



The Potential of Digital Storytelling as an Ethnographic Research Technique in Social Sciences

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Abstract

By using ethnographic research techniques, we can ask questions in order to understand some issues in the social sciences such as experience, the unique, the ordinary, daily life, emotions etc. However, it is possible to query the proficiency of current ethnographic techniques to design dialogic research and to convey the experiences of the ‘subjects’ of the field research. Techniques such as in-depth interviews, informal interviews and even the focus group depend on the dichotomy of the researcher who asks questions and the subject who responds to them. However, designing dialogic field research requires refusing those dichotomies, which can be considered to be inherited from a positivist understanding of science. In this article I discuss the potential of any digital storytelling workshop as an ethnographic research technique, with regard to three issues that seem problematic in current ethnographic techniques: *integrated research processes; power and hierarchy relationships; and conveying the voice of subjects*. The discussion of this article results from two academic experiences: One of them is my ethnographic field research experience for my doctoral dissertation;¹ the other is the digital storytelling workshop entitled *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*.² First, I

¹ When I was writing my doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Experience of Asylum Seeking in Turkey within the Context of Intercultural Communication*, I conducted field research between 20 July and 20 December 2011, when I investigated how asylum-seeking in Turkey is experienced in daily life within the context of intercultural communication. In my field study, which lasted for five months in Gaziantep, one of the provinces that is located on the south-eastern part of Turkey, I adopted and put to use the participant observation, informal interview and in-depth interview techniques. I experienced a number of difficulties in conducting a field research with a sensitive (disadvantaged) group of people such as the asylum seekers.

² We conducted this workshop within the body of Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication, between 25 March and 16 April 2013. I was one of the facilitators of the workshop. We had two purposes. The first was to share stories about our field research experiences as woman academicians. We wanted to understand if gender differentiates the field research experiences. The second was to use DST (digital

discuss the weaknesses of current ethnographic research techniques and, second, I focus on how digital storytelling workshops can help to reduce these weaknesses. Finally, in conclusion, I touch on the discussions – carried out in the workshop mentioned above – regarding the opportunities and difficulties of using the digital stories and the workshop process as one of the ethnographic research techniques.

Keywords: Ethnographic research techniques, digital storytelling workshop, hierarchy, power relationship, representation of experience.

In need of new ways of knowing

In a very real sense, the ethnographer may be profitably understood as a storyteller.

(Grills, 1998: 199)

The dominant epistemology of science in “trying to know” by certain question patterns and certain techniques is that, while it regards a number of fields and experiences as insignificant and far from being scientific, it does not have need to know them as well. As Law stated in his book *After Method: Mess in Social Research*, there is:

[N]o doubt some things in the world can indeed be made clear and definite. Income distributions, global CO₂ emissions, the boundaries of nation states, and terms of trade, these are the kinds of provisionally stable realities that social and natural science deal with more or less effectively. But alongside such phenomena the world is also textured in quite different ways. My argument is that academic methods of inquiry don't really catch these. So what textures are they missing out on? If we start to make a list then it quickly becomes clear that it is potentially endless. Pains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much form at all, unpredictabilities, these are just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social science methods. It may be, of

storytelling) as an ethnographic research technique. We wanted to discuss the problems of ethnographic research techniques that we encounter in the field and see if DST has a potential that allows us to ask new questions.

course, that they don't belong to social science at all. But perhaps they do, or partly do, or should do. (2004: 2)

This argument holds that it is not possible to proceed with a science that assumes objectivity purified from value, surrenders its scientific manners to researches at the rate of their being repeatable by others, deems uniqueness worthless and is in pursuit of universal realities. Therefore, there are valuable objections not only towards the positivistic understanding of science, but also towards the positivistic viewpoint of social sciences. One of the strongest critiques comes from Cultural Studies which finds it valuable to be curious about, to discuss and ask questions about daily life, race, popular culture, and gender and women's studies. These approaches further define the boundaries of science with one of feminism's most important discourses: "The personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970), Which opens personal experiences and private issues to discussion in the context of political analysis. It can be said that all these new research fields stemmed from the need to ask new questions. It seems to me that the need of science for new perspectives, vision and a different mode of knowledge can possibly be met by the answers generated from these objections that I mentioned above.

With the increase and diversification of the issues that we can investigate in social sciences, it has become more important to discuss the adequacy of current research techniques. Even though ethnographic techniques allow us to ask questions about the experiences, perceptions and the meaning systems of subjects, these techniques need to be criticised in terms of three aspects:

1. Are these techniques sufficient to design a research process that has an integrated structure rather than the sum of separable stages, from the beginning to the end of the research? Can we design dialogic field research, where knowledge is produced and interpreted in cooperation between the researcher and the subjects?
2. Are these techniques sufficient in effacing the hierarchical power relationship between the researcher and the subjects?
3. Are these techniques sufficient to represent the experiences, perceptions and meaning systems of the subjects?

The first question is one of the vital issues about ethnographic research techniques, because this is the point where we can see the shadow of positivist understanding of science having fallen upon ethnographic techniques. According to the positivistic viewpoint, a research is a structure that comprises separable stages. In other words, there are questions that can be asked to build up the *research object* (as the first stage), there are

some techniques to *collect data* (as the second stage), there are some criteria to *interpret the data* (as the third stage). Research is the sum of these separable stages. Unfortunately, it is possible to see that ethnographic researches have almost the same separable stages. In this separable structure, the researcher and the subjects come together just at the second stage, while the data is being collected. But the researcher is alone at the other two stages, when the research object is built up and the data is interpreted. According to this separable structure, a researcher is a person able to know which questions she/he will ask and to interpret the responses. This structure has defined the hierarchical positions of the researcher and the subjects in the beginning of the research and this approach, as Wolf has stated, “entails and encourages distance and non-involvement between the researcher and researched and assumes that the researcher may objectively see, judge and interpret the life and meanings of his/her subjects” (1996: 4). An approach of conducting science with a dominant understanding of hierarchy, which is established on the duality of the researcher/researched, deserves some criticisms.

When we (all participants and facilitators of the workshop) discussed the hierarchical positions of the researcher and the subjects, in the digital storytelling workshop entitled *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*, it turned out that we had designed our field research along this separable structure. So, there was a problem. Because in our field research, all of us, as both facilitators and participants of the workshop, had experienced similar difficulties in trying to interpret the data; in other words, in trying to tell the stories of the subjects in the context of the collected data. For example, Feride, one of the participants of the workshop told her story, as follows:

It was one of my first in-depth interviews for my dissertation’s field research. I was a little bit nervous. But it was a good interview, we drank tea, chatted, had fun. But after this interview, when I started to listen to the recordings and to try to categorise the data, I suddenly began to cry. I felt sad and alone (15th March 2013).



“Face with the Sameness.” One of the stories of the DST workshop entitled, “When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women”, 2013, Ankara. <http://vimeo.com/91293008>.

I experienced a similar difficulty. The subjects had remained in the field and I had to interpret the data alone. My field research took five months in Gaziantep and we spent a lot of time with the subjects. Yet, after the fieldwork, when I turned back home and began to interpret the data, I realised that there was something that I could not understand clearly enough. I felt as Feride did. There are a lot of experiences like these. For a dialogic research process that enables subjects to participate in the research from beginning to end, we need to design the research as an integrated process rather than separable. Therefore, with such an integrated process, the researcher may not feel alone while interpreting the data; as well, the contribution of the subjects to the research may be increased.

To include the subjects in the process of interpreting data, as Atay (1995) has explained in his article on the dialogical research process, reduces the power of the researcher’s initiative in interpreting and publishing the data. This point brings us to the second question: Are these techniques sufficient in effacement of the hierarchical power relationship between the researcher and the subjects?



“A Travel Story in Field”. One of the stories of the DST workshop entitled, “When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women”, 2013, Ankara. <http://vimeo.com/91301104>

The power relationship between researcher and subjects constitutes one of the most sensitive discussion topics concerning method and techniques. Such a relationship is grounded in a dualistic viewpoint and as Hekman has stated dualisms always imply hierarchies and hierarchies always imply control (Bleier, 1984: 164; Haraways, 1978: 36; cited in Hekman, 1990: 121). The ability to decide to begin and end the research, which is under the initiative of the researcher, constructs a relationship based on hierarchy. This relationship is of great importance as it has a determining effect on the research process. Wolf points out 3 interrelated dimensions of power:

1. *Power differences stemming from different positionalities of the researcher and the researched (race, class, nationality, life changes, urban-rural backgrounds);*
2. *Power exerted during the research process, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange, and exploitation;*
3. *Power exerted during the post fieldwork period – writing and representing.* (1996: 2)

What is the meaning of “the hierarchical power relationship between the researcher and the subjects”? In the context of this article’s discussion, it would be better to define where the power relationship is, rather than what it is. Thus, I would like to mention the last two dimensions that Wolf points out.

During field research, an in-depth interview technique gives the power to ask questions almost solely to the researcher. In other words, the precedence to ask questions frequently

causes the researcher to establish power over the subjects. On the other hand, this situation of the researcher may cause them to be perceived as an authority on the issue by the subjects. “In cases where the participants perceive the researcher as an authority or an expert, they can hesitate to explain their views or thoughts with the fear of giving inaccurate, incomplete and insufficient information” (Kümbetoğlu, 2011: 487).³

Such a perception, as Kümbetoğlu has stated, may have an effect of increasing the distance between the researcher and the subjects. Therefore it would be better to support the research with a participant observation technique. But the data that are produced by participant observation and in-depth interview techniques may be incompatible. The former depends mainly on the perceptions of the researcher, and the latter may lead the subjects to feel uncomfortable when telling their stories. In some examples, especially in research with groups that can be defined as disadvantaged in different ways, like prostitutes, disabled people, criminals, refugees, etc., perceiving the researcher as an authority can lead to the rejection of interviews. I faced a similar situation in the fieldwork for my dissertation. Some asylum seekers refused to do an interview with me. The subjects who refused to be interviewed gave as a reason that I came from Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. When I said, “I come from Ankara”, it was reminiscent of the State as the biggest authority. This single sentence created a definable power relationship between the subjects and me. The hierarchical relationship between us was obviously there even if I absolutely did not desire it to be. They assumed that I was a part of the biggest authority on the migrant issue, in other words, a part of the State.



“Meeting the New Me”. One of the stories of the DST workshop entitled, *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*, 2013, Ankara. <http://vimeo.com/91294990>

³ Translation: Hatice Şule Oğuz.

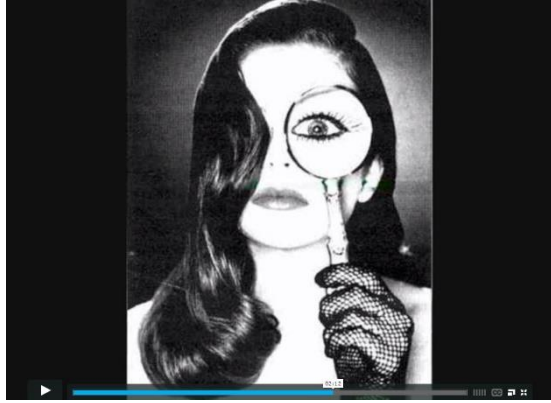
Another aspect of the power relationship emerges when the data are interpreted. With current techniques of the ethnographic research, such as participant observation, informal interview and in-depth interview, a researcher can collect voice data by voice recorder, visual data by taking photos, and videos and script data of her/his observations by keeping a field diary. All these records build up the main parts of a story; but not the story itself. They reflect the perceptions and inferences of the researcher about the story. It is certain that all these perceptions and inferences rest on a scientific basis, yet the problem is, who interprets the data; both the researcher and the subjects or just the researcher her/himself?

This question is important because, as Kümbetoğlu has stated, “[p]eople, always, remember and quote their narrations with many other things going on together. How a researcher conceptualises this complicated social reality and depicts the world of the participant, is directly related with the theoretical orientation of the researcher” (Kümbetoğlu, 2011: 485).⁴ It is likely to say that there is a relationship between the theoretical orientation of the researcher and his/her own story, which consists of their own priorities, fears, ideology, imagination, interests etc. Because of this relationship it is impossible to talk about either a value-free description of the field or a value-free interpretation of the data.

The term ethnographer quite literally translates from its root words as, ‘one who writes about a people’. In writing, we make decisions about the story we will tell – how the tale will be made theoretically interesting, what questions we will engage with our work, and what aspects of our research will be presented and what will be set aside. Through this process, lived research and the experiences that accompany it are represented and mediated by text. (Grills, 1998: 199)

The researcher redirects not only the data but also the subjects and the process of the field research. In the context of this assertion, I would like to discuss the third question concerning the sufficiency of the current ethnographic research techniques to represent the experiences, perceptions and meaning systems of the subjects.

⁴ Translation: Hatice Şule Oğuz.



“Incognito”. One of the stories of the DST workshop entitled, *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*, 2013, Ankara.
<http://vimeo.com/91294985>

Redirection is one of the central matters that has a significant effect in how a researcher represents the voices of the subjects. In the social sciences, the preferred technique for including the voice of the person under research is the in-depth interview. As Patton has stated, the in-depth interview technique provides the researcher with an opportunity to come into other people’s lives and understand their viewpoint. In order to understand how people arrange the world and how people give meaning to what is happening in the world we have to ask questions (1987: 109). However, even though it has been designed as semi-structured, the in-depth interview technique cannot escape from the redirection of the researcher as it starts out with the questions. Because of this redirection, the subjects may try to understand the expectations of the researcher, rather than telling of their own experiences. In my field research on asylum seekers’ daily lives, some of the subjects told me that they were worried about the questions; they were afraid they might not know the answers.

To summarise, the researcher’s redirection may affect not only the interpretation but also the production process of the data. Therefore, with current ethnographic research techniques, we can only talk about a representation of what the researcher understands about the experiences and meaning systems of the subjects. To reduce the power and redirection of the researcher, and to establish a mutual trust relationship, we can conduct dialogical research. At this point, it is reasonable to ask whether conducting a dialogical research process depends on the competence of the researcher, or the ethnographic research techniques. Certainly both of them are important, but it seems that to conduct dialogical research with current ethnographic research techniques depends more on the competence of the researcher than on the techniques.

What can be the contributions of the digital storytelling workshop form as an ethnographic research technique?

In this article it is not claimed that it is possible to construct dialogical ethnographic research process just by using the digital storytelling workshop form. But I do claim that this form can contribute to the construction of a dialogical ethnographic research process. Now, then, I want to discuss what the digital storytelling workshop form is; and then why I offer this form as an ethnographic research technique.

“Digital storytelling is a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives. The idea is that this puts universal human delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone” (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009: 3). Digital storytelling does not require professional technical competence in order that the digital storyteller to be able to produce her or his own story. During a workshop, participants and facilitators use certain software for voice recording, visual material editing and combining voice and visuals to form a story. These “technical and media artefacts are relatively easy to access; anybody can become the author of a digital story and distribute it over the internet” (Helff and Julie, 2009: 134).

In their stories, participants use visuals (photography from their albums, drawings, videos or any visual that they produce or find) and self-expression skills to tell of their unique experiences. So, it can be said that the stories of the participants include ethnographic data. For example, in the stories of the workshop entitled *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*, it turned out that we had to face fears in the field due to being women. It was not one of the topics of the workshop; it appeared in our stories spontaneously. We realised it after we saw each other’s stories. This is not the only reason to offer the use of the digital storytelling workshop as an ethnographic research technique. The workshop process itself can also be used as a technique of ethnographic research.⁵ So, at this point it would be better to talk on the structure of the workshops.

A digital storytelling workshop consists of six co-creating stages, which Şimşek explains as follows:

⁵ We (the facilitator team) conducted this workshop as an ethnographic research that focused on understanding the field research experience of the participants, who met the digital storytelling workshop form for the first time but have had field research experience. In other words, young academic women participated in this workshop as subjects who told of their own field research experiences. Hence, the facilitators were researchers and the participants were the subjects, at the same time.

Every workshop opens with the story circle, followed by more technical processes such as the script-text writing, voiceover recording, sound editing, image production and editing, and putting the digital story together using the available software. This technical workload is relieved with a final dialogic stage in the screening session, where participants see each other's digital stories as finished digital pieces. (Şimşek, 2012: 59)

In digital storytelling workshops, beginning with a *story circle* produced around a concept, rather than beginning with direct or indirect questions, minimises the redirection and eliminates the power of the researcher as much as possible. Before discussing how this is managed, it will be better to define what the story circle is:

The story circle is also the stage where the facilitators convince the participants that everyone has stories to tell and they are worth sharing. No story is more valuable than any other, and there cannot be a hierarchy among stories. As the story circle is a dialogic stage, the stories emerge with the contributions of the others in the dialogic nature of the workshop. Once a participant takes the floor for her [/his] turn, she [/he] freely tells the story she [/he] has in mind. Then the process of developing the story follows the habits of everyday conversational storytelling patterns. The listener participants ask questions about some of the details they want to understand in that story. (Şimşek, 2012: 61)

At the story circle stage, the question that the facilitators ask the participants – “[w]hat is the story you want to tell?” (Lambert, 2013: 54) – may reduce the power of the researcher and strengthen the participation of the participants in the research process. In other words, using digital storytelling workshops as a research technique may allow appropriation of the research process by both the researcher and the subjects. But it is certain that this is not the first time that such open-ended questions are used. For example, in oral history studies, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups also apply open-ended questions. However, the dialogue between the researcher and the subjects that depend on questions and answers does not change; in other words, it is evident who asks and who responds to the questions. On the other hand, in the story circle stage of the digital story workshop, after the first question the dialogue turns into an everyday conversation. At this point, it is necessary to emphasise that one of the physical structure features of the story circle is that “the participants and facilitators sit in a circle.

This sitting position gives the first message about the non-hierarchical nature of the digital storytelling workshop” (Şimşek, 2012: 62), and all the participants have an equal right to speak. Such a relationship may eliminate the researcher/researched duality and define everyone in the workshop as subjects who produce the knowledge together. The researcher also shares her/his own story with the other participants as everyone in the story circle creates her/his own digital story by cooperating with the other participants during the workshop process. At this point, it is clear that “[t]he Digital Storytelling workshops are dialogic rather than being didactic” (Şimşek, 2012: 53). So that, in defining the relationship between facilitators (/researchers) and participants (/subjects), it is more realistic to talk about interaction rather than redirection.



Some of the facilitators and the participants of “When I was in the Field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women” DST workshop, 2013, Ankara.

Dialogue provides one of the strongest aspects of digital storytelling workshops as an ethnographic research technique, owing to the fact that it can overcome the difficulty of establishing *mutual trust* between the researcher and the subjects. From the very start, for the researcher to be telling, sharing and producing his/her own story under the same roof and conditions as the subjects of the research, renders the digital storytelling workshop as a more promising research technique than other techniques in enabling the trust relationship which is desired to be created. Nevertheless, such a cooperative production process allows the researcher and the subjects to experience something about the research, together. And such an experience may also help to establish a trust relationship. The trust relationship was one of the big topics of the workshop, entitled *When I was in the Field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women*. Some of the participants expressed their thoughts about this issue by referring to their own experiences of field research and the workshop, as follows:

When we first came here, there was a sense of comfort and trust. It is strange. I do not know if anybody else felt the same. But I could open myself, easily. (Esra, 16th April 2013)

I did not plan to tell this story. I could not understand what happened. You know, it's like getting relaxed by telling the things that you never uttered spontaneously. (Yağmur, 16th April 2013)

I do not know why I think so, but, in my opinion digital storytelling workshop form can be used in any case that requires a feeling of trust. For example, in participation of the people who have been raped or have been abused. I do not know. I think any other traumatic things can be researched by this form. (Nihal, 16th April 2013)

Cooperating in producing knowledge significantly diminishes ethical concerns. But, because the *benefit gained from the research* is unilateral, it creates another ethical problem for which a solution must be found. We have to discuss the solutions self-reflectively. In the beginning we have to ask some questions of ourselves, as Selek has stated:

A person or a group of people comes into other people's lives, keeps records of these lives, and collects data about them. In this process what happened to those people who came into their lives, took a record, and what was the data collected about? What kind of a relationship is established with them? How do they participate in this process? What kind of relationship is developed between the researcher and the subjects? How are they affected by the research? (Selek, 2009: 115)⁶.

The digital storytelling workshop form can contribute to overcoming this problem by including the participants in the construction process of the research object, starting from the story circle stage. Thus, subjects (both participants and facilitators) can share the initiative on what is to be emphasised regarding the research issue. In addition, for the participants to have completed digital stories of their own and to hold the rights of use

⁶Translation: Hatice Şule Oğuz.

and to move at the end of the workshop, increases the visibility of participants in the research, thus to a great extent saving the benefit gained from being unilateral.

Using ethnographic research techniques such as participating, observation, informal and in-depth interviews can supply only a representation or translation of the subjects' voices. Writing up someone's experiences and meanings inevitably causes this representation/translation. However, at the same time it diminishes the voice – and also visibility – of the subjects of the field within the research. But, if we can include the voice of the subjects, in other words, if we can directly use the stories of the participants in the research, this allows the subjects to represent themselves. At this juncture, one of the strongest aspects of digital storytelling emerges: the opportunity for the participants to tell of their unique experience using their own voices, instead of going through a researcher's representation. As distinct from ethnographic research techniques such as participating observation and in depth interview techniques, “[i]n digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator, their unique character, and their connection to the lived experience” (Lambert, 2013: 63).

The opportunity of self-representation that is provided by the digital storytelling workshop becomes important especially for disadvantaged groups, such as LGBT, minorities, refugees, poor, prostitutes etc., who do not have the opportunity to represent themselves in the mainstream media, where they may be exposed to discrimination or have prejudices expressed against them. Self-representation is not the only reason for increased visibility; the other is the circulation capability of digital stories through a variety of media. “In addition to face-to-face in-group and public screenings, the circulation of digital stories through a website dedicated to Digital Storytelling projects, or through social networks such as Facebook and YouTube, can be an effective way of sharing digital stories with wider audiences” (Şimşek, 2012: 203). Contrary to research held with current ethnographic techniques, which keep the experiences of the subjects in dissertations, articles or books, this sharing capability of digital storytelling increases the visibility of the unique stories of the subjects.

Conclusion

As a result, it can be claimed that the digital storytelling workshop – as an additional ethnographic research technique – possesses a strong potential that may help to strengthen some of the weaknesses of ethnographic research. When we gathered in the workshop, entitled *When I was in the field: Digital Stories from Young Academic Women* to discuss this potential, two issues were especially emphasised:

- The capability of the digital storytelling workshop as a research technique in establishing a dialogical relationship between the researcher and the subjects, more than any ethnographic research technique.
- Its capability to reduce the power and redirection of the researcher and to establish a mutual trust relationship between the researcher and the subjects.

On the other hand, it has been emphasised that there were some difficulties that must be overcome. First of all, all participants asked the same question: While working with groups which we can define as disadvantaged such as migrants, prostitutes or minorities, although rendering their experiences visible through their own voices is a potential that the digital storytelling workshop should take into consideration, can this also turn into a problem (handicap) while working with participants who are illiterate or who have never used a computer before? If I were to provide an answer depending on our workshop experiences that we have gained under similar conditions, I can state that many difficulties that the story production process may involve can be overcome through the interactive and sharing relationship established in the workshops between the facilitators and participants.⁷

The other problem expressed by the participants was related to the financing of the research. In order for a researcher to be able to evaluate the potential of the digital storytelling workshop as a research technique, she/he should be provided with the necessary technical equipment as well as the necessary training for being a workshop facilitator. However, one of the participants, Nihal, had a suggestion to overcome this problem:

Maybe you will think that is not realistic but I would like to suggest something. Let's say I want to use this form in my research. But I did not receive any facilitator training, and I do not have the technical equipment such as PC, headphone, printer etc. Isn't it possible to establish digital storytelling workshop centres that researchers can use or get support? (16th April 2013)

⁷ For the workshops that we have conducted within Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication, Digital Storytelling Workshop, see: <http://vimeo.com/dijitalhikayeler>.

To summarise, there are some difficulties in putting the potential of digital storytelling workshops into practice, but also it can be regarded as an ethnographic research technique in social sciences in which the components of the digital stories and the workshop processes – that I mentioned above – are taken into consideration. Yet, the digital storytelling workshop form is certainly not a magic wand; putting this potential into practice depends on how the researcher and the subjects experience the workshop process.

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