

**FINAL RESEARCH REPORT**

**Digital Stories of Coming to Learn: Experiences of Access and Narrative (Im)possibilities**  
**in a Community-Based Digital Storytelling Workshop for Immigrant Women**

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## **Executive Summary**

Our aim in initiating this study was to offer educational researchers and community-based organizations greater insight into the complex social and personal dynamics that structure the participation of newcomer and low-income women in adult learning initiatives and especially arts-based community programs. We set out to examine the educational biographies and experiences of women who are newcomers to Canada and participate as adult learners in workshops offered by the Central Neighbourhood House (CNH) Women's Program in downtown Toronto. Our study explores the following questions: What are the non-material barriers and motivators experienced by newcomer and low-income women who access community- and arts-based adult learning programs? How do previous educational experiences and personal beliefs about education inform their experiences of access? How do the educational biographies produced by these women in the digital storytelling workshop offer insight into these barriers and motivators?

Over approximately nine-months, in collaboration with two community-based social service agencies, we co-facilitated two digital storytelling workshops with the staff of the CNH Women's Program who have been offering workshops of this kind to women in the community for several years. The first workshop was conducted as an open workshop offered at CNH and the women who attended did so voluntarily, in many cases hearing about the workshop by word of mouth. The second workshop was offered in collaboration with the Immigrant Women's Integration Project (IWIP) at the Centre for Community Learning and Development (CCLD). CNH has facilitated this workshop for IWIP in years past and the workshop has become a mandatory part of the IWIP curriculum. In this way, the research project was able to offer

workshops in two different kinds of community-based program settings, which has provided a very interesting source of contrast and comparison for the study.

During the digital storytelling workshop, participants in both of these settings worked in a close-knit learning community, producing short (2-3 minute) digital videos of their own life stories. The participants' stories often explore issues of social identity and difference, creating content meaningful to themselves and their communities. The digital storytelling process comprises several stages: sharing personal narratives in an oral story circle; creating storyboards; writing stories or "scripts" and recording them as voiceovers; collecting visual artefacts and footage; and combining and editing all these elements in a non-linear digital environment to create digital videos. Participants become familiar with computer-based applications, including programs for word-processing and sound-, photo- and video-editing (in this case, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere). In our project they also worked closely with facilitators to develop their spoken and written literacy.

Following the workshops we conducted in-depth interviews with willing participants; these narratives offer a further site of storytelling, adding to the rich and complex body of data provided by the stories told and made in the workshops. Research team members conducted in-depth interviews with a total of nine participants and peer leaders. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and inquired into educational histories, experiences of migration to Canada, perceived material and nonmaterial barriers to adult education, experiences of digital storytelling, and family and community support.

The women who participated in the workshops and interviews range in age from 30 to nearly 70 and represent a cross-section of immigration demographics. Their journeys to Canada began in different places – Sri Lanka, Somalia, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan,

Egypt, Taiwan, and Mexico – and took different trajectories. Some came directly to Canada; others lived elsewhere first.

As we anticipated, the digital storytelling workshops and the stories participants created, as well as the in-depth interviews we conducted with nine of the workshop participants, provided us with a rich source of data on for exploring our questions about the non-material barriers and motivators for immigrant women pursuing these adult learning opportunities. In addition, we were able to make unanticipated insights into the nature of the storytelling process itself, both as a tool for community-development and learning and as a method of research. As such, our major research findings can be categorized under two broad headings: 1) experiences of access and 2) narrative (im)possibilities.

First and foremost, with regards to their experiences of access, our research findings illuminate the (non)material – the organizational, social, and psychological – factors that encourage newcomer women to participate in, or exclude them from, community-based adult education opportunities. These factors include language fluency and resources, program design, family and community support systems, self-perceptions and beliefs, and societal perceptions of immigrant women, each of which may act as a barrier or motivator at different times for different women. In addition to offering insight for community-based educators and policymakers into the significant impact of what may often be viewed as mundane choices around program design, these findings offer two further outcomes.

Our research findings trouble the distinction between material and non-material factors, especially in the lives of socio-economically marginalized subjects. Poverty and economic vulnerability heightened our participants' sense of the material dimension in every aspect of their lives. Likewise, our participants' material choices – be they learning-related (which music to use

in a digital story; how to transition between images) or logistical (daycare or timetable arrangements) – undoubtedly have nonmaterial meanings and effects. The power to make those choices can become symbolic of socio-political relations between individuals, their communities, and society as a whole; the absence of that power can cast doubt on education’s sincerest emancipatory aims.

Also, while our research findings identify key non-material factors for community-based adult educators to consider in their program design, they also suggest that what “worked” for our project’s participants should not be interpreted as a prescriptive recipe for all community-based learning. Indeed, we conclude that what contributes more than a specific set of instructions that attempts to remove all barriers to adult learning is a flexible responsiveness to whatever barriers and motivators may be present in a given context. Reductive notions of “what a community needs,” “what immigrants need,” “what women need,” or, in the present context, “what a community of immigrant women needs” are problematic because they rely on assumptions that social relations of power, social differences, even entire ethnic groups, can be unambiguously categorized and transparently understood. In fact, our study found that such over-generalizations are one of the primary non-material barriers to access for our participants. In this particular setting and with this particular group of participants, some things did work very well – demonstrating that responsiveness and flexibility can help create opportunities for adult learning that is appropriate, productive, and emancipatory.

Our second set of research findings suggests that narrative inquiry and storytelling, and specifically digital storytelling, offer a very powerful method for community development and community-based learning. Indeed, many of our participants, as well as the peer leaders who helped us facilitate the workshops, talked extensively about the power of telling one’s own story,

of being heard, and of listening to the stories of others. Within our workshop groups, participants were able to make deep and arguably life-changing connections to one another across great linguistic and cultural differences. Our research clearly indicates that these digital storytelling workshops have provided a network of women with the community and socio-psychological resources necessary to motivate them to pursue further education and training.

At the same time, along with its possibilities, we have discovered the limits of storytelling and narrative as supposedly transparent sources of data. In particular, our research reveals a tension between *what we know of the self* and *what we can tell* that manifests itself in the kinds of story, and the processes of telling, that unfold in digital storytelling workshops. Workshop participants create complex and aesthetically rich narratives in which the coherence of the spoken autobiographical narrative is both enhanced and undermined by the various ruptures, contradictions, and gaps that emerge through the juxtaposition of sound and image. Both in their multimodal complexity and in the ways they reflect significant shifts from their original telling (usually aloud in a “story circle”), the digital stories seem to offer something in excess of the original scripts they are based on, and even in excess of the storyteller’s conscious intention.

These findings are of significance for educational and other researchers who use stories as both a source of data and an interpretive method. Our research findings suggest the need to acknowledge the limits of the narrative that is understood as self-evident and coherent. Indeed, we argue that in some way every story is contradictory, partial, untold, and that these contradictions, refusals, and silences are central to understanding how we negotiate our relations with others and the world. The dynamics of storytelling documented in our study reveal some of the ways in which telling a story may simultaneously function as a means to know ourselves and a resistance to self-knowledge.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research project was to explore the complex social and psychological factors that function as barriers and motivators to newcomer and low-income women who access community-based adult learning opportunities. In particular, this study aimed to examine the educational biographies and experiences of women who participated as adult learners in the digital storytelling workshops offered by the Central Neighbourhood House (CNH) Women's Program. More specifically, our aim was to offer educational researchers and community-based organizations greater insight into the complex social and personal dynamics that structure the participation of newcomer and low-income women in adult learning initiatives and arts-based community programs.

Since 1998, the Women's Program at CNH has offered community-based media workshops for diverse groups of low-income women. Currently, a majority of participants in these workshops are from immigrant and refugee communities that include East African, Chinese, Spanish, Tamil and Bengali. The goal of these community-based workshops is to provide an adult learning experience through which participants develop literacy and media skills and can access technological tools that enable them to explore social issues, such as violence against women and poverty, to tell the stories of their lives and communities, and to promote social change in creative and innovative ways. Since the inception of its media workshops, the CNH Women's Program has used a variety of media technologies, such as black and white photography, digital photography, digital video, web design, and sound recording to engage women in telling their stories.

Most recently, the media workshops offered at CNH include an educational model called “digital storytelling” (Lambert, 2002). Digital storytelling is a multi-media art practice developed by artists Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert in the early 1990s and disseminated by the Center for Digital Storytelling ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)) in California, which has trained more than 10,000 people in hundreds of workshops around the world. Using the digital storytelling method, participants engage in a range of literacy and arts-based practices, including sharing narratives in the tradition of oral storytelling, writing stories that are then audio recorded, collecting and digitizing still and moving images and artefacts, and combining all of these elements in a non-linear digital environment. Through the process of digital storytelling participants produce 2-3 minute multimedia art works that can be screened like videos and that reflect a range of approaches to personal narrative and storytelling, from confessional to more experimental or poetic. These workshops represent a semi-formal, community- and arts-based adult learning experience through which participants develop intimate learning communities, explore issues of social identity and difference, and improve oral, written and computer literacy skills. Through digital storytelling, participants not only learn new skills but also create content that is relevant and meaningful to themselves and their communities.

In this research project, the digital storytelling workshops functioned both as the context for research and as one of the methods of data-collection. In collaboration with CNH, we offered two digital storytelling workshops to newcomer and low-income women who were asked to create digital stories that explore their own educational biographies. We also conducted in-depth interviews with willing workshop participants and peer-leaders (who themselves had completed previous iterations of the same workshop).



Through the digital stories produced in these workshops and in-depth interviews with participants we wanted to examine the following questions: What are the non-material barriers and motivators experienced by newcomer and low-income women who access community- and arts-based adult learning programs? How do previous educational experiences and personal beliefs about education inform the ability of newcomer and low-income women to access adult learning opportunities? How do the educational biographies produced by these women in the digital storytelling workshop offer insight into these barriers and motivators?

In our original research proposal, our objectives were to explore 1) the non-material barriers and motivators for women accessing community-based adult education opportunities, and 2) the complex social and psychological dimensions of their experiences of access to and participation in such educational programs. As we anticipated, the digital storytelling workshops and the stories participants created, as well as the in-depth interviews we conducted with nine of the workshop participants, provided us with a rich source of data on the participants' previous educational histories, experiences of migration, material and non-material barriers to education, reasons for participating in the digital storytelling workshop, and levels of family and community support. In addition, we were able to make unanticipated insights into the nature of the storytelling process itself, both as a tool for community-development and learning and as a method of research. As such, our major research findings can be categorized under two broad headings: 1) experiences of access and 2) narrative (im)possibilities.

### Experiences of Access

First and foremost, our research findings illuminate the (non)material – the organizational, social, and psychological – factors that encourage newcomer women to participate in, or exclude

them from, community-based adult education opportunities. These factors include language fluency and resources, program design, family and community support systems, self-perceptions and beliefs, and societal perceptions of immigrant women, each of which may act as a barrier or motivator at different times for different women. In addition to offering insight for community-based educators and policymakers into the significant impact of what may often be viewed as mundane choices around program design, these findings offer two further outcomes.

Our research findings trouble the distinction between material and non-material factors, especially in the lives of socio-economically marginalized subjects. Poverty and economic vulnerability heightened our participants' sense of the material dimension in every aspect of their lives. Likewise, our participants' material choices – be they learning-related (which music to use in a digital story; how to transition between images) or logistical (daycare or timetable arrangements) – undoubtedly have nonmaterial meanings and effects. The power to make those choices can become symbolic of socio-political relations between individuals, their communities, and society as a whole; the absence of that power can cast doubt on education's sincerest emancipatory aims.

Finally, while our research findings identify key non-material factors for community-based adult educators to consider in their program design, they also suggest that what “worked” for our project's participants should not be interpreted as a prescriptive recipe for all community-based learning. Indeed, we conclude that what contributes more than a specific set of instructions that attempts to remove all barriers to adult learning is a flexible responsiveness to whatever barriers and motivators may be present in a given context. Reductive notions of “what a community needs,” “what immigrants need,” “what women need,” or, in the present context, “what a community of immigrant women needs” are problematic because they rely on

assumptions that social relations of power, social differences, even entire ethnic groups, can be unambiguously categorized and transparently understood. In fact, our study found that such over-generalizations are one of the primary non-material barriers to access for our participants. In this particular setting and with this particular group of participants, some things did work very well – demonstrating that responsiveness and flexibility can help create opportunities for adult learning that is appropriate, productive, and emancipatory.

### Narrative (Im)possibilities

Our research findings suggest that narrative inquiry and storytelling, and specifically digital storytelling, offer a very powerful method for community development and community-based learning. Indeed, many of our participants, as well as the peer leaders who helped us facilitate the workshops, talked extensively about the power of telling one's own story, of being heard, and of listening to the stories of others. Within our workshop groups, participants were able to make deep and arguably life-changing connections to one another across great linguistic and cultural differences. Our research clearly indicates that these digital storytelling workshops have provided a network of women with the community and socio-psychological resources necessary to motivate them to pursue further education and training.

At the same time, along with its possibilities, we have discovered the limits of storytelling and narrative as supposedly transparent sources of data. In particular, our research reveals a tension between what we know of the self and what we can tell that manifests itself in the kinds of story, and the processes of telling, that unfold in digital storytelling workshops. Workshop participants create complex and aesthetically rich narratives in which the coherence of the spoken autobiographical narrative is both enhanced and undermined by the various ruptures,

contradictions, and gaps that emerge through the juxtaposition of sound and image. Both in their multimodal complexity and in the ways they reflect significant shifts from their original telling, the digital stories seem to offer something in excess of the original scripts they are based on, and even in excess of the storyteller's conscious intention.

These findings are of significance for educational and other researchers who use stories as both a source of data and an interpretive method. Our research findings suggest the need to acknowledge the limits of the narrative that is understood as self-evident and coherent. Indeed, we argue that in some way every story is contradictory, partial, untold, and that these contradictions, refusals, and silences are central to understanding how we negotiate our relations with others and the world. The dynamics of storytelling documented in our study reveal some of the ways in which telling a story may simultaneously function as a means to know ourselves and a resistance to self-knowledge.

### **Methodology**

In clarifying our research methodology, it is important for us to speak to both our methodological framework – narrative inquiry – and our methodological practices – the digital storytelling workshop and in-depth interviews.

#### Narrative Inquiry

Perhaps better than any other method, narrative inquiry and biographical research of the sort we have conducted “reflects the complex interwoven relation between the individual and society, or between subject and structure” (Stroobants, 2005, p. 48), inviting insights into how social relations support and/or constrain individuals, and understandings of individuals as “competent

agents who actively give meaning to their life and to their social environment” (Stroobants, 2005, p. 48). The study of marginalized communities within adult education requires an approach that recognizes the complexity of individuals and their social networks (Alfred, 2003; Phillion, 2003; Rhee, 2006), engaging issues such as what immigration means for newcomer women who experience complex social challenges and socio-economic oppression, and whose strengths, resilience, resourcefulness, and community networks are often disregarded by social scientists (Alfred, 2005; Rhee, 2006; Yakushko & Chronister, 2005).

Many have argued that narrative is central to the interrelated processes of cultural meaning-making and individual self-creation (Bloom, 1998; Pitt, 2003; Richardson, 1997). Following from this, we are interested in how self-narratives and biographical stories offer insight into the nature of present experience, and how they might, in fact, delimit and shape such experience. We suggest, as have others, that “an understanding of the relationship between learners’ self-narratives and their experiences of learning” is integral to a deep understanding of community-based adult education and improved educational practice (Rossiter, 1999, p. 67). This is a particularly important inquiry for community-based organizations that provide adult learning experiences to newcomer women who, “as they cross cultural and national boundaries... are forced to negotiate these early learning and socialization experiences to participate in the activities of new cultures and meet cultural expectations” (Alfred, 2003, p. 247).

Unlike large-scale qualitative or quantitative studies that aim to study patterns of aggregate experience, autobiographical or narrative methods can capture complex social experiences and “identity shifts” and “reveal much about what it means to speak from the margins of mainstream discourse” (Morrow, 1997, p. 178). Such narratives disrupt the notion of

a “universal subject” of adult education (Hicks, 1999; Rhee, 2006), by accommodating a greater diversity of experiences within adult education and suggesting a wider range of approaches to thinking about adult learning.

The specific use of digital narrative as a research method is largely undocumented in the educational research literature. Indeed, it is our hope that this study will contribute to filling this gap. The explorations of digital storytelling that have been documented by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2006) and a few others indicate that the digital storytelling method is effective in a wide range of contexts, including projects geared towards community development and mobilization (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Freidus & Hlubinka, 2005), art education (Chung, 2007), and media access and literacy (Meadows, 2003). Additionally, researchers are beginning to theorize the richness and complexity of expression afforded by a multimedia or multimodal narrative structure (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Brushwood Rose, Forthcoming) and its potential as a site of identity construction and representation (Burgess, 2006; Hull & Katz, 2006; Vasudevan, 2006).

### The workshops

Over approximately nine-months, in collaboration with two community-based social service agencies, we co-facilitated two digital storytelling workshops (Lambert, 2006) for newcomer and low-income women in downtown Toronto. As planned, this research project was undertaken in collaboration with Central Neighbourhood House (CNH), and specifically the staff of the Women’s Program there who have been offering digital storytelling workshops to women in the community for several years. The first workshop we conducted was an open workshop offered by the Women’s Program at CNH and the women who attended did so voluntarily, in many

cases hearing about the workshop by word of mouth. The second workshop was offered by the Women's Program at CNH in collaboration with the Immigrant Women's Integration Project (IWIP) at the Centre for Community Learning and Development (CCLD). CNH has facilitated this workshop for IWIP in years past and the workshop has become a mandatory part of the IWIP curriculum. In this way, while remaining in collaboration with CNH throughout, the research project was able to offer workshops in two different kinds of community-based program settings, which has provided a very interesting source of contrast and comparison for the study.

During the digital storytelling workshop, participants in both of these settings worked in a close-knit learning community, producing short (2-3 minute) digital videos that reflect multiple approaches to personal narrative and storytelling, from confessional to more experimental or poetic. The workshops represent a semi-formal, community- and arts-based adult learning experience through which participants explore issues of social identity and difference, and improve oral, written and computer literacy skills (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Freidus & Hlubinka, 2005; Burgess, 2006), while creating content meaningful to themselves and their communities.

The digital storytelling process comprises several stages: sharing personal narratives in an oral story circle; creating storyboards; writing stories or "scripts" and recording them as voiceovers; collecting visual artefacts and footage; and combining and editing all these elements in a non-linear digital environment to create digital videos (see Appendix A for a more detailed outline). Participants become familiar with computer-based applications, including programs for word-processing and sound-, photo- and video-editing (in this case, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere). In our project they also worked closely with facilitators to develop their spoken and written literacy. Throughout these production stages, the women "tell their stories" numerous

times, in different ways: through short writing exercises and discussions meant to elucidate the elements of storytelling, in the story circle where everyone has time to share the story they are working on by telling it to the group, in the writing of a final story script, and then in the editing process as they combine their audio-recorded narratives with moving and still images, cinematic effects, and music and other audio.

Our first digital storytelling workshop was offered over sixteen weeks for two hours weekly, to accommodate participants who are primary caregivers to their children. This workshop was attended voluntarily by eight women who spoke five different first languages – Tamil, Bengali, Mandarin, Somali, and English – and who had signed up to participate after seeing advertisements in local community-based agencies. The second workshop was offered one full day a week for nine weeks: six women participated as part of the year-long Immigrant Women’s Integration Project (IWIP), and two others attended as part of their training for other community-based organizations. The women enrolled in IWIP had come to Canada from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Egypt.

Both workshops, in which participants developed digital stories about significant and often transformative events in their lives, were co-facilitated by a team including two researchers, a staff member from one of the collaborating agencies, and three “peer leaders” – women who had participated in earlier iterations of IWIP and previous digital storytelling workshops. The workshops functioned as both research context and data collection method. Following the workshops we conducted in-depth interviews with willing participants; these narratives offer a further site of storytelling, adding to the rich and complex body of data provided by the stories told and made in the workshops. In addition to the digital stories and the



interview transcripts, our case study analysis relies on our own field notes taken throughout the workshop process.

### In-depth interviews

At the end of the series of workshop sessions, research team members conducted in-depth interviews with a total of nine participants and peer leaders. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and inquired into educational histories, experiences of migration to Canada, perceived material and nonmaterial barriers to adult education, experiences of digital storytelling, and family and community support.

An in-depth interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method that aims to deeply explore the respondent's point of view, feelings and perspectives (Miller & Crabtree, 2004; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). The key characteristics differentiating such an interview from more usual ones include open-ended questions (see Appendix B), a semi-structured format, and an interviewer who seeks understanding and interpretation by asking probing questions throughout. In addition to recording the participant's responses, the interviewer records her own observations of non-verbal behaviours and her own views and feelings upon completing the interview.

The women interviewed range in age from 30 to nearly 70 and represent a cross-section of immigration demographics. Their journeys to Canada began in different places – China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt, Somalia – and took different trajectories. Some came directly to Canada; others lived elsewhere first. The majority (seven of the nine women interviewed) immigrated with spouses and have children, born either in their countries of origin or in Canada. One is divorced; her son remains in China. Another is the sole

parent of a Canadian-born child. Their educational and work backgrounds vary as well, from one who immigrated soon after completing secondary school, to a senior engineer, to a social worker with a masters degree; several others are qualified and experienced in nursing and nursing education, computer science or accountancy; one had been an elementary schoolteacher. Several are mothers at home with young children.

Finally, it is important to note that one of the primary differences between the two groups of participants was their relative facility with English. The first digital storytelling group were primarily not English-speaking, and interpretation was necessary for communication during both the workshop and interviews. Within the IWIP group, comfort levels in English varied, but all could communicate quite comfortably in English, and they were able to complete the workshop and interviews without the interpreters.

### **Experiences of Access: Findings and implications**

*I think whenever you get the opportunity to enrich your knowledge or learn new things... you have to pay a price. And sometimes, some people might not be able to pay the price for that new knowledge. – Liliana<sup>1</sup>, peer leader*

Data released following the May 2006 national census indicates that two-thirds of Canada's population increase of 1.6 million over the previous five years resulted from international immigration (Statistics Canada). Of the approximately 240,000 newcomers arriving in Canada yearly, a majority settle in large urban centres such as Toronto. There is an increasing need for community-based adult education that is responsive to these diverse, and often marginalized, communities and sensitive to the socio-cultural complexities they face. Our research project was developed in response to this need, and with the particular aim of considering the nonmaterial –

the social and psychological – factors that encourage newcomer women to participate in, or exclude them from, community-based adult education opportunities. Our hope is that the insights generated here can offer educational researchers and community-based organizations greater insight into the complex social and personal dynamics structuring the participation of newcomer and low-income women in adult learning initiatives.

In planning to facilitate two digital storytelling workshops and to conduct interviews with workshop participants, we began with several questions: What non-material barriers and motivators are experienced by low-income and recently immigrated women who access community- and arts-based adult learning programs? How do previous educational experiences and personal beliefs about education inform these women’s ability to access learning opportunities? Might some factors or beliefs act simultaneously as both barriers and motivators?

Based on participant narratives collected in interviews and in a focus-group discussion involving the program facilitator and the workshop peer leaders, this section outlines some of our most significant findings regarding motivators and barriers these women face as they encounter community-based adult learning opportunities. We first examine factors that comprise both material and nonmaterial elements: childcare, transportation and proximity to workshops, language, and program scheduling. We then consider nonmaterial factors, including the dynamics of social difference and family/community support; previously held beliefs about learning, and about themselves as learners; and experiences of social identity and the various social relations at stake in community-based learning – between peers, with mentors and facilitators, within families, and within the immediate community and larger society. Finally, we offer some thoughts about the potential for appropriately conceived and implemented

community-based learning opportunities to yield important implications for both individual achievement and community socio-political relations.

(Non)material barriers and motivators

One of the most significant aspects of this study has been the degree to which it sheds light on the difficulty of distinguishing *material* and *nonmaterial* barriers and motivators in the lives of newcomer and low-income women. As Liliana, quoted in this section's epigraph, so succinctly puts it, there are various costs involved for women who seek adult learning opportunities, and it is often difficult to separate the material costs from the social and emotional ones. Indeed, many interviewees reported material and nonmaterial barriers to adult education in the same breath, identifying factors such as childcare which are simultaneously material because they pose financial challenges, and deeply nonmaterial insofar as they are largely understood in emotional and relational terms. In addition to childcare, we briefly discuss transportation costs and workshop proximity, language, and scheduling as (non)material barriers and motivators to adult education for these women – categories similar to those of child (or elder) care, transportation, financial resources, and timing uncovered in McGivney's (1993) examination of issues faced by women returning to paid work in the UK.

*Childcare, transportation and proximity*

Childcare is a primary motivator. But for the women interviewed, its mere availability was not, on its own, sufficient: as mothers who care deeply for their children's well-being, the quality of the childcare and their own ability to choose the kind of childcare they want were very important factors in facilitating their participation. For IWIP participants, childcare costs are covered, but

the women can also choose where to spend that childcare allowance. Nalini articulates this combination of economic and parenting concerns:

IWIP is a free training course. And also, the women get childcare, we don't have to worry about our children. And in my personal case, my family is not set up in the daycare. We don't like the daycare. ... [the IWIP director] told me, you [may] choose one person, like personally, ... They cover the cost. That's why I think as a new immigrant woman this is really good opportunity. (Nalini, IWIP participant)

In addition to helping women access the childcare they need and want, and attend classes and workshops without incurring tuition or training costs, these programs take seriously the small but often prohibitive cost of transportation. As we discovered in the interviews, a woman's proximity to available programs has a huge impact on her ability to participate. When something as simple as transit fare is made available to participants, the distance from home may no longer be experienced as a barrier: "We had one woman, she came from, ... I think almost Mississauga, [or] somewhere [far]. She finished her... digital story, and the [subway] token helped her a lot" (Sati, peer leader). At the same time, the close proximity of adult education programs was also identified as a crucial motivator for those who might not normally travel very far for these opportunities: women often found their way to community-based programs through ads posted in local libraries and supermarkets. Several of the women describe the benefit of living in a neighbourhood such as Regent Park where, despite an arguably unfounded reputation as a troubled area, significant community-based resources and opportunities for community-building are available:

When I was moving in ... lots of people said, 'Why are you moving into Regent Park? It's not an area that's good, and you know they have lots of problems.' And I said I go

because I need to go, I have no choice... I saw ... drug problems and other problems, but personally I never faced [those]... There is lots of community so I started to go. There are lots of programs... (Sati, peer leader).

### *Language*

Language, and more particularly accessibility to programs despite language differences, is such an important motivator that without it the digital storytelling program itself might not be possible. In the first workshop, most participants spoke very little English or none at all. Nevertheless, informal interpretation in Mandarin, Bengali, Tamil, and Somali was provided by a Mandarin-speaking participant and by peer leaders who, although not formally trained as interpreters, were able to offer support in participants' first languages and to interpret facilitators' English instruction when necessary. While we had been unable to make prior arrangements for paid interpreters, it became very clear to us throughout the workshop and in the interviews that without this language support, virtually no one in this group would have been able to participate.

One particularly interesting dynamic we observed was that the barrier of language had much to do with participants' perceptions of their own language capabilities. Fadiyah, a peer leader, suggests, "I think a lot of women have more English than they think. ... They feel like 'I have no English' but they function in an English [speaking] country." Another, Sati, remarks that "most of the women, though they're educated they feel shy to talk outside [home]. Though they understand what you're saying, they don't have the ability to speak the expressions. And they feel shy, so they don't want to go out and talk."

The combination of multiple languages and the multiple media of digital storytelling poses interesting complexities in relation to representation and interpretation. The language of

the computer – its technical jargon and even its basic technical directions such as “click on this” or “open that window” – is almost like a third language to be mastered. Some peer leaders responsible for interpretation felt it was better to give the women instruction in their first language, so that their explanation could “go deeper, and I can explain *why* you have to do it like that” (Sati). Others believed it was important for the women to learn the technical terminology in English: “I can explain everything okay in our language, but words like ‘click’ and ‘open’ – these small words we should use in English... if we say ‘open’ in Tamil this does not work for them” (Chandra).

Whatever their various strategies, it was clear that the ability of the first workshop participants to attend and complete the program depended above all on their access to language support. As one of the participants, Zhen, said, “I was hoping I could learn something... The most important thing is there was a translator. If there was no one I could not [succeed]... I appreciate that somebody [who] cannot speak, [who] is not able to communicate well – is able to learn something. That is the most important.”

### *Program schedule*

The final motivator and barrier comprising both material and nonmaterial dimensions is the scheduling of adult education programs. Many participants evaluated a given program’s schedule – or even the possibility of participating – in terms of how it would conflict with or undermine time spent caring for their husbands and children. In some cases, this was a real concern for the woman herself. In others, participants perceived it as a concern for their husbands, or a potential source of marital conflict. For Munira, with two school-age children and a working husband, the time commitments required by some programs had already posed a significant barrier:

I have been trying most of the time to find a course, but I didn't succeed. Most of them ... are from 9 to 5. And as I told you my first priority is family. ... So that means I go at 8, and I'm not coming home before 6. So although I was accepted, I refused... [IWIP] was the first course [to] consider that you are a mother. After all, you are a mother, you [have] children. ... I really like this course, and how they do the time management from 10 to 3, this is a very reasonable time. (Munira, participant)

In an attempt to eliminate precisely this barrier, the first digital storytelling workshop was scheduled to run only two hours a week, from 1:00 to 3:00 pm, so women could see their children at lunch hour and then pick them up after school. While in many ways this is a less efficient workshop schedule, the CNH women's program manager was clear from the start that it was the only way to ensure accessibility for most newcomer women. For peer leader Liliana, although her own preference would be to run the workshop intensively, it was crucial to accommodate the women because this is "the nature of CNH and a lot of women are mothers taking care of kids and so on." Liliana also acknowledges that "two hours [per week] over a longer period of time works, and it gives the women more chance to interact... so they can get to know each other a little bit better."

In this way, the right kind of schedule both encourages the development of community and demonstrates a commitment to the women themselves, through an awareness that they are already working full-time at home. With this commitment and awareness, adult education projects themselves become motivators for women seeking learning opportunities. Otherwise, as Munira asks, "How can you help women [if] you are forcing them to stay away from their families? You're not helping them."



Scheduling, language, transportation and proximity, cost, and childcare: these are aspects of the workshops and/or their accessibility that comprise simultaneously material and non-material elements which can facilitate or inhibit women's participation. We turn now to examine non-material factors – individual and community systems of support, perceptions of self and beliefs about technology – which originate outside the program itself, yet significantly affect participation in and completion of it.

### Family and community support systems

Many project participants described social, community and familial factors as either motivating or frustrating their attempts to access community-based adult education and, specifically, the digital storytelling workshops. While their participation in the program indicates the presence of motivating factors, on many occasions women indicated how the absence of these factors would, and indeed for others does, inhibit or prevent participation. Their comments about family and community support thus yield rich insights about how social networks can function as both motivators and barriers, again echoing McGivney's (1993) identification of "cultural constraints," including gender socialization, restricted mobility and behaviour, and familial power structures, as issues faced by women entering or re-entering a workforce.

Research also indicates that levels of engagement in adult learning depend on, among other factors, "levels of employer and *public support*, ... on *incentives*, on *culture*, ... on *family size*, and on the information and advice that is available about learning opportunities" (Pont & Sweet, 2006, p. 45; italics added). Taking the view that these amount to sub-categories of what might more broadly be described as "the social" or the community, we find that an additional sub-category of support, crucial to our project's participants, is support from immediate and

extended families and friends. In our digital storytelling groups this took various forms. Shun says her friends and family find the idea of digital storytelling “interesting” and are “curious about it.” Liliana, who has no close family ties in Canada, comments that her parents in Mexico were “very touched” by her story. Lian, who likewise has no immediate family in Canada, is encouraged by a nephew to persevere. When asked to whom she will show her video, she names him, adding, “I can visit my friends, and say, ‘Oh, I’ve got my DVD, let’s share it!’ And give them a surprise. [They] will be very happy, I think. And [I’ll] bring it back to China and share it [there].”

Children offer motivation and support for participants, as subjects of stories and as a prospective audience. Liliana’s young son, who spent his school break in daycare so she could participate, was the “main person” motivating her throughout the program. This motivation was concretized in her story, which is about her son’s artistic talent, and her devotion to him: he “loves” the finished product. Similarly Jiang is eager to show her son the story she has made about him – to “give him a surprise!”

Husbands too are identified as significant sources of support, for the project itself and for their wives’ educational endeavours more generally. While this challenges in complex ways some of the prevalent assumptions (and prejudices) about women from – and male-female relations within – certain cultures, it is understandable, because most participants are married and living with partners. For example, Nalini’s husband, who she says is “excited” to see her story, has always supported her educational interests, staying at home when their child was an infant so she could finish her masters degree, and encouraging her application to IWIP. Sati’s spouse too, while not especially enthusiastic about her story as such (due, she implies, to its content), is nevertheless generally helpful: “He always gives me space to study ... and helps me a lot. He’s

supportive, very supportive, he always ... asks me if he can help me. ... We always discuss our decisions. ... [H]e gives me opportunities to go and do something for [myself].” Jiang’s husband thinks digital storytelling is “great.” She adds, “He likes me to do what I want to do.” And Munira similarly says her husband has always supported her educational efforts, even helping her with her initial IWIP application, and that he and their children, who occasionally assist her with computer skills, “are very interested” in digital storytelling.

But the motivation garnered from family, friends, and community, and the implications of participating in the workshop, are multilayered. First, some women see their husbands’ support as exceptional within their communities, and by implication, the lack of similar support as preventing participation for others. Nalini contrasts her situation with that of other women: “In my neighbourhood, a woman [might] want to do something outside, but her husband [says], ‘Stay at home, take care of the baby,’ and he doesn’t like the woman to go outside.” Sati too describes her husband as “more open-minded than others who have just come from Bangladesh” and says that she sees “lots of barriers ... because culturally lots of women can’t go outside [the home].” She explains:

If all the Regent Park [neighbourhood] women came it would be a *big* women’s group...  
But [if] the husband is at home at program time, they need to take care of him, [do] food preparation ... And some [husbands] don’t want to take care of the kids ... they want to relax.

She further observes that sometimes a husband “doesn’t want his wife to go outside, doesn’t support her learning something new,” a remark corroborated by Chandra in the focus group: “Husbands won’t allow [their wives] to come because ... they don’t like to share knowledge. They think, ‘she’s not listening to me’. She has knowledge and she doesn’t listen to me.”

Second are feelings of guilt around taking part in unpaid work, however enjoyable.

Liliana acknowledges, “I always feel bad because I should be making money, or...making food.” Ironically, her guilt may stem from the mothering role that inspired her story: “Sometimes I feel guilty that ... my poor boy is ... with a babysitter.” And “we are [so] submerged in our activities as mothers, taking care of the house, the children, that we never give ourselves the chance to do something else for the pleasure of doing it.” Munira’s involvement too is ambivalent; she finds both IWIP and the digital storytelling workshop satisfying but feels they diminish family time: “Sometimes I feel I shouldn’t do this, especially to the kids, because my main responsibility is a mother. ... They feel that I’m away all the time from them. Especially my husband.”

Third, and perhaps surprisingly, the challenges to cultural norms presented by the participants may themselves motivate members of their (and other marginalized) communities. Sati implies that she may be a role model for others in her culture when she reports that women who attend the Bengali women’s group at CNH “already watched my story, and they asked me if it is telling [secrets], because culturally, we do not actually talk about our past.... So they [tell] me, ‘You have courage that you can talk about those things.’ They are happy, they said, ‘It’s good that you can talk.’ But lots of people ... can’t talk [this way].”

### Self-perceptions and beliefs

Social networks, including the community within the workshops, are shaped in large part by interactions with others. But they are also informed by individual perceptions of self and society, as exemplified by the project participants. Peer leader, Fadiyah says, “Especially immigrant women, we always worry, ‘Ah, you cannot do this’... They have limits, as if they can only do housework.” She says that challenging these beliefs is central to her role of empowering other

women. She tells them, “It is challenging. But you can do it... You already have your education. It’s just new skills.” Throughout the digital storytelling workshops and the interviews, it became clear that women’s previously held beliefs and perceptions, and the ways they had been challenged by various life events, were central motivators, and sometimes barriers, to their participation in community-based adult education. In this section, we explore two sets of beliefs and perceptions identified in the interviews: beliefs in oneself as a learner and perceptions of oneself in relation to technology.

*Belief in oneself as a learner*

While the experience of the digital storytelling workshop is highly collaborative in nature, it is also deeply personal and affecting on an individual level. As Liliana remarked of her experience, “Finally nobody’s telling me what to think or how to do it, I’m doing it by myself, it’s really exciting to be able to choose my own images.” Not only did the women interviewed express the transformative power in being able to express themselves through the workshop experience (see Brushwood Rose & Granger, Under review), but it was also clear that for many the fundamental belief in themselves as capable of accomplishing something new, and as deserving of educational opportunities, significantly motivated their participation.

Several women identified their belief that they could make a difference for other new immigrants as motivating them toward educational opportunities. Jiang told us, “In my heart I really, really want to help others. Every immigrant suffers at first, at the beginning, [it’s a] difficult time... I [need] knowledge, experience... so I attend this program. I really, really want to find a job in the community service. This [is] my desire.” Here, the belief in ‘making a difference’ for others is a powerful motivator, but underlying it is the more profound *belief in*

*oneself as capable of enacting social change.* Lian's comment exemplifies the development of this sense of herself as able to contribute in significant ways to those around her: "I [have] received a lot of help from others, I think it's time for me to contribute to society. And this program will help me to realize my dream. I can learn the knowledge, the skills to help others, that's the motivation for me to come here."

In many ways the participants' belief in themselves as active learners and social agents contradicts dominant stereotypes of the immigrant woman – as passive, domestic, and conservative – and illuminates the complex interaction between a woman's own belief in herself and society's willingness to support her vision. This tension is evident in the way Sati expresses her determination to access further learning opportunities: "I'm not uneducated, I finished my studies, I should [find] something [to] do. And it was my plan from... childhood that I'll do something, I'm not going to only stay at home, I'm not. I don't want to be a stay at home mom." The participants' beliefs in themselves also intersect with their beliefs about what is possible, specifically for women, in Canada. Nalini says, "There is a difference between our country and here... in our country, most of the women stay in the home and take care of the baby and do all of the housework... But here, *this country is for women*. That's why I think I can do what I wish to do, here" [italics added]. Despite the reality that sexism and gender inequality are clearly not absent from the Canadian context, these perceptions of Canadian women's freedoms are powerful motivators; at times – when taken up by others who perceive them as threatening – they are also barriers.<sup>2</sup>

### *Perceptions of technology*

The series of perceptions and beliefs about computer technology that the women articulated echo their complex self-perceptions. As with their beliefs in themselves as learners and social agents, their beliefs about themselves as users or non-users of technology are inevitably informed by the dominant discourses that circulate in relation to women and technology. What has been described as the masculinised culture of computing (Jenson & Brushwood Rose, 2003; Volman et al., 1995; Wajcman, 1991; Whitehead, 1996), along with the sexist depictions of women-and-computers so common in popular discourses and texts, have a profound influence on individuals' perceptions of computer technology and their willingness to take up an active role in relation to computers. Not unlike the teachers in a study by Jenson and Brushwood Rose (2003), whose "perceptions of expertise and experiences of access in relation to new technologies were produced and structured by the gender inequities evident in computing cultures and pervasive in both society and schools" (p. 169), the women in our study had to overcome significant discursive barriers in order to see themselves as users of computer technology.

Many of the women's perceptions of technology, and their struggles to see themselves as computer users, are tinged with strong emotional undertones. Lian says, "I had taken some computer courses, but I just was very... nervous and felt bad – what is the word? Resistant. I used to hate the computers." Not only do the participants share strong affective responses to the computer, but it is almost as though they perceive the technology itself as a personal barrier. At the same time, they shared the strong sentiment that the technology skills they would gain were the most practical aspect of the digital storytelling workshop. Indeed, Susila, who insists, "I don't like technology," and who originally saw the workshop as primarily offering technical skills, remarks on how she was confused when initially it did not: "I thought, digital means connected

with a machine, but at the start we're not doing anything with a machine and nobody's telling us about a machine... that's what [made] me confused.”

This tension between the perception of technology as anathema to themselves and the notion of technology-related skills as a social and economical asset is perhaps best exemplified by Munira whose script for her digital story explores her relationship to ‘the computer,’ an object she both fears and romanticizes:

From the first sight, I hated [the computer]... I was frustrated as I didn't know how to deal with it, even to open it. Many times I stood in the room and asked myself, ‘Is there any chance that someday we could be friends?’... ‘Is my mind frozen? Are the gears of my brain rusted?’

After taking a basic computer course, Munira tells us that “My enemy [the computer] has become my dearest friend. I cannot imagine my life without this friend: my computer is a window that I open to see the whole world.” Ironically, after taking a computer course and completing the digital storytelling workshop, Munira still insists “I am not a computer expert,” but she also recognizes that “learning the computer taught me not to be afraid of new things.”

### Societal perceptions of “immigrant women”

In this final section we focus on how mainstream society's views of women such as those in the digital storytelling program may act as a barrier to the provision of adequate and relevant community-based education. Research suggests that immigrant women in general tend to be “perceived as a ‘special commodity,’ that is, a group of people lacking ‘Canadian experience’ who are not qualified and skilled enough to engage in paid work or assume any position that



would allow them to assimilate adequately into the Canadian society” (Elabor-Idemudia, 2001, p. 235). Some of these perceptions conform to Western stereotypes of developing countries as “backward” in terms of education, technology and women’s social and economic roles; they include notions that immigrant women (especially in Asia and Africa, whence come most of the workshop participants) are generally un- or under-educated, and particularly lacking in both English language and computer technology skills. Other stereotypes relate to beliefs that females from some cultures have not yet attained the equality presumed to have accrued to Western women, but rather are relegated by gender to domestic subservience to fathers and husbands.

Of course, some perceptions concerning immigrant women are grounded, as are those about any group or individual, in what they tell – or, as discussed below, do not tell – about themselves. And indeed, about others: some Western perceptions of (especially) Asian and South Asian immigrant women, as passive and deferential to their husbands’ and families’ wishes and neglectful of their own, are reinforced by comments, quoted earlier, that reflect what several interviewees’ claim to “know” of others who are *not* taking part in the workshops. Nevertheless, in two important ways the digital storytelling participants challenge Western – and indeed their own – assumptions about immigrant women. First, however true their reports may be, of others confined to their homes or otherwise prevented from attending workshops, *these women are actively taking part in community educational offerings* (which in IWIP are geared specifically toward paid employment); thus, at the very least, the stereotypes are not universal. Moreover, most are highly educated, speak multiple languages including English, and have used technology in various ways, although computer knowledge and English fluency vary considerably: Susila speaks English and four other languages fluently but has previously used a computer only for

email; Jiang has taught university-level computer science and is fairly fluent in English; Zhen is a senior engineer but requires an English interpreter to participate in the program.

They are also resourceful. Zhen is a case in point: inexpert with English, she explains in her interview that while the translator was helpful, when actually working with the computer she did not rely on commands translated into Mandarin but rather “just observed how the teacher did it, and ... followed it and just memorized it by heart.” Similarly, Chandra describes how participants who are relative beginners (both in English and in computer use) learned the Premiere and Photoshop commands in English, rather than their native Tamil, because “[the] technology is in English, ... [so] they can learn better in English, ... very quickly.”

It is beyond the scope of either this paper or the project as a whole to undertake a full disquisition of stereotypes that may cloud views of immigrant women as potential workers and contributors to Canadian society. Nevertheless, we are concerned that such discriminatory misapprehensions may serve as barriers: not just to employment, but also to the provision of community-based educational resources that would initiate newcomers to paid work for which they are already qualified, as well as to new skills and knowledge that challenge stereotypes (Mason, 2003) but in which they might become proficient. In her study of women and self-employment in Sweden (a nation which, like Canada, prides itself on awareness of and respect for cultural diversity), Mason (2003) observes that even in that context, “[i]mmigrant women are seen as miserable, passive, assisted and seeking assistance, and thus get less support, money and confidence invested in them than do indigenous women ...” (p. 231). She reasserts “the urgent need to counteract stereotyped images and to rectify the idealized image of Western emancipation that serves as a yardstick by which immigrant women are judged” (p. 231).

Part of this “image of emancipation” includes the presumed capacity, and the desire, to proclaim one’s expertise by promoting oneself in competitive or potentially competitive settings (such as, arguably, IWIP). Relatedly, it is not easy to know what educational qualifications or experience an individual has if she does not reveal them. At the same time, it is important to recognize the possibility of a vicious cycle, between society’s mis- or under-recognition of potential on one hand, and personal or cultural reticence about announcing one’s abilities on the other. For example, Zhen and Jiang were clear from the outset about their substantial academic and professional qualifications, while Susila, Nalini and Lian (variously qualified as teacher, accountant, and social worker) hardly mentioned their professional experience until they were asked in their interviews. While it would be incorrect to draw conclusions about specific cultures based on this small group alone, the contrast between what individuals reveal about themselves may speak to more than individual differences.

Mahoney, Williams and West (2001) argue that “[a] particular challenge of considering the experiences of immigrant women is to take into account the influence of a woman’s cultural background without allowing stereotypes to direct one’s attitudes about that [woman]...” (p. 166). While their specific focus is on violence against immigrant women, the advice they give would be well taken by community-based education providers too. For instance, a culturally-based disinclination to individualistic self-promotion should not be confused with the absence of qualifications, and it must never, even inadvertently, skew the provision of opportunities for further education and training. Similarly, individuals’ capacity for a particular kind of learning should not be wantonly prejudged on the basis of assumptions about what knowledge is or should be already present. The digital storytelling program is a case in point: the women’s successful completion of it demonstrates that a lack of computer expertise, and even a lack of

English fluency, need not be a barrier to success *even in a computer-based workshop conducted in English*. Rather, the provision of adequate and appropriate material resources in the educational setting (in the form of up-to-date technology, trained facilitators, and needed translation services), and non-material home and community support systems such as those described here, can motivate and expedite both the undertaking and the completion of community-based learning opportunities.

### Conclusion

The combined (mis)perceptions – that immigrant women lack linguistic and technical skills, knowledge, and the resourcefulness to acquire them, and that they are culturally or socially prohibited from seeking paid work – may contribute to the erroneous conclusion that they are a poor investment vis-à-vis publicly funded education. An important conclusion of this study is that however such misperceptions are created, whether by the dominant culture as a whole or by marginalized individuals in response to their understandings of that culture, to apply them would be to risk sabotaging otherwise well-meant attempts to meet community learning needs.

Reductive notions of “what a community needs,” “what immigrants need,” “what women need,” or, in the present context, “what a community of immigrant women needs” are problematic because they rely on assumptions that social relations of power, social differences, even entire ethnic groups, can be unambiguously categorized and transparently understood.

Still, the existence of such perceptions raises important questions. Might the assumption that women from some cultures are unlikely to take advantage of learning influence decisions about what to provide? Is there danger that a troubling cycle will develop (or has already developed), based on the perception that immigrant women want and need neither paid

employment nor education in anticipation of that employment, and fed by decisions to cut back on the provision of relevant and fully accessible educational resources? And could such a cycle lead ultimately to the occupational ghettoization of women who want and need work but cannot obtain it because they lack Canadian education and training, and are unsure how to promote the qualifications they do have? What are the implications of such a scenario for community-based adult learning?

Pont and Sweet (2006) assert that “ICT-based adult learning is, or should be, critical and emancipatory rather than solely about the transfer of information and specific skills” (p. 26). While we might well argue that *all* adult learning should aim for these goals, digital storytelling has multiple import in this regard, especially for immigrant women, because it simultaneously challenges stereotypes of women-and-computers, invites the engagement of social issues in ways that can lead to change, and offers space to create personally meaningful work. But telling (often difficult) personal stories involves emotional risks, and while this aspect of our project is not the focus of this paper, it is instructive to consider the connections between the facilitation of storytelling and the context surrounding it.

The other side of storytelling is listening: “In developing their own story and listening to others, people can make the links between their own struggle and the larger social struggle ... [and] a larger social consciousness is possible” (Lambert, 2006, p. 160). But both *story* and *teller* must be listened to. Elements such as those outlined here, that support learning in both material and nonmaterial ways, are crucial to the success of the digital storytelling workshops and, we suggest, of any adult learning program. It is very significant that the recently immigrated women in our workshops felt “listened to” when applying for and undertaking *all* their chosen learning opportunities, whether through the CNH women’s program, IWIP, or in the digital storytelling

workshops themselves. Material choices – be they learning-related (which music to use in a digital story; how to transition between images) or logistical (daycare or timetable arrangements) – undoubtedly have nonmaterial meanings and effects. The power to make those choices can become symbolic of socio-political relations between individuals, their communities, and society as a whole; the absence of that power can cast doubt on education’s sincerest emancipatory aims.

These concerns relate to both the conceptualization and the implementation of learning opportunities. And yet, a cautionary note must also be sounded in relation to the interpretation of research. For to read our findings here, about what “worked” for our project’s participants, as a prescriptive recipe for all community-based learning would be to miss another significant lesson: that what contributes more than a specific set of instructions that attempts to remove all barriers to adult learning is a flexible responsiveness to whatever barriers and motivators may be present in a given context. In this vein, we note that given the complexity of narrative inquiry as a research method, the way in which an interviewee conveys perceptions, beliefs, or experiences is inevitably shaped by the research context and her perceptions of, and relations with, the researcher. The non-reproducible intricacies of these relationships underline the importance of guarding against assumptions that what is effective in one setting must necessarily show identical promise for others.

At the same time, in this particular setting and with this particular group of participants, some things did work very well – demonstrating that responsiveness and flexibility can help create opportunities for adult learning that is appropriate, productive, and emancipatory, such that the personal “costs” Liliana refers to at the beginning of this paper might be more easily borne.

### **Narrative (Im)possibilities: Findings and implications**

From an early age, we are instructed in the art of telling tidy and coherent narratives. As children, admonished to “get our stories straight,” we learn early on that changing a story is the sure sign of a lie, an untrue story, a false self. In schools, Language Arts curricula teach us to identify the central argument of a text and all its supporting points. Yet, as subjects and researchers with many stories to tell, we know that a central dilemma of any narrative inquiry is that “our voice is always contingent upon shifting relations among the words we speak, the practices we construct, and the community within which we interact” (Britzman, 2003, p. 34) – what Bakhtin (1981) calls “heteroglossia.”

In addition to the contradictions within a story that reveal its complexity and (perhaps unconscious) ambivalence, we have observed in others and in ourselves the tendency to tell many different stories, to change our stories again and again, to repeat the same story as if its first telling has been forgotten, and to tell strange stories from which even the teller seems distanced. In our own experience as narrative inquirers, we are curious about how these storytelling dynamics may paradoxically let us tell both more and less about the self, or even avoid telling that self’s story altogether.

In our study of the oral narratives and digital stories of immigrant women living in Toronto, we have become interested in how this tension between what we know of the self and what we can tell manifests itself in the kinds of story, and the processes of telling, that unfold in digital storytelling workshops. Workshop participants create complex and aesthetically rich narratives in which the coherence of the spoken autobiographical narrative is both enhanced and undermined by the various ruptures, contradictions, and gaps that emerge through the juxtaposition of sound and image. Both in the stories’ multimodal complexity and in the ways

they reflect significant shifts from their original telling, the digital stories seem to offer something in excess of the original scripts they are based on, and even in excess of the storyteller's conscious intention.

This section offers a discussion of what these unexpected self-expressions might mean for understandings of narrative and practices of narrative inquiry in an arts- and community-based setting: How do stories reveal the possibilities and impossibilities of self-representation? How might a discussion of storytelling's unconscious dynamics change how we think about narrative inquiry and the function of the story in research? And how might the processes of telling, representing, and interpreting be more significant than the nature of the story that gets told? In order to consider these questions, we begin with a conceptual exploration of narrative and its limits and possibilities. This is followed by a discussion of two case studies from our project that illustrate the tension between self-expression and self-knowledge, and the way it manifests itself in a range of dynamics – refusing to tell a story, telling several different stories, telling a strange or contradictory story, and repeating the same story over and over.

As researchers who use stories as both a source of data and an interpretive method, we have become wary of the narrative that is understood as self-evident and coherent. Indeed, we argue here that in some way every story is contradictory, partial, untold, and that these contradictions, refusals, and silences are central to understanding how we negotiate our relations with others and the world. The dynamics of storytelling documented in our study reveal some of the ways in which telling a story may simultaneously function as a means to know ourselves and a resistance to self-knowledge. Just as our narratives of educational experience are characterized by the space and movement between learning and not learning (Britzman, 2006), the digital stories we discuss here offer complex insights into the experience of migrating and not



migrating, growing up and not growing up, leaving home and not leaving home, being a daughter and not being a daughter, and so on. Similarly, both the stories themselves and the narratives of their telling help us understand the vicissitudes of knowing and not knowing, telling and not telling.

### Some thoughts on narrative and its limits

Evolving at least in part as a response to worries that quantitative research subsumes the active agency of individuals into the conceptualization of identity as static and structurally predetermined (Elliot, 2005), narrative inquiry, and by implication narratives or stories as such, have for many decades been used across academic disciplines to study experiences of and in the world: recent work locates itself in social sciences generally (Bruner, 2002); medicine (Charon, 2005; Randall, 2007), psychology and psychiatry (Coles, 1989; Schafer, 1992; Church, 1995); anthropology and higher education studies (Behar, 1996; Rodman, 2007); and migration and feminist studies (Kadar, 1992; Riessman, 1993; Brinker-Gabler & Smith, 1997; Bloom, 1998), among many others.

In the field of education, Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 2000) view the storying and restorying of our lives as a basic human experience and a “fundamental method of personal (and social) growth” (1991, p. 259), and – following Mitchell (1981) and Polkinghorne (1988) – give the name *narrative* to the “structured quality of experience to be studied” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Within the overarching field of education research there has been a good deal of meta-level research on narrative as methodology (Richardson, 1999, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Granger, 2007) and counter-hegemonic strategy (Grumet, 1990; Lather, 1991; Fowler, 2006). Alongside this work are narrative inquiries in the areas of teacher

education and development (Britzman, 2003; Goodson, 1992; Wilson, 2002; Pitt, 2003; Luce-Kappler, 2004), adult education (Rossiter, 1999; Alfred, 2003), second-language learning (Peirce, 1994; Granger, 2004; Rhee, 2006), English education (Ashton-Warner, 1986; Schaafsma et al, 2007), adolescent and literacy studies (Majors, 1998), arts-based research (Singer, 1996; De Freitas, 2007), and work on difficult knowledge in teaching and learning (Pitt & Britzman, 2003).

Notwithstanding occasional critique of narrative inquiry as privileging the individual by ignoring the social (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), we concur with the view, by now fairly consensual (Grumet, 1990; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Richardson, 2001; Elliott, 2005), that narratives both allow and articulate places and moments in which the individual and the social meet and interact, where the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives not only reflect our realities but construct them as coherent and meaningful. That is, narrative works, and is worked, in multiple directions shaped both “by the social world... and... through the cultural repertoire of stories to which each individual has access” (Elliott, 2005, pp. 126-127). Bound by contexts social, cultural, historical, yet simultaneously idiosyncratic (Neumann, 1998; Rosen, 1998; Richardson, 2001; Elliot, 2005), narrative’s instantiation as written memoir is described by Grumet (1990, p. 322) as simultaneously inner and outer, personal and public. Her later (1992) discussion of “inner temporality” further elucidates this surprising and complexifying phenomenon, wherein remembering events and narrating those memories involves a “double awareness of encounters in the world and of experience of those encounters extended through...inner time” (1992, p. 35).

*Making meaning, and beyond*

Narrative is complex; it can do a lot. In turn, we ask a lot of it. Richardson (1990, p. 10) contends that narratives of experience do not “simply chronicle what happened next, but place the next in meaningful context,” while Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 11) argue that stories allow us to “broaden” (generalize) and “burrow” (deepen) understandings of their tellers. Rossiter (1999, p. 59) argues that approaching questions of development from the perspective of “story as a metaphor for human life” helps us think more deeply about “narrative knowing” as constructed, interpretive, and, with its historical and temporal aspects, central to retrospective identity formation and meaning-making. More particularly, in discussing the role of illness narratives in patients’ search for authenticity, Bochner (2001, p. 147) posits that such stories teach us “about the struggle between personal and cultural meanings.” Pagnucci insists that in “showing us things we never knew” stories can be “both powerful and frightening” (in Schaafsma et al, 2007, p. 298).

But the more we ask a method or a discourse or a genre to do, the more questions we open up. How do we decide what matters most, or least, about a story? What else might matter, apart from the story as such? And as Riessman asks in her exploration of narrative analysis as a research genre, “How are we to evaluate a narrative analysis? Can one tell a better one from a worse one?” (1993, pp. 64-65) To these questions Riessman responds that what can be said about narrative analyses can equally be said about narratives themselves; they are interpretive events, situated within social and political discourses, which change from one individual to the next and from moment to moment. Nevertheless, they can be evaluated in terms of qualities of “trustworthiness” – including persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence and pragmatic use: “the extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others’ work” (1993, p. 68).

Meaning-making seems to weave thematically through these ideas about narrative's value and about how to determine that value. This is not surprising; stories can help us understand our own and others' lives. But no narrative holds, or even invites, a singular interpretation. In this view we are, with Pitt (2003, p. 5), "suspicious" of unproblematized personal narratives offered as "an explanatory device for understanding experience." And given this suspicion about the transparency or "meaningfulness" of narratives, what else, we ask, do narratives do beyond making meaning? What are the limits of what they can do? Crucially, *what do we use them to do – or not to do?* Our focus in this project, and in this paper, is less on the specific meanings of the stories we tell than on the importance of the processes of telling, listening, and interpreting those stories.

### *Story as partial*

Pitt is not alone in taking the view that narratives are always partial, and that reading them is likewise selective. In contesting the traditional social-scientific views of personal narrative as "useful only when it is subjected to some form of cultural criticism or when it is theorized, categorized, and analyzed," Bochner (2001, p. 133) is asserting that stories offer possibilities for representational pluralism in research – for moves "away from facts and toward meanings" (p. 134). Goodson's (2006) analysis of distinctions between "grand narratives" and "life narratives" insists that opportunities for understanding how subjectivities are socially constructed are lost if narrative remains "at the level of the personal and practical." Elliott too (2005, p. 127), in viewing "narrative identities" as constructed in interactions between "... cultural discourses ... and the material circumstances and experiences of each individual," acknowledges and values multiplicity. And in her work on narrative and memory, Chambers (1998, p. 14) asserts that

stories of earlier life hold potential for “revising and reinterpreting not only the stories themselves but the lives to which they are connected.”

Thus is narrative a helpful “thing to think with” (Turkle, 1985, p. 22). In educational research in particular, approaches to narrative that incorporate, as Miller recommends, “situated analyses of specific contexts that influence the constructions and representations of self and other” (Miller, 1992, p. 508) may usefully challenge positivist educational discourses, provided we recognize that no story holds a unitary meaning (or represents a unitary subject *of* meaning).

Further, it is not just the story as told that cannot be easily and immediately interpreted or known. This is particularly relevant in the context of digital stories, which add visual and often musical dimensions to the verbal one. To wit, in response to Adrienne Rich’s contention (1996, p. 32) that “relationships of race and power exist in [white poets’ writing] most often as silence or muffled subtext,” Mazzei (2003, pp. 355-356) asks whether these relationships might also exist in the “unspoken, the inaudible, the ignored” aspects of stories – in their silences. This is, arguably, more emphatically observable in narratives of women who might perceive a need to conform to traditional discourses or “audience” expectations: “For women, the ability to value their own thought and experience is hindered by self-doubt and hesitation when private experience seems at odds with cultural myths and values concerning how a woman is ‘supposed’ to think and feel” (Anderson et al, 1991, p. 232). Of course, the cultural myths and values that shape a narrative also shape its interpretation, determining which parts of a story – whether spoken or not – are attended to and which are ignored. Relatedly, in her work on feminist research methods Bloom (1998) compares the initial telling of a respondent’s story, in which she positions herself as a “feminist icon” (p. 72) with a second, more complete version that includes

some complexly nuanced affective elements. Bloom demonstrates how the first telling conforms to a narrative “master script” that is ultimately unsatisfying and incomplete: hence the retelling.

Bloom’s notion of a second telling does not map isomorphically onto the addition of visual and audio layers to the initial spoken narratives that become our project’s digital stories. There are, however, Put another way, we might understand the story as a space in which the storyteller risks her or his connection to the world by both finding and creating useful objects: perhaps, as Hull and Nelson (2005, p. 252) suggest, “the power of digital stories ... has to do with a happy melding of old and new genres and media” which in the case of the digital storytelling project allows for a more multilayered and nuanced story than one genre on its own could convey. Indeed, many theorists have argued that multimedia or multimodal composition creates new meaning forms, qualitatively different from the sum of their parts, which transcend the simple addition of what is possible in each medium alone (Lemke, 1998; Packer & Jordan, 2001; Hull & Nelson, 2005).

However, what is often missing in these discussions, which ultimately seek to totalize the meaning of a multimedia text, is a consideration of an aesthetic quality central to multimedia’s productivity – that is, the spaces and gaps between media, which hold the productivity of juxtaposition (Landow, 2000). Paradoxically, multimedia collage not only produces a multiplication of meaning, but also points to the limits of meaning-making and illustrates the insistence and significance of what cannot be known. Understanding multimedia text as straightforwardly “multiplying meaning” (Lemke, 1998) leaves little room for representations or narrations that fall outside of or exceed traditional boundaries of meaning-making: silences, contradictions, ambivalence, nonsense. Art historian Elkins (1999) and others, including Barthes (1981) and Greene (1995), have discussed the limits of meaning-making in their theories of the

image or visual medium as narrator. For Elkins (1999, p. 81), “pictures are those images taken to be constituted by the in-built vacillation, contradiction, paradox, or uncertainty of ‘saying’ and ‘showing.’ Something in them is linguistic, propositional, systematic, or otherwise semiotic. The rest, as Wittgenstein famously said, is ‘silence’.”

In his work on memory and autobiography Kermode (1995, p. 37) argues that “honest truth” is never fully accessible. Perhaps not. Perhaps, like any narrative, the digital narrative tells a story, or rather a version of a story, “that is possible, not one that is necessary” (Ellis, 1993, p. 725). But adding layers to our stories and retelling them in different ways allows us to get at a less partial story, if not an altogether full one, so that a digital story arguably becomes something more than its text-only counterpart by adding to what Bloom (1998, p. 65) suggests is the potential of a back-and-forth re-editioning of an individual’s experiences, and understandings of those experiences, and by shining a light on the ongoing process of making and remaking identity: our perpetual “becoming”.

### *Story as unconscious*

How should we think, then, about the empty or silent spaces that make a story partial, about the ways digital stories may fill in some gaps but leave others open? What creates the gaps in the first (and second) place? Keeping in mind that the structure of the analytic encounter within “talk therapy” embodies multiple narrative qualities, it is instructive to look to psychoanalytic theory for ways to consider these kinds of questions. In our case-study discussion below we raise the psychodynamic concepts of free association (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973) and transitional objects and spaces (Winnicott, 1971); the foundational concept of the unconscious is worth summarizing at the outset.

A teller of stories – or narrating self – can be conceived psychoanalytically as a manifestation of a psychosocial whole that embodies both conscious and unconscious elements. But in the normal course the conscious individual has no access to the unconscious except through its “effects” (Benjamin, 1992, p. 137): forgetting, jokes, and inadvertent “slips.” To translate this partialness to a context of narrative, although we may imagine we are telling the whole story, we are telling only part of it. Even a retelling that fills in some spaces in the original never quite arrives at the whole story: we may believe, with Harper (1997, p. 156), that storytelling – written, verbal or otherwise – “demands self-consciousness,” but in psychoanalytic thinking, full self-consciousness is simply not possible. Perhaps that is part of what makes narration difficult: the unconscious cannot be put into words, thus a story is limited to an encounter between the narrating subject and the “otherness of her own unconscious knowledge” (Pitt, 2003, p. 54).

Furthermore, in a psychoanalytic framing, not only is our unconscious knowledge rarely accessible to us, and partial at best, but we always come to it belatedly. For Benjamin (1992, p. 155), “the word [we might extrapolate, the *story*] as well as the presencing of the unconscious ... are to be understood as articulating and thereby being articulated [with] ... *Nachträglichkeit*...” This is psychoanalytic theory’s “deferred (re)vision” or “afterwards-ness” (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 111), which King (2000, p. 22) relates with personal story in her contention that “[a]utobiographical narratives reconstruct the events of a life in the light of ‘what wasn’t known then’.” A story can be “a narrative reconstruction of [a] split ... between the ‘child who knew’ and the conscious self who [at the time of the event] had no knowledge...” (p. 65). While remembering, and narrating what we remember, can identify gaps in memory and even help begin to fill them, rendering narrative at times both “necessary and therapeutic” (King, 2000, p.



24), the “afterward” location of memory means that any narrator, “in the present moment of the narration, possesses ... knowledge that she did not have ‘then’, in the moment of the experience” (p. 2). Thus, while memory is what makes narration possible, narration also constructs what is remembered. And yet we forget this: we imagine narrated memory “as if the narrating ‘I’ and the subject of the narration were identical” (King, 2000, p. 3). This flawed imagining further complicates the work, and the implications, of telling one’s story.

The implications and complications that emerge for narrative inquiry from psychoanalysis and its understanding of the story or narrative as unconscious, belated, and incomplete similarly emerged for us in relation to this study of the oral narratives and digital stories of the participants in our two digital storytelling workshops.

### The story circle

Interview data confirms that the story circle is a “moment” that serves as both locus for community-building and motivator for engagement in the workshop’s collaborative structure. Zhen refers to the story circle experience as “precious” — a way of “sharing, so we can understand each other better, and ...enhancing our friendship.” Liliana, who describes the story circle as “intense” but “very touching, because a lot of us talked about abuse, and losses,” also calls it “beautiful”, a “way of nurturing ourselves and each other.” For Chandra, it provides a space for honouring stories that busy daily life lacks; a kind of “freedom” or “power” to “take something ... that is hiding inside” and “put it outside.” Several credit the story circle with inspiring the disclosure of previously “secret” feelings; Ming says that by “talking about the moment in their lives, their personal things, the [others] encouraged [her] to tell [her] story,”

while Nalini refers to telling her “untold story” as a moment of self-revelation: “In front of people [there are things] I hide, but in my story I don’t hide anything.”

The dynamics of how stories come to be told in the story circle are marked by a reluctance that, curiously, is ameliorated by other, similarly reluctant participants. This is key to understanding the story circle as motivator. Sati recalls how in her own first digital storytelling workshop the facilitator said, “Okay, tell something about your life story, and everybody said ... we don’t have any stories.” Yet they do. Some participants have stories they have long waited to tell; others’ stories are reawakened by those of fellow group members.

And there are surprises. Some women note that hearing someone else’s personal story changed their minds about which of their own stories to tell. Others are reminded of a particularly important or difficult experience, which they share in the story circle, later choosing another story to produce digitally. In some cases, hearing others’ narratives reminds participants of forgotten events, or gives them courage to speak what they have previously kept silent. A case in point: Christine was initially quite reticent in the story circle, waiting until the very end of the meeting to tell her difficult story, about a death that had occurred while she was in Bangladesh. She later confided that this was not the story she originally had in mind; she had decided to tell it when those of several other participants, equally poignant, reminded her of both the death and her trip to Asia.

Thus can telling one story make it possible to tell others. Partly this happens because another’s story reminds us of our own similar one. But the circle additionally issues an invitation – a validation of personal narrative that hearing others’ stories offers – which opens up a space to tell stories that might otherwise have remained untold. And in this way, as Chambers (1998, p. 14) notes, the work of remembering the narratives of earlier life hold potential for changing “not

only the stories themselves but the lives to which they are connected,” including the lives of those who hear them. While the act of telling the story expands, enriches and complicates the answer to the question “Who am I?”, the telling and listening that occur in the story circle connect the selves and stories of the women with the shared culture they create together.

Not all stories are told. In our first workshop, some participants, originally keen to be involved in digital storytelling, stopped attending once they realized they would be asked to tell their story to others and receive constructive feedback on it. Yet these silences also attest to the story circle’s import, for if there is power in having what Lambert (2006, p. 93) calls a safe place to be heard, it may be that not everyone feels equally safe or is equally able to engage that space by breaking a silence. After all, the stories that are told are often difficult, even horrific: stories of harsh economic, political or religious struggles; of terrible personal loss; of violence or abuse. What is clear, albeit ironic, is that the story circle can be a significant experience whether or not one undergoes it.

Throughout this study, and through the processes of each story circle and the production of each digital story, we have grown particularly interested in both surprises and silences. In the following case studies we return to the questions we posed at the beginning of the paper, about the significance of unexpected and perhaps unintended expressions and resistances that characterize the experience of storytelling, or narrating one’s life: What do these unexpected self-expressions reveal about the unconscious dynamics of storytelling? What do those dynamics suggest about the function of storytelling in our lives? And what are their implications for our conceptualizations of narrative inquiry?

Shifting stories: Munira’s “Love with the enemy”

Often, the stories spoken in the story circle remain there, while other stories are told in the more “public” venue of the digital story itself. Yet we are reluctant to reduce the cause of these shifting stories to the public or private nature of the varied contexts of telling. What other dynamics of self-representation are at work here? What does it mean to change one’s story many times, to tell one or more stories in the story circle and then tell another in the digital story? Our first case study explores the experience of the shifting story, manifested in the contrast among Munira's multiple stories: two she told in the story circle, and a third that became her eventual digital story.

Despite usually being quite a vocal participant, Munira waited until the very end of the story circle to take her turn. She began by saying that she had three stories in mind but could not decide which to tell. The others in the circle encouraged her to tell all three, suggesting that they could help her think about which to use as her digital story. In the end she told two: the first summarized a news story she had heard about a young female activist killed while acting as a human shield against the bulldozing of houses in the Gaza Strip; the second, described as the story of “how I met my husband,” turned out to be primarily about her experience as a graduate student in Egypt and her rejection of the idea of marriage in favour of her education, until she met the man she eventually married. Curiously, her digital story was ultimately neither of these, nor was it the third story she had originally intended to tell. Rather it was a narrative about her intense personal struggle learning to use the computer to communicate with her husband, who worked abroad while she remained in Egypt.

While they are clearly different, there are interesting parallels among these stories. In Munira’s two “told” stories, there is a resonance between her description of her younger self, steadfastly resisting the expectation of marriage, and the young woman standing up to the

bulldozer. Indeed, the way she described her marriage to her husband and the experience of becoming a wife and mother as terminating the progress of her graduate degree might be interpreted as the death of another version of herself – a younger self, resistant and independent. This death is paralleled in the death of the young activist and then again, metaphorically, in her digital story through the demise of her computer, which in her words “broke down, completely dead. My attempts to revive him failed.”

In each of her stories, Munira referred to herself as very smart and very good at school. Yet when speaking of becoming a wife and mother, she described herself as being at a loss, not knowing what to do. In her digital story, she says, “I was not stupid, I always got the highest marks in my education,” and then wonders, “What has happened to me after getting married and having children? Is my mind frozen? Are the gears of my brain rusted?” The parallel between the image of Munira as a rusted machine whose gears are frozen and the image of the computer that won’t work and eventually breaks down is striking. While Munira positions herself in opposition to the computer, which she refers to as “the enemy,” her simultaneous identification with it, which comes through in metaphors and images, offers her a way to express something about herself she may not yet know: through her multiple and shifting stories, Munira tells a story she may not yet realize she has to tell.

One of the dynamics characterizing this tension between self-expression and self-knowledge, and arguably lying at the heart of self-representation, is ambivalence. For Munira, this ambivalence is evidenced both in her difficulty deciding which story to tell or which self to express, and also in the shifting of her story, which is somehow both resisted and discovered in the process. This ambivalence is also at work in the details of the stories themselves, and in the contradictory title Munira gives her digital story – “Love with the enemy.” Who is the enemy

here? The computer about which she says, “from the first sight, I hated it”? The marriage that signals the death of her graduate education? Perhaps. Yet she has chosen both her marriage and the computer. And at the end of her story she says, “My enemy has become my dearest friend. I cannot imagine my life without this friend. My computer is a window that I open to see the whole world.” But ambivalence emerges yet again in her interview where she recognizes the implications of this new “friendship” (and its professional commitments) for her roles as wife and mother: “Some weekends I wasn’t able to go out, I had to stick in front of my computer at home doing a lot of homework, so sometimes I feel I shouldn’t [participate in educational programs], ... because my main responsibility is to be a mother.”

Munira’s telling of these three stories reveals much about the complexities of lived experience and identity as well as the ambivalence of storytelling itself and, at times, the impossibility of telling the story at all. In her digital story, her difficulty mastering computer technology seems to stand in for the twin difficulties of knowing, and representing, the self. After all, Munira’s story about the computer functions to estrange her from other stories of herself, which do not get told, while it is also a hidden story about herself and her estrangement from her former self. Perhaps not coincidentally, at one point in her interview Munira insists, “Everyone’s a stranger here.”

Munira’s digital story, in which she reveals little about any other person, but instead describes her relations to a machine, also reminds us of the importance of the social in producing the unconscious dynamics that shape a story. It is a public document in a way that her oral narratives were not. Her story about the computer may be another way of expressing her necessary estrangement from others, insofar as the full details of her personal life are present only in symbolic terms in the digital story viewed by a “strange” public.

Strange Stories: Faribah's "My life mystery"

The theme of estrangement appears in many of the digital stories, often quite overtly. Some women talk about being separated from their families and their homes, others about being alienated in a new city. One feels estranged from her own emotions: even when her deportation order was rescinded, she tells us, "I had no feelings. I did not even hear the part of being approved [until] the immigration officer said, you should be happy." But accompanying this estrangement motif is also the notion of strangeness. Like Munira's reckoning with the strange technology of the computer and the strange shifts in her self-concept, other digital stories, as well as many of the interviews, refer to the difficulties of making new lives in Canada, where the women "didn't know the culture," "had no one to talk to," and where "everything – the weather, the city, education [for themselves and their children] – was unknown." Some stories take strangeness itself onto unfamiliar ground, as the women puzzle through events or moments that took them by surprise. One story that embodies not only elements of estrangement from parts of the teller's own life, but also a sense of puzzlement, even bewilderment, at the strangeness of the story she is telling, is Faribah's.

Like Munira, Faribah initially described her story as being about meeting her husband. But her digital creation reveals a complicated tale of transitions and losses; where Munira's ambivalence is demonstrated in her multiple, shifting narratives, Faribah's is carried by her digital story's structure, with voiceover, image and sound colliding to offer contradictory meanings. Additionally, Faribah seems, paradoxically, to be unable to find a clear beginning or a definite ending to her story, yet at the same time to be positioned close to the edge of an awareness of its contradictions, its shifts, and perhaps even its secrets.

For a “main” character, Faribah’s husband is a visually ambiguous “absent presence” throughout the video. For the entire first half, he is represented only briefly, and by a clip-art silhouette at that. Faribah’s stated reason for this was that since she didn’t know what he looked like at this point in the story, neither should the viewer. But his near-invisibility persists. He is shown for less than 20 seconds of the three-minute video, and not once does Faribah zoom in to a close-up of his image, as she does with photographs of herself and her own family. The voiceover treats him similarly; until the halfway point he is referred to only as he, him, or “the man from Canada.”

These aesthetic choices extend to her husband’s positioning within the story’s narrative arc. The opening and closing images are of Faribah, her mother and sisters; her husband is there at the story’s temporal midpoint, but surrounded on all sides by her family – including their children, whom she refers to as “hers.” The story she intended to tell about “the man who changed her life” is bracketed by the more central one of Faribah and her family (especially the women), her children, her experiences. Indeed, in the video’s final moments her words – “I am struggling to find a good job [in order to bring] the rest of my family here and we can live together” – are accompanied by an image that underscores what seems clearly to be the main relationship in the story: that of her and her mother. Her spouse is ostensibly positioned at the middle of her story, but we are not convinced that he is its centre; as the video ends, he is quite literally “out of the picture” altogether.

The ambiguous, even contradictory, positioning of her husband both at and outside of the centre of her story, and the individualist language she uses to talk of both past and future – “I and my family were living in Pakistan. ... I have a new family now ... I’m ... bringing my family here...” – position Faribah in ways that challenge dominant notions of the passive, obedient,



Middle Eastern wife. In her story, as in Munira's, a resistant thread moves through Western views of non-Western women. Sadness and loss are evident in Faribah's story, but alongside these are strength, resourcefulness and optimism; with her articulated refusal to continue letting "destiny" keep her apart from her family she subverts both the notion of a unitary self, and the stereotype of a passive wife, and articulates the position of strength from which she will try to mitigate the losses so evident in her narrative.

Is this what Faribah herself is using her story to do? Her title, "My life mystery," offers an important clue. While at first we assume that this mystery is the unknown "man from Canada" who suddenly entered her life, the multiple and complex dynamics of images, voiceover, and narrative structure invite a more open reading, through which we perceive Faribah as puzzling over her own story, over the mystery that is not quite named but that seems to constitute not a stranger but a strangeness: How, she seems to be asking, did all this happen? Or even, how could I have let all this happen? But Faribah does not ask these questions out loud, and perhaps they cannot be asked, not directly, or not yet.

Does expressing something that is not yet known help us come to know it? Can a question help us get to a story? Conversely, can telling a story be a point of entry to a transitional space where we might begin to imagine asking our question? Might it be that the very act of telling our stories – even though there is always something we do not tell – can move us forward in how we read the stories, and think the questions, of our own and others' lives? So it may be with Faribah. The fact that in her story the images of her and her family do not follow a strict chronology, along with the video's layered narrative structure and its ultimate return to its starting point, gestures toward a kind of uncertainty around when and where, and how, the larger story – of which the video is one part – begins and ends. Perhaps telling her story is a way for

Faribah to begin a beginning, if not to get to an ending: a way, that is, if not quite to answer those questions, at least to recognize them as questions.

### Some thoughts on narrative inquiry and its limits

As our two case studies illustrate, and as our earlier observations suggest, what remains untold or silent in a story can both constitute and undermine a telling. Instructive here is the psychoanalytic notion of the “screen memory” – a dynamic in which the collision between the urge to remember something significant and the unconscious resistance to that remembering results in the collapse of the memory into a symbol or image (the “screen”), which allows its retention yet inhibits the conscious attention that might cause the painful reliving of a trauma (Freud, 1899, p. 307). The story that is remembered or told via this dynamic is necessarily incomplete, marked by unconscious resistances, refusals, and concealments. And yet the possibility of ever getting to the whole story, or even to a more complete version of the story, rests on the possibility of that first partial telling. We must tell one story to tell the next.

The tension between self-expression and self-knowledge at the core of all narration, which we have explored in the case studies offered above, suggests an understanding of the self and of narrative that is implicated in Freud’s notion of “free association” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973), described by Britzman (2006, p. 22) as “an occurrence where the drive plays with and may destroy the representations it seeks.” While free association is most importantly a technique of therapy, Britzman suggests that it might also describe “any form of practice, including our own pedagogical ones, that requires a faith in narrative, the faith that words create forms of life” (p. 27). At the same time, “free association reveals the trouble with language” and indeed all attempts to represent or narrate experience. The technique of free association can offer us insight

into the work of narrating experience as, significantly, something both more and other than meaning-making. Indeed, for psychoanalysis, it is precisely the conflict at the heart of narrative, as a way of making meaning and a resistance to it, which makes free association useful as a therapeutic technique. Britzman writes (2006, p. 39):

[W]e are closest to the difference that is the unconscious when we notice its displacement, when we are not listening, when we say the opposite of what we mean, when we turn language inside out, when our grammar collapses under the weight of our desire, and when we have no regard for staying on the topic. We are closest to our unconscious when it can be witnessed by another, when the Other puts us on notice, gives us back our conclusions so that we can redo them again.

Reading and interpreting an Other's story is arguably a way to "give back" the teller's conclusions. In thinking about the digital storytelling, and "reading" the digital stories, of the women we have worked with, we want to suggest that these modes of self-expression and processes of storytelling might similarly offer a space for representing to the Other, and to the self, the ambivalence and contradiction that can characterize the interminable process of relating our inner reality and the external world (Winnicott, 1971). Munira's shifting narratives, and Faribah's surprising and even contradictory combination of images and voiceover, each complicate notions both of the unitary subject who can tell a coherent life story, and of the transparency of that story for the reader or viewer. And yet, as in free association, which requires faith in language but also demands that we notice its limitations, it is precisely the undermining of narrative coherence, both intentional and accidental, that offers these and other participants

the possibility of self-expression as a method for working through complex experiences of ambivalence, power, and loss.

Put differently, alongside the complex meanings made and resisted in these particular digital stories, and personal narratives in general, there is the important question of what we use story to do. Pitt suggests that we consider curricular experiences and objects, not primarily in terms of their content, “but rather as a method for observing how we experience ourselves in the world” (Pitt, 2003, p. 89). Following Pitt’s lead, we might ask: What is the use of the story? How do the dynamics at stake in narrating the self allow us to observe our experience in the world? As researchers engaging in narrative inquiry, it may be that we need to follow the story, not as a vessel of meaning, but as a practice that illuminates the complexities of the storytelling subject and her relation to her own experience.

In his provocative descriptions of the infant’s early researches into and negotiations with the external world, Winnicott (1971) suggests that rather than encountering the truth about the world, a task which is interminable and never complete, the best we may do, to begin with, is find and create useful objects. Winnicott writes about the transitional object, often in the guise of a well-loved teddy bear or blanket, as what we see of “the infant’s journey from the purely subjective to objectivity...of this journey of progress toward experiencing” (1971, p. 6). The parent makes an agreement with the baby, Winnicott says, not to force differentiation between primary creativity and objective perception of the transitional object by asking, “Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?” (p. 12). This allows for a neutral area of experience in which the child gets to have the illusion that external reality corresponds to her own capacity to create. This “transitional space” (p. 64), in which transitional objects do their work, lies “between the inner reality of an individual and the shared reality of the world.”

In the same way, we might understand the story or narrative not primarily in terms of its accuracy or authenticity in representing experience, but as an intermediate area of experience in which the story we tell can contain both what we know and what we imagine or do not yet know. Put another way, we might understand the story as a space in which the storyteller risks her or his connection to the world by both finding and creating useful objects – in this sense, it is up to the researcher never to ask “is this the truth, or did you make it up?”

Two questions we asked our participants to think about in the story circle and in the scripting process for their videos were, “Why tell this story?” and “Why now?” Sometimes we don’t know the answer to such a question; sometimes the answer, whether explicitly articulated or not, is that we do not choose which story to tell so much as the story chooses us. Sometimes the story we end up telling is not the<sup>3</sup> one we began with. And sometimes we just don’t know where to begin. No story tells everything. But some stories cannot be told at all, because we do not (yet) know them. Perhaps the ambivalences, contradictions, concealments and tentative beginnings we read in, or into, Munira’s shifting narratives and Faribah’s contradictory digital story are born of an unconscious, paradoxically unprepared preparedness to tell – without telling all – that Winnicott names the “secret self,” for whom it is “joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found” (1963, p. 186; original italics), and which Pitt (2003, p. 83) summarizes as the “need to communicate ... countered by the equally pressing need to defend against communication.” Winnicott might say that as storytellers, both Faribah and Munira are finding ways to make their not-quite-asked questions, and the selves that are not-quite-asking them, a little bit accessible, not for the researchers, and not for the audience, but for themselves.

## Conclusion

In her work on “a narrative approach to development,” Rossiter (1999, p. 69) opines that development is better understood inductively from stories rather than by applying theories to what we observe. This may be so, but in a sense even an inductive understanding is grounded in one or another “theory” or principle or way-of-reading, however multiply informed that theory may be and whether or not we are even aware of it. Nevertheless, Rossiter’s idea seems to resonate somewhat with Hunsberger (1992, p. 85), who understands the work of engaging with others’ narratives as feeding “a continual impulse toward making sense, unity, and ... integrity in our lives” both during the act of reading itself and in the belated, *nachträglich* understanding that follows.

As transitional space, the digital story may allow us the experiences of beginning to find and create objects without the demand to distinguish between them. More importantly, as researchers, in our engagement with and interpretation of these digital stories, we can resist seeing them simply as transparent representations of a subject’s experience or life and instead try to bear witness to the ways in which they are also testaments to the unknowability of the self and the (im)possibilities of self-representation.

Alongside the tensions between what we express and what we know, and between what we know but cannot express, and between what we express without knowing we are expressing it, there is another tension between the necessity, indeed the compulsion, to tell stories and the insufficiency of the story itself – the impossibility of ever telling the whole story. The unconscious dynamics at stake in storytelling remind us that the narrative itself is both a path toward knowledge and a resistance to it. This conception of narrative, as not only incomplete and partial but powerfully resistant to the demand to fully know (or transparently represent) the self,

has implications for both our thinking about the work of narrative inquiry and our conceptualization of the function of story for both teller and listener.

Indeed, these impossibilities similarly apply to the research story we tell here. For even as the complexities of the stories we discuss in this paper might open up the possibility for their narrators of representing the not quite fully representable complexities of the self to the Other, as that Other – the researcher – we each must acknowledge that our own investments and resistances are inevitably also (re)presented in our own always-incomplete readings of the stories.

While the storyteller can never tell the whole story or perhaps even the true story of herself, we are convinced that the act of telling one story remains powerful, often transformative, and fundamentally helpful. Indeed, it is only in telling one story that we can go on to tell another, and another, and another, and in the telling work through the complexities of being our selves in a world that is not us. As in free association, wherein "words fail in so many ways, even as they may urge us along to notice just that" (Britzman, 2006, p. 27), it is precisely the impossibility of storytelling – the incoherencies and ambivalences – that offers us the possibility of a space where we can work through complex experiences, both found and created.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Names of all participants have been changed in order to protect their identities.

<sup>2</sup> As researchers, we also want to note how Nalini's comment about opportunities for women in Canada, and comments like it, point to the dynamic nature of the interview setting and remind us that the narrated self is a relational self: "how we represent ourselves... depends on who we are trying to be in relation to others in the present" (Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 45). These comments

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were made in relation to the interviewees, all three of whom were perceived by the participants to be professionally successful “Canadian women” free from many of the constraints they identify in their own lives. A similar dynamic may be at play in the comments in which Sati and Nalini distinguished themselves from other Bangladeshi immigrants.



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## APPENDIX A:

### Description of Digital Storytelling Workshop

#### General Outline of 4 Step Process:

##### 1. Presentation of Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling

As both a guide to scripting and design, and as a showcase for design examples, we begin each workshop with a lecture-demonstration on guidelines to creating a digital story. Examples are presented and discussed.

##### 2. Group Script Process

As in a creative writing class, we facilitate a review of story ideas or actual scripts, in a group process. Both the general approach and specific editorial issues are addressed, and issues of storyboarding and design are touched upon.

##### 3. Hands On Software Tutorials

Participants are taken step by step through the basics of the software used in the process. While we often use Adobe Photoshop, for image manipulation, and Adobe Premiere, Final Cut Pro or iMovie, for video editing, the process can be done with a large number of alternative tools as well.

##### 4. Production Support and Management

Most of the workshop involves participants working on producing their own projects, with their own ambition and pace. As teachers, we guide each person through the steps they need to complete. Great attention is given to time management, troubleshooting, and prioritizing the process to assure that participants achieve the goal of a completed project.

#### Basic Workshop Agenda:

The workshop may be conducted over three days, or a series of weeks or months. However, because the model originated with a three-day workshop, it is helpful to think about the workshop as having three phases.

#### First Phase:

- Introductions
- Introduce digital storytelling with samples of prior students' work, presentation of 7 Elements of Digital Storytelling as methods of analyzing various pieces. Discuss with students their own project plans, preparation of material including scripting, rough source material selection and storyboarding.
- Overview of digital video editing software and procedure for preparing still images in Photoshop.

- Adobe Photoshop Elements Tutorial
- Preparation and Digitization of Material
- Each student will be scheduled for input of source material to individual workstations, scanning and sizing images in Photoshop, capturing soundtrack audio and video, and recording voice-overs.

Second Phase:

- Digital video editing software Tutorial
- Review and re-write scripts
- Finish recording voice-overs
- Begin rough edit in Digital video editing software

Third Phase:

- Continue editing in digital video editing software
- Complete Second Edit
- Participants will explore special effects for their work in digital video editing software including image pan, motion, superimpositions, transparency and titles.
- Final Edit and Review
- Participants will complete edit and make draft of final version of their digital story for class presentation in final hour.

Core Methodology

1. **The Role of Story.** Story defines and leads all aspects of the process. The workshop is built around the writing of the narration, its recording by the participant, and the edit of the visual material as led by the narration. Our initial process of introductions, the showing of examples in the framework of the seven elements of digital storytelling, and group script feedback are meant principally to inform the writing of the script. We work closely with participants to ensure they are comfortable with the draft they record for their story.

2. **Personal Voice.** Students work on first person, personal stories. Whether the stories are reflections on a particular event or a larger issue, we generally insist that the stories reflect firsthand experience. In this sense, our work shares methods with creative writing workshops

dealing with memoir and life stories. The subject matter generally encourages thoughtful, meaningful writing and a high emotional commitment of the participant.

As observed by anyone involved in therapeutic process, the dynamics of a group of people sharing life experiences in story have a special magic. This simply does not happen if the approach is an expository essay or business presentation on a general subject with little connection to the author. Even if the goal of someone's participation is to at some point improve or develop stories related to subjects outside their direct experience, teaching this person to find their own voice is invaluable.

**3. Still Images vs. Video.** Pre-existing visual archives, i.e. the family album and home video, inspire the stories. In film or video production, a script or video interview leads to production of the media elements and to the assembly in the editing suite. Conversely, the assumption of our workshops is that most of the critical visual elements already exist and inform the design of the narration.

Photo albums and archives carry particular connection to our lives. It is not difficult for any of us to get in touch with a profound sense of meaning, through a process of reflection with a set of images from our lives. As such, these images are an ideal prompt for creative writing.

Photographs can be organized and brought into a computer with relative ease. Video, by contrast, is much more time consuming and difficult to log, organize, and manipulate in the design of a story. As such, we promote a restrained use of video in production, particularly given that so many of our participants are new to the media production experience.

**4. The Seven Elements.** We have organized a brief lecture with examples to provide a context for students as they draft their narration and design their story. The lecture is called The Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling and follows the preparation materials provided in the Digital Storytelling Cookbook. Reviewing and analyzing a small number of stories helps structure the feedback in the group scripting process, and inspires a degree of thoughtfulness, creative experimentation, and risk-taking in the participants.

**5. The Story Circle.** Each workshop includes a group script review process. Participants either bring ideas or drafts of scripts for presentation. As facilitators, we invite group feedback and brainstorming when appropriate, but closely moderate the process to avoid overwhelming the author. We emphasize several methods in the creative critiquing process including:

a. Positive re-enforcement and accentuating strengths in the story concept or script.

b. When possible, stating a critique in the form of a question; i.e., "What was the intention of your approach to the story?" As part of this process, we also encourage the participant to ask questions of the other members of the group, related to writing or design issues.

c. Identifying specific ways to focus the story, reflecting on the issues raised in the seven elements lecture or using the examples of digital stories presented in the process.

d. Allowing participants a graceful way to terminate the review of their idea.

**6. Equipment and Software.** In our workshops, the choice of the software tools and production environment has been considered in detail. The process began with a mixture of Adobe PhotoShop and Adobe Premiere, and these tools are still the predominant tools used in the process. Our choices were predicated on specific concerns: Is the software relatively easy to teach at a beginning level? Is the platform (Mac/PC) sufficient to operate the full extensive use of the software? Can the participants express a range of styles and design choices within the tools?

But the workshop is not dependent on a given digital toolset; various other software will perform the function of allowing someone to edit a short video with a voiceover and soundtrack. Different software and hardware configurations will have a range of impacts on the experience of the workshop participants and their final results.

In the context of the production environment, there are a number of considerations as well. Does the environment allow for the easy distribution of material (i.e., voiceover files, scans, captured video) from devices central to the production process? Is there adequate space for group processes? Is there space for people to spread out and work with their script and image material?

**7. Workshop Tutorials.** The approach to teaching software tutorials is also informed by both concerns of technological inadequacies or concerns of the participants. We have organized the materials to cover a minimum level of functionality necessary for the completion of a project. At the same time, the tutorials inspire and excite the participants about the potential of the tools, demonstrating some of the more surprising or unusual potentials of the tools in design. This expands the creative palette of the participant, which creates a more powerful potential experience for a range of participants. The tutorials are meant as a first orientation, and we emphasize that each of the steps or procedures will be re-visited individually during the production process.

**8. Management of the Production Process.** The management of the participant's experience from the beginning of their entry into the digital tools to the completion of their project requires immense attention by the facilitators. Everyone enters the production process with significant strengths and weaknesses in various components of media production. The facilitator assesses each participant and works with them to adjust the expectations of their objectives and approach to production. Participants are monitored during the various steps in the process to see if they are proceeding on a relative schedule, and to assess the priorities of their design decisions and work in a pace that will allow them to complete their work. As we move toward the completion of the workshop, facilitators will gently intervene with participants that have become stuck in the process, and direct them in the shortest steps to finalize a sufficient draft of their work for a final showcase.

**9. The Final Presentation.** An essential, perhaps the most essential, component of the workshop, is the final presentation. Our workshops are dedicated to completion of a reasonable draft of the project. There is no getting around this objective for the facilitator or the participant.

For many people in our culture, the idea of starting a process but ending without a result to be shared is part of their deepest sense of inadequacy. Finding the means to allow the participants to be celebrated in what they have accomplished, to see what others have accomplished, and to have the vision of where this may lead them in their future with this project, or other projects, pays off the entire process. This is true equally for the participant and the facilitator.



**APPENDIX B:**

***Digital Stories of Coming to Learn Interview Protocol***

Section I: Identifying Questions

- 1) When and where were you born?
- 2) When did you immigrate to Canada?
- 3) Who and where are the members of your immediate family?
- 4) How do you describe your ethnic identity?
- 5) Do you have any religious affiliation?
- 6) What kinds of paid and unpaid work do you do?

Section II: Main Questions and Prompts

Experiences Prior to Immigration:

- 1) Would you take me through some of the educational experiences you had before coming to Canada?
- 2) Would you describe for me how you decided to come to Canada?

Experiences of Migration:

- 3) From your experience, can you tell me about some of the challenges facing women who immigrate to Canada?
- 4) What motivated you to come to Canada? Describe some of the barriers to immigration you faced.

Access to Community-Based Education:

- 5) Can you tell me about how you first came to Central Neighbourhood House?
- 6) Would you describe for me how you decided to take the digital storytelling workshop?
- 7) Describe what motivated you to come to Central Neighbourhood House and to take the digital storytelling workshop.
- 8) Tell me about the kinds of barriers you have had to contend with and overcome in order to participate in this program or other adult learning programs.

Experience of Digital Storytelling:

- 9) Would you take me through your experience of the digital storytelling workshop?
- 10) From your experience, can you tell me what impact the workshop has had on the women who participated?

Implications and Future Possibilities:

- 11) Can you tell me what the response from your family and community has been to your participation in the workshop?

- 12) From your experience, would you tell me about the kinds of educational opportunities available to women who immigrate to Canada?
- 13) Would you describe some of your hopes and worries for the future?