Story Circle

Digital Storytelling Around the World

Edited by

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An Emerging Institutional Technology?

Patrick Lowenthal

Education is susceptible to fads (Maddux and Cummings 2003). Technological innovations have brought about a number of fads in education that have failed to meet expectations (Oppenheimer 1997). Despite storytelling's recent renaissance, storytelling is not a fad; it has been used throughout history for teaching and learning (Abrahamson 1998). Stories help make meaning out of experience (Bruner 1996, Schank 1990). Experience, and the stories created to make sense of that experience, is key to learning (Schank 1990, Zull 2002). Stories also help build connections with prior knowledge and improve memory (Schank 1990). As a result, good stories "are remembered longer by students than lessons that lack them" (Rex et al. 2002: 787). Given storytelling's central role in living and learning and the technological explosion since the late 1980s, it is not surprising to find digital storytelling entering the academic mainstream (Ohler 2005/6). However, despite the growing popularity of digital storytelling, its place in the classroom is still unclear.

Digital Storytelling and Education

Digital storytelling is used to describe a variety of different things. However, when educators talk about it, they are typically talking about the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) tradition of digital storytelling. Thus, related trends using digital moviemaking (e.g., Sweeder 2007), video case studies (e.g., Harris, Pinnegar, and Teemant 2005), and telling stories online

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(e.g., Mellon 1999) are beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I focus on how the CDS tradition of digital storytelling is being used (and transformed) for educational purposes.

A digital story, in the CDS tradition, is a 2–3-minute personal story told with the use of graphics, audio, and video. It includes many, if not all, of the following seven elements:

1. Point (of View)
2. Dramatic Question
3. Emotional Content
4. The Gift of Your Voice
5. The Power of the Soundtrack
6. Economy
7. Pacing (Lambert 2002)

These elements, coupled with the short duration, are what differentiate a CDS digital story from other types of digital stories or other media (e.g., film/TV/YouTube/blog). Digital storytelling is quickly capturing the hearts and imaginations of educators because it combines traditional storytelling with modern-day pop culture and technology. Educators have identified a list of educational benefits of digital storytelling; I list the most cited ones below.

Increase student engagement

Students are motivated, engaged, and interested in digital storytelling (Davis 2004, Hofer and Swan 2006). This is because digital storytelling, unlike traditional instructional strategies, engages students in the "language of their generation" (Hofer and Swan 2006: 679). Whether it is the Internet, television, film, or video games, students are interested in multimedia (Kajder 2004). As a result, digital storytelling offers educators a new and exciting way to captivate students' interests like never before.

Give access to a global audience

Another benefit is the fact that digital stories can be shown online. Students are motivated by the possibility of showing their story to a global audience

(Roland 2006, Salpeter 2005). In fact, Standley (2003) has claimed that this alone makes digital storytelling more powerful than other forms of storytelling. Putting digital stories online serves other educational purposes. The value of storytelling lies both in the telling and the retelling (Brown and Duguid 2002). Digital storytelling enables a student a chance to tell their story time and time again.

Amplify students' voice

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits is digital storytelling's ability to reach the many "unheard and unseen students" in our classrooms (Bull and Kajder 2004). Storytelling gives students voice (Burk 2000). However, digital storytelling can give students voice "in ways that are not possible without the technology" (Hofer and Swan 2006: 680) because it can amplify a student's voice (Kajder, Bull, and Albaugh 2005). Further, it can help give voice to struggling readers and writers (Bull and Kajder 2004) and students with special needs (Salpeter 2005), as well as students who do not fit the typical academic model (Ohler 2005/6).

Leverage multiple literacies

Literacy is no longer viewed simply as reading and writing. To be effective communicators in the twenty-first century, students need to be able to employ a number of different literacies (Porter 2006). Digital storytelling helps reach students' existing multiliteracies (Kajder, Bull, and Albaugh 2005). Further, multimodal texts, like digital stories, "increase the meaning-making potential of a text" (Hull and Nelson 2005: 225), thereby giving students a different kind of meaning-making and a different way of knowing.

Student emotion

Emotion has been shown to be central to teaching and learning. One of the benefits of digital storytelling is its unique way of giving voice to, space for, and validation of student emotion. Digital storytelling has been shown "to provide closure to deeply emotional issues in … [students] lives" (Robin and Pierson 2005: 713).

Agency

Perhaps the most complicated and least understood benefit is digital storytelling's ability to create agentive senses of self (Hull and Katz 2006). The stories we tell about ourselves influence our sense of self (i.e., who we see ourselves as and who others see us as) (Bruner 2002, Schank and Abelson 1995). Hull and Katz (2006) and Davis (2004) have shown how digital storytelling can serve as a tool for self authoring and agency (and hopefully change).

Some other commonly identified benefits range from increasing student reflection (Barrett 2004), engendering student creativity (Hofer and Swan 2006), increasing students' technology skills (Robin 2006), developing communication skills (Porter 2006), appealing to diverse learning styles (University of Houston n.d.), creating critical thinkers (Ohler 2005/6) and critical viewers of media (Howell and Howell 2003), improving research skills (University of Houston n.d.), and, finally, building learning communities (Standley and Ormiston 2003).

Trends

Digital storytelling is being used for educational purposes in elementary and secondary classrooms, computer courses, after-school programs, and college classes, as well as in professional development settings. Below, I address some of the ways it is being used.

Digital storytelling contests

One method of integrating digital storytelling into schools, districts, and communities has been through the use of digital storytelling contests. Notable here are the iDidaMovie and Island Movie. Contests like these have been successful with uniting people and building learning communities (Standley 2003). In these contests students and teachers develop and share digital stories (Standley and Ormiston 2003).[1]

After-school clubs

Another commonly used method is to integrate digital storytelling into after-school clubs. DUSTY in Oakland, California (Hull and Nelson 2005) and the Cyber Cougar Club in Denver, Colorado (Davis 2004) are two examples from the USA. These types of programs often develop partnerships with colleges and universities to serve socially and economically marginalized children; some are also part of the fifth-dimension network of after-school programs. Some of the best empirical studies on digital storytelling have been done in these types of programs (e.g., Davis 2004, Hull and Katz 2006, Hull and Nelson 2005). However, it is important to highlight that these programs often involve faculty, graduate students, and volunteers who work individually with students to help co-construct their digital story.

Classroom integration

Perhaps the fastest growing method involves integrating digital storytelling projects into elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms. Educators have had students create their own digital stories in language art classrooms (Banaszewski 2002, Kajder 2004), undergraduate and graduate IT courses (Hofer and Swan 2006, Robin and Pierson 2005), and in teacher preparation courses (Lathem, Reyes, and Qi 2006) to name a few (see Rudnicki et al. 2006 for other cross-discipline examples). Educators have also created their own digital stories to enhance lessons (Robin 2006) as well as to introduce themselves to students when teaching online (Lowenthal and Dunlap 2007).

Issues

Despite its growing popularity, there are a number of technological and pedagogical challenges with using digital storytelling for educational purposes (Hofer and Swan 2006). The following are just a few issues that educators need to consider.

Time

Creating digital stories takes time (Hofer and Swan 2006, Kajder 2004). The CDS takes 3–4 full days in their workshops to create a digital story; others

have spent 4–6 months on digital storytelling projects (Banaszewski 2002, Davis 2004). In addition, today's standardized curricula leave little time to spend days or weeks creating digital stories (Kajder, Bull, and Albaugh 2005). Therefore, educators need to be prepared for the time commitment a student-centered digital storytelling project may require.

Training

Creating digital stories is not easy (Meadows 2003). In fact, the average educator does not have the technical skills to facilitate a digital storytelling project. While Ohler (2005/6) encourages educators not to be intimidated, I suggest that proper training in both technology and pedagogy is a vital component of a successful digital storytelling project. The CDS offers workshops on how to create a digital story. While students often possess the skills needed for a digital storytelling project, they often still need guidance.

Curriculum

Digital storytelling is not a panacea; it is the pedagogy and not the technology that makes the difference. Educators need to identify what their students need to know and be able to do and then decide how digital storytelling can accomplish this; Ohler claims that "if digital stories are going to survive in education, they need to be tied to the curriculum" (2005/6: 46). In other words, student-centered digital storytelling projects must be aligned with appropriate standards and support student learning (Hofer and Swan 2006).

Structure

The success of a digital storytelling project depends on its structure. Without adequate structure, students begin adding images and music rather than focusing on their story (Standley 2003). The story should always be in the foreground (Banaszewski 2002, Bull and Kajder 2004). By emphasizing a story-centric approach, educators can help prevent students from creating a techno-centric, special effects-driven product. Educators also need to be clear about their expectations; their expectations can often "help determine the quality, focus and direction of student products" (Hofer and Swan 2006: 681).

Emotion and trust

Some students are not comfortable with the depth of emotion that is sometimes involved in creating a digital story. Educators need to create a safe and trusting environment if they hope to tap into student emotion. In fact, Banaszewski (2002) recommends that educators create their own digital story to demonstrate their willingness to take the risk of sharing.

Access

Perhaps the most important issue is access. While some are optimistic that all educators need "is a digital video or still camera; a scanner; a networked, multimedia computer; video-editing software" (Roland 2006: 26), others point out that educators rarely have easy access to what they need (Kajder, Bull, and Albaugh 2005). Educators should not assume that students have access either; thus, educators should think twice before expecting students to complete digital storytelling projects at home. However, this is also one of the reasons to provide students – especially marginalized students who are being digitally excluded – an opportunity to become media producers rather than consumers (Tucker 2006).

Assessment

One last issue that educators must consider is assessment. Assessment of student learning is an important component of any digital storytelling project and must be carefully planned for (Hofer and Swan 2006). Barrett (2006) provides some rubrics that can be used as a starting point; Ohler (2007) also has written an entire chapter on assessing digital stories. However, educators need to be aware of the complexities of assessing student work that might be very emotional and that they themselves might have helped coauthor. After-school programs and digital story contests often avoid this dilemma by not formally assessing or separating development and assessment.

There are, of course, other challenges and issues (e.g., copyright) that educators need to consider, but with proper planning and forethought, these issues can be addressed.

Conclusion

Despite the lack of research, educators appear to be having great success using digital storytelling for educational purposes. As digital storytelling grows in popularity, it continues to change and take on a local flavor (Salpeter 2005). However, many questions arise as educators continue to experiment with this emerging instructional technology. For instance, are certain elements of a digital story more important than others? What happens if a digital story is lacking a first-person "point of view?" Does a digital story have to have "emotional content" to be effective or to even be considered a digital story in the CDS tradition? While Bernard Robin (2006) argues that there are different types of digital stories, I often find that the further educators get from the CDS model, the weaker the digital stories become. Perhaps the power of digital storytelling is not in the CDS method but rather in providing students with an opportunity to have a voice and to create something that is meaningful to them and relevant to their life.

Note

1 For more information on the rules of a contest like this, visit www.aste.org