

Designing Digital Storytelling Workshops for Vulnerable People: A Collaborative Story-weaving Model from the “Pre-story Space”

Keywords:

Digital Storytelling, participatory media, story-weaving model, dialog, photo-taking

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Abstract

Digital Storytelling (DST) is a grassroots movement and a workshop-based practice through which people are taught to use digital media to create short video stories, usually about their own lives. Although DST practices are spreading throughout the world, it seems that little attention has been given to the story-generating process. In running several workshops, we presumed that it was difficult for many people to express their experiences and thoughts in a clear, coherent way, and it is important to rethink how they generate their stories. In this paper, we propose a digital storytelling workshop model for vulnerable people that entails establishing key concepts of “the collaborative story generation” from “pre-story space.”¹

First, we examined two game-like workshop methods. One of them was a DST program “Media Conte,” in which participants and facilitators co-created the stories primarily through dialogs and card games. The other was “Photo Karuta,” in which participants were required to take photos and interview others to find new perspectives through fieldworks. Both workshops shared the concept of focusing on pre-story space to generate stories. These workshops were developed and modified through numerous attempts, which were conducted by the methodology of “critical media practice.”²

At the end of this paper, we depict how the collaborative story-weaving model is developed from the pre-story space and discuss the advantages for vulnerable people using these storytelling methods.

1. Background and objectives

1-1. Why should we focus on pre-story Space?

Typically, a Digital Story is a two-to-three minute video clip that combines photo images with a storyteller’s voiceover. It is produced through intensive workshops during which each participant speaks freely to constructively address the stories told by each other participant (“story circles”). Stories told in this format focus on everyday life, such as memories of school days, personal experiences, and family histories. These videos can be likened to sonnets or haiku for the digital age (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). This process was inspired by the performances of artist D. Atchley, and the California-based Center for DST has continued his activities, implementing his practices worldwide. Many individuals and groups conduct the workshops over a wide range of locations and in various fields of interest, such as education, empowerment, and public history³ (Lambert, 2013; Tsuchiya, 2013).

While participatory media or public access television have attracted increased attention across Japan, most citizen media practices have been developed for “healthy” citizens, who are viewed as having clear opinions and the ability to

logically express themselves. In our society, since passionate groups promoted these media, they unintentionally tend to exclude the engagement of the everyday people. That is, participatory media still has not become a familiar presence for vulnerable people.⁴ In this context, the examples of global DST practices, which are aimed toward laypeople’s expression, are shown to benefit participatory media practices throughout Japan as well.

Certainly, DST is a unique form of media, allowing laypeople to simply and richly express their thoughts and everyday lives. However, we have a question about their premise that “everyone has a story to tell,” which is often assumed in basic Californian practices. We attempted a couple of trial workshops based on the DST approach, and it proved difficult to develop meaningful stories. In our experimental workshops, vulnerable participants seemed unable to voice what they desired to say in individual situations and were not conscious or self-aware of the own stories. In the Western model, it seems that little attention has been given to the story-generating process. By conducting several workshops with vulnerable groups, Ogawa & Ito’s previous paper pointed

1 This is a study to explore people’s media creativity by designing and examining experimental workshops, which are based on an approach of the Critical Media Practice proposed by Mizukoshi (Mizukoshi, 2011).

2 In Critical Media Practice, we will design a system or program to facilitate citizen media expression and plan and hold a workshop to implement the system. We will then analyze and evaluate the results of the workshop, based on which we will develop an improved workshop plan. By repeating this cycle, we will incrementally improve the performance of workshop program (Mizukoshi, 2012).

3 Of particular note is the Capture Wales project in the UK. The project attracted attention as a high-profile example of this type of activity in which the BBC, which operates under the banner of objective reporting, transferred editorial authority to general audiences (Meadows and Kidd, 2009). Lambert, the founder of the Center of DST in California, notes that over 15,000 people were trained in the art of DST (Lambert, 2013).

4 In this paper, we define “vulnerable people” as the voiceless in society such as marginalized people and laypeople who are inexperienced in expressing themselves in public.

out the importance of focusing on the “pre-story space.” The term refers to a space in which only small fragments of ideas, experiences, or untold complaints, or laughter, —“story seeds”—are jumbled together prior to verbalization (Ogawa & Ito, 2010). It is important to rethink how they generate their stories and to start practices from the pre-story space.

1-2. Objectives of this paper

In this paper, by developing the concept shown in previous paper about pre-story space and examining and comparing our two workshop methods and results,⁵ we propose a new model of story generation for vulnerable people.

First, we re-examined our workshop programs to determine how we intended to generate stories. The first workshop method (Media Conte) included finding story seeds inside of a supposed storyteller and combining the picked seeds to rearrange them into a storyline. The examined second workshop (Photo Karuta) included seeking story seeds in the outside world. It set up fieldworks during which storytellers visited unfamiliar locations equipped with cameras. While photographing the location and witnessing others, the storytellers picked up story seeds. Those seeds were selected and used to create a set of game cards, called “Photo Karuta,” which displayed local features that were in line with participant’s established theme.

By comparing these two workshops and clarifying their common and contrasting points, we attempt to extract a model that could facilitate vulnerable people to generate stories, and examine a new digital storytelling perspective. In addition, we want to emphasize that our goal is not to analyze and verify experimentally and demonstratively subjects such as the reactions to or changes in the participants or the works they have created in workshops. Rather, the goal of this paper is to devise a storytelling program for educational and societal practice to present new possibilities for digital storytelling.

2. In the case of Media Conte

2-1. General information about Media Conte

As an attempt to seek out a DST model that adhered to Japanese society, we have continuously improved our two-to-three day workshop program, named “Media Conte,” since 2008.⁶ With our project, more than 10 workshops have been conducted among teenagers with foreign nationalities, senior citizens, disabled people, and students in Fukushima; over 100 Digital Stories have been created thus far. Setting aside the Western assumption that “everyone has a story to tell”, we designed workshop programs that would enable laypeople to generate stories that focused on their everyday thoughts and dissatisfactions. This program intends to develop

5 Media Conte workshops are mainly conducted by A. Ogawa, M. Ito, and S. Mizojiri, who collaborate with members: K. Sakata, S. Mizukoshi, A. Kikuchi, and Y. Tsuchiya. Photo Karuta was designed and conducted by Y. Tsuchiya.

6 We have been conducting workshop, since 2008, with teenage children of foreign workers of Japanese descent, senior citizens, women, disabled persons, and university students in Iwaki, Fukushima (Higashi Nippon International University). For more details, see <http://mediaconte.net/>. Most of the stories are available on the “Theater” page. Some have English scripts.

the marginalized participants’ Digital Stories, which empowers the creation of self-narrative through dialogue and story generation.

During these workshops, we focused on the role of facilitators to reveal the participants’ story seeds. Then we established a service-learning course at the Community Collaboration Center of Aichi Shukutoku University, and the students majoring in media studies were expected to act as facilitators and listen to the participants’ unvoiced experiences and thoughts to help generate their stories and produce videos.

2-2. Basic workshop method

During our workshop, we aimed to make story-generating possible using dialogues and game-like programs instead of writing scripts. We designed the workshop by keeping in mind the story-making theory proposed by Ohtsuka (2003). He proposed one antithesis of a storytelling theory from the perspective of the individuals’ confessions, which coincides with the Western or modern story theory. What has been cited here as the means of producing stories within non-Western or postmodern story-making theory is not the novel or film, but card games. With a card game, deconstructing experiences and impressions, and linking and combining them into stories are made easier. Moreover, they are directly experienced as physical actions. While the participants and facilitator students engaged in the dialogic card game, they would identify the hidden voice fragments and withdraw their story seeds. In addition, this deconstruction and construction method of storytelling employed

perspectives similar to the theories and practices of narrative approach⁷.

2-2-1. The “combining-photos-into-stories” game⁸

The “combining-photos-into-stories” game is an icebreaking, story-focused workshop. With this game-like program, each participant chose one photo from a diverse collection of photos relating to a single subject, such as a frog, or a piece of cake. The participant attached the photo to a base card and then partnered with another participant to create a story linking their two motifs; this was performed within a time limit. Simply attempting to link the two photos as-is would not have yielded successful results; however, by recording the symbols and connotations that sprang to mind while viewing the photos and writing these on sticky notes, which were then attached to the photos, participants were able to identify and visualize the structural elements of potential stories. Another intention of this

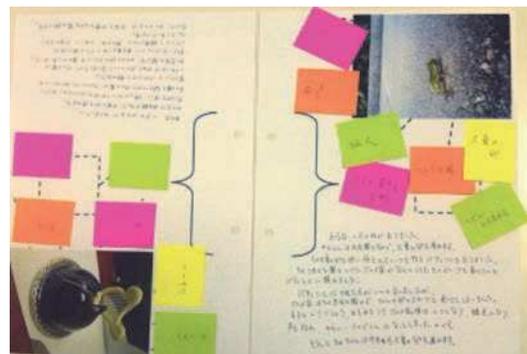


Photo 1 “Combining-photos-into-stories” game. Start from a frog and end with a piece of cake.

7 In narrative theories, story is often defined as “describing the plot of two or more events”. It means stories are generated by linking pieces of information. For more details, see Yamada (2000).

8 Workshop methods and tools are available at the website: <http://mediaconte.net/workshop>

program was to show the participants that storytelling practice was a freewheeling activity in which, unlike their schoolwork, there were no right or wrong answers.

2-2-2. Interview time

Starting with this program, each participant would move forward to generate his or her own story. First, five small cards were prepared. A single theme, such as “annoyances,” “my most memorable event,” or “my treasure” was written on each of them. These questions were intended to guide participants in voicing their experiences and thoughts. A facilitator placed one of these cards in the middle of a sheet of paper and asked questions related to the subjects on the card. The participant’s experiences and thoughts, which were voiced in response to the questions, were written on sticky notes and attached around the card; these served as motifs that could potentially generate a story. If the subject on the card did not seem to activate discussions, then the process was attempted again with a different card. Finally, if an interesting topic arose, the card in the center was replaced with a note recording the main topic or episode; this note was coupled with the sticky notes gathered from keywords during the question time and was used to assemble a story.

2-2-3. Storytelling by five picture cards

From the collected notes with key concepts written on them, participants and facilitators created the outline of a story by selecting notes and attaching them to five picture cards. On each card, a square for attaching sticky notes and some dots for main ideas were printed. Participants and facilitators put their notes with keywords on sheets of paper, and they wrote down keywords for each scene. After the outlines

of stories were presented, all participants and facilitators exchanged feedback—questions, — comments—and advice— about what kinds of photo images would be effective to use in the stories.

2-2-4. Storyboard productions and editing

This process began by printing the photos and attaching them to the picture-script cards, which included rough scenarios consisting of short sentences. Each picture scene required one or two sentences. Since it was much easier and more impressive, participants were encouraged to speak in monologues using a colloquial style, conversational tone. Finally, they combined the photos and voiceovers using Windows Movie Maker or iPad application software.

2-2-5. Preview and media coverage

Completed Digital Stories were screened at the conclusion of the workshop. The participant-facilitator pairs introduced their works prior to the screening. In order to share these stories with the local community members, most of the works were later broadcasted on local cable television.

2-3. Workshop results

Although we had to partially rethink and reform the program, it proved functional during each session. Every participant was successful in developing a story.

First, in each session, most of the story seeds were found in seemingly unimportant chats with facilitators about every day matters. The facilitators accomplished this through continual, diligent questioning, listening, and nodding, and by mobilizing the frameworks of their own interpretations. These interactive, game-like

sessions evoked participants’ motivation to self-disclose. For example, in the youngest participant’s case,⁹ a female student facilitator used a question card with the theme “Annoyances,” and she encouraged a boy’s complaints about chores and his brother by asking numerous questions, providing various options of how to combine identified story seeds, taking photos, and combining these elements that reflected their own past experiences. Achieved here were stories created together, with the teenagers and facilitators serving as catalysts for each other. In contrast, unlike the workshop with facilitators, the stories, which are generated without facilitators’ help, tended to be elusive. Also, in the case where we skipped the “combining-photos-into-stories” game, it took longer for participants to understand how to generate meaningful stories (Ogawa et al.2010). This proves the effectiveness of our card-game- like and conversational story-generating method (Ogawa & Ito, 2010; Ogawa et al., 2010; Ogawa et al., 2012; Mizojiri et al., 2012).

Second, our collaborative model encouraged participants to “re-present” their new story of self (Ogawa & Ito, 2010). “Self” came to be theorized as “a perpetually rewritten story (Bruner, 1991)” in cultural psychology, and the self-narrative is recognized as essential when a person constructs and reconstructs one’s identity. However, as narrative theories stipulate, people do not find it easy to write or rewrite their self-narrative without someone’s conversational help. In our workshops, many stories concerning the self were generated through the facilitator’s questioning, and selecting and connecting story seeds. Since our identities and those we attribute to others are relational and constructed in conversation (Gergen, 2009), the

dialogic “story-weaving” method proves to be very effective in empowering participants.

These new stories also help participants make sense of their lives. The participants pondered about their pasts and rethought their futures through the story-weaving process. In the case of young participants who created future self-stories, it seemed some of the dream stories actually came true.

Finally, as a side effect, the collaborative story-weaving workshop provides both participants and facilitators with a strong sense of empathy toward their workshop partners. In order to help generate the participants’ stories, facilitators were required to understand each participant’s unique situation. As stated earlier, the facilitators were required to listen to the participants’ voiceless thoughts, imagine the situation their partners were in, and try to interpret their narratives using their own past experiences; this called for them to demobilize their own frameworks and perspectives to understand others with different backgrounds. Printed photos were also effective in encouraging empathy toward others and to interpret the background situation of each participant. Through story-weaving processes, facilitators frequently interpreted what the partners desired to say by reflecting on their own experiences and feelings. Many student facilitators mentioned their newfound interest in news regarding the vulnerable groups with which they became involved.

2-4. Problems

Although the programs were primarily functional, the collaborative story-weaving model presented two problems. First, we absolutely

9 Their stories are available at the website: <http://mediaconte.net/theatre/?cat=8>.

needed the facilitators to maintain positive attitudes toward their participating partners. Without positive attitudes, interview sessions did not prove to be effective, and the story seeds were not properly gathered. In addition, the process worked best when the facilitator's background differed from that of the participant's. The differences seemed to raise more questions despite the fact that they had difficulties in understanding their backgrounds.

Second, since participants sometimes relied too heavily on the facilitators' help, which was especially the case with the more vulnerable participants, the facilitators tended to hold stronger initiatives when generating stories. This was inevitable to some extent, but the facilitator should always avoid too much interference.

3. In the case of Photo Karuta

3-1. General information on Photo Karuta

Photo Karuta combines photo-taking research with the making of a Japanese traditional card game, called "karuta." Even though it is not identical to DST, developed by the Center of DST in California and others, the Photo Karuta workshop guides participants in exploring a pre-story space and gathering story seeds. With this workshop, participants took photos and wrote short poems similar to haiku that related to each photo. These pair cards included the photo and

haiku, and were interpreted as a group of short and fragmentary digital stories. We referred to them as "story sprouts" in the pre-story space.

Karuta is traditionally a popular Japanese card game with roots dating back to a shell-matching game played among aristocrats of the Heian period (794-1185).¹⁰ Today, Karuta uses two types of paper cards: which are pairs of picture cards, or "e-fuda," and written cards, or "yomi-fuda." A yomi-fuda is written in a short poem of 17 syllables arranged in a 5-7-5 pattern, similar to a haiku.¹¹ A karuta set often consists of 46 pairs of cards, the same number of letters in the Japanese alphabet, called "hiragana." During the game, while a facilitator reads aloud the written yomi-fuda one by one, players attempt to snatch the e-fuda associated with it from among all the other cards before the other players can. The player who gains the highest number of e-fuda is declared the winner. A karuta set has a single



Photo 2 Photo Karuta

10 The Japan Kyoto Karuta NPO introduces history and basic description of karuta. See <http://www14.plala.or.jp/hpmsmiki/englishpage.html>.

11 Haiku is a form of traditional short poetry with 17 syllables in Japan. As a conservative rule, it requires a season word "kigo" and focuses on natural subject matter. "Senryu" is also a form of poetry written with the same number of syllables without a kigo, and deals with humor and human nature. Now, however, senryu features appear in haiku, and the differences are sometimes blurred. In the Photo Karuta workshop, it did not matter if the strict rule was followed, so the students wrote the haiku in freer way.

theme, such as proverbs, dialects, historical figures, local specialties, and so etc. Therefore, karuta is often played among children as an educational exercise to grasp fundamental knowledge home and in schools. Kids enjoy using the game to learn. Additionally, because of its popularity, karuta is often designed to promote local culture. One of the well-known examples is “Jomo karuta,” which was made to introduce historical characters, famous locations, and products of Gunma, one of the prefectures in Japan. Citizens participate in large competitions each year.

3-2. Basic workshop method

During the Photo Karuta workshop, participants tried to make the karuta themselves to introduce their local places. They took photos for the picture cards and wrote haiku on the written cards. In the process of making the karuta sets, participants used their individual perspectives to discover charming points of these locations. Because this activity resulted in 46 pairs of photo-haiku cards, it had the potential to produce 46 story sprouts.

Since 2008, Photo Karuta has been used in the course “Watashitachi no Hiroshima-Photo Karuta dukuri (Rediscovering Our Hiroshima-A Photo Karuta Production),” which is an active learning programs at Hiroshima University of Economics. The course aims to enhance planning abilities and other social skills, such as cooperation and presentation. For six years, we have made karuta cards for local towns and islands in Hiroshima prefecture: Hiroshima-shi, Okunojima, Miyajima, Osakikamijima, Onomichi-shi, Sandankyo Valley, and Osakikamijima. Every year, there are about 20 to 30 attendees, divided into four or five groups comprised of three or four members. Each group

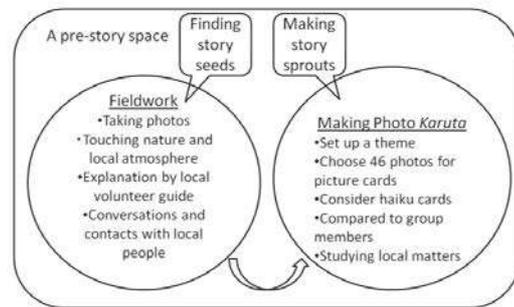


Figure 1 Design of Photo Karuta workshop

makes a karuta set consisting of 46 pairs of cards. The groups are required to establish one unique theme for their karuta based on the attractions that they find from the field.

Figure 1 displays the full design of the Photo Karuta workshop as a pre-story space. To find story seeds, participants visited a location and photographed eye-catching scenes, while experiencing nature and the local atmosphere. They also heard explanations given by a local volunteer guide, and held conversations with locals. After that, participants attempted to generate story sprouts by creating Photo Karuta according to their set theme. This process included: choosing 46 photos for the picture cards and printing them, considering haiku for the written cards by finding adequate words to match the photos, comparing their works with group members to modify them, and studying local matters. Through these activities, they found and expressed various attractions relating to the location.

3-3. Workshop results

3-3-1. Story sprouts generated in the workshop

Story sprouts, that is, pairs of karuta cards generated by participants, were multi-faceted and richly expressive. They were divided into four categories: description, knowledge, thoughts,

and imagination.

The first category, description, described and explained scenes and people that students took notice of while working at the location. For example, one photo card captured an image of autumn maple leaves turning fiery red. On the paired haiku card, the student wrote a realistic and rhythmical poem: *Very red, autumn leaves, very red* (This text is translated to English by Tsuchiya. The same applies to the following haiku). Another example of a card included the words: *On the canvas, a gentleman draws, also autumn leaves*. This haiku described a photo of colored leaves at a valley and an elderly man who sat riverside to paint those leaves.

The second category of karuta card provided knowledge relating to the area, including information and history that the student learned while working at the location. It was based on the participant's thoughts and interests during activities. As an example, the following haiku introduced the biological reason why the waterfall appeared red, taught by the local guide. *Such a mysterious, red color of waterfall, the reason is bacteria*.

The third category included the thoughts and emotions that came to mind when the students took the photos, listened to others, and explored the nature. These were not merely explanations of what they saw and heard, but were expression of their thought processes. On a photo card depicting a flower and autumn leaves in a valley, students wrote the haiku: *It is the lovely, the forgettable flower, blossoms quietly*.

The fourth karuta category included the imagination and inspiration that the participants drew when they were inspired by the photo cards. It allowed for a freer mind than category three, and the objects and scenes shown on the

photos were not directly related to the haiku's messages. For example, seeing a photo of a scenic waterfall, a student wrote the haiku: *I feel ridiculous myself, why I was worrying, until midnight yesterday*. The writer did not mention the waterfall at all, but, instead, wrote what came to her mind as she witnessed the natural creature. Taking photos of the waterfall reminded her of everyday annoyances and awakened her to its minuteness.

3-3-2. Narratives composed from 46 story sprouts

During the workshop, as mentioned earlier, each group was required to set up one theme for their karuta, which specified an attractive feature that the group discovered while visiting the location. In a completed karuta set, the theme was elaborately depicted by 46 story sprouts with various expressions of individual members. This proposed theme acted as a unique local narrative relating to their original view, which was collectively and collaboratively weaved.

In the case of the karuta created from the Sandakyo-valley in 2012, five groups of students specified their themes: 1) the healing effect of the visit, 2) a romantic location for dating, 3) rich history built by people's endeavors, 4) a charming combination of many natural aspects, such as the sounds of a river, fresh air, scenic valleys, and autumn leaves, and 5) an enjoyable place for children. During the workshop, varied narratives were raised, composed of diverse images and words proposed by each group.

3-3-3. Effectiveness of the workshop design

With the design of this Photo Karuta workshop, we focused not only on dialogues but also on experiences to gather story seeds. The

photographing activity allowed participants to easily discover their interests and individual points of view. Moreover, the photos were effective when the participants were asked to reflect upon and evoke their associated ideas. Additionally, visiting the location for the fieldwork caused the participants to feel the experience through their bodies; that is, they not only were able to see the field, but they were also able to hear, smell, touch and taste the experience. Those experiences facilitated participants to more sensitively perceive and to create haikus, story seeds, and sprouts as categorized in 3-3-1.

Surely, it is relatively easier to develop story sprouts - pair cards of the photos and the haiku - than rationalized stories. For vulnerable people, the ease of story sprouts acted as effective starting points to raise their voices freely. Moreover, a form of karuta does not have a linear storyline, but can generate unique narratives as a whole based on the 46 story sprouts. It may aid in the discovery of local features and attractions in a wider perspective. In addition, the story-making process was more interactive and community based, allowing the participants to help each other.

The form of karuta could be interpreted as “cool media” that Marshall McLuhan named media which demand audience participation (McLuhan, 1994=1964). A haiku is a very short poem and requires readers to use their imagination to make sense of the words. Karuta, which is an aggregation of such haikus and images, is considered to be cool media as well. The form asks players to read between the cards, and to interpret and appreciate local attractions while enjoying the game.

4. The story-generating model from pre-story space

By reflecting and examining both activities of Media Conte and Photo Karuta workshops in accordance with the concept of the pre-story space, we elaborated a model to generate stories for vulnerable people. The extracted model is shown in Figure 2. Both workshops, basically followed three steps when weaving these stories: 1) pick up story seeds, 2) select and classify the story seeds, and 3) transform the seeds of stories into coherent stories.

In the case of Media Conte, participants picked up story seeds from their memories and internal voices through a workshop exercise called “interview time.” Through conversation with facilitators, they were inspired by the use of question cards. In the next activity, “storytelling with five picture cards,” story seeds were selected, classified, and arranged in a timeline, and edited into a story. In the Photo Karuta workshop, story seeds were picked up from field experience. The photos, knowledge, and memories participants gained on location played a role in gathering story seeds. To make karuta

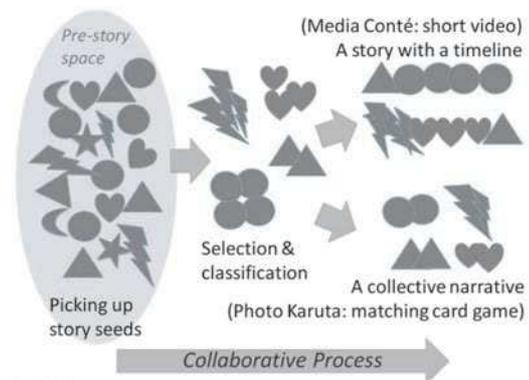


Figure 2 The model of story generation from pre-story space

cards and story sprouts, they selected and classified those seeds. Though the process of reflecting on their experiences and creating photo-haiku pairs cards, they established a theme of locality. At last, a collective narrative was weaved from a completed karuta card set.

These two workshops resulted in different story forms; one was a short video story, and the other was a matching card game. However, there is commonality in the basic process of deconstruction and construction, as well as story weaving from story elements based on collaborative works among participants and others. In both workshops, each story element, namely seed, is visualized by using sticky notes, cards and photos. Therefore, thoughts and images in a storyteller's mind become visible, which allows facilitators and other participants to share ideas and advise about making a story and how to edit and show it. This visualization of story seeds enables the collaboration among participants in all steps. It helps storytelling for vulnerable people.

5. Towards further research

As is propounded in Western practices, does every person really have a story to tell? The careful answer is that every person might not have a story, but story seeds might be in and around themselves, hidden in pre-story space. In short, as we examined, our model proved to be generally effective for digital stories creation, and showed the potential of designing workshops in multiple ways and for various groups of people.

We found that a side effect of the workshops included the fact that these haiku-like short stories or story sprouts of Photo Karuta could evoke audience engagement. Since the stories were created through card-games, some of the

stories were not complete "stories" in terms of the causal nexus that is usually required for coherent stories. However, the audiences were required to read "between the lines" and use their experiences or imaginations to appreciate the laypeople's Digital Stories (Media Conte) or the developed Photo Karuta. In the case of Media Conte, through a collaborative story-weaving process, student facilitators were frequently required to "read" participant's utterances, photos, and narratives using their knowledge and experiences. Through these reflective processes, a facilitator and a participant co-created the participant's self-narrative, which proved to be important to one's identity, and it helped them to gain empathy. On the other hand, making and playing with a set of Karuta might inspire people to see a story world in their mind.

In addition, the process of collaborative story generation and appreciation of sprouted poem-like stories may invite audience members not only to engage in the interpretation of the stories, but also to generate further stories in their own minds.

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