Preventing early school leaving through digital stories and maps

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Introduction

Tell Your Story aims at exploring the use of digital storytelling and story mapping in education to contrast early school leaving.

Well-told stories are very powerful artifacts. Digital storytelling is therefore a suitable and effective means for young people to communicate their experiences.

Storytelling is defined as a short form of digital media production, which allows people to share particular aspects of their lives. “Media” may include full-motion videos with sound, animation, stills, audio, etc., which individuals can use to tell a story or present an idea. Digital stories are often presented in compelling, interactive and emotionally engaging formats. A recent Web 2.0 development is represented by the use of maps and connected media for digital storytelling; for instance,
the “Story Maps” initiative has opened the possibility for anyone to tell and share their story (storymaps.arcgis.com/en/) and in particular, Story Maps can combine interactive maps and multimedia content into user experiences.

Story Maps uses geographical location as a means of organizing and presenting information and tells the story of a place, event, issue, trend, or pattern in a geographic context. Users can combine interactive maps with other content – text, photos, video and audio – within user experiences that are basic and intuitive (ESRI, 2014).

This project has the dual aim of:

**Motivating early school leavers to re-enter lifelong learning**

**Preventing young people who are at risk from prematurely dropping out of school or vocational education**

**Beneficiaries:**

- Adult educators, teachers and youth workers working with young people with a background of (potential) early school-leaving;
- Early school-leavers - aged 15-25 - motivated to re-enter education, young people at risk of dropping out;
- NGOs working in education, policymakers, researchers, academic and education institutions.
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The concept of early school leaving

The concept of Early School Leaving (ESL) is quite ill-defined. There are many possible meanings, each of which depends on the context where ESL takes place and measures are used.

The EU developed an indicator to monitor progress on early leaving. It has been created as part of a political compromise. It enables EU level comparisons but it is not sufficient to monitor at national and regional levels. The EU definition of early leaving combines three main dimensions: an age parameter of young people (18 to 24), their current status (not in education and training) and a variable about education achievement (completion of upper secondary education). This definition...
was designed for international comparisons between different education systems across the EU.

**Factors affecting early school leavers**

“School failure is not the consequence of only one cause, but from a combination and addition of various obstacles and disadvantages preventing the path of the pupils all along their lives” (OECD, 2012b).

Scientists, educators and policymakers have started to look for common characteristics of early school leavers, on the basis of which might indicate the potential risk factors. Much of the research tends to focus on avoiding the stereotyped views of those who have dropped out.

Many factors can cause the ESL phenomenon. Cedefop (2016a) suggest there are four groups of them:

01. Factors related to the individual and their family background
02. Factors related to education and training
03. Factors related to employment
04. Other factors, like changing school, moving home

The Cedefop study focuses on the contribution that vocational education and training (VET) can make in reducing ESL. They highlight the need for better data and its systematic use for shaping targeted policy to tackle early leaving.
EL-Mahdi and Moullet (2016) examine the characteristics of schools to explain their role in the dropout rate. They confirm ESL is more frequent in vocational secondary schools than in general and technical secondary schools and they attempt to understand the causes of early school leavers in order to prevent early school leavers. They identify 4 different categories of early-school leavers as i) the unexpected, as they have a similar profile as the non-ESL, ii) the disengaged, who do not graduate, iii) the abandoned, who are predominantly male and iv) the expected, where dropping out is predictable.

**Non-formal education, method to prevent early school leaving**

Non-formal learning methods are frequently cited as successful solutions for working with students at risk from leaving education and training. For instance, Bezjak (2014) explores the informal or alternative pedagogical approaches that proved to be efficient and effective in working with young dropouts, based on the findings of an international research project entitled “Success at School”, which was conducted between 2012 and 2014 in Slovenia.

Caruso (2015) confirmed facilitating the recognition and validation of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning and its permeability with formal education pathways was very important.

An approach for the validation of non-formal learning scenarios for young students less than 16 years old located in a
formal setting, i.e. in secondary schools, and at risk of becoming ESL was presented.

Why is it important to integrate digital storytelling and Story Maps in educational processes?

Storytelling can be used as a didactical approach in education. Its main strengths are in their appeal, variety and accessibility. Stories are also engaging and easy to remember. Storytelling helps to share experiences, explain events and phenomena and transfer knowledge.

Narratives and stories constitute an alternative approach to knowledge and learning. The narrative provides a cognitive organizational scheme through which the narrator can subjectively organise, shape, and structure experiences into a coherent whole. Bezjak (2014) reviews the Storymapping pedagogical approaches that young people have an affinity with. Four main characteristics of the approach are identified, interactive content, more dynamism in the ways of teaching, less traditional pedagogical approaches and challenges that provoke greater creativity and empowerment to participate in decisions on many aspects of their lives. Narratives and stories are powerful aids to understanding and reflection as they can give attention to feelings, thoughts, and emotions.

According to Strachan and Mitchell (2014) story mapping is increasingly being used in education. They studied teacher’s perceptions of Story Maps as effective teaching
tools and resources for learning. Esri, a company providing the Story Maps tool for creating and hosting web-based story mapping, had reported in 2015 that they had provided over 1000 accounts to schools to facilitate the use of web maps and story mapping in education.

A Story Map is a graphic organizer that helps students (and teachers) present different media elements. Thus a story is created by gathering multimedia elements that allow the storyteller to identify and develop story characters, a plot, a setting, and in the case of early school leaving, a problem and hopefully a solution.

Research by Barber (2016) explored how the creative practice of digital storytelling can promote critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, and civic engagement. Other studies have shown positive outcomes such as learning and reinforcing understanding of content, facilitating discussion, comprehending difficult material (Wang (2012) and Zhan, 2012) and development of twenty-first-century literacy skills like research, writing, technology and teamwork. Also noted as being of importance was the ease with which digital stories can now be created and distributed to a broad audience (Strachan and Mitchell, 2014).
In our experience, early school leaving can be prevented by enhancing communication and digital skills among the youngsters.

Tell Your Story aims at exploring the use of digital storytelling and story mapping in education to explore early school leaving, and has followed a logical framework during the two years period.
The most important was the impact on the early school-leavers who were potentially motivated to re-enter education and training by:

- Reflecting on their own life stories, the consequences of their decision to drop out, and the benefits of alternative pathways;

- Increasing their self-esteem through being proud of their capacity to produce and publish high-quality digital content;

- Acquiring key competencies (digital competence, communication in the mother tongue, language competence) which increases their employability and may be the starting point into new training and career pathways.
Producing training modules: “How to tell a life story” and “Media production skills”, August 2017

The whole team approached the design of the training modules with the full involvement of the 6 partner countries - from Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Slovenia and United Kingdom - and informed by the previous desktop research conducted.

Blended mobility, Palermo (Italy), September 2017

During the transnational capacity building seminar, the whole partnership had the opportunity to pre-pilot the training modules.

A number of improvements were identified and addressed over the following months to improve them and inform the piloting.

Evaluation framework, December 2017

An initial evaluation framework was produced, discussed and amended, this initial framework contains mainly quantitative data, later on, the partnership agreed to include an element of qualitative feedback.
Preventing early school leaving through digital Story Maps, May-August 2018

Each partner implemented “My decision, my action, my future” workshops for preventing Early school leaving through digital stories and maps.

Piloting phase, February-March 2018

A number of pilots were conducted in all partner’s countries, with different approaches and different demographics to produce the best comparative approach possible.

Online exhibition of digital life stories, July 2018

Each partner organisation engaged a group of early school leavers in the creation of multimedia stories and maps.
**Piloting phase**

Based on the different modules, each partner organisation engaged with a group of early school leavers and tested the modules on the spot.

During the piloting, a group of young people, mostly with a background of early school-leaving shared their life anecdotes about what led to their dropping out of the school system, and the consequences arising from this decision. They exchanged the digital stories and maps they produced in the project and engaged in joint multimedia production.

In the end, they shared their digital Story Maps with the other young people from partner countries.
In general we can assume from the initial data, that participants in all countries feel comfortable and close to the idea of storytelling, they all have been exposed to a certain element of technology and they do not feel confident with the more specific topics of story mapping & data protection. From this final data, we can imply that the storytelling aspect became relevant for most of the participants and that the delivery itself has been affected by technicalities and difficulties, a degree on equity process should be involved to make the workshop fair for all participants.

Feedback from participants

What did surprise me?

“*Myself, stories from others, having found the courage to speak about myself, be able to open myself to the others.*”

“It was nice to do an initial research of our own stories, learn that all of us has our own story and be able to show it at the end.”
What did I learn and bring with me?

“To create Story Map through ArcGIS platform, mobile applications to create video, to use better a computer (digital skills), the courage to express myself, the memory of this week, some knowledge about privacy and author’s rights.”

“TYS activities have been very useful. During these days I learn new thing about myself through the Story Maps.”

“I got more friends and more experience in storytelling and Story Maps.”

What did I enjoy less?

“To speak about being unwell, platform ArcGIS, to have to do a Story Maps about my life, to speak in front of others including youth workers.”
What did I like?

“I liked everything, everything except ArcGIS platform.”

“I liked methodology used, platform ArcGIS, I liked the project because it allowed me to gain self-confidence, I liked doing my Story Maps, I liked working in team.”

“It has been really nice experience even if a bit embarrassing sometimes, but it gets gradually easier. I’m happy I’ve learned to use this very nice tool.”

“I particularly enjoyed “Mapping the journey of life” session. This was really highlighting the importance of storytelling and made the utilisation of the IC tool easier.”

What were my difficulties?

“To speak about my life, some difficulties with ArcGIS.”

“I didn’t like the first days’ activities. In my opinion, these activities are more suitable for children and all other target group. However, the tool we used and the stories we made were very interesting, useful and enjoying.”
Feedbacks from trainers

There were a good number of relevant comments in the trainers’ questionnaires that we were able to put together and summarise:

◆ The size of the group - in between 10 and 15 participants as the very maximum

◆ Unanimous mention of how the workshop increased the self-awareness of participants. The storytelling related content is also mentioned by almost all participants on how positive impact has the activity overall

◆ Shared comments about more time needed to deliver this more efficiently

◆ Shared comments about the ArcGIS tool not being fit for purpose

◆ Shared comments about the mapping aspect not bringing enough attention or not relevant for the particular users.

◆ Shared comments about the group, the bond, the relationships created and its positive impact
Prevention module

This third learning module capitalizes on the outputs produced in the piloting of O2 How To Tell a (life) Story and O3 Media Production Skills. While the latter informal learning activities are targeted at those young people who have already dropped out of education and training, the local workshops were addressed to those who are at risk of leaving school early.

The multimedia life stories produced by the early school leavers were used as the basis for developing a workshop design for young people at risk to prevent them from taking the same decision and/or reflect on the decision made.

The life stories have been discussed in workshops at school or youth organisations and the motivation and consequences of individual early school leaving biographies have been reflected and related
to the own life situation. The aim was to give young people the opportunity to reflect on the value and importance of education in their future. During the workshops, the young people went through the most significative Story Maps and got acquainted with the content, discussed all important points of the story, discern the message of the story by answering to questions such as:

Thus, dropping out from school can be “simulated” in a safe environment and alternative pathways can be developed. The developed concept was tested and evaluated with groups of 15-20 young people in schools or youth organisations in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Slovenia and United Kingdom.
Online exhibition

The Story Maps the young early school leavers have produced are in an online exhibition that is available via Tell Your Story’s website: tellyourstorymap.eu/stories/

This exhibition is a key output of the project as it:

- Raises self-esteem of the producers as a consequence of showing their products,
- Addresses peers and invites them to interact with the stories and maps,
- Demonstrates the potential of using stories and maps to teachers, educators and youth workers as a methodology to re-engage early school leavers.

Thus, the exhibition sensitizes young people for the problems connected to dropping out and so contributes directly to the prevention of early school leaving. Secondly, it motivates teachers, educators and youth
workers to launch similar activities with their groups of young people.

An online campaign has been launched on social media’s and website of partners. The aim was to have a bigger impact on young people and sensitize them on the topic that usually is not tackled.

tellyourstorymap.eu/stories

Our favourite stories

Joely’s Story
Joely’s Story (public) (Language: English) A story told using video, the short film is entirely produced, shot and edited by Joely, using her own voice and narrative style to guide us along a pathway of suspense. Facebook Twitter...

Angela’s Stories
Angela’s Story (public) (Language: Italiano) She tells about her link with school, not always easy for her, and her choice to learn the job she wants: becoming a cook. Facebook Twitter...

On my road
On my road (public) (Language: Français) Zouina was born in Martinique and left the island to go to France in order to try to study, but she did not succeed in it. She is now looking for a training as an intern.

Shannon’s Story
Shannon’s Story (public) (Language: English)

Directed by Guillaume
Directed by Guillaume (public) (Language: Français) Guillaume got first produced in...

Another kind of Cinderella
Another kind of Cinderella (public) (Language:...
The overall experience of the piloting clearly validates the framework (Cf. Learning module: How to tell a (life) story and Learning module: Media production skills) as a supportive and efficient tool to raise awareness, self-esteem, and social inclusion.

The sense of belonging and the improvement in personal and interpersonal skills is widely demonstrated.

All the main indicators relevant to a sustainable application in schools as a prevention module have been addressed. These fall within the scope of problems already foreseen by the partnership experts. Given the limitations of the piloting phase in the time frame allowed, this is considered to be a positive informative outcome.

All elements of the curriculum were of some use and/or inspired new solutions for local and specific implementation.
**Before to start the activities**
the trainer should carefully prepare and pay attention to the following:

Initial profiling of participants: it is almost demonstrated along the whole study and pilot that an initial dose of information about the single participant and the whole group could help the delivery,

Equity and equality: as on one side to have a diverse group is a key aspect for the success of the framework, at the same time it brings an extra element not foreseen, we need to apply a singular attention to both equity and equality in order to give every participant the same opportunities,

Creating the condition for creating a story,

Duration of the activities: it is better to make sessions of maximum 2 hours to keep participants concentrated and focus on what they are doing,

Size of the group: it is much better to work with small groups. Maximum 6-8 young people, so you can really support each of them in their storytelling writing and creating process. For the target group we are working with, they really need attention and support individually.
At the beginning of the activities, the trainer should:

Pre-arranged the structure,

Gives clear instructions for work facilitated the preparation of activities for mentors and the provision of information, as the participants were able to promptly ask questions and get clarifications.

The participants were satisfied that the implementation of the activity was concrete, with the space for both: the personal experience of the workshop – for additional information, as well as for questions and discussions about possible ways of carrying out an individual activity.

During the activities, the recommendations are:

Take some time to listen to participant’s story: one important and useful competence for the trainer in order to deliver this kind of workshop is the active listening. Some participants have accepted to share a tough period in their lives. The trainer should listen and not show any kind of judgment and make this rules respected by all participants.

Support the young people in creating the Story Maps: they are used to be connected on social media, but not to platform such as ArcGIS. In fact, it would be useful to have a trainer 1 or 2 participants while it came to put into Story Maps their stories. The trainer should give the participants time to create or search on internet content for videos, photos to insert in their Story Maps.

At the end of the session, it is recommended to make an evaluation and collect feedbacks from participants.
Principles for an effective use of the Story Maps

Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) Story Maps are web applications based on maps and other multimedia, which can be effectively used in learning and teaching.

Storymapping has been used in classrooms for a number of years. The subjects covered range from history, literature, and science as well as languages, art and geography. In most cases, teachers reported that relatively little time needs to be spent on the ‘technology’ as Story Maps are easy to use. With as little preparation as one class session, most of the students are then able to use the tools to create Story Maps that explore areas of the curriculum in different ways. For instance,
Story Maps can be used to present the results of research or project work. They can be used to examine timelines, events or inventions with images and comments, or to investigate and map characters in readings or explore texts. It is a great way for students to get a sense of the spatial and temporal relationships of events and ideas.

Esri (2017) describe five principles for the effective use of Story Maps as:

- **Audience suitability**: concerns matching the content of the Story Maps with the intended audience.

- **The appeal**: suggests informing the user of the rationale of location(s) in the Story Map at the beginning of the presentation and saving any links that would lead the user to navigate away from the Story Map until the end of the presentation.

- **User experience**: it requires considering the best format (e.g., scrolling or tabbed webpage) for the story being told.

- **Easy-to-navigate/read**: tips for making interactive maps clear, concise, and visually intuitive.

- **The simplicity of the story**: it advises Story Map authors to strive for simplicity by reducing text and making maps more intelligible through an iterative review process before publishing.
Examples of classroom

Story Maps can be used in situations where the teacher decides upon the learning resources and materials and determines the key elements that the students should identify.

Teachers choose (or create) a Story Map that is most appropriate for the type of work or activity (i.e., fictional or non-fictional) and subject (curriculum area) to be studied. As with other teaching approaches, teachers should model the procedure to ensure that students understand why and how to use it and monitor and support students as they work.

Story Maps can also be used as creative tools where students are tasked with preparing responses to questions and present their findings. Making their own Story Maps helps
students demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter. In this situation, students will use Story Maps to plan, summarize, and write their own main ideas, issues, problems, characters, setting, and plot for a story.

Story Maps are specifically useful for supporting basic student needs, as they improve students’ comprehension, they provide students with a framework for identifying the elements of a story and they help students of varying abilities organize information and ideas efficiently. Research has highlighted the potential usefulness of Storymapping in science communication for non-expert audiences (Patterson and Bickel, 2016), in adopting new technologies in the classroom (Hong, 2014) and engaging citizens on community issues (Santo et al., 2010).

A generic example of Story Map use within a curriculum context is:

1. Teachers introduce the text/story/content to be studied and provide each student with a blank Story Map template.

2. Students begin by understanding the problem or issue to be studied, undertake research on the theme and identify the title of the Story Map they will create.

3. Other components of the Story Maps are mapped out during the brainstorming process. Examples of such key elements are listed on following page:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Element</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Characters / topics** | • Who are the people/content/issues involved?  
• Which ones have major roles/are most important?  
• Which ones were minor/less significant? |
| **Setting** | • Where and when did this take place? Over what period of time? |
| **Plot** | • Problem/Goal: What set events in motion? What problem arose, or what were the key players/areas after?  
• Events/Episodes: the key steps or events that capture the progress of the situation.  
• Resolution/Outcome: How was the problem solved? Was the goal attained? |
| **Theme** | • The larger meaning or importance/conclusion to the story |

4 Students then gather/create information and resources to compose their Story Maps.

5 After the students have completed their Story Maps, they may discuss why each element was recorded and share it using social media.
The most successful pedagogical approaches for the reintegration of early school leavers in education are therefore flexible, inclusive and participatory, tailored to the needs of young people, aimed at the development of their careers, and include a variety of possible approaches, such as mentoring or individual learning plan.

Teaching with Esri Story Maps has both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage is that the Story Maps can easily integrate some traditional teaching tools and techniques as multimedia, maps, and narrative-based learning. Interactive maps and multimedia resources are engaging and encourage self-guided exploration of real-world data and models (Ramasundaram et al., 2005).

Then, Esri Story Maps are interactive, collaborative and cloud-based, making them available over an Internet
connection without the need to download software. Story Maps can also be accessed on desktop, laptop, tablet, or smartphone devices.

This allows Story Maps to reach a large audience or be utilized by many educators and institutions. The creation process is user-friendly and requires no coding. Story Maps are most often freely accessible for the user.

The disadvantages of Story Maps are that they rely on the availability of Internet access, and the scientific peer review process is not yet fully developed to ensure the educational quality of Story Maps' content.

Esri Story Maps cannot replace textbooks, field trips, or laboratory exercises, but they can be designed to offer an augmented reality teaching experience that may improve learning of science concepts.

The Story Maps also offer the added advantages of interactivity, global access, and use on multiple devices. Teaching with Story Maps has significant potential for education in most disciplines and in many contexts.

The use of innovative, interactive storytelling pedagogies at school is a methodology that can on one side motivating early school leavers to re-enter lifelong learning and on the other side preventing young people at risk to prematurely drop out of educational paths.

By stimulating young people's interest, helping them express their difficulties and sharing their experiences, the adult educators, teachers and youth
workers working with young people can easily apply Tell Your Story’s learning activities and play a crucial role in their personal and professional pathway.
Tell Your Story is a 2 years project co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme, Key action 2 – Strategic Partnerships for adult education – aiming at exploring the use of digital storytelling and story mapping in education to contrast early school leaving.

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