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WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT MADE VISUAL: DIGITAL STORYTELLING AT PATHWAYS RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

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Abstract

I present a case study of the digital storytelling (DST) project at the Pathways for Women’s Empowerment Research Consortium. Pathways undertook DST as a new research tool to articulate how women strategize and experience positive change in their daily lives in Bangladesh. I analyze the relation between DST and feminist research, and evaluate its capacity to represent women’s diverse experiences given the genre’s formalities and narrative preoccupations. Inspired by Chandra Mohanty’s argument for situated and historical meanings of “experience”, this study aims to counteract the tendency within the DST movement to propagate digital stories as complete, “authentic” voices. I make the case that DST should be recognized as a co-creative process rather than independent authoring. An actor-centric approach is applied to explore the overlapping discourses and workshop practices that actors must mediate. I find that the DST methodology and specific narrative structure of storytelling may delimit ways of conveying empowerment. Not every participant’s experience of empowerment or mode of narration is readily appropriate for DST. On the other hand, some participants report DST guidelines as useful tools for strengthening community relationships and opening up a more self-reflexive space for critical thinking. When researchers use or watch digital stories, it is important to be cognizant of the workshop as sites of struggle over meaning in which multiple actors mediate tensions over process and product. Exploring the commonly overlooked role of feminist action research in workshop mediation, this study contributes to the growing body of work on DST in the development sector of the global South.

Keywords: digital storytelling, feminist methodology, standpoint, women’s empowerment
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Chapter I. Introduction

In this project, I investigate how the increasingly popular workshop-based practice of digital storytelling (DST) was appropriated by an openly feminist transnational network of researchers. The Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Consortium (RPC, hereafter as “Pathways”) undertook digital storytelling as a new research tool for articulating how women experience and negotiate positive life change in Bangladesh. The meaning of “positive change” is specific to Pathways’ concept of empowerment. Pathways does not offer a simple definition of being empowered. In fact, that is what their work is fundamentally against, because they recognize that empowerment involves various and contradictory meanings for different people in different contexts. Their aim is to bring empirical and conceptual insight to an international audience of development and policy actors, for whom “women’s empowerment” is a familiar mantra, but one that rarely considers the complexities of daily life. Often spoken in terms of what development can give to women, conventional approaches of empowerment neglect what women are doing for themselves to bring about positive change in their own and others’ lives (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). The term “hidden pathways” is used to emphasize the less known dimensions that women face in the process of feeling empowered: the dilemmas, choices, negotiations, and contexts (RPC brochure, n.d.). Pathways’ digital storytelling project tries to bring to the forefront audio-visible self-representation of “hidden pathways”. Both the workshop process and videos are framed as research tools that help challenge stereotypes of women’s lives, particularly of women from the global South.

DST workshops are understood as opportunities for participants to exercise representational control over their own narratives. My thesis is critical of the assumption underlying the DST movement that digital stories offer more “authentic” self-representations.
For example, Daniel Meadows, director of the digital storytelling BBC TV show, *Capture Wales*,\(^1\) writes,

No longer must we put up with professional documentaries recording us for hours and then throwing away most of what we tell them, keeping only those bits that tell our stories their own way…If we will only learn the skills of Digital Storytelling then we can, quite literally, ‘take the power back’ (2003: 192).

By “we”, Meadows invokes the UK public in opposition to media professionals. DST is implicitly associated with hopes for enhancing democracy by eradicating professionals’ power to shape representations. Furthermore, Meadows’ comment demonstrates how ideas of technology are entwined with processes of mediation. Nancy Thumim (2009) highlights a paradox in mediation work. When representations are made, mediation must take place in order to produce, circulate, and interpret the text. However, it is suggested (i.e. the quotation above) that mediation is minimized when people represent themselves (2009: 619). Hence, the appeal of adopting DST in feminist research, as it may construct new images of women who are the beneficiaries of development projects.

I argue, however, that DST should be spoken more in terms of a co-creative production. I challenge the tendency of DST research to present digital stories as end-result, atomized products. Self-representations are a key site of struggle in the relation between development institutions and their beneficiaries, brought to the fore through a focus on mediation process and, in particular, on the institutional dimension. I explore how the DST movement, feminist institutions, and their researchers become part of the mediation process. To do this, I examine how social relationships are negotiated in the production process and what digital narratives come into being as a result of that context. I argue that the concept of mediation must include more than the role of technology in transmitting representations.

\(^1\) BBC Wales *Capture Wales* available at www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales
Furthermore, DST may not be compatible with every person’s story or relation to empowerment. This is especially important for researchers to consider as DST is increasingly used to reflect on and analyze lived experiences of others.

Hardly any research has been done on digital storytelling in the context of feminist action research. This is curious considering the shared principle that personal experience can communicate valuable understanding of historical or political issues. The South African non-government organization, Women’sNet, has been conducting international DST training workshops predominately in the global South since 2005 (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006). I investigate the web of relations between the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), Women’sNet, and Pathways, documenting how feminists from different geographical locations and different objectives have been engaging with DST for years. DST scholarship can benefit from examining how DST is appropriated to advance feminist causes. I argue that this may help sophisticate understanding the intricacies of mediating “voice” through video research.

*Research Purpose: Debunking Non-Mediated “Voice”*

Nearly two decades following CDS’s inception, the workshop model is now known as a global movement. Today, CDS’s co-founder, Joe Lambert, travels around the world seeking support to establish more digital storytelling centers and workshops. The BBC TV program *Capture Wales* (see Couldry, 2008), the “Millions Life Program” and Museu da Pessoa in Brazil (Clarke, 2009), the Israeli “Kids-for-Kids” (Hartley & McWilliams, 2009) and UNESCO’s “Finding a Voice” project across South Asia (Watkins & Tacchi, 2008) are just a few development initiatives in which CDS practices have been directly incorporated. Popular in various educational and developmental projects, a large body of literature builds
on Lambert’s DST toolkit (2009) and documents the various uses of the workshop practice (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Lundby, 2008; Couldry, 2008).

The majority of scholarly work on digital storytelling tends to focus on its capacity to engage “true” voices of so-called ordinary and marginalized groups in the public sphere (Couldry, 2008) or mainstream popular culture (Burgess, 2006). Indeed, Jean Burgess, a scholar and DST facilitator, considers digital storytelling capable of “amplifying the ordinary voice” in such a way that those voices are valued in cultural and political arenas (Burgess, 2006: 207). The public arenas she is referring to are those which the storyteller and institution supporting the workshop intentionally seek to reach and who are imagined to benefit from watching the story. In the case of Pathways’ workshop, digital stories were meant to be screened at Bangladeshi NGOs for training and advocacy purposes. The imagined audiences were development practitioners and academics, both from Dhaka and the international community. Another audience was Pathways’ researchers themselves, with the hope that the videos would offer new ground for theorizing empowerment (internal communication, May 14, 2009).

I argue that this claim of authentic voice, replete in DST literature, risks essentializing certain identities the digital story makes “evident”. It masks the relations of production in which multiple actors, who are positioned differently in the production process, mediate workshop activities. Mark Peterson explains that the way media ascribes authorship to texts is crucial because “authorship is always about authority” (2003: 166). According to Foucault’s concept of the author-function, authorship is a social construction through which claims of authority are established, contested, and reproduced. Part of the work of ethnography of media is to reveal how production is a collaborative activity, thus problematizing the centrality in DST of an individual storyteller (Peterson, 2003: 80). Additionally, social categories of difference intersect and mediate the way actors relate to one
another as media producers. My interviewees express how social hierarchies of age and occupation, intersected with class and gender, created unique challenges and opportunities in the workshop process. The point here is that DST workshops are not isolated from relations of power that make up the greater social context and this must be considered when reflecting on the stories as sources for theorizing.

My thesis takes a critical stance towards concepts of “voice” and argues that the mere proliferation of women’s “voices”, enabled by particular research initiatives, is not evidence of validating subjectivities or democratizing development efforts. Instead, as Chandra Mohanty (2003) argues, the way in which representations are presented, read, understood, and located institutionally is paramount: “The point is not simply that one should have voice; the more crucial question concerns the sort of voices one comes to have” as the result of one’s context (2003: 216).

I argue that the co-creativity of the workshop process alters positionality. The speaking positions made available through the workshop have the potential to cultivate a reflexive space for critical discourse. However, positionality may also be limited by specific narrative elements of the DST genre, which emphasize resolve (the story must make a point), explicit meaning (not ambiguous) and coherence of theme. The challenges experienced at Pathways’ workshops demonstrate that the DST genre is limited in its popular form. By examining the relationship between the stories and the discursive context in which they are produced, my analysis counters Burgess’ stance that DST facilitates self-representations with “minimal direct intervention by the workshop facilitators” (2006: 207). I do not believe that these modes of mediation are inherently bad, but I think it is important to examine how discourse is exclusionary to certain meanings of experience.

I aim to expose the author-function and debunk the fetish of DST, in which assumptions of authentic knowledge or coaxed-free representations mask the complexities of
the workshop process and product. In the case of Pathways’ DST project, multiple life experiences are encouraged to be shaped into stories about positive change that was initiated by the speaker herself. The stories produced are a product of the institution’s own discourse, thus must be understood as co-creative representations. This has interesting implications for developing feminist collectives and concepts of “voice” because Pathways’ digital stories may be understood as an intervention to rethink meanings of experience and difference. These stories draw from the storyteller’s “experience” in particular ways and simultaneously speak from within a feminist collective in opposition to certain neoliberal development models of women’s empowerment. I argue that DST practice may be reconceptualized through feminist practice which emphasizes co-creativity. It is particularly relevant for producing counter-hegemonic knowledge of empowerment that is meaningful to a range of women’s lives.

_A History of DST_

I am using the term “digital storytelling” to refer to a particular workshop practice which is often referred to as a global movement and textual genre in its own right (Hartley & Williams, 2009: 12). The practice produces videos of approximately two to three minutes, which present a first-person voice-over to match visual material sourced from the storyteller’s personal archives, hand-made crafts, and internet stock-images all edited together on consumer-grade computers and software. The workshop methodology and “seven elements” of story structure were developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in California in the 1990s. Joe Lambert, co-founder of CDS, explains that digital storytelling was part of a wider shift in the U.S. from one-way communication (TV broadcast media) toward two-way communication (participatory media) at a time when digital hardware and software was
increasingly available to more people (Lambert, 2006: 9). In other words, the workshop model developed through and alongside emerging digital technology, not because of them.

The Center was launched as part of an extension of head founder Dana Atchley’s one-man theater production, *Next Exit*. This was an interactive multimedia show that incorporated a dozen short video pieces illustrating various anecdotes from personal experiences of the producer. On their “History” webpage, CDS’s mandate is part of community arts and popular education movements that accompany thinkers like Arlene Goldbard, Liz Lerman and Bill Cleveland, all of whom have written about how artistic practices have been used to address social problems. These movements treat art education as a means of mobilizing people to contribute their own “voices” to the representation of their own and shared histories (“History”, 2011: para 3).

Zoe Jacobson’s dissertation (2009), based on her work as an intern at CDS, explains the workshop schedule and process developed at the Center. CDS organizes three types of workshops that are open to the public and also organizes custom workshops for sponsoring organizations. The first, called a “standard workshop”, generally takes place over three-days with 8 to 12 people who simply learn to make digital stories for their own personal interests. Participants are given materials to assist them in writing scripts, and collect photos and video clips in order to come prepared for the first workshop. The workshop functions as a space for participants to share their stories so that other participants and facilitators can offer feedback. This process is called “story circle”, which is meant to create a safe and productive space for people to engage with each other’s narratives. For example, one of the primary rules of story circle requires participants to frame feedback in a subjective, non-critical manner; “If it were my story, I would…” and then state recommendations to improve the storytelling. After story circle, participants can work one-on-one with trained facilitators to edit their scripts, record the sound track, and compose the video (2009: 24).
The second type of workshop is the “educator’s workshop”, which is designed for teachers who wish to integrate digital storytelling into their course curricula. The idea is to give hands-on experience to teachers and then to discuss how to practically and theoretically implement digital storytelling into their respective classes. Jacobson explains that all CDS workshops are designed to be technologically accessible to everyone regardless of their familiarity with computers. Throughout the three days, CDS trains participants to use software programs, such as iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, and Adobe Photoshop in order to enable storytellers to use the equipment and have “creative control over their narratives” (2009: 23).

Third, “customized workshops”, unlike open workshops, usually focus on particular issues and are sponsored by external organizations. Often the sponsoring organization has a particular topic and expects that these digital stories will mobilize a specific community on certain issues. CDS works in partnership with the organization to design a program for producing and sharing digital stories. Therefore, CDS manages all the post-production editing, training material development, public screening, and discussion facilitation (2009: 27).

Research Site: Locating the DST Project at Pathways

I conduct a case study examining the potentials and limitations of DST as a feminist endeavor. As mentioned above, Pathways is a unique transnational feminist network focused on theories of women’s empowerment. They consider themselves first and foremost a research organization that addresses public policy and development problems and solutions. They are located across five institutions: the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia in Salvador, Brazil, the Social Research Center (SRC) at the American University in
Cairo, Egypt, the Center for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA) at the University of Ghana, and BRAC University in Dhaka, Bangladesh (“Research Hubs”, n.d.). Each research Hub conducts separate projects contingent upon the local context and regional priorities, while also building constituencies with local and international community groups, activists, policy makers, and academics. As a whole, Pathways organizes its research into four specific themes that act as different entry points for study. These themes are “Conceptualizing Empowerment”, “Voice”, “Work”, and “Body” (“Research Themes”, n.d.). The myriad of projects and resources under each theme will be discussed at length in chapter three as a way to position the DST project in relation to their work as a whole.

Another main area of intervention is the integration of communication practices at every stage of the research process. Half of Pathways’ budget is reserved for communications. This is indicative of the central role communication plays at Pathways in their efforts to disseminate their research through multiple mediums rather than depend on written academic reports alone. As stated above, one of their primary purposes is challenging existing stereotypes of women in development and mainstream media, as well as creating new representations that Pathways feels are missing from those popular circulations. Pathways researchers regularly engage with mainstream media, writing newspaper columns, contributing to and appearing on radio and television programs, and performing at theatre events. They solicit media professionals to engage with their work, including journalists, photographers, and filmmakers. Understanding their communication mandate is important for this study as it contextualizes where and why digital storytelling was applied to Pathways’ work. Similar to the principles which characterize DST scholarship, communications team manager, Tessa Lewin argues that it is crucial that more alternative realities are articulated in the public. “We need to see the world presented in different ways- our emotional and visceral responses are very important in shaping how we think and, more importantly, how
we feel” (Lewin, 2010: 223). Subversive narratives are woven through numerous genres, not just what counts as scholarly work. DST is appropriated by Pathways as one other channel in their attempt to communicate more critical understandings of women’s empowerment.

Here, I outline their DST program, followed by my research questions and methodology. All three workshops functioned as a platform to communicate multiple ways of experiencing “empowerment” by participants’ own terms; meanings which are not typically represented or taken into account for identifying developmental issues (Lewin, 2010). In the DST program proposal, researchers express hope to reflect and analyze these digital stories and “use them as sources of knowledge and ground for theorizing about empowerment” (Internal communications, May 14, 2009).

The first workshop was a three-day program organized to take place during 12-14 November, 2009, in a computer lab at BRAC University in Dhaka. In an internal report, Samia (the lead organizer and facilitator) writes to her international colleagues that the purpose is to understand researchers’ own notions of empowerment, and to familiarize them with DST as a research tool, which they could then think of incorporating in their own research (Rahim, internal communications, 19 June, 2010). It was prominently agreed upon by my interviewees that the first workshop was a “training of trainers” in the hopes that DST would be replicable at other Hubs.

There were a total of ten participants, three of which were senior researchers and the rest junior researchers, plus two communications officers: Léa and Kristina.² All of the researchers were from Bangladesh and either worked at the South Asia Hub or at the BRAC Development Institute where Pathways was located. None had prior experience with DST workshops and at least two researchers never used computers for video production. The communication officer, Léa, works at the Latin American Hub housed at The Federal

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² Refer to Appendix for a chart of the communications officers and their corresponding Hub locations and roles in each workshop.
University of Bahia. In our interview she explained that she never participated in digital storytelling before, but she had some idea of what to expect at the workshop and how DST had been used at the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) in 2008 (more on this in chapter two) and did some personal research on the CDS website. She considers herself “tech-savvy”, having used consumer-grade video software before, such as Windows Movie Maker (the most widely available video software) and Audacity (free online audio-editing software).

Kristina works at the Middle East Hub at The American University in Cairo, Egypt. She did not work at Pathways when the communications officers attended the FTX in 2008, and she did not have any experience with DST before the workshop. Kristina also considers herself tech-savvy. Part of their responsibilities as communication officers is to think strategically about different communication outputs for different Pathways projects to be directed at academic or policy activists, development practitioners, or popular media audiences in radio, newspapers, and TV. Thus, having computer web and social media skills is integral to their job. Kristina never used Windows Movie Maker or Audacity before, but found them similar to other programs and easy to learn in the workshop.

There were three facilitators: Samia, Akofa, and Tessa. Samia is the communications officer of the South Asia Hub and the director and lead facilitator of the workshop. Akofa is the communications officer of the West Africa Hub located at the University of Ghana (she declined an interview). She attended the DST track at the FTX with Samia and helped organize the program, as well as offered support as a technical assistant. Tessa is the Communication and Learning Manager of the Global Hub housed at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. Tessa has an extensive background in video media and animation. She was the main technical assistant, teaching participants how to use Audacity and Windows Movie Maker. She also helped facilitate group activities and
took pictures to document the workshop. I will discuss my relationships with each interviewee later in this chapter.

The second workshop began shortly after the first. It was held in the same computer lab during 19-21 of November. The purpose of this workshop was for participants from other on-going research projects to create their own digital stories about personal struggle and positive change. Participants were encouraged to reflect on personal experiences of transformation in light of the various complexities “rather than create a simplistic story of linear progress of [one’s] life” (Rahim, internal communications, May 19, 2010).

I want to pause here and explain what is meant by “transformation”. This meaning is intrinsic to Pathways’ concept of empowerment. Stated in the opening of this introduction, the aims of Pathways research is to challenge what has been called the neoliberal World Bank approach to women’s empowerment. Pathways argues that this approach is instrumentalizing as it constructs women and girls as the key to solving economic problems in communities, while promoting the withdrawal of state responsibility from economic and social support, hence translating women and girls as responsible for development (Lewin, 2010). The World Bank’s Buvinic and King (2008) for example, offers a neat chain of causalities that begin with empowering women and girls, and results in economic growth and poverty reduction (cited in Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008). Pathways challenges this development policy by producing different understandings of empowerment. As stated on their 2010 brochure, “empowerment” is an on-going process, one that changes throughout life and is partial and uneven across different daily activities (Pathways, 2010: 1). Research focuses not on replicating program models, but on understanding the different life processes in order to offer more possibilities for women. Such an emphasis on the experiential requires analysis of the context in which women make sense of their daily lives and articulate versions of empowerment to fit those contexts. Hence, the reason for Pathways’ investment in multiple
communication channels for which they aim to make oppositional representations of women’s various experiences more available.

In the second workshop there were ten participants. Three women of the Upazila Parishad government councils that came from rural districts just outside Dhaka and eight undergraduate students from different universities in Dhaka who studied different disciplines. As will be explored in chapter four, the age and class group dynamics played an important role in the workshop process. The local government representatives ranged between 40-50 years of age and came from middle to lower class backgrounds. The students were between the ages of 20-22 years old and came from middle to upper class families. In our interview, Samia (lead facilitator) explained that none of the participants were familiar with DST, but that one’s relationship with the technology had little to do with the recruiting process. Instead, she aimed to gather an equally distributed sample of women who were involved in the South Asia Hub’s three main research programs. Thus, all ten were already participants of the Hub’s on-going projects and knew or heard of Samia.

There were five facilitators in the second workshop, of which four were involved in the previous workshop, including Samia as lead facilitator and Tessa, Léa, and Kristina as technical assistants. As will be addressed when discussing facilitation challenges, the latter three do not speak Bengali thus were limited in their assistance. The fifth facilitator was Samia’s colleague, Sahida, who was hired because she was fluent in Bengali and would support all group and one-on-one activities.

The third workshop was planned to take place in the town of Rangamati in February 2010, but was postponed when violence broke out in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region the evening before the facilitators were to leave from Dhaka (internal communications, May 14, 2010). The workshop was postponed until the political situation had calmed down. It was held in a computer lab at the Ashika Training Centre in Rangamati during 18-22 April, 2010.
The 5-day workshop was organized to engage discussions on security from the perspective of indigenous and minority communities. There were a total of 12 participants who came from various backgrounds, occupations, religions, and ethnic groups. The majority came from the Chakma community, while the rest belonged to the Tripura, Marma, and Khiyang communities.

Five facilitators were involved: Samia, her colleague Aanmona, and three hired technicians from the Ashika Training Centre to help participants use the computers and navigate Windows Movie Maker. The third workshop is not included in this study, however, because I could interview only one participant, Samia, the lead facilitator. Also, while Samia was the only interviewee involved in the third workshop, we were unable to schedule time to discuss its context in detail. Instead, our conversations tended to circulate around the issues in the first and second workshop. This is also true of my interviews with Tessa, Léa, and Kristina. The communication officers typically compared and contrasted the dynamics between the first and second workshop. This is not to say that challenges or opportunities did not arise in the third. Rather, perhaps it is because the first and second were scheduled back-to-back, conducted in the same lab, and involved all of the communications officers. In fact, these two workshops were the first time all five communications officers met and worked in the same geographical location together (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011). As evaluated in chapter four, DST was used as a way to strengthen the communications team and colleague relationships. Thus part of this DST project was about developing a feminist community.

Research Questions

The Pathways DST project inspires the following research question: Does making a digital narrative (as opposed to a written one) produce more polysemic frameworks to
understand our social world? The multimodality of the medium may open up greater choice in the items and signs to articulate concepts and experiences. My inquiry of mediation also considers DST on the level of plot structure. The genre tends to insist on personal, first person narratives that state a problem and end with clear resolution. Thus DST might be obstructive for some and compelling for others in representing the complex and heterogeneous relations to “empowerment”. Who comes to experience these differences reveals problems and potentials in the genre at large.

I believe that DST may suit feminist methodology because of the shared value of daily experience as the basis of knowledge. Thus, I aim to trace the relations between feminist action research and DST. This leads to my question: What overlapping discourses and assumptions about “voice” within the DST genre, and Pathways’ discursive institutional context, frame the mediation process? The answer to this question greatly depends on my theoretical position of media production and how meaning is produced. I follow Mark Peterson’s (2003) stance on the ethnography of media and assume that meaning is never simply found in the text, but rather is socially negotiated. Hence, I aim to expose the tendency in DST research to convey digital stories as more “authentic” evidence. Unlike the tendency in DST scholarship to ignore the multiple factors involved in mediation, this position allows one to investigate how both the relations and means of production are organized. It is also important to balance this inquiry with the agency of media producers. Thus, I also pose the question: How do workshop participants negotiate these discourses and institutional contexts? Therefore, the DST workshop is conceptualized as a site of shared mediation of authorial voice.

Feminists have developed controversial notions that research itself can contribute to producing liberatory subjectivities in a marginalized group and that this kind of engaged research can produce knowledge that such a group desires. But under what conditions may
digital storytelling projects do so? With my research questions focused on the ways in which actors perceive and negotiate the localized, context-specific relations within the Pathways DST program, I hope to make the case that DST should be spoken more in terms of co-creativity, rather than individualist representations. This can further complicate understandings of “voice” and help build on research methodologies that incorporate video.

**Research Methodology and Participants**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with four Pathways communications officers who were DST workshop facilitators, technical assistants, and trainees-participants. My aim was to produce dialogue, rather than a formal interview, in order to allow participants to lead in identifying what aspects of the DST experience were challenging and beneficial. This approach suits the actor-centric orientation of my thesis. I formulated a number of standardized interview questions, as well as questions specific to the person with whom I was interviewing. For example, I framed more comparative technical questions about the workshops with Samia, as she was the lead facilitator of the project. At times, I added questions to first and second round interviews based on information another interviewee might reveal. For example, one of my participants explained that Léa (communications officer) had chosen not to make a digital story. I had not interviewed Léa by this point, thus was able to tailor some questions based around that circumstance in order to gain detail from her perspective. I used these questions as initial tools, both to establish rapport and a level of comfort during our conversations.

In order to understand both the activities Pathways facilitates and how these activities are represented, I also conducted content analysis of Pathways’ work. Identifying the range of ideas about a topic and how it is articulated in discursive ways enables analysis of the institutional agenda that frames the DST project. I read though and compared over 20
organization reports, working papers, workshop summaries, and article publications derived from each Hub’s website and various media outlets. This includes the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) biannual bulletin, publications by the UK government Department for International Development, various academic journals (e.g. *Development, Gender & Development*, and *Hawwa Journal*), plus publications in local (English written) media outlets. I was also given access to internal email correspondences between the communications officers regarding the DST project. This includes the project budget proposal and write-ups that would be incorporated into Pathways final synthesis reports.

I was able to engage participants in this project by way of networks within Pathways and my prior relationship with a few members. These introductions felt indicative of the central role that networking plays for Pathways as a research institution. A referral from a friend and meetings with members helped establish rapport in initiating a relationship with the institution. I learned about their DST project from a friend and research participant, Kristina. She is the communication officer of the Middle East Hub at the American University in Cairo. Kristina is the newest member to the communications team, moving from her home in the United States to work in Cairo in 2007. In 2010, we organized an on-campus film series which screened *Thorns and Silk* (2009), a short documentary funded and produced by Pathways’ “Real World” film project. This project linked young filmmakers with academics from Pathways to collaborate on short films exploring everyday lives of women in Brazil, Egypt, and Palestine (“Real World”, n.d.). While planning our film screenings, Kristina shared with me her experience at the DST workshop in Bangladesh. She wanted to facilitate a similar workshop at the Middle East Hub. I was interested in her idea and offered to help pool resources and be a technical assistant. I had some knowledge of the DST genre, but no actual workshop experience. A few friends shared their digital stories with me as a possible technique to employ at Stella, a Montréal organization for sex workers.
where I interned in 2007. I was intrigued by the process and keen to learn more. Indeed, knowing that storytellers had control of the editing process—choosing what to say and what images and sounds to include—made the videos appealing. However, due to other commitments and priorities between Pathways members, Kristina, and I, this project was unable to materialize before the deadline to finalize all research for the closure of their five year budget. Nonetheless, this did lead to my contact with the other communications officers involved in DST: Samia, Tessa, and Léa.

In late 2010, I asked Kristina if she would be willing to participate in a few interviews for my thesis. At this point, I knew I wanted to evaluate DST as a feminist research tool, but had not established a research site. Kristina participated in the first and second workshop and experienced being both a storyteller and a technical assistant. Due to her different roles with DST, I felt she would be an invaluable person to interview. She agreed and also offered to put me in contact through email with the lead workshop facilitator, Samia, who lives and works in Dhaka.

Samia is the communications officer of the South Asia Hub. She pitched the concept to Pathways, developed the workshop program and schedule, recruited participants, arranged the location and materials, and facilitated all three workshops. Through email correspondence, Samia agreed to be interviewed on Skype. We also arranged a brief informal phone meeting a month before the interview in which I was able to introduce myself in a more personal manner. We shared our academic backgrounds as well as our interests in DST, and social media more generally. Samia is from Dhaka and has a Bachelor’s in Gender Studies from Smith College in Massachusetts (Rahim, personal interview, June 14, 2011). She has been a part of Pathways since 2006, and has facilitated many visual media related projects on behalf of the South Asia Hub. For example, she facilitated a photography competition among amateur photographers to make a photo-documentary of women working
and moving through Dhaka’s cityscape. The objective was to challenge images of a male-dominated public by showing that many women occupy public space (Rahim & Azim, 2009). Samia was also a researcher in the Hub’s “women and media” project, which investigated how Bangladeshi women watch television and the meaning, choices, and subjectivities they derive from it (Priyadarshani & Rahim, 2010). Samia is an avid believer of the influence of visual images on concepts of gender and sexuality, and supports efforts to reframe stereotypes.

Some of my research also derives from informal interviews with senior Pathways researchers. During a meeting when I was discussing my thesis idea with Dr. Hania Sholkamy, convener of the Middle East Hub and my AUC professor at the time, she recommended that I also interview Tessa, who is the Communications and Learning Manager of the Global Hub, located in Brighton, UK. Tessa was the lead technical assistant in both the first and second workshop. She has an extensive background in film animation and is confident teaching consumer-grade software like Windows Movie Maker and Audacity.

Tessa grew up moving back and forth between Zimbabwe and England, and has had a privileged education. She studied Art History and Political Science at the University of Cape Town and has an MA in Digital Moving Image from London Guildhall University. Before Pathways, Tessa was Curator and Digital Arts Project Manager at Lighthouse, a digital art gallery and leading mentor program for filmmakers in the UK. She has worked on award-winning digital shorts as an animator, producer, and director, including Bafta-nominated “The Dog who was a Cat Inside”, which addresses concepts of sexuality and identity.3 As Communications Team and Learning Manager, Tessa oversees all outputs of Hub activities and research projects to be directed at certain audiences. Her vision for Pathways’ communication ranges from documentaries to audio programs to communicate research. For

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3 “The Dog who was a Cat Inside” is available to watch online at http://onlineshortfilms.net/watch/the-dog-who-was-a-cat-inside-video_709227f68.html
example, she is currently creating an animated project based off the *Qalet el Rawiyah* (“So Said the Storyteller”) performance series produced by the Middle East Hub and the Cairo-based Women in Memory Forum (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). She also attends and speaks at many conferences. As one example, in 2010, Tessa presented Pathways “Real World” doc film project at the UNIFEM conference examining gender equality in world media (“IDS and The Commission”, 2010). Dr. Sholkamy called Tessa on her personal phone during our meeting, which led to our extensive email communications and Skype interviews. Tessa was extremely instrumental in my research as she provided access to Pathways’ digital stories that were not readily available on the internet, as well as shared internal Pathways correspondences and reports relevant to the DST project.

By the time I had scheduled interviews with three of the five officers involved in the workshops, I wanted to solicit participation from the remaining two. Kristina gave me their email contacts. The communications officer from the West Africa Hub declined an interview. Léa, the communications officer of the South America Hub in Salvador, Brazil, agreed to participate. Like Kristina, Léa also was a participant-trainee in the first and a technical assistant in the second workshop. Léa is from Salvador. She has a BA in Public Relations and is currently pursuing an MA in Gender and Regional Development at the Federal University of Bahia, where Pathways is located (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Her work involves coordinating outputs for researchers’ projects for the benefit of both the academic and general community in Salvador. She also writes and translates materials. For example, she helped write and translate a 100 page report about the Hub’s research on the capacity of police stations for women in Brazil as a means to legally address situations of domestic violence (Sardenberg et. al., 2010).

I interviewed all four participants at least once via Skype for up to one hour and a half. Each interview was recorded using QuickTime from a laptop. QuickTime has very
simple one-click recording with good sound quality, plus there was no need for additional equipment. A few times we experienced bad internet connections, which were resolved by calling back via Skype to their work phone. It is interesting to note that my participants scheduled our interviews to take place during their working hours at Pathways. This might reflect that they relate themselves to my research more prominently as officers, rather than another identity. This also might reflect an incredibly busy schedule they manage between their professional and personal lives, or that there is a clear boundary between work and life, or also perhaps that there was better internet connections at the office.

In order to collect and study all Pathways’ material that may be relevant for content analysis, I asked for recommendations and suggestions from interviewees. This led me to documents I may not have had access to otherwise, such as the DST project proposal, concept note, and email correspondences between Pathways members regarding various issues related to implementing the workshops and sharing digital stories outside the workshop. I was also forwarded a list of Pathways reports on DST that have yet to be published, as well as documents available in *The Guardian* and *OpenDemocracy*. Tessa shared with me two digital stories made in the first and second workshop via the internet software, Drop Box, a free information storage website.

I also conducted follow-up interviews with most participants. These were shorter, about 45 minutes, and usually involved asking the participants to clarify certain aspects brought up in the previous interview, such as clarifying a name, place, or title. After transcribing and reviewing the first conversations, I would take notes on what points I felt were unclear and required more real-life examples. There were also topics that may not have been discussed either because they did not suit the direction of dialogue and/or we ran out of time. Follow-up interviews allowed this advantage to act on retrospect.
I submitted my questions to my participants at least 24 hours before each interview in order to allow time to reflect on answers. I wanted to offer as much sense of comfort for our discussions, considering I had never met most of them in-person. This method was also particularly useful because we were discussing events which had occurred over one year ago. Offering the questions in advance allowed for more time to remember, retrieve notes and documents, and prepare more confident answers. Also, because my participants’ time schedules were so demanding and reserving interview time-slots proved difficult, I wanted to ensure that the time we did have was used most efficiently.

The breadth of research participants is limited to the four communications officers. I wish I was able to recruit more participants, such as senior researchers, organization founders and public figure-heads, as well as interviews with the rank-and-file staff from each of the Hubs. I desired more interviews with various digital storytellers in each of the three workshops. In fact, Tessa and Samia recommended interviewing specific digital storytellers who were senior researchers at the South Asia Hub, as their stories were considered exemplarily of the project. This information about the types of stories considered representative, and how they were utilized after the workshop is important for my thesis questions and will be considered at length chapter four. Interviews with these storytellers would have enriched an understanding of the discursive process that multiple actors mediate, in particular how story narration developed. However, I was unable to establish a Skype or phone interview with those recommended. I also could not interview other digital storytellers, particularly from the second and third workshop, as the majority does not speak English and I do not speak Bengali.

Interviews with Pathways’ communications officers, nonetheless, have very important benefits and suit the type of inquiry this thesis aims to achieve. As mentioned earlier, innovative communication strategies are integral to the way Pathways differentiates from
other research institutes. Communications officers are the only full-time staff position. The officer is responsible for keeping in touch with all the researchers, maintaining relationships, and acting as a liaison between Hubs and project actors. She writes monthly updates on all Hub activities and archives work being done in her Hub. The officer writes news articles on different researchers’ projects for publication on IDS websites or other communication outlets, such as OpenDemocracy. She is to think strategically about different communication outputs for different projects to be directed at certain audiences, like academics or policy activists, development practitioners, and popular media. Where appropriate, the officer is to come up with independent communication projects (Hallez, personal interview, June 6, 2011). Thus, not only are my research participants able to speak about their experience as DST facilitators, technical assistants and storytellers, but are also able to give unique insight on how DST fits among other activities at Pathways and the greater institutional culture. Indeed, by virtue of their work responsibilities, these participants are the primary generators of the DST program.

**Thesis Outline**

The chapters are structured in a way to build theory and context before analyzing the workshop experience. In chapter two, I provide a discourse analysis that explores relations between DST scholarship and feminist action research. This is done by engaging other DST workshops from many locations, as examples of the assumptions, values, and purposes that make up the history of the method. Building my theoretical approach of DST mediation, Kelly McWilliam’s (2009) study of institutional discourse and Anna Poletti’s (2011) analysis of the seven narrative elements of DST are important for analyzing how the workshop encourages certain meanings attached to life experience while limiting others. This chapter establishes the reasons of adopting an actor-centric approach, as it emphasizes the
collaborative nature of media production, looking at how producers use their agency to mediate institutional discourse and social forces in the workshop. Drawing on work by feminists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on Latina testimonials, and Chandra Mohanty’s transnational feminism, I argue against the tendency to decode digital stories as purely experiential. The production of digital stories is an interpretive act involving multiple actors that strategically determine what counts as valuable experience. After establishing a relationship between feminism and DST, I trace the influence of the DST training at the Feminist Tech Exchange where Samia and other Pathways’ members participated. This is important for contextualizing how and where DST became part of Pathways.

Chapter three examines the institutional culture of Pathways. Here I look at specific ways in which the workshop theme is shaped by Pathways’ research aims and concepts of “empowerment”. I outline the purpose and activities of research that categorizes Pathways work, as well as how their work is communicated, as this demonstrates how Pathways make sense of their agenda as a collective and how they position themselves within the industry of development in the global South. Specifically, Pathways aims to counteract hegemonic neoliberal discourse of women’s empowerment. Each research theme informs the framing discourses of the DST project, considering that the storytellers were recruited from within ongoing researches. Examining these factors, along with the seven narrative elements, presented in chapter two, are important because they have implications for the speaking positions negotiated in the workshop.

Chapter four analyzes how Pathways presented the outcome of the DST workshop and discusses the challenges and benefits my interviewees expressed. The type of stories produced tended to represent empowerment as a successful struggle towards positive transformation initiated by the storyteller’s political agency. I examine some of the pragmatic and social elements at play that actors mediated and how the storytellers followed
and diverged from the narrative guidelines and production schedule. One participant declined to make a digital story. Others, such as the local government women, insisted on telling stories in long monologues which did not fit the DST narrative guidelines and set challenges for facilitating adequate feedback for all participants. There are also those who found the production process successful in enabling personal reflection as a source for critical and political “voice”. Finally, hierarchies of age and occupation entered both workshops. However, in one workshop such hierarchies were disrupted, while in the other they were exacerbated.

In chapter five, I conclude the study by offering some ways to re-establish DST as a co-creative (not solo) media process. The concept of co-creativity can help debunk the fetish of DST and draw out the challenges and benefits that participants experience producing together. This chapter provides suggestion for how to integrate the concept of co-creativity in DST mediation and consumption. This is written in anticipation that Pathways members will read and respond to my research. It is hoped that Pathways may apply this research to benefit their work and I may apply their critique to benefit my own work.
Chapter II. The Relationship between DST and Feminist Methodology

In this chapter, I explore the competing discourses of “voice” that characterize the DST international movement and what can be learned from feminist works. I take a Foucauldian framework of discourse and power, alert to the relationship between a topic and the representations that make coherent that topic (Parker, 1992). I aim to identify the discursive features that distinguish DST as a video genre, as it aids understanding why and how DST is used in feminist research. Examining themes and debates taking place amongst scholars, practitioners, and feminists, I ask: What frames of reference are employed to make sense of digital storytelling? What values, purposes, and assumptions about “voice” proliferate in the literature? What is the relationship between feminism and DST methodology?

This literature review stages my theoretical grounding for adopting an actor-centered approach. I arrive at this position by engaging examples of other workshops and categorizing the DST literature according to three modes of analysis, which are representative of the different ways that media production has been framed in communication studies: mediacentrism, sociocentrism and actor centrism. The theorists that fall under these modes of analysis emphasize different aspects of production. Based on close readings of these literatures, I identify two key aspects of the DST discourse; first, as a textual genre and second, as an advocacy practice. I argue that the literature values authorial voice that is independent; self-made digital stories are represented as “true” and autonomous translations of daily life and have the potential to empower the storyteller and democratize mainstream corporate media (Burgess, 2006; Hartley, 2009; Lambert, 2006). In addition, there is a preferred construction of “voice” that emphasizes point of view, closure, and coherence of theme (Poletti, 2011). An actor-centered approach, however, complicates this notion of voice by framing production as a site of struggle over narration. Drawing on work by feminists,
such as Chandra Mohanty, who have criticized the conventional notion of “experience” as an unexamined, universalized category, I argue against the tendency to decode digital stories as purely experiential. The production of digital stories is an interpretive act involving multiple actors to translate what counts as valuable experience and to make it coherent. The agency of media producers involves mediating specific social forces, group dynamics, and institutional constraints. Hence, returning to my main argument that the production of digital stories is co-creative, rather than individualistic.

At the heart of studying feminist media production is the concept of voice and authorship, as suggested by these key questions: Who speaks through the media and what audience is addressed? To what extent are the views and intentions of the producer encoded into the text? The literature on DST is embedded in assumptions about the relationship between society and mass media. First, that those who produce the text have primary control over its meaning. Second, that meaning is assumed to reflect the world of its producers (Burgess, 2009; Hartley, 2009; Lambert, 2006). On the other hand, media theorists from outside DST literature have argued that meaning is unstable and socially negotiated (Mohanty, 2003; Peterson, 2003). For example, in her work on Latina American autobiography, Gloria Anzaldúa explores the role feminist writing has played in constructing “mestiza consciousness”. This refers to a plural consciousness born of the historical and geographical context of the United States-Mexican border. She argues that writing and re-reading testimonials requires understanding multiple, often ambiguous and oppositional experience. It requires negotiating these narratives, not just taking a counter-stance to hegemonic knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1987). Thus, the development of a feminist consciousness was not confined to social movements, but also through the act of writing and reading. It is a consciousness that is plural, as contradictory lived experiences are centered as the basis of knowledge, which are not abstract, but from specific historical contexts. From this
perspective of media production, the content of “voice” is not necessarily fixed and autonomous, but rather dialogical and mediated. It is this perspective that may help debunk the fetishization of digital storytelling.

After establishing my case for actor-centered analysis, I shift my focus to relations between digital storytelling and feminism. This is done by tracing the history of self-identified feminist agendas that have utilized DST. I discuss the relationship between the CDS and Women’sNet, which led to DST training at the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) in 2008. Pathways’ communications officers attended the FTX and that is where their DST project was conceived. Exploring other feminist DST workshops by Silence Speaks, Women’sNet and Rina Benmayor, I find that digital storytelling has predominantly been used as a tool for challenging stereotypes and validating one’s story as valuable knowledge. The Pathways’ DST project, in particular, focused on expressing a feminist community from within the context of development research through a shared frame of reference about “empowerment”. Thus, digital storytelling is another site (or discursive production) for contestation about reality itself. Pathways’ DST project may be thought of as a part of a history of feminist engagements with story-oriented narratives. At the end of this chapter, I unpack what constitutes research methods as “feminist”, paying careful attention to the plurality of feminism and how standpoint theory relates to DST discourse.

Different theoretical approaches are explained by Mark Peterson (2003) in his book on the move towards ethnography in communication and media studies. Peterson differentiates between mediacentric analyses, which emphasize the significance of institutional influences on content, and sociocentric analyses, which emphasize the producer’s agency to incorporate cultural symbols to shape content (2003: 163). These modes of analysis are replete in the DST literature. It is important to identify the theoretical
positions as they constitute authorial voice differently, thus create different implications for why and how DST is used in social research.

Mediacentric Approach

To apply a mediacentric approach of production involves focusing on how organizational structures and discourses shape content. Investigators explore the various ways in which institutions, such as Pathways, are organized in terms of professional roles, routines, project objectives, legal regulations, publications, budget line (Peterson, 2003: 162). Kelly McWilliam’s comparative study of two Australian digital storytelling programs from different organizations exemplifies a mediacentric framework. She found that the digital stories emphasize different things in correlation with how the two organizations constructed the workshops. McWilliam applies the concept of “discursively ordered domain” by Selsky, Spicer, and Teicher (2003) to explain why these differences occur.

Domain theory, integrated with discourse analysis in the context of development organizations, argues that organizational relations are a constructed social field of shared issues and concerns, and these relations structure discursive patterns around ideas (such as implementing digital storytelling workshops for ‘at risk’ youth). This theory conceives subject positions as limited by the way in which ideas are represented and circulated by institutions. As McWilliam explains, “one discourse can become discursively dominant and, in that dominance, shape the course of emerging discourses and related actions or practices” (2003: 159). Analyzing the digital storytelling programs at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (AMCI) and Tallstoreez Productionz as “discursively ordered domains”, McWilliam delineates the similar and different structural features, such as operational agendas, pedagogical models, and targeted participants that influence the workshop process and end-product.
Here I outline McWilliam’s findings because the structural features she identifies are typical across the body of DST research and Pathways’ institutional reality. She lists the similarities between the two workshops. Both programs

- adopt the standard workshop-based pedagogy developed by the CDS;
- structure their workshops around skill-building that teaches short script-writing, storyboarding and technological skills (scanning, image cropping, basic movie and audio software, etc.);
- facilitate the production of short personal narratives in digital video form;
- facilitate the production of these videos following one narrative style (which McWilliam’s identifies as “realism”);
- have a community-support agenda to give “ordinary” or “marginalized” communities a means to self-representational storytelling and;
- provide participants with their completed digital stories on CD, DVD formats and/or open storage and distribution channels, like Drop Box, YouTube and Jump cut (2009: 150-51).

While both DST programs share features that are generally consistent with the CDS model, McWilliam identifies divergent practices, as well as how the two programs differ from each other. She categorizes these differences into three sites: Institution, participant, and text. It is within these sites that discourse is constructed.

ACMI and Tallstoreez Productionz differ significantly as institutions. ACMI is a publicly funded cultural arts institution dedicated to preserving and exhibiting all forms of the moving image, such as film, television, and games. It has a public-service agenda, facilitating educational and memorial exhibitions and workshops for the public (2009: 147). Tallstoreez Productionz is a private company with a business-oriented agenda. However, the majority of its funding is from public organizations (i.e. youth council funding) and most of its participants are from the public sector (teachers and youth groups). This company specializes in multiplatform digital art production.
Unlike ACMI, which conducts DST workshops at their facilities in Melbourne, there is no central location for the Tallstoreez Productionz’s digital storytelling program. Instead, they facilitate workshops in schools across Australia organized with students between the ages of 13 and 18 (2009: 148). McWilliam’s analysis demonstrates that the construction of each programs’ preferred participant is framed by their agendas. ACMI promotes their DST workshops to an abstract “public” who are presumably interested in digital media. Their promotional material emphasizes that there is “no technical prerequisites” and that “everyone has a story to tell” in an effort to be inclusive (2009: 152). In other words, ACMI constructs its participants as amateurs that will be taught. Tallstoreez Productionz, on the other hand, constructs its participants as “experts-in-training” (2009: 154). They frame digital storytelling as a program “that empowers young people” with the prospect that the workshop will uncover a famous film director to-be. McWilliam points out that this is skill-building with a view to the future. ACMI emphasizes once-in-a-life-time storytelling.

McWilliam’s case study reveals that the narratives have different emphasis in association with organizational construction of context of production. She argues that, visually, the stories from ACMI tend to be composed of photographs and other scanned objects (drawings, certificates, etc.) and the narratives are sentimental memoirs. Those from Tallstoreez Productionz tend to be based on digital video footage. The narratives are often exploratory and aspirational of “self-empowerment” (2009: 154). McWilliam also demonstrates that the site in which the story is made is informed by the DST movement more broadly. The movement propagates that personal stories must be told and assumes that there is always already a story (recall the slogan, “Everyone has a story to tell” [Meadows, 2003: 190]). Thus, how participants shape their stories in response to institutional discourses is crucial, especially at a time when visibility tends to be equated with capturing more authentic
voice about “experience” (see for example Pahl, 2009, presented at the First International Visual Methods Conference).

McWilliam’s mediacentric method is useful for identifying these mechanisms. However, her approach neglects the way agency of actors (facilitators, technical assistants, participants) plays a crucial role. By “agency” I am referring to Peterson’s definition as an individual’s capacity to make decisions and act in the production process (2003: 164). Thus, I am careful to locate how workshop participants both comply and deviate from workshop standards. Here I want to discuss another mediacentred study which also raises important methodological concerns about voice and authorship.

Anna Poletti (2011) argues that the DST genre presents limitations for the many ways one can represent personal experience (i.e. “voice”). She takes a mediacentred approach by directing her focus not on institutional discourse per se, but rather on the textual instructions to produce a “good story”. She deconstructs the seven story elements, developed by the CDS, which are the foundation of script writing in a DST workshop. Her analysis is important because it is common for facilitators to incorporate the seven elements, such as the case at Pathways.

Led by the concept of coaxed life narrative by Smith and Watson (1996), Poletti claims that the seven elements “establish expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told…and the speaking positions available to the participants” (2011: 77). Similar to McWilliam’s study, the institutionally supported pedagogy is criticized for constraining subject positions, which counters the very principles that the DST movement espouses. Here I briefly summarize the elements as defined by Joe Lambert (2006) and outline how they may function to limit self-representations à la Poletti.

1. Point (of view)
2. Dramatic question
3. Emotional content
4. The gift of your voice
5. The power of the soundtrack
6. Economy

The first element, point of view, embodies two meanings. First, it encourages the producer to clearly define a realization drawn from personal perspective (one’s point of view) and is meant to establish a course of events to address it. Second, narrative element one is considered essential for digital stories as the DST movement “believes all stories are told to make a point” (Lambert, 2006: 46).

Element two of the dramatic question functions as a way to help structure the narration and make the story interesting for an audience. Poletti points out that this explicitly involves “the public” in the practice of writing a digital story, as the storyteller is encouraged to structure the narrative by answering the question for an imagined public (2011: 77-78). Stories which do not make their intentions clear or leave the question unresolved are not preferred. According to Poletti, this is the coaxing of a “good story” (2011: 78).

Emotional content is also framed as a desirable feature to engage its audience. However, it is presented as something to be treated cautiously. Lambert cautions that representing emotion could have exploitive outcomes. Facilitators and participants are instructed to take into account where the story will be distributed, for what purpose, and directed to whom before designing the content. They should consider the lack of control over the story once it is publicized and the potential for unintended interpretations to occur (2006: 53).

Voice-over is another defining characteristic of the DST genre. Element four combines personal point of view and emotional content. Similar to this textual element, the soundtrack (element five) is also a feature which is meant to connote emotion (2006: 55).
Lambert denotes the first-person voice as “authentic” and preferable to the “authoritative…obscure stance of the third-person voice” (2006: 49).

The multimodality of DST is mediated by features of economy and pacing. Elements six and seven involve matching of voice-over with images, transitions, and soundtrack. As with voice-over, there is a clear preference to produce explicit meaning through editing and pacing (Poletti, 2011: 78). Very little should be left obscure. A measure of “good” storytelling is narrative closure. “Closure means recognizing the pattern of information being shown…to describe to us in bits and pieces, and completing the pattern in our minds” (Lambert, 2006: 58).

Other DST theorists, such as Hartley (2009), write about how this insistence on first-person narrative impacts DST’s ability to help democratize knowledge. Here we may observe a set of assumptions. One is that “authorship” is directly associated with “voice”. Multimodal representations (narratives that engage visual-audio sensory) of “voice” seem to be afforded more value than, say written words, or even sign language or silent linguistic forms, as evidence of truth. Perhaps this is because many interpretations are offered by the medium by virtue of its multimodality- its ability to combine text, still and moving images, sound and silence into one piece of work that can be watched and heard instantly. Thus, there is the potential to produce new metaphors and associations, to impart certain meanings more readily (Hull & Nelson, 2005). This is why DST has been used as a tool to counter negative stereotypes. On the other hand, as we have seen within debates on representations, such as documentary film, photography, and oral history, increased visibility and audibility does not guarantee mutual understanding or legitimatization of one’s voice. Watching and listening does not decode greater truth about experience, as this is predicated on access to the “real” in which the storyteller is truth-teller. More critical is what defines “experience” as this is grounded by the complex positioning in society that privileges some ideas of
“experience” and “difference” while erasing others. Thus, I argue, there is tension between the genre’s insistence on coherent, autonomous stories and the conviction to uncover lesser known experience. This issue is raised by feminists such as Chandra Mohanty, Maithree Wichramasighe, and Sandra Harding as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Poletti’s analysis aids our understanding of the dominance of certain textual elements and modes in the DST genre. Themes of emotion, personal point of view, and revelation are products of the genre’s own discourse. This analysis challenges claims by scholars and DST practitioners, such as Jean Burgess, that DST workshops enable participants to make editorial decisions with “minimal direct intervention by the workshop facilitators” (2006: 207). Poletti complicates claims of autonomy associated with “voice” and demands more theoretical approaches that take into account the broader textual and political context of producing DST.

One may argue, however, that Poletti’s analysis might imply that there exist personal narratives that are free from coaxing and that this is a desirable direction. Also, she may undermine the knowledge and benefits which are experienced from producing a story in this way. Indeed, participants and facilitators may conceptualize the seven elements as helpful guidelines that are appropriated, not imposed. As shown in the following chapters, this is the case for some of my participants. For example, Kristina (communication officer and storyteller in the first workshop) found that the story circle and the dramatic question (element two) helped “tease out” her critical reflection of social structures of power that shaped her experience (Hallez, personal interview, June 6, 2011). Likewise, Hartley explains that formality is a pragmatic necessity in order to communicate most effectively among workshop participants and (when applicable) between the digital story and its audience. He writes that storytellers “must learn not only the basic skills of self-expression, but also those of effective communication; not only tell stories, but also attended to their [audiences’] demands for information, education, and entertainment” (emphasis in original, 2009: 33).
Both Poletti and McWilliam present important theoretical positions for understanding media production. They emphasize the significance of institutional discourse which provides a much needed way to make sense of when and where certain digital media practices are taken up to serve a range of purposes. However, mediacentric approaches overlook the agency of individual actors and their relations to one another. Poletti’s analysis contributes to our understanding of the narrative formula generally used in DST workshops world-wide. Assumptions and values of a “good story” mediate how one makes representational decisions. Yet, left out of her study are different histories and circumstances in which workshop actors manipulate the seven elements or do not apply them at all.

Such is the context of the large-scale, UNESCO-UNDP funded “Finding a Voice” project (2008) that took place across 15 communication media labs in South Asia. The project directors describe examples in which the seven elements were deemed unsuitable for particular community agendas. Therefore, in a collaborative effort between facilitators and participants, the narrative guidelines followed a more journalistic style in which storytellers constructed their narratives by “the five W’s”: What is happening in this story? Who is involved? When and where does the story take place? Why are you telling the story? (Walkins & Tacchi, 2008). Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the history of certain literacies adopted, like the five W’s, as well as the complicated and specific social context of this massive DST project, it serves as a useful reminder of the malleability of narration, and the different social demands and needs that mediate the workshop. In contrast to the drawbacks of mediacentrism, individual agency is the focus of the sociocentric approach. This approach is also common throughout DST literature.

*Sociocentric Approach*
Peterson explains that the sociocentric approach derives from anthropology’s desire to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (emphasis in original, 2003: 164). This approach constructs media producers as socially contingent agents; one does not develop texts in isolation from the society in which they live. Investigators look at how media producers have “special competencies”, utilizing shared cultural symbols and language to generate specific meaning (2003: 165-64). John Hartley (2009), who has written extensively on digital storytelling as a means of contributing to cultural shifts away from the dominance of expert media, describes digital storytellers as analogous to bards. In fact, he argues that this is more than an analogy. Tracing the literary history of Taliesin (the Chief Bard of Britain from the fourteenth century), Hartley argues that within many societies, communication systems have “evolved” the “bard-function” from specialized professionals who communicate stories for all people across social strata to “all people with access to computers” communicating their own stories “for themselves” and “for everyone” (2009: 24). One may take exception with the causal relationship assumed between technological access and advancement of democratic society that underpin Hartley’s analysis, as well as its Eurocentrism; but what I want to demonstrate here is that he constructs the producers of digital stories not as agents of powerful elites, but as agents of themselves.

The literature on digital storytelling articulates storytellers as “ordinary” people (Burgess, 2006: 209), “consumer-producers” (Hartley, 2009: 24) and people who come from marginalized communities and groups that are under- or mis-represented in popular media (Lambert, 2006; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010). Indeed, personal narrative is central to the process of creating a digital story and is given priority over other visual-audio aesthetics. Emphasis on point-of-view and the storyteller’s representational decisions are crucial elements in which researchers like Hartley and Burgess anchor its democratic potential. Burgess writes that digital storytelling, as a movement, is “designed to amplify the ordinary
voice” in such a way that those voices are afforded legitimacy and relative autonomy as valuable contributions to cultural and political arenas (emphasis added, 2006: 207).

Burgess adopts a sociocentric approach and argues against mediacentric and structural analyses. She conceptualizes digital storytellers as “vernacular specialists” and this is why, she argues, that digital storytelling “sits uncomfortably with...the available tool kit for structural and textual analysis” (2006: 208-09). Burgess coins the term “vernacular creativity” to describe the creative practices that emerge from “non-expert” communications. The term “vernacular” implies skills that derive from archival practices (drawing, scrapbooking, family photography) and everyday practices (language, time management, shared cultural symbols) (2006: 207). For her, DST is a process by which available resources, both material resources (digital images, audio files, drawings, etc.) and immaterial resources (such as genre conventions and shared ideas), are assembled in novel ways (2006: 206).

Some scholars, such as Chandra Mohanty (2003), importantly argue that so-called “formal” and “informal” literacies, resources, and narrative modes are produced in a complex matrix of the political and commercial marketplace that marks social differences such as nationality, race, class, gender, age. Thus, how and where a story comes into being is crucial for unpacking “voice” (e.g. “experience”). Speaking about testimonial writing that emerged from Latina American movements in the 1980s, for example, Mohanty explains that the publication of life story-oriented text by “Third World feminists” are in increasing demand by international publishing houses. She argues that this exemplifies the role that university and trade presses play in the production, distribution, and reception of feminist work, as well as “to the creation of a discursive space where (self-)knowledge is produced by and for Third World women” (2003: 78). In other words, women’s narratives are not produced in a vacuum. The existence and proliferation of certain life histories are due to the political
market place as to the skills, motivations, and locations of individual writers. Some critics have argued that the proliferation of certain autobiographies is often depicted as a search for more different and “exotic” stories in which the subject is represented as barer of truth (Mohanty, 2003: 77). Here we may question the process in which certain women have been pushed into “vocality”; that by simply being a woman, or being poor or non-white, is sufficient grounds to assume politicized knowledge of daily experience.

We could apply similar critique to the DST movement, especially as DST workshops are often organized around social causes to empower marginalized “voices” in mainstream media. As discussed below, DST workshops are a context in which many have tried to develop political consciousness. However, Burgess claims that such a structuralist investigation devalues individual agency and appropriates personal stories for its own argument. She believes that textual critiques of digital stories are not only disrespectful to the author of the text, but also misrecognizes the nature of the genre itself (2006: 208). She offers an example by one of the digital stories produced at Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) in Queensland, Australia, where Burgess facilitated workshops.

The digital storyteller is Jenny, a 20 year-old volunteer at the youth center and an undergraduate at a local university. Her story is about becoming pregnant in her teens and her realization that being a mother has created more opportunities rather than limited them. In the final story sequence, with photographs of Jenny and her daughter appearing and dissolving on screen, the narration states: “I can still hear people saying, ‘your life is over when you have children’, but when I stop and look at where my life is today, I know they were wrong” (2006: 208-09).

Burgess argues (in almost tongue-and-cheek fashion) that “taking a familiar textual analysis approach to Jenny’s story [the researcher would say that] it relies on clichés representative of dominant discourses of femininity, family, and individual agency, all of
which mask social structures and power relations” (2006: 208). She argues that critiques like these condemn the people who made them as dupes of ideology, and does not take into account that digital storytelling is not “commercial culture”, nor are they “straight-forward examples of the discourses of dominant institutions” (2006: 209).

Burgess makes an important point to caution against the theoretical fallacy that portrays social actors as passive recipients to institutional agendas and ideologies. As demonstrated by critiquing media-centered approaches, workshop facilitators and participants should not be reduced to predetermined roles dictated by an institution. Burgess highlights the risk in taking out-of-context the intentions of a narrative when conducting analyses. Yet I argue that that very risk indicates meaning as never simply encoded in the text by one author, especially in a collaborative process as DST. Meaning is negotiated and struggled over. It is produced within social circumstances that are mediated between the producer and the text (and workshop facilitators) as well as between the text and audience. Thus implies serious methodological concerns for researchers and activists who analyze digital stories as tools and receptacles of meaning that, once observed, uncover unique, textured insight into lives of others.

Thus far, I hope to have shown that many analyses of DST mediation are incomplete. As Peterson explains, “Emphasizing the degree to which media producers are driven by social forces and constrained by institutional forces, [mediacentrism and sociocentrism] tend to ignore the degree to which people acquiesce to or resist such forces” (2003: 164). For these reasons, my thesis is situated in a more actor-centered position. It is important to my study because it reveals how media production rarely involves one author’s use of technology.

*Actor-centric Approach*
In this section of the chapter, I engage the term “co-creative media” which is a recent concept in DST research. It first occurred in 2009, by Christina Spurgeon et. al., in response to assumptions within media studies that participatory media organically comes into being by virtue of “digital natives” (2009: 275). I find this term particularly useful to theoretically frame the use of DST as a tool in feminist action research. Through an actor-centric approach, I challenge the slogan of the DST movement that the power in DST is through eradication of mediation between the author and the technology.

Spurgeon et. al. (2009) introduce the term co-creative media in order to account for the collaborative production of DST. This includes addressing the enabling and restrictive factors such as project goals, participants’ and facilitators’ expectations, the availability of certain resources for production and distribution, and institutional realities (2009: 278). Out of all these factors, the authors tend to focus on the role that the facilitator-researcher plays in adapting methods of DST. Take, for example, the “Sharing Stories” project that involved older residence of an inner city area of Brisbane, Australia, to record histories from the area as part of a redevelopment program. These participants were interested in contributing to the archive, but were not interested in the DST production process. Spurgeon et. al. explain that residences did not have the free-time required to make a digital story, as well as tended to view computer technology learning as more of “a hindrance rather than a help to storytelling” (2009: 279). To overcome this challenge, the facilitators took on the technical role of production. Storyboarding was often done at the storyteller’s home at times that suited him or her. Some technical production occurred at the home. The storyteller selected photos to be scanned and some stories were voice-recorded at his or her home. The authors conclude that these participants were actively involved in directing the production without needing to learn computers and software (2009: 280).
The term “co-creative media” is useful for thinking about these social relations and dynamics. Indeed, digital storytelling is a form of production that involves multiple actors with different relations to technology and multiple uses on the part of participants, facilitators, and stakeholder organizations. What is not discussed by Spurgeon et. al., however, is the way in which social categories of difference (e.g. axes of age, class, nationality, and gender) enter the workshop process and how actors must negotiate privileges and disadvantages that could inhibit the stories participants tell. This level of analysis is crucial, especially since DST workshops are propagated as a space for historically silenced people to voice themselves. Yet little in DST literature examines the role “difference” plays in mediating the process of production. Also overlooked is how facilitators and participants must mediate the DST genre at the textual level. To what extent is one’s personal experience compatible with formalities of the narrative scheme? How does the facilitator-participant relationship negotiate that compatibility? What does this imply about “voice”?

Zoe Jacobson’s experience as a storyteller at the CDS demonstrates that the workshop process is fraught with moments of struggle over meaning, knowledge, and power. She employs an actor-centered analysis by reflecting on how participants accept and reject certain guidelines of storyboarding and facilitators’ advice to help improve stories. Offering detailed, first-hand accounts of the DST workshop process, Jacobson’s thesis exemplifies the theoretical advantages to actor-centered positions.

The workshop project that she participated in was called “Another School and Another Community Are Possible”, sponsored by a number of local educational institutions. The Project’s mission was to “create community dialogue about changes that community members would like to see in its schools and community organizations in order for them to better fulfill the community’s hopes…for the future” (2009: 32). The storytellers were students, parents, and teachers from communities in Watsonville, California that are
identified as “low-income, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse” of whom are “misrepresented and underserved by public education standards” (2009: 32). The desired outcome of the project was to allow these storytellers to express themselves and initiate critical discussions amongst the education community. Jacobson reflects on how a workshop facilitator, “Ron” mediated narrative element standards and institutional interests while offering technical assistance.

Jacobson was creating a digital story about her close relationships with her grandmother. Part of her script explains that there was no ceremony for her grandmother to celebrate her bat mitzvah when she was thirteen. Jacobson explained in her script that the reason for this was because parents tended to privilege sons over daughters at that time. Ron, being Jewish himself, and more familiar with the era of her grandmother’s youth, corrected Jacobson by explaining that the lack of celebration was because “it was not the norm for girls” (2009: 37).

Jacobson uses this example to explain that, though Ron reasonably pointed out a possible misunderstanding, it also challenged the authority of Jacobson’s “voice” in her personal narrative (2009: 37). Jacobson expresses that her sense of validation in sharing her story was diminished by Ron asking about her grandmother’s age in order to decipher whether Jacobson story was correct. Consequently, Jacobson entirely omitted the portion about her grandmother’s bat mitzvah because she was no longer clear on the “facts” nor had the chance to ask her grandmother for clarification (2009: 35-36).

Her account highlights the relationship between knowledge-power. By virtue of being more knowledgeable about Jewish-American history, Ron’s criticism of Jacobson’s narrative is deemed legitimate. The consequence, however unintended, was that Jacobson felt illegitimated to share her narrative and censored certain elements from the story. While
Ron’s criticism was reasonable, did it produce just and equitable outcomes as is the stated goal of the CDS?

Because digital stories are often intended to fulfill certain purposes, workshops demand the storyteller to formulate their narratives in ways that fulfill that agenda. Yet Jacobson’s experience demonstrates that this phenomenon is written into CDSs’ practices in problematic ways. In order to keep a digital story short, a storyteller must omit parts of the story that she or he finds important. At one workshop session, Jacobson observed a participant say, “I feel bad taking out certain parts of my story. It’s fine for the end result. But it makes my personal process harder” (2009: 63). As Jacobson explains, shortening a story and omitting pieces might make it “better” according to CDS’s standards and the Projects’ objectives. However, there is a risk of detraacting from the process of validation when making digital stories and “silencing” experiences, feelings, and beliefs of the storytellers (2009: 63). The “silences” Ron “imposed” in the workshop represent power dynamics between the workshop facilitator and the participant, to which all actors are encouraged to be cognizant.

I argue that Jacobson’s critique demonstrates what many feel should embody “voice” in the DST genre. The goal of authenticity is achieved by the degree of autonomy storytellers have over representational decisions. In the words of Peterson, this describes some of the values that bound the “field of production” and it is through these values that relations of production and relations of power are negotiated (2003: 179).

I think Peterson’s framework is especially relevant here as voice is constituted by considering the means and modes of production (e.g. digital video technologies, genre formalities, institutionally supported workshops) as well as the relations of production (facilitators, technical assistants, and storytellers). Media production is not only a site of struggle over what the text is about; it is also a struggle over how one performs within certain
roles and how that performance is done in relation to others within the field of production (Peterson, 2003: 179). Establishing DST as a co-creative process, rather than a set of atomized, self-referenced storytellers, the question becomes: How do agents mediate authorship?

Foucault’s Author-Function

Authorship is the entry point for which this thesis conceptualizes power. Michael Foucault’s concept of the “author-function” is helpful for understanding how DST participants are “authors” through practices of script writing and video editing. However, authorship is also an idea encoded in texts. It organizes relations of control over text and at the same time conceals them with signifiers that ascribe authorship to one individual (Peterson, 2003: 165). In the case of digital storytelling, this is done with title and credit pages that state the storyteller’s name. It is also signified by narrative elements, like voice-over. Recall that Lambert believes this feature generates identification between the author and the audience (2006: 54). Following Foucault, it may also be seen to centralize authority to the role of the author, concealing the relations and means of production. It is part of an effort in media “to turn dialogue into monologue”, to fix responsibility about the truth claims in the text.

Explained by Peterson, the issue of how media ascribes authorship to a text is crucial because “authorship is always about authority” (2003: 166). It is a social construction through which claims of authority are established, contested, and reproduced. Relations of production are organized around who is considered an author and who is not. In digital storytelling, authorship is spoken in singular terms to emphasize one “voice” (or even “Find a Voice” [Walkins & Tacchi, 2008]), as facilitators guide storyboarding, as for the case of Jacobson at the CDS. Part of the work of ethnography of media is to reveal how media
production is a multilayered and collaborative activity (Peterson, 2003: 80). Thus, to speak of digital storytelling as involving a single author is problematic. Instead, one might relate this approach to the ethos of postcolonial feminism whereby the researcher is attentive to the particular material complexities of meanings of experience and difference (Mohanty, 2003). The production of Pathways’ digital stories involved a network of co-creative activities. The theme of the workshop (personal stories about struggle that led to positive transformation) was conceived and invested by an organization that promotes a particular epistemology of women’s empowerment with specific objectives. Script writing was mediated by group activities (which included referencing the seven elements of DST) to offer feedback that altered story sequences and associations. Technical assistants and facilitators taught participants how to work with symbols and technologies. Furthermore, the author-function is embedded within the seven elements of the genre. The elements function as guidelines to ensure the story is coherent. Nevertheless, because these guidelines are deemed necessary to some extent does not mean they are not locations of power. Therefore, it is important to recognize how actors engage with ways of narrating. Finally, Pathways’ DST project was also an effort to establish a plural and collective feminist consciousness, to speak (in a new, visual way) from within a collective as participants, and to speak with the expressed purpose of bringing about change in development policy through an oppositional paradigm of “empowerment”.

**Mapping DST as Feminist Method**

An important part of this thesis is to engage DST with feminist scholarship, in which few studies have invested their attention. This does not suggest that Pathways is the only feminist organization to incorporate DST into its agenda. There exist digital stories about feminist and gender issues produced from workshops not necessarily framed by such causes;
as well, there are many DST projects world-wide facilitated around issues of gender and sexuality. In fact, during the early days of its establishment, the CDS co-facilitator, Amy Hill founded a sister-organization known as Silence Speaks. Initially, this was conceived as a way for CDS to specialize their activities of DST as a tool for advocacy projects working with victims of sexual assault and domestic violence in the United States (Rhee, 2011). Since 1999, this non-profit organization has expanded to address a range of issues world-wide, particularly in areas of women’s health, HIV/AIDS awareness-prevention, and gender-based violence. Silence Speaks has coordinated more than 40 projects in locations across the United States and in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Guatemala, Uganda and South Africa (Silence Speaks, 2010.). They are partners with Women’sNet in South Africa which led DST training at the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) in 2008.

I outline who Women’sNet and the FTX are and their work with digital storytelling as they are important organs to explore how DST is framed as a feminist research tool. But first I would like to explain how I use the term “feminist”. What constitutes methodology and ethos as “feminist” has been a contested site amongst researchers and activists. This is because meanings and agendas of feminism are socio-historical and politically contingent. Visions of justice intersect various, unstable differences across time, nations, classes, sexualities, religions, disabilities and more. Furthermore, feminist practice operates on a number of levels, such as the level of theory and textual creativity in writing and other media productions; on the level of groups, networks, and movements framed by feminist visions of social transformation; and on the level of daily life and everyday “acts of gender/being gendered” (Wickramasinghe, 2006: 609). As Mary Dankoski conveys: “Just as there is no one feminism, there is no one answer to the question of what constitutes feminist research methods” (2000: 4).
In an effort to be inclusive of a multitude of practices and avoid essentialist notions of feminism, Shulamit Reinharz (1992) defines feminist methodology as that which is carried out by self-identified feminists. Dankoski, however, makes a convincing argument for why this definition is problematic. One problem is that it excludes people who do not identify with the label “feminist”, yet dedicate work to the advancement of feminisms (2004: 5). For example, bell hooks writes about how African-American women activists do not necessarily identify with the women’s movement or with U.S. liberal feminist theory of the second wave, as these were profoundly racist, neglecting to take into account how race and class (among other categories of difference) impact women differently (Mohanty, 2003: 4). Many researchers and activists across locations may also refuse to adopt the label “feminist” to protect themselves and their projects from negative connotations associated with feminism and negative responses by non-feminist or anti-feminist receivers (Dankoski, 2005: 5). Not all work done by self-identified feminists is made for a feminist agenda and vice versa. Hence raises some complexities in the relationship between media production, identity, and feminist consciousness. This may be exemplified by at least one of the digital stories produced at Pathways.

In our interview, Tessa (DST tech assistant and communication and learning manager at the Global Hub) explained that Firdous’ story, “Weight Listeners”, from the first workshop, stood out as one which did not overtly discuss gender issues or have any political leaning. Instead it was a personal reflection about aging and the weight of responsibility that comes with age (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). Firdous is a senior researcher at the South Asia Hub and has worked on gender issues for years, but this alone cannot constitute her digital story (made within a feminist research institution) as “feminist”. However, the process of participating in story circle that is framed by sharing “empowerment” as a term of reference, listening to others, offering feedback, all are an
important part of producing narratives from within a feminist collective. By acknowledging
the co-creativity of her story, the product becomes an interesting reflection of what “voice”
one comes to speak through the DST process of collaborative resources and discourse. What
is valued by both the DST movement and feminism research is knowledge derived from lived
experience, hence I argue, the close relationship to standpoint theory.

_Feminist Standpoint Theory_

But what exactly is identified to constitute “experience”? Scholars such as Sandra
Harding, Maithee Wickramasinghe, and Chandra Mohanty argue for the legitimization of
“situated knowledges” in the face of challenges posed by positivist-empiricists approaches.
Positivist science privileges objectivity in order to uncover “universal truths” and claims
good method to be culture- and value-free; meanwhile, this procedure has consistently
produced sexist results (Harding, 2008: 114). It is the contention of many feminists that
research cannot, and should not be value-free as researchers are never isolated from societal
norms, assumptions, and practices that shape interests and conceptual frameworks employed
in their work (Harding, 2008). Instead, this form of feminist methodology calls for centering
“standpoints” of both the researcher and the researched. Self-reflective modes are to be
included at all stages in the process, from the questions the researcher poses, the methods
selected to answer those questions, to the way in which results are concluded and represented.
Integrating self-reflexive practices does not necessitate forms of relativism, but rather can
lead to better science, instilling “validity, methodological rigor, and credibility” to knowledge
production (Wickramasinghe, 2010: 55).

In the context of digital storytelling workshops, practitioners have written about the
importance of self-reflexivity on the part of facilitators and trainees when mediating different
activities (Benmayor, 2009; Jacobson, 2009). Whether during group activities, such as ice-
breakers or story circles, or during one-on-one interactions for editing, workshop actors are challenged to reflect on how their positions relate to the discursively chosen stories that are told and how they are expressed visually and narratively. According to Samia’s (lead workshop organizer-facilitator) experience at the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX), a significant amount of time was spent strategizing ways to negotiate power relations between workshop participants and facilitators. The role of the facilitator is to mediate a non-judgmental environment in which the storytellers feel safe to share and develop their narratives with maximum possible control over their own representations. In order to do this, facilitators must be intellectually alert and sensitive to the different kinds of social power (i.e., class, race, gender, ethnicity, urban or rural backgrounds, etc.) that will inevitably enter the workshop (Rahim, personal interview, 30 June, 2011). The workshop process itself was discussed as a site that produces power relations in terms of who defines its purpose: Who decides what makes a “good story”? What counts as a problematic situation? What indicates a safe and egalitarian environment? (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). The circumstantial nuances that the Pathways actors negotiated will be explored in chapter four. For example, Samia felt unable to mediate story circle due to the authoritative status of the government women. What I want to demonstrate here is that feminist methodology framed by principles of standpoint and self-reflectivity are also valued and organized in DST practices. However, it is not inherently part of DST to turn descriptive narrative into critical discourse. But perhaps feminist critique can enrich DST practices. For example, where other DST studies have neglected to address social categories of privilege or subordination among workshop actors (as demonstrated above by Burgess, 2006, Spurgeon et. al, 2009 and Walkins & Tacchi, 2008) feminist perspectives tend to highlight these social dynamics, as many feminisms hold the conviction that these understandings are needed to respond seriously to challenges of gender, race, and economic inequality.
Another equally compelling component of feminist standpoint methodology is its priority to “study up”, which entails grounding one’s work in the daily lives of women’s experiences. Indeed, discourse surrounding digital storytelling values knowledge derived from daily life. One core belief at the CDS, for example, is that the first step in creating change for a community is by understanding first-person experience (“Values and Principles”, n.d.). According to Harding, subjugated knowledge is acquired by starting one’s inquiry from the everyday lives of people in oppressed groups in order to identify the conditions of their oppression (2008: 117). Harding argues that standpoint theory is interested in the knowledges of “the oppressed”, as they are supposedly capable of identifying otherwise obscured features of dominant discourses (2008: 122). In other words, this particular inquiry makes the workings of power visible in ways that would otherwise be unrepresented.

However, this potential is not without challenges and criticisms. Others have cautioned essentialist claims that all marginalized locations yield crucial knowledge about power and equality (Wickramasinghe, 2009: 133). There is serious concern of what becomes categorized as “experience” and “difference”. In the development of her paradigm of transnational feminism, Mohanty (2003) criticizes western feminists for essentializing differences among women in the global South into unified oppression, in which difference is reduced to male/female. She argues that the point is not to subsume other women by one’s own experience, nor uphold a separate “truth” for them. This has a colonializing effect on “voices”. It over-determines certain ways of knowing experience while erases other interpretations (2003: 112-115). Rather, Mohanty insists that feminism must be self-conscious in producing notions of experience and difference. In her words,

The experience of being woman can create illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class, and age at various historical moments that is of strategic significance. In other words, it is the kind of
interpreive frame we use to analyze experiences anchored in gender, race, class, and sexual oppression that matters (2003: 118).

Thus, the notion of experience of the self is fundamentally political. With the goal to foster cross-cultural solidarity, she argues for shared frames of references among feminists in order to deliberate over what counts as difference and experience (2003: 223). Following Mohanty’s analysis, location and history must be foregrounded and self-experience understood as discontinuous and fragmented (not complete and autonomous) before it can be generalized into collective consciousness (2003: 122). Mohanty’s critique is important for my study because she emphasizes, and in fact necessitates, struggle over meaning that contradicts and obscures; that experience is not immediately accessible, understood, and named. This counteracts universal claims in the DST movement of what emotional and narrative elements best communicate the vernacular in such a way that they are valuable (Burgess, 2006). Struggle over meaning is an interpretive process that involves blurred boundaries between experience and identity; but, as Mohanty insists, we (feminists) must renegotiate theses boundaries and connections (2003: 86). Producing and receiving texts takes place in historical locations which enable various modes of interpreting, narrating, and knowing. The struggles one chooses to engage are an intensification of modes of knowing “experience” and are contingent upon positionality. I think understanding “experience” as an analytical category opens space to be critical of how telling a digital story is institutionally taught.

Similar assumptions of a subaltern “unified repression” or authentic knowledge exists in DST literature. Specifically, digital stories are commonly denoted as complete and autonomous (in some cases, heroic) representations of the storyteller’s experience. As discussed above, there exists the belief that audio-visual narratives provide evidence unavailable to written voice alone. Indeed, voice in writing is very different from voice in
video recording. The latter has textural and sensory qualities that may be combined to signify experiences or express realities in ways that have not been communicated before. There is an element of play and creativity that has potential for theorizing experience differently. However, we must be careful not to claim wholeness or finality of the storyteller’s voice.

Feminists have critiqued power relations between gender and visibility, exemplifying that in some cases the camera can be invasive and the act of making visible can actually silence women further. Some of this scholarly work is summarized by Patricia Hayes in *Gender and History* (2006) in which she introduces a special journal issue on the history of visual constructions of gender across urban sites in Johannesburg, Gaborone, and Harare. The contributors, who studied photographic collections in these cities from nineteenth and early twentieth century reveal the extent to which women were “pushed into visibility” (Hayes, 2006: 524). The studies are in tension with the frequently stated problem of a lack of women’s “voices” to be found in official history texts. Hayes summarizes that if photography is granted the status of evidence and placed alongside textual records, then it is overwhelmingly argued that women were historically “seen and not heard” (2006: 523). Academic projects such as this demonstrate that visibility does not necessarily equate with meanings of truth or validation. Thus it is important to be critical of claims, such as those promoted in the DST movement, of the liberatory potential of visual technologies.

As discussed throughout this chapter, the textual qualities of DST are combined in such a way that the relationship between voice and vision is assumed evidence of complete, unmediated truth. Recall that Lambert favors story element four, voice-over, in order to connote story element one, point (of view). According to Lambert, voice-over does much of the work of making the narrative personal, as opposed to the seemingly neutral stance of third person voice (Lambert, 2006: 49). Argued by Poletti, these elements establish expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told and the speaking positions available to the
participants (2011: 77). While some feminists are asking questions about the ways in which visual-audio constructions can complicate cultural and historical meaning, this analysis is rarely applied to the developmental context, where Pathways is located. Yet the increasing popularity of digital storytelling workshops as means of community building, literacy training, and/or challenging certain stereotypes makes it all the more important to investigate.

Furthermore, if women have been pushed into visibility, what about being pushed into vocality? As discussed earlier, the political and commercial marketplace plays a crucial role in the production and reception of autobiographical texts by women in the global South. The increase of Latina American testimonials, for example, was also legitimated by political events, such as the Cuban revolution and by the motivations of revolutionaries. As characterized by Anzaldúa (1987), these writings were an important context through which new, sometimes contradictory political identities and consciousness were forged. Testimonials functioned to document and foreground individual experience from within a collective that were outside “official” documents and imperialist history. There is an important genealogy of feminist resistance and identification through life-writing that tries to negotiate the relationship between self- and collective consciousness.

Digital storytelling can and has engaged with this long-standing imperative to rethink, remember, and utilize lived realities as a basis of knowledge. Rina Benmayor (2008) incorporated DST into her course in Oral History and Latina Studies at California State University Monterey Bay. The course material comprises of testimonies by US women of color from multiple ethnic and national origins, such as Bell-Scott, hooks, Moraga, and Anzaldúa (Benmayor, 2008: 191). After reading these life stories, students produce their own testimonies through short digital videos. Different from the CDS workshop model, here the students explicitly theorize their own stories drawing on course material. Benmayor explains that “key to theorizing is standpoint”, so students are asked to engage with concepts of
positionality and “approach their stories as ‘writing back’ and ‘writing for’, rather than simply ‘writing about’ personal experience” (2008: 190). The premise is that these digital stories become spaces for constructing perspectives and “new” knowledges that may help transform the way problems and solutions are understood for one’s self or communities.

Benmayor’s digital storytelling curriculum is a helpful model for addressing how a digital personal narrative can transform into critical discourse. It demonstrates one way in which the integration of feminist theory changes digital storytelling practices. This leads to interesting questions about the challenges and potentials of theorizing visually. Does making a digital story (as opposed to a written story) enable a different, more polysemic space for reflecting on one’s life experiences? May it construct new knowledge? Therefore, one of the most significant challenges here, as explained through Mohanty’s analysis of “experience”, is questions of decoding digital stories.

In response to the difficulty of consuming these stories and understanding subjectivities of “the subaltern”, Wickramasinghe makes a compelling argument derived from standpoint: knowledge can only be partial, incomplete, and uncertain (2009: 1). She writes that standpoint, as critical theory and methodology, takes into account diverse identity politics and ethical issues of difference and intersectionality (2009: 133). “Intersectionality” represents the crosscutting between researchers’ and participants’ fragmented identities and variable positions (2009: 134). Similar to Mohanty, Wickramasinghe believes that being cognizant of the ethical issues of where difference is experienced can help overcome “experience” as catch-all and unexamined. In chapter four, I address this process of mediating multiple factors for distribution from Samia’s account of making public Lopita’s digital story. To protect both Lopita and Pathways from classist scrutiny, and prevent alienation of the audience, Samia decided not to screen her story at a particular book launch.
In the following section of this chapter, I address how other feminist projects have distributed digital stories.

*DST and the FTX*

Now I outline who Women’sNet and the FTX are and their work with digital storytelling. Extensive detail on the context of production and the specific relationship between those involved cannot be analyzed here. This would require another study. Instead, I want to present the roles and functions of these DST programs as described by the organizations themselves. I show that there exist feminist uptakes of DST within the history of the DST movement, to which Pathways became involved. In chapter three, I trace in more detail how the DST training at the FTX influenced Pathways members, demonstrating how DST is part of building community.

Women’sNet is a South African-based non-government organization that focuses on training and advocating the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for other South African organizations and campaigns that seek to advance gender equality. Women’sNet frames access to ICTs as a human right that is intrinsically linked to rights to information and self-expression. They advocate for universal access to “affordable, secure, and gender-aware” ICT services (Women’sNet, n.d.: para 2.). They provide training courses on ICT strategies for NGOs, a drop-in center located in Newtown, Johannesburg, offering free access to the internet and computers, and a weekly newspaper on women and gender issues across South Africa (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 8). They also organize a variety of co-operative programs. For example, in collaboration with local women’s shelters, Women’sNet developed a nation-wide project that gives survivors of domestic violence untraceable, donated cell phones to ensure anonymity when they seek safety services (Women’sNet, “Cellphones”, n.d.: para 1).
In 2005, Women’sNet participated in DST training at the CDS in California which led to initiating their own DST program. The lead trainer and Women’sNet’s program manager, Sally-Jean Shackleton (who Tessa knows personally), explains that the objectives of the DST project were to raise awareness of domestic violence against women, locate violence against lesbian women, and create a safe space for healing and empowering participants (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 9). Summarizing their workshop schedule and activities, it is apparent that Women’sNet upholds many of the same values and guidelines that are found throughout the DST literature. In particular, the program emphasizes point of view, narrative accessibility, and narrative closure.

Women’sNet organized two workshops of four days each, held at their computer training center in Johannesburg. One workshop focused on personal experiences of domestic violence, the other on lesbian women facing systemic and social discrimination. There were five facilitators, all project coordinators and ICT trainers from Women’sNet. Participants were recruited through affiliation with other non-government organizations, such as Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA), Out LGBTI Wellness, and Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 5). Information on exactly how each actor learned about the DST project or how they relate to the stated organizations is not made available. Nonetheless, the central role of networking is apparent.

The workshop schedule described in Women’sNet training booklet is also similar to the schedule at Pathways. The first day involved brainstorming and sharing script ideas with the group. The facilitators encouraged the group to focus on one particular moment that is meaningful in their lives as a way to adhere to preference of a short length story, but also in an effort to keep the narrative coherent and concise. The group is meant to give feedback to the storyteller on what aspects they found important in the story. The second day, facilitators lead a tutorial on downloading, scanning, and manipulating images (resizing, cropping,
coloring, etc.) using computer software. Participants also record their narrations. Day three involves storyboarding by which images are matched to the pacing of the voice-over. The storytellers are meant to work individually, with facilitators “roaming” the lab to help with technical problems when asked. The final day is spent finalizing edits and then screening each (willing) participant’s story (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006).

In an effort to raise awareness, some of the digital stories were copied onto CDs and made available for distribution among other organization and activist agents. A training booklet (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006) accompanies the CD to give ideas on how the stories can be used in the public to encourage discussion about gender stereotypes and heteronormativity. For example, Women’sNet suggests an activity in which participants are asked to list characteristics of men and women, and about lesbian women, with the idea that the facilitator can draw out stereotypes identified by participants. Then the facilitator can show a pre-selected digital story and ask participants whether the characters in the story behave in ways that confirm or challenge the stereotypes. The idea is that stories can be consumed to stimulate critical thinking (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 25).

The Women’sNet DST booklet also gives practical points on using digital stories to encourage debates on specific human rights legislation. For example, once a course has finished a session on the Domestic Violence Act with policy makers or community workers, the facilitator can screen a story and ask how the Act could have been used by the storyteller (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 28). The DST program is funded by the Foundation for Human Rights, which partly explains why the booklet emphasizes human rights language and law. Its material copyright dictates that the digital stories may only be used for non-profit use and for no other purpose other than education and training in human rights (Shackleton & Schroder, 2006: 20).
The Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) is an annual meeting in Johannesburg hosted by Women’sNet in association with AWID (Association for Women’s Rights in Development) in which an international community of feminist and gender-rights researcher and activists come together to exchange ideas and practices related to ICTs. Hosting different workshops and discussion platforms, the FTX focuses on the politics of technology and the role of communications in the struggle to advance gender rights world-wide (Turley, 2009). According to their webpage on “Critical Perspectives and Analysis of Technology”, the FTX discourse is framed by two views. First, ICTs have resulted in new issues and challenges for women. Second, ICTs also help develop new solutions and new approaches to addressing women’s issues (FTX, n.d.: para 1). The first meeting was in November 2008, and has been organized each year since. Some of the activities include campaign activities, such as “Take Back the Tech” in which participants are led through the internet to solve problems related to online security and information storage (Turely, 2009).

Digital storytelling has been part of the FTX since its inception. In 2008, both Women’sNet and Silence Speaks facilitated DST training workshops in the hopes that participants could use the practice for their own agendas. Pathways’ communications officers, Akofa, Léa, Tessa, and Samia⁴ attended the FTX in 2008. This is where the Pathways’ DST project began to develop. Samia’s experience at the DST training is discussed in chapter three, where I demonstrate that there is a complex web of networking between feminist research and activist organizations that influence the development of projects like digital storytelling. This is important to consider when analyzing the way in which international networking structures the workshop context.

I emphasize here that gender issues and activism were an integrated part of the beginning institutionalization of the CDS model, eventually becoming the standard to which

⁴ Refer to Appendix for a chart of the communications officer and their corresponding Hub locations and roles in each workshop.
the majority of workshops and stories where measured against. Hence, it is curious that few have written about the relationship between digital storytelling and feminist theory and practice. The majority of DST literature tends to focus on computer literacy training (Hartley & William, 2009), collecting public histories (Thumim, 2009), or helping storytellers overcome adversity (Hull & Nelson, 2005). My thesis argues that by delineating the relationship between DST authorship and feminist interventions on knowledge, we may be able to rethink what is at play when one tells personal stories from within an international technological movement like DST. The DST movement should recognize the role gender activists and feminist researchers play in appropriating DST if we are to take seriously its potential of contribute positively to the democratization of media.

Conclusion:

To summarize, the first part of this chapter identifies the discursive features that characterize the DST genre, particularly with regards to the author-function and assumptions about voice. It is common across the literature to define digital storytelling as “DIY” (do-it-yourself) or “user-generated” production (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). The “power in” DST derives from independent participants’ control of representational choice. However, by identifying three major aspects of the workshop process, I make the case that it is important to rethink DST in terms of co-creativity. First, there are various institutional motivations in supporting a workshop. As McWilliam’s analysis demonstrates, how an institution represents itself and intentions affects who the participants will be and the kind of digital stories produced. Second, there is a preferred construction of “voice” within the DST movement that emphasizes individualistic point of view, explicit meaning, and narrative closure. The formalities that Poletti refers to encourage participants to shape their heterogeneous experiences into personal reflections of these dominant themes of emotion and
resolution, hence delimiting meanings attached to digital stories. Mohanty’s analysis of “experience” as an analytical category emphasizes the urgency to be self-conscious of what counts as valuable experience and how “difference” is expressed through that experience. A third aspect to consider in the workshop is the social dynamics of power that affect how actors listen to and share stories in relation to each other. “Voice” is constituted by knowledge and embodiments of gender, class, race, age, and other social categories which inevitably enter the workshop context and engage with the means and modes of production (e.g. digital video technologies, genre formalities, institutionally supported workshops) as well as the relations of production (facilitators, technical assistants, and storytellers). Media production is not only a site of struggle over what the text is about; it is also a struggle over how one performs within certain roles and how that performance is done in relation to others. I argue for an actor-centered approach to the study of DST as it emphasizes the role of agency in mediating these social and institutional structures, thus complicating what is involved in constructing “voice”. These three aspects guide my analysis of the Pathways DST experience in chapter three and four.

The second half of the chapter explores the relationship between DST and feminist methodology, as this is one of the discourses which frame Pathways’ research and their workshop process. The meaning of feminism I apply for this study is greatly influenced by Chandra Mohanty’s approach to “experience” and “difference”, which is introduced in this chapter. I try to demonstrate that feminist methodology informed by values of experiential knowledge and self-reflexive practices are also shared in the greater DST movement. This is significant for why DST lends itself well to Mohanty’s brand of feminist endeavors. I also argue that feminist critiques of representing women’s voices, both visually and narratively, such as the tradition of Latina life-oriented writings, may help untangle the unstable qualities of “voice” that are so often associated with women’s empowerment. Acknowledging the co-
creative process of digital story making can help shift simplistic notions of life-experience to emphasize its mediated self- and collective dimensions. The overlapping discourses discussed in this chapter are a partial account of studying feminist digital storytelling. There are indeed other modes of reading and studying DST. After all, multiple factors are at play in each workshop. Pathways is one effort to establish a plural feminist consciousness, to speak (in a new, visual way) from within a collective, and to speak with the expressed purpose of bringing about change in development research and policy.
Chapter III. Tracing Hidden Pathways: The Institutional Context of the DST Workshops

An important dynamic of my argument requires study of the institutional context where DST workshops took place. Following Kelly McWilliam’s (2009) analysis of the discursive encounter between participants and the organization conducting the workshop, I examine the work which defines Pathways. How are the narrative guidelines and workshop theme structured in response to Pathways’ interests and aims? In order to answer this research question the following set of sub-questions are answered in this chapter: What does “voice” and “experience” mean to Pathways as a collective and how does it relate to their concept of “empowerment”? What are the various interests that define Pathways? How are they sought and with what resources? How might projects in one Hub relate to another Hub’s work and to the general rhetoric of the DST workshop?

I begin by examining the theoretical ground of the four themes that categorize Pathways’ research: concepts of empowerment, voice, work, and body. Most of the storytellers were recruited from other on-going studies, thus their research acts as a frame of reference for the DST project. The purpose and activities by each theme further demonstrate how Pathways make sense of their agenda as a collective, and what issues are deemed significant within the international development sector. Also, my research participants explain how resources and ideas for structuring the workshops developed from multiple, sometimes interconnected channels and relations within the international research and activist community, such as the FTX. I then identify two areas of inquiry which structure how Pathways engages in their work as a whole. First, researchers locate processes of positive change in women’s everyday lives. Second, they engage public policy to suggest ways to achieve social change. I demonstrate that these two points of inquiry constitute the position of the storytellers and the audience. After mapping these themes, I show how the DST program is part of Pathways’ commitment to innovating ways of communicating research.
As explained by Tessa at the Global Hub, a particular Pathways “culture” enables certain research topics while limiting others. This institutional culture provides the rationale for why and how these topics become communicated and distributed (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). Regarding organizations or institutes as having culture is not new. This correlates with Sally Engle Merry’s ethnography work on UN conventions on violence against women, in which she examines the ritualized way consensus-based human rights documents are produced in meeting rooms by state-representatives. Her study debunks the notion that the UN is a neutral, cultural-free organization. She defines culture as a “consensual, interconnected system of beliefs and values” (2006: 6) and as a fluid “repertoire…of ideas and practices that are not homogeneous, but continually changing because of contradictions among them or because new ideas and institutions are adopted by members” (2006: 11). Thinking about culture in this way allows one to see how discourse on issues, such as women’s empowerment, is reinforced and reconfigured by an organization.

Again, this study is a situated and partial account of the Pathways culture, relying mostly on publications, such as brochures and project updates available on their websites and blogs. I examine research reports, workshop summaries, working papers, and articles published by various outlets in order to understand both the activities Pathways facilitates and how these activities are represented. While the Consortium’s archives are vast and diverse, only a portion are selected here on the basis that I feel they represent the research interests and objectives that characterize Pathways’ ethos. Other projects could also have been selected to illustrate the same purpose. These communication outlets include the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) biannual bulletin, publications by the UK government Department for International Development, the four university press publications from where
the Hubs are located, the Pathways’ e-journal *Contestations*, various academic journals and publications in local (English language) media outlets.

This chapter discusses the Pathways “way of doing things” that some of my participants spoke about, which tends to highlight certain participatory communication practices that value grounded theory from daily life. I do not offer “thick descriptions” of the chain-of-command and the intricate relationships across and between team members as they have developed since (and prior to) the formation of Pathways. Such a study would require long-term, on site participant-observation and multiple interviews with staff and affiliates from each Hub. My project delineates the discursive construction of “women’s empowerment” that Pathways promotes. Thus, it furthers an understanding of the context in which DST becomes a feminist research tool and how feminist networks bring certain personal narratives into being.

*Research Theme: ‘Conceptualizing Empowerment’*

Pathways is a transnational feminist action and policy-oriented research network established in 2006, and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Norwegian and Swedish Ministries of Foreign Affairs (DFID website). Coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, UK, the Consortium is collectively run by six partners (identified in the chapter one). There are over 40 team members working in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Britain, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Sierra Leone and South Sudan. As Maheen Sultan, convener of the South Asia Hub, explains in a video interview on the Pathways website, the team members are

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5 These include the BRAC Institute, the Social Research Center, the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies and the Center for Gender and Advocacy.
6 Pathways work may be found in the following academic journals: *Development, Gender & Development, Hawwa, and Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.
7 Some of Pathways’ projects and research have been distributed in the UK’s *The Guardian, OpenDemocracy, The Economic and Political Weekly*, Bengali daily *Samakal* and *The Daily Star*, the Ghana news press, *Daily Graphic*, and Egypt’s *Al Masry Al-Youm*. 
generally composed of scholars and development practitioners, some of which come from an activist background or are currently involved in activist movements, and others who have become activist through academic and development work (“Conceptualizing Empowerment”, n.d.).

Under the first research theme, *Conceptualizing empowerment*, Pathways aims to understand women’s empowerment differently from conventional development discourse in important ways. Throughout their brochures, webpages, and journal articles, Pathways criticizes development agencies for conceptualizing empowerment as a product or outcome of interventions. Andrea Cornwall, director of Pathways, argues that this is reductionist logic in which women’s choices and actions are transformed into a linear sequence of inputs and outcomes (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). Those outcomes are often formulated in terms of materiality, such as economic growth or social “goods”. When women gain the (material) means to empower themselves as individuals, this is put to better service their families and communities. Neglected is the complex process of making choices for one’s self to bring about life transformations (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010: 1).

It is this concept of empowerment as *process* that underpins the work at Pathways. The common understanding is that empowerment is a fluid process of positive transformation (Hallez, personal interview, June 6, 2011). The term “pathways” is used as a metaphor to express the diverse and uncertain strategies that women come across at different points in their lives. It also demonstrates how Pathways structures a particular notion of experience that is temporal. The course of life is unpredictable, relational, and fragmented. A strategy might start well, but end up leading women into circumstances where there is no obvious escape. What might enable one woman to feel empowered might for another lead to a more difficult situation than the one she left. Empowerment can be experienced unevenly in various contexts at different moments for different reasons (RPC brochure, n.d.). There are
tropes, such as “hidden pathways” and “journeys without maps”, throughout Pathways’ work to underscore experiences that are less known or taken seriously in development research to which Pathways seeks to learn from and communicate. One of their brochures states that “by tracing the pathways they take, with a sensitivity to context and history, we can learn lessons that may be useful to other women who are embarking on similar journeys” (RPC brochure, n.d.: 3). This is similar to Mohanty’s methodological paradigm, as discussed in the previous chapter, for at least two reasons. Firstly, both highlight the importance to historicize and locate agency when theorizing experience. Secondly, it is important to share an interpretive frame to analyze experience, while recognizing and valuing plurality of difference within collective struggle. For Pathways’, that shared framework is “empowerment”. Overall, the Pathways program seeks to engage the complexities of women’s experiences that are absent from the conventional discourse of development agencies, and reposition empowerment in opposition to the World Bank narrative. In doing so, researchers reinforce their slogan that “empowerment is a journey, rather than a product” and that this journey involves “constant negotiation and compromise, with uncertain outcomes” (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010: 2). One may argue that Pathways’ research culture values a form of transnational feminism à la Mohanty.

It is no surprise then that the theme of conceptualizing empowerment significantly frames the DST workshops. Samia, the DST project coordinator and workshop facilitator, explained the main objectives were both to produce a space for participants to reflect upon their experiences and to translate them into different narratives about empowerment (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). Thus, DST is used as a tool to cultivate critical dialogue about “experience”. The seven narrative elements guide that translation process. The facilitators incorporated a specific “dramatic question” (element 2): “Is there a story of struggle that leads to positive transformation?” As discussed in chapter two, the dramatic
question structures the narration and makes the story easy to understand for an audience. The imagined audiences will be discussed below. Here I want to emphasize that the seven narrative elements were partly re-constituted by the Consortium’s specific understanding of empowerment.

One way to understand how Pathways’ culture mediates the workshop environment is by examining what terms and concepts are taken for granted, or alternatively, require further explanation for those not familiar with institutional codes. Samia made an interesting point in our interview about the difficulty of translating Pathways’ approach to empowerment into Bengali for the second workshop. The second workshop was made up of students from various universities in Dhaka and council women from the Union Parishad (UP), most of who do not speak English. In Bengali, there is no single word equal to empowerment. The closest translation used by development agencies is *kṣamatāyana*, which can be translated as “power” or gaining a type of power. This does not readily convey Pathways’ meaning of empowerment as a continuous process of negotiation. Therefore, Samia thought it was best to define the workshop theme as stories of struggle that lead to positive transformation; “Transformations that made [the storyteller] feel more confident or fulfilled in some way (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). In chapter four, I examine the facilitation problems Samia experienced when encouraging participants to narrow their focus to one or two snapshots, or moments of change. This is in contrast to the ease Samia experienced facilitating the first workshop composed of Pathways’ senior and junior researchers. The other three communications officers (Tessa, Kristina, and Léa) also explained that less time was needed in the first compared to the second workshop deliberating over what kind of stories would fit under the theme. All participants were already familiar with each other and the culture and language at Pathways. All knew what was meant by “empowerment” and were familiar with related concepts and research in which one another were involved. Léa
stated that participants in the first workshop were involved in its programming and agreed that it would be a training session to learn the workshop process and possibly reproduce it in other Hubs (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Samia also explained that participants from the first workshop were much more familiar with the rules of engagement in story circle, as it is a practice driven by an ideological stance shared at Pathways- that everyone’s experience is equally valuable knowledge from which to learn. This is in contrast to the difficulty Samia experienced in the second workshop trying to facilitate equal and fair sharing time for each participant during story circle. I discuss this at length in chapter four. The point I make here is that the culture of the organization, the “consensual, interconnected system of beliefs and values” (Merry, 2006: 6) that the actors in the first workshop are a part and create, arguably helped the workshop processes run more smoothly.

The comparison between the first and second workshop highlights at least two tensions. First there are questions about translation and whether there is an effect of alienation in the vocabulary of empowerment. Fundamental to Pathways’ conception of empowerment is the notion of time and space. Empowerment is a process of time that changes and fluctuates under conditions that are not always of one’s choosing. How might this translate for others who do not experience time the same way? What gets lost and what gets gained when translating this specific meaning of empowerment into other languages? Pathways is working on this issue at the Middle East Hub, convening workshops over a two year period with translators, academics, politicians, and development practitioners to discuss how empowerment is and may be translated into Arabic (Talking Empowerment in Plain Arabic, n.d.). These are important challenges to investigate. Similarly, this thesis is interested in how Pathways’ conception might translate via the specific narrative model that defines the DST genre- a model that derives from a specific geographical location and time.
Thus the second tension lies between Pathways’ concept of empowerment and applying a narrative structure which emphasizes explicit meaning and closure (i.e. the dramatic question should be answered) (Poletti, 2011). In the workshop process, Pathways’ meaning of empowerment as a “journey with no final destination” is amended to short stories that seek resolve (“Conceptualizing Empowerment”, n.d.: para 2). One is encouraged to restructure and consolidate experiences of transformation to one or two related “life moments”. Those moments are encouraged to be told in a way that is coherent (not confusing) and that generate closure (not open-endedness). Activities such as screening samples of digital stories, referring to the seven elements, altering scripts according to group feedback, imagining particular addressees, learning technology under time constraints, are all facilitated to produce a “good story”. Part of my argument of co-creativity is that the institution facilitating the workshop is not the only influencing force of production and what stories get told. Also involved is the DST movement which historically values a specific way of representing personal experience.

Considering this, might the feminist ideological stance of empowerment as a situated, non-linear process “without maps” be representable through a genre with such predictable narrative elements and emotional themes? Refer back to one of my research questions: “Does making an audio-visual digital story (as oppose to written form) within a workshop setting open up a more polysemic space for theorizing empowerment?” One answer is that there are limiting implications for how one may express their story. Representing the breadth of lived complexities of positive transformation is a difficult task that may not be fixed to a single narrative format or co-creative production.

On the other hand, both Tessa and Kristina discuss the narrative structure in terms of “guidelines” and found it helpful for building stories. Tessa described the workshop processes as a circumscribed space for reflection that allows for “an element of play” that
doesn’t exist in other production (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). Along with the guidelines, it is the multimodality of the medium, the various elements that link to movement and time (cuts and fades, editing rate and rhythm, flashbacks, flashforwards, manipulating photographs) as well as to sound, that may insight different understandings one may not have thought of before, both for the audience and for the storyteller engaging with the technology and facilitators. The multimodality of the medium is an important appeal to Pathways’ interests for theorizing empowerment. Visual-audio representations are infinite in their creative combinations and can provide clues to understanding different theorizing processes and ways of knowing. However, these representations are encouraged to follow a coherent strategy of the visual text and narration. This coherency is partly determined by the intent and purpose of the workshop. I recognize that my argument that the genre’s parameters are limiting heterogeneous storytelling is a partial statement about DST. The range of ways actors mediate intertextually cannot be defined. I add, however, that this genre typically involves simplistic and quick video production, and the visuals tend to function as literal illustrations of the narration. More emphasis is usually placed on voice-over and narration (Lambert, 2006). Thus, to pinpoint tension within the narrative formula may be a partial account, but an important one for the DST movement.

I argue throughout this study that it is important to understand DST workshops as sites of struggle over meaning, or fields of production in which actors must negotiate these competing discourses over what is expected in storytelling and what counts as valuable or what gets censored. This matter will be examined from the perspective of the facilitators’ experiences in chapter four. There were participants who did and did not follow the narrative guidelines and this caused problems for the workshop.

Research Theme: ‘Voice’
The second theme in which Pathways’ projects are organized is titled *Building constituencies for justice and equality*. The primary focus here is on women’s political engagement in government and activism, hence, a particular concept of voice is taken as the subject of study. “Voice”, in this context, is conceptualized as powerful speech associated with acts or arguments in public decision-making arenas, such as legislation (Goetz & Musembi, 2008: 2). Projects which fall under this category explore how to make institutions (both government and non-government) more accountable and responsive to women (Goetz & Musembi, 2008). A number of solutions that have become universalized by development agencies are explored, such as quota systems to increase women’s political representation and legal reforms to secure women’s rights. These are examined against how they are experienced within daily realities of particular historical contexts (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010: 2).

Pathways does not support the number of women in public office as an adequate measurement of women’s “voice”. Instead, they have a research agenda that seeks to advance ways of measuring women’s political representation by asking what is being said, who is saying it, and what is achieved. For example, in a working paper on political voice, Goetz and Musembi propose a qualitative description of the relationship and frequency of contact between women’s organizations and women in politics and their male allies (2008: 7). The measurement implies attention to how interests are articulated and mapped amongst networks of women from many demographics. This kind of socio-structured analysis guides researchers’ questions about how women articulate and aggregate their interests. Furthermore, it raises questions of what women are able to do once in office via the quota seats (Tadros, 2010: 3).

Research under this theme of “voice” tends to indicate that a strong women’s movement is an important factor to implement affirmative actions, such as candidate quotas.
As a brief example, in Bangladesh, Sohela Nazneen and Sakiba Tasneem (2010) discuss how women who were elected reserved seats in the lowest administration unit of local government (the Union Parishad), sought help from women’s organizations for legal, human rights, and administrative training to increase their skills. Conversely, they encouraged women’s organizations to address these issues in different forums on behalf of women council members.

It is interesting to note here that some of the interviews for this particular study by Nazneen and Tasneem were conducted at the second digital storytelling workshop at BRAC University, which included three UP members as storytellers. These interviews were scheduled to take place during workshop breaks. The researchers interviewed the UP members to explore the following questions: What led to gains in legitimating women’s political voice? To what extent will these gains made by women transform local politics? (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010: 35). There were pragmatic reasons for conducting interviews during the three day workshop. It was difficult to schedule interviews that accommodated the UP women’s busy schedules. Also, these women were based in rural districts outside Dhaka. Thus, it was a rare opportunity to have them travel and dedicate three full days to Pathways’ research. The event also demonstrates that research projects at Pathways are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can intersect and share interest, leading to resource exchanges in order to advance their own objectives. It may also show that Pathways closely associates digital storytelling with the idea that women’s empowerment is political; that making self-representations in this context constitutes the kind of voices that incite political dialogue and individual standpoints to record and learn from. Similar to Latina autobiography as discussed in the previous chapter, one may infer a production of voice that functions to reflect on the politics of experience (Mohanty, 2003). Voice may be specific to the storyteller, yet through
co-creativity, is also speaking from within a collective frame of reference about “empowerment”.

*Research Theme: ‘Work’*

The third category of Pathways’ projects is “work”. Projects organized under this theme investigate the conditions under which Bangladeshi women (mostly from under-paid and stigmatized jobs) may experience empowerment through work, and how these conditions are achieved (“Empowering Work”, n.d.). This research explores the multiple choices and relationships women must negotiate within specific circumstances and try to trace the empowerment processes through that work. As senior researcher, Simeen Mahmud explains in a video interview, “Not all kinds of work may be empowering and different kinds of work may be empowering in different ways. For example, a public sector job may be empowering in different ways for a woman than a job at a garment factory” (Mahmud, n.d.).

These investigations aim to counter what Tessa identified as the “World Bank model” of women’s work (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). As discussed earlier, this model tends to view women as efficient instruments of programs like microcredit, in which the choices they make are “purposeful” and empower the entire household and family (Alsop et al., 2005: 120). Pathways’ research highlights many problems and assumptions that underpin this model. What I want to emphasize here is that Pathways represents itself in opposition to the World Bank and other neoliberal approaches to women’s empowerment, which evoke images of autonomous individuals, able to choose and shape their own destiny. Alternatively, participants of Pathways’ research tend to be framed by “structures of constraint” (e.g. intervention by donor organizations, the nature of the state, the economy, cultural norms and other contextual factors) that restrict one’s ability to choose their own paths (Kabeer, 2008). For example, Penny Johnson’s (2010) focus groups with Palestinian
women who choose work outside the home in preference to marriage demonstrate how difficult choices can be against society’s expectations and in the context of violence and occupation. As Cornwall articulates, “it may be the case that to be able to [experience empowerment], women need to subscribe to certain societal expectations” (2010: 7).

Relating this back to the DST workshops, part of what frames the dialogue, feedback, and stories produced are Pathways’ intentions to express context-specific and contradictory knowledge. Facilitators do not aim to instill a specific political agenda for participants to respond. It is important to recognize, however, that the purpose to make stories of positive transformation is motivated by Pathways’ positionality in the international development sector. Thus, an example of how institutions play in bringing certain life stories into being.

Pathways as Feminist Action Research: Two Points for Inquiry

Discussed thus far are approaches and topics of inquiry that characterize the Pathways program. I diverge here to highlight how Pathways’ approach exemplifies feminist action methodology as discussed in chapter two. Pathways researchers understand knowledge and power to be inextricably linked, hence their commitment to prioritize women’s standpoints as legitimate resources for policy change (Eyben, 2008). One may extrapolate at least two areas for inquiry that guide Pathways’ projects. Firstly, researchers must locate how positive change happens in women’s everyday lives. This involves applying a range of methodological strategies, including ways of building theory from ‘below’, emphasizing context-specific dynamics rather than apply grand theories and ahistorical policies on reality. Reflexive research practices are valued in order to be critical of what is deemed “positive change” by whom and in what particular context. Secondly, projects must address policy-making processes and try to engage practitioners in the research. Indeed, many of their
research reports are written to and for development academics and policy activists (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010).

These two points (women’s standpoints of positive change and to whom research is directed) are at play in the framework of the DST workshops. In the DST concept note, digital storytelling offers “compelling stories about individual lives- stories that are deeply personal, yet connected to greater social communities” (internal communications, March 24, 2009). In other words, the participants’ stories are framed as valuable standpoints from which viewers can learn and theorize about processes of empowerment. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, all of the participants were associated with Pathways in some way, as either research participants from other on-going projects (such as the taleem group, UP members, and students) and members of Pathways’ staff (senior and junior researchers). Therefore, the DST project is inherently linked with Pathways’ multifaceted research and is perceived as a way to further the goal to depict the complex realities of women’s lives.

Furthermore, participants are not only represented as individuals, but also as members of communities of interest. These communities are represented in association with research projects at the South Asia Hub. It is stated in the project proposal that DST workshops are a way to “give back to the communities- endowing participants with skills and enabling them to leave with a personal product that can always remain with them” (internal communications, March 24, 2009). This indicates that Pathways’ researchers are careful not to structure the project as archival, voyeuristic or an exercise of knowledge extraction. As Tessa expressed in our interview, the DST practice seemed to fit well with Pathways’ feminist ethos, which she defined as “participatory research that tries to engage as much as possible with the community we are researching and allow the participants to get something from the research themselves” (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011).
The second point of inquiry that characterizes the Pathways program - that projects must try to engage audiences for social change- influences the way in which audiences and distribution strategies are imagined. Samia conceptualized at least four outputs of the project, listed in the DST project proposal. First, the digital stories would enrich the different ongoing researches at Pathways. One way this has been done is by making some digital stories available on the Pathways website in accordance to research themes. For example, Lopita’s story “WHAT!!!” is available to watch as a sample of the DST project under the theme of empowerment. In chapter four, I will discuss why Lopita’s story was chosen to be uploaded here, and in what context Samia did not feel comfortable publicizing Lopita’s story. Second, digital stories could be used as advocacy tools for alternative research methodology, such as at conferences. This implies an audience of academics. Third, digital stories could be used to compliment certain advocacy or policy change initiatives. For example, Tessa explained that Maheen’s story reflected on her years of activism with a group of sex workers. Maheen came to realize through interaction with them that their rights were the same rights that anyone would demand. She reflected on her own prejudices and challenged them through her digital story (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). Tessa suggested that a story of this political conviction to challenge stereotypes could be screened at a conference or meeting with development and policy practitioners. The fourth output on the DST project proposal suggests that selected digital stories could be burned on a CD and distributed with a training manual for others to use for feminist research or advocacy (internal communications, March 24 2009). Recall that this is similar to the way in which Women’sNet packaged and distributed digital stories made at their workshop on gender violence, as discussed in chapter two.

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8 Lopita Huq’s digital story is available to watch at http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Annual_Report_2010/DigitalStories.html
Most participants from the first two workshops consented to uploading the stories on YouTube,\(^9\) sharing them at conferences, and making them available for training purposes (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). At the time of conducting my field work, Pathways had yet to screen or distribute stories (with the exception of Lopita’s on the website). This was because of time constraints and the need to translate some of the stories from Bengali to English and vice versa. Samia explained that she planned to screen them at the final closing conference of the Pathways program at BRAC Institute.

*Feminist Networking: The Role of the FTX*

It may be fair to say that the training workshop facilitated by Women’sNet in which Samia participated during the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) played an influential role in Pathways’ workshops. One reason I speculate this is because of the similar workshop production schedule and distribution plans. I present an outline of Pathways’ workshop schedule in chapter four. Also important to consider is the positive experience at the FTX in which new colleague relationships formed and old ones were nourished. Networking is a key channel through which new ideas and methodologies are established in Pathways’ institutional culture. Here we see how a complex web of networking between feminist research and activist organizations influence the uptake and delivery of projects like digital storytelling. Indeed, the DST movement propagates particular ideas about the power of story to promote community bonds (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). However, when referring to this particular feminist network I do not imply a cross-cultural group formed through the production of similar stories. As Mohanty (2003) importantly argues, transnational feminist solidarity must be established through a shared framework of theorizing “experience” that values self-reflexive, situated knowledges grounded in time. In other words, the embodiment

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\(^9\) The Pathways YouTube channel is available at http://www.youtube.com/user/Pathways08
of difference is crucial to human experience. Thus, Mohanty prefers the term “coalition” over “unity” to signify that the locations and politics one positions themselves is strategic and temporary, limited by the consolidation of “difference” that identity politics requires (2003: 118). I think it is important, especially when foregrounding co-creativity, to keep in mind that DST is applied by different actors for different reasons in multiple locations, times, and relationships. The genealogy I explain of Pathways’ adoption of DST underlines their coalition with an international feminist network organized around the issue of women and girls engagement with ICTs as a human right. One may argue, that the grand narrative of technological skills as progressing democracy, which I identify in the DST movement in chapter two, is one of the many discourses in which digital storytelling travels throughout the global South. On the other hand, rethinking DST discourse through a transnational post-colonial feminism developed by Mohanty, how actors discursively mediate and strategize discourse is important. While Pathways took part in this coalition, they repurposed DST not as technological training. Their oppositional positioning against dominant neoliberal development narratives may explain why Pathways is careful not to equate technology with giving empowerment to women. Rather Pathways discursively represented their DST project as an opportunity to communicate various experiences of empowerment through a less conventional medium, outside of scholarly, “expert” communications channels. Visibility and audibility were articulated as resources of new meaning and evidence to think about experience differently.

In November 2008, the entire communications team of Pathways went to Cape Town, South Africa, to participate in the first FTX event. As explained in chapter two, FTX was a three-day training program preceding the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) Forum that would bring together more than 100 activists from Asia Pacific, Africa, South America, North America, and Europe working on women’s rights, feminism, and
information communication technology (ICT). The aim of the FTX was to share ICT skills and cultivate a network of feminist practices that recognize the critical role ICTs play to meet different feminist agendas worldwide (‘FTX Basics’, 2009). There were five training tracks. This included workshops about the strategic uses of social networking platforms, emerging ICT tools, mobile phones, and community wireless networks for advocacy and movement building, as well as digital storytelling (‘Feminist Tech Exchange’, 2008). After they completed the DST training, Samia and Akofa regrouped with the other three officers and shared their experiences.

Léa (communications officer of the South America Hub) described feelings of excitement and encouraged Samia’s idea to organize a DST project at the South Asia Hub. “When Samia shared the approach with all of us [the communications officers], it seemed like a tool useful for Pathways…it matched the Pathways way of doing things” (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Tessa also explained that Pathways’ staff tended to say things to each other, like “that’s very Pathways” when referring to statements, arguments, or practices that they felt characterized their organization. She defined “the Pathways way of doing things” as grounded anthropological work in which the researcher asks “What is your reality?” Digital storytelling seemed to be a unique way for one to express their reality (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011).

Léa also explained that the FTX was part of the beginning process of team building amongst the officers. “During the week at the FTX, we exchanged material and taught one another the different tracks we were in…the FTX and the DST workshop were the first two events in which all of us met together in person” (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Therefore, the FTX served as a way for all the communications officers to get to know one another as colleagues and to brainstorm projects.
There were also long-standing relationships that linked the DST training at the FTX to the Pathways project. Tessa explained that she studied with the lead trainer and Women’sNet’s program manager, Sally-Jean Shackleton, at the University of Cape Town and has been friends with her for many years. Sally had shared some digital stories with Tessa in the past (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). Thus, Tessa was exposed to DST before Pathways was established and understood it to be a creative way to challenge negative stereotypes related to gender issues (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). When Samia expressed her interest in digital storytelling, Tessa encouraged the idea and thought it would be an effective way to integrate communication strategies into research. These relationships and networks trace how the feminist approach to DST became a part of the Pathways institution.

*Research Theme: ‘Body’*

The fourth theme of research projects organized at Pathways is titled *Changing narratives of sexuality*, in which “body” is the theoretical entry point. Specific to this theme are narrative approaches in which stories of bodily vulnerability and constraint that women tell, as well as stories that try to represent them, are compared against narratives in which women find ways to resolve restrictions. In a concept paper under this theme, Charmaine Pereira explains that narrative analyses inspect the “social role of narratives”, the ways they are produced and how they are read (2008: 25). Pathways’ projects are interested in narratives produced by cultural arenas, such as the music industry and soap operas. For example, the West Africa Hub conducted textual analysis workshops of popular music lyrics with Ghanaian radio presenters, DJs, and musicians, reflecting on meanings about womanhood encoded in the text. The group identified both positive and negative gender
stereotypes and then instructed participants to consider alternative narratives about women (Roadburg, 2009).

Pathways adopts a narrative approach to the study of sexuality (specifically, heterosexuality), because narratives have the potential to bring together diverse representations that encode cultural values and are sites in which women may exercise their agency to try to change perceptions. Pereira explains that

it is precisely because multiple dimensions of the social constitute the terrain on which the complexities of heteronormative social relations needs to be explored, that the salience of narrative as sites for the social and cultural representation of sexuality may be understood (2008: 24).

This narrative-for-change approach privileged by Pathways demonstrates that there already existed within the organization, before the implementation of the DST project, a shared belief that storytelling has an important social function in feminist action research. In an informal meeting with the convener of the Middle East Hub, Hania Sholkamy pointed out that certain practices of storytelling were exercised throughout the history of Pathways and that digital storytelling was understood as the logical “next step” in communicating women’s empowerment.

She informed me that storytelling at Pathways began with the joint project, Ana el Hekkeyya (“I Am the Story”) and Qalet el Rawiyah (“So Said the Storyteller”), in which writing workshops were held at Ahfad University for Women in South Sudan, Birzeit University in Palestine, and at the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo. The objective of the project, run by Pathways partner Mona Ibrahim Ali, was to revisit Arabic folktales from a feminist perspective exploring to what extent negative concepts and attitudes about women prevailed in the texts (Lewin, 2008). This activity stems from the belief that portrayals of women in media deeply affect how they are treated. Literature in Egyptian Arabic and classic texts, such as 1001 Nights and Aladdin, were examined in the workshop. Participants
included young journalists, writers, poets, and bloggers. They rewrote some of the traditional tales and developed stories from their own life experiences that were then used in storytelling performances held in the Wekkalat el-Goury Theater in Cairo. These stories have provided the basis for a forthcoming animation short produced by Pathways (Ana el-Hekkeyya, 2010).

Writing stories developed further and branched into another project, called Stories for Change. Pathways’ research material in the form of interview transcripts and tapes were used to inspire fiction stories written by young writers as a new way of sharing the Consortium’s findings with a broader audience (Ali, 2010). At the writing workshops, participants were introduced to the process of creating stories from research material. Stories were then selected to be published in a book by Pathways. Stories for Change is part of an inter-Hub project in which researchers and writers from Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt participated (Ali, 2010). These storytelling projects incite questions about who the participants were, how they were recruited, and what stories they told. Also, how was the final publication received and how might one measure its impact on raising awareness? This information is not readily available in Pathways’ public records. While an investigation of these publications is beyond the scope of this thesis, I do want to illustrate that these inter-Hub narrative projects represent just a few of the many Pathways initiatives that aim to create and distribute alternative images of women. Digital storytelling was appropriated as a tool to fit within this greater research agenda.

It was through a project categorized under the research theme of Changing narratives of sexuality that exposed Samia for the first time to digital storytelling. In 2007, Andrea Cornwall, Tessa, and Samia participated in a symposium on “Politicizing Masculinities” in Dakar, Senegal, in association with the IDS and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance (“Changing Narratives of Sexuality, n.d.: para 11). One of the facilitators, Alan Greig, shared a digital story he made about his relationship to masculinity in U.S. culture. His digital story
was made at the CDS in California and arguably adheres to the narrative structure produced by CDS.10 Samia found his video to be extremely powerful and motivated her to make her own story and share this practice with others. She was thrilled to learn that there was DST training at the FTX, which she applied for as her first choice (Rahim, personal interview, June 14, 2011). Indeed, there are multiple channels and contexts through which one may engage with the CDS model of DST.

Changing the Way Research Communicates

A final aspect that is crucial for considering the institutional culture of Pathways and the co-creativity of DST is the emphasis placed on diversifying ways to communicate research. Each researcher is responsible to think about how communication fits each stage of the research process (Lewin, 2010). Observing this approach, it becomes more apparent why the multimodality of digital storytelling appealed to the mandate at Pathways. I was told by more than one participant that the organization reserves half of its budget on research and the other half on communicating that research. As I indicated earlier, the communication officer is the only full-time paid position and is responsible for strategizing how projects are represented and channeled through media circuits. This is indicative of the central role communication plays and is fundamentally linked to Pathways’ purpose of challenging existing stereotypes of women’s lives, as well as constructing new representations, or images that Pathways feels are missing from mainstream media and development discourse.

Tessa explained that Pathways was structured in reaction to top-down communication operations of social research, in which one analyzes and represents their findings in a written report. Communications is typically limited to the publication of that final report. She explained that when Pathways began in 2006, “there wasn’t a culture of spending money on

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communication processes of research”, but that the director, Andrea Cornwall, facilitated and insisted on the importance of communications and that it be a part of everyone’s research (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011).

This has developed in diverse ways. Along with establishing a communications team, Pathways also forms strategic relationships with journalists, activists, photographers, and filmmakers. Exemplified by the projects like Ana el-Hekkayya and the popular music workshop at the West Africa Hub, Pathways actors regularly engage with mainstream media, writing newspaper columns, radio and television programs, performing at theatre events and soliciting media professionals to engage with Pathways’ work. Other projects include a documentary film scheme “Real World”, which links young filmmakers with academics from Pathways to collaborate on short films exploring everyday lives of women in different contexts. In 2009, A Vida Politica and Thorns and Silk were produced. The former documentary looks at activism from the perspective of four Brazilian women engaged in struggles for abortion rights, sex worker rights, and racial equality (Lewin, 2010). The latter represents four Palestinian women talking about their experiences of empowerment while they negotiate working in male-dominated jobs, including a police officer, taxi driver, filmmaker, and car mechanic.

Alongside research conducted by Pathways’ Terezinha Gonçalves on the Brazilian domestic workers movement, she organized a domestic workers photography course. The photographs were exhibited in an upmarket gallery in Salvador. The objective was similar to the DST project in that women were meant to produce their own representations of themselves. The difference with this photography project was that representations were explicitly made and directed to confront prejudices of the middle class who employ domestic workers (Lewin, 2010). As I have argued throughout this chapter, the DST project was not facilitated around a specific political issue in Bangladesh, but rather was trying to diversify
ways of representing and understanding empowerment in development discourse and research. Again, we see the why the multimodality of DST, different from convention research mediums, appealed to Pathways. A key element of Pathways’ operations is to make their work accessible and engage actors beyond research. In an article in the journal *Development*, Tessa summarizes Pathways’ principles by referencing bell hook’s argument that academics have a responsibility to make their ideas accessible in a way that as many people as possible can understand (Lewin, 2010: 226). Through the vast application of digital format, personal stories might be watched and heard more instantly than through reading an official report. Again, there is the association of visibility associated with making “voice” more coherent.

**Conclusion**

Chapter three offers an analysis of the institution that conducted the DST project. I delineate the values, intentions, categorization, and frames of reference that characterize the culture of Pathways. Their centrality of “experience”, with “empowerment” as the concept through which to understand women’s daily lives is similar to Mohanty’s transnational feminism. Identifying some of the dimensions involved in co-creative production, I question issues of language and the limits of digital story narration that actors mediate. I suggest tension between Pathways’ meaning of empowerment and the formalities of DST, as both frame the theme and activities in the workshop.

I explain how there is an expressed purpose to bring about social and political change in Pathways’ work. Pathways developed a feminist collective in opposition to the neoliberal World Bank model and this informs the site in which the stories are narrated. Their collective consciousness is fundamentally based on knowledges (derived from women’s experiences) that are often contradictory, hence the importance to be able to produce
heterogeneous stories. This also frames the way the digital stories were planned to be used publically: for advocacy and policy change initiatives, awareness training, and innovating research methodologies. Similar to the fluidity of the concept of empowerment, DST authorship may be understood as situated and personal, while “voice” simultaneously speaks from within the institutional body.

I suggest that the DST project is also part of Pathways’ efforts to create and nurture feminist communities. I outline the communication officers’ experiences at the FTX which led to developing their DST project. Networking is important in Pathways’ institutional culture for exchanging new methodologies. Also, storytelling has played a major role for expressing and constituting such communities of consciousness throughout the history of Pathways. Considering this, one of the main challenges of the Pathways program is to decentralize certain mainstream representations as “truth” by circulating diverse counter-narratives in which nuanced and paradoxical lives of women are shared. Indeed, the Pathways DST program frames participants’ stories as sources of new or lesser known ontologies from which viewers can learn and theorize about empowerment. Therefore, I hope to demonstrate why co-creativity is an important concept to dissect mediation on a number of levels. This chapter functions to explain the discourses of the institution involved in framing the production process. If we are to understand these digital stories as sources of counter-hegemonic knowledge, the social context of media production also needs to be taken into account. This is the subject of chapter four.
Chapter IV. Mediating the Limits of Representing Empowerment

In the previous chapter, I examine how DST is positioned within the institutional structure of Pathways- their theoretical grounding and feminist objectives for how they organize and communicate their work. After establishing why and how Pathways adopts DST, chapter four pushes my argument forward by exploring the capacity of digital storytelling to articulate experiences of real-life empowering processes, given that the narrative structure tends to emphasize resolve, explicit meaning and closure (Poletti, 2011). In order to do this, I focus on the ways in which the facilitators and storytellers followed and diverged from the narrative guidelines and production schedules. Across all interviews conducted for this study, there is evidence of conflict over process and product and where the emphasis should lie. This reveals that mediation is constituted through tension in at least two areas. First, there is tension between the purpose of the projects and how the digital stories will be used after the workshop; second, how the facilitators define and achieve quality stories while enabling a reflexive space for multiple, contradictory meanings of “experience”.

Before discussing the relationships and challenges that took place, I revisit the context of the first two workshops by outlining the workshop activities and schedule. Then I identify the different objectives, who the participants and facilitators are, and examples of the kinds of stories they co-created.

Pathways Workshop Model

While each of the workshops composed of different objectives, actors, and stories, there were general program guidelines followed. The planned schedule and activities demonstrate how intensive the work load can be and how time is crucial, which became an obstacle in the second workshop. During my interview with Kristina, she uploaded some manuscripts, such as the DST budget proposal, schedule, and concept note, and walked me
through the steps of the three day workshop model. This section will describe the activities and schedule that both workshops followed, as explained by the communications officers.

On the first day, the facilitator (Samia) defines DST and explains to participants her influential experience at the FTX that led her to organize this workshop. The objectives of the workshop are laid out, which becomes a prompt for introducing the theme of “empowerment” and how it may be expressed through meanings of struggle and change centered from lived experience. Then there is a session on approaches to structuring digital stories, which focuses on the process of script writing and the seven narrative elements. Next is a discussion about confidentiality and the rights of permission before making a digital story public. The group discusses steps to be taken if one were comfortable sharing their story publicly but wished to protect their identity, such as changing one’s voice on the recorder, avoiding pictures of oneself, or changing names. Also discussed are the choices one has if they are not comfortable sharing their experience to the group. One may designate a single partner or facilitator to work with. This segment is followed by a screening session of some digital stories Samia selected from the CDS website.\footnote{Exactly which stories were screened is unknown. CDS stories may be watched online at http://www.storycenter.org/stories/} Kristina explained that these examples did not necessarily have anything to do with women or women’s empowerment, but were meant to stimulate some ideas about how to convey a story audio-visually. I asked my interviewees if showcasing digital stories may overly influence participants’ creativity. In general, they felt that it was important to give participants concrete examples of what they will be doing. Tessa wrote in a report that the organizers were nervous about showing too many completed stories for fear of influencing participants’ own presentations. However, during the end of the workshop celebration, participants explained that they found the screenings “inspiring rather than prescriptive”, as it stimulated discussions (internal communications, March 14, 2011).
The screening is followed by participants sharing their ideas about what stories they will tell and the verbal and visual elements they might include so that the group, including co-participants and facilitators can offer feedback. As discussed earlier, this process (invented by the CDS) is called “story circle”. After story circle, participants work individually and their homework is to complete writing their scripts.

Day two begins with laying out the agenda of the next nine hours and then share scripts in story circle. Participants have the opportunity to split into pairs or work one-on-one with the facilitators to edit and finalize their scripts. Next, the participants begin their first round of practicing narration and voice-recording their scripts using the free software, Audacity. After lunch break, the process of storyboarding begins. This involves planning what visual elements to incorporate and match with scripts, which include taking digital photos, drawing, downloading and scanning images. Most of this time is spent working individually with facilitators around to offer technical help. The end of the day is spent introducing participants to the video-editing software Windows Movie Maker.

The final day is dedicated to completing the digital stories. Ideally, every participant has a computer and the facilitators are available to help with any technical issues. At the end of the day, after about eight hours of editing, all willing participants screen their videos with the group and there is an end of the workshop celebration. This schedule does not run as smoothly in practice. Delays arise with regards to technical failures and facilitation challenges.

The facilitators are expected to initiate processes of mediation between participants. In addition to initiating activities, teaching technical skills, and providing script writing assistance, they carefully examine each participant’s experience and try to ensure that they receive positive feedback and adequate collaboration. Making personal stories can be emotionally draining and challenging, thus facilitators regularly observe and check-in with
each participant so that they might intervene if something is causing one’s workshop experience to be unrewarding. However, as will be discussed below, this is not an easy task. There are relations of power that inevitably enter the workshop and the extent to which one can mediate against them is limited. As Tessa affirms, this is something that is discussed often between colleagues who practice DST. Managing this “is always tricky” (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). This is part of the reason why Tessa feels the process is more important than the final product. Later I will explore how the facilitators tried to manage social dynamics. But first I will explain the separate contexts and actors in more detail, followed by an examination of the kinds of stories produced.

First Workshop

The first workshop was a three-day program organized to take place during 12-14 November, 2009, in a computer lab at BRAC University in Dhaka. This lab offered access to 12 computers, internet, printer-scanners, digital cameras and space to write scripts and draw images. It was prominently agreed upon by my interviewees that the first workshop was a “training of trainers” in the hopes that DST would be replicated in other Pathways projects. In an internal report, Samia wrote that the purpose is for researchers to experience DST as a process in which they examine their own notions of empowerment and transformation. It would also familiarize them with DST as a tool, which they may then think of incorporating in their own research (internal communications, 19 June, 2010).

There were a total of ten participants, three of which were senior researchers, including the convener of the South Asia Hub, Maheen Sultan, team leader of the Changing narrative of sexuality theme, Firdous Azim, and BRAC University researcher Lopita Huq. All of the researchers were from Bangladesh and either worked at the South Asia Hub or at the BRAC Development Institute where Pathways is located. There were also two
participating communications officers: Léa and Kristina. As explained in chapter one, most participants had university degrees, came from middle to upper-middle economic class backgrounds and ranged between the ages of 25-55. The facilitators were Samia, Akofa, and Tessa.

The digital stories from the first workshop produced a diverse trajectory of women’s lives. Some were more politically driven, such as Maheen’s story about her experience working for the sex workers’ rights movement in Dhaka at the beginning of her career as a researcher. She reflected on how that affected her activism and notions of feminism (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). Firdous’ story had less of a political mandate and was more reflective of her feelings of growing older and the experience of responsibility that comes with that. Lopita’s story was about how she resisted and rebelled against societal pressures that she endured at different ages in her life to lose weight, get married, not smoke in public, or pursue another Master’s degree (Huq, 2009). Later I discuss the careful decisions made by Samia about where Lopita’s story should and should not be publicly screened. Kristina’s story reflected on how she abused her influence over other team members as senior player on her American high school rugby team. Her story concludes as a lesson to be cognizant of power relationship in our lives and how one can affect others and how others affect one’s self (Hallez, personal interview, June 6, 2011). Léa did not produce a story. The reasons for this will be explained in this chapter when I discuss the limits of DST.

Second Workshop

The second workshop began shortly after the first. It was held in the same computer lab for three days, during 19-21 November. This workshop was geared towards participants from various South Asia Hub researches (specifically from the “voice”, “body”, and “conceptualizing empowerment” categories) to create digital stories about personal struggle
and positive change. As discussed in the previous chapter, the project proposal stipulates the potential to produce theories derived through analyzing digital narratives: “The aim is to use these cultural artifacts as sources of knowledge and ground for theorizing about empowerment” (internal communications, March 24, 2009). Pathways upholds the belief that video not only fulfills their mandate to deliver innovative ways of communicating research, but also that DST can offer critical theorizing, where new knowledge and future theorizing are derived from the union of self-reflective narrative, visual illustrations, and critique.

Thus, this workshop also functioned as a communication channel through which ongoing research would be represented. Samia originally wanted an equally distributed sample of three people per research project participating in the DST workshops. However, due to schedule conflicts she was not able to recruit as many participants from each research group. This addresses one of the challenges and exclusionary aspects of DST. It demands commitment of nine hours for three consecutive days. As Tessa expressed, it is quite a luxury for people, especially adults, to take that much time away from their daily responsibilities and be able to reflect on them (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011).

One may interpret from the project proposal that the separate purposes for the two workshops place different emphasis on process and product. Both workshops functioned as a way to reflect, self-consciously and collectively, about what empowerment means to one’s situated experience. Workshop activities were very important for creating this space for dialogue. The first workshop, however, was also about exposing researchers to a new research tool. Thus, process had special significance as participants were critically engaging in each step with the possibility of replicating the project in their own research. For the second workshop, more emphasis may be on product, as it was anticipated that the different stories would be used as a new way to communicate Pathways’ work to specific audiences in the development sector. The process is still important as facilitators try to enable a safe space
for sharing, but the products of the second workshop are emphasized as a significant source of theorizing by viewing-listening. This tension between process and product is observed throughout the chapter.

There were ten participants in the second workshop. There were three local government women from the Union Parishad (UP) who came from rural districts just outside Dhaka. These women ranged between the ages of 40-50 years and came from middle to lower economic class backgrounds (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). Eight undergraduate students from different disciplines came from universities in Dhaka. They were between the ages of 20-22 years and came from middle class families. In our interview, Samia explained that age and class differences played an important role in the ways that participants related with one another as they shared their narratives. I discuss this at length below as I argue that social relations configure the field of production in ways that importantly affect the creative process.

The majority of the students who participated came from the “women and media” project, which investigated the gendered practices of watching TV in Bangladesh and the meanings, choices, and subjectivities that women derive from TV programs (Priyadarshani & Rahim, 2010). Focus groups were conducted with these middle-class university students. The research fits in Pathways overarching agenda to challenge and change conventional images of women in popular media, but also to understand how different women reject or appropriate certain TV representations of women and men. The project leader was the aforementioned participant of the first workshop, Firdous Azim. Samia was a researcher for the project and assisted focus group discussions. Thus she already established a researcher-participant relationship with the students prior to the DST project.

The three council women from the Union Parishad (UP) were participants of Pathways’ on-going research assessing whether perceptions have changed about women
representatives in local government. The objective of this research was to explore the challenges women councilors negotiate and how they interpret their strategies in public office, and whether there are new gender norms being created for women politicians (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010). The Union Parishad (UP) is the only administrative unit at the local government level and is responsible for the economic and community development activities of 10 villages. It consists of a chair and nine general members (which can elect males and females) and three women in reserved seats (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010: 36). As part of an extension of the research, these three UP women attended the second DST workshop as a new channel to express their experiences of struggle and transformation.

The third cohort of participants came from the “women and religion” project. The research examines the processes of women’s empowerment through religious discourse. It is done through interviews with women in Dhaka who attend *taleem* (lectures and discussions conducted by women, organized around religious texts and explanations of how best to lead a religious life). Lead researcher, Samia Huq (2010) argues that academics and policy personnel must include in their theories of empowerment how women actively use religion as a resource for negotiating gender norms and relationships with their families. What is at work here, Chandra Mohanty may underline, is a production of “experience” and “difference”, and the assertion of knowledge that is outside the parameters of hegemonic development discourse. Religion signifies “difference” and a force that configures one’s experience of empowerment. Only one *taleem* woman participated in the DST workshop. Samia felt that she was unsuccessful in recruiting more because she did not have a long-term relationship with them or the research project (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011).

The second workshop also functioned as a first-time experience for the trainees to participate as assistants. There were five facilitators in the second workshop, including Samia (lead facilitator), Tessa, Léa, and Kristina (technology assistants). The latter three do
not speak Bengali, thus were limited in their participation as assistants. The fifth facilitator was Samia’s colleague, Sahida, hired because of her fluency in Bengali.

I did not have access to the majority of stories produced because they were not yet translated into English, hence, my own limitation as a researcher who does not speak the same language as DST participants and the texts. I had access to only Firdous’, Lopita’s, and Mahmuda’s stories, which will be discussed below. For the majority, I rely on Samia’s description of the digital stories both from our interviews and from her internal Pathways report that was written for Tessa, who would edit and integrate the report into a final publication upon Pathways’ closing conference in late 2011. The stories of empowerment that are discursively and deliberately selected in Samia’s report demonstrates what Pathways, as an organization, deems important to engage in development discourse. The stories are represented in a way that reinforces the purpose of their research and the policies they recommend. This is important for the main argument of my thesis, which is to debunk the myth that mediation is minimized when people represent themselves through video technology. The organization constructs the site of narration, which results in variations in the kinds of stories produced. Furthermore, vision and sound, along with plot guidelines and themes, are complex modes, each with their own potentials and limitations, as well as material histories that participants and facilitators must play and trial. I have tried to trace the history of the DST genre, illustrating its preferred visual and narrative style, and argue that it sets boundaries for the meanings attached to life stories. An actor-centered approach to the process of meditation, informed by feminism alert to notions of “experience”, underscores the role of institutional constraints, social forces, relationships, and overlapping discourses that storytellers and assistants engage. Considering these elements in the mediation process encourages us to re-conceptualize DST methodology as a collaborative production. It opens
up dialogue to locate how and why particular life-stories come into being for critical visual theorizing.

In her write-up, Samia summarized the digital stories according to the researches from which the storytellers were recruited. She wrote that the students tended to make stories that expressed the burden they felt having to negotiate with gender norms and social customs as they negotiate urban public space and engage in higher education (internal communication, June 13, 2010). As a group, the students are described as undergoing immense transition as they engage in studies while having to travel miles from their homes in Dhaka suburbs to pursue education. The UP women made stories about their struggles in family and community life to take up positions in politics. Samia pointed out that one UP woman spoke about being poor and the courage it took to run for public office with little financial resources or emotional support from her family. Others explained the bad politics that their colleagues and male counterparts engaged in and their struggle to implement development programs in their constituencies (internal communications, June 13, 2010).

These stories reflect changing life trajectories of women from different generations and backgrounds in Bangladesh. What I find interesting is that all the stories are about women using their agency to bring about change in their own lives. There are no stories in which life changes unfold as a result of chance or luck. This is a particular construction of experience. Also, there are no stories reported that contradict or counter Pathways’ emphasis on the success of the DST workshops. Left unsaid are the struggles faced during the production process and that not all stories were completed. This is likely due to the fact that this is a summary report written for the conclusion of Pathways’ research and will be directed at an audience of Pathways’ funders and policy practitioners. To expand into the dynamics of the workshop would transform the report into something else. I explore later in the chapter the challenges faced in the workshops when I discuss the limitations of DST. For now, it
suffices to say that Pathways puts the DST workshop in a positive light in which they successfully produced the kinds of stories institutionally sought—positive transformation that occurred through struggle. The highlighted variable is women asserting their agency to bring about change in their lives in the face of structural and institutional harms.

It is less the descriptive accuracy of the presentation of digital storytelling that is interesting here. Referring back to McWilliam’s analysis of the DST workshop as a “discursively ordered domain”, the organization which conducts the workshop plays an important role in structuring the stories made (2009). Pathways researchers are clear in their desire to challenge conventional development discourse that understands empowerment as women gaining (or being given) the material means to empower them. What marks Pathways’ contribution is their insistence on women’s standpoints and real life understandings of how agency brings about change for themselves (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). This arguably has limiting effects on the heterogeneous speaking positions one is encouraged to occupy in the workshop. Yet it is part of their collective discourse, critical and liberatory in intent. The descriptions of the stories that are presented on Pathways’ website and in their publications are posited as self-evident. However, I argue they are actually shaped by the organization’s own framework.

_The Function of the Dramatic Question: Political Agency_

Here I would like to clarify what is meant by “agency” and its relationship to empowerment through the example of two digital stories by Lopita and Mahmuda. Tessa gave me access to these videos via Drop Box. I argue that Pathways’ workshops have made stories which determine and produce “experience” and “difference” as political frameworks that talk back to specific hegemonic narratives. Struggle is the focal point of experience, as framed by the dramatic question (narrative element 2): “What is your story of struggle that led to positive transformation?” I demonstrate the context in which the genre’s narrative
preferences enable Pathways’ motivations. This is exemplified by the digital story, “WHAT!!!” by Lopita, a Pathways senior researcher, “From Darkness to Light” by Mahmuda, a student from the taleem group, and Kristina’s (communication officer) experience in story circle.

Lopita’s story was made in the first workshop. She crafts a riposte to comments she has faced at points in her life by her friends and family. She explains that at age 10, her father bought her a bicycle, with the restriction that she could not ride it on the public streets. Lopita responds: “What? But boys can cycle on the streets!” (Huq, 2009). The narration jumps to the age of 15, when her father’s friend told her that she was too fat and that her father will have trouble arranging a marriage. Lopita responds: “What? No one has to worry about getting me married! If I want to I can do it myself. And I thought: fat men have wives” (Huq, 2009). These life moments serve as a metaphor of Lopita’s defiance against unequal expectations for women and men in Bangladeshi society. In her story, difference is signified by male/female. Her struggle is continuous through life into womanhood. Empowerment is achieved through her choice to constantly oppose patriarchal structures. This may be interpreted as political agency because she is positioning herself in opposition to ideological and institutional structures that frame her experience of gender difference.

That her story is political can also be determined by the way her story was distributed. Lopita’s digital story is popular amongst Pathways researchers. More than one personnel told me how much they enjoy her use of humor to express certain frustrations and double standards. However, using her story in the public required facilitators to anticipate how certain audiences would “read” the text. Samia decided not to screen Lopita’s story at a Pathways book launch in Dhaka because she felt that it would alienate Lopita, as well as portray Pathways as elitist. She explained that the majority audience comprised of lower-middle class Bengalis who were not well versed in English. Lopita’s story is grounded in her
life and reflects her upper-middle class social positioning (i.e. she reveals that she has two Master’s degrees, she smokes cigarettes, and she narrates in English, etc.). Given the class differences, the audience may not relate to Lopita’s empowerment and feel that Pathways was valorizing this upper-class lifestyle (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). Samia also explained that there may have been people Lopita knew at the book launch whom she may not feel comfortable sharing this story. With Lopita’s permission, Samia decided instead to upload her story on Pathways’ website. According to Samia, this is a safer space for her digital story as few Bangladeshis who know or work with Lopita use their website. Her narrative is instead directed at “an international audience to whom her story may not seem elitist” (Rahim, personal interview, June 30 2011). Underlying this statement is the notion that a particular international audience would relate to this representation of political agency. Furthermore, it demonstrates that telling a story in different contexts and relations alters positionality, as consumption of stories is also a situated experience, hence the strategic process of when and where to share a story. This reinforces Mohanty’s call for concepts of experience and difference that are situated and historicized (2003: 118). It unsettles any assumption of a singular, coherent, essential self, based on absolute divisions between various sexual, national, or economic identities. Thus, digital stories are not representative of “authentic” realities; rather they are situated, collaborative representations. The digital stories themselves are relational to Pathways. Indeed, my own positionality as a researcher interpreting a story in this context repositions “experience” to particular questions and critiques developed in feminism.

Pathways’ DST workshop also produced representations of political agency geared towards different outcomes of empowerment that uphold certain gender relations in Bangladesh. Mahmuda’s story titled, “From Darkness to Light” illustrates her spiritual pursuit of piety. Mahmuda is a participant that was recruited from the taleem women
research project. She narrates why she has decided to wear the *niqab* (face and head veil) as it represents an active pursuit of the self that she desires to bring her closer to *Allah*. She illustrates the alienating comments that targeted her in daily life. Still-drawings matched with different female voices act out: “Why do you wear that? You look like a black ghost. Why are you such a fundamentalist? Look! Here comes a ninja! [Laughter]” (Choudhury, 2009). Mahmuda’s struggle is enduring feelings of isolation and the pressures of fitting in a society where the *niqab* is not common. Her transformation is through her political positioning. This is visually represented by a montage of piles of money and women’s make-up to connote the insignificance of materialism, the beauty myth, and Mahmuda’s distancing from it (Choudhury, 2009). Thus, Mahmuda’s struggle of empowerment is one in which she draws a sense of power from her critique of society and the ability to affect change in her life. In her story, meaning of empowerment is intrinsically linked to religion and a life lived in accordance to negotiating religious ideals.

What I want to show here is that both digital stories represent enactments of political agency and different life outcomes. The DST workshop does not prescribe one outcome of empowerment in which participants’ stories should be situated. This would go against Pathways’ ethos of transnational feminism, which is attentive to historical and grounded social differences that constitute “experience”. The common denominator, nonetheless, is reminiscent of Pathways’ critique against development models that instrumentalize “empowerment” as something to be given to women through measurable, discrete inputs. The processes of transformation are initiated by the storytellers themselves, not given to them by external societal or institutional agents.

Additionally, both storytellers find empowerment in their subversive and oppositional position towards what they define as discriminatory social forces. I argue that this is partly due to the instructions of narration in the workshop. Participants were asked to answer the
question: “What is your story of struggle that led to positive transformation?” This structures the story to be self-reflexive and think about experience in terms of struggle. It functions to represent political agency because struggle informs one’s right to positive transformation. Also, the narrative is encouraged to have closure and resolution, as instructed, “…what led to positive transformation?” As discussed earlier, the dramatic question functions to make the plot coherent and engage with publics - audiences should be able to interpret the answer to the question detected in the beginning of the story (Lambert, 2006: 50).

The two stories provide the possibility of communicating different journeys of empowerment. They demonstrate how the narrative elements developed in the DST movement and appropriated by Pathways, can enable the production of critical narratives that provide different standpoints. Watching the stories also demonstrates modes of theorizing visually. Rina Benmayor states, “visual theorizing is like narrative theorizing, only it is up to us to ‘see’ it” (2009: para 18). Both Lopita and Mahmuda use literal correspondences of visuals and sounds to illustrate their scripts. Many family and self-photographs are used when referring to people, and still-drawings to show scenarios, like Lopita’s drawing of a child on a red bicycle or Mahmuda’s drawing of a ninja. There are also visual strategy of symbolic juxtaposition and metaphor. For example, Mahmuda centers her feelings of conflict by contrasting side-by-side images of cosmetics with images of veiled women praying. Consequently, the interpretation of sounds and visual images may help stimulate critical thinking about the meaning of the story. I would like to turn now to an example in which a workshop actor found the DST narrative strategies to facilitate her theorizing.

Recall that Kristina (communication officer of the Middle East Hub) made a digital story in the first workshop that was about how she dealt with the influential power she experienced as a senior rugby player in high school. Kristina explained why she views the seven elements as important guidelines to accompany story circle. Sometimes when one is
telling a story one may not realize that the desired meaning does not communicate to the audience. The feedback process was crucial for Kristina to pinpoint where to elaborate the story in order to make certain connections. For example, Tessa (as co-facilitator) asked Kristina, “Where is the significance of this story? Where is the struggle? You are part of a rugby team and then you become a senior player and realize how much people look up to you…so what?” Kristina said that this question helped her examine the team dynamics and revisit some things she had done as a senior player that were actually abuses of power.

It helped me form a loop of self-reflection… [it helped me] be aware of relationships around me and how we are all marked by privileges and burdens. It demonstrated that something like empowerment is not just a stagnant state of being. You can experience different degrees of empowerment at different areas and moments. It’s a dynamic (Hallez, personal interview, June 22, 2011).

Kristina’s account of her experience considers some of the narrative elements of DST to be the foundation of a reflexive space that not many people are given, or able to reserve time for. The dramatic question, and the encouragement by Tessa, incites Kristina to reposition and re-interpret herself in relation to shifting conceptual frameworks. In this sense, DST lends itself well to this feminist project, as it incorporates self-conscious inquiry as an integral part of mediating stories. It also demonstrates how centering one’s own personal experience as the subject of analysis may facilitate critical and visual theorizing. This can be a useful methodology, for Pathways’ intent to re-conceptualize empowerment and build theory from women’s standpoints, particularly in the context of their own counter-hegemonic position within the development sector.

In the spirit of Mohanty’s and other feminists work to uncover how dominant discourses over-determine certain features and silence others, I explore some possible limitations of DST. What notions or nuances of life struggle are silenced by workshop
discourse and activities? How might the DST form limit meanings of experience? These limits were explained from my interviews by at least two accounts: First, what Léa called her “resistance” to make a digital story in the first workshop; second, Samia’s difficulty to encourage the UP women to limit their storytelling to one or two life moments.

Not everyone has a “Story” to Tell: Léa’s Resistance

Léa is the communications officer of the South America Hub in Brazil. She explained to me that she entered the first workshop prepared to learn about the process from first-hand experience. She knew the workshop theme, the “dramatic question”, and activities that would be involved. Alongside following the development of Samia’s project via email correspondence, Léa also familiarized herself with DST material on the CDS website, such as the Digital Storytelling Cookbook (Lambert, 2010). Despite her preparation for the workshop, Léa explained that during the first day of the process she realized that she did not feel comfortable sharing a story. She stated:

The question of empowerment was a very deep question for me that I couldn’t answer right there...it was an issue very close to my heart and was something I needed to work out privately rather than with a group...I could not bring myself to do it...I didn’t have an answer to the [dramatic] question (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

Léa clarified that this had nothing to do with the group dynamics. She felt that she fitted well with the group and that the workshop was a space in which everyone was equal as participants. “It didn’t matter that I was amongst my bosses, because at that moment I wasn’t there as a worker. We were all participants and my peers were facilitating” (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

Léa’s circumstance raises important ethical questions about the process of making personal stories heard and watched by a public, even if that public is confined to the
workshop. As explained in chapter two and above in this chapter, one of the activities in the DST workshop is to discuss the risks involved in rehashing emotional experiences. It may be traumatic for some to revisit certain experiences of struggle or change, and this is stressed at the beginning of the workshop. It needs to be dealt with caution and respect. This is why story circle and other sharing activities are framed with a set of guidelines for listening and offering feedback of which the facilitators try to encourage and monitor. Producers and workshop leaders are also encouraged to consider their lack of control over a story once it is made public, and the potential for unintended interpretations (Lambert, 2006: 53).

Pathways’ workshop had provisions for these ethical concerns. Léa explained that she approached Samia and Tessa after the first day of the workshop and expressed her unease. She did not feel pressured to make a story. The facilitators respected Léa’s feelings and accommodated the workshop so that she could participate as a listener and offer feedback to others, but was not obligated to share anything with other participants.

However, Léa’s case also highlights one of the failures that DST promises. She perceived her relation to empowerment as a process that could not be inspected (or resolved) through the discrete question-answer format. Her statement, “I did not have an answer” may demonstrate that the speaking position this mode of storytelling facilitates was not inclusive of Léa’s positionality or interpretation of empowerment. Léa’s case challenges the assumption that informs the DST movement: “Anyone can make a digital story because everyone has a story to tell” (Meadows, 2003: 190). Léa did not come to terms with empowerment in the way that the narrative scheme expected. The seven elements of DST tend to discard meaning that is obscure or ambiguous. Stories are encouraged to have closure, rather than open-ended statements. Instead she found the meaning “deeply personal” and could not offer explicit meaning, revelations, or conclusions. Indeed, meanings of the “personal” may not be static, nor confined to immediate feelings expressed confessionally.
They change through experience and with knowledge (Mohanty, 2003: 191). I am not arguing that Pathways did something wrong. On the contrary, the facilitators found ways to accommodate Léa’s circumstance. Specifically, I am arguing that not everyone may be able to pin-down empowerment as a definable state of being, or a pivotal life moment to document via video. The process of knowing one’s empowerment does not always require making it heard or visible. Here, Léa cannot bring herself to express experience or structure feelings in this way. This demonstrates that some life experiences are not easily compatible with the DST form and questions whether it is necessary or beneficial to represent empowerment, or struggle, through DST.

Limited Modes of Narrating the Self: The UP Women

The second point of tension is a related problem that occurred during the second workshop. Samia had difficulty as lead facilitator trying to delegate equal amounts of sharing time for each participant during story circle. The local government UP women tended to tell lengthy monologues compared to other participants. She explained that it was not like any other women talking in the group. These were politicians. They were accustomed to being heard and told stories in a particular fashion that was much like campaigning. “They were telling us their whole life stories…How they struggled with situations in their childhood to experiences as a young adult…to decisions made today in their lives” (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011).

Story circle is restricted to a particular time frame in order to ensure that enough time is allocated for participants to edit their scripts and storyboards, as well as spend time navigating the technology. The workshop schedule was not prepared for, or perhaps, could not accommodate the mode through which the UP women wanted to tell their stories. The workshop is made in a way that narration is expected to be shortened and precise. Recall that
the CDS recommends scripts no longer than 250 words (Jacobson, 2009). It is an expected feature of the DST genre that videos are two to three minutes in order to “give poignancy” and “keep the audience’s attention” (Lambert, 2006: 54). Also, it is important to offer each participant the opportunity to be listened to and receive group feedback. This process takes more time when there is a large workshop. Having ten participants, and taking into consideration all the activities that needed to be conducted in three days, Samia calculated a limit of ten minutes of speaking time to each storyteller. However, not everyone narrated succinct vignettes. Despite the emphasis on time constraints, the UP women insisted on drawing out lengthy accounts. Samia told me, 

There were huge power dynamics at play. I didn’t have the training or the authority to tell them that they needed to allow time for other people to share. I tried to explain to them that they must be brief, that they have to tell their story in ten minutes, but one woman ended up telling her story in one and a half hours! And I wasn’t able to control [the discussion] and assert my authority [as facilitator] (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011).

Samia reveals a conflict in DST facilitation. Equal participation is defined by enabling everyone the same opportunity to share their story in the group. This is a problematic stance towards meanings of participation, but one that cannot be elaborated here.12 What I focus on is that the rules of engagement emphasize that participants narrate short stories focused on pivotal moments in one’s life. Short narration is meant to help enable everyone the chance to share. At the same time, facilitators are encouraging participants to explore their creativity and make independent choices about how “to speak for themselves” (Meadows, 2003). Samia did not want to inhibit the UP women by forcing them to stop speaking. At the same time, she was concerned about other participants being compromised while mediating an intense workshop schedule. As a result, Samia explained

12 For an extensive analysis of issues on participation in DST see Carpentier, 2009, Jacobson, 2009 and Thumim, 2009.
that they were extremely behind schedule, making other activities very hectic, such as learning to install music in the videos. Consequently, not everyone’s story was revised or cohesive in the way that the facilitators had hoped (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011).

Activities of DST workshops are organized and governed to support a predictable and uniform range of ways to represent the self. Contravening the rules of engagement in story circle put the schedule off kilter. One may argue that such rules are pragmatic and necessary; that without guidelines and distinctions text would lose meaning. It is not the point here that these systems of distinction are wrong. Nevertheless, because they are necessary does not mean they are not also loci of exclusions and should be recognized as such. Specific barriers are established that limit the capacity of DST to redefine or challenge a diversity of meanings attached to “experience”.

Samia, however, did not consider the workshop theme to be a factor of facilitation challenges. For her, the problems she faced were expressed in terms of negotiating social relations of power, specifically age and occupation dynamics. This is an important element of the workshop that needs to be examined, especially as I underscore the co-creativeness of DST, because the relations of production are organized in ways to develop particular stories. Samia felt there was a hierarchy of age and professionalism which challenged her role as facilitator. As she described, these older politicians have many incredible stories of struggle as women over tremendous obstacles, and there is a lot one could learn from their experiences. They entered the workshop from a certain level of authority in their communities, and that authority is attributed by an intersection of age, occupation, as well as gender and economic class background. In comparison, the facilitators and other participants were at least 15 years younger. The students were in their early 20s, all from middle economic class families in Dhaka and their digital stories generally reflected on how “their
lives were very much about being at university, struggling to study, with their whole lives in front of them” (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). Their experiences in terms of relations to economic inequalities were different from the politicians’, who came from lower economic class families. Recall that one digital story articulated how one UP woman lived in poverty and the courage it took to run for public office with little financial resources or emotional support from her family. Also, part of their profession as politicians is to understand local socio-economic problems and campaign for solutions in a complex, male-dominated bureaucratic system. Therefore, the UP women entered a workshop (framed as “women’s empowerment” research) positioned as “experts” in a field associated with public decision-making power on women’s issues.

This is not to suggest that the UP women’s experiences are more valuable for Pathways’ work. The principle of Pathways research is that all standpoints are crucial resources to help transform knowledge. The point here is that the DST workshop is not isolated from relations of power that make up the socio-historical context. Samia explained that actors in the workshop maintained certain social codes that signify power relations in terms of senior and junior dynamics. For example, the facilitators and student participants would offer their chair to senior UP women. When it was their turn to speak, the UP women tended to dominate the story circle and Samia felt uncomfortable asking them to respect the time frame allocated to everyone. These not only signify terms of respect. It also exposes the DST workshop as a political and cultural site in which differences are asymmetrical and situated within hierarchies. The relations of production do not just include sociotechnical roles, such as facilitator, technical assistant, and storyteller, but also these are configured along lines such as age, gender, class, language, religion, education, and occupation. Means and relations of production are also linked to how skills will be taught and evaluated, what the purpose of the digital story is, and what constitutes success. This is discussed below.
Process and Product: Defining and Achieving the “Good Story”

Samia expressed that the challenges of facilitation were reflected in the final products. She felt that due to a lack of time in offering script feedback, a lack of consistent one-on-one help by the facilitators and a schedule gone incredibly off-track, participants simply recorded whatever scripts they made without revisions. She personally felt that the stories resulted in much flatter and underdeveloped narratives. Some stories were never completed and most were only narrations as participants did not have time to finish installing music. She described some stories as “scattered” in that they tended to jump from childhood, to another incident, to another that did not lucidly relate to the overall theme (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011).

The “failures” of the workshop, according to facilitators, draws out a host of specific expectations about what constitutes a “good” story and how that story can be made communicable to its intended audience. Digital stories are expected to be visually coherent, with clear associations to match the narrative. Referring to Poletti’s critique of the seven elements of DST, a good story is defined as one in which the first-person voice explicitly answers the dramatic question that is posed in the beginning, and offers closure or resolution (2011: 79). The DST genre insists on emotional, so-called “universal” themes of human experience, such as “loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship, and love” (Poletti, 2011: 81). The Pathways workshops appropriated the seven elements to suit their objective of creating positive representations of lived empowerment. Participants were encouraged to produce stories that reflect one or two moments which they found pivotal. Earlier I discussed how this was productive in some cases. Here I consider how it discourages stories that are obscure, inconsistent, purely experiential, or represent linear progression through life, such as the way the UP women narrated themselves.
The plot structure is a peculiar representation of time and change, which arguably conflicts with the very concept of empowerment that the organization developed. As discussed in chapter three, Pathways defines empowerment as an on-going process, one that changes throughout life and is partial and uneven (2010: 1). Empowerment is understood to happen in a recurring fashion and is not easily defined to discrete instances. As Tessa explained to me, the policy recommendations of Pathways are about:

…not assuming that you can roll out a blueprint in different contexts. It’s about not assuming you are going to get a predictable outcome, but to actually see what the reality is of people’s lives in particular contexts….there are multiple terms of empowerment. [For example,] there is political empowerment, economic empowerment…and they are all relative depending on one’s life experience” (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011).

The DST movement produced measures of story quality that have an effect on how other DST workshops order these pre-existing themes and narrations. While Pathways aims to understand empowerment from participants’ own terms, there are guidelines for participating in digital storytelling that encourage individuals to structure their diverse, sometime contradictory, experiences into stories that reflect on these dominant themes. This is evidence of tension over process and product. The implication is that quality of process and quality of the digital story are inextricable; the one will produce the other. As we have seen in the discussion of process, it is vital that participants have a positive experience enjoying the luxury of time for personal reflection and creativity. Outcome is also important if the digital stories are to be used on behalf of the institution. They must meet the standards of quality and expectation of the institution and of the imagined audience. This implies methodological concerns for researchers and activists who analyze digital stories as potential tools to uncover unique, “hidden” meaning of life experiences. Hence a return to my main
argument of co-creativity: researchers should be attentive to the institutional environment, but also the narrative formula and structures of feeling that the practices of DST reproduce.

*DST’s Potential: Building Collectivities through Process*

The relations of production in the first workshop were also framed by power dynamics of age and occupation. However, the way in which these dynamics are configured is very different from the experience of the second workshop. All of my research participants pointed out that the process of the first workshop disrupted Pathways’ age and power hierarchies. Communication officers were leading the project and instructing the senior researchers at the South Asia Hub. Tessa stated, “It was a flip of the normative hierarchy in which the younger were teaching the older” (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). Recall that Léa expressed that, “It didn’t matter that I was amongst my bosses…We were all participants and my peers were facilitating” (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

There are a number of benefits to the DST process that my interviewees highlighted. Part of the disruption of the usual power dynamics was due to different relationships to digital media. The younger facilitators were more confident with the technology. Especially as communication officers, engaging with different digital and internet media is integral to their job title. In general, the senior researchers owned and used laptops, wrote online via email and were comfortable with Word processors and Windows. They (as well as the participants in the second workshop) had never worked with Windows Movie Maker or Audacity. According to my interviewees, one of the challenging and rewarding aspects of the DST process was dealing with technophobia and the anxieties participants experience as they learn and create with the medium. Tessa explained that it is crucial for extra time to be built into the schedule as the technical learning process is one that requires intense one-on-one instruction, trial and error, and patience (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). While
mediation may be a laborious and hectic process, in the end, many participants felt it was rewarding to digitally “play, discover, and create” (Samia, personal interview, June 30, 2011). This is also true of the second workshop. Léa explained that during production and when they watched the final videos, she witnessed many positive reactions by participants. “I saw people meet the realization that ‘Wow! I can do that!’ It was very rewarding. This is why I feel even if the [final product] cannot be used by Pathways, it doesn’t matter, because it belongs to and is for the storyteller” (Santana, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

Samia and Tessa also described feelings of excitement and reward that stemmed from the first workshop and the way in which the context altered power relations. They felt that the senior researchers genuinely supported and invested in the new methodology. The participants did not imagine that they would ever make a video, and to learn how to do it in a short time frame was motivating. “That interaction itself, in which [the senior researchers] were learning from the junior staff, and the fact that they were able to [commit] that amount of time out of their busy schedule is unprecedented,” Tessa asserted (Lewin, personal interview, June 22, 2011). An article Tessa wrote explains that good communication tends to disrupt the established hierarchies of the organization in which it operates (Lewin, 2010: 226). She explained that this is evident by the experience at Pathways and stated that the DST methodology influenced the evolution of the organization. The hierarchical shift had implications beyond the DST workshop by increasing both the confidence of the younger members and the older members respect for their work (internal communications, March 14, 2011).

The benefits of DST described above demonstrate that it may be an excellent tool for strengthening groups with a shared agenda. Freidua and Hlubinka (n.d.) argue that through crafting digital stories in a shared space and influencing each other, there is a metanarrative that develops in the group. This may be the case, and indeed, the digital stories developed at
Pathways were informed by a shared framework of empowerment which the participants and facilitators theorized together. However, I argue that this not a natural component of the technology of DST. Rather, it is the social context and framing discourses of its use that matter. One should be conscious of the environment that gives DST meaning. The purpose of the first workshop and the shared aspirations amongst the actors had constructed DST as a mode through which researchers re-explored their framework of empowerment and the organization’s way of communicating research. Hence, we may understand the first workshop as an already established collective of researchers coming to collaborate in a new way that resulted in a reconfiguration of power dynamics and bonds.

The majority of the communication officers felt that the process of the workshop was far more important than the end-product. When asking about the limitations of DST, Tessa eloquently described the tension between process and product. The facilitator wants to be able to guide that process, but with the “knowledge that she might not be able to use the end-product” afterwards (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). Stylistically, digital stories are not “slick, glossy, or of expert quality…which audiences are often used to and so [digital stories] aren’t going to get a lot of air time because of that…However, it’s not about that. DST is first and foremost process-driven” (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). Tessa found that the process of DST lends itself as a qualitative tool that can complement other methods, depending on the objectives of the research. For example, it may be a more suitable tool for self-reflexive analysis, because unlike a survey or highly structured focus group or interview, “there is space in the process for people to have a fair amount of agency to articulate experience in visual and narrative ways” (Lewin, personal interview, July 13, 2011). Tessa explained that if someone is going to use the end-product for a certain public purpose, such as lobbying or awareness-raising, then there would need to be measures taken
within the process where consent is established and the narrative is refined for that end-
purpose.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter serves my core argument by centering how actors perceive
mediation of specific mechanisms in the workshop. First, I demonstrate how both the
institution’s framework of empowerment and positionality in development result in particular
life stories. The three stories represent meanings of empowerment with different outcomes.
This is not variety for the sake of “difference”. The way Pathways appropriated the dramatic
question functions to bring narrative into critical discourse. The digital stories represent the
embodiment of political agency to respond to and reconcile one’s position within social
structures of power in a way that feels empowering, however that may be felt in one’s
context. Thus, we see how participants’ and facilitators’ engagements with the narrative
elements and Pathways’ discourse, can enable critical voices about what is negotiated in life
“experience”; hence, one reason why the workshop is about co-creativity.

Then again, I also delineate the shortcomings of the narrative model by examples of
Léa and the local government women. Lea’s situation is an important reminder that some
experiences do not become intelligible through collaborative video production. The UP
women’s preferred mode of storytelling highlights some of the boundaries that are set by the
DST genre. Discouraged are extensive monologues, ambiguities, and unresolved endings.
The DST methodology has parameters for which certain narrative and visual qualities of
expression are marked as “less effective”. Indeed, Lambert asserts that “all stories are told to
make a point” (2006: 46), and thus, many workshops are adopted for social causes. I argue
that this is one dynamic which requires acknowledgement when utilizing DST for theorizing
experience. It challenges the notion that mediation is minimized when people represent
themselves in this way. There are narrative strategies excluded, hence meanings of experience overlooked in DST methodology.

Another important aspect of mediation is the relations of production in which multiple actors are positioned differently in the process. There are dynamics of power that inevitably enter the workshop and signify differences across and between actors in important ways. My interviewees explain how difference was generally configured along categories of class, age, and occupation status. The workshop methodology had the effect of shifting hegemonic hierarchal positions among Pathways members in a productive way. Hence, we may determine that DST is a useful tool for supporting collective relationships. How group dynamics played out in the second workshop, however, caused points of tension in story sharing and instruction.

Approaching DST as co-creative opens up an investigation of positional shifts and power exchange, which is significant for conceptualizing “voice”. To be cognizant of how meaning is struggled over is to frame “voice” as an embodiment of the production process. Some qualities are strategically chosen over others due to the social context and competing discourses. Why and how these choices were made has potential to reveal powerful efforts of integrating personal experience, visual concepts, and critical discourse, where empowerment is theorized from the convergence of the story.
Chapter V. Contributions and Future Research

This project tackles digital storytelling from a critical perspective on mediation. The wider DST movement celebrates a production of “true” voices, but at the expense of considering the institutional context supporting the workshop. As argued in chapter two, this is indicative of the author-function that organizes the relations of control over production while simultaneously concealing them (Peterson, 2003). The fetish of DST serves the myth that technological progress of consumer media equates with “democracy”. Self-representations suggest a challenge of power when institutions represent people. Some transnational feminists have argued, however, that it is crucial to examine the historical and political marketplace which facilitates self-narratives, because this significantly frames how they are made, understood, and read (Mohanty, 2003: 77). As DST becomes more common to make and watch as sources of evidence, analysis of the behind-the-scenes production is a pressing concern.

In this final chapter, I revisit the purpose to build on method considering the limitations and potentials of DST. I have argued that a shared frame of reference about mediation needs to be established in terms of co-creativity. This is an alternative to popular terms of “self-made” and “DIY” technology. I suggest that acknowledgement of co-creative media can take place by first, generating a discussion in the beginning of the workshop about the idea of co-creativity and the possible influences of the institution, the technology, and the group dynamics; second, communicating co-creative awareness to DST consumers. I then readdress the question of polysemy and video research in light of my examination of the multimodality of DST. This chapter concludes with plans for further research with Pathways.

Acknowledging Co-Creativity
One way to acknowledge DST as a collaborative site of media creativity is to plan a discussion about co-creativity in the first day of the workshop to couple other prep sessions about the process. The concept could be defined by a facilitator and then a discussion followed in which actors identify a number of discourses to anticipate in their specific context of production. One definition of co-creative media is offered by Spurgeon et. al. as a conceptual tool for describing the way participatory media is facilitated between participants and facilitators (2009: 275). However, my research demonstrates how co-creativity can extend to analysis of the framing discourses of the workshop and social relations of power between actors (not just across facilitator-participant). For example, engagement of Pathways’ concept of empowerment with participants’ personal stories is one way institutional discourse guides narratives. Another example is the genealogy of DST workshops among different networks. Women’sNet trained a four day workshop at the FTX developed from a history of using DST to raise awareness on domestic and gender violence. The timeline and activities by Women’sNet are similar to Pathways’ workshop schedule. They also share similar distribution plans. Since the FTX was Samia’s first formal DST training, it is no surprise that it greatly influenced the way the Pathways’ project was organized. There is also the influence of the DST genre itself, which reproduces a standard way of visually and narratively making a story. This plays a part in the process of co-creativity because it is something actors must mediate in order to produce a digital story. The point is to generate a collective awareness of the complex intersection of possible social forces and constraints that generate mediation.

Another way to acknowledge co-creativity is through consumption of digital stories. How this is done will depend again on the context in which DST is watched. Throughout my study I have argued that it is crucial for researchers to be aware of the mediation process when analyzing the meaning of a story, since understanding the context in which this
meaning was produced can help avoid essentialist connections and foster understanding the intricacies within authorial “voice”. In other words, it situates the narrative process in social space and time, and through analysis, repositions meaning of the texts. Co-creativity may be brought into the experience of viewing by introducing the term alongside the product. For example, one of the ways in which Pathways wanted to distribute their stories was with CD packages accompanied with training manuals to give ideas on how the stories may be used in to encourage discussion about negative attitudes towards women and empowerment (Samia, personal interview, June 30, 2011). In the manual, the workshop may be introduced as a collaborative production, followed by context-specific explanations of what mediation entails. Usually when digital stories are screened for an audience there is a summary about the purpose of the workshop. Co-creativity could also be illustrated here to clarify to the audience the complexities of the process. It is not about independent work.

Rethinking DST as a site of shared production is not limited to these two avenues. The way in which we articulate co-creativity needs to be reevaluated and rewritten for each context and for the DST movement at large. As explored in my research, feminists such as Anzaldúa (1987) and Mohanty (2003) demonstrate that rewriting is itself an interpretive act also embedded in social and political practice. Constant re-evaluation of the methodology could reveal powerful efforts to transform the oversight of technological fetishment and uncritical propagation of participatory media. This is similar to how I feel the narrative elements should be assessed.

The Narrative Elements Revisited

I have been critical of the boundaries of the narrative elements developed by the CDS and the range of ways to narrate life experience. This critique stems from the observation that while the institutional context of production changes greatly and diffuses globally, the
genre form of DST generally remains the same across locations (Poletti, 2011; Spurgeon et. al., 2009). This is an understated aspect of DST that deserves more attention. Even as actors claim to only loosely refer to one or all of the seven narrative elements, stories typically continue to replicate emphasis on explicit meaning, resolve, and closure. One reason for this may be that distribution of stories is not always the goal of the workshop. Many stories are produced for personal and limited consumption. Thus, stories which transgress the genre’s visual and narrative boundaries simply may not be in circulation for others to witness. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that the predictability of the narrative structure holds significant status in DST production and consumption.

I have argued that this is a discursive outcome of co-creativity. Pathways’ appropriation of the narrative elements, its emphasis on the dramatic question and resolution, is a nexus of concepts of voice, empowerment, and political agency. These overlapping discourses generate a shared frame for telling personal stories and, consequently, what knowledge is represented. The feedback Kristina received helped her reposition a new relationship to her experience and she became conscious of the power relations in which she was implicated. The narrative guidelines and collaboration with workshop assistants facilitated critical, self-reflexive thinking. For Kristina, the very process of production was her empowerment.

As demonstrated by Léa, however, repositioning one’s relationship to empowerment may not translate in DST. She stated that she did not have an answer to the theme and did not feel comfortable examining her experiences through this process. Co-creativity requires sharing personal experience at different degrees of interaction with different actors and this may not be suitable for some. As well, the methodology encourages participants to apply the complexities of daily life into a pre-existing textual format that encourages a range of ways to
represent the self. For Léa, the insistence of succinct, narrative resolve and closure would place her in a speaking position that she did not feel she could fit.

In an effort to reconceptualize DST through feminist practice, I found Mohanty’s paradigm of transnational feminism particularly useful. In *Feminism Without Boarders* (2003), she locates “experience” and “difference” as problematic concepts in feminism as they tend to be catch-all phrases, while afforded significant status in research. Mohanty calls for a shared frame of reference to investigate and recognize that the meanings attached to “difference” from various historical moments are strategically important. In order to prevent “experience” and “difference” from being fixed and excluding others requires a self-conscious inquiry of the discursive events, relationships, terms, and categories that organize how they are lived. Perhaps it is this process of constant repositioning of “experience” that can challenge and blur narrative boundaries set up in a workshop. For example, part of Léa’s situation for not making a story was that she had not figured out what empowerment meant for her in her life “experience” yet. Engaging with a format that measures quality in terms of narrative accessibility and coherence discourages the production of ambiguous, open-ended, obscure, and incoherent narratives. This also relates on the audio-visual level of the storytelling.

Co-creativity can expand to discussions in terms of multimodality. This feature of DST is appealing because interpretive meaning is inspired by the infinite expressiveness of visibility and sound, movement and pace. Digital stories are able to produce polysemic space in ways unavailable in other productions. It has been argued by DST researchers that the aesthetic “look” is framed by the DST movement at large. As Burgess states, “Rather than employing ellipsis, a refusal of closure, [and] irony, digital stories are in general marked by their sincerity, warmth, and humanity” (2006: 209). It is common in the genre for sensory to take secondary status and function to illustrate the narrative. As stated by Lambert (2009),
the DST movement places more emphasis on voice-over and plot structure than on video aesthetics.

The context of the workshop will also affect aesthetics. For example, participants are asked to bring family and self-photographs that they may want to incorporate. Photographs can signify a sense of geographical space and time through items of landscape, clothing, style, etc. If personal photos are not available, it is common to take photos during the workshop, scan in drawings, and download images from the internet. Obviously, mediation of technology also affects aesthetics. Samia explained that they experienced some technological challenges. For example, some of the machines had viruses and were eating up the pictures that participants were using. In the second workshop, everyone fell behind schedule, which resulted in some stories without music or sound (Rahim, personal interview, June 30, 2011). If we think of the sensory components in terms of co-creativity, this can offer clues about the context and the discursive (and pragmatic) selection of elements and combinations. The medium’s sensory possibilities can inspire critical thinking, while creativity cannot be prearranged or over-determined.

I am arguing that framing DST as a site of co-creative production can address how the narrative parameters are set up in the workshop according to intent and purpose. There needs to be recognition that the ways of telling a digital story are limited and partial accounts of “experience”, as are all standpoints. Re-evaluating the dominant textual characteristics of the genre could challenge DST into new direction. It would be interesting to ask Léa if she would have produced a story if contradictory and confused narration were an option. It also raises questions, such as: If the process is more important than the final product, can the process of producing an anti-DST story also be fulfilling? What might this look like?

Re-engaging Pathways in Further Research
I write this conclusion with the anticipation to share my findings and arguments with Pathways’ DST actors. In the spirit of collaborative research, I seek Pathways’ feedback and critique of my work. I hope to do this by meeting with each interviewee separately again on Skype. Meeting in-person would be ideal, but is not likely considering our geographical distances. Separate meetings instead of all at once together could offer more time for each to respond. The point of discourse would be for members to engage with my critique in ways that are useful for them, while I engage their critiques in useful ways for my work. This may launch compelling ways to re-think feminist methods and video research together.
Bibliography


## Appendix: Interviews and Dates

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Kristina Hallez</th>
<th>Léa Santana</th>
<th>Samia Rahim</th>
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