Essay

STORIES WITHOUT VISA: DIGITAL STORIES OF HOPE FROM MOROCCO AND TURKEY

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Since the beginning of the Digital Storytelling Unit at Hacettepe University in 2009, the ideas about organizing digital storytelling workshops and the related research, emerged in the dialogues among the Digital Storytelling Unit facilitators and colleagues who are supporters of digital storytelling for community empowerment and who share similar concerns regarding issues like gender, discrimination, politics, etc. The *Stories Without Visa Digital Storytelling and Research Project* is the outcome of such a dialogue between the team and Hakan Ergül from the Faculty of Communication, Hacettepe University. In this brief paper, I talk about the project and what we share.

Journey

The idea of facilitating digital storytelling workshops is the ticket to a journey within one's self and the lives of others. The dialogic organization of a typical digital storytelling workshop run by trained facilitators enable participants to share their stories from their everyday lives and connect to one another. The journey of the <u>Digital Storytelling Unit</u>[1]

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[1] The digital stories created in the digital storytelling workshops facilitated by the unit can be found at <u>www.digitalstoryhub.org</u>

at Hacettepe University was started because of my personal concern about women's stories and my own need to discover an alternative quest to solidarity of who I am as a feminist, academic, mother and daughter in this society. Sharing this concern and having learned the facilitation of a digital storytelling workshop from Christina Spurgeon at Queensland University of Technology, where I later completed my PhD on digital storytelling and women's participation, I have realized that digital storytelling helped me to discover my link to stories. Rather than listening to others tell me their stories and I as a writer transmitting them to others through writing, I find myself enabling an environment where others tell their own stories to be listened to as they want to tell them. My journey with digital storytelling, with the voluntary involvement of friends and colleagues enlarged through the years and as a team we found ourselves in the journey of *Stories without Visa Project* traveling from Ankara to Rabat in January 2017. The establishment of the project goes back two years earlier with Ergül's settlement journey to Morocco. In the first phase of the project, that hosted the digital storytelling workshop and facilitator training for refugees in January 2017, UNHCR Morocco and EgE Faculté de Gouvernance, Sciences, Economiques et Sociales became the project partners of the lead institution, Hacettepe University. In the second phase of the project, in which Young Hopes Rabat Digital Storytelling Workshop was organized with the participation of young refugees in Morocco in 6-8 March 2017 and the Young Hopes Ankara Digital Storytelling Workshop in Turkey with the participation of young refugees on 4-5 April 2017, UNHCR Turkey joined the partner institutions. The correspondence with UNHCR Morocco and EgE for logistic details to host the workshops in Morocco were all managed by project co-ordinator Hakan Ergül. The participants of the first workshop were from the Congo, Ivory Coast, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The participants of the Young Hopes Ankara workshop were from the Congo, Central Africa, Mali, Ivory Coast and Yemen. The participants of the Young Hopes Ankara Workshop were mostly from Syria except one from Iraq.

Starting the project in a country where the team members were also foreign, changed the whole flow of the project with refugees for sure. Language was a major barrier for us on the streets of Rabat as the team members are Turkish mother tongued, second-language English speakers. In the workshop context, we planned to have professional translators of Arabic and French to English. From the beginning of the project preparations Ergül and I had major concerns regarding this component, most probably relying on our earlier experiences with multi-national projects in various

geographical regions. The team is familiar with flexible working hours in order to complete tasks in the course of the digital storytelling workshops. However, the translators in the first workshop were not familiar with community work and thought the activities would be similar to a conference or seminar format. The first morning session of our workshop where we introduced ourselves and our aim with the project to the participants, the translators realized that the task was pretty different from their earlier translation experiences with international organizations. One of the most important assets of a digital storytelling workshop facilitator is finding solutions to unforeseen problems. Managing the problems with the translators of the first workshop needed that skill and the support and trust of the participants.

We use a very simple icebreaker in the beginning of our digital storytelling workshops. After lighting a matchstick, the lead facilitator tells her name, three things s/he likes and three things s/he dislikes. Once we reached Rabat, I realized that I forgot to put a box of matches into my luggage. Dropping our bags to the hotel, we decided to take a walk in the city and on our walk I thought it would be good to buy a box of matches. With the help of Google translate we accessed the word "match" just the same word in English. At first we thought our poor French pronunciation was the barrier. So Evren from our team decided to illustrate the image below. We tried even the smallest kiosk or a supermarket. However, at some point a salesperson, who spoke some English asked us why we don't use a lighter. It was hard to answer this question. So we ended up buying a sensory light ball from a street vendor.

Journeys sometimes host funny and sometimes exhausting memories. Our workshop participants, through their stories took us to further journeys in Rabat and Ankara.
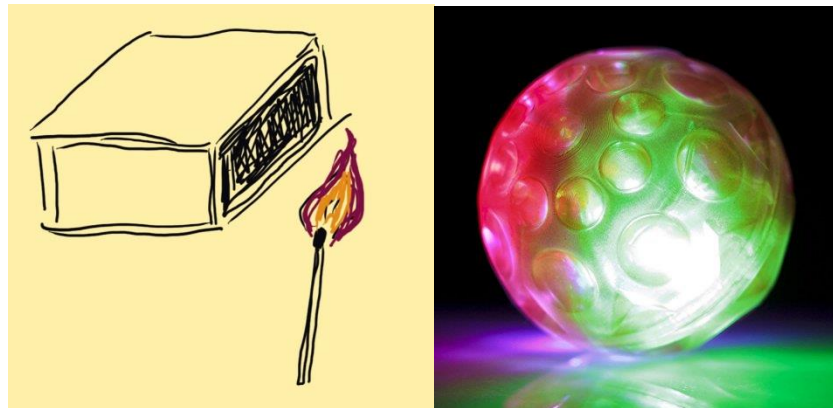
Evren's illustration of a match (on the left) and the sensory ball we end up buying instead (on the right).

Workshop

We start each workshop knowing that we will be questioned by our participants about how the workshop will flow and why we are keen on listening to their stories, followed by convincing them they have stories to tell. Since the very beginning, this phase excites me most and I well know that as long as we are sincere in stating our purpose, it becomes easy to built trust. In the case of the digital storytelling workshops in Morocco and Turkey, the project aimed to enhance an environment where participants shared their experiences of leaving their beloved countries and talk about their future in addition to carry the stories out of these experiences in online and offline platforms in order to raise awareness about refugee lives.

We spent most of the introduction session building up a dialogue with our participants in the January DST workshop in Morocco. I introduced our team and Ergül introduced the project very briefly. Then I was asked why I cared and what will happen at the end of this project. Very sincerely, I admit that most probably this project would not solve of the problems that the refugees in Morocco face, but at least it would contribute to make changes as the participant refugees tell their own unique stories. I was challenged in the beginning, however when we all sat in the story circle, the stories started to flow. The beginning for Young Hopes Rabat Digital Storytelling Workshop and Young Hopes Ankara Digital Storytelling workshop were rather easy because our youngest participant in the Stories without Visa workshop in January, Ketsia's intention for running a similar workshop to the one she attended with other young people inspired us to organized the Rabat and Ankara Young Hopes workshops.

Empowerment for all- not only for the participants, but also for the facilitators- in a digital storytelling workshop emerges in interaction. The pedagogic organization of a digital storytelling workshop is different than a training session where there are instructors to lead participants to develop skills and knowledge. In the case of the digital storytelling workshops, the facilitators position themselves as the ones learning from the experiences of the others who in exchange share their own experiences and stories. Having experienced a coup attempt in our country a few months earlier the workshops had an impact on us for sure. Realizing none of us are too far away in distance from the experiences of the refugees participating in our workshop minimizes the asymmetries, but at the end of the day we couldn't make a huge difference in the lives of our participants. The participants who traveled from different cities of Morocco to Rabat stayed at a hotel and expressed that even that opportunity was a relief. We acknowledge

the contributions of our funding institutions. On the other hand, for all of our participants being on the premises of a university, for the two workshops in Rabat it was EgE and for the Ankara Young Hopes Digital Storytelling workshop it was Hacettepe University who hosted the refugee participants. Especially for the young refugees this was an opportunity to help visualizing a path back to education.

At the end of the three digital storytelling workshops with the refugees in Rabat and Ankara we had a collection of twenty-two stories. The digital stories created in the January workshop, mostly house images from the personal archives of the participants, except three, that were created using Creative Commons safe stock images due to security concerns by the participants. In the Young Hopes Rabat and Ankara Digital Storytelling Workshops, the facilitator team brought local postcards from Morocco and Turkey.

Typical Turkish Coffee Cup on a postcard used in the Young Hopes Ankara Digital Storytelling Workshop (on the left), typical Moroccan mint tea glasses on a postcard used in the Young Hopes Rabat Digital Storytelling Workshop.
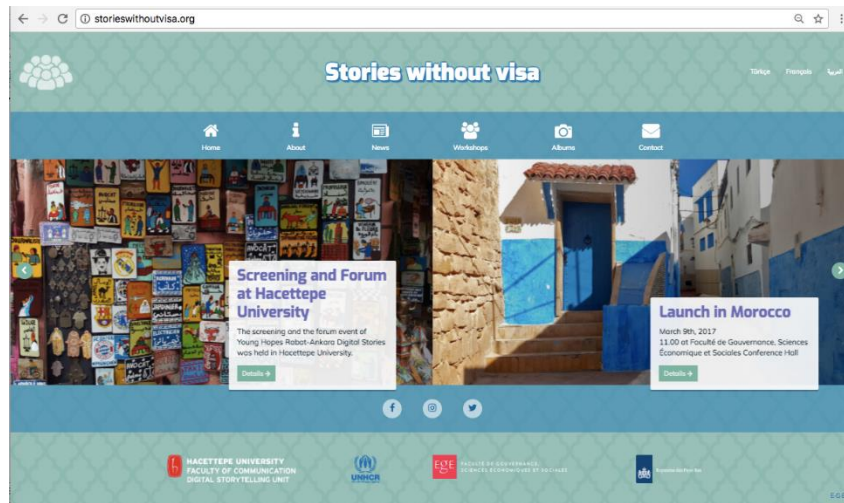
At the end of the Young Hopes Ankara and Rabat Digital Storytelling Workshops, we asked our participants to write or draw something about their future plans. Now we have those postcards in our workshop for display as another way of enhancing story circles. Our hope is that some other people will become connected to these stories.

Home Online and Away

The digital storytelling workshops trigger storytelling processes among the participants and the facilitators. However, once the workshop is over, the responsibilities of the facilitators don't come to an end. Another phase opens with the completed digital stories: Enabling the circulation of these stories in online and offline environments. We created a special website for the Stories without Visa Project[2] to be a home for the digital stories of our participants who had to leave their homes and who are trying to make another
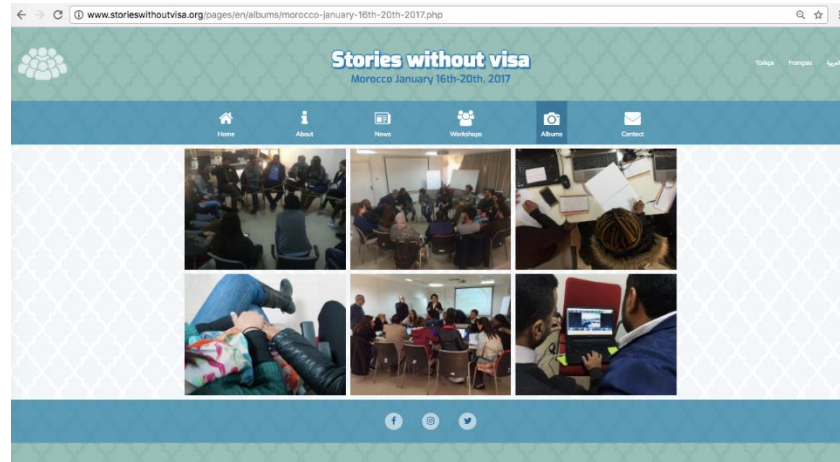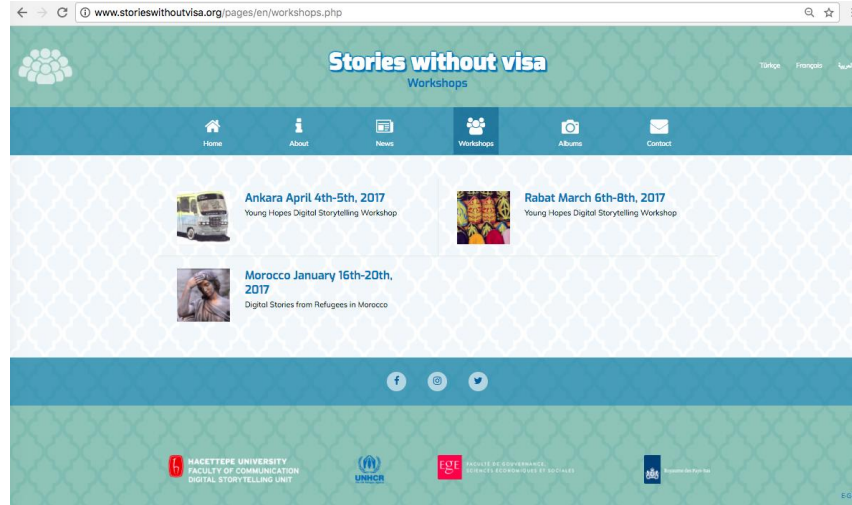
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[2] http://www.storieswithoutvisa.org/

country a temporary home for the time being, in four languages, Turkish, English, Arabic and French. In the home page of the website, the brief information about the public screening and forum event are given. The workshop's page hosts the digital stories in separate sections for <u>Stories without Visa January Morocco Digital Storytelling Workshop</u>,[3] <u>Young Hopes Rabat Digital Storytelling Workshop</u>[4] and <u>Young Hopes Ankara Digital Storytelling Workshop</u>.[5] All of the digital stories can be reached with subtitles in English, French, Arabic and Turkish. The website also has an album in which we share some images from the workshops that give some idea about the various steps of the workshops. The faces of the participants are blurred for anonymity.

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[3] <u>http://www.storieswithoutvisa.org/pages/en/workshops/morocco-january-16th-20th-2017.php</u>

[4] <u>http://www.storieswithoutvisa.org/pages/en/workshops/rabat-march-6th-8th-2017.php</u>

[5] <u>http://www.storieswithoutvisa.org/pages/en/workshops/ankara-april-4th-5th-2017.php</u>

Online circulation of the digital stories is not sufficient to spread the word of the refugees. Using digital stories as an agent to ignite dialogue has been at the core of all our community projects. In order to attract attention to the lives of the refugees living in Morocco, we organized a public screening of the digital stories from the first workshop in Rabat accompanied by a forum event in which we invited our participants on stage to talk about their lives in Morocco. Among the audience were the heads of international organizations acting in Morocco such as UNICEF and UNHCR, our vice-rector representing Hacettepe University as the lead institution of the project, EgE dean, ambassadors and public officers working with refugees in Morocco. The forum session was moderated by Abdelilah Bouasria from EgE and simultaneously translated to English and French.

In the second public event, organized in the scope of the CRIPT conference in association with Hacettepe University Faculty of Economics and Administrative Science Department of Political Science and Public Administration on May 25th, 2017, the digital stories from Young Hopes Ankara and Rabat DST workshops were screened. Following the screening, with the moderation of Abdelilah Bouasria and myself, we hosted the participants from our Ankara workshop in a forum session. In addition to university administration representatives, UNHCR was represented besides the audience formed by academics and university students. Although we had the simultaneous translation on site, our workshop participants were keen on talking in Turkish.

The scope of the World Refugee Day program of UNHCR Ankara Office on June 20th, 2017 at CerModern, Young Hopes Rabat and Ankara Digital Stories were available on a screen with headphones for the audience of the event to watch.

Young Hopes Rabat and Ankara Digital Stories in CerModern on the World Refugee Day 2017.

The third public screening event was far away in Australia at Curtin University organized as a joint event of the Centre for Culture and Technology and Centre for Human Rights Education on August 21st, 2017 at the Hive. The screening of the Young Hopes Rabat and Ankara Digital Stories was followed by a Q&A session in which I answered questions about the project and the digital storytelling practices in relation to reflecting refugee lives.

An extract from the poster of the public screening event in Curtin University in August 2017.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Each digital storytelling workshop had surprises for us as a team, from the very beginning in 2009. As a team we travelled together in Turkey and abroad. We have our own stories about being on the road. However, the digital storytelling workshops in Morocco and Turkey with refugees who had to leave their countries with great difficulties, fleeing away from life threatening situations such as war, tribal conflicts and forced marriage. The stories we heard were heavy. However, the moments we shared in the workshop environment while trying together to complete the workshop with individual digital stories, enriched our lives, convincing us that the effort we put in has been a reward in our lives.

We concluded each workshop with the in-group screening in which the participants and the facilitators share feedback about each digital story and about the workshop. We also present our participants a certificate of participation inviting them on stage, taking photos to share. We completed that stage with the first workshop participants and one of our participants stated on behalf of the refugees participants of the workshop, that they appreciated our efforts to complete the process and assist them in the creation of their digital stories and they presented us with the certificate below signed by each participant. That moment will be remembered by all of us.

The Appreciation Certificate the Digital Storytelling Unit team received after the January 2017 DST workshop in Rabat.

In addition to the certificate, one of our participants who is from Yemen took out the little ornament he had brought to Morocco with him and wanted one of the participants to translate from Arabic to English that he wants to give that ornament to us to bring to our unit. Although we didn't want to take that very special remembrance from him, he insisted and we brought it to our workshop as a memory of our participant as a part of our homework.

A reminder from our refugee from Yemen

The research component followed each workshop with in-depth interviews conducted by researcher –facilitators, Burcu Şimşek, Eda Çetinkaya Yarımçam, Hakan Ergül, Gökçe Zeybek Kabakçı and Şengül İnce. The in-depth interviews gave us a wider insight about the personal tragedies of our participants. It is clear that advocacy of right

to education for young refugees has a meaning. In Turkey, accessing education is relatively easy, whereas in Morocco the education issue is more complicated. These are global problems that leave us all with a primary question that John Hartley in this issue reminds us of: "What does it mean to be human?"

Acknowledgement