

Making digital stories by tablet devices to connect thoughts for earthquake disaster recovery

-A study from Bridge! Media 311 project-

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Abstract: Bridge! Media 311 project (BM311 project) began in 2011 with the intent to collect people's thoughts and wishes for recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. University students would record videos of reconstruction work in affected and non-affected areas and share them nationwide. This study describes a 3-day media workshop held in February 2013 on the use of tablet devices, with student participants from non-affected areas in Niigata and Hiroshima. The participants visited the devastated city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi to make "digital stories" of their thoughts after seeing and hearing, and brought them back to their hometowns to convey their findings to a wider audience. Students conducted fieldwork in Inshinomaki by taking photos of the disaster site and interviewing people about the tsunami and how they have lived since it happened. After that, they reflected on their experiences together and made short slide movies adapting the format of "digital storytelling" to our purpose. Our study shows how we have designed the workshop to help participants express their thoughts, and further shows what students learned. The possibility of using tablet devices for media expression is also discussed.

Keywords: *Digital storytelling, Exchange Learning, Media Literacy, Media Workshop, Disaster Information*

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1. Study Objectives

Bridge! Media 311 project (BM311 project) began in 2011 with the intent to collect people's thoughts and wishes for recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. University students would record videos of reconstruction work in affected and non-affected areas and share them nationwide.

This study describes a 3-day media workshop held in February 2013 on the use of tablet devices, with student participants from non-affected areas in Niigata and Hiroshima. The participants visited the devastated city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi to make "digital stories" of their thoughts after seeing and hearing, and brought them back to their hometowns to convey their findings to a wider audience.

Students conducted fieldwork in Ishinomaki by taking photos of the disaster site and interviewing people about the tsunami and how they have lived since it happened. After that, they reflected on their experiences together and made short slide movies adapting the format of "digital storytelling" to our purpose. Even though it generally signifies any computer-based digital narratives such as motion pictures and computer games, the digital storytelling we took here is a particular practice based on a workshop to facilitate video making for common people's narratives. The practice began in the early 1990s from California in US and has had spread around the world¹. In the workshop, participants create short video stories for self-expression basically using photos and their own narrations.

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2. Programs of the BM311 project

We designed a 3-day workshop for university students who live in non-devastated places, Niigata and Hiroshima. Chart 1 is a depiction of the design of the workshop. On the first day, participants gathered in a public media center called Sendai Mediatheque, which is located in Sendai, the capital city of the disaster-stricken Miyagi prefecture. Visiting students showed videos of reconstruction work that they had shot in their hometowns, and discussed the videos and reconstruction activities together with Sendai residents. The videos are planned to archive on the Web in the Center for Remembering 3.11 (<http://recorder311.smt.jp/recorder311/>).

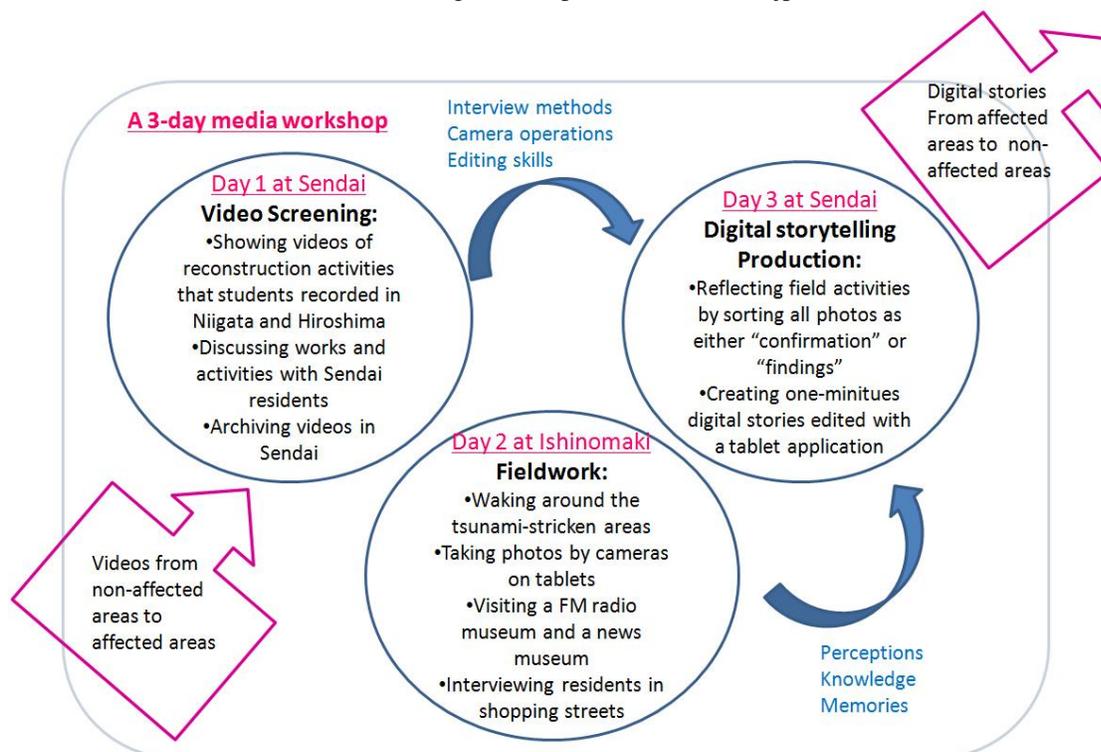


Chart1 Design of a 3-day media workshop of the BM311 project in 2013

¹ For details of the world movement of digital storytelling, see Hartley and McWilliam (2009) and Tsuchiya (2013).

On the second day, participants took tablet devices and began fieldwork in Ishinomaki-shi, which had suffered heavy tsunami damage. First, they walked around the tsunami-stricken areas near the sea to observe the sights with their own eyes. Then, they used the tablets to take photos of whatever caught their attention (Photo A, B, C). After that, they visited a community FM station, Radio Ishinomaki, and a news museum, Ishinomaki NEWSsee, with its exhibit of handwritten newspapers published just after the earthquakes. They listened to staff accounts of what happened on March 11 and in the days of suffering that followed, and how they kept reporting through aftershocks and power outages. At last, they visited shopping streets in several groups. Each group interviewed local residents who reopened liquor and butcher shops after the tsunami had closed them. They also talked to new residents who were working to reconstruct the towns and start new businesses.



Photo A



Photo B



Photo C

On the third day, participants gathered in Sendai again to make videos based on their fieldwork experiences of the previous day. This activity was designed to facilitate students' reflections and the recording of their memories. At first, they sorted their photos as either "confirmation" or "findings" (Photo D) "Confirmation" photos included scenes that they had already expected to find before they actually visited the affected areas, for example, mountains of rubble and collapsed houses (Photo E). Such images had been pre-formed by media such as TV reports, newspaper coverage and Web information. The "findings" category included unexpected scenes such as a sign showing the height of the tsunami water, a placement of flowers in tribute, and new food stands (Photo F). Tablet devices were again used to accomplish the sorting. By creating "confirmation" and "findings" folders, students reflected on what they saw, found, and thought in Ishinomaki.



Photo D

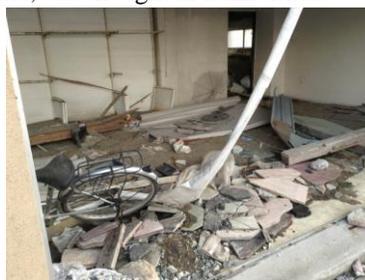


Photo E



Photo F

After the individuals shared their reflections, they made presentations in groups of three or four, and reported on why they labeled the scenes as "confirmation" or "findings" (Photo G). During these presentations, audience members took notes on feelings and comments such as empathy or surprise, and the questions that arose (Photo H). Group members also commented on presenters' selections and discussed the scenes and their experiences of the previous day. Through this group reflection, students gained a wider point of view on Ishinomaki and deepened their understanding of current situations in the affected areas.



Photo G



Photo H



Photo I

After reflection, they used a video editing application on the tablets to create one-minute digital stories, with the goal of bringing their memories and thoughts of the disaster and current conditions back to their hometowns. They each made three sequences of two or three photos each². After completing sequence worksheets, they started up a video editor, inserted their photos, and recorded a narration in their own voices (Photo I). The files were then edited into complete narrated video slideshows. At the end of the workshop, they showed their digital stories and shared their comments with each other.

3. Digital stories made by students

The students of Niigata University made six digital stories which consisted of 6 to 15 photos, each about one minute long. All the students were shocked to see a real landscape damaged by the earthquake and tsunami. They learned how their knowledge of the disaster area had been wrong or incomplete. Their digital stories in the end seemed to be motivated by gaps between what they had imagined and what they actually saw.

“They are all alive” by Haruna Ejiri focused on people who were struggling to revive their town. She was deeply impressed by their varied activities and their strong passion. “We shall recover!” by Azusa Kobayashi also described people confronting hard situations, such as the journalists of community media who had managed to publish handwritten newspapers for the suffering inhabitants. She expressed her strong wish that they recover. “The disaster and people” by Takahiro Matsui also expressed how moved he was by the firm faith of some people while facing difficulties. But he also described people who could not stand hardship and confined themselves to their rooms. He discovered the wide variations of feelings among the earthquake victims. “Until people smile again in Ishinomaki” by Arika Nagata focused on a family running a butcher shop. She grieved for the miserable conditions in the town and swore to continue supporting them until they could smile again. “Ishinomaki can teach something” by Noriko Takahashi bears witness to the actual damage from the earthquake and tsunami that the student could see and understand. There was great controversy about how much of the damaged buildings should be kept as commemorative remains. She hoped that many buildings would be preserved and many future visitors would learn from them as she had done. “Understanding” by Wakako Yoshii questioned what she had known about the earthquake and what she understood after seeing the disaster area. She realized the importance of trying to imagine the thoughts, desires, and sorrow of people in the wake of the disaster.

Students at the Hiroshima University of Economics created four digital stories. Like the students of Niigata University, they were shocked by the reality of Ishinomaki, more specifically, the gap between the city’s actual conditions and the mediated images they had received from the television, newspapers, and other media reports. Their stories hold in common an attempt to show, as far as possible, the reality of Ishinomaki based on what they had seen and heard.

“My thoughts after seeing and hearing in an affected area,” created by Kohei Hisamichi, emphasizes the actual height of the tsunami by using photos of signs in affected areas. After showing the severity of the damage, he also presented the words of a person who managed a food stand and was devoted to the reconstruction of the shopping area. He felt a deep empathy for this person’s words, “We just do what we can,” and began considering what he himself could do. In “Places I wish to recover,” Takeyuki Nakagawa first laments the overwhelming destruction. However, he also discovered aspects that remained unchanged, such as sculptures of anime heroes, people’s will to live, and the beautiful scenery, and whispered about how he can contribute toward restoring the Ishinomaki that was. “Forward,” by Fuka Ohhata, describes the harsh damages wrought by the disaster, contrasting

² The story creation based on several sequences uses the method of Media Conte as a reference, which has developed a dialogic story weaving model. See <http://mediaconte.net/>

the current devastated landscape with an old picture depicting many houses and buildings standing side by side. Expressing her shock, she also conveyed the active features of Ishinomaki. She introduces persons who reopened shops and launched a new cafe, and she showed appreciation for people's endeavors to move forward one step at a time. In "Going forward, Ishinomaki," Minae Seto carefully draws on still existing damages, such as a bent guard rail and leaning buildings close to the river where the water from the tsunami surged back. She also showed several strong messages written on a road and a wall, including: "We are going to recover" and "We are never defeated." She was moved by people's strong will under such terrible conditions, and saw the strength to move on.

4. What students learned

The students learned much during this project. We will use their reflections and comments to analyze what they felt and learned.

Firstly, all the students were shocked by the terrible situation in the disaster area. They found the town more damaged than they had imagined, mainly because their imaginings came from news reports in various media. Immediately after the disaster, TV news programs devoted a huge quantity of broadcasting time to reporting on the disaster and the victims with sensational pictures. However, because the coverage of the disaster gradually diminished over time, and the students believed the recovery might be making steady progress and the towns might be restored to peace and ordinary life. The students learned that the facts were very different. Moreover, some became convinced of the importance of seeking information about the disaster proactively, rather than watching TV passively.

Making digital stories from their observations brought up different feelings in the students. Using one tablet per student, they took many photos and recorded the comments of inhabitants that impressed them. In the process, they realized that it was arbitrary and intentional to choose photos and decide how to reconstruct them in a narrative. They learned that every visual image is made according to the intention of the image maker. They also came to understand that their own thoughts became clearer as a result of making digital stories to express their feelings to others.

5. Conclusion

We designed a 3-day workshop for university students living in the areas not affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake to deepen their understanding of the affected areas. Students were shocked by the reality and reconsidered the damage caused by the disaster. Showing compassion, some students indicated their will to do something themselves to aid reconstruction. This does not mean that they fully understand the affected areas, but that they at least realize that the images they had of the disaster were far removed from the reality thereof, and that they have started thinking about what has actually happened. Moreover, they gained a critical view of the existing media environment. Many students voluntarily felt they had to convey what they had seen and heard. In fact, students of the Hiroshima University of Economics reported their experiences in a community FM radio program at Asaminami-ku in Hiroshima-shi.

It turns out that creating digital stories was an effective method for reflecting field activities. In addition, the movie file repeats their perceptions and thoughts so that they are not forgotten, and this can be shown to many people at any time in any place. Moreover, in this workshop, we used tablet devices to take photos, record narration, and edit videos, that is, for all aspects of the digital story making. This all-in-one mobile environment helps participants complete their work in a limited period of time. This is one possibility with regard to using tablets, which facilitate the liberation of an individual's media expression.

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