

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND LIFELONG LEARNING EDUCATION IN INFORMAL CONTEXTS: THE MEMEX PROJECT

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### Abstract

This contribution intends to present the design, methodology and first results of MEMEX, a 3-year project (2019-2022) funded by the European programme Horizon2020, aimed at promoting social cohesion through collaborative, heritage-related tools that provide inclusive access to tangible and intangible cultural heritage (CH) and, at the same time, facilitates encounters, discussions and interactions between communities at risk of social exclusion. Cultural participation is conceived as a way to engage communities in lifelong learning processes taking place in informal contexts, aiming at promoting social inclusion and cohesion. To achieve these goals, MEMEX uses innovative ICT tools that provide a new paradigm for interaction with heritage through Digital Storytelling (DS), weaving heritage-related memories and experiences of the participating communities with the physical places/objects that surround them. The project encompasses the ICT tools and the use of DS in the framework of Audience Development (AD), defined as a strategic and dynamic process enabling cultural organisations to place audiences at the centre of their action. The use of DS applied to CH is highly related to lifelong learning processes, since it provides knowledge, understanding, awareness, engagement and interest, enjoyment and creativity. The evaluation of a number of DS produced by migrant women participating in a MEMEX pilot project in Barcelona confirms the validity and soundness of the methodology and the power of DS to engage in cultural experiences.

**Keywords:** *Socio-cultural inclusion, participation, digital storytelling, cultural heritage, pilot project.*

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### 1. Introduction

Culture is recognized as a natural feature of human beings (and not only). The Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. In the Article 5 of the 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, this concept of “right” is emphasized and defined as the right of access to, participation in and enjoyment of culture for individuals and communities to know, understand, visit, make use of, maintain, exchange and develop cultural heritage (CH) and cultural expressions, as well as to benefit from the cultural heritage and cultural expressions of others. In the Articles 4 and 5 of the same Declaration on Cultural Diversity, it is recognized that the defence of cultural rights is inseparable from the achievement of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of women, minorities and indigenous peoples. The right to culture is complemented by the freedom of expression and cultural diversity, information and education; and is conditioned by opportunities and chances of access and participation. The cultural access and enjoyment are a matter of human dignity, equality, individual and collective identity, participation in democratic and civil societies. Thus, education, cultural access and participation are among the key/vital challenges of the postmodern societies and particularly among the values and policies of the EU.

In the last decades, both material and immaterial CH has been understood as a strategic tool, an opportunity to promote and ensure the right to knowledge, to quality education; to encourage the expression of individual and collective potentialities, skills and characteristics; to foster civil-social participation and inclusion; and to build identities and develop a sense of belonging to a community. The European strategy and vision is clear in its cultural goals and guidelines: the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) recognizes that everyone, individually or collectively, has the right to benefit from CH and to contribute towards its enrichment rights; the relationship between the conservation and sustainable use of CH and human development and quality of life ;the role of CH in the construction of a peaceful and democratic society, in processes of sustainable development and the promotion of cultural diversity and The Member

States be committed to improve the access to CH, namely for young and disadvantaged people, in order to expand their awareness about its value, the need of its conservation and its individual and social benefits. In the recent document signed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation And Development (OECD) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) “Culture and local development. Maximizing the impact” (2019), social inclusion through CH is a strategic theme, as a means to change people’s perception about their needs and problems and foster them to be active in improving the quality of their lives; increase their individual wellbeing, with special attention towards marginalized or excluded people; raise their self-esteem, empowering skills and competencies for professional pathways; and strengthening social cohesion. Other EU Declarations and Documents reaffirm the link between the use of CH, access, participation and inclusion of marginalized people. These statements are reinforced by the first of the five pillars identified by the “European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage” (2018), which is “Cultural Heritage for an inclusive Europe, participation and access for all”: it recommends to break up whatsoever barrier (physical, educational, economic, social, sensorial, digital, etc.) to cultural access. Strategies to overcome barriers and obstacles are fundamental themes for Audience Development (AD) projects aiming at promoting cultural access, engagement and participation of different people, as stated by the “Study on Audience Development” published by the European Commission in 2015.

In this scenario, the MEMEX project (Memories and Experiences for inclusive digital storytelling; <https://memexproject.eu/>) was born - thanks to a funding by the Horizon2020 programme -, from the collaboration of 8 partners, with socio-cultural and technological profiles and expertise<sup>1</sup>. The communities chosen to participate in the MEMEX pilot projects are: migrant women in Barcelona; inhabitants of the 19th district of Paris; and first, second and third generation Portuguese migrants living in Lisbon, all communities at risk of cultural exclusion. During the pilot projects, Digital Storytelling (DS) was employed to work with the participants, starting from local expressions of CH in each place. This paper aims at opening a debate about the theoretical frameworks of MEMEX and its methodologies, focusing on the first results of the pilot activities carried out in Barcelona.

## 2. Objectives and theoretical framework

MEMEX’s primary objectives consist in experimenting the synergic power/impact of digital technologies (ICT), CH and storytelling for the cultural and social inclusion of potentially marginalized people, through a) three pilot projects actively and creatively engaging the above mentioned targets in the implementation of personal storytelling inspired by local CH, and b) testing the impact of a smartphone App offering an AR experience co-designed and based on DS. Currently, two of the pilot projects are still ongoing and the Barcelona one completed the first phase of implementation.

MEMEX objectives and methodologies are based on some assumptions and theoretical frameworks hereafter presented:

1) Cultural participation impacts positively on social cohesion and inclusion; 2) Digital Technologies (ICT Tools) can improve cultural and social inclusion of potentially marginalized people, excluded from cultural benefits (cultural accessibility and participation); or citizens less used to take part in CH activities and enjoyment; 3) ICT Tools can contribute to audience development and engagement in cultural experiences; 4) Storytelling is considered a powerful and universal form of communication, a tool for personal and social empowerment and intercultural dialogue; 5) CH is a special field/horizon for social comprehension, inclusion, intercultural dialogue and individual and social empowerment.

These assumptions have been strategically based and developed on the following frameworks and guidelines.

All these theoretical assumptions and frameworks are strictly related to the understanding and acknowledgement of Audience Development (AD) defined as a strategic and dynamic process enabling cultural organizations to place audiences (understood not only as visitors, but also as individuals and communities) – at the centre of their action. This approach is aligned with the already mentioned Faro Convention (2005) on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, by emphasizing the active role of communities in re-interpreting existing heritage as well as in co-creating plural meanings of it. There are many strategies and tools to pursue different audience goals, and they can be classified in many different ways. For the purposes of MEMEX, four key action areas that represent the main assets for AD strategies have been identified:

**Place** refers to those projects and cultural organisations strategies strongly relying on the "place factor", creating links and building relationships based on a physical site (e.g. interventions on space design, brand identity, etc.) and aimed to foster ownership towards a cultural and physical space. In the MEMEX

<sup>1</sup>Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia (IIT) (project leader, Italy), Interactive Technologies Institute (ITI, Portugal), NOHO Limited (Ireland), Ernst & Young Italia (Italy), Michale Culture-Dédale (France), Interarts (Spain), ECCOM (Italy), Mapas das Ideias (Portugal).

framework, place is fundamental in the participants' lives and experiences, but also for their sense of belonging and inclusion, in the cities they migrate to some material or immaterial elements of the place can be especially significant and associated to CH.

**Digital** refers to those projects and cultural organisations strategies strongly relying on the "digital factor", as a key to reach audiences and foster engagement. In the MEMEX framework, the working group chose DS as the adequate strategy to foster the participants' engagement, creativity and empowerment.

**Capacity building** refers to those projects and cultural organisations strategies strongly relying on the "people factor". The empowerment of the staff and the development of their skills, competences and leadership are a key factor of different experiences, recognizing the need for change inside the organisation to pursue alterations in the audience behaviour. In the context of MEMEX, ECCOM led a professional training workshop for social partners and their local stakeholders, aimed at improving their skills and attitudes towards narrative strategies and their technical expertise in DS to implement the methodology and to engage the participants in the process of producing their DS. As part of this training experience, the partners realized their own DS.

**Co-creation** refers to those projects and cultural organization strategies strongly relying on the "participatory factor". These are also particularly interesting in terms of impacts on the organisations. In MEMEX, participation/co-creation mainly refers to the working group and consequently to the other participants; the storytelling option both for the mediators and the other participants is connected to its power of engaging, of encouraging participation, enhancing motivation, fostering personal believes and emotions, stimulating imagination and creativity.

Storytelling - and namely digital storytelling (DS) - lies at the heart of the MEMEX project. Storytelling is a widespread communication practice, whose origins, motivations and uses are rooted in the mental-cultural complexity of human beings. It is therefore of great interest for a variety of disciplines, both at a theoretical and at a practical level, aiming to understand how and why it became so pervasive, what are its mechanisms and its educational, social and even therapeutic role. All human languages and cultural-communication codes include storytelling. It is typical of both oral/informal and formal cultures, artistic expressions included. It therefore unfolds as a common expressive feature of all human beings, whose mind gather and interpret sensory information, events and emotions, and organizes them in the shape of a story. All human beings, everywhere and in every time, have used storytelling. Informally, we tell stories virtually every moment of our daily lives: our minds are organised to perform this function. Stories (imagined, told) have a great individual and social value, they play a fundamental role in language learning, in constructing and exchanging knowledge, in shaping educational processes, in sharing moral and ethical rules, values and traditions. They make a contribution to shaping or reinforcing personal identity and self-esteem; all individuals, in fact, define and recognise themselves in a process of "narrative creation of the self" (Bruner, 2003), through both personal stories and stories about their families, communities and cultures of origin. The shaping of an individual identity also makes it possible to understand others and helps creating or consolidating social identities and shared cultures. In turn, these shared, community cultures enrich narrative thinking with their stories, traditions, languages and educational practices, thus building the symbolic, cognitive and expressive features of the different peoples in different times and place (for a wider treatment of Storytelling and DS see Da Milano and Falchetti, 2014). A fundamental role in the human communication, education, knowledge construction and learning, creativity and imagination and intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and the definition of individual and collective identities is recognized to narration and storytelling (Bruner, 2003; Demetrio, 1996, 2012; Graesser & Ottati, 1995; Falchetti, 2014). This communication shape is accessible also to people not formally educated. Moreover, storytelling engages both storytellers and audiences/listeners in a cognitive and emotional-empathetic relationship. As a consequence, the postmodern shapes of formal and informal communication and education prefer storytelling.

DS is a short digital story/tale with texts, images, videos and sound effects which combines the traditional narrative power with the creative resources of the digital tools. DS requires, harmonizes and promotes multiple skills: disciplinary, artistic, musical, logic, technological competencies. It is cognitively and emotionally engaging and fosters multiple intelligences. DS is considered a valid tool of social, democratic and transformative processes; it is effective and manageable also by not formally educated people or by subjects at risk of marginalization or exclusion (Lambert, 2013). For these reasons, DS is mostly recommended among the digital resources for all the socio-cultural-educational (but also therapeutic) interventions. Its role in upholding human rights is today acknowledged. The partners experimented the inclusive power of DS with many potentially marginalized audiences/people (see the Diamond project in Da Milano and Falchetti, 2014; Falchetti and Guida, 2019).

DS constitutes an invaluable strategy for communication, mediation and valorisation of CH (see the programs "We are Mont'e Prama", aimed at enhancing Sardinian pre-historical sculptures; and Live Museum Live Change for the Roman "Mercati di Traiano"; <https://monteprema.it/we-are-monte-prama/>;

<http://www.pav-it.eu/live-museum-live-change>). Many museums in the world are exploiting this tool for operators' training, for visitors' inclusion and participation, and the interpretation of the collections. In MEMEX, the DS implementation has been conceived as a tool and an opportunity to give voice to the participants, to promote personal expression and creativity, cultural and social empowerment, promotion of skills and competencies. CH is the field within which their creativity, memories, emotions, beliefs, metaphors, social representations emerge and develop.

### 3. Methodology

ECCOM elaborated a 32-question preliminary questionnaire, aimed at providing an initial overview of the perceptions of the target of interest -migrant women at risk of socio-cultural exclusion in Barcelona - about CH and cultural participation, before the implementation of the pilot project. The questionnaire was translated into Spanish and applied in person by MEMEX Spanish partner, Interarts Foundation. 22 questionnaires were completed in two sessions between July and August 2020, coded and handed to ECCOM for analysis. All respondents were migrant women living in Barcelona. They are in the 30-59 age range, and arrived in Spain between 2016 and 2019. The vast majority of them come from different Latin American countries, while 2 from Nigeria and 1 from Italy. Consequently, most of them speak Spanish as a first language, and 6 of them speak also a second one (mainly English). Half of them completed high secondary education and most of them were, at the time of the survey, unemployed and actively looking for a job. 82% of the respondents had a smartphone, device used for the MEMEX app, and 91% had access to internet on their smartphones and/or at home. 64% of them declared a medium to a high level of skills with technology and electronics. The great majority of the respondents understands CH as both tangible and intangible, referring to it as History and Memory, Tradition, Identity, Architecture and Community. When asked about what they considered to be the main expressions of their own CH/origin, they mainly mentioned heritage buildings, archaeological sites, examples of their gastronomies, music and dance. Only 23% of the respondents feel they can freely express their own CH in Barcelona. Between 77% and 82% of them agree with the idea that diverse cultural groups should be able to maintain their customs and traditions within host societies; that cultural exchanges between different cultures and groups are important to learn from each other and to develop more understanding societies. 10 of the women which completed the preliminary questionnaire actively took part in the pilot project for the implementation of the DS. The pilot activities were led by Interarts Foundation with the collaboration of 2 local stakeholders: LaBonne and Sindillar-Sindihogar. 3 meetings between the facilitators and migrant women were organized online and at LaBonne cultural center to present the MEMEX objectives, explain the goals and technical approach of DS and start a dialogue about CH. 4 walks were organized to inspire narrations, foster emotion and feelings, gather impressions, traces and images. During 4 sessions, each participant created and edited their own DS. To date, 8 DS have been finalised and evaluated by ECCOM, as described in the following section.

### 4. Evaluation and discussion

The 8 DS realized by the migrant women were analysed following as indicators the 7 points identified by Lambert (2002) as fundamental points of DS: Points of view, Dramatic questions, Emotional contents, The gift of your voice, The power of soundtrack, Economy, Pacing of narration; as well as the purpose of the story and contents and some technical approaches, systematized in four main dimensions: style, content, personal/emotional elements and technical quality. All the stories are coherent from the point of view of contents and purposes; they narrate about the women' lives, memories, relationships with past and present times, original culture and traditions and about feelings, perceptions and disposition towards their new lives in Barcelona. The personal emotional aspects prevail in all the stories; the city places, the events, the life habits, everything recalls the women' experience of migration, the sense of belonging to their home countries, the deep bond with their traditions, and for some of them, a sense of disorientation about themselves and their "double" personality. Some of them also express a sort of gratitude for the new opportunity provided and describe some special moments of mental, emotional and spiritual engagement in certain places of the city they migrated to. The sense of CH is linked to a work opportunity or to the places and events that trigger those special moments.

Some DS reveal dramatic questions of migration history or past injustice, that remain in the mind, emotions and memories of these women.

All the storytellers narrate their stories with an engaging, strong and evocative, charming tone of voice, that determines also the involving pace of narration; no uncertainty or hesitation emerges from their voices. They appear pleased to have this opportunity to express themselves without limits and constraints; probably, this opportunity promotes their self-esteem, their imagination and creativity and reinforce social bonds by the sharing of experiences and feelings and the awareness of the interest shown by the project partners. Sounds and music are coherent with the pace, the contents and questions of narrations. The video

technic has been preferred by all the women; many technical aspects are lacking and weak, but this problem do not decrease the value and effect of the narrative performance. Altogether, these special storytellers reveal a well-developed narrative inclination and skills, but the project strategy of privileging storytelling is confirmed as valid and engaging with special audiences, namely migrants or other potentially excluded people. DS is verified as a tool that is fit to engage, to promote participation and give opportunity to people belonging to different cultures, backgrounds and imaginary horizons to express, for its focus/point of strength on the personal storytelling/narration (by texts, images, voices, music, etc.) and its easiness of digital format/realization. The MEMEX strategy based on DS and CH therefore can have a great/promising value in terms not only of AD, but also of cohesion, understanding, intercultural, intergenerational and inter-human trust. Yet by these preliminary results this strategy appears to be an appropriate relational form to generate a climate of real dialogue, democracy, promotion of different personalities, experiences and potential skills. Beyond the quantifiable and evident results the contribution of the “MEMEX Stories” can be considered an enrichment of the diverse CH narrations, of intercultural dialogue and community cohesion. MEMEX Stories can contribute to the construction of cultural and social capital.

A brief SWAT analysis applied to this pilot highlights as points of Strength: the potentialities of narration (cognitive and emotional involvement, empathic relationships, universality of the framework, inclusive inter-cultural and social value), increased by digital resources and by the CH environment/context; as point of Weakness: the possible lack of training/practice in the digital field; as Opportunities: the enhancement of accessibility and inclusion for vulnerable and marginalized people, mediation in the intercultural dialogue, production of new CH storytelling, positive impact on basic, transversal and soft skills; as Threats: the hard and demanding task for the participants - both cultural operators and the “disadvantaged” storytellers - in the DS implementation.

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