

# USING DIGITAL STORYTELLING TO IMPROVE LITERACY SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

The paper shows the importance of Storybird, an online platform, for developing writing and storytelling among young learners of a foreign language.

## KEYWORDS

Digital literacy, storytelling, creative writing, foreign language

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Story telling is one of the most ancient forms of human expression. In an increasingly complex and media-saturated world there are a vast range of digital tools that allow students to express through digital narratives. Digital storytelling emerged over the last few years as a powerful teaching and learning tool that engages both teachers and their students, (Robin, 2008). Teachers must invest more time/effort in getting both content producers and consumers to develop their storytelling and narrative skills.

There are several definitions for 'Digital Storytelling' however we identify with the one from the Digital Storytelling Association that defends that "Digital Storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Throughout history, storytelling has been used to share knowledge, wisdom, and values. Stories have taken many different forms. Stories have been adapted to each successive medium that has emerged, from the circle of the campfire to the silver screen, and now the computer screen." (Leslie Rule,2010)

Digital stories usually contain computer based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and music. They vary in length but in education the most used last between two and ten minutes. Topics range from a wide area, covering almost everything thinkable.

## 2. STORYBIRD

Storybird is an extremely engaging collaborative storywriting website that embodies three ideas – creating, reading, and sharing. It is also a collaborative storytelling tool that allows students to focus more on the content of their writing rather than drawing pictures. Students are provided with the pictures - free collections of art. They just have to add the words to write stories. Once the art is chosen, students are able to build their story by dragging and dropping pictures and creating/writing a story to match the pictures chosen. Stories can enclose a variety of genres – poetry, mysteries, tales, among others.

For teachers it is very easy to use because Storybird requires minimal teacher preparation and allows them to easily create individual user accounts for students. With that, teachers can view all story books that students are making. Storybird also has online safety for young students built into it. Storybird can be used collaboratively with, either with another student in class or school, or with students from different schools in the region or even from another country.

Storybird can also be used as a way to collaborate between parent and child. Several experiments were made in the USA in order to bridge home and school by having a child and their parents writing pages in a book. Afterwards schools have a *book share day* where parents come to school and read the story with their children to the rest of the class.

Storybird is also excellent for many writing assignments (feature built in the platform) helping even the most hesitant writers to bring out of their shell as this can be considered an engaging activity.

### 3. APPLICATION IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Storybird was introduced and demonstrated in a Language Teacher Master class in the Polytechnic of Castelo Branco, Portugal. It arose enthusiasm among the student teachers and so they decided to design activities to be used in schools with their own students. As there were teachers from different levels of teaching, activities were designed for kindergarten students up to secondary students. I'm going to describe the implementation and outcomes of some of those activities below:

1. The first one was implemented in two Primary Schools and intended to pair up students from two classes in different schools in the region. They had to write a story together. This was very important because each student brought his/her own style to the story while working together. First they chose a theme. Then they were given a vast array of pictures that could accompany that theme. They had to choose the pictures for the story and then drag and drop each picture onto the pages. Afterwards they discussed orally about the story and then wrote it. The fact that the work could stay unpublished until it was finished allowed it to be worked on and improved over several class periods. Each class worked on the stories at their own pace and rhythm and once the stories were finished, students read/tell the story via Skype to the other class. Afterwards the story was published online and printed.

Writing and reading for an audience encouraged and developed literacy skills. Storybird also helped the reluctant and shy students to write on their own. The use of artwork allowed students to develop deep reflection and higher-order thinking.

#### 2. Progressive story project

This activity was developed in a language class in a Basic School. The class was divided into groups. One group of students started the story and then the next day, the rest of the students read what the first group wrote, then the second group added to it and so on until the end of the story. All the students participated actively. Students loved seeing how the story that they started went on and ended.

In this case it was not only a great writing opportunity, but a great reading one as well. Creativity was high. All the students wanted to surprise the group that was coming afterwards.

3. In a Kindergarten, the experiment was done orally, using the art available. Children were asked to tell the story. When they did not agree, they negotiated another development for it. With these wordless picture books Storybird promoted early writing and early story telling creatively.

With these young students it was also used to develop sequencing skills and understanding the parts of the story (reading/writing skills).

There were many other activities developed by the students. These were only some examples.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Engaging in activities which students see as having a concrete and practical outcome, such as writing electronic books, allows the students to be creators of something unique, of which they have ownership. They become comfortable with the act of creation: turning nothing into something.

It also facilitates the transition from teacher-centred, class-based learning to one in which the pupil begins to acquire individual responsibility.

Because the work is carried out and published online, new, previously inconceivable possibilities of peer- and self-assessment also emerge in which students start learning via interaction with others.

The art pictures were so good that the students in the activities described above, were inspired to write and read the colleagues' stories. The more they read the more they wanted to write in order to read more stories to the classmates. This was very important because students were able to understand concepts and ideas better. The sharing of their stories made them comment, negotiate and discuss, giving them the tools to live in society.

Storybird promoted imagination, literacy, and self-confidence.

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