DIGITAL STORYTELLING: EMOTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In tandem with the deep structural changes that have taken place in society, education must also shift towards a teaching approach focused on learning and the overall development of the student. The integration of technology may be the drive to foster the needed changes. We draw on the literature of pertaining to the role of emotions and interpersonal relationships in the learning process; the technological evolution of storytelling towards Digital Storytelling and its connections to education. We argue Digital Storytelling is capable of challenging HE contexts, namely the emotional realm, where the private vs. public dichotomy is more prominent. Ultimately we propose Digital Storytelling as the aggregator capable of personalizing Higher Education while developing essential skills and competences.

KEYWORDS

Digital Storytelling, Higher Education, Emotion.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the complex society we live in, with the unforeseen future demands and the need for competence development, it has become widely acknowledged that approaches to teaching and learning need to encourage greater student involvement anchored in constructivist perspectives. As Laurillard (1993), among others, has argued, higher levels of thinking and cognitive development occur in contexts that stimulate curiosity, problem solving and reflective, critical thinking skills (see also the work of Schön, Kolb, and Moon), where students are actively engaged in learning, in the construction of knowledge (see the work of Dewey, Freire, and Vygosky, for example). In the foreword of the book *Education for judgment: the artistry of discussion leadership*, Elmore (1991) states:

> The aim of teaching is not only to transmit information, but also to transform students from passive recipients of other people's knowledge into active constructors of their own and others' knowledge. The teacher cannot transform without the student's active participation, of course. Teaching is fundamentally about creating the pedagogical, social, and ethical conditions under which students agree to take charge of their own learning, individually and collectively (p. xvi-xvii)

For many teachers in higher educational contexts, the challenge lies in attempting to understand the emerging educational context and the creation of learning environments that will make the development of higher-order cognitive abilities possible while encouraging teachers and students to thrive in what has been said to be the new technological paradigm: informationalism (Castells 2000). The integration of technology in education has been acknowledged to bring forth positive student engagement on all educational levels (Bates and Bates 2005, Latchman et al. 1999, Laurillard 1993). As students become not only consumers but also active content creators, and literature demonstrates that technological integration in HE may constitute an interesting strategy to motivate student learning (see Laurillard 1993, Rogers 2000, Bates and Poole 2003, Daniel 1998, Garrison and Kanuka 2004), it invites the question whether digital technology, particularly Digital Storytelling (DS) can possibly foster a more *personalized* Higher Education (HE). However, *getting personal* in HE, especially through *stories* seems to give raise to conflicting views. Based on the literature, we analyze and discuss emotion, interpersonal relationships and storytelling in order to seek further understanding regarding the possible reasons for this contradiction and argue Digital Storytelling might be a feasible approach to reemerge the *emotional* and *personal* in HE.

2. GETTING PERSONAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Thirty years of research have allowed Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) to conclude that "Modern colleges and especially universities seem far better structured to process large numbers of students efficiently than to maximize student learning" (p. 646), given that there are other essential dimensions beyond the cognitive skills and intellectual growth that HEIs that are still lacking. These include consideration of students' psychosocial changes, related to identity and self-concept; those related to others and the world; those related to values and attitudes; and those related to moral development. If HE is to be viewed as a facilitator for positive overall student development, all stakeholders involved need to rethink learning to include more than scientific knowledge. Illeris (2003) conceptualized this interplay of multiple dimensions and processes into a model of leaning. Illeris (2003, 2008) claims learning implies a series of processes that "lead to relatively lasting changes of capacity, whether they be of a motor, cognitive, psychodynamic (i.e. emotional, motivational or attitudinal) or social character, and which are not due to genetic-biological maturation" (2003, p. 397). Illeris' definition of learning demonstrates that it cannot be separated from personal development, socialization and qualification. The author explains that learning implies the integration of two processes - an external interaction process between the learner and his or her social, cultural or material environment, and an internal psychological process of acquisition and elaboration - and three dimensions - the content dimension, usually described as knowledge and skills, but also many other things such as opinions, insight, meaning, attitudes, values, ways of behavior, methods, strategies, and so on; the incentive dimension which comprises elements such as feelings, emotions, motivation and volition and whose function is to secure the continuous mental balance of the student; and the interaction dimension, which serves the personal integration in communities and society and thereby also builds up the student's social dimension.

Illeris draws on the work developed by Vygotsky (1978) and Furth (1987), who acknowledged the connection cognition and the emotion, and that of Damasio (1994, 2000) who has more recently proven that both cognition and emotion are always involved in the learning process. While cognition is connected to meaning making, the emotional content, Illeris defends, secures mental balance. The social dimension's main function is personal integration in communities and society. Other scholars who recognize this three dimensional interplay in learning – meaning, personal (self and identity) and contextual interaction – are Lave and Wenger (1991), in what they describe as *situated learning* and Wenger (1998), on *communities of practice*, where learning is perceived as "a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it" (Hanks, 1991, p.??). While cognition is embraced and nurtured in HE, emotion and close interpersonal relationships are aspects that, despite the literature advocating their relevance, still tend to be disregarded in favor of more traditional approaches to teaching and learning, as these are considered private and beyond the scope of HE (Leathwood and Hey, 2009, Morley, 2003, Clark, 1983). Thus, regardless of the current emphasis on student-centered learning approaches, considerable effort is made to maintain the firmly established boundaries and the distance deemed necessary.

2.1 Situating Emotion

Stones (1978) was amongst the first scholars to talk about the convergence of psychology and teaching, in what he termed as *psychopedagogy* (p. 1), which means applying theoretical principles of psychology into teaching, in order to enhance teaching and its affective context, establishing a link between cognition and emotion. Although current literature often tends to associate psychopedagogy with learning problems, Saravali (2005), for example, recognizes the role of psychopedagoy in HE, where teachers are asked to facilitate meaningful learning at a time when students of all ages face personal development challenges, as we have seen. Saravali admits knowledge on student development and pedagogy is useful to help students, both socially and affectively. Emotions are essential for human survival and adaptation as they affect the way we see, interpret, interact and react to the world that surrounds us (Horsdal 2012). Boler (1999) admits emotions are underexplored in education. We concur with the author that it is not that pedagogy of emotions should prevail, and that teachers and students should disclose their innermost secrets and feelings to each other in the classroom. As teachers we do need to be aware of the intrinsic implicit and explicit relations in higher educational settings and consider the reasons why emotions have systematically been discouraged at this educational level.

Boler (1999) claims emotions are embodied and situated, in part sensational and physiological, consisting of actual feeling – increased heartbeat, adrenaline – as well as cognitive and conceptual, shaped by beliefs and perceptions. The author identifies three deeply embedded conceptions surrounding emotions, which may allow us to better grasp the reasons behind the apparent duel. Emotions have been conceived as private experiences people are taught not to express publicly; they are a natural phenomenon people must learn to control; and are an individual (intimate) experience. Finally, emotion has been excluded from the HE's pursuit of truth, reason and knowledge. To address emotion is risky business, especially when, as the author argues, reason and truth prevails in HE. Emotions still tend to be associated with what the author describes as "'soft' scholarship, pollution of truth and bias" (Boler, 1999, p.??), despite the proliferation of recent findings from the neurosciences advocating emotions as natural and universal.

In his theory of consciousness, neurobiologist Damasio (2000) argues feelings and high-level cognition are intimately connected. The author claims a person's emotions can either inhibit or foment the brain's rational functioning. Additionally, consciousness of the world and of the self emerge in the same process. Damasio (2000) explains: "the presence of you is the feeling of what happens when your being is modified by the act of apprehending something" (p. 10). Thus, all that occurs to a person is emotionally laden. Damasio links not only cognition and emotion, but also the process of meaning making, or learning. Given the significance of this finding, the last ten years has seen an increase in the literature on emotions in education. Schutz and Lanehart (2002) state "emotions are intimately involved in virtually every aspect of the teaching and learning process and, therefore, an understanding of the nature of emotions within the school context is essential" (p. 67). Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) emphasize the bound relationship between emotion, learning and context in their recent article *We feel, therefore we learn,* where they discuss the relevance of emotions and social context on learning. The authors claim:

> Modern biology reveals humans to be fundamentally emotional and social creatures. And yet those of us in the field of education often fail to consider that the high level cognitive skills taught in schools, including reasoning, decision making and processes related to language, reading, and mathematics, do not function as rational, disembodied systems, somehow influenced but detached from emotion and the body. (p. 3)

As empirical studies proliferate and claim positive connections between emotion and learning in HE, some authors recommend a cautious approach and alert to the risks involved. Rai (2012) examined the significance of emotion in assessment through reflective or experiential writing in the context of professional practice-based learning. The author found that reflective writing raises important issues in relation to emotion for both students and teachers assessing their texts. While admitting the advantages of personal, emotionally laden reflective writing, Rai adverts to the full complexity of the impact of emotions. Tobin (2004) also explores some of the academic literature focusing on writing personal reflective accounts and contends that while teachers should encourage emotion in the classroom, there is a degree of risk. For Tobin (2004) and Rai (2012) personal, reflective writing translates into a focus on emotions, in line with Schön's (1983) view of reflection as an emotional process. On this account, Brantmeier (2013) also claims learning that involves reflective critical-thinking activities allows students to be flexible and fluid, responsive to future yet unforeseen contextual needs. The author admits emotions invite vulnerability that, despite the risks discussed previously, is able to deepen learning. Brantmeier argues the dialogic learning process should be based on the following premise: *share, co-learn*, and *admit you do not know*. Closer personal relations, whether between students or between students and teachers, step beyond the confines of what has traditionally been deemed as appropriate for HE. Personal or emotional aspects are met with mental barriers that pose difficulties to overcome but necessary to manage.

3. THE INTERCONNECTED THREAD OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Traditional storytelling and educational technology can be said to have travelled divergent paths in education. While technology has seeped relentlessly into classrooms of all grade levels, storytelling seems to be imprisoned in lower grade levels (K-4), and the remaining grade levels continue to intently pursue Portuguese and Mathematics with a strict focus on standardized, national assessment. This system pervades HE. However, research has, time and again, demonstrated the connection between storytelling and higher-order thinking skills (Bruner, 1990, 2004; McAdams, 1993, 2001, 2008). Stories are essential to human communication, learning and thinking. Sarbin (1986) proposed the "narratory principle: that human beings

think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (p. 8). This is corroborated by neuroscience and neuro-imaging studies, which validate the claims that stories activate brain activity associated with cognitive processes (see for example, Fletcher et al., 1995, Gallagher et al., 2000, Mar, 2004). It is through stories that experiences gain meaning (Bruner, 1990, Polkinghorne, 1988) and, through reflection and interpretation, is then transformed into knowledge (Schön, 1983, Lave and Wenger, 1991). Stories enable the audience to learn by analogy, instead of direct experience (Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, Witherell and Noddings, 1991). Through storytelling, memory structures are construed (Schank, 1990, 1995) becoming easier to recall than scattered pieces of information. Schank describes intelligence as the "telling of the right story at the right time in the right way" (1990). Storytelling derives from the recollection and interpretation of an experience that has been significant; otherwise it is not remembered (Bruner, 1990, Schank, 1995, Thorndyke 1977, 1990). It is this dialogic activity in storytelling process that enables learning and thus, human development. Learning occurs when reflection on experience is then transformed into a logical, meaningful story that is shared with others (Clark, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008). This frames leaning as a social, experiential, reflective process, integrating the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions that Illeris (2003, 2008) identifies as essential to learning. From the author's perspective, stories, especially personal stories, motivate and engage the author in the act of creation. To create a coherent and effective story, the author must carefully reflect, select, prioritize and organize what he/she wants to say and how this can be conveyed. As the story is told, the audience interprets, reflects and connects to their own personal experience, construing new (mental) stories or reinterpreting older stories, in order to construe new ones. Furthermore, if interaction is possible between author and audience, or amongst the audience this (social) interaction fosters discussion and further reflection. The entire process is mediated by the intervenients' prior knowledge, their feelings in addition to the social and cultural context.

Despite the perceived value in storytelling, Cooney et al. (1998) have argued that once students reach functional literacy, story is cast aside, and regarded as an informal and recreational practice, not longer an essential skill for students. Pagnucci (2004) also posits while scholars promote the value of story writing, the academy often devalues narrative. This idea expressed by Bendt and Bowe (2000) summarizes what we believe is commonly accepted amongst educators, "Storytelling can ignite the imagination of *children*, giving them a taste for where books can take them. The excitement of storytelling can make reading and learning *fun* and can instill a sense of wonder about life and learning" (our emphasis, p. 1).

The authors identify the advantages of storytelling, but associating it to a particular timeframe, when entertainment in education is socially acceptable. This has repercussions on higher levels of education. Stories, especially personal stories, tend to be subjective and emotional. In fact, what is most significant in storytelling is the premise that most significant learning takes place during or after powerful emotional events (Witherell and Noddings, 1991). Whereas some regard the emotion in storytelling as powerful, others deem emotion as a weakness. Crafting a personal story is a highly complex and engaging activity for meaning making that couples cognition and affection, and links the self to others. Stories are used to create consistency, clarification and coherence of the self, through subjective interpretation. Some criticize emotional and personal content in HE. However, research has repeatedly demonstrated the emotional content at the core of personal storytelling is connected to intelligence and higher cognition. It is a highly reflexive and recursive process which incorporates the essence of human development, identity and education. By adding the digital to personal storytelling, we are able to incorporate the technical aspects, which drive the information society we live in.

Digital Storytelling allows conjugating storytelling and the latest technologies accessible to our students for learning purposes. DS addresses story in its multiple, interrelated elements, as well as visual and media literacies. Literature review reveals that DS and the inherent construction process engages and motivates students (Fletcher and Cambre, 2009, Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2010, Mcdrury and Alterio, 2003, Robin, 2008, Sadik, 2008, Sandars et al., 2008).

We posit DS is the adhesive force capable of aggregating what research has identified as core. DS is capable of integrating different literacies and language skills, as it combines multimedia researching, production and presentation skills with more traditional activities like writing and oral production skills. In practice, DS compels students to interpret, organize, prioritize, and make meaning of scattered events. Students are forced to reflect on their relationship with themselves and their relation to others. The preparation and creation phase requires students to search for and collect audio and visual materials, such as images, photos and soundtracks, to support their story and then combine and organize them in such a way that allows them to create the effect they want. It obliges students to think critically about the meaning and

effectiveness of multiple modes (elements) and their combination. This also confronts students with copyright issues on the Web. The narrative function allows students to tell a story with their own voice. Students need to reflect and decide on what to disclose. They are able to record and edit their stories as often as they want before finally presenting them to their teachers and colleagues, thus being able to improve their work until it is to their liking. DS is a personal self-representation, mediated by its limits. Length restrictions foster new ways of thinking, creativity and imagination. DS is also user-generated media, placing the focus on the student instead of the teacher, giving students leeway to cater to their own individual interests and learning styles, toward a more personalized learning context. This however, changes classroom dynamics and relationships, putting a spin in traditional lectured-based HE classrooms.

During the final viewing students may be confronted with positive or negative feedback to their final stories (as for example happens with movies uploaded onto YouTube). As a result, the sharing process is, as Malita and Martin state, "an excellent way to foster self-expression and tolerance, and to create an engaged community of learners", as students are "actively engaged in the exchange of ideas, the asking and receiving for feedback, the learning in an informal and, concomitantly, in a familiar way about their topics of interest, from peers, (older) colleagues" (2010, p.??). This fosters further reflection, interpretation and meaning making in the author and the audience. The story circle and the story show are about listening, promoting community, trust and closer emotional ties between teacher and student and amongst the students. The content is personal and emotional, and thus empowering, motivating and engaging. It seems that Digital Storytelling offers more than an opportunity to incorporate technology. As a process, Digital Storytelling demonstrates the capacity to aggregate the essence of HE: human (personal) development, social relational development, and technology.

4. CONCLUSION

DS is not just about creating digital stories; the foundations are embedded in story *telling*, in the act of sharing. DS in education can foster closer interpersonal connections based on trust, affection and dialogue. The act of sharing begins in the Story Circle and continues through the Story Show. Significant cognitive development takes place in the interpersonal interactions prior to and after the act of creating the final story where self-reflection is the steppingstone to dialogue, as advocated by the literature. This process fosters opportunities to connect and deepen relationships between students and teachers and amongst students. On the other hand, for students to talk about what is socially perceived as private is hard because they are afraid to be criticized. Students, like everybody else, worry about what impression they make on others and each element of the Story is carefully selected and organized to disclose what they want. The DS process enables students to undergo a process of self-reflection on who they are and what they wanted to show, whether they then disclosed their thought or not.

Additionally, DS is emotional, sometimes upsetting. However, the shift to personal perspective from which emotion stems is associated with higher-order cognition, positive student development and personalized, closer and less formal learning. Moreover and connected to emotion and self-disclosure, interpersonal relationships influence have significant impact not only at the personal level, but also on the academic and the professional realms as well. However, we would like to assert that while these three perspectives are intertwined and cannot be dissociated, our practical experience as teachers has demonstrated, the *personal* is still seen as unessential and even uncalled for in HE by teachers and students alike. Students are understandably reluctant to talk about themselves and what they perceive to be as private and not belonging to the field of academia. Teachers seem to have the same opinion, admitting that there is an invisible boundary that is not crossed unless students volunteer the more personal details. This raises the question of what is considered appropriate in HE, what is perceived as private, and what is considered public.

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