

Digital stories: improving the process using smartphone technology

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Abstract. With smartphone saturation at 100% among Japanese university students, educators are developing new and innovative ways to bring them to the forefront of learning, ensuring students are as engaged with their technology in their formal learning as they are with their informal learning. Smartphones of today are small, portable, have high spec cameras, microphones, and a large storage capacity. These devices also allow for videos to be edited within applications on the smartphone itself, without the need for a separate and expensive computer and editing software. Aspects such as these make using smartphones to make Digital Stories (DS) one possible way to effectively use this technology for formal learning purposes. This paper shows the results of a paper-based survey and discusses preliminary observations conducted with 38 Japanese university students undertaking a short-term study abroad experience in Australia and New Zealand.

Keywords: DS, smartphones, study abroad, Japanese university students.

1. Introduction

Educators are now implementing innovative ways to use smartphone technology, such as DS. DS help students present on a variety of topics in an innovative and engaging way. Reinders (2011) states that

“[m]ost societies have culturally unique stories that have been passed down through the generations, in some cases going back thousands of years [and that] the power of stories is such that many anthropologists, psychologists, and other scientists see it as being at the core of what makes us human” (p. 1).

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This statement demonstrates the power of DS and the importance they can have on our lives. DS have been successfully used in elective classes in the Japanese university context “to conduct and video record interviews with non-Japanese speakers in preparation for the conversational demands of study abroad” (Brine et al., 2015, p. 92). In Japan, short-term study abroad programs are the most common means of studying in foreign countries (MEXT, 2015), and DS have gained a foothold as an important means for students studying abroad, specifically to prepare and overcome the cultural shock of daily life in their country of choice (White, 2018). Yet the finished products can sometimes be less than ideal due to (1) the students’ inexperience in making DS, (2) inadequate instruction on what a DS is and how to make them, and (3) English language issues. This paper discusses the need for effective planning, basic training on how to take effective videos, and peer and teacher feedback and will conclude by providing a model of how DS should be administered to provide the most effective results.

2. Method

2.1. Population

The current research project was part of a three-year Japanese government funded grant into the use of DS for study abroad. The population for this study consisted of 38 18-22 year old ethnic Japanese undergraduate students from the College of Information Science and Engineering at a private university in western Japan. The students were all members of college organized study abroad programs to Australia and New Zealand which took place over five-weeks. Students had varying levels of overseas living and travel experience to English-speaking countries, and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) level of the students ranged from 400, the minimum to take part in the program, to over 800.

2.2. Instrument

The instrument used included a post study abroad experience survey, asking if their expectations before they studied abroad were close to the reality experienced, and their opinion on the usefulness of DS. Questions for this survey were developed based on over ten years study abroad experience of two professors at the university. Questions and answers were written in Japanese, the native language of the students, and translated to English for the purpose of this paper. In addition, analysis of the DS making process from the researcher’s perspective has been included.

2.3. DS

Students taking part in study abroad programs were required to make a three-minute DS in groups of three in relation to their classes, homestay life, most interesting and surprising experiences, and advice for future students. Students took photos and videos on their mobile phones during the five-week period and compiled them into a DS upon their return to Japan. The 24 students who studied in Australia were not given any DS training before their departure, whereas the 14 students who studied in New Zealand were given some basic training activities.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows a selection of the results from the post study abroad survey indicating that students enjoyed making DS and felt watching DS before departure would have been beneficial to reduce the gap between their study abroad expectations and reality. This is in line with White's (2018) previous research. Even with the need for DS justified there are some issues when preparing students to make them. Firstly, it is difficult to find a format all students can agree on. Although this researcher suggested students use mobile devices to take photos and videos and then develop the DS, some preferred to use regular cameras and computers. It is impractical to insist on a certain format when students are using their own devices. Due to this, this researcher could not develop specific training videos, and lacked the experience to act as the expert with multiple software applications. Secondly, even though this researcher provided equipment including gimbles, microphones, as well as stock photos and drone images, feedback from the students suggest that this equipment was cumbersome and remained mostly unused.

Table 1. Selected questions post study abroad survey

Did you enjoy the process of making a digital story? Why/Why not?	New Zealand	Australia
Yes	11 (79%)	21 (88%)
No	3 (21%)	3 (12%)
Do you think watching a digital story of Christchurch/Brisbane before your study would have been helpful?		
Yes	10 (71%)	18 (75%)
No	4 (29%)	6 (25%)

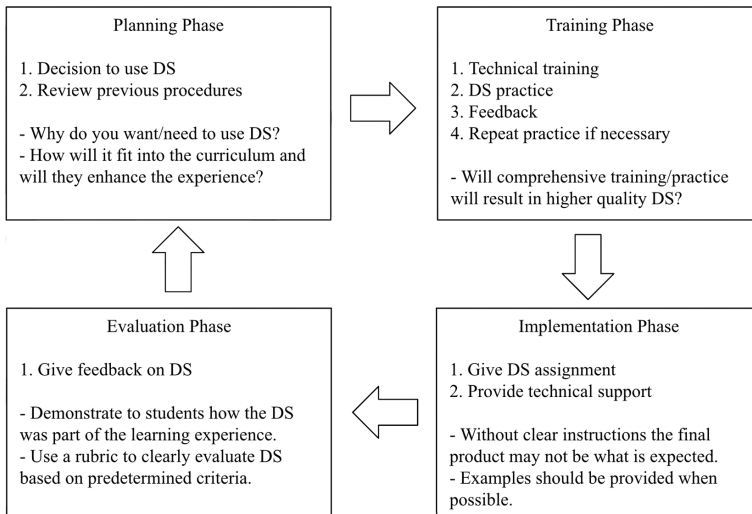
As it is impossible to control what equipment and software is used, this researcher will instead now focus efforts on developing effective DS training programs for the

study abroad students. These could include basic camera and video training, how to frame shots appropriately, lighting, and the need for clear audio.

Furthermore, in this research, the Australian group produced videos of much lesser quality than the New Zealand group. This, as [Reinders \(2011\)](#) points out, is likely to be due to the training received before departure which did not give the students enough insight into the need for DS, how they would become part of their evaluation, and the quality expected of the students. In addition, from observations of both groups, it is clear that we cannot assume all students are in fact ‘digital natives’, even as is the case in this research if students come from a technical based faculty within the university.

This researcher, based on the results of this study, developed a preliminary DS implementation cycle ([Figure 1](#)), which is divided into four stages: planning, training, implementation, and evaluation. Future research will demonstrate whether the use of this model will help students build more effective and professional DS.

Figure 1. DS implementation cycle



4. Conclusions

The use of DS is becoming an increasingly common way for students to have a voice. In the current paper, the author has shown that this voice does not occur

without effort on the part of the student and the educator administering the task. Although the current generation has been provided with an abundance of technology possibilities, educators cannot assume students to be digital natives, and must provide training as they would with other non-technological activities. This paper has discussed the need for effective planning, training, implementation, and evaluation. It is hoped that by using the digital stories implementation cycle that more effective and professional DS can be developed.

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