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Extending the Classroom: Digital Micro-Narratives for Novice Language Learners

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Abstract

Digital Storytelling offers many advantages for language learning, especially within a project-based framework. In this article, the use of Digital Micro-Narratives is proposed as particularly useful for second language learners at the novice level. As a sub-genre of Digital Storytelling, Digital Micro-Narratives focus more on frequently updated content and continuous feedback and less on crafting a flawless final product, as is the case with more traditional Digital Storytelling. The value of Digital Micro-Narratives lies within a procedural framework that fosters agency, authenticity, the use of multiple modes and media, and which addresses individual learner differences and inspires identity formation.

Background

Digital storytelling (DST) is conceived in many ways, ranging from the narrowly defined "first person video-narrative" (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2014) to a broad spectrum of applications that may include a twitter feed, a blog post, or a Facebook thread as viable forms (Alexander, 2011; Fulwiler & Middleton, 2012). This article asserts that DST is a communicative activity that allows second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) teachers to extend the boundaries of the traditional classroom. It enables learners to create meaningful L2 communication both inside and outside of formal instruction time. In order to adapt the concept of DST to the realities of the L2 classroom, this author explores the use of Digital Micro-Narratives (DMNs) as a technology-supported instructional approach for novice L2 learners in secondary and postsecondary classrooms and as a way to help learners develop 21st century skills and communicative abilities.

DST in general is not part of a particular method or approach, but can be situated among constructivist approaches and categorized as part of a task-based curriculum. Digital stories are constructivist in nature because they allow learners to connect their existing knowledge, experiences, and skills with new material. With respect to task-based learning, creating such stories can be set up as a series of concrete tasks with clear goals and outcomes.

DST is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered in that learners are "the builders of their own cognitive tools, as well as of their external realities. In other words, knowledge and the world are both construed and interpreted through action, and mediated through symbol use" (Ackermann, 2004, p. 18). Moreover, DST is at

the same time an independent and a collaborative process because knowledge and world construal happen individually and collectively as learners share their work among peers. Accordingly, digital stories are a medium that provides both construction and dissemination channels. While DST is suitable for all levels of L2 learners, this article centers on novice L2 or FL learners and therefore highlights the use of DMNs. The short, concrete, frequently performed tasks of DMNs aptly lend themselves to a highly scaffolded instructional approach, which is consistent with the needs of beginning level language learners (Díaz-Rico, 2002; Macaro, 2010).

DMNs are a sub-genre of DST, and this author claims that they are particularly useful for L2 learners at the novice level, since they are frequently revised and are not encumbered with extensive scripting and editing. DMNs differ from more traditional DST in that while they do place a high value on authorship, they do not place as high a production value on extensive crafting and polishing of content. They are nonetheless coherent narratives, and thus are more than individual social media posts or disjointed chunks of information. For example, a student uploading a photo with a short narration several times a week over the course of the semester to a narration application, such as VoiceThread, and chronicling his or her daily leisure time activities would constitute a DMN. Each entry would be both a self-contained brief narrative as well as part of a larger, overarching narrative. As opposed to more traditional DST, the more frequent crafting of stories leads to less emphasis on form and final product, and more on process, authoring, and constant application. This focus on process should be the goal of DST in general and DMNs in particular (Chan, 2011; Nelson, 2006).

The use of multiple modes and media, such as images, sounds, motion, and narrative context, helps to bridge linguistic gaps and functions as scaffolding (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). It is suggested here that because of these bridging and scaffolding characteristics, the use of DMNs fosters beginning L2 learners' creation of meaningful and authentic output. Through DMNs, learners make use of nonverbal communication modes, such as images or background music and sounds. Hull and Katz (2006) maintain that DST and DMNs provide a framework for projecting student voice and advancing agency, and thereby offer motivational advantages, minimize learner anxiety, and establish a safe space for learners to create alternate, multiple, or even hybrid identities. For example, learners can choose which aspects of their lives they are willing to share and thus either save face, present themselves more positively, or create interesting alter egos. Learners can also influence and manipulate their audience, and thus gain control of the discourse.

It is proposed that DMN activities are aligned with three of the FL national standards: Standard 1.3 *Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics*; Standard 5.1 *Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting*; and Standard 5.2 *Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment* (NSFLEP, 2006). These micro-narratives allow students to present information to the teacher and their peers inside the classroom but also beyond its physical boundaries through the use of digital media. DMNs create opportunities to connect with others beyond the classroom, and these connections hold potential to extend beyond the phase of formal instruction and lead to lifelong learning opportunities.

The following appraisal of the use of DMNs is divided into two sections. The first section, Extending the Classroom, deals with the different ways in which DST practices extend the classroom in general and includes discussions of modes and media, identity work, and flipping the classroom. The second section, Digital Micro-Narratives, uses these concepts as a basis for the adapted model of DMN as a proposed variant of DST, which is suitably adaptable for the teaching of FLs.

Extending the Classroom

Extending Modes and Media

Communication involves various modes, such as written texts, spoken words and visual information. In today's multimedia society, visual information is ubiquitous. Finnegan (2002) maintains that "the visual symbols override language differences and communicate more directly than written words" (p. 150). Kress (2003) posits that as visuals become more dominant, writing will undergo profound changes. It is clear that the use of visuals in language learning plays an important role. The convergence of old and new media is not a mere technological shift, but rather it is a changed media logic. Correspondingly, transmedia storytelling transcends previously accepted boundaries, making use of the different affordances of various media and combining their effects (Jenkins, 2006). The utilization of different modes, such as images, writing, gesture, speech, or music, offers new possibilities for creating meaning.

Neu (1990) argues that nonverbal competence is a crucial component of adult second language learners' overall communicative competence. Verbal output, for example, can be enhanced by music, sounds, utterances, or tone, and visual output can be manipulated through images, facial expressions, posture, or gestures. For instance, when talking about their morning routines, learners can add information such as the water is running while they are brushing their teeth by either creating the sound themselves or making the recording while water is running in the background. They could also show an image of running water. Novice language learners most likely do not know how to form a complicated sentence that involves two actions happening at the same time, but the affordances created by the storytelling tool allow the learner to convey this extra reinforcing information.

Extending the available modes and media can provide language learners with new vehicles for communication. For novice L2 learners, complementing oral and written information with nonverbal and non-written information allows for meaningful authorship experiences with the ability to provide narrative elements beyond speech and written text. Thus, more complex ideas and additional information can be generated through other modes, and meaning can be amplified by nonverbal information. Auditory information can be enhanced with the integration of music and utterances. Visual information can be enriched, complemented and manipulated by using images, facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Such additions allow learners to experiment with language at a very early stage. DST extends not only students' communicative toolkit by enabling the use of multiple modes and media, but also their authorship to a wider audience, which could be simply the learners' peers, but may include anyone who has access to the Internet.

Creating and Maintaining Identities

In the media culture we inhabit, multiple identities are common. Users manage and switch among multiple individual, social, connected and collective identities. Burr (1996) posits that language is a social phenomenon and that a person's identities are created through various forms of discourses. In today's environment, these identities exist not only in the physical world but increasingly in the digital realm, in social media, and in online discourse.

The development and maintenance of one's identity is inextricably intertwined with various forms of narratives, both fictional and nonfictional. The creation of an identity comprises narratives that a person constructs for him or herself as well as for others (Hull & Katz, 2006). Identities are not something learners have or innately possess but something that they continuously create, change and use (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008). Learners produce meaning through the process of narrative production and identity construction. Telling digital stories not only allows for the presentation of the self (Hull & Nelson, 2008), but also cultivates a group identity of agents through a transitional object. The created narratives are such an object, allowing the students to externalize and share information, create narrative voices, and be part of an in-group of producers.

Removing oneself and enacting a different identity and a different role allows users to modify and adapt a persona in order to project a positive face and prevent a negative one (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Nelson (2006) recommended a potential leveling effect in multimodal communication for L2 learners by providing an alternative way of expressing oneself, one that does not solely rely on the L2. This is relevant for the relationship amongst the learners and for the asymmetric instructor-student connections, which can be especially inhibiting for beginning L2 learners. (Blake, 2008). Individualized, creative expression, such as through DST and DMNs, allows learners to craft identities that promise learner engagement (Erstad & Silseth, 2008), while supporting individual learning styles and strategies. As individual learner differences, such as learning styles, motivation, and creativity, have a significant influence on learner success, more flexible and varied tasks increase opportunities for developing L2 competencies (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2003).

Digital Micro-Narratives (DMNs)

Whereas traditionally defined DST emphasizes form, written text, and a polished final product, DST is continuously moving towards a less defined and more open format (Alexander, 2011). Nonetheless, DMNs are oriented toward recursive application and are also adaptable to varied modes of expression. As explained above, novice language learners generally benefit from the use of varied modes of expression, which makes DMNs suitable for beginning L2 learners as they attempt communicate identity meaningfully. With access to diverse modes of expression and teacher support, novice learners are further enabled to develop an agentive self. DMNs promote flexibility for both teachers and students during early stages of students' L2 acquisition process.

What follows is a proposed set of criteria for the implementation of DMNs in L2 instruction: frequency, process and feedback, media and mode selection, task-

based learning, and identity work. These criteria are illustrated by examples of DMN learning activities.

Frequency

Frequency of use is a crucial criterion for DMNs, which sets it apart from DST, and allows learners to continuously and regularly spend time on task. Time that might be spent on elaborate editing in traditional DST can be applied instead toward producing a greater number of DMNs in the target language. While DST is often part of a special project, DMNs can be integrated throughout the semester. Repeated use of content and structures is encouraged, and learners may thereby experience less anxiety about language production. For example, a learner describing his meals throughout the semester may repeat similar phrases and structures but in varied forms.

Frequent implementation of DMN assignments is possible due to the use of easy-to-use tools such as VoiceThread, which is easy to learn and the technical aspects are relatively smple. Also, as learners repeatedly use the tool, time spent on the language task increases with decreased time and facility in use of the tool. Frequent production lends itself to the creation of an overarching narrative in which each entry is only one element in a larger unit. For example, students create one recording along with a visual for individual events - one for a shopping trip, one for a vacation, one for a day in school, and one for a weekend activity. These individual DMNs could then become a part of a creative portfolio or larger narrative of a learner's daily activities, in which the emphasis on each individual piece is reduced.

Process and Feedback

In a successful DMN, there must be balance in the amount of energy spent on process and aesthetics, which, even though they play an important role (Nyboe & Drotner, 2008), have the potential to reduce time using and practicing the target language. The instructor should set clear expectations for DMN assignments and share a balanced rubric early on with students to deter them from too much focus on production. Because DMNs can be produced and updated frequently, they offer multiple opportunities for feedback from both the instructor as well as fellow learners. Since digital technology features bidirectionality, learners benefit from being recipients as well as disseminators of knowledge (Kress, 203). Moreover, emotional engagement is an important component of both individual and group identity work. Thus novice learners can readily develop an L2 identity by creating content for their community of fellow L2 learners and receiving feedback from that community.

Because DMNs can be archived and shared easily, they can be readily used for assessment purposes. Sadik (2008) argues for appropriate assessment strategies for DST and suggests electronic reflective portfolios for formative assessment. A portfolio is useful in particular for DMNs as a practical means to catalog the quantity of work generated. A growing portfolio thus enables the possibility for pre-, mid-, and post-narrative reflection and assessment and provides students with rich, constant feedback—from the teacher and from peers—and allows them to revise or adapt their narratives accordingly.

Media and Mode Selection

A digital narrative created by a novice language learner has the potential to in-

spire genuine interest from a more advanced or a native speaker because of the use of multiple modes of narration that do not solely rely on L2 competence for meaningfulness. For example, the expressive power of images or the use of tone and composition can create more meaningful and interesting content than if a story were simply told orally. All of these tools, whether they are installed software (e.g., Photo Story 3) or online (e.g., VoiceThread) produce digital media that are participatory, collaborative, and distributed (Alexander, 2011). These media are participatory because they allow the creator and others to access the narrative, comment on it, influence it, or rate it. Stories can be created by more than one individual, even if these users are not physically close. The media are widely distributed because they can be accessed by more than the creator and the instructor, and can be created and accessed on a variety of devices and platforms.

The instructor's ability to choose the tool, the medium and the modes of use allows for adaptation to students' needs and learning goals. If, for example, oral communication is the focus and the topic is food, a short VoiceThread narrative about a recipe or a narrated shopping list may be appropriate. If culturally authentic online materials are the focus, then a micro blog post (e.g., Tumblr) may be better suited for the task because students could choose freely among various modes and media. Another example may be the use of place-based digital stories and tools such as *woices.com*. During a study abroad program or a field trip, students could make use of the geographic significance of place, in addition to voice, text, and images. Hull and Katz (2006) discuss the expansion of our understanding of textual production and reception: "While broadly speaking, dance, music, and poetry might all be viewed as textual performances, digital stories, because they of necessity layer multiple media and modes, complicate our understandings of textual performance as it is linked to the development of identity and agency" (p. 47).

Task-based Learning and Identity Work

Micro-storytelling practices are very suitable for a task-based approach (Ellis, 2003). Because of the frequency and the limited scope of their content, learners are guided by achievable goals. Task-based language production, such as DMNs, can lead to increased motivational benefits (Egbert, 2003). Because of their frequency, there can be an overarching narrative that encompasses the smaller narratives. This larger narrative may function as an identity marker for their creators and allow for creative agency within a task-based framework.

Tasks are commonly used in L2 instruction, for example in textbooks, teacher prompts or in homework assignments. But they are moved into the open, into the community of learners, through the storytelling process. Creating shareable narratives connects students' existing worlds with newly acquired structures and information and thus personalizes the learning process, because the authentic and meaningful content is provided by the learners and not by an outside source, such as a textbook or a teacher. The narratives allow student work to leave the immediate environment of the classroom and contribute to a group of peers rather than simply the instructor or an automated Computer-Assisted Language Learning or CALL program. DMNs can foster ongoing identity work as they motivate students to assume different roles and experiment with different voices. Learning, then, becomes

contextualized, and as a result of the frequency of DMNs, it becomes a regular aspect of language learner identity.

Mackey (2009) discusses the appeal for young people to be experts in a changed media environment. The new reality is one where the teacher will no longer be all-knowing, but can and must increasingly rely on learners' knowledge and skills. Students might be more media-savvy, or they may have specialized knowledge of certain subject areas, such as contemporary music, internet memes, and popular movies. Instructors can leverage this knowledge and bring it back into the classroom through their learners. This fosters learner agency, learner control, self-confidence, and a participatory learning environment. According to Robbins (2003), this role reversal supports the student as a whole person, not only partial aspects of his or her personality, because it allows for increased input from the learners. The content provided no longer comes solely from the instructor and from teaching materials.

Tools that allow the student enough creative freedom within predefined parameters are ideal, such as VoiceThread or Photo Story 3. Restrictions provided by the software may function more as a channel and allow the user to quickly create multiple narratives without necessarily relying on heavy scripting. For example, the software may permit students to import only certain file types, or it may not allow them to add visual effects. Therefore it is important to choose software that does not involve a steep learning curve for students or that focuses heavily on technical aspects, such as with Final Cut Pro or Adobe Premiere Pro.

Sample Digital Micro-Narratives

While the integration of DMN into a FL class invites multiple possibilities, following are two examples of implementation:

Example #1: Multimedia Diary

Software/tools required. VoiceThread, a Web 2.0 tool that allows students to upload images (as well as videos or documents) and record a narration.

Role of individual student/students as a group of peers. Students are able to present an idealized identity of themselves to their peers through a multimedia diary and present information in a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways, such as using photos, drawings, sketches, music, or sounds. An assignment variation includes options for students to have access to classmates' DMNs and comment on each other's narratives.

Role of instructor. The instructor provides a rubric that establishes evaluative criteria for students and gives frequent individual student feedback throughout the semester - both formative and summative. Additionally, the instructor supplements individual guidance with group support in the form of posted questions, suggestions, and directions.

Time required (inside/outside class). The instructor gives students the task to chronicle their activities as a multimedia diary and asks them to create five posts per week, each of them consisting of an image and a brief verbal description of an activity they performed that day. The average time spent on task per entry is five to ten minutes. An initial learning and production session of approximately 20 minutes is advised for users to set up accounts and become familiar with the tool.

Expected student learning outcomes. As a result of successfully completing the Multimedia Diary assignment, novice language learners will be able to produce personalized, authentic, meaningful, verbal output outside of class. They will enhance their personal messages with multimodal forms of meaning, including sounds, images, and motion videos.

Criteria/categories for evaluative rubric. Possible criteria may include appropriateness and meaningfulness of content, accuracy, creativity and complexity of structures, quality of recordings and visuals, use of identified skills and materials.

Example #2: Alter Ego

Software / tools required. The tool in this example is Tumblr, a multimedia microblogging tool.

Role of individual student/students as a group of peers. Students in this class each take on a role, an alter ego. Their characters or avatars are digitally crafted personalities with fictional lives. Each DMN is an expression of their personalities. In contrast to Example #1, these DMNs are not limited by reality or the use of predefined modes (voice and images). Students may post interesting findings from the Internet in addition to status updates, shorter and longer written texts, videos, quotes, and voice recordings. These micro-blogs can refer to each other and create a network of learners, by using predefined tags or by creating links, for example. The students would thus be able to see their peers' DMNs but also be able to try out different identities, such as taking on the role of an older person or someone from another country or social background.

Role of instructor. The instructor provides continuous feedback because all DMNs are publicly available. Students are given tasks throughout the semester to develop their alter egos progressively, in response to new content introduced during the semester.

Time required (inside/outside class). An initial learning and production session is advised. Twenty minutes should suffice for users to set up accounts and become familiar with the tool. Time spent on task throughout the semester can differ, from only a few minutes per week to several hours per week. The majority of work time is outside of the classroom, although some content should be shared and presented during class time.

Expected student learning outcomes. As a result of successfully completing the Alter Ego assignment, novice language learners will be able to produce personalized, authentic, meaningful, written output outside of class. They will be able to consider alternative modes of expression and be able to practice 21st century discourse situations.

Criteria/categories for evaluative rubric. Possible criteria may include appropriateness of content, frequency, correctness, creativity and complexity of structures, quality of recordings and visuals, use of learned skills and materials.

Conclusion

Instructors may extend and enhance existing secondary or postsecondary cur-

ricula through the use of DST practices, in particular short, flexible, and frequently implemented narratives, known as micro narratives. These DMNs open the boundaries of traditional learning environments, are learner-centric, and are focused on achievable tasks (Ellis, 2003). The narratives are a collection of tasks, of achievable language goals, which advance self-confidence and make learning benchmarks more concrete. Because DMNs lend themselves to multiple opportunities for feedback, they hold potential for collaborative group work, extending beyond the level of individual assignments seen and evaluated solely by the teacher.

The resulting extension of the communicative face-to-face classroom with the use of DMNs gives learners agentive power and promotes ongoing and frequent feedback throughout the course of their studies. By extending the possibility of using different modes and media, novice L2 students can create meaningful content. This is true for general DST, but the affordances of frequent communicative expression offered through DMNs throughout a whole course are particularly suited for novice L2 learners.

As articulated above, this article conceptualizes DMNs for language learning and teaching purposes. Micro-narration supports an individualized instructional approach that places the learner at its center and can be used both as produced and as consumed media. The stories add an affective learning component to the curriculum and accommodate individual learner differences. Encouraging L2 communication by providing concrete and authentic DMN tasks fosters student engagement in and out of the classroom. In light of the promising use of DST in the FL curriculum, especially DMNs for novice L2 learners, there is a need for further studies. Future research should look into the effectiveness of such practices and should involve both quantitative and qualitative studies, including how the use of DST/DMNs addresses ACTFL Standards 1.3, 5.1 and 5.2. A future study designed to compare learning outcomes from a novice learner group producing DMNs throughout the semester with a group working on a traditional, project-based DST assignment would serve to enlighten the premises put forth in this article.

The utilization of creative affordances of various modes and of narrative technologies is a 21st century skill: "Now more than ever," Nelson (2006) argues, "we, our students and ourselves, need the highest level of understanding of the semiotic workings and affordances of language, as well as of other modes, in order to enact and facilitate powerful personal expression" (p. 72). DMNs add a layer of complexity and profoundness to the language learning experience that might otherwise be restricted by the learner's limited expressive capabilities, and allow learners to become active and engaged participants and producers rather than merely receivers of knowledge. The use of DMNs also supports learners' development of 21st century skills and communicative abilities that they will need beyond the formal classroom setting.

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