

Digital Storytelling: A Classroom Experiment

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Introduction

Storytelling is a powerful way to express ideas and communicate experiences. It takes place both through the spoken form and in writing. Storytelling has been part of teaching since the definition of subjects, as far back as Aristotle (Alexander, 2011). According to Sharda (2007a), storytelling, in general is a powerful pedagogical paradigm that can be used to enhance learning outcomes for general, scientific and technical education. With the rapid development of information technology, "students live in a world that has been transformed by technology, and they are often referred to as 'digital natives' because their exposure to digital resources begins at birth" (Morgan, 2014, p.20). Thus, there is always an inertia in education for these two strands—that of storytelling and technology to converge, one such attempt is being made in this paper.

Concepts

The American Digital Storytelling Association defines digital storytelling as "the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling (in which) stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative, and voice together, giving deep dimension and vivid colour to the characters, situations, experience and insights". Digital stories combine a spoken "text" with still images, and sometimes with music or sound as well, to create what is in effect a "mini-movie" (5 minutes). Digital storytelling, therefore is the process of creating a short purposeful movie

with various multimedia components in order to create an engaging presentation.

The use of digital storytelling in education allows students to express their thoughts and ideas in a different, and hopefully creative manner. It is also used to make students reflect on their learning; it can be equally used as a method of assessment. However, the emphasis of digital storytelling has to be on the story itself, rather than the technology. "Story without digital works, but digital without story doesn't." (Ohler, 2008, p.xviii).

Integrating Digital Story Telling (DST) in English Literature Class

In a program held in the University of Houston's College of Education, the students' digital stories "demonstrated creativity, thoughtful writing, organizational skill and powerful incidences of self-expression, even by students who were often reluctant to speak out in class." (Rudnicki, Anne et al., 2006, p.2) Digital stories are also known to facilitate learning in students who are new to academic writing and who have problems in engaging intellectually with conventions of academic writing (Clarke & Adam, 2010).

Sylvester and Greenidge (2009), in their study on struggling writers, found that creating digital stories helps students gain more awareness of purpose, structure and form of the story. Moreover, the use of photographs and videos helps students express themselves more easily and competently.

Digital Storytelling Workshop

Students at different levels have different digital skills and knowledge. In this regard, the first step of integrating DST in a class is to conduct a workshop for the students. The main aims of the workshop would be to:

- a. Introduce digital storytelling to the students, brainstorm a story idea, teach them how to draw a storyboard and how to find the required materials.
- b. Introduce an application for producing DST, such as Adobe Premiere Pro software, Movie Maker, Microsoft PowerPoint, etc. Also teach the students how to create, edit and present their digital story.

Students Performance and Activity

Ohler (2008), believes that digital storytelling helps students develop the creativity required to solve problems in innovative ways. Researchers found that it gives them an opportunity to express their ideas, interests and dislikes. Also, it forces students to use a more complex set of structures and a presumably advanced range of vocabulary, and develop their critical thinking abilities. They have to think critically about the story and express it using their own words and visual representations. They also have to use other critical thinking skills such as deduction and interpretation. Furthermore, digital storytelling helps to develop the students' ability to express an opinion, argue their case, initiate and sum-up ideas and illustrate their opinions using examples.

Digital storytelling can be easily adapted for the English literature class by asking the students to present their tasks, ideas and their understanding of the text in a digital form. The DSTs can be presented individually, or through collaborative groups comprising 2-4 students by first reading the text in the class, and then creating a digital representation of it. Throughout

the activity, group members are encouraged to exchange ideas to establish the purpose of the story. Members of the group are assigned specific responsibilities. For instance, if a group is producing a video, members are assigned the roles of director, writer, producer and editor. They coordinate the activity according to their roles and the text they are reading. Each group is given a storyboard to complete (Figure 1).


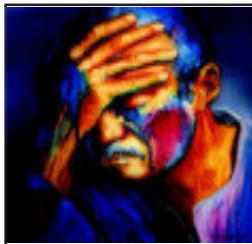
	Transition	Transition
		
	fade out	fade out
Time (sec)	25 sec.	30 sec.
Effects	slow-motion	slow-motion & colourful picture
Music/ audio	Disperatamente Giulia Italian	
Script	Victims of violence grow up to perpetrate it. Patriarchy suppresses the voice of women.	When the chain of control is reversed the perpetrator becomes the oppressed and the oppressed the perpetrator.

Figure 1. Student-created storyboard based on Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*.

With their storyboard in mind, the groups engage in discussions based on the text and use their knowledge of the text to plan their digital stories, often making links between the text and their personal experiences, outside media (such as relevant songs) and images. The storyboard serves as a guiding framework to keep the groups on track, and helps them to set

manageable goals for the scope of their project. It is also important that group members have access to the necessary technological tools such as a computer and an internet connection. Should they choose to take pictures or a video, the group would need appropriate cameras. Groups with limited access to technology may choose to create a slideshow of still images taken from the Internet for pictures, graphics, and sound files.

This collaboration allows for thoughtful and insightful discussions of the primary text within the context of an assigned role. Students gradually assume responsibility for comprehension, interpretation, and understanding of the text through the process of selecting words and producing multimodal representations as a group, guided by the roles assigned to them. Thus, a DST provides a social context in which students utilize multimodal tools to construct personal interpretations of the text and externalize their interpretations through collaborative activity.

The structure of a digital storytelling activity is such that the students' attention is directed towards metacognitive process such as planning, monitoring, evaluating and reflecting on the accomplishment of multimodal tasks (Ohler, 2008). DST also provides social support that helps students acquire additional reading knowledge and skills; but most of all, it is a fun activity and today's students relate to such activities very well.

Teachers don't often associate inquiry with the language arts, but rather with the sciences (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Yet at its core, DST is an inquiry-based activity, and the first step in the inquiry process is to ask questions, either about the narrative or about the subject matter of the central text. Personal knowledge, knowledge systems (history, science, politics, etc.), and sign/symbol systems (art, music, etc.) are typically the sources for student inquiry (Short, Harste,

& Burke, 1995). However, in this activity, the principle source of inquiry is the text that the students are reading. The beauty of a digital story is that the nature of the activity fosters a culture of inquiry within the classroom, which is found to have practical implications for engaging the students in talk and significantly improving the quality of classroom conversation (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Student and Group Roles

The purpose of an activity drives the nature of the activity within a group; and the social interactions that take place during a DST are critical to its success. Deep comprehension of a subject relies on the students' ability to verbalize known content, listen to differing view points, and synthesize new information (Burns, 1998). Just like literature circles, DSTs allow for student choice, self-management, and variety grouping, which promotes a more cooperative and responsible classroom climate (Burns, 1998).

Allowing students to make decisions and choices based on their roles provides "a sense of empowerment, and empowerment leads to engagement" (Seely-Flint, 1999, p. 17). Research has also shown that students feel an increased sense of ownership with regard to their learning, coupled with a responsibility to their groups, when a specific role is assigned to them (Wilfong, 2009).

Role of the Teacher

Monitoring the classroom discourse is the most important role of the teacher in DSTs. At the outset, just as in a traditional literature circle model, teachers facilitating DST should first work collaboratively with the students and then reduce the level of scaffolding as the students demonstrate independent learning and assume responsibility for their own learning within the roles assigned to them (Brown, 2002). With

technology as the added component in story telling, teachers are also responsible for monitoring and scaffolding the students' technological proficiency (Mills, 2010).

Novice digital storytellers can often get lost in the Internet "thicket". A recommendation to the teacher is that, during the students' first attempt at this activity, the class be permitted access to only a limited repository of teacher-selected images (e.g. a shared drive folder or CD containing subject-specific pictures). This will limit the Internet wandering and focus the students' attention on the craft of digital story telling. Once the students have mastered the making of a digital story, they can move on to more advanced techniques, such as recording their own videos, voice-overs, or even original music.

It should be noted that some current classroom teachers may themselves not be comfortable with technology, despite the fact that today's K-12 students are "digital natives" (Prensky, 2005). It is also not uncommon for students to be more tech-savvy than their facilitators. This should not be a cause for concern. The role of the teacher is more to provide access to technology and then to monitor the appropriateness of the result antimages, sound files, dialogues and story and subject matter.

Assessment

"Present the Production" is the conclusion of the activity in which students present their production of digital storytelling to their classmates and parents. This is the culmination of the social exchange of the activity, as the language learned during the students' movie-making experience can be shared with outsiders. As Vygotsky's (1978) work in sociocultural theory asserts, learning is best experienced when shared with others; the end result here should also lead to this. Thus, assessment can be done in terms of reflection

and feedback with blogs, discussion boards and student response systems. This kind of feedback would allow students to share their learning with wider groups than just teachers and also give teachers much better platform for assessing their students.

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