around what it means to co-construct knowledge with youth and to remain faithful to a critical, liberatory pedagogy that often works to disrupt youths’ realities. I question where our responsibility, and our complicity, lies when working with youth to create digital
stories that will be shared with a wider audience. Dani Snyder-Young, an applied theatre scholar, posits that sometimes our efforts to empower youth decision-making and representational choices may in fact work to ‘reinforce more dominant positions than it challenges’ (Snyder-Young 2011, 42). She asks, ‘Where are the points of balance between honouring participants’ voices and critiquing embedded assumptions? How do facilitators learn to negotiate their own authority and privileges?’ (2011, 42–3). Like applied theatre work in general, digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis raises questions about power and identity in the room (ours and the youths with whom we work), not simply in society at large. Together, these embodied and mediated practices implicate each of us in the meanings that are made and performed, disrupted and reinforced. The process and product of this digital storytelling project opened a door, if only slightly, to dialogues around these struggles, as well as the complexities surrounding mediated representation of the youths’ lives and stories.

Both the process and the product of this digital storytelling programme invited youth to (re)imagine theoretically and creatively metanarratives about their lives. Nicholson contends that ‘[h]ow meanings are ascribed to these interwoven narratives of self and community becomes, therefore, not a search for “unmediated truth” but a more creative process of invention and speculation’ (Nicholson 2005, 90). By staging messy and sometimes competing narratives and voices together in a single performance, the youth paid attention to and sometimes complicated personal and community narratives, as well as their relationships to Parramore and each other. Importantly though, the process continues to raise questions around how to negotiate sometimes competing commitments within critical and liberatory pedagogies, and more specifically, how the inclusion of digital media may require a further examination of what it means to facilitate a critical (embodied and mediated) performance pedagogy with youth.

Towards an embodied and mediated applied theatre praxis

As digital media becomes increasingly woven into the fabric of our lives, young people readily invite the language of interactive technologies into our creative spaces, forcing a reconsideration of what constitutes theatre and performance. Digital media – specifically digital storytelling – has the potential to extend and broaden our work as applied theatre artists. In my own practice, digital storytelling has diversified which and how youth participate in applied theatre work. Specifically, the addition of digital storytelling attracts youth with interests in film, photography, digital media and technology – youth who might not otherwise join an applied theatre programme. As both a devising medium and a performance product, digital storytelling offers twenty-first century tools, such as digital photography, video and visual collaging for engaging youth in often less realistic and/or body-centred performance practices. In addition, combining applied theatre and digital storytelling has allowed me to engage young people who might typically be excluded from the privileged position of regular, on-going participation in ensemble-based work. Digital storytelling, for example, is well situated to support the participation of migrant farm workers and other transient populations that do not have the luxury of time in any given place, as well as youth in foster care and others for whom staging the live body/voice might carry high levels of risk. While digital media is not without its challenges around access, quality and sustainability, it presents and extends other
opportunities as applied artists consider performance as a site of possibility for engaging with and in the lives of young people.

Locating the performance project described above at the intersection of digital storytelling and applied theatre meant that we focused much of our time on the devising process (rather than the digital product). We structured a collaborative, creative practice that engaged, named and honoured participants’ lived experiences and worked towards socially/culturally responsive performance making. The products, the digital stories themselves, came towards the end of the process. They grew out of our discussions around the city’s efforts to ‘revitalise’ the neighbourhood, and were shaped by conversations around potential viewers for a digital story that complicated ideas about Parramore and its residents. The creation of digitally devised and performed stories shifted our applied theatre process to include both mediated and embodied elements of performance, as well as digital artefacts. These artefacts invited youth to simultaneously see themselves perform and see themselves be performed within a context where they directed the representation. Moreover, it allowed us to repeatedly share and archive this performance in both public (city hall) and private (the youths’ homes) spaces, a process that included youth in formal and informal conversations about the future of Parramore and identity-based inequities in the city.

Looking forward, I am interested to explore how in fact this both embodied and mediated praxis can and will transgress time, draw on and contribute to the past/present/and future, and ultimately reflect and (re)constitute relationships between youth and society. As I explore digital storytelling as a site of possibility for applied theatre practice, I am encouraged by the potential for building cultural capital with and among young people. The practice of digital storytelling offers new performance methodologies and products, as well as structures for reflection and dialogue. However, these opportunities present new questions around how we critically engage and support youth to create and disseminate self-representations. They also compel us to revisit what constitutes theatre and performance in a rapidly advancing, digitally mediated world. How can we engage aesthetic and story-based tools in the service of community dialogue and change with youth? What conditions are necessary for digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis to raise critical and participatory consciousness? Together, these creative disciplines invite us to engage youth and their audiences in new ways of not simply naming and reflecting identity and culture, but intentionally contributing to it as well.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling; applied theatre; youth; critical performance pedagogy; representation

**Notes**

1. The term ‘prosumer’ was first coined by Alvin Toffler in 1981. This term is discussed in more detail in the article by Wu Qiongli (2009, 233–4).
3. For examples of warm-ups that work to build ensemble, see Michael Rohd’s *Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue* (1998) and Augusto Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992).
4. For example, teams of participants might be asked to capture a series of photographs from their immediate environment that speak to the ways they think young people are valued in their school or community. These images might be furthered explored through the development of first-person narratives, poems or other modes of creative expression.

Notes on contributor

Megan Alrutz is assistant professor of applied theatre at the University of Texas at Austin where she teaches in the Drama & Theatre for Youth & Communities Master of Fine Arts programme. Her research and creative activity focus on applied theatre and digital storytelling praxis, specifically in relationship to identity-based inequities and social justice, as well as school-based arts integration and community engagement.

References


