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# Digital storytelling in a digital environment: a case study for social work education

Edda Stang and Tonje Steen

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Service organisation and innovation in social work and child protection, Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore students' learning experiences from an online workshop focusing on digital storytelling: an active learning method in which students create a digital story. At Oslo Metropolitan University, the learning method is implemented for training in reflection after a period of placement. However, the methodology is resource-intensive, and there is little research on resources combined with the pedagogic potentials. An online workshop with large classes requires fewer resources than a face-to-face workshop. We have studied the students' experiences and what we can learn from this case to adapt the methodology to online teaching, with minimal compromise on quality. The data are derived from 122 evaluation forms and focus group interviews with 15 students who had taken an online workshop, as well as 94 evaluation forms from the subsequent year, when the workshop was carried out face-to-face. This article is based on a descriptive case study and thematic analysis. Our findings indicate that, although the conditions for learning are different, there is no indication of lower learning outcomes in relation to reflection. The article illustrates how digitalization and the downscaling of resources bring about new opportunities for learning, but also new potential risks.

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Digital storytelling; digital learning; learning experiences; reflection; distance education

## Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore students' learning experiences from participating in a workshop focusing on digital storytelling, in which all parts of the workshop were carried out online and the number of students was relatively high ( $n = 150$ ). A digital story is a short, personal story told with the use of graphics, audio and film (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 252). In higher education, digital storytelling is often used as a pedagogical method to promote active learning and digital competence. Digital storytelling can be used to present learning material or learning experiences, for example when students are asked to reflect on their experiences from a period of placement (Fossland, 2015, p. 96).

**CONTACT** Edda Stang  [eddast@oslomet.no](mailto:eddast@oslomet.no)  Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), Pb. 4 St. Olavs Plass. 0130, Oslo, Norway

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Research on digital storytelling in higher education in the United Kingdom and Norway indicates that performing this learning activity more than once during a study programme might be valuable for students' development of professional identity and reflection skills (Lie & Schjelde, 2019, p. 113; Marín et al., 2018). According to Marín et al. (2018), one can observe 'students' identities evolv[ing] – from one that is largely emotionally based to one that is more politically aware, values-driven and cognizant of the realities of the workplace' (Marín et al., 2018, p. 407). Lie and Schjelde (2019) found a similar development among students in a bachelor's programme in childcare and welfare.<sup>1</sup> In their study, after the second placement period, the students more clearly applied their profession-specific competence and made their stories more theoretically and personally rooted; the authors conclude that this may indicate that the students had progressed further in their development toward professional qualification (Lie & Schjelde, 2019, p. 113).

However, this methodology is resource-intensive compared to traditional lectures. To carry out digital storytelling as a learning activity more than once, with the aim of utilizing the potential, it must be practically and economically feasible. One solution is to hold an online workshop, with large classes and groups, as this requires fewer resources than a traditional workshop with physical classrooms and constant teacher presence.

At Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), digital storytelling is practiced as a method for reflection after the first period of placement for bachelor's students in social work (child welfare) education. It is conducted as a three-day workshop that is taken once during the three-year programme. To foster professional identity and reflective abilities, it might be beneficial to integrate a second workshop, possibly in connection with the final placement period.

In 2021, lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a unique opportunity to explore students' experiences with an online digital storytelling workshop, which would not otherwise have been implemented. We were curious to assess whether (a) it would be possible to pay sufficient attention to a diverse group of 150 students, divided into groups of 15, when all communication took place online in a digital environment<sup>2</sup>; and (b) it would be possible to create a similar pedagogical situation online to that of a physical environment—or if the conditions would change. The study's aim was thus to assess areas in which the current workshop could be improved upon and rationalized while exploring the possibility of integrating an online workshop.

In this article, we explore and describe how the students worked, cooperated and reflected when they created a personal digital story during the workshop. Findings from the study might be of interest to other social work education programmes that seek to implement or further develop the use of digital storytelling in their curriculum. The research questions were as follows:

- (1) What are the students' learning experiences from participating in digital storytelling workshop, when the entire workshop takes place online?
- (2) What lessons can be learned from this case to improve and adapt the learning tool to online teaching without compromising on quality?

Research and evaluations related to digital storytelling in higher education vary greatly in terms of the learning process, objective, resources, and group size. To our knowledge, this is the first study to be conducted emphasizing students' experiences with a fully digital storytelling workshop with a large number of students (i.e. over 140) who create their own 'story' after a period of placement.

In the following sections, we will first explain what digital storytelling is and how and why it can be used in higher education. Further, we will describe our data collection and analysis procedure, before presenting the students' experiences and lessons learned from a three-day digital storytelling workshop conducted online.

## **What is digital storytelling?**

The Digital Media Center in California developed the digital storytelling method in the early 1990s (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). It comprises a short digital production lasting two to three minutes, in which the narrator uses their own voice. The story should concern something the storyteller has experienced themselves (Haug, 2016; Jamissen et al., 2017). The story may be based on an experience, an atmosphere, a memory or an idea that carries significance for the storyteller. The main point is that the story brings out the storyteller's own thoughts and emotions in the reflection.

The work of developing the story is part of a process and relies on a facilitated workshop (Jamissen et al., 2017). According to Lambert and Hessler (2018), the story circle is at the core of the concept. The storyteller, who in our case is the student, shares ideas with and receives feedback from peers in the circle. As part of the story circle process, they develop a script, record a voice-over, select images and use video-editing software to assemble the elements into a short film. In this way, the storytelling process is collectively driven forward. Another significant component of the workshop is 'the final stage' (Kearney, 2011, p. 173), in which the students' digital stories and corresponding discussions are shared and celebrated.

Digital storytelling is implemented in multiple forms and frameworks in higher education, and recent studies report considerable variation in, for example, the duration, size of student groups, degree of online activity and resources available. One important distinction in digital storytelling as a learning tool in higher education concerns whether the stories are created by the students (e.g. Marín et al., 2018) or are prefabricated (e.g. by service users, patients or actors) for pedagogical purposes. Examples of the latter include the use of patient digital stories in nursing education (Christiansen, 2011) and simulating social work practice online by developing a client-centered digital case study using actors (Goldingay et al., 2018). As an example of the former, in Norway, several universities use student-generated storytelling as a learning activity after a period of placement for social work programmes (Arnesen, 2018; Lie & Schjelde, 2019).

## **What is the point of digital storytelling in higher education?**

New pedagogical perspectives focus on students' active participation, with a view toward increasing understanding and creating new knowledge (Damşa & Lange, 2019). Through active reflection and communication with teachers and peers, students can develop their abilities in analytical problem solving and critical

thinking (Loeng & Mørkved, 2019, p. 8). Social work educators must prepare students for demanding and complex professional roles, requiring the development of students' critical thinking skills (Goldingay et al., 2018). Incorporating reflective practice throughout students' social work education can contribute to an active, explorative relationship toward their own learning (Nordstoga, 2019, p. 91). Research indicates several areas of pedagogical potential with using digital storytelling in the field of social work. The method of digital storytelling can, for example, be used with the aim of enhancing reflection, collaboration and the development of professional identity (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018; Jamissen, 2015; Marín et al., 2018).

In Norway, social work education is meant to promote the integration of theory and practice and facilitate training in critical and ethical reflection (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). 'Reflection' is mentioned in both guidelines and learning outcome descriptions pertaining to a range of subjects; however, several studies highlight that the concept lacks clarification, both within and across disciplines (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Van Beveren et al., 2018).

In this article, we understand 'reflection' in the context of learning as a term for intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences, with the goal of acquiring new understandings and appreciation (Boud et al., 1985, p. 19). Furthermore, we build upon Schön's (1987) concept of 'reflection on action'. Schön identifies two types of reflection that increase understanding regarding the actions of the professional practitioner: reflecting *in action*, reflecting on unexpected phenomena and conducting 'experiments' which generate new understandings; and reflection *on action*, reflecting on an experience or situation retrospectively and thus exploring what took place and alternative interventions. For students to develop their reflection skills, they require planned activities that invite reflection *in* and *on* action (Anderson, 2017). This is an important objective of student-generated digital storytelling after a period of placement.

Studies highlight the potential of digital storytelling for training students in reflection and developing their professional identity (Christiansen, 2011; Kearney, 2011). Professional identity concerns a personal identity construction related to the performance of a professional role (Heggen, 2008, p. 324). According to Marín et al. (2018), 'the construction of identity is a reflective task, and the reflective nature of digital storytelling makes it suitable to carry out tasks involving the reflection on the professional self' (p. 407).

Further, using digital storytelling as a learning method for reflection after a placement is a collaborative process. A digital story is not completely self-made, but created through two-way communication between the person presenting it and those they address (Lundby, 2012, p. 33). The students share their personal experiences from the placement period, and the sharing itself provides knowledge and insight into different aspects of social work practice (Lie & Schjelde, 2019, p. 105).

## Risks and new possibilities

Studies suggest that certain aspects of digital storytelling might be challenging for some students or in some situations. According to Lowenthal (2009), the method is a unique

way to give voice to students' emotions, but not all students are 'comfortable with the depth of emotions that is sometimes involved in creating a digital story' (pp. 254, 258).

In a Norwegian study of nursing students' experiences with student-generated digital storytelling after a period of placement, Urstad et al. (2018, p. 94) found that, even if the students appreciated the digital story programme, many were nervous before sharing their story and worried about how it would be received. According to Urstad et al. (2018, p. 95), the vulnerable role of the digital storyteller should be carefully considered when student-generated digital storytelling is implemented.

Differences in students' digital competence and their capacity for independent learning are to be expected in large classes on higher education programmes. Complex demographics and other factors affect students' digital skills, and the increasing use of digital methods in higher education may have expanded the digital divide for some students (Martzoukou et al., 2020, p. 1435). This also applies to digital storytelling. Students who are more familiar with traditional learning tasks might find digital storytelling more challenging (Kearney, 2011p. 172).

In a situation in which the entire workshop takes place online and students work more independently, the learning method is highly dependent on individual digital competence. However, the workshop itself might increase student engagement and digital media literacy (McWilliam, 2009, p. 45). Digital storytelling can be used to develop students' skills in digital content creation, which is considered an essential aspect of general digital competence (Ferrari, 2013; NOU 2019, p. 2). Digital content creation involves skills in creating and editing new content, such as texts, images and videos (multimedia). Further, it concerns producing creative expressions through digital media and technologies, in addition to having the competence to deal with, for example, copyright and licenses (Ferrari, 2013, p. 25; NOU 2019, p. 22). The use of digital storytelling in higher education entails an opportunity for training in all of these aspects.

## Data and methodology

### Data

Our main data derive from three focus group interviews with 15 students who participated in the workshop online in 2021. Students were randomly recruited to the interviews from a list that included all students who participated in the mandatory workshop—with the exception of students from groups with which the authors of this article had been involved as facilitators.

The authors are teachers at OsloMet and facilitators in the digital storytelling workshop. Although we ensured that we did not interview students from our own groups, we cannot guarantee that the responses were unaffected by the fact that the interviewers were teachers. Nevertheless, we perceived no indication that any of the students refrained from speaking freely about their learning experiences. In fact, in all three interviews, the students were outspoken and unreserved and willingly shared their feelings and experiences from the workshop.

In addition to the focus group interviews, we drew upon relevant excerpts from 122 evaluation forms (from among the 150 students) from 2021 and 94 evaluation forms (from among the 140 students) from 2022. These evaluations are a standard part of the

course; the same forms have been in use since 2012, and include both standardized answers and free-text fields. These evaluations provided an opportunity to analyze whether there were notable differences between students from the digital year (2021) and the following year (2022), when the workshop was carried out traditionally (i.e. face-to-face). In addition, the free-text answers to questions such as, ‘What was the most important thing I learned from making a digital story?’ and ‘What was the most difficult . . . ?’ provided valuable information about the students’ learning experiences.

The study received ethical approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data on 16 June 2021.

### ***Descriptive case study and thematic analysis***

We decided to perform a descriptive single-case study in order to understand the students’ experiences from and perspectives on a particular set of circumstances (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 346). The use of a single case is suitable for the study of a phenomenon that has had not yet been researched and constitutes a unique occurrence (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 346). The online workshop was a unique occurrence that would not have taken place without the pandemic lockdowns.

This case is limited to one three-day workshop. All three days are *within* the case, while other components like the period of placement or the final exam, are *outside* the boundaries of the case (see Stake, 2005, p. 444). While the evaluation forms from the year after the workshop are defined as outside of the case, we utilize them in the analysis to better understand the information that emerged from the case.

Transcripts and evaluation forms were analyzed using thematic analysis, with the aim of capturing the students’ experiences from the workshop. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis ‘is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset’ (p. 4); through a systematic process of data coding, themes are developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). In the context of this study, a ‘theme’ is a group of data with common features (Johannessen et al., 2018, p. 279). The research questions guided our preliminary coding, in which we accentuated and defined important subjects from the transcripts (Johannessen et al., 2018, pp. 284, 295).

Data (quotes) with common features were grouped and further rearranged into more general categories of themes. The data were re-read and categories were rearranged several times (Johannessen et al., 2018, pp. 295, 299). We ended up with four overarching themes that represent our results: (a) the importance of joint reflection; (b) the significance of group dynamics on Zoom; (c) digital benefits; and (d) digital obstacles and variation in digital competences.

### ***The context and description of the case***

#### ***The context***

The pandemic forced the fields of social work and education to change their methods. Social work educators, students and practitioners expended considerable effort to fulfil their professional responsibilities, and this was not without tension (Taylor-Beswick, 2023, pp. 45, 58). Research on consequences of the pandemic for social work students and education shows they shouldered a heavy burden from lockdown-required changes

**Table 1.** Description of the case (the workshop).

Writing the story down (introduction day) Day 1	Production day Day 2	Sharing digital stories (sharing day); final stage Day 3
The first day consisted of a plenary lecture on Zoom about digital storytelling and the aim of the workshop.	The second day consisted of a lecture on Zoom about how to create a digital story.	The final day was spent on Zoom in the groups of 15 students together with the teacher.
The students were divided into groups of 15, with one teacher per group.	The students recorded their voice-over and added pictures, drawings, music etc.	All the stories were watched one by one. Each student was given an opportunity to introduce their digital story. After the story was shared, the student's story circle reflected and commented on the content and meaning of the story, after which the entire group contributed to the reflections.
The students worked in smaller groups (story circles) in breakout rooms on Zoom. They shared their ideas for the story and assisted each other in developing it. The students alternated between working in story circles and individually.	The students worked alternately in story circles and individually with editing the digital story. The teacher was available digitally for help. All students handed in their final digital product at the end of the day.	As the workshop focused on students' self-reflection from their placement, the students were not assessed in a traditional way (see Anderson, 2017, p. 77). <sup>3</sup> The workshop ended with comments and shared reflections on each student's story.

(Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; De Jonge et al., 2020, p. 1029). Many students studied entirely at home, and social distancing and the lack of face-to-face contact had consequences (De Jonge et al., 2020, p. 1029).

Aside from the period of placement, the first-year students in our study largely experienced their first months at the university in digital settings. They therefore were accustomed to a digital learning environment but had minimal social interaction with teachers and peers. For this reason, most did not know each other before the workshop.

### *Description of the case*

The case concerns a three-day online digital storytelling workshop taken by 150 students in their first year of the bachelor's programme in social work (child welfare). The learning process consisted of plenary lectures, group sessions with a teacher (10 groups), sessions in story circles (30 story circles) and individual work. Ten teachers were involved in the workshop, with responsibility for one group each.

The workshop took place in the spring, after the students' first period of placement. The placements were in institutions for children and youth, child welfare services, kindergartens, youth clubs etc., and lasted three months.

Prior to the placement period, the students received an online lecture explaining the purpose and structure of the workshop. The following Table 1 presents the pedagogic elements for the three-day workshop.



## Results

### *Learning experience: the importance of joint reflection*

Previous research shows that reflection is the most important learning outcome in digital storytelling (Haug, 2016; Jamissen & Skou, 2010; Long & Hall, 2018). We therefore asked the students specific questions about their experiences concerning reflection. In all three focus groups, the students underpinned the importance of being able to reflect together on different experiences from their social work placements. They appreciated having the opportunity to reflect on what they themselves would have done in a similar situation, thereby experiencing different ways of understanding the situations. The students were clear about what made them share that story and specific details, as well as which factors could contribute to, or hinder, good reflection processes.

Students whose placement had been at the same place highlighted this as a great advantage. They felt they were able to learn something new about familiar episodes when their peers shared their stories. Thus, they were able to understand how situations that initially seemed familiar could be interpreted and handled differently by different people. As one student said:

It was nice to hear about different ways of doing things and reflect on what you yourself would do in the same situation, or how you yourself would have reacted.

However, student groups representing different placements also emphasized this as a particular strength for learning. By sharing experiences, they could reflect on what was similar and what was different, as well as gain insights into the variation in the field of child welfare practice:

I'm very curious about where I can work as a child welfare officer. I felt that I could step into the different placements by hearing the stories.

Some of the students underlined that listening to others' stories made them reflect on their own story—and on how they had ultimately settled on a different story than the one they had initially chosen. One of the focus groups expressed that they were able to share their thoughts on suitability, attitudes and values, and used what they had learned on the course about ethics. Those reflections made them think about the importance of acquiring experience—and education. As one of the students conveyed:

I felt more that it confirmed the importance of getting an education, at least if you're going to work with children. Because the whole of my story, or the digital storytelling, was about the attitudes of people working with children.

These statements align with Long's (2014) study, in which students found the method helpful in increasing their understanding of the reflection process and the skills required to become reflective practitioners.

Nevertheless, all three focus groups pointed out that the digital environment affected the reflection process in different ways. For example, informal reflections might have been shared more extensively had the students been physically present in the same room. Some students also mentioned that another disadvantage of the digital format was not

being together in the process for as long as they would have preferred. As one student explained:

I think silence is easier to cope with when you're physically in the same room together. So I felt I tried to take the lead in asking questions or paving the way for delving deeper into things. But I didn't want to nag either, like always saying '[Can you tell us] 'a bit more'!

Several students agreed that they could have endured the silence or uncertainty in a different way had they been together in person, and consequently, that the reflections could have become deeper. The digital setting was seen as sometimes sparking the need to hurry things along.

The informants emphasized that, through joint reflections, they gained a greater understanding of their own placement. They experienced new ideas and were encouraged to reflect on and explore their own story from the placement period. To encourage reflections that broadened the students' perspectives, it was essential that they felt safe in their group.

Students who did not experience a safe space in their story circles felt that the reflections were more superficial. This can partly be explained by the digital setting, but also by whether or not they knew each other from before or found it valuable to actively participate, as well as the teacher's involvement. According to the students, most teachers actively went in and out of the Zoom rooms during the periods in which the groups were self-organized, and they helped to establish clear guidelines and facilitate reflection and debate (see for example Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018, p. 811). In some groups, however, the teacher chose a more detached approach, asking the students to contact them via Zoom, e-mail or phone when they needed help or advice.

But I think it would have helped if the teacher was clearer and took a more participating role from the start.

Despite consensus among the students about the teacher's availability to facilitate the reflection, some students reported feeling hesitant to reach out to them.

Evaluation forms completed after both the online workshop (in 2021) and the physical workshop (in 2022) show that approximately the same percentage of students (56 and 57.4%, respectively) mentioned the term 'reflection' in their free-text response as to what they considered the most important learning outcome from the digital storytelling workshop. Concerning the question of whether peer feedback contributed to new reflections, they reported affirmatively, both in 2021 and 2022, with similar percentages: at 81.8 and 80.4%, respectively. This may indicate that the other factors mentioned—such as the teacher's encouragement and clear expectations, the students' motivation, and whether they felt that the social circle was a safe space—are just as important for stimulating reflection as the physical versus digital presence factor.

### ***Learning experience: the significance of group dynamics on zoom***

The analysis revealed several factors that affected the learning experiences, the most noticeable being the variation in how students organized and cooperated within their story circles. While some students talked about well-organized story circles, others

referred to issues such as detachment, black screens, muted microphones and a lack of engagement.

Students from story circles that found effective cooperation strategies reported that every participant had their camera and microphone turned on, each participant shared their story and commented on the others' stories, and everyone contributed to each other's stories through discussion. They decided together in which order and for how long each of them would speak and reflect.

Everyone had their camera on, and we read through [the stories] several times. Lots of feedback and ideas. So I was very satisfied. I don't really think there were that many drawbacks. I didn't think about it then at least, that I wished it had been face-to-face.

If we had a break and someone asked a question, we turned on the camera when answering the question and when we returned to the room, so that we all saw who was there.

Students from these story circles described positive experiences with supporting each other in choosing the right story and receiving feedback from peers. Feeling safe in the group made it easier to share. On the other hand, in some of the groups, the digital environment affected the dialogue. The digital situation could interrupt the group focus and make it difficult to read each other's body language and interpret each other's reactions.

Because when it's digital, you know that you can do other things, and they might not be listening. You don't look at body language. That whole aspect is gone. So in general, I think it's more awkward online.

Several students expressed feeling uncomfortable when sharing their ideas for their digital stories when it was not obvious who was listening and the feedback engagement was low.

So I thought, 'Was that okay that I told them that? Or should I have chosen another story that was less personal?' So I really agree with the relational aspect. Yes, it was a bit difficult.

I'd had lots of feelings about it throughout the placement period, and it felt very personal. And then you were supposed to share it with someone, and some people were on their way to work with their phone in their hand.

The atmosphere in these groups affected the students' learning experiences in the story circle. Issues that arose from the digital context made some students reluctant to share more than absolutely necessary in story circles. Others described feeling uncomfortable about being too exposed after sharing their ideas for the story digitally. Urstad et al. (2018) and Hill (2018, p. 173) have highlighted that sharing a personal story in a digital storytelling context is a vulnerable situation in itself. The responses in our study indicate that different aspects of the digital environment intensified this vulnerability.

To sum up, although all three focus group interviews revealed that the digital environment affected the learning experience for some students, this was not the main impression from the focus groups. As shown above, other groups had few, if any, problems related to the digital setting.

## **Digital benefits**

All three focus groups were initially asked to reflect on their learning experiences with a three-day online digital storytelling workshop. The students were asked to discuss possible advantages and disadvantages of their digital experience with the learning method. Most of the students had no previous experience with digital storytelling in a face-to-face environment; any of their reflections on 'what it might have been like face-to-face' were thus hypothetical.

Several students stated that there were no inconveniences caused by having the workshop be online, and in all three interviews, the students were quick to refer to various advantages of the digital format. These included the convenience of having relevant material available at home, and that it was comfortable working alone and not having to constantly compare themselves with others on the production day.

Although a few students felt that the digital setting had led to slower communication, more dominant was the feeling that the digital context had contributed to greater efficiency and that they would likely have spent more time on the various tasks had it been face-to-face.

I think it might have been a bit quicker when we did it online. Because you arrived, I felt, more quickly at the core of things. When you told a story, you got right into it and received feedback directly. And I think that was good.

A number of students mentioned the favorable combination of working individually and in a story circle on Zoom. The opportunity to work alone while knowing that the others were available was an advantage mentioned several times. Several groups organized themselves so that they could periodically work alone on the production of the film, but with a mutual agreement to support each other by joining Zoom when someone needed help or advice. One student explained:

Just being able to have the peace and quiet to make the film at home helped me at least very much.

And another added:

I agree. Still being available, because we had Zoom open all the time, but turned off the cameras when we were going to work on our own. So we could check in if someone was wondering about something. It think that was really good, because then you're sort of in your own little bubble without being disturbed by those around you.

In summary the most highlighted advantage of the first two days was the combination of individual work with active support from their peers through Zoom if needed. Notably, however, the interviews also revealed an individual variation in this respect. The comments demonstrated differences in how the students experienced the time spent, the potential for efficient work and the overall digital experience.

## **Digital obstacles and variation in digital skills**

In initiating a digital workshop that includes digital content creation, some digital challenges should be expected. The groups of students varied in age and individual

digital literacy. In addition, unexpected situations occurred, including weak internet access and PC/Mac/smartphone breakdowns that affected the learning experience.

In the evaluation forms, 25% of the students mentioned ‘the technical aspects’ in their free-text answer when asked what was most difficult about making the digital story, while 14% mention ‘editing’ or ‘making the movie’. Digital and/or technical challenges were also present in different parts of the focus group discussions. These challenges are thematized as (a) a barrier in terms of relations, groups and possibilities for reflection (accounted for above); (b) problems if the digital devices did not work properly; and (c) variation in digital skills.

A successful three-day workshop in an online environment is necessarily dependent on well-functioning digital devices, communication platforms (like Zoom and Teams) and sufficient internet access. Several students spoke of trouble with their technical devices during the workshop. As one student noted:

The camera doesn’t work on my computer. I had to connect from my phone and computer to be able to . . . So it was very complicated.

Several students also mentioned digital obstacles when the stories were scheduled to be shared on the third day. In some cases, the sharing was affected by poor sound, either due to the voice-over or because of technical troubles during the presentation.

The only thing that wasn’t that good was maybe the technical problems with the video. For example, the sound was a bit low, or there were problems sharing the screen . . . I remember in particular not hearing anything in one of the films. So I couldn’t reflect on it since the sound was so low.

Another digital challenge that arose relates to the variation in digital skills between the students. As shown in the evaluation forms, some students struggled with creating and editing the digital story. Several students in the focus groups had similar experiences:

I’m in a group with fellow students, . . . and many of them struggled a bit with the software we could use. It might be hard to learn and understand the technical aspects when you’re on Zoom, than if you were in a classroom where you can get help there and then by someone who knows the system.

Maybe not everyone is good at using digital software. I had a huge challenge when I was going to make the film because I’m not like other 20-year-olds . . . So I had to re-learn some things how to use these programmes to create a good film.

Some of those who struggled with the technical tools and editing software needed support from peers and/or the teacher. These students clearly expressed that it would likely have been easier to receive support in a physical situation at the university.

The interviews revealed that variations in digital literacy affected the students’ learning experience at an individual level. Variation in digital skills must also be accounted for in physical workshops, but this is likely easier to identify and manage when both students and teachers are physically present. A quick glance at the evaluation forms from the digital year (2021) and the year after strengthens this assumption. There is a difference in the free-text answers in the evaluation forms from the digital year and the answers from

the ‘normal’ year, with fewer than 10% mentioning ‘the digital’ or ‘the technical’ aspects in 2022, compared to around 25% in 2021.

These results might not be surprising, but they illustrate the importance of providing support for groups of students who are less confident with digital content creation and digital environments. If all communication is digital, attention to aspects such as the presence of the teacher and time spent providing help and support (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018; Lowenthal, 2009) become even more crucial, to ensure that every student is included and acquires the expected learning outcomes.

### **Digital learning experiences and possibilities for future workshops**

The case of digital storytelling presented in this article was a consequence of the pandemic and would not have taken place under normal circumstances. We know from other studies that it is possible to implement digital workshops in a digital environment (e.g. Hafford-Letchfield et al. 2018). Yet, at OsloMet, physical presence has been considered to play a significant pedagogical role in the implementation of this learning method—particularly for the story circles and on the sharing day. We therefore did not know what to expect in 2021, when the circumstances required that we carry out a fully digital three-day workshop.

### **Learning experiences: learning digital storytelling digitally**

Overall, both the focus group interviews and evaluation forms indicate that students had a positive learning experience from the digital workshop. However, some findings show that the conditions for learning are slightly different, and that a digital workshop is not the same as a physical workshop in a digital setting. Our findings indicate both new pedagogical opportunities and new possible risks that emerge in the digital environment.

As the evaluation forms from 2021 and 2022 show, many students considered ‘reflection’ to be a major learning advantage gained from the workshop (whether online or in person). Moreover, from the focus groups discussions, we found that the students explored their experiences both intellectually and emotionally, which led to new understandings (see Boud et al., 1985).

In line with Schön’s (1987) concepts of reflection, the students in our case were tasked with *reflecting in action* when situations occurred in their practice, and they also reported that they reflected *on action* in the digital storytelling process. The interviews contain several instances in which students explored situations from their placements and reflected on potential alternative interventions (see Anderson, 2017). However, determining the number of students for whom this learning experience is applicable, across the entire group, is challenging. The analysis reveals that variation in digital skills and conduct affect the potential for joint reflection. While some students were motivated, interested and engaged in the project, they found that other members of their story circle were hesitant to contribute.

Most students expressed an enhanced understanding of their own experience from the placement. The interviews revealed an increasing interest in the field of professional social work, particularly in child protection and the ability to envision themselves in various professional scenarios. This substantiates the idea of the reflective nature of

digital storytelling (Marín et al., 2018). The digital format of the workshop (in our case) appears to have fulfilled the aims of the methodology, even if some of the conditions varied and some reservations must be taken.

### **Lessons learned**

An increasing number of universities have high ambitions for digital learning activities (Fosslund, 2015, p. 15). According to Lillejord et al. (2017, p. 2), it is not the digital tools in themselves that create learning, but how they are used pedagogically. At OsloMet, digital storytelling is used pedagogically to process experiences from practice and expand reflective skills. The bachelor's programme in social work (child welfare) in Norway has encountered criticism for prioritizing theory and research-based teaching at the expense of training in practical skills. High-quality learning methods that confer practical skills and supervised placement periods are expensive. Thus, giving these methods lower priority could be related to considerations around financial resources (Bufdir, 2019). Digital storytelling as a methodology requires more resources than theory-based lessons. It is an innovative learning method that includes active learning strategies and allows teachers to dedicate time to each student and their respective story circles.

One of our research questions focused on the plausibility of permanently shifting some of the digital storytelling workshop components from face-to-face to online learning, without reducing learning outcomes. This would enable us to simplify the workshop and downscale resources, as there would be less need for physical rooms (e.g. lecture halls, group rooms and rooms for audio recording). Further, the teachers could support the students individually and in groups at specific timepoints and would not need to be constantly present in the classrooms.

Returning to our case, the students reported several digital advantages of the online setting, including efficient self-organized study, self-regulated allocation of time and the convenience of being at home with the support of others when needed. Their responses indicate that the second day of the workshop appeared to be most suited to digital learning, and that most of the story circles found an effective way to combine individual work with reflection and support in groups.

To make things work digitally, the teachers must ensure that the learning environment is respectful and that the participants feel safe when sharing their stories (Anderson, 2017, p. 86; Hill, 2018, p. 173). The finding that one out of four of our students struggled with technical challenges shows the importance of the teacher's digital presence and competence. This applies both to the sessions in the story circles and when the stories are shared with the whole group. According to Hill, the facilitators must pay attention to both the participants' words *and* their body language when communicating (Hill, 2018, p. 173). In cases where the story circle and the story sharing take place online, it might be more difficult to instruct the students, and the technical and communicational responsibility of each student is thus increased.

Although there were a number of digital challenges that arose in the online workshop, knowing the potential 'weak spots' in the digital implementation will make them easier to address in the future. For example, as the interviews indicate, some issues might be solved through clearer instructions and more active engagement from the teacher. Based on our findings, we also recommend that the third day—when the final stories are shared with

the whole group in the final stage—be in person (at least if it is the first time the students have participated in the workshop). This recommendation stems from the students' reports of digital vulnerability and nervousness about sharing, and that the difficulties in reading each other's body language affected how they felt about the feedback comments.

Students would likely be better equipped to handle these issues if they have participated in a digital storytelling workshop previously and thus developed competence in content creation and confidence around sharing their stories. Thus, if the goal is to implement the workshop twice, after the first and second placement periods (in the first and third years), a further downscaling of resources should be feasible. This could involve digitalized preparation lectures that can be reused several times, in addition to online learning through platforms such as Zoom or Teams. Our findings imply that it is possible to secure support and processes online, in addition to accounting for individual differences in how much time students need to accomplish tasks.

## Concluding remarks

Using a single case study, we highlighted students' experiences from a digital storytelling workshop and emphasize the digital aspects of the students' learning. Digital storytelling is one of many ways in which digital tools can be used for learning. Some of our findings might be transferable to other active learning methods that include digital learning online: indeed, issues such as teacher engagement, variation in digital skills and the importance of group dynamics are not unique to digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling is used by universities in a range of disciplines and is being increasingly implemented in social work programmes. In our literature review, we found that digital storytelling has promising results for collaboration, reflection and more. However, there is a dearth of information regarding whether these learning outcomes are lasting. It would thus be beneficial to gain empirical insights into any sustained improvement in students' reflective abilities and practical skills, particularly in relation to their future social work with children and families.

## Notes

1. In Norway, the bachelor's programme in child care and welfare is a social work programme in the child welfare field, from here on referred to as social work education or social work (child welfare) education.
2. 'Digital environment' can be understood as a communicative environment involving information and communication technologies like computers, mobile phones, tablets and smart devices, and including websites, search engines, apps and more (Law Insider, 2023). In this article, 'Digital environment' and 'digital settings' refer to situations in which common activities took place online—mainly through computers and cell phones—rather than face-to-face.
3. In addition, the students delivered a written exam at the end of the placement period which was independent of the workshop.



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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Edda Stang** is a lecturer at Oslo Metropolitan University. Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy. Her research interests are social work, child protection and social media.

**Tonje Steen** is a lecturer at Oslo Metropolitan University. Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy. Her research interests include child protection, domestic violence and social development.

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