

PROJECT REPORT

DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT FUND

“IF I KNEW THEN...”: MESSAGES TO MY FORMER SELF

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I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This digital storytelling project consists of a series of anecdotes, lessons, and messages to each narrator's younger selves based on their vast life experiences. The narrators are comprised of senior citizens at the Ohio Eastern Star Home, an assisted living facility in Mount Vernon. Each participant in this digital archive was kind and willing enough to share tidbits of stories, regrets, and wisdom that they have collected throughout their lives. The goal of this project was to gain the insights of this older generation and pass their advice along to the younger generations.

The website is the product of a Kenyon College class project for ANTH 327: Narrative Lives during the fall semester of 2017. The students invested a considerable amount of time interviewing the participants at the home, and in doing so gained their trust, allowing for meaningful information to be shared and stored on this online database.

The 12 residents profiled corresponded to the 12 students in the course:

- Alessandro Russo
- Charents Apkarian
- Maria Brescia-Weiler
- Caroline Dellheim
- Sabrina Greene
- Taylor Hazan
- Isabel Kotlowitz
- Griffin Walsh
- Erin LeVar
- Mary Moore
- Catherine Wessel
- Amanda Lyn

Each student was responsible for a “Digital Oral History” exercise in which they prepared their narrator for an interview that focused on things that they wish they had known when they were younger. These interviews were recorded on videotape, and Alessandro and I edited them for continuity.

II. EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

By far, the biggest surprise was the initial reluctance by many of the residents to appear on camera, presumably due to being self-conscious about their appearance in front of a wider audience. While they were more than willing to be audio-recorded, the possibility of having their lives made publicly available on the Internet was daunting until they were reassured that nothing would be included that they did not approve.

Another related phenomenon was how frequently many of the narrators contradicted on video what they had previously shared with the students on audio. These included lies of omission (ie not mentioning unpleasant memories) as well as lies of commission (ie claiming that they had idyllic childhoods or happy marriages). Perhaps because they were aware that others might see or hear their words, the narrators wished to portray themselves and their family members as positively as possible.

III. TIPS AND STRATEGIES

As a way to alleviate some of the anxiety and nervousness by the narrators, my students had them complete self-reflection exercises before the interviews. These included a handwritten (or, in some cases, transcribed) letter to their former selves and their own obituary. As a result, the narrators had the opportunity to carefully think about their responses before appearing on camera.

The narrators were also more likely to participate and feel comfortable with a less intrusive presence in terms of the film crew and camera equipment. Initially, three or four of us walked into their small rooms with a collection of lighting and sound equipment. One elderly lady even asked us if we were planning on making a Hollywood movie. After the first few (unsuccessful) interviews, I realized that only one or two individuals with the bare minimum of equipment would elicit a more natural response. I also deliberately decided to wait outside in order to avoid the temptation to talk over my students or hijack their interviews entirely. As a pedagogical lesson, it is important for the students to learn from their own mistakes.

Lastly, in order to maximize the quality of the final product, the student researchers must take ownership of the project. Unfortunately, a number of them perceived their involvement as a perfunctory chore and, as a result, did the bare minimum. Those who recognized and appreciated the utility and efficacy of this project took a more invested role, which was critical to their success.

IV. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I intend to teach Narrative Lives every other year, and I will make this digital storytelling component a permanent part of the course. As the years accumulate, this archive will grow.

This digital archive also serves as a template for a more ambitious project that I am currently developing with my colleague, Tomas Gallareta Cervera, a visiting professor in the anthropology department, which will explore the intersection of rural life and archaeological landscape in the Puuc zone located in the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. Our objective will be to collect oral histories from the “Puuc Angels,” a group of local farmers who have taken it upon themselves to record and protect the archaeological richness of their rural landscapes for the past 50 years. We will be co-teaching a course next spring titled “Digital Storytelling in the Yucatan.”

On a final note, I would like to express my gratitude to the Center for Innovative Pedagogy for generously funding this project. My students and I benefited from the experience immensely. Hopefully, the residents of Eastern Star Home who graciously shared parts of their lives enjoyed it as well.