Digital storytelling and collective religious identity in a moderate to progressive

youth group

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Storytelling has long been an important aspect of memory and identity. People tell stories about their past as a way of underscoring concerns about their present and future, as Ochs and Capps have argued in their influential research on narratives (Ochs & Capps, 1996). We choose to tell certain stories as a means of communicating our concerns with particular audiences, and when our stories are received positively, we feel affirmed in our sense that we, and our stories, hold value. As Lovheim has noted in her chapter on identity in this volume, digital media offer new means of constructing religious identities, both as such media mediate self-representation and as they offer enhanced means of social interaction. As individuals use digital tools to produce and share religious narratives, they perform a certain form of self that is enacted in relation to others. Digital media therefore contribute to trends in the personalization of religion, as individuals can reflect on their own narratives and can also participate in collective reflection on what it means to assume a religious identity in a particular context.

As Nancy Ammerman has noted, our religious identity narratives occur at the intersection of two kinds of stories: autobiographical stories about ourselves as individuals, and stories of religious traditions, sacred actors, shared experiences, and religious institutions that help to shape the meaning we attach to our autobiographical stories (Ammerman, 2003). Whereas much of the literature on religious identity and spiritual narratives has focused on how individuals tell these kinds of religious identity stories, the case study presented here explores the collective aspects of religious identity storytelling, in which a group of young people who were members of a moderate-to-progressive faith community were given an opportunity to create a narrative of identity using digital storytelling.

Case Study: Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling has arisen as a movement that teaches ordinary people both narrative development and digital authoring technologies, enabling them to tell meaningful stories that are of significance to them (Lambert, 2006; Davis & Weinshenker, 2011). Perhaps now more than at any previous moment in history, people can use digital authoring technologies to bring longstanding interests in storytelling into conversation with multimedia production techniques (Gauntlett, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2008). What sets apart a digital storytelling experience from the production of a news package, a promotional video, or a do-it-yourself production is that digital storytelling engages participants more directly in a process that focuses on the construction of the story to be told. Group members who participate in a digital storytelling project are therefore

encouraged to see the story that emerges as "their" story rather than a story or a commentary put together by experts. Group members who wish to engage in a digital storytelling process often seek the help of a facilitator, whose work can range from providing instruction on certain aspects of the process to overseeing both story development and the final production's technical aspects.

Because of its accessibility and ease of use, digital storytelling has come to be of interest among religious groups, particularly among communities that wish to counter misinformation or stereotypes that might lead others to make false assumptions about who they are or what they stand for. The process of constructing an identity narrative in digital storyteling allows participants to recognize their agency and claim their right to tell their own story. (Hess, 2010). In their study of digital storytelling among Norwegian youth, Kaare & Lundby (2008) found that the digital storytelling process also enabled young people to consider what it meant to create what they considered an "authentic" narrative of individual religious identity within their particular context.   The case study reviewed here similarly found that the young people involved in digital storytelling needed encouragement as they sought to connect their individual biographical narratives with those of their religious traditions. It differed from the Norwegian study in that rather than creating individual narratives, participants were encouraged to work together to construct a collective religious identity narrative.

Methodology

The research project titled, "Digital Storytelling and Religious Formation" had its start after a six-month interview-based research project that explored the cultures of religious youth groups (Dierberg et.al., 2009). Clark wanted to further develop the research relationship with a local Jewish and a local Lutheran (ELCA) congregation to consider how they might benefit more directly from our interaction with them; as researchers we wondered how we might not only *write about* but *work with* these groups. This turn to a redefinition of roles between researcher and researched is consistent with calls for greater reflexivity in ethnographic projects that seek to work with communities "to capture and build upon community and social movements," as Fine and Weiss have written (Fine & Weiss, 1998, pp. 277-278; see also Fine, 1994; Dimitriadis, 2001). Gary Knutson, the youth leader at Christ Lutheran Church where Dierberg had been the primary contact, expressed willingness to extend this relationship, but stipulated that Dierberg needed to attend weekly meetings as a volunteer so as to build trust within the group. She did this for two months. Then, she began engaging the young people in the digital storytelling process. As part of that process, she led discussions concerning what members of the group felt were most important to them as a group. This chapter is based on fieldnotes from the experience of creating the digital story over a six month period and subsequent interviews with the five young people and the youth leader who had been most centrally involved in its production.

Discussion

The narrative of collective religious identity

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Members of the group decided that their group's collective life could be captured in relation to three stories: (1) the story of how they were unique and how they differed from other Christian communities, as captured in the catch phrase "We're different"; (2) the story of how they felt they engaged in community service as a means not only of changing their communities, but also of changing themselves; and (3) the story of how they took these experiences of transformation and made them a key part of how they accepted others into their youth group community regardless of who they were, what they believed or what they struggled with personally. This latter idea was captured in the phrase of their youth group leader, who related this accepting ethos to a life of living out a relationship with God through living out relationships with one another: "Incarnational relationships are it." (Personal interview with Knutson, 4/06/09).

Once the group had identified three central stories that they believed characterized who they were, Dierberg encouraged them to think about how they would express those stories visually through photos and film footage. Young people gathered photos from key moments in their experience with the group, and in consultation with the group members, Dierberg and other members of the research team developed a set of questions for on-camera interviews with members of the group. Members of the team then scripted and edited a final version of the story.

The resulting digital story opened with a photo and video montage of young people interacting with one another and with those of the community. Then, the young people

discussed their youth group as a "safe space" in which young people could be themselves, could raise questions about beliefs and behaviors, and could find acceptance among their peers. In a second section, group members discussed the ways in which their experiences of service had transformed their understandings of people whose life experiences differed from their own. The third section included statements about and images of mutual support and shared experiences. The 15-minute video also included photo and video montages of the young people engaged in conversation with one another and in service projects involving people outside their group (CLC Video, 6/02/10).

"I wish I would have been in the film"

Immediately after it was completed, group participants who hadn't been in the film expressed some regrets about their absence, which was a sign that the resulting video expressed a group narrative of which they wished to be a part. These regrets came from students who had been invited but had declined to participate in the video's production. One youth, Kelsey, explained this common regret, and noted, "If we did the process again, I think we would want to include more youth group members." (Personal interview with Kelsey Veeder, 10/20/10). Another youth, Hailey, shared similar sentiments: "I feel that more kids would want to voice their opinions, even if they seemed like they wouldn't." (Personal interview with Hailey Johnson, 10/20/10). Perhaps these regrets voiced after the fact emerged because it had difficult for participants to envision ahead of time what the final video would look like or how it would represent the group as a whole. As a result of this experience, group members at Temple Emmanuel were invited to view

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an incomplete version of their group's video that highlighted only two young people on screen. After that screening, ten other young people volunteered to participate in the interviews so as to have their experiences represented in the final digital storytelling product. The Christ Lutheran Church video might have similarly looked different had there been an opportunity for its further development.

Shared Communal Identity

Overall, members of the group and the youth director reacted positively to the finished digital storytelling product. They recognized themselves in the completed video, as Kelsey stated: "I do think the video accurately portrays the youth group. It represented the strong relationships we share and the love that we have for each other."(Personal interview with Kelsey Veeder, 10/20/10). Another young person, Kyle, even suggested that some of the youth have become more aware of what the youth group is all about after the process. "I think this video accurately portrays this youth group in a way that not even some of the kids realized until they saw it," he said (Personal interview with Kyle Russell, 10/19/10).

When asked if the video allowed them to better understand who the group is in relation to the community, the answers were surprising. It seemed the video allowed the group, as a whole, to take ownership of who they believed themselves to be in the context of the local church as well as in the wider Christian community. In the context of the local church body, for example, Kyle reflected, "I believe it made us feel as though we really are part of the church as a whole, not just a separate entity that helps the church out

occasionally."(Personal interview with Kyle Russell, 10/19/10). Hailey suggested: "I think that the adults in the congregation should see [the video]. They need to have their eyes opened about how truly smart and genuine we are about these topics" (Personal interview with Hailey Johnson, 10/19/10). Overall, it seemed that the video allowed the youth an outlet through which to voice their sense of identity for, and in relation to, the larger church body. When speaking of this relationship to the wider church, Hailey noted that she believed that the video helped her and other group members to articulate both how they were different from other more conservative Christian groups while affirming that their group held value that was apart from, rather than inferior to, those other groups.

The youth director in particular had an especially positive response to the video. He felt the video resonated with most of the youth, and he was eager to share the video with parents, with potential new group members, and with the wider church body. In fact, he screened the video at a district-wide meeting of his church's denomination. When asked how the video was received, he said enthusiastically, "everyone wants one of these for their church youth group!"(Email correspondence with Gary Knutson, 11/2/10).

Interpretation and Analysis: Fluid Identities and Anchoring Narratives

As Jerome Bruner (1990) has pointed out, as humans, we seek to organize our experiences into narrative form so that we can make sense of our lives. We reflect on the narratives we construct as we consider who we are and who we want to be, and this process of reflection in turn influences how we will pursue our own ends. Such reflection

can actually encourage us to change our behaviors and our actions, resulting in personal transformations (Davis, 2005; Ochs and Capps, 1996). Moreover, as the process of participating in and creating a digital storytelling project can result in stories that are "fixed" in a certain sense, they allow both the creator and the audience to reflect upon the story and to consider how well it does or does not represent both who they are and who they aspire to be (Davis and Weinshenker, 2011). In this sense, digital stories provide *anchoring narratives*: narratives of identity that help people to reflect upon a story that held resonance and meaning for them at a particular time and in a particular context. As people view a digital story over time, they can continue to reflect on the extent to which they see continuity or change between that anchoring narrative and the narratives that they use in subsequent settings.   Digital storytelling, therefore, provides a means by which individuals or groups are afforded opportunities to not only tell, but to listen to, their own stories. Such listening to the narratives of the self is a key aspect to identity development, as Holland (1998) and her colleagues have noted:

> People tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities (p. 3).

Yet as Davis and Weinshenker (2011) note with reference to the question of whether or not digital stories are an enactment of identity, "Without the ongoing support of a community, the self-realizations [digital stories] report and the personal transformations they testify to are likely to fade from consciousness without translation into action" (p. 22). Digital storytelling may provide groups with anchoring narratives that contain

significant aspirations, therefore, but they only become catalysts to support movement toward those aspirations with the support of a community. In the case of collectively produced digital stories such as the one explored here, the communal nature of the process and its interpretations in various screenings has demonstrated the importance not only of expressing those aspirations, but of revisiting those group narratives among communities that are willing to share the work of enacting them. Digital storytelling therefore can serve as a catalyst for both individual and collective purposeful action.

Although it was not the original intent of this project, the participants' comments about wanting to screen the video for parents and other members of the congregation revealed a felt need to be seen by those constituents as members of the wider church community, albeit on their own terms. In this sense, it affirmed Frank Rogers' (2010) Narrative Pedagogies project and the idea that "the narratives of our lives intermingle with the narratives that ground our faith and [participating in storytelling can] inspire people to journey toward hope as empowered agents of healing in our world"(n. pag.). Stories, therefore, can play a key role in helping young people to be integrated into the life of the faith community.

Participating in a digital storytelling project also engaged young people in the important process of *articulation*, giving young people an opportunity to practice talking about and expressing what it means to them to embrace a religious identity. Such work is important, for "articulacy fosters reality," as Christian Smith (2005) has written in his argument for greater opportunities to practice such talk. In this case, such articulation occurred

relationally rather than individually. Taking on a digital storytelling process required the young participants to work together, to think through commitments, and even to do research on the history of their community and tradition to consider how those relate to their own lives. Digital storytelling – because it provides effective prompts for discussion and an engaging and vivid process for rendering that discussion into tangible public form – served as an opportunity for this kind of relational development of identity.

Conclusion

This case study illustrated that digital storytelling can serve as a resource for both the expression of and continued commitment to a collectively held identity. Over a period of six months, young people in Christ Lutheran Church made decisions about which stories to tell about their group, they collected photos and music that they believed would bring those stories to life, and they viewed the digital storytelling product both immediately after its production and in subsequent settings. Through this process, the participants in this digital storytelling project authored their collective identity and took ownership of the aspirational elements it entailed.

The final product itself served as a catalyst that galvanized the group, helping them to identify their desire to be viewed by parents and congregation members as part of a larger church body and providing further encouragement for them to participate in meaningful service activities and to continue to provide a safe space for those who might become a part of their group.

Digital storytelling is not always an enactment of collective identity. If young people feel coerced to tell a story that they don't believe in, or if they feel left out of a key telling of the collective narrative, digital storytelling can serve to expose tensions rather than enhancing inclusion. In this particular case study, however, the digital storytelling process enabled young people to write themselves, and their community, into being in a way that was fresh and meaningful for them. And in so doing, the process became a means by which young people could employ the tools of digital media for the creation of an enhanced and collective narrative of religious identity.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think that several of the young people who had opted not to participate in making their religious group's video eventually felt some regret about this decision?

- Do you think that communicating your religious commitments through a video format is easier or more difficult than communicating through written or oral form? Why do you think this?

- Over the past two decades, in an increasingly diverse and plural world, the concept of religious identity has shifted How might a collaborative process of narrative construction in digital storytelling assist young people in developing a sense of identity in this religiously plural context?

- How might digital storytelling assist researchers in providing a richer understanding of how religious narratives relate to the everyday lives of differing members of society?

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