Digital Narratives: Women and Treatment

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse Issues of Substance

Pre-Conference Workshop

Colin Ford, NettieWild, Colleen Dell, Nancy Poole, Deborah Chansonneuve, Sharon Acoose, Violet Naytowhow, and Elizabeth Head at the Digital Narratives, Women in Treatment workshop

Authors on this report: Elisabeth Bartlett, Shannon Taylor, Roisin Unsworth, Colleen Dell and Nancy Poole

BACKGROUND

This national networking, half-day workshop was held as a pre-conference session in conjunction with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) Issues of Substance conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Since 2007, this bi-annual Canadian conference has committed to sponsoring a workshop that focuses on women and substance use issues, with the goal of participants linking priority issues addressed within it to their participation in the larger conference. The theme of the 2011 IOS conference was "transforming health promotion, prevention, treatment and recovery."

The 2011 workshop, called *Digital Narratives: Women in Treatment*, was held on November 6 from 1:30pm – 5:30pm at the Vancouver Hyatt Regency hotel. It was funded by Health Canada, and co-sponsored by the British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health (BCCEWH) and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse in partnership with the University of Saskatchewan (U of S).

The interactive workshop was designed and facilitated by Nancy Poole of BCCEWH and Dr. Colleen Anne Dell of CCSA/U of S. It was led in part by Nettie Wild of Canada Wild Productions, who is the renowned director of the documentary *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*, and documentary filmmaker Colin Andrew Ford of Urban Sherpa Films. Collaborators and presenters included Dr. Deborah Chansonneuve of Minwaashin Lodge (ON), Violet Naytowhow of the Prince Albert Parkland Health Region (SK), Sharon Acoose of the First Nations University of Canada (SK), Arlene Hache of the Centre for Northern Families (NWT), Jim Cincotta of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ON) and Betty Head of the Cree Nation Tribal Health (MB).

The workshop built upon:
- The relationships fostered during and the findings of the *Moving Forward on Improving Treatment for First Nations and Inuit Women at risk of having a child with FASD* project, from which recommendations for improving treatment for Aboriginal women were made.
- The findings and workshop follow-up related to the research project entitled *Aboriginal Women Drug Users in Conflict with the Law: A Study of the Role of Self-Identity in the Healing Journey*, which was led by Dr. Colleen Anne Dell, and involved women in treatment and treatment providers from National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs.
- Sessions offered at previous IOS conferences that were organized by the session facilitators, which have attracted 100-200 conference attendees who might not otherwise have the opportunity to discuss gender-informed and culturally safe treatment.

- The work of the Connections knowledge exchange project (see www.connectionscanada.ca/) to identify and share evidence of treatment practices with women's programs in Canada. Both session facilitators are on the Advisory Committee to the Connections project, and Dr. Dell has written an article on Aboriginal women's treatment with the principal investigator: Niccols, A., Dell, C. A., & Clarke, S. (2009). Treatment issues for Aboriginal mothers with substance use problems and their children. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction, 8*(2), 320-335.
- Other work done by the BCCEWH on trauma-informed, culturally safe and gender responsive treatment for women (see www.coalescing-vc.org).

PURPOSES

The **first purpose** of the *Digital Narratives: Women in Treatment* IOS pre-conference session is to inspire, engage and educate participants of the session (from 20 organizations or institutions across Canada) on the tremendous, progressive work being done to improve access and quality of treatment for women in Canada. This is in keeping with the **first and second objectives of the session** identified to the funders:

1. To increase awareness of recent research, program development and projects related to substance use treatment for Aboriginal women; and
2. To foster dialogue among service providers delivering substance use treatment for women, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

The **second purpose** of the session was to provide participants with a hands-on opportunity to make a digital narrative— a creative and meaningful way for participants to engage in a new, culturally relevant method of sharing evidence and experience-based stories about women's treatment. After making the digital narrative, participants were asked to complete a *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheet*, which helped to meet the **third specific objective of the session**:

3. To provide the opportunity for those designing and offering treatment, to reflect on and describe their work in a way that can later be shared on websites and other digital media.

During this workshop, participants learned about the possibilities and benefits of using digital stories within their organizations and institutions, with specific attention to working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis women throughout Canada. Participants were provided with the skills needed to create digital stories, which they could then bring back to their respective organizations or institutions. There were 26 registered participants, including an outreach coordinator, an addictions counselor, a social worker, recreation therapist, trainers, a clinical supervisor, addiction/treatment services managers, a program coordinator, a program director, executive directors, academics, researchers and administrative assistants.

In recent years, digital storytelling has been gaining increased attention within public health and other settings because of its use in improving health and promoting gender equality. It is an innovative and interactive process that can be used to share personal or collective stories, and to serve as a lasting record. Digital narratives can be told in many different and unique ways, and can be used to discuss any topic. Digital storytelling supports self-representation, and can be used to empower and build self-esteem among those sharing their stories. It is a powerful process and an excellent, creative way to share knowledge.

WORKSHOP

As participants waited for the session to begin, they were asked to reflect on a story that they think is important to tell about their organization's addiction-related services for women. Members of the "From Stilettos to Moccasins" research team opened the workshop; Violet Naytowhow sang a welcoming prayer, and Sharon Acoose introduced the event. Nancy Poole followed this by providing participants with the session's agenda, and formally thanking the funders and sponsors. Nancy Poole also told participants that information from the session, including creative ideas on how they can use digital narratives within their organizations or institutions, would be written up in this summary report. To assist with this summary, participants were issued a *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheet*, which will be described later in this report. Dr. Colleen Dell then asked the participants to share what their aim for the workshop was, to make sure it was responding to any key expectations. The participants were very open to "whatever the afternoon would bring".

Next, a panel of service providers and researchers from across Canada shared their expertise in offering culturally relevant programming, support and treatment for Aboriginal women. The goal was for the audience to hear three 10-minute stories they could relate with, and from there one would be chosen to use in making a 2-minute digital story. Dr. Deborah Chansonneuve began by sharing her experiences working at the Minwaashin Lodge, an Aboriginal healing lodge in Ottawa. She shared the importance of storytelling in the Aboriginal culture, as she noted, "stories are our medicine, we need these stories for us to heal." Sharon Acoose, Violet Naytowhow and Dr. Colleen Anne Dell then presented a short video that was created by the "From Stilettos to Moccasins" research team. This 10-minute video emphasized the importance of applying community-based, culturally relevant research methods, and how this approach to doing research has been integral to the impact and longevity of the project. Lastly, Betty Head, from Cree Nation Tribal Health in Manitoba, discussed her community outreach work, and the importance of applying culturally focused and strength-based programs when working with women who have had a child with FASD or who have FASD themselves.

Nettie Wild and Colin Ford then began the interactive portion of the workshop. Colin Ford introduced the basics of digital storytelling. Highlights included that they are typically a 2-3 minute narrative, coupled with relevant images, video and/or music, which portrays an individual's personal and precise story. A digital story can be told in a number of ways. For example, storytellers can use educational statistics with their stories, different tones of voice, and/or photos or simply-drawn pictures. Focusing on one key message or theme is critical to the digital storytelling process because of the limited time allotted to the story.

Nettie Wild reviewed the 'golden rules' of storytelling, with emphasis on the digital story, including talking the first person (because we are all experts on our own story), having a plot (including a beginning, middle and end to the story) and the importance of using conflict, which helps emotions come to the surface, and provides a 'turning point' within the story. Nettie Wild and Colin Ford shared that it is important to have hurdles in a story in order to connect with listeners, recognizing that this is only one (and a Western) way of storytelling.

Colin Ford shared several examples of digital stories from youth he had worked alongside to develop. In one digital story, a youth shared his experience of getting placed in dozens of foster care homes in one year and how that changed his life drastically, and he used humor and staged video footage to create his digital story. Another youth shared his experience of wondering whether or not he had a sexually transmitted disease and the denial of getting tested. The youth used simple drawn images to convey his story.

A digital story is typically no more than 250 words. Nettie Wild and Colin Ford, in collaboration with the participants, chose Betty Head's narrative to turn into a digital story format. The participants were guided through this process of creating a story and learned about the low to no-cost software and computer programs needed to create digital narratives. A step-by-step guide was issued to all participants on how to create a digital story (see Appendix). As a group, the workshop attendees worked with Betty on writing her 250 word story, created the drawings, sound and visual components for Betty's story, and at the end of the session, viewed the finished product. Afterwards, based on the knowledge the workshop participants had gained, they analyzed the video, and made adjustments in order to make their group story more compelling.

The session concluded with Nancy Poole and Dr. Colleen Dell discussing with the group key ways in which they thought that digital storytelling could be used to *bring* new and culturally relevant methods and knowledge to their practices and programs, and *share* evidence and experience-based stories about their work in women's treatment in lasting and meaningful ways. Key points highlighted in the group discussion were: 1) digital stories can be used to exchange and share knowledge in a multitude of ways; 2) the power of digital narratives can be used with many populations, such as at-risk female youth or women in treatment; 3) digital stories provide a powerful and accessible means to disseminate research findings; and 4) the process of telling one's story is healthy, and can empower and give those involved a forum to express themselves.

WORKSHOP *CREATIVE IDEAS ACTIVITY WORKSHEETS*

As previously stated, participants were told that information from the session would be written up in this summary report, and were asked to complete a *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheet* to assist with the report. Of the 26 participants, 14 submitted their completed Worksheets, and 2 others were asked not to complete forms because they were assisting with writing the report.

In the *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheets*, participants documented: (1) how they see the use of digital storytelling as a method of creating change within their addictions program; and (2) in what ways they feel digital storytelling can benefit the support and treatment from addictions for First Nations, Inuit and Métis women.

In their *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheets*, participants voiced the importance of digital storytelling. In fact, they identified four reasons why digital narratives are important:

1. Digital narratives are a way to honour the traditions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women, and can be used as a first step towards healing from trauma – either individual or collective – that has resulted from "residential schools, displacement from land, genocide…"
2. Digital narratives are a way to illuminate different perspectives, and to bring about a multifaceted view of women's needs, which is critical to talking about women and the programs that serve these women.
3. Digital narratives can allow stories to be accessible to a broader audience, and can increase the chance of relating with the audience.
4. Digital narratives can preserve stories that may otherwise be lost.

In addition to these reasons for why digital narratives are important, a number of themes relating to the use of digital narratives emerged from the *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheets*. The themes are: (1) the use of digital narratives in therapeutic/treatment settings; (2) the use of digital narratives with staff/service providers; (3) the use of digital narratives within the community; (4) the use of digital narratives with other organizations; and (5) the use of digital narratives for evaluations/reports.

Use of Digital Narratives in Therapeutic/Treatment Settings

Purpose of Using Digital Narratives in a Therapeutic Setting. According to a participant, digital storytelling can be used in the treatment of various issues, including eating disorders, trauma

work, addictions, etc. Furthermore, participants identified several purposes of digital storytelling within therapeutic settings. Two participants stated that digital narratives can be used to get to know or connect with clients, specifically youth (the "digital generation"). Two participants stated that the digital stories of past clients could be used (if permission is granted) with current clients to initiate discussions, or to contribute to a program. Furthermore, four participants stated that digital narratives could be used to help clients who have difficulty telling their stories, whether because age (i.e., youth), disability (for e.g., dyslexia, speech impairment), low literacy (resulting from low level of education or English as another language) or being "'drowned out' by others."

Benefit of Using Digital Narratives in a Therapeutic Setting. According to participants, digital narratives benefit clients in a number of ways. Of primary importance, four participants stated that it can be empowering for a client to tell his/her digital story. Furthermore, two participants identified that digital storytelling can be a means by which clients challenge stigma and/or shame/guilt. Relatedly, one participant said that digital storytelling builds skills, pride and self-esteem among clients. Finally, two participants thought that digital storytelling can connect clients to each other, and another thought that it can foster communication and healthy boundaries.

Use of Digital Narratives with Staff/Service Providers

The comments from participants on the use of digital narratives with staff or service providers were limited. However, three participants said that digital stories could be used with staff or services providers as a teaching or brainstorming tool, and another said that staff could be involved in creating digital narratives to put on the organizational websites. A participant also mentioned the possibility of using digital storytelling to recruit mentors and coaches for community-based programming designed to support women with substance use problems.

Use of Digital Narratives within the Community

A number of participants said that they were interested in using digital narratives to inform the public about their organizations. Specifically, two participants said that digital narratives could be uploaded to their organizations' websites, to provide information about the organizations. And, also specified that such narratives could be used in public presentations. Similarly, participants stated the desire to use digital narratives to educate the public/community about issues related to treatment; one specified the desire to raise social awareness, and foster the "de-stigmatiz[ation]" of women with mental health or addictions issues. Finally, two participants suggested that such narratives may be useful in promotional or public relations campaigns.

Use of Digital Narratives with Other Organizations

A number of participants (six) stated that digital narratives could be useful in educating or affecting the perceptions held by funders, policy makers, partners or 'stakeholders,' and/or program developers. Additionally, one participant suggested that digital storytelling could be used to educate or inform organizations/professionals in adjacent fields.

Use of Digital Narratives in Evaluations/Reports

Several participants said that digital narratives could be used in program evaluation, or to present research. Specifically, participants said that digital storytelling could be used in both process evaluations and outcome evaluations, to actively involve program developers, managers and staff, or clients. Additionally, participants suggested that digital narratives could be used as "trailers" to research reports, or as a means to present qualitative or quantitative research findings.

WORKSHOP *EVALUATIONS*

In addition to completing the *Creative Ideas Activity Worksheets*, session participants were asked to complete an evaluation form once the session came to a close. Participants were asked to record their answers to five questions. The questions were:
1. Why did you attend the Session?
2. Did the Session meet its stated objectives?
3. What did you find the most valuable about the Session?
4. What did you find least valuable about the Session?
5. Please identify one thing that you learned at this Session.

The first question asked participants to state why they attended the session. Out of the fourteen participants, twelve stated their reason was to learn about digital narratives in some capacity, while the remaining two participants said that their reasons for attending were because s/he: (a) was looking for creative ways to work with clients; and (b) was interested in the topic. Of the fourteen participants, half specifically mentioned the use of digital narratives in therapeutic settings or treatment programs. In addition to this, one participant mentioned digital narratives as a tool for communicating ideas to different audiences, while another mentioned the use of digital narratives in program evaluation. All but one participant replied that the session met its stated objectives; the lone participant was undecided.

When the respondents were asked what they found most valuable about the session, a variety of answers were provided. Nevertheless, the majority of participants (10 of 14) said that instruction/demonstration on how to create a digital narrative was the most valuable part of the session. Two said that the tips/'golden rules' were most valuable. Lastly, two participants said it was most valuable to learn about the possibilities in or different ways of telling stories.

When asked what they found least valuable about the session, nearly half (6 of 14) of the respondents answered there was nothing they found least valuable or did not respond, while a few (2) mentioned the session needed to be longer. Two others mentioned that too much time was spent on the technical aspects of creating digital narratives (for e.g., taking pictures and uploading them), one of whom suggested that it would be useful to have some material pre-uploaded. Additional concerns from three participants related to room lighting, breaks and the size of the group. Finally, a participant said that there could have been a greater focus on First Nations, Métis and Inuit women.

Lastly, the participants were asked to identify one thing that they learned during the session. Nearly a third (4 of 14) of participants said that one thing they learned about was the power, value or effectiveness of digital narratives. Three participants said that they learned "how to" create a digital story. Three others stated they learned about the technology/equipment needed to make digital narratives. Also, two participants specified that they learned about the practicality or ease of using digital narratives within their own setting. Finally, a participant learned "how to bring a story to life… [and] think outside the box to share important messages," and one participant said that s/he learned about the "evaluative power of digital narratives especially for funders."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON DIGITAL STORYTELLING

We see this report as an excellent opportunity to promote increased awareness of promising developments in treatment for Aboriginal women in Canada. It builds on Aboriginal story telling traditions, and creates the opportunity for posting stories online, to prompt ongoing learning and connections.

In addition, there are many websites dedicated to digital storytelling. Colin Ford's website http://urbansherpafilms.com/ds/ is an excellent starting point.

There are other available examples of digital storytelling that may be useful. These include the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence website http://www.pwhce.ca/program_aboriginal_digitalStories which has an assortment of digital stories created by women. This website highlights the digital storytelling project - Intergenerational Effects on Professional First Nations Women Whose Mothers are Residential School Survivors.

The University of Alberta website http://www.ualberta.ca/digitalstories provides a variety of digital stories created by students on campus. They are creative, innovative, and insightful. This website explains digital storytelling and provides many links to other sites.

To find inspiration from examples, the story centre website http://www.storycentre.org also offers endless examples of digital stories. This Toronto-based website is designated as a place for people to share their digital stories with others. The website also posts upcoming digital storytelling events.

Appendix A

AGENDA		
1:30	Welcoming Prayer	Sharon Acoose
	Welcome & agenda	Nancy Poole & Colleen Dell
	• Our Aim for the Afternoon	Nancy Poole
	• Your Aim for the Afternoon	Colleen Dell
	Creative ideas activity sheet	
2:00	**Story Panel**	
	• A story from Minwaashin Lodge	Deborah Chansonneuve
	• Doing empowering research with First Nations, Inuit and Métis women	Sharon Acoose & Violet Naytowhow
	• Community outreach programming	Betty Head
2:30	**Digital Story Telling**	
	• Introduction	Colin Ford
	• The golden rules of storytelling	Netti Wild
	• Translating a *story* into a *digital story*	Colin Ford & Netti Wild
4:30	Sharing your creative ideas activity sheet	Colleen Dell & Nancy Poole
	Evaluation	
5:00	Networking Q & A with Nettie & Colin	

Appendix B   Digital Stories workbook (attached as separate file)