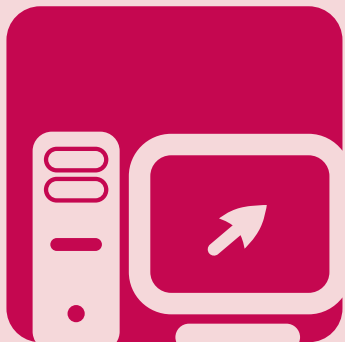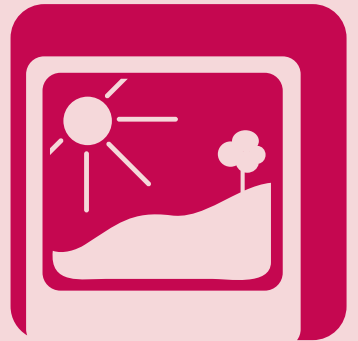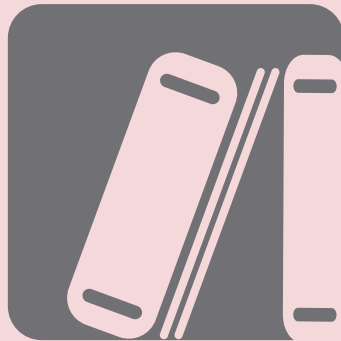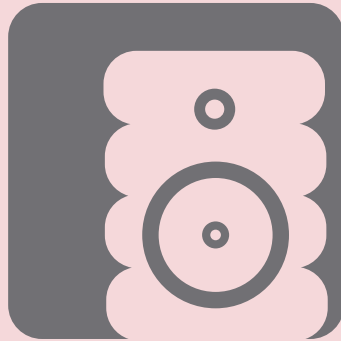# A Reflection:

Technology is becoming an integral part of the educational realm. In an effort to blend technology with education, I took on the challenge of digital storytelling as a way to generate interest, attention, and motivation for the "digital generation" in today's classroom (Robin, 2006).

Digital storytelling is the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound, and video, to create a short movie, typically with a strong emotional component (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007). They may be instructional, persuasive, historical, or reflective in nature. There are seven elements necessary for creating effective and interesting digital stories: point of view, a dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of voice, the power of the soundtrack, economy, and pacing (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2006). All of the elements are critical to the success of the digital story.

Benefits of Digital Storytelling

Looking to motivate and challenge my students, I took on the task of conducting my own action research on digital storytelling. Articles on this topic gave me a multitude of reasons for trying it out with my advanced students. Digital storytelling enables teachers to provide differentiated instruction that meets the needs and interests of advanced and gifted learners while providing a venue for them to be consistently and sufficiently challenged.

Digital stories not only reflect each student's understanding of the subject, but also allow collaboration, which can encourage personality development, collaborative skills, and creativity (Dupain & Maguire, 2005). Digital storytelling integrates technology with learning, facilitates an emotional connection to the content, and allows for the sharing of that content (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007). Highly capable learners can have trouble interacting with others, and this can lead to difficulties with peers. Sharing an activity is one of the best ways to create mutual respect (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982); digital storytelling addresses that need by giving students opportunities to interact and brainstorm through the creative process. People who are able to read and deal effectively with other's feelings are at an advantage in all areas of life (Goleman, 1995). I felt that digital storytelling would help my students to experience growth in the affective area.

I decided to use digital storytelling in my classroom for a variety of reasons:
- it motivates students because it involves them in the writing process in a novel way,
- it helps improve writing skills by having students learn to write with a concise point of view,
- it encourages research skills, and
- it helps to develop organizational skills while appealing to a wide range of learning styles.

Trials in Using Digital Storytelling Effectively With the Gifted

Lynda Kieler

Table 1 Helpful Sites on Digital Storytelling	
The Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling	http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu
The Center for Digital Storytelling's Memory's Voices	http://www.storycenter.org/memvoice/index.html
A Guide to Digital Storytelling	http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/yourvideo/pdf/aguidetodigitalstorytelling-bbc.pdf
Digital Storytelling	http://electronicportfolios.com/digistory
Tech Head Stories	http://tech-head.com/dstory.htm
DigiTales—The Art of Telling Digital Stories	http://www.digitales.us

Barrett and Wilkerson (2004) claimed that digital storytelling is a deep learning tool and listed its benefits. They defined deep learning as reflective, developmental, integrative, self-directive, and lifelong learning that develops critical thinking, communication, information literacy, and an ability to understand diverse societies and cultures. Because advanced learners require a broad range of information that they usually acquire faster than other students, they benefit from accelerated learning experiences that involve complex thinking and synthesizing of information, both of which can be incorporated into digital storytelling experiences. Additionally, it has been determined that people process visual information 60,000 times more quickly than narrative information, making visual literacy a key 21st-century skill for today's students to master (Porter, 2006). I was sold and eager to get started.

My Beginning

Although my purpose is not to relate the technical steps in the creation of a digital story, sites that teach digital storytelling mechanics are plentiful and a search will yield a wealth of information. The University of Houston maintains a most helpful site titled "The Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling" (http://digitalstorytelling.

coe.uh.edu) that includes information on creating stories, examples, and links to other sites and scholarly articles; I found it is a very good place to start. For those looking for sources about digital storytelling, I have included a table of websites (see Table 1). My purpose in this article is to relate my own experiences and convey the learning benefits that digital storytelling might hold for those who are willing to dive into this technology. Additionally, I want to highlight aspects of digital storytelling that I found critical for its efficacy—and which might otherwise be omitted in the effort to get the technical aspects of digital storytelling mastered.

As recommended on many of the digital storytelling sites, I began with a story of my own. At the time, I was not thinking about the best way to start, but I found that this was a wise way to begin. It gave me an understanding of some of the frustrations and intoxications that come with the art of creating something that has the power to move others. I realized that writing the script for a digital story helped narrow my focus. With the script finished, I was ready to mix text, photos, and music to create a product that satisfied my creative needs. I was Steven Spielberg creating a masterpiece. I was absorbed and driven. When I was done, I had a moving story of a family's struggle with autism titled *Joel's Journey*

Through the Puzzle of Autism. Since then, that story has been used to raise awareness for autism—I *was* a movie producer! It was a highly motivating and rewarding experience for me. The story I created was used as a closing to a workshop on the topic of autism and it can still found on the Five for Fighting's charity website (http://www.whatkindofworlddoyouwant.com), where it generates funds for autism research each time it is viewed.

Having created my digital story, I reflected on the steps I had taken and the ways I would modify it with a group of gifted elementary children. Clearly, I would have to break it down and teach it in small steps. I had learned that it was a worthy task for my students. It provided opportunities for self-motivation, problem solving, and collaboration, as well as learning and using information and communication technologies—things that the *Long Range Plan for Technology* (Texas Education Agency, 2006) indicated our students need to compete as digital citizens.

My Classroom Experience

I began with a small group of fifth-grade students who had been identified as gifted by a screening process that determined their entrance to the gifted program in my district. I followed the technical steps I had taken, but in a hurry to get the task done, I left out a whole series of steps that I later discovered were crucial—steps that help participants develop an emotional attachment to the material.

My students wrote a story about escaping slaves on the run toward the North. They knew it would become a digital story but did not really have a good understanding of what a digital story was or what a digital story could do. In retrospect, I believe they

thought of it as a developing a type of PowerPoint presentation using a different program. They lacked excitement but they managed to focus and tell a story. Next, they found pictures of runaway slaves and maps and put them in their electronic folder, along with gospel music samples. Lastly, they used a digital storytelling program, dropped in the photos, and recorded themselves telling the story with the music in the background.

When we watched it, we all experienced a sense of disconnection. It was a decent product, but there was no real engagement. We did not feel the danger that the escaping slaves felt, we didn't recognize their courage and strength, nor did we feel their sense of pride, accomplishment, or joy when they made it to safety. No aspiring Steven Spielbergs had risen up to challenge my creative genius. What had happened? What was the difference between my own experience and that of the students? This experience was *not* what the digital storytelling advocates said would happen. Nor was it what I had expected based on my own experience with it. I knew that digital storytelling could be a deep learning tool (Barrett & Wilkerson, 2004), and somehow I had missed that deep learning with my students. We had gone through the motions, but my students had not had that transformative experience of success.

Had I not had my own personal experience to fortify me, I would have considered digital storytelling to be a waste of educational time. I learned the hard way that going through an abbreviated version of the steps would not be sufficiently motivating to sustain the project nor would creating it in a disjointed way. In fact, I suspected that perhaps I should not expect that every learner would be up for this kind of creative challenge. I realized that it would take more collaboration

and time to figure out how to create a mood or point of view with visual images, music, and voice. This kind of project could not be done quickly. Digital storytelling requires time—something many teachers complain they don't have enough of, myself included. So, recognizing the value of it—how could I afford more time to this task?

The Missing Elements

I went back and looked at "Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling" developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (2006) and began to understand what I had left out of the instructions to my students. I began to understand that all of the elements are critical to the success of the story, and I had not given them the attention that was needed.

To begin with, a digital story requires the creator to find a perspective or point of view. This step is not easy for an adult, and is a real challenge for fifth graders. Children of this age are generally not that adept at seeing other people's points of view, but if a child can learn to appreciate how the world looks through other people's eyes and can put himself in the shoes of others, he will have fewer frustrations (Webb et al., 1982). Although I knew that point of view was important to the story and for helping my students to have fewer frustrations in life because their interpersonal skills had been improved through their experiences in collaboration, I had still missed the mark. At the time the students were creating the story, I had thought they understood point of view. Affective skills are sometimes handled intuitively and are always a very personal experience, and I assumed my students would get that internal connect as I had during my

own experience. Additionally, in taking on a point of view, the creator of the story has to narrow the focus and be concise. Often, advanced students have gotten by with a shallow learning of a subject. In having to narrow their

> I realized that it would take more collaboration and time to figure out how to create a mood or point of view with visual images, music, and voice.

focus, they must know how that focus was formed from the larger picture or events of a situation, knowledge that I later realized they did not have.

A second element I had omitted was a dramatic question that should be answered by the end of the story. In asking a question about the event or person highlighted in the story, the creator is developing an understanding of the situation. The creator is analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the situation. In other words, a person is connected and interacting with that point of view. Collaboration can be very helpful at this stage because it helps the creator of the story to clarify points for herself.

The third element that I had somehow managed to omit was in having the students find the content that spoke to them in a powerful and personal way. Perhaps they had found it but I had not given them the time to discuss it, reflect on it, and interact with it so that they became emotionally involved. And so our digital storytelling experience was not the success it could have been.

A Second Chance

A new year has begun, and I have a class of students chomping at the bit to create a digital story. What made the difference? My introduction of a digital story has been gradual. For novice digital story creators, my new timeframe is the whole school year instead of 3 weeks. There is student buy-in because of the challenge I leave them with each time we watch and evaluate digital stories. I have provided the stimulus. They are finding the emotional element and initiating their own dialogue about it.

I created several digital stories with moving music to introduce what happens in an oil spill and to retell a story about the Alamo. I have shown them examples of digital stories created by college students on the University of Houston's (2010) "Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling" website, and we have talked about what makes some of them interesting and emotional and what makes others lack emotion and not seem as interesting. They are learning that if they are concise, their story will be more effective.

Our digital storytelling discussions have led to other connections and discussions on how advertisers use color, music, and images to sell products and how movies grab us and hold us glued to the screen. We are creating a class digital story as a method of learning the technical steps in a digital story, and I will have them create one about themselves before having them start one based on the research of a historic topic in which they are interested. We have already started collaborating on ways to present their topic in a manner that will move others. When the students need a break from their research, they spend time listening to music clips and saving favorites in their music folders.

The gauntlet has been thrown down and taken up. I am on better footing with this group of students. The previous year, I had not given the students the time needed to create, collaborate, and to reflect. I didn't instill that challenge one must feel for creating the story that will move people the most. I had left the emotions out of the point of view and I ended up selling those students short. I had reduced digital storytelling to nothing more than a PowerPoint presentation, and I had not made sure those students really understood the point of view of the escaping slaves. In that first experience, my students operated at the lower end of Bloom's taxonomy instead of at the higher end with analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This time, I have managed to whet my students' appetites for the creative aspects. I have sold them on the passion and thrill of creating and the challenge of evoking emotion while telling a story.

Conclusion

My students' outcomes for this year are still evolving, but I have learned that digital storytelling can indeed be motivating and leads to a deep understanding of the material. To evoke emotion and be an effective storyteller, a person must truly understand the point of view and communicate it. Digital storytelling is learning to influence others through story, sound, and voice. It is about getting a true understanding of the forces that shaped an event or a person's story. It broadens our students' appreciation for others who they aspire to be like and haven't understood before, and it clarifies situations so that they can learn from history or others. Students become active learners through this type of interaction, while creating a memorable learning experience for themselves and others. Finally, it helps them to become better communicators in the growing global community they interact with, through the use of a variety of digital tools. I have learned that digital storytelling is a worthy educational endeavor for teachers who are looking for ways to prepare their 21st-century gifted students for their future. **GCT**

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