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Digital storytelling
multimodal meaning making

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Potential impact	medium
Timescale	short term
Keywords	storytelling, multiliteracies, interactive fiction

What is it?

Robin (n.d.) defines digital storytelling as “the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories”, stressing that “they all revolve around the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of multimedia, including graphics, audio, video, and Web publishing” (n.p.). Ohler (2009) suggests that

> “digital storytelling […] uses personal digital technology to combine a number of media into a coherent narrative” (p. 15).

Very often, digital storytelling involves some kind of video production (see examples on https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu).

Including stories and storytelling for language learning barely needs justification. The ability to tell a story is important in many life settings, from hanging out with friends to selling a product. But why *digital* storytelling? In 1996 The New London Group argued that the traditional perspective on literacy should be extended to encompass a broader range of meaning-making practices, including

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those involving digital media. In a similar vein, The Douglas Fir Group (2016) argues that “language learning is semiotic learning” (p. 27), and goes beyond the acquisition of words and structures.

While engaging in digital storytelling, learners practise the target language in a potentially highly motivating context, use the target language and other linguistic resources to engage in discussion and negotiation about the process, and in the production of their stories (e.g. in a task-based language teaching tradition); also extending their repertoire of meaning-making resources through practice and reflection – cf. The New London Group’s (1996) notion of critical framing. Students of many different levels of proficiency can create engaging digital stories – from the A1-level primary school student telling a story via the Puppet Pals app, to the adult language learner engaging in a complex cross-media storytelling project.

Examples

Creating interactive fiction:

> Your teacher caught you cheating on your vocabulary test. They confront you. Do you:
>
> - [[deny any wrongdoing]]
> - [[admit to cheating]]
> - [[try to change topics]]

Interactive fiction refers to branching stories in which narrative sections and/or dialogues are interspersed with decisions the player/reader makes, which impact how the story continues.

When creating interactive fiction, students can draw on experiences with a broad range of interactive fiction types, from interactive films such as Bandersnatch, to popular games and apps such as ‘80 Days’, or even traditional, 1980s-style

‘Choose your own adventure’ books (which are available in language learner-friendly formats, from A1 level onwards, e.g. in the Oxford Bookworms and Helwig series of graded readers). Many computer games can also serve as inspiration.

Branching stories can become very complex very fast. Using authoring software such as Twine (twinery.org, see also Ford, 2016), can help keep an increasingly-entangled web of story nodes under control. But of course knowing how to use authoring software is only one step towards creating a great piece of interactive fiction. The FanTALES project (https://www.fantales.eu/results/) has published a card-based interactive storytelling tutorial that combines a step-by-step approach in learning to use Twine with instruction and inspiration regarding the craft of storytelling, using popular contemporary stories as a backdrop.

A single telegram text can be the beginning of a love story, or the first step down a slippery slope. A harmless enough WhatsApp conversation can turn from funny to scary and back to funny in just a few typed words, a single audio message, and some emoji or photos.

With the search term ‘texting story’, or the combination of a chat app brand name and ‘fake’ or ‘simulator’, you will find many different commercial apps that help with the creation of stories in the shape of fake chats.

Taking The Douglas Fir Group’s (2016) assertion to heart that “language learning is identity work” (p. 31), such chat simulators provide rich opportunities to let learners draw on semiotic resources and identity aspects that are rarely in the forefront in the foreign language classroom, e.g. informal registers, translanguaging skills, (partially) conventionalised use of visual resources such as emoji and memes, as well as combinations of written and spoken language. With their dialogue structure and the opportunity to draw on a wide range of semiotic resources, chat simulators can enable beginners to tell a coherent story, while also providing advanced language learners with interesting design options.

Benefits

The ability to 'tell a story' is not only of relevance in the creative professions. Teachers, salespeople, journalists, and political activists all depend on communicating their knowledge and ideas in memorable ways. Digital storytelling is an established element of advertising and public relations.

Digital storytelling provides students with the opportunity to develop – and to showcase – their multimodal meaning-making skills, to play with languages and genres, to be creative, and to inspire others. Furthermore, from a language learning perspective, digital storytelling has a lot of potential as it can provide opportunities to focus on planning and revision of texts, as well as for negotiation of meaning if done collaboratively. When products are to be published, aspects of linguistic accuracy and social appropriacy, as well of audience design, may play a role too.

Potential issues

Some tools for digital storytelling are very powerful – and complex. Authoring tools that may have fewer settings, but require little to no instruction, might be a better fit in contexts in which only little time is available for a digital storytelling mini-project.

Also, care should be taken that the tools chosen are fully accessible for language learners. Some authoring tools may not be suitable for students with visual impairments or difficulties with fine motor control, for example. Fortunately, the market for authoring tools (commercial and non-commercial alike) is large, providing many different options.

While most learners will have some experience with non-linear storytelling and chat-based communication, providing learners with sample stories can be helpful for those with less experience or few ideas about how to translate their experience into a new story.

Looking to the future

Digital storytelling will develop in parallel with changes in our media environment. Virtual reality digital storytelling is already used in some schools. On one hand, as prices drop and hardware becomes more widely available, virtual reality storytelling will likely be adopted more broadly. On the other hand, as some media and genres lose popularity, their role for digital storytelling will also wane (e.g. blog-based digital storytelling).

When The New London Group (1996) discussed the need for a new understanding of literacy, they also stressed the need for learners to be able to engage in plurilingual meaning making, including "the code-switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers" (p. 69). Digital storytelling that includes plurilingual practices, or that is designed to appeal to users with different sets of linguistic resources, may play an increasing role in the future.

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Resources

Educational uses of digital storytelling can be found here: https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu

FanTALES Interactive Storytelling Tutorials: https://www.fantales.eu/results/

A short course (MOOC) on Powerful tools for teaching and learning: digital storytelling: https://www.coursera.org/learn/digital-storytelling

Twine, an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories: www.twinery.org

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