



Casestudy

"DON'T KEEP IT TO YOURSELF!"

Young people in Mhlontlo (Eastern Cape) tell their stories through the Digital Storytelling Project, by Amber Reed



CENTER
for DIGITAL
STORY
TELLING



Sonke Gender
Justice Network
HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights





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“I LIKED WHAT SONKE DID, SO I TOLD MY FRIENDS. SO NOW WE DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT. IF SOMEONE HAS A PROBLEM WE SAY, ‘DON’T KEEP IT TO YOURSELF! NO – YOU CAN TELL US.’”



High School in Mhlontlo District

Tokozi is a 17-year old girl living in Mhlontlo Municipality in the Eastern Cape. In March 2008, along with seven of her peers and through funding from UNICEF, she became involved in Sonke’s Digital Storytelling Project.

This project involves workshops that guide participants in creating their own multimedia stories that addressed critical issues in their communities such as rape, gender roles, HIV/AIDS, and violence. A facilitator from the Silence Speaks project of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California worked with Sonke staff to support workshop participants in speaking out about the challenges faced by youth living in rural South African communities.

Mhlontlo Municipality is characterized by high rates of HIV/AIDS, widespread poverty, and violence. Children in this region deal with a host of extremely difficult challenges: loss of family members due to HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, shortage of food and clean water, and sexual abuse. Sonke’s involvement in the region reflects its overall mission to address HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence as matters of national and regional priority through a variety of tactics in local contexts, such as gender equality training, responsible fatherhood projects, and individual skill building. Through the partnership with Silence Speaks, the project was able to incorporate this international digital storytelling initiative’s experience and knowledge in order to better achieve its goals. Silence Speaks supports the telling and witnessing of stories of survival; its topics vary from violence and abuse to armed conflict and stigma/marginalization. Its rationale behind this work is that encouraging the telling of otherwise silent stories will help attend to pain and grief, explore power issues, and build leadership skills.

The eight students involved in the project produced stories covering a wide range of topics – from sexual assault, to living with HIV positive family members, to contaminated drinking water.

“THEY’VE GIVEN ME THE STRENGTH, COURAGE OF SAYING WHAT I FEEL FOR ONCE, YOU KNOW? WITHOUT PEOPLE SETTING ME BACK.”

Myolisi, one of the young participants, used his story to highlight his experiences with the devastation of HIV/AIDS in his community. He concludes his digital story with the imperative that

“people must not stigmatise those who have HIV. People must not be afraid to know their status. And people must be faithful to their partners and treat them with respect. We want our children to grow up in a world that is not sick, but healthy and alive.”



Drawing from Tokozile's story

Tokozile’s story, in contrast, profiles a close friend whose boyfriend raped her. Tokozile’s friend never reported the incident, as an excerpt from her story explains:

“...She has never had the courage to report this case. She is afraid that the police will blame her for going alone to her boyfriend’s house. He still walks free, while she lives in fear of what he might attempt to do again. Justice has never been served.”

When Sonke invited Tokozile to talk about a challenge in her community, she approached her friend and “told her to talk about it so it could help someone else who has been through the same thing.” As Tokozile goes on to explain, her friend “finally voiced out about it,” giving Tokozile permission to talk about the incident in a digital story. Tokozile attributes changes in her friend’s behaviour to this experience. The girl now serves as a peer educator in local schools, where she discusses the issue of rape with the goal of increasing awareness among young people.

The other digital stories also demonstrate positive results. One student, Kulile, describes how Sonke’s focus on gender equality reshaped his attitudes about roles in his community:

“I thought okay fine, a man can cook, but it’s not important ritually. And when I met with Sonke my mind completely changed. I mean if you are surrounded by people who are stereotyping, you end up also

“I’VE LEARNED HOW TO USE A COMPUTER, IT WAS MY FIRST TIME AND I WAS EXCITED WHEN I SAW IT AND I THOUGHT THAT IT IS GOING TO BE USED BY ME”

stereotyping. They say if there’s only one potato rotten in a bag they all get rotten. And I don’t think I can ever stereotype now, because everyone is equal. What you can do, I can also do.”



Photo from Kulile's Story

An excerpt from Kulile’s story demonstrates this commitment to gender equality:

“People in my village sometimes gossip about me, saying, “Uphakamile uyawuthanda umsebenzi wamontombazana” (He is a high-class person, and he likes women’s jobs). But even when I came back from circumcision school in July, I did not change my views. I am living outside the box, being the kind of man I want to be, not the kind others want me to be. I live my life to be happy.”

Another student talks about how the project got him back on track at school.

“I was drinking and doing such bad things...stealing some things off other people. So then I decided that when they chose me that, okay, it seems as if I am still a person who can succeed in life. Then I decided to change...they changed my life. Seriously.”

Training, provided by Silence Speaks and Sonke staff during five weeks in October 2008, focused not just on enabling the youth to create stories but also on providing them with health education about gender and HIV and basic communication and technology skills.

At the four-day digital storytelling workshop, students were each assigned a laptop to work with; for many, this was their first exposure to a computer.

“I’ve learned how to use a computer, it was my first time and I was excited when I saw it and I thought that it is going to be used by me. And I tell myself, inside myself, that this is the beginning of my life. (sic)”

"THEY'VE GIVEN ME THE STRENGTH, COURAGE OF SAYING WHAT I FEEL FOR ONCE, YOU KNOW? WITHOUT PEOPLE SETTING ME BACK."

Other students mentioned how they gained the confidence to speak in front of others through producing their stories. About a community screening of the stories that was held shortly after the workshop, one participant said:

"I was never used to talking to a crowd...then we had to talk to the whole hall, a lot of people from different places, old and young. So I learned how to talk to people, how to address something that is a problem to someone else, and how to help others in things that they need help with. It's very easy [now]! I can talk in front of school!"

The combination of skill-building workshops and the creativity of digital story production, along with attentive and engaged facilitators, produced incredible results both for the students involved and for the larger community.

For Sonke, the goal of working with youth and adults to create digital stories is not just to empower individual storytellers but also to produce viable educational and advocacy tools and spread awareness of critical health and gender issues in rural communities and beyond. Since 2007, the organisation has held seven workshops and developed three story collections with accompanying discussion guides.

As part of a pilot project during August 2009, Siyakhanyisa staff (a local HIV/AIDS support organisation) and I took the Eastern Cape youth stories to several schools within the Mhlontlo Municipality, sharing them as part of workshops with students who were unfamiliar with the project or Sonke's work.



Student participating in a drawing project

In one-hour sessions, students viewed selected stories and then participated in discussions about the issues raised. Follow-up activities included group work compiling a list of universal human rights, as well as a drawing and writing project in which students wrote their own stories. Students responded quite positively to the digital story screenings,

demonstrating the power these stories have as educational tools in the classroom. One 17-year-old learner said,

“I’ve learned a lot of things. They’ve given me the strength, courage of saying what I feel for once, you know? Without people setting me back. They made me feel very emotional. I don’t know how...but they’ve brought courage and determination in me.”

These pilot educational workshops were also useful in highlighting the challenges that Sonke and local organisations working for gender equality face in rural areas. One boy in a workshop described how women in his community are lazy and “men are oppressed by the women here.” Widespread homophobia also presented a problem in discussions of equal rights for all people. Using the Sonke digital stories in the classroom allows students to speak up on issues not normally addressed in school and gives facilitators an opportunity to increase dialogue, counter misunderstandings and assumptions, and provide accurate information on critically under-represented topics in the classroom environment. The story-writing portion of these pilot workshops also offered an inside view of the challenges and preoccupations faced by rural youth. Writings focused on issues such as rape, violence, death, and despair:



One learner selected this photo to represent the isolation she feels

“I have a cousin who is HIV positive. She did not know what to do. I think she needs an advice about her status (sic). All she can do is lock up herself in her room and cry, she really needs help.”

Another story directly begged for help against local violence:

“I am a girl of 16 years. I meet a guy which is too old he is wearing a black hat when I pass near with it, he told me to give him my bag I ask him that I can’t, he promise to kill me. I notice that this is a tsotsi (gangster) he take my bag off and he run away with it. I don’t know what can I do who can help me! (sic)”

The anonymous nature of story-writing encourages students to speak openly about otherwise taboo subjects, and allows facilitators to address the entire class during follow-up rather than single out particular students who may not feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Such powerful cries for help allow facilitators to identify and address gaps in the educational curriculum and advocate for the provision of appropriate services and health/law enforcement outside of the classroom environment. Indeed, after this pilot study Siyakhanyisa staff made arrangements to regularly visit a local school to provide follow-up support on the issues raised during the workshop.

This project is a reproducible model that can serve students in other communities as well, though it is essential to have trained facilitators available to provide adequate instruction and support. The pilot study, then, illuminates future work for Sonke in training rural community members to deal with critically under-emphasized issues for young people in unique and engaging ways.

The consequences of the youth digital stories project in Eastern Cape reached far beyond the excitement and skill-building imparted to the original eight workshop participants. In a heart-warming conclusion to Tokozile's experience, she explains that Sonke's efforts in her community have encouraged her to gather friends and extend their ideals to other young people. She now travels with her friends around the community, seeking out those in need of emotional support for a variety of difficult issues. She describes an experience in this work:

"There was this girl in class...she's so quiet, she is so distant! She never says anything. So we, like, talk to her. She says that she's afraid of people. And in class we look like people that she wouldn't talk with and stuff...she's afraid of what she can say, maybe won't accept her for who she is and stuff (sic). But now she's our friend! She's like the most silly in class! She can talk, she can do whatever."

Another participant, Nombasa, sums up the goals of the digital storytelling project nicely in her description of her own story:

“My story is about a woman standing up for herself. A woman talking for other women and trying to help the children in my community, and trying to tell all the people who’ve been involved in each and every pain that we must be strong and stay positive about whatever happens. We must also try to be free in our community and I’m telling those people who are abusing people, please let’s leave this and be a community. A community with love and freedom and peace.”

For more on Sonke’s work with Digital Stories and to view selected stories, visit

www.genderjustice.org.za/projects/digital-stories



Mhlontlo's Digital Story Tellers

ABOUT THE SONKE DIGITAL STORYTELLING INITIATIVE

Crucial to the success of Sonke's work is ensuring a central role for those most directly affected by violence and HIV. A platform is required for their voices to inform our efforts and be represented across Sonke activities.

We all have stories to tell about our lives. Through sharing and listening to such stories, we come to know each other, our communities, our world, and ourselves. Stories can inspire us, educate us, and move us deeply. As a result of being touched by someone else's story, we make connections between their circumstances and our own. When it comes to confronting complex social issues, these connections can help us to bridge the vast differences that often divide us and instead act with wisdom, compassion, and conscience.

Sonke Gender Justice and the Silence Speaks digital storytelling initiative are working together to enable young people and adults affected by violence and HIV and AIDS to share their stories. From cities to rural villages, the project offers participants a rare opportunity to talk about their own experiences and bear witness to the lives of others, in a supportive setting. Through intensive, participatory video production workshops, we are bringing rarely-heard voices and images into the civic arena. Our hope is to deepen existing conversations about gender norms and the spread of these twin epidemics, by highlighting everyday stories.

ABOUT SONKE

Established in 2006, Sonke Gender Justice works in Southern Africa to create the change necessary for men, women, youth, and children to enjoy equitable, healthy, and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies. Sonke uses a human rights framework to build the capacity of government, civil society organisations, and citizens to achieve gender equality, prevent gender based violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

For more information: www.genderjustice.org.za

ABOUT SILENCE SPEAKS

Silence Speaks is an international digital storytelling initiative offering a safe, supportive environment for telling stories that too often remain unspoken. Our process is modified to accommodate the languages, literacy levels, and technologies of a given setting. The guiding vision is to listen deeply, facilitate reflection and transformation, and encourage involvement in collective action. Stories produced in workshops are shared in training, community organizing, and policy advocacy settings to support social justice globally.

For more information: www.silencespeaks.org



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GVIAGIANYISA
HIV/AIDS SUPPORT GROUP
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unicef
unite for children



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