Stories Matter: Sharing our Voices with Digital Storytelling

Lindsay Yearta, Shawnna Helf, and Lisa Harris

Abstract

Our students' voices matter; their stories are important. Digital tools can help students craft and publish their stories for wide, varied, authentic audiences. As little as a decade ago, it was difficult and expensive to publish digital stories. Given the myriad of apps and tools now available, teachers in elementary, middle, and high school settings can select the tools that will work best for their students. Digital storytelling can empower students and teachers to share their voices, participate in the ongoing, collective conversation, and learn from one another as they listen to and engage with others.

O ur students matter. Stories matter. Our students' stories matter. Yet, when we introduce the unit on digital storytelling at our university, students typically react with a flurry of questions that do not focus on the stories themselves. Instead, they ask questions such as, "How long does this need to be?" and "When is this due?" However, as students become entrenched in the digital storytelling process, the focus turns to the story. While our original intent with digital storytelling was to teach students the process, how to use the necessary digital tools, and how to integrate content, we were delighted to discover that when students shared their stories, our classroom community was strengthened, students often discovered they had something important to say and the process of learning from others was better understood.

The project is presented in a way so students understand they may construct a personal, funny, or informative story. Given a plethora of choices, many students choose to share something personal about themselves. We have had students share stories about battling anxiety and depression, living with eating disorders, taking transformative trips, and dealing with death. Through listening to and sharing stories, students are better able to understand one another and the world (Cunningham, 2015; Lambert, 2013; Rief, 2016) and empathy is developed. Digital tools can better enable students and teachers to share stories with authentic audiences.

In this article, we discuss the benefits of digital storytelling and examine digital storytelling as a medium for sharing voices from the classroom. We share two examples from university students enrolled in a technology integration course in an education program. Then we describe the digital storytelling procedures and resources that can be used by any grade level.

Why Digital Storytelling?

The way we read, interact with, and compose texts in the 21st century is changing. Many teachers and students embrace new technologies as tools for writing, thinking, and learning. In fact, the use of technology has been found to improve student learning outcomes (Andes & Claffett, 2011; Boling,

Castek, Zawlinski, Barton & Nierlich, 2008; Larson, 2009; Mills & Levido, 2011; Yearta, Stover-Kelly & Sease, 2015) as well as student motivation and engagement with academic tasks (Couse & Chen, 2010; Mills & Levido, 2011). Technology can enhance storytelling with an increased awareness of audience (Crawley, 2015; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009), more time and effort spent in planning and revision (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009), and opportunities for development of and engagement across a broad range of literacy skills (Morgan, 2014).

Creating digital stories provides English Learners (ELs) a context for using language that is authentic, personal, and meaningful (Rance-Roney, 2008). The oral aspect of digital storytelling allows for English Learners to activate background knowledge and develop ideas (Tompkins, 2015) without having to rely solely on spoken or written language (McGeoch, 2012). Additionally, digital storytelling by ELs has been shown to increase motivation (Yang, & Wu, 2012; Gimeno-Sanz, 2015; Nishioka, 2016; Yoon, 2013; Razmi, Pourali, & Nozad, 2014); improve listening, reading, and writing skills (Yang, & Wu, 2012); and develop speaking skills related to proficiency, pronunciation, and grammar (Nishioka, 2016).

When students understand their work will be shared with an authentic audience, they are more likely to spend time planning (Graham & Harris, 2013) and become more active and invested in the writing process. Digital tools can help teachers open the classroom (Stover-Kelly & Yearta, 2017), serve as writing mentors, and provide students with increased decision making ability and choice. As students plan their digital stories, they gather information, pictures, and music. They make decisions about what best helps them tell the story and then decide on the format. As they work on their storyboards and scripts, they repeatedly read their drafts. This continual process of planning, writing, and creating includes constant revision as students evaluate whether the story works and is appropriate for the intended audience.

Although digital storytelling can help develop and nurture students' writing skills, the highlight of this process is being able to share stories with audiences within and beyond the classroom. It is about discovering that being a part of a collective conversation means sharing, listening, and learning about ourselves and one another.

SHARING THEIR VOICES

When we ask our students to share personal stories with one another and the world, it helps if we do the same. Teachers serve as models and mentors for their students in many ways. Specifically, teachers can show students the importance of telling and listening to stories by creating and sharing their own digital stories. This has become increasingly important in today's political climate, where many feel as if their voices are not being heard. Jennie, an undergraduate middle level education major, eloquently describes how digital storytelling can make a difference. She posits that digital storytelling can be an "excellent platform for both teachers and students to have a voice and share their stories with a wide, authentic audience" and states how important it is for students to have their voices "not only heard, but valued."

Do students feel their voices are valued? Sandez, an undergraduate special education major, discussed how we must not "shy away from the stories that make us uncomfortable." We must use our stories as catalysts for discussions. It is through this process of crafting and understanding our own stories, as well as listening to and reflecting upon the stories of others, that we can truly begin to engage in powerful discussions.

In one of their college courses, Jennie and Sandez were given an assignment to create a digital story on a topic of their choosing. They were required to include images and narration and to post their final product on a course discussion board. Students were also encouraged to share their stories on social media in order to reach a wider audience. Jennie chose to create a story based on her experience as a peer mentor (See Figure 1) and Sandez created a digital story on the Black Lives Matter movement (See Figure 2).

Figure 1: Digital Story on Peer Mentor Experience by Jennie
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs8XUFAkIHw

Figure 2: Digital Story on Black Lives Matter by Sandez
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPGMb9BY3n4

Working through the process of digital storytelling was beneficial to these future teachers, as we imagine it would be for practicing teachers, in several ways. First, Jennie and Sandez recognized the importance of choice. Being able to choose a topic of interest leads to increased motivation and engagement (Graham & Harris, 2013). Although the digital storytelling project accounts for a very small percentage of the course grade, students spend more time on this assignment than any others in the course. They traversed the writing process as they carefully crafted the script, chose only the most relevant photographs and images to support the writing, and recorded and rerecorded until they were satisfied with the narration and flow of the story.

Students posted the final product to the class discussion board and several posted to YouTube. As students shared their work and viewed the work of others, a collective conversation began. By selecting their own topics and sharing the products within and beyond the classroom walls, a sense of classroom community was developed (Cunningham, 2015). This sense of community, often begun with teachers sharing their own work, is an integral component of an effective learning environment.

Teachers who teach writing should be writers themselves (Angelillo, 2005; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Similarly, teachers who encourage the crafting and sharing of digital stories need to add their voices to the collective conversation. Jennie and Sandez worked through the digital storytelling process and, therefore, have experienced the difficulties and joys of creating a finished product. Sandez noted that it "took a lot to gain the strength to write and speak the words in my story." When teachers have gone through the process, they are better able to empathize with and encourage students as they negotiate the process themselves. They are better able to support students as they struggle to determine a meaningful topic, help troubleshoot when students run into difficulties with the writing process or the technology, and contribute to the class writing community.

Both Jennie and Sandez created stories on topics that were important to them, and with the help of digital tools, added their voices to the larger conversation. Being a part of the collective conversation requires the right tools. In the following section, we examine a few of these tools.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROCEDURES AND RESOURCES

A decade ago, digital storytelling tools had an associated cost and learning curve (Robin, 2016). Now, everything that students need to create a digital story can be found on a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Before beginning a digital storytelling project with the students, teachers should decide which tools will work best in their classroom. Computer programs such as iMovie and MovieMaker are readily available. Additionally, tablets and smartphones provide access to a myriad of useful apps. Puppet Pals, ShowMe, Photostory, Splice, Book Creator, and Educreations are free apps that allow the user to upload or draw images and record audio. Once a tool is selected, the teacher should create a digital story first. This can serve as an example and allows the teacher to practice with the tool and experience any technical difficulties that might arise for the students. In addition to teachers sharing the digital story they created, students should also view and discuss a variety of examples. These could include previous students' work or examples the teacher has found online. Students can then engage in a conversation about possible feedback they would provide the author, such as the alignment of image and narration, the volume of narration, or the story itself. Evaluating sample stories allows students to determine effective methods for portraying their own stories. Once students are familiar with the genre of digital storytelling, students should brainstorm ideas for their own stories, and then begin drafting the script. This can be done in writer's notebooks or with digital tools such as Google Docs or Notability.

Once a story is drafted, students can determine where natural breaks in the story occur, what images fit the story, and where those images should be placed. Storyboards are useful here and can be compared to a digital storytelling blueprint (Robin, 2016) as they help students construct and see the order of the story (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). See Appendix A for a sample storyboard created with Microsoft Word.

To add images to the script, students can use personal photographs or find appropriate images online. There are several helpful tools for finding free and appropriate images online including the

Google suite of tools, or websites such as Photos for Class, Pexels, and Pics4Learning. Additionally, historic images are available through the Library of Congress.

The variety of tools available allows teachers to tailor digital storytelling to fit students' needs. Regardless of the tools selected, digital storytelling tends to follow a recursive process inclusive of writing the story, creating storyboards, creating or selecting images, recording narration, and putting everything together. Students may revise and edit or revisit past stages throughout the process.

Once the digital stories are complete, there are several ways to save and share the work. Digital stories made with MovieMaker or iMovie can be saved as mp4 files and uploaded to Canvas, Edmodo, class websites, YouTube, or Vimeo. Puppet Pals, ShowMe, Photostory, Splice, Book Creator, and Educreations all provide links that can be shared on any platform. See Appendix B for an easy-to-reference listing of potential tools. The ability to share work with a wide audience is one of the best features of digital storytelling and can widen the community of writers and impact motivation and engagement.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The need for stories is everlasting. Stories can be used to support ideas and underscore main points (Ohler, 2013). Katie Egan Cunningham (2015) discusses how stories, such as those shared by the people of New York, http://www.humansofnewyork.com, can illustrate the universality of many aspects of our lives. Specifically, sharing and listening to stories can help people better understand themselves and others.

Digital tools can allow stories to be shared within a classroom or with a wide and varied audience. By engaging in this authentic experience, our university students Jennie and Sandez now better understand how digital storytelling allows for choice in the writing process, leads to increased engagement, contributes to classroom community, strengthens student voice, and aids in the development of empathy. While it was difficult for some of our students to find the strength to speak their truth, in the end they recognized the value of engaging in discussions that might have made them slightly uncomfortable. Empowering students and teachers to add their voices to the collective conversation means that we continuously discover ourselves, learn from one another, and strengthen our ability to empathize and advocate.

REFERENCES

Andes, L., & Claggett, E. (2011). Wiki writers: Students and teachers making connections across communities. *The Reading Teacher, 64*(5), 345-350.

Angelillo, J. (2005). *Making revision matter*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Boling, E., Castek, J., Zawilinski, L., Barton, K., & Nierlich, T. (2008). Collaborative literacy: Blogs and internet projects. *The Reading Teacher, 61*, 504-506.

Couse, L. J., & Chen, D. W. (2010). A tablet computer for young children? Exploring its viability for early childhood education. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 43*(1), 75-98.

Crawley, S.A. (2015). Beyond digital stories: Crafting digital compositions for opinion writing. *Voices from the Middle, 23*(2), 49-55.

Cunningham, K.E. (2015). *Story: Still the heart of literacy learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gimeno-Sanz, A. (2015). Digital storytelling as an innovative element in English for specific purposes. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 178, 110-116.

Graham, S., & Harris, K.R. (2013). Designing an effective writing program. In S. Graham, C.A.

MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction* (2nd ed., pp. 3-25). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Lambert, J. (2013). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Larson, L.C. (2009). Reader response meets new literacies: Empowering readers in online learning communities. *The Reading Teacher, 62,* 638-648.

McGeoch,K. (2012). Digital storytelling, drama, and second language learning. In Winston, J. (Ed.) *2nd Language Learning through drama: Practical techniques and applications.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Mills, K.A., & Levido, A. (2011). iPed: Pedagogy for digital text production. *The Reading Teacher, 65,* 80-91.

Morgan, H. (2014). Using digital story projects to help students improve in reading and writing. *Reading Improvement, 51*(1), 20-26.

Nishioka, H. (2016). Analyzing language development in a collaborative digital storytelling project: Sociocultural perspectives. *System, 62,* 39-52.

Ohler, J.B. (2013). *Digital storytelling in the classroom: New media pathways to literacy, learning, and creativity* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Rance-Roney, J. (2008). Digital storytelling for language and culture learning. *Essential Teacher*, *5* (1), 29-31.

Razmi, M., Pourali, S., & Nozad, S. (2014). Digital storytelling in EFL classroom (oral presentation of the story): A pathway to improve oral production. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *98*, 1541-1544.

Rief, L. (2016). Let's not leave story behind. *Voices from the Middle, 24*(1), 36- 40.

Robin, B. (2016). The Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling Website. University of Houston College of Education. Retrieved from: http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu

Stover-Kelly, K. & Yearta, L. (2017). *From pencils to podcasts: Digital tools for transforming K-6 literacy practices.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Sylvester, R., Greenidge, W. (2009). Digital storytelling: Extending the potential for struggling writers. *The Reading Teacher, 63*(4), 284-295.

Tompkins, G.E. (2015). *Literacy in the early grades: A successful start for preK-4 readers and writers* (4th Ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Yang, T. C, & Wu, W. I. (2012). Digital storytelling for enhancing student academic achievement, critical thinking, and learning motivation: A year-long experimental study. *Computers and Education, 59,* 339-352.

Yearta, L., Stover- Kelly, K., & Sease, R. (2015). Fifth graders blog with preservice teachers to discuss literature. *Reading Horizons*, *54*(1), 26-47.

Yoon, T. (2013). Are you digitized? Ways to provide motivation for ELLs using digital storytelling. *International Journal of Research Studies in Educational Technology, 2*(1), 25-34.

Appendix A: Digital Storytelling Storyboard

Title: _____

Author: _____

	Scene: Main Idea:	Scene: Main Idea:	Scene: Main Idea:
Script	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Image and Transition			
		transition	transition
Music / Sound Effects			

Appendix B: Easy-to-Reference List of Digital Storytelling Tools

Component	Description	Digital Tools
Drafting	In this initial stage, students begin to write their stories. Traditional writer's notebooks or daybooks can be used for this part of the process.	Notability (app) Google Docs (app/web-based)
Creating Storyboards	After students have a draft of their stories, they will want to begin thinking about what image will best represent each portion of the story. Students can chunk text and match each chunk with an idea for an image in this stage.	Storyboard That (web-based) Microsoft Word (see Appendix A)
Selecting Images	Once students have an idea of what images will work for each chunk of text, they can begin exploring appropriate photographs online. Photos for class comes with automatic citations and images that have been filtered. Pexels has a wider variety of images, but no filter is in use. Both Photos for Class and Pexels use Creative Commons licensing. Pics4Learning features images that are safe and free for education. The photos are copyright friendly. The Library of Congress features historical images.	PhotosforClass Pexels Pics4Learning Library of Congress
Combining Stories, Images, and Narration	When students have their drafted stories aligned with the images that they have chosen, they can upload everything to an app or software editing tool. Students can narrate their stories in this stage as well. Keep in mind, there is variability in this process. Book Creator works well for realistic videos. If students prefer to have animated stories, Puppet Pals is a good choice. If you have older students, Splice is a favorite.	Book Creator (app) Puppet Pals (app) Show Me (app) Splice (app) MovieMaker or Photos (software) iMovie (software/app)
Sharing Widely	Many of the apps allow for students to upload their work to a repository. They also have the choice to share to video websites. This will allow for easy sharing across wide audiences.	YouTube (app/web-based) Vimeo (app/web-based)

AUTHORS

Lindsay Yearta, Assistant Professor, Winthrop University; email: yeartal@winthrop.edu

Shawnna Helf, Associate Professor, Winthrop University; email: helfs@winthrop.edu

Lisa Harris, Associate Professor, Winthrop University, email: harrisl@winthrop.edu