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Digital storytelling and the pedagogy of belonging: reimagining inclusion in higher education

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1 Introduction

The incorporation of technology in higher education has transformed the way students interact, communicate, and learn. Of these technological advancements, digital storytelling has been at the forefront as a communicative practice of power—blending personal narrative with technology to enhance reflection, creativity, and connection (Dutta and Keith, 2023). As the universities across the globe are faced with the problems of inclusion, diversity, and engagement, the practice of digital storytelling provides a timely solution through developing a pedagogy of belonging. This opinion piece establishes that the practice of digital storytelling may be strategically located within institutional communication models and pedagogical frameworks to foster more inclusive, engaged, and empathetic learning communities (Petousi et al., 2022).

Although the function of social media to promote engagement and trust has been investigated in the literature, the potential of student-initiated narrative construction is less exploited (Manganello and Baldacci, 2024). Digital narrative has the potential to not just operate as an engine for storytelling but also a way of reimagining belonging in the learning environment. Based on communication theory, educational psychology, and institutional practice, this paper critically assesses the potential strengths and weaknesses of using digital storytelling as a mechanism for inclusivity and outlines a framework for its implementation.

2 The concept of belonging in higher education

A sense of belonging is a foundational component of student success and wellbeing (Dunleavy and Burke, 2019). Crawford et al. (2023) describe belonging as an individual's perceived social support and connection within an institution. Numerous studies confirm that when students feel seen and valued, their academic performance, retention, and emotional wellbeing improve (Strayhorn, 2021; Waya et al., 2017).

Though of high importance, numerous higher education settings fail to create inclusive climates for diverse student populations. Marginalized groups—international students, first-generation college students, students of minoritized groups—too commonly experience isolation and invisibility (Peček et al., 2008). Often, institutions turn to static representations or top-down message campaigns to address these issues, which may fail to speak to student experience in meaningful ways.
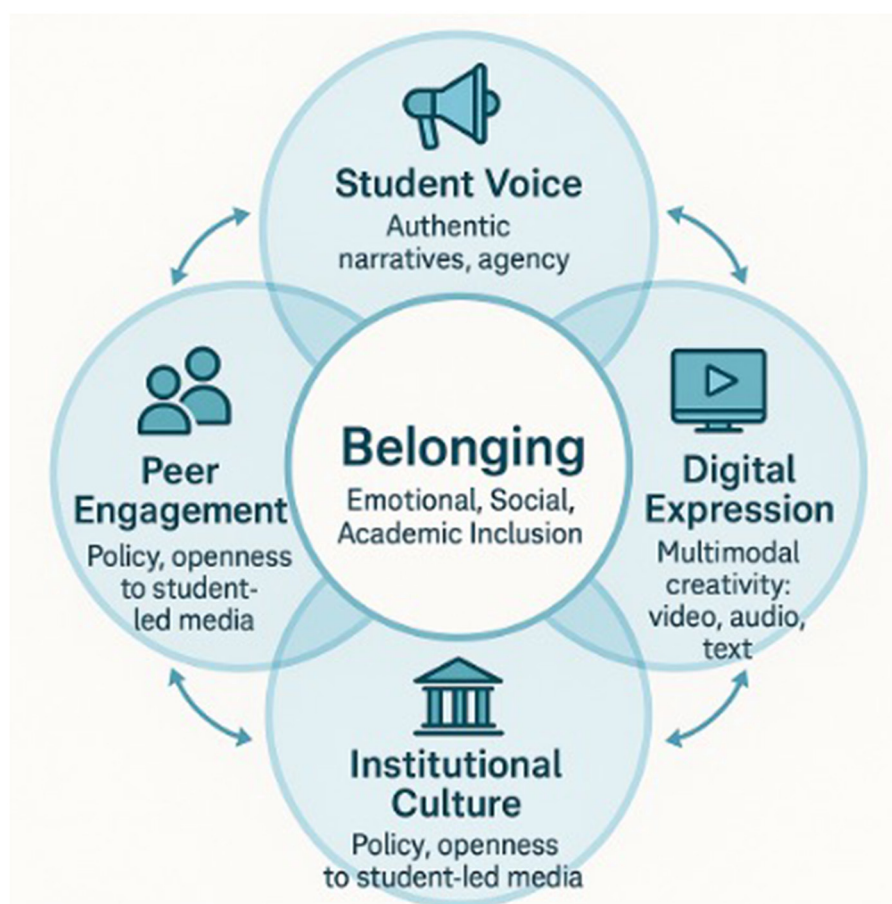
FIGURE 1
Conceptual model of digital storytelling's impact on institutional inclusion.

The conceptual model of digital storytelling's impact on institutional inclusion is visualized in Figure 1. The concept of a "pedagogy of belonging" invites educators and institutions to embed belonging into curriculum, communication, and culture (Koo et al., 2024). This pedagogy acknowledges the social, emotional, and identity-related dimensions of learning and proposes that belonging should be co-created through active participation and authentic storytelling.

3 Digital storytelling as a communication tool

Digital storytelling is a multimodal method that combines personal narrative with video, images, sound, and text. First popularized in community-based education and journalism, its applications have since expanded into mainstream pedagogy. Its alignment with constructivist learning theory—where knowledge is actively constructed by learners—makes it especially relevant for inclusive education (Shin, 2016; Smeda et al., 2014).

A student who shares a digital story about navigating higher education as a migrant, for instance, does not just communicate a personal experience; they contribute to the broader institutional narrative. These stories humanize abstract concepts like inclusion, resilience, and diversity, offering both peers and educators insights that traditional forms of communication cannot. Unlike institutional campaigns, digital storytelling decentralizes authority and amplifies student voices from within the community (Ruiz-Pérez, 2023).

An experimental research by Pellas (2023) demonstrates how storytelling platforms can help students develop self-efficacy, agency, and academic confidence. Moreover, by engaging with tools such as video editing, scripting, and online publishing, students also develop technical skills essential for 21st-century communication.

4 Institutional integration and practical challenges

For digital storytelling to move from the margins to the mainstream in higher education, institutions must integrate it into official communication strategies, student development programs, and curriculum design (Bryant, 2023). Some universities have piloted digital storytelling labs or allowed students to take over official social media channels temporarily, as seen in recent European models (Galioto et al., 2025).

However, institutional adoption is not without challenges. Key concerns include:

- **Privacy and ethics**: students may unintentionally share sensitive content. Clear ethical guidelines and informed consent processes are critical.
- **Digital divide**: not all students have equal access to technology or the skills to create high-quality media. Training and resource allocation are essential (Gulzar et al., 2024).
- **Evaluation frameworks**: measuring the impact of digital storytelling on belonging or inclusion is complex and may require mixed-method approaches.

Despite these obstacles, institutions that invest in this practice report enhanced student engagement and a more authentic institutional image.

5 Constructive reflections and future directions

Digital storytelling is not a cure-all for exclusion, but it is an earnest step toward inclusive and participatory academic communication. To move toward implementation, the following should be considered by universities:

1. **Establish storytelling labs**: create campus spaces where students receive mentorship and access to media production tools.
2. **Integrate into courses**: encourage departments, especially within the humanities and social sciences, to embed storytelling assignments into coursework.
3. **Use in orientation and transition programs**: stories from current students can support new students' integration (Austen et al., 2020).
4. **Collaborate across departments**: connect communication, education, and IT departments to ensure holistic support.

Future studies should investigate the long-term influence of storytelling on institutional culture and validate scalable models across cultures. Cross-institution partnerships and public sharing (e.g., YouTube series, podcasting) can amplify influence and exposure.es.

6 Discussion

This piece has put forward digital storytelling as an emancipatory tool for building inclusive communication cultures in higher education. By infusing the institutional narrative with student voice, universities are capable of moving from a performativity of inclusion to genuine engagement. Belonging pedagogy, made possible through the medium of digital, is a road to equity, identity affirmation, and respect.

Based on theory and augmented by developing practice, this frame encourages institutions to rethink how they represent who belongs at the university—and to whom the university belongs. Amidst a time of unprecedented technological disruption, increasing demands for justice and inclusion, digital storytelling is a participatory, compassionate, and future-oriented answer.

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