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The Politics of Education and the Digital Turn in Storytelling: A Critical Introduction

Abstract Storytelling is an activity with important social and political functions. The digital turn in education affects the educational functions of storytelling in ambivalent ways. While the emancipative affordances of this turn are given much visibility in academic and corporate discourse, the risks are neglected. Education and storytelling are influential practices in the social construction of reality. The uncritical endorsement of the digital turn in storytelling, however, makes education vulnerable to the influence of technocentrism and its myths. The ideas that images "have power", that digital community can compensate for the isolation of the individual and that the digital "revolution" brings about the "end of history" and politics are influential manifestations of these myths. The possibility for the digital turn in education and storytelling to open up emancipative opportunities depends on the extent to which educators are aware of and able to develop countermeasures against the oppressive tendencies associated with technocentrism and its myth. The chapters in this collection aim at supporting the efforts in this direction.

1. The Politics of Education, the Functions of Storytelling and the Problem of Control

The politics of education is a key dimension in the competition for control over the future of society. For the actors participating in this competition, mastering the functions of storytelling is both crucial and elusive. It is crucial because storytelling is the activity through which the meaning of the world and the social world itself are created. It is elusive because storytelling is everywhere, present in numerous forms and shapes, public and private, and mediated and non-mediated communication.

The dual and perhaps contradicting nature of storytelling functions poses a very practical problem for those forces in society that are in apprehension of the intrinsic capacity of storytelling's meaning-generation ability to subvert existing relations of power. The political ambivalence of this capacity reflects the broader ambivalence of education: necessary but dangerous. The question of control is rooted in this ambivalence and in the efforts to resolve the uncertainty it generates in one direction or another.

In much of the relevant literature, digital storytelling is credited with all the functions of traditional storytelling in addition to the alleged virtues of digital

technology. The potential of this combination seems to exceed the mere sum of its parts. In this chapter I discuss the power of storytelling and the implications of the "digital turn" separately, in order to avoid confusing the two. Clarifying this confusion is especially important because it helps to avoid the intrinsic attribution of the emancipative properties of storytelling to digital technology while disclosing the ideological implications of the digital turn in the politics of education.

By changing the rituals associated with the practices of storytelling, *the digital turn frames the role of storytelling in education within the myths associated with digital technology and, in doing so, enforces the performative control of digital institutions on the subversive potential of the culture, if not the content, of storytelling itself.*

It may be a good idea to start by discussing the power of storytelling, its fundamental ambivalence and the problem of control that it implies. Among the most effective and, in a sense, most radical cases for the power of storytelling is still that made by Jerome Bruner when he claimed that reality itself is constituted through narrative form (Bruner, 1991: 5). All other functions commonly attributed to storytelling, including its pedagogical functions, are in fact included in the idea that narratives are the tools through which reality itself, as accessible to humans, is constructed.

If the idea of the "narrative construction of reality" sounds too generic to underscore the problem of control, one should consider that most of the relevant practices to establish, reproduce or subvert relations of power are based on and are intelligible through storytelling of some sort.

The broad notion that storytelling is essentially about sense-making points, for example, to a variety of communicative practices with important political implications such as the legitimisation of political power, the construction and manipulation of the symbols of collective identity, the interpretation of history and collective memory, the social construction of truth etc.

Justification, for example, is a particular form of sense-making through storytelling: an explanation with strong moral elements that perform important emotional and cognitive functions at individual and collective levels. Painful personal experiences need to be made sense of to deal with their emotional implications but also with the rational need to control the possibility of their occurrence in the future. At the collective level, events that can seriously undermine the integrity of the community also need justification. The best examples that come to my mind are the narratives of war casualties, especially in the Great War, and the narratives of economic "austerity" deployed in Western Europe since 2008. The justification of war casualties usually contains the idea that the sacrifice of so many young lives has not been in vain. This is obviously easier for the societies of those states that

won the war. But the idea of sacrifice in these narratives also contains normative values that stretch into the future: from the sacrifice of the past into the lives of the present and the possibility of their sacrifice in the future (Mosse, 1990). More recently, the economic crisis triggered by the financial speculation in the US has been made sense of through narratives of sacrifice similar to those used in war, but ones in which democracy seems to be the first casualty: a luxury that the European citizen may not be able to afford anymore (Silva & Escorihuela, 2013: 1–8).

When wars or other dramatic events occur that may undermine social cohesion, institutions may engage in "authoritative sensemaking" through forms of storytelling that reduce public anxiety but also reassert the integrity of social institutions that the crisis may undermine, through myths that depoliticise the crisis (Brown, 2004: 95–112).

The concept of legitimisation usually describes the form of justification involved when political power is at stake. The legitimisation of the forms of authority described by Max Weber – traditional, charismatic and legal-rational – is grounded in narratives of one form or another. It is through these narratives that traditions, charisma and law itself become influential in the daily lives of people. In practice, to legitimise the power of some individuals, groups or institutions means to justify their power but also, and maybe this is the distinctive content of this concept, to issue an implicit claim about the rightfulness of the concrete manifestations of this power in the future.

In the critical tradition, Walter Benjamin's ideas about the importance of storytelling and the politics of truth are probably among the most influential in contemporary research. Narges Erami, for example, uses Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* to deploy a metaphorical linkage between carpet making and storytelling in support of the case for the ethnographic and "experiential" significance of the latter (Erami, 2015).

Inspired by the same essay, in addition to the works of Kierkegaard, Jung, Heidegger, Bruner and others, Patrick J. Lewis juxtaposes research and storytelling in a passionate plaidoyer for the value of the latter in human life in general and teaching in particular (Lewis, 2011: 505–510).

Annabel Herzog argues that Hannah Arendt's ideas about political storytelling and the "redemptive power of narrative" (Benhabib, 1990) were inspired by Benjamin's notion of storytelling as interpretation and the relation that, through this notion, connects history to those who experience it (a collective) through storytelling (Herzog, 2002: 89). The emancipative function of storytelling emerges quite clearly in both Benjamin and Arendt's endorsement of the idea that the truth that can be passed on by the storytellers is the

point of view of the defeated and the dead … the story told by those who have experienced the events and who, by virtue of this very fact, cannot tell and will never be able to tell any story. (Herzog, 2000: 15)

In this account the power of storytelling consists in the recovery of a "destructive standpoint" which "dissociates the linearity of the victors' commemoration and wrecks conformist historical narrative" (Herzog, 2000: 15).

If storytelling is the activity that can recover the truth of those who are denied the power of objectivity, one may appreciate with a certain dose of irony, the idea that even the authority of science needs narrative support.

Jean-Françoise Lyotard famously argued about the importance of narrative legitimisation of truth in the practices of scientific enquiry to ground its thesis about the "incredulity towards metanarratives" that, in his view, is the distinctive trait of the "postmodern condition" (Lyotard, [1979] 1982: xxiv). In relation to our discussion, I would argue that this "condition" is not one in which storytelling has lost its power but rather one in which performativity or "legitimization by power" (Lyotard, [1979] 1982: 45–48) signal a fundamental change in the nature of the dominant "grand narrative": a new story in which "truth" is replaced by "operativity" as the leading criterion inspiring the quest for reliable knowledge (Lyotard, [1979] 1982: xxv). From the perspective of Benjamin and Arendt's notion of political storytelling, one may therefore argue that, in the postmodern condition, storytelling may constitute the "destructive standpoint" from which modern science can resist performativity and legitimation by power – a point that unfortunately I cannot address in this chapter.

In sum, all forms of political power need the support of storytelling: the process through which the grounds, values and beliefs on which these forms are based are established and re-actualised in the community. There is no engagement with storytelling that is not directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly associated with relations of power. However, storytelling is also the activity through which all forms of power can be challenged, or delegitimised and the 'magic' of storytelling can work in different ways. Whether we like it or not, to deal with storytelling is to deal with an important process in the establishment, preservation, challenging and subversion of relations of power. And it is because of this intrinsic ambivalence that the discussion about the political functions of storytelling is always, in one way or another, a discussion about the *control* of these functions. The ambivalence intrinsic in the affordances of storytelling constitutes the problem of control as the fundamental problem associated with this activity because *it is the very power and ambivalence of storytelling that prompts the effort to control this form of communication*. If we restrict the discussion about the virtues of storytelling in education

to the power of storytelling, without looking at the forces that inside and outside the educational arena are competing to control this power, we make ourselves, educators and learners vulnerable to these forces. If scientific research is incapable or unwilling to broaden the scope of its attention to capture this dimension and to make a credible case about the nature of the risks involved, it will fail its mission.

In a critical perspective, the main goal in educational storytelling is first of all to make people aware of the fact that the ambivalent nature of the power of storytelling supports influential efforts to control its subversive potential in education and elsewhere. Other critical competences, such as recognising the moral and social implications of alternative stories, assessing the impact of particular stories on particular relations of power, and even the capacity to create stories that can effectively support a more emancipative social order, depend on this awareness.

2. The Digital Turn

If the emancipative or subversive potential of storytelling is already, albeit ambivalently, embedded in storytelling, and this very potential is at stake in the politics of education and, more broadly, in the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society, what is the impact of the digital turn on this state of affairs? My suggestion here is that this 'turn' can be interpreted in relation to the problem of controlling the productive capacity of storytelling through the repression of its radical potential. This is where digital technology enters our story.

At least some of the important functions usually associated with storytelling pertain not only to the "story", for example, in Jonathan Gottschall when he discusses the role of story as "a counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart" or "the center without which the rest cannot hold" (Gottschall, 2012: 138), but also to the "telling". Intuitively, an "untold" or uncommunicated story is a non-story. What this means is that whatever storytelling can do depends not only on the features of the story but also on the conditions of the "telling": the nature of the relations in which storytelling occurs as a communicative event and that the event itself contributes to reproduce, or subvert. The case for the importance of this dimension was famously made by James W. Carey in his discussion of the "ritual view of communication" (Carey, 1988: 14–22). The importance of these rituals is discussed, for example, by Nick Couldry in relation to the symbolic power of television to keep alive the "myth of the centre" (Couldry, 2003: 36–54). Even more radically, Marshall McLuhan's renowned phrase "the medium is the message", which lends the opening chapter of *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964) its title, expressed the idea that the main story in the media is always, albeit implicitly, about the media themselves. In this way he argued convincingly for the

kind of shift in attention from issues of content to the capacity of new media to change the nature of relations in society. Neil Postman made a similar point even more explicitly, in relation to the educational role of computers:

> What we need to consider about the computer has nothing to do with its efficiency as a teaching tool. We need to know in what ways it is altering our conception of learning, and how, in conjunction with television, it undermines the old idea of school … New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. (Postman, 1993: 19–20)

From this point of view, the movement from traditional to digital storytelling implies a movement from one set of rituals to another. The problem I am discussing here is to understand the implications associated with the rituals enforced by the digital turn. To ask this question is important because the idea that digital storytelling has all the goodies of storytelling plus the bonuses of digital technology is a philistine simplification. To neglect the changes brought about by the digital turn in the rituals, relationships and ultimately "power" of storytelling is a form of reductionism that endangers the critical assessment of this "turn" in education.

To put it otherwise, the problem is not only to assess the impact of more or less dramatic changes in the quantity or quality of information that can effectively be embedded in digital stories, but also that of understanding the implications, changes and continuities in the relationships involved. Particularly significant among these is the relation between storytelling and its legitimising functions and the forms of power associated with the "digital turn". The idea that digital storytelling makes it easier to produce and circulate "immersive" stories, thereby increasing the "power" of the Author, hides the enormous complexity of the digital infrastructure, the variety of political conditions, actors, negotiations, interests, struggles etc. supporting it, and ultimately the magnitude of the social change associated with its effects.

In traditional storytelling, the relationship between the "teller" and her audience is probably the most salient one. In the digital age, however, an equally if not even more salient relation is that between the human and the digital interface or, more precisely, between the human motives that establish the narrative relation and the infrastructural constraints (ideology, interests, conditions of use etc.) that transform storytelling into a productive activity and stories in textual objects that can be produced, promoted, circulated, consumed etc. In these circumstances, it seems to me, issues relating to the possibility of emancipative changes in content may be no more relevant than issues pertaining to changes in the rituals associated with the digital turn in storytelling.

Among its supporters, digital storytelling seems to be considered a new educational tool and one that is useful for emancipative purposes. Enthusiasts are fascinated by the attributes of appeal and "circulability" of digital storytelling and seem to believe that, because of these, digital storytelling can credibly perform as critical pedagogy: one that could enable the excluded and marginalised voices to be heard and, consequently, to support political inclusion. Sceptics, however, point to problems that have more to do with access and implementation than with the ideological and pedagogical implications of the digital turn in storytelling.

According to Gregori-Signes, for example, "digital story is a genre that allows students to work both individually and in group to produce a critical opinion about a conflicting social issue" and "multimodality should receive the same attention that we give to reading and writing" (Gregori-Signes, 2014: 247).

Rina Benmayor acclaims digital storytelling as "a signature pedagogy for the New Humanities in the 21st century" (Benmayor, 2008: 201) for its formidable pedagogical, political and even theoretical power enabling students to

> bring their own cultural knowledge and experience to the fore … to transform their thinking and empower themselves …[to] encourage historically marginalized subjects, especially younger generations, to inscribe emerging social and cultural identities and challenge unified cultural discourses in a new and exciting way …To demystify theory and … to become theorizers of their own historical and cultural experiences. (Benmayor, 2008: 200)

More critical formulations point to a variety of problems. For Robert Clarke and Andrea Adam, for example, the actual assimilation of digital storytelling into students' curriculum may be more complicated than some of the enthusiastic supporters are ready to acknowledge. Problems include

> the time required to undertake such projects, the necessity of training for teachers; the importance of alignment with curricula goals; the need for clearly articulated goals and structures; the importance of awareness of the emotional sensitivities of students; the problems associated with access to digital hardware and software; and the challenges of appropriately assessing individual digital storytelling projects. (Clarke & Adam, 2010: 173)

This kind of criticism, however, underestimates the performative power of the technological infrastructure and the "complex underweave of power at play in the digital mundane" (Beer, 2009: 999), especially when this all applies to storytelling in education.

For example, recent research suggests that, in the digital environment of social media, the practices of storytelling are vulnerable to the "capitalist regime of time" (Fuchs, 2014) and to self-representation strategies that ultimately reflect the sense-making role of technological platforms (De Ridder, 2013: 370).

A convincing argument in support of the emancipative potential of digital storytelling must first decouple the potential of storytelling from the changes associated with the digital turn. As I argued in this section, the political potential of storytelling is ambivalent, and an important question is to understand if the changes introduced by the digital turn can resolve this ambivalence in an emancipative or oppressive direction. The relevance of the educational functions of digital storytelling is a reflection of the functions of traditional storytelling. The digitalisation of these functions is a process with ideological and political implications that cannot be ignored. In the next section I will look into these implications from the point of view of the myths associated with digital technology.

3. Storytelling and Digital Mythologies: Images, Community and Revolution

My analysis of the digital myth here is inspired by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes, [1957] 2000) and Vincent Mosco's analysis of cyberspace as a mythic space (Mosco, 2004). Through this analysis I intend to offer a few propositions as a preliminary interpretative framework to understand how the digital turn may bring about the repression of the emancipative potential of storytelling in education.

First, myths are a special kind of story. The first proposition is that myths are stories but of a special kind. They appear as timeless and authorless, effectively hiding their origins as part of the charm which endows them with some sort of everlasting wisdom. While the significance of every story can be established in relation to particular events, spaces, time, authorship etc., a myth is a story whose significance resides in the indeterminacy of the same elements. This is one preliminary reason why, as Barthes suggested,

> myth does not deny things … it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (Barthes, [1957] 2000: 143)

A myth is productive of other stories. A second and related proposition is that myth is a story of a special kind also because it establishes the symbolical grounds for the intelligibility of other stories that keep the myth itself alive. As such, a myth is the source of "magic" from which the "magic" of storytelling depends. In this capacity myths establish meanings that, albeit implicitly, support the intelligibility of other stories. The dependence of these stories from the story-myth however reproduces the fundamental symbolical elements of the latter whenever the former are communicated. From this perspective, myths are not "true or false" but

"living or dead" (Mosco, 2004: 29) depending on their productivity: their capacity to generate, inspire, instigate and encourage new stories.

Myths have a special relation with truth. As sense-making devices, the social influence of myths does not depend on the correspondence between the mythic and the empirical event(s) since, in fact, "myths persist in the face of powerful evidence that they do not accurately embody an underlying reality" (Mosco, 2004: 49). Myths do not tell an empirical or verifiable truth. But they tell no lies either. Rather

> they give meaning to life, particularly by helping us to understand the seemingly incomprehensible, to cope with problems that are overwhelmingly intractable, and to create in vision or dream what cannot be realized in practice. (Mosco, 2004: 14)

In their capacity as interpretative framework, "attractive vision or template of perception" (Mosco, 2004: 49) supporting specific forms of engagement with problematic aspects of the world, a myth is a narrative device to preserve beliefs, together with the principles, values and the relations of power associated with them, from the erosive effects of time and social change. Mosco appropriates Barthes' notion of myth as "depoliticized speech" arguing that

> this conception of myth as living, meaningful story is particularly powerful because it suggests why people embrace it even in the face of otherwise compelling contrary evidence. Myth does not embody a truth, it shelters truth by giving it a natural, taken-for-granted quality. (Mosco, 2004: 29–30)

Myth in bourgeois society is depoliticised speech. While Mosco adopts Barthes' notion of myth as depoliticised speech, one should not forget that Barthes coined this notion as a "semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society" (Barthes, [1957] 2000: 143) to describe the strategy of the bourgeoisie in the ideological competition with the revolutionary forces in society:

> The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth. (Barthes, [1957] 2000: 146)

For Barthes, this myth performs identifiable ideological functions, and there is little doubt that

> statistically, myth is on the right. There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly. It takes hold of everything, all aspects of law, of morality, of aesthetics, of diplomacy, of household equipment, of Literature, of entertainment. (Barthes, [1957] 2000: 148)

The bourgeoisie and capitalism rely on myth to present as eternal what is contingent and as natural what is social. Myths legitimise beliefs to be believed not because they are true but – especially when they are not true – because they are

necessary to preserve the credibility of values, visions, identities, hermeneutic frameworks and the relations of power associated with them – e.g., a certain idea of France to justify French imperialism or, in our case, a certain idea of the digital to enforce technocentrism in education. Myths are therefore stories performing the legitimisation of relations of power by hiding the political dimension of these relations: the competition for power, the uncertainty of the struggle before it is won by one of the parties and ultimately the vulnerability of relations of power to the possibility of social change. In this perspective, the important contribution of Mosco consists in revealing how the myths of the "digital sublime" are the functional equivalent of that certain idea of France.

The analysis of myth performs the re-politicisation of speech. The political functions of myth that Barthes and Mosco synthesise with the formula of depoliticised speech result from the cultural productivity of myths and their peculiar relation with truth. This special relation with truth makes the analysis of myth useful to gain a deeper understanding of the aspects of reality that may otherwise be overlooked because they are taken for granted. Mosco suggests that "myths can be understood for what they reveal, for example, the desire for identity and community, but also for what they conceal" (Mosco, 2004: 154).

If myth performs the depoliticisation of speech by naturalising the capitalist order, the critical analysis of myth applied to cyberspace may bring about the re-politicisation of speech as a way "to loosen the powerful grip of myths of the future on the present" (Mosco, 2004: 15).

> If the telling and retelling of the mythic story shields cyberspace from the messiness of down-to-hearth politics, then the critique of the myth, told many times over in many different ways, gives new life to the view that cyberspace is indeed a deeply political space… It is here, on the intellectual border, where cultural and political economic understandings meet, that the analysis of myth becomes particularly productive. (Ibid. 31)

In his argument about the "cyberspace as a mythic space" and the political relevance of the "myths of our time" attached to it, Mosco described three central myths: the end of history, the end of geography and the end of politics (Mosco, 2004: 13–14). In my analysis I look at another set of myths that in my opinion is more relevant to understanding the political impact of the digital turn in educational storytelling: the myth of the "power" of images, the myth of the digital community, and the myth of the digital revolution. More precisely, I argue that the influence of the digital myth

- misconstrues the political role of digital visuality, misplacing the political from the process of interpretation and the user of images to the image itself;

- naturalises the digital community as a political community, neglecting to problematise the nature of the forces it depends on for its existence and of the constraints to its political role that are associated with this dependence; and
- enforces a deceptive, "revolutionary" representation of the changes associated with the digital turn, whereas notions such as the "end of history" and the "end of politics" have fundamentally conservative implications.

3.1 The "power" of images

The mythic relevance of the cyberspace extends to the technological affordances of this space absorbing and giving a new appeal to the myth of the "power" of images. The argument that digital storytelling has superior educational potential because of its visual affordances combines the myths of the digital turn with at least two beliefs associated with the so-called "visual turn". First is the idea that "one image is worth a thousand words" or, put more technically, that images are "living organisms" (Mitchell, 2005: 11) that can "speak to us" (Mitchell, 1980: 3). As I argued elsewhere, giving agency to inanimate objects is a pathetic fallacy with serious ideological implications (Stocchetti, 2011: 11–38). Claiming that images can "want" or "speak" is an apparently innocent figure of speech that legitimises the removal of human agency from the process of sense-making, which is then construed as depending on the image itself: the naturalisation Barthes describes so effectively in relation to the image of the "Negro giving the French salute" (Barthes, [1957] 2000: 116–117). Second is the belief that the power of digital visuality is a revolutionary power: a form of communication that supports democracy and participation by exposing and discrediting the practices of tyrannical regimes. This belief not only underestimates the capacity for resistance of these regimes but, most unfortunately, also simplifies the complexity associated with successful revolutionary efforts and the role of material and immaterial factors such organisation, ideology, leadership etc. (Stocchetti, 2014).

These interpretations of the 'power' of images depoliticise the process through which not only the meaning of images but the meaning of visuality is established. As Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord and, more recently, Jonathan Beller, among others, have argued, this is a most political domain: a place of struggle between competing forces. The recognition of this struggle and the forces involved is repressed because it exacerbates the problem of control resulting from the ambivalent power of storytelling. This is why the emancipative potential of digital storytelling cannot be taken for granted but has to be critically assessed. Neglecting to recognise what remains hidden in the naturalisation of visual meaning makes visual storytelling in education vulnerable to the same forces

that Benjamin discussed in relation to the "capitalist exploitation of cinema" (Benjamin, 2008: 33–37), Guy Debord described in his analysis of "the society of the spectacle" (1967) and Jonathan Beller discussed in terms of the "industrialization of the visual" (Beller, 2006: 3–7).

3.2 The digital community

The idea that digital storytelling has (digital) community-building capacity seems to be the newer version of an older myth about the capacity of technological progress to conquer distance in the physical sense but also in the metaphorical one: erasing difference, bridging intellectual or emotional distances, making us "equals" in the fruition of technological opportunities (Mosco, 2004: 117–140). Digital storytelling promises to reconstitute the lost sense of community in the mythic space of cyberspace (Coskie, Trudel and Vohs, 2010: 2–9). This promise contains a moral appeal to democracy, egalitarianism, polyphony (plurality of voices), participation, empowerment of marginalised identities etc., which makes digital storytelling quite appealing especially in education. While this promise effectively voices the hope that a technological infrastructure could not only overcome spatial barriers and distance but most importantly diversity of identity and interests, it also hides the fear that feeds this hope. The appeal of this promise is all the more seductive in the conditions of late modernity, when the dissolution of traditional communities generates new form of precarity which transforms the experience of freedom into an experience of insecurity – a process that Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and others refer to as "individuation". The belief in the digital salvation of the community needs to be re-evaluated against the fact that digitalisation is one of the constitutive processes of late modernity. The fears, frustration and alienation associated with this condition feed the need to believe in the egalitarian, participatory and democratic virtues of storytelling. Construed within the coordinates of the digital myths and the end of history and politics, the same fears, frustration and alienation may easily turn to the power of digital narratives for the legitimisation of inequality, exclusion and authoritarianism. The question is then to see if utopia will prevail over dystopia: if the communities of late modernity will be inspired by their hopes more than their fears since, as we know, the power of storytelling is ambivalent.

3.3 Digital Revolution: End of History & Politics

The myths of the end of politics and the end of history converge in the myth of the digital revolution and the faith in the revolutionary potential of digital storytelling – in education and presumably elsewhere. The ideological implications of this myth

were already clear in the early stage of this "revolution". Cees J. Hamelink for example, observed that

> in contemporary society – almost worldwide – a powerful myth is being persuasively told by numerous story-tellers. It is the myth of the information society … The tone of the myth is 'computopian': it expects that the application of computer-steered technologies will effectively terminate the social structure which is characterized by an endless struggle between winners and losers, between rulers and ruled. (Hamelink, 1986: 7–8)

The idea that the digital turn in educational storytelling has "revolutionary" capacities, participates in the digital myth evoking and betraying its political significance: it evokes the radical subversion of an established order but betrays the emancipative promise by hiding the conservative, if not reactionary implications of technological determinism. In fact,

> the development of information technology makes centralized control over decentralized activities simpler than ever before … Moreover, the link between information technology and democratization is guided by unwarranted expectations about what machines per se can do. (Hamelink, 1986: 13)

As Robert McChesney's observed in the case of American society, the idea of a revolution brought about almost automatically by technological progress is easily embraced by the "celebrants" of the digital that

> mostly tap into an untethered love of some combination of technology, gadgetry, markets, utopianism, progress, and individualism that is quintessentially American and downright intoxicating; you get the benefit of revolution without the messy of politics. This may explain why it is so widely embraced in the mainstream culture and can be regarded as the dominant mode of thought about the internet. (McChesney, 2013: 12)

The belief that education in digital storytelling is an emancipative practice for subjugated identities, one that makes the power of recognition suddenly available to everyone able to master digital technology reflects the mythical belief that

> the Information Age transcends politics because it makes power available to everyone and in great abundance. The defining characteristic of politics, the struggle over the scarce resource of power, is eliminated. In this respect, myths create a new history, a new time, by denying history. (Mosco, 2004: 35)

By performing a fundamental misconstruing of the nature and working of relations of political power, the myth of digital revolution gains egalitarian connotations that increase its appeal in education and strengthen the incitation to forget the past, embrace the future and challenge the authority of educational institutions and its representatives. The same notion, however, hides the power of the institutions ruling the digital space, the double processes of increased concentration and

decreasing liability of corporate power in the digital industry, and ultimately the resilience of capitalist exploitation in late modern societies. In practice, as Mosco noted, "for all its revolutionary potential these myths tend to hide the continuities with the past" (Mosco, 2004: 49).

4. Steps Towards a Critical Engagement with the Role of Digital Storytelling in Education

The digital turn in storytelling is a process that contributes to the normalisation of education in the digital age. This process consists of the suppression of the radical potential of digital media, storytelling and education by framing them all within the coordinates of technocentric discourse. The credibility of this discourse is supported by the informal reproduction of the myths associated with technology in general and digital technology in particular.

The functions of storytelling are politically relevant, and the educational use of storytelling should introduce students to them: to the processes through which meanings, relations, values and indeed the whole reality is socially constructed.

What has changed in the nature and functions of story/storytelling in the movement from the analogue to digital world? Does digital technology introduce some significant difference in the functions of storytelling? And if digital storytelling is indeed a "powerful tool in the 21st century classroom" (Robin, 2008: 220–228), what is the nature or direction of the changes it can bring about? Do they support emancipation? The answer is yes to the important changes and not necessarily to emancipation.

Digital storytelling is not only about delivering stories with other means. Rather is it about changing the way meaning is created and changing the nature of the relationships based on those meanings. Educators need to question the nature and direction of the change brought about in the social creation of meaning by the digitalisation of storytelling.

Digital storytelling takes the functions of storytelling and wraps them up in the technocentric myth. This, like all myths, is a form of depoliticised speech in which storytelling loses its subversive potential. Digital storytelling thus becomes a form of communication that is supportive and reproductive of capitalism, of its cultural logic, of the functional identities, relations of power and transformative tendencies associated with it.

If one keeps in mind the fundamental importance of education in the construction of societal future, and the competition for the control of this future in the politics of education, one cannot disregard the impact of the ideological elements that accompany the digital turn in storytelling. My suggestion is that the digital

turn in education may indeed perform the repression of the subversive potential of both storytelling and education by repositioning these activities within the performative reach of the myths associated with technology.

In these conditions it is crucial that critical educators become aware of the risks of the digital turn in educational storytelling. This is a preliminary step to developing forms of educational engagement with digital technology and storytelling that are endowed with credible emancipative potentialities.

The chapters in this collection are inspired by the effort to make educators aware of these risks but also of the opportunities for critical engagements as these emerge for the experience of researchers in this field.

In the next chapter, **Nachshon Goltz** and **Tracey Dowdeswell** discuss the risks associated with the growing use of virtual worlds for children, presenting evidence that this kind of digital storytelling lacks many of the positive aspects of non-digital storytelling, may inhibit the development of imagination in children, and appears to reproduce corporate and commercial narratives and values. While more research is needed in order to determine the long-term effects of virtual worlds on child development, the authors invite caution and suggest that virtual worlds may indeed be an inappropriate educational tool for developing children's storytelling abilities.

Even more radically, **Vincenzo De Masi** and **Han Yan's** report on the Chinese animation industry is an empirical falsification of the belief that the digital turn in storytelling is associated with or strengthens emancipative tendencies in society. At least in that society, the "digital turn" has transformed cultural repression into a productive process while at the same time thwarting dissent and marginalising whatever emancipative functions this 'turn' may have.

Bringing the focus back to Western education, **Nathalie Hyde-Clarke** argues for the educational productivity of storytelling and its usefulness, even without the support of digital technologies. Her experience confirms the idea that the educational potential of this practice is not dependent on the digital infrastructure but rather on the teacher's competence and, ultimately, commitment to creating an engaging learning experience for methodology courses usually "deemed to be boring or a 'necessary evil'"

In the other chapters of this collection, the attention shifts to experiences of more critical use of digital technology in support of practices involving storytelling as a tool or as an educational outcome.

Cristina Aliagas-Marin and **Ana M. Margallo** conduct a microanalysis of the implementation of digital storytelling in an Initial Teacher Education course on literary education. The study highlights the importance of appropriating digital

storytelling in each particular educational context, rather than thinking of digital storytelling in education broadly and just applying it generally. This chapter discusses the complexities involved in the process of making sense of digital storytelling in a particular subject, and testifies to the need of empirical educational research analysing the process, challenges and effects of introducing digital storytelling in the classroom across the educational span.

Simge Esin Orhun discusses the effects of the digital turn in design education and argues for the need of revising the traditional approaches in this field. Her chapter describes the Communication Design Program, an educational initiative based on storytelling in which digital media are used to facilitate youth participation in the use of cultural knowledge in the transformation of meanings.

Julie Faulkner and **Greg Curran** report on their experience as educators not only aware of the risks associated with the uncritical introduction of digital technology in education, but also committed to developing its emancipative affordances. In their chapter, they give a closer look to the conditions in which these emancipative affordances may be actualised in the construction of meanings associated with personal identity.

Gloria Gómez-Diago suggests a conceptual shift from storytelling to storymaking, arguing that while the former is based on a linear mode of communication, storymaking describes a communicative environment resulting from a shift in emphasis from investigative and writing skills to new collaborative and participatory skills. In her chapter, the author describes the use of storymaking as an environment for learning in which students can become aware and gain control of conceptual, procedural and tacit knowledge.

Finally, the linkage between critical uses storytelling and critical pedagogy is explicit in the chapter of **Susana Tosca**, **Anne Katrine Nørgaard Isholdt** and **Niklas Tarp-Petzke**. Their chapter recounts an experiment, inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which social media are used as a tool to teach literature in a Danish high school. The authors coined the notion of "social media storytelling" to describe the practice through which a social medium is used as technological infrastructure for role playing – and role playing itself as a participatory approach to a Danish medieval ballad.

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