This is a report of an evaluation of the online Talk:Share group.

The evaluation checked out how the group works as a tool for community members and community workers to learn together using digital stories.

The report is written by Penny Vincent

I am a senior lecturer in Civic Engagement in the Creative Communities Unit (CCU) at Staffordshire University.

I could not have developed the Talk:Share project, done this evaluation or written this report without the time, skills and knowledge of the people who have worked with me.

This report is for them with many thanks.

I teach community practice, including:
- community research,
- skills for active citizenship and
- community volunteering.

Learners are community members and people who are paid to work in communities.
I also do community development work in North Staffordshire, particularly the area around the University.

I train and support community research teams to carry out community consultation for community planning and service development.

I am committed to work in communities which leads to a shift in the balance of power, so that the majority of the population have control over their own lives and the decisions affecting them.

(Thompson, 2011; Freire, 1996; Community Development Exchange, 2011)

There is a strong argument that the involving active citizens and community practitioners in learning together can make it easier for people to speak up about the things that affect their lives in communities, and influence decisions which affect them.

Community members affected by public policy and neighbourhood projects should be able to influence the training of the professionals carrying out that work.

People are experts in their own lives, and understand the skills and knowledge that professionals working with them need.

(Buhaenko, Butler, Flower, & Smith, 2004; Bolton Council and Torbay Council; Weil, 2005).
There is a lot of evidence that digital storytelling can help people share their experience and get people talking about community work in a way which gives community members more power.

Digital stories are “short, first person video-narratives” which are created, stored and shared using digital media (Center for Digital Storytelling, n.d.).

“The focus is on the story tellers’ control over the medium, choice of words (narration), pictures and music” (Association for Progressive Communications, 2011).

Social networking sites offer a place to share digital stories. Social networking sites are services on the internet that let people share information, talk and work together (Lasa, 2006).

This has “the potential to change the way we engage in our communities” (Meadows, n.d.).

However, there are limits to this approach including the things that make it hard for people to use IT and the internet, especially people from the most socially excluded communities.

The evaluation of Talk:Share is important because it helped me to understand how people feel about using IT and the internet to watch and talk about digital stories and learn together.

We started the Talk:Share project in 2009. The CCU supported three people to share their digital stories. The stories were shown on both a wikispaces site and a ning social networking site.

People who took part in the project tested both sites and gave their feedback about how easy they were to access and use.

The ning was easiest to use for most people. A ning is a social networking website which allows people to set up groups, upload media files (pictures, videos and sound) and chat in groups called discussion forums.

We worked together to produce a clear guide to making digital stories which was designed by REACH self advocacy project.

In 2011 the CCU started the Volunteering Journeys project. Student volunteers are working in partnership with community volunteers to support them to share stories of volunteering.

Two community volunteer have
produced a digital story and three more hope to do so by Summer 2013.

The four stories people have already shared are about their experiences of taking part in the community as volunteers, speaking up to influence decisions or supporting other people to speak up and take part.

A few years ago a Creative Communities Unit student set up the Creating Communities ning.

I have set up the Talk:Share group in the Creating Communities ning.

I put the four digital stories in the group. The stories are linked to a forum where people can talk about the stories and the topics that they raise.

The Talk:Share group is set up for community members, people who work in the community and people who are studying community practice, to learn together.

I wanted to know how people felt about:

- using the ning,
- looking at the digital stories,
- doing the activities and
- talking about the stories with other people online.
Over the Summer of 2012, I asked people to try out the Ning website and tell me what they think about it.

I wanted to know how the website helps people learn and what is difficult about it.

I wanted to know how taking part in the Talk:Share group affects people’s relationships with each other.

This evaluation report shows what people said.

It shows -

some of the good and bad things about using a Ning website to share and discuss digital stories

what people learned

how community members and workers feel about learning together in this way

and

people’s ideas about how to develop Talk:Share

I invited 62 people to take part in the evaluation.

23 people joined the Talk:Share group on the Ning.

Seventeen were female and seven male.
People were age from early twenties to beyond UK state retirement age.

Two people described themselves as having a disability.

One person is part of the African-Caribbean community.

At least two people were of non British nationality.

One of these is Lithuanian and took part from there. Another is Polish and has lived in Britain for a few months now.

People took part in the Talk:Share between the 8th and the 25th August.

- One person who joined did not write anything in the Talk:Share group on the Ning.
- Twenty people introduced themselves to the group.
- Eleven people replied to at least one other person.
- Thirteen commented on at least one digital story.
- Eleven people took part in discussion, in response to other things in the Talk:Share group.
- Five people gave me private comments through ning messages, email or talking.
People gave me their feedback on the website and by email.

Between the 23rd August and the 5th September, eleven people came to group meetings to talk about how it went. I spoke to 10 people on their own.

The information I got from people taking part in this evaluation suggests that, in order to take part in Talk:Share people need two essential things –

1. access to the internet and the Talk:Share group

and

2. a strong reason to take part that would encourage them to stick at it

It was also clear from the evaluation that taking part in Talk:Share affected people’s feelings.

One of the main things which affected people’s feelings about taking part in Talk:Share was their personal situation.

This included:

- their community work roles and experience and existing relationships between people;
their skills, confidence and experience with social media;

the place where they used the internet to take part and the time they had to take part.

A big thing that encouraged people to take part in Talk:Share was their relationships with me and the CCU.

Eleven participants have been a CCU student before or are students now. Seven people have taken part in digital storytelling projects at the CCU, including three whose digital stories are on the Talk:Share group.

Many people joined the Talk:Share group to “contribute, “say thank you”, and “repay” me and the CCU for supporting their community work and learning.

Some people took part because they know me but once they had started, the conversations between people in the group kept them interested.
Three other things were very important:

- how the Talk:Share group linked to people’s work,
- how much people want to learn about community practice and
- how much people want to make contact with a wide mix of people doing the same sort of work as them, who they would not usually meet.

Twenty of the 25 people taking part gave information about themselves.

I found out about the roles and experience which people have which made a difference to people’s feelings about taking part.

People who took part were paid community workers and volunteers.

The same people often did paid and unpaid or voluntary work.

There were other things which affected the roles they take in the community including disability.

Many of the participants had more than one perspective, more than one reason for taking part and more than one topic they were interested in.
Many people felt like taking part because Talk:Share seemed interesting and linked to their roles and experience.

However a few people felt like they did not have enough experience compared to other people, like one who was, “slightly intimidated by the wealth of experience and expertise”.

More than half of the people said they were “eager”, “excited” or “looking forward” to take part.

Many of the people knew each other, and some were encouraged to take part more by these connections.

Existing relationships made it easier for some people to comment.

A couple of people found it easy to talk to people who were strangers but one person didn’t know many people and “felt like a “loner” which put her off.

A few people felt like they can find out what they need to know by meeting people face to face, so they were less keen to take part.
However, for many people who took part in Talk:Share this type of learning together online seemed attractive.

The way people felt about joining and using the ning and Talk:Share group was linked strongly to their experience of using social media websites.

Many people use facebook and for some the differences between facebook and the ning put them off, but others found that knowing how facebook works helped them.

Some people had little or no experience of using social media. One person who said she is a “technophobe”.

A few others new to the ning found it easy to join though.

People who had the least experience and confidence also had the strongest negative feelings about the process of taking part.

One person said, “it’s been a bit fraught some days”.

The place where people took part from had a big impact on some people’s feelings about doing so.
A few people used phones or other mobile technologies and it was easy for one and less so for a couple of others.

A few people found it difficult to find a quiet space to take part in the Talk:Share group, either at home or at work but were interrupted by other people, their work or their phone.

A few people enjoyed taking part at home, but one person’s dial-up internet connection limited the amount of time she could be online.

Lack of time was a big issue for many people.

Two people spent a lot of time working out how to use the Talk:Share group.

Many could not give it the time they wanted during the 2 weeks I was doing the evaluation, and some felt “under pressure” and “guilty” for not taking part more.

- The design of the ning and the Talk:Share group,
- the quality and format of the digital stories, and
- the things in the digital stories

had a big impact on how people felt about taking part.
A couple of people were put off by the need to join the ning and the Talk:Share group with a password.

The need to log in and out confused a few people.

Quite a few could not tell the difference between the ning and the Talk:Share group very easily.

Almost everyone found it difficult to find their way around the ning and the Talk:Share group.

The way that ning manages comments and posts in discussions, was also a difficulty.

It was hard for experienced social media site users and people with no experience.
It provoked strong feelings in many people.

People reported feeling frustrated, impatient and confused, and found it annoying, irritating and daunting.

Some people found the number of email alerts hard to deal with, and for one person they were “overwhelming”.

A few people thought they were useful reminders.

Some people found ways of dealing with them including changing their personal ning user settings to get just one email each day with all the news in.

A few people got used to using the ning quickly and easily, particularly one person who was familiar with other discussion forums.

Some people said the difficulties did not put them off, and kept at it.

A couple of people gave up.

The strongest negative feelings about taking part were expressed by a couple of the oldest participants, like one who found it “mind-blowing”.

The men taking part found using the ning and the Talk:Share group easier than the women.
People like to learn in different ways.

The Talk:Share group satisfied most people apart from the most active learners who like to learn by doing things and those who like to learn in a very random or a very step-by-step way.

The sound quality and the format of the digital stories aroused significant emotional reactions amongst participants.

A few people found three of the digital stories too quiet.

The digital stories were too long for some people, but others found the length just right and two would have liked to hear more.

Some people thought the places where the films were recorded were distracting.

The camera angles had the biggest impact on people.

Most people thought they really needed to be able to see people’s eyes, otherwise they found the films impersonal and “clinical” as one person put it.
The way the films were made and where they were made caused a few people to wonder whether the storyteller had control over the process or if the person filming them had made the decisions for them.

These technical issues with the digital stories affected how people felt about concentrating on watching them and how much people felt able to take part in discussions by leaving comments about the films.

Many people made comments about having enjoyed, liked or loved watching the digital stories.

People found the digital stories interesting, surprising, alienating, boring, intriguing or affecting.

The person from Lithuania said she was upset watching one story because she wonders why disabled people are not involved in her country.

One person felt like she had met one of the people telling his story on film even though she'd only watched it on a computer.
Some people were impressed with the storytellers community work and their attitudes.

Some agreed the stories were amazing or inspiring.

Some people admired and respected the work that storytellers are doing and some were grateful to the storytellers for sharing their stories.

I took part in the Talk:Share group. My role was to help people take part by asking questions and thanking people for making comments.

This encouraged some people to take part and to stay involved.

One person said it felt like I was holding her hands.

Another said it “gave people a sense of confidence, credibility and leadership”.

For other people, I did not do enough.

Some people were motivated by the conversations between group members.

One person described the Talk:Share group as “like having a great chat”.

However, some people thought there was not enough discussion about the digital stories and this put them off taking part.
One person said that “If you invest time and energy and you make a comment then you don’t get a very clear message that somebody replied... then you don’t come back”.

One reason for lack of comments was some people found it difficult to use the ning, but another was people’s feelings about making comments.

A few people talked about the rules for taking part in the Talkshare group. They thought there were rules even though they were not written down.

A couple of people thought that because people have to join the group with a password, this meant that people taking part will be “like-minded” which will make it “quite a supportive environment” as one person put it.

Some people felt safe to comment.

Comments which were made about the stories were mostly very positive.

However, some people said that they did not take part as much as they wanted to because they worried about posting comments that might upset other members.

Two people didn’t comment because they didn’t just want to just say “very nice” or “very good”. A few people did not want to criticise.
Some people were concerned that comments might be misunderstood because things that are written are not the same as spoken words.

One person thought it was not fair that only four people have shared a story. He thought this means that the people taking part are not equal.

He did not think the people who have shared their stories would expect other people to make judgements about them. He would not like it himself because his volunteering is very personal to him.

One person has shared her story on the group, did not mind getting comments from people. A couple of other people who would share their story, want to get feedback to learn from it.

One person said these problems are the same in all the other discussion forums on the internet that he uses and not just in Talk:Share.

Because of the difficulties using the Talk:Share group and the worries about upsetting people, only 13 people left a comment about a digital story.

These comments were about:
- the information in the stories
- the format of the stories (how they look)
- what people got from watching them and
- questions to the storytellers about their work.
Eleven people made comments about other things in the Talk:Share group, including replying to each other.

The main topics covered were:
- why and how to make digital stories,
- ways to consult people,
- teaching and learning
- managing volunteers
- community group development.

Some people said they had not learned anything from taking part in Talk:Share, but were inspired to find out more.

Most people did learn from taking part, and a few people said they had learned a lot in a short time.

The main things that people learned were:
- practical ideas and information about community work
- how to use the ning
- how digital stories can be used and how to make them.

It made some people think hard about what they do already.

There were two main things that stopped people learning.

One was the limited time people took part in Talk:Share for.

For a few people the digital stories and discussions were not about topics that interest them.
English language was the main thing that stopped one person learning more, but being able to pause the digital stories to get a dictionary, and reading comments from other people helped her understand.

Many people thought the things other people wrote helped them to learn.

The main thing which helped people learn was the digital stories. As one person put it, “Learning from community members is, “always going to be informative, it can teach you and help you learn” because “It’s their life, they live in that community, they’re constantly doing what I’m working to do, there’s no one better”.

Nobody thought taking part made any difference to the relationships they already had with other members of the Talk:Share group.

This was mainly down to taking part for a short time.

A few people could not tell who other people were just from their name and what they write, because they remember people by their face.

Some people would prefer to keep relationships going face to face as they find this easier.
A few people made good and useful links with people they have never met in person.

Some people thought they can keep these relationships going through the Talk:Share group, particularly those people not based in Stoke.

One person based in Lithuania said she never thought she had a relationship with one of the digital storytellers, “and now I think I really do”.

A few people said the Talk:Share group felt like a great place, like a community.

Most people thought the Talk:Share group had potential as a tool for people to learn about volunteering and community work.

A few people think it could be very good for people who cannot or would not come to meetings, including disabled people,

as long as there is help for people to use it.

Some people were impressed by the amount and range of information, opinions and tools which can be put in the Talk:Share group.

Some people like the opportunities it gives people to take part for a few minutes at a time or longer, as often as they want, when and where they want.
Most of the people who took part shared their ideas about ways to make Talk:Share easier to use, information they would like to see and ways to develop the group in future.

Ideas included:

- a simple main page for the Talk:Share group to make it easier to get around;

- a better way to let people know if new messages or information has been added;

- extra information related to community work and volunteering;

- information about using the ning and Talk:Share group;

- practical help to use the Talk:Share for the first time and support after that;

- working together to make things to put in the Talk:Share group like guides to using it and new digital stories; and

- publicity and activities to get people to take part in Talk:Share.

A lot of people had ideas about digital stories they would like to make.
It is clear that people got quite a lot from taking part, even though it was also quite difficult.

So, this means Talk:Share should carry on, but it needs to be made better to make sure people can take part.

Most of the people who took part think the group is important as it helps people who are paid to work in communities and people who volunteer to learn together about topics to do with community work, active citizenship, and taking part in decisions that affect communities.

This evaluation has given me information to help the CCU develop the Talk:Share project.

There are two main things that we need to do

1 – make the Talk:Share group easier to use

2 - make the Talk:Share group more interesting and useful.

We can work with volunteers and paid community workers including students in the CCU to do this.
We can:

- give people access to computers with internet and “assistive technology” at Staffordshire University
- tell people where they can go in the community to use the internet
- give people practical face-to-face help and support to use the Talk:Share group
- write a guide to help people take part in the Talk:Share group
- put together information about topics that people want to learn about
- make new digital stories
- develop the interactive map which shows the digital stories

There are some technical issues to get over with the ning, and this might mean we need to try a different website.

Working together, we can offer new digital stories and valuable information and experience about community practice.
Please contact me if you would like to:

- Get a copy of the clear guide to making digital stories
- Join the Talk:Share group
- Work with me to develop the Talk:Share group,
- Make a digital story
- Learn about digital stories or community work
- Ask me a question.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Creative Communities,
Room L220 Flaxman Building
Staffordshire University
College Road
Stoke on Trent
ST4 2DE

Phone: 01782 294540

Email: p.e.vincent@staffs.ac.uk

http://creatingcommunities.ning.com/
Creating Communities ning

http://ccustaffs.wordpress.com/
Creative Communities Unit blog

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