Digital Storytelling

in the
Language Arts
Classroom

*By Glen Bull
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Subject: Using new technology effectively

Technology: Digital media and video editing

Standards: *NETS•T* II, III; *NETS•S* 3, 4 (http://www.iste.org/standards/)

Technology offers a number of opportunities for connecting classrooms with the world. The advent of the Internet has offered unprecedented prospects for classroom connections, but the recent diffusion of digital cameras throughout society offers instructional possibilities as well. The May 2004 issue of *L&L* described potential connections to the curriculum in science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies.
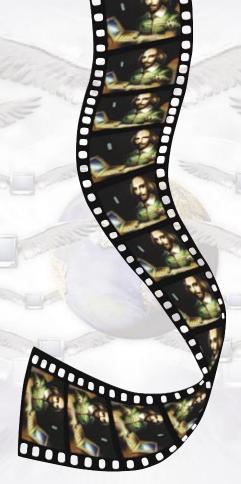
Digital storytelling was one of several methods presented in the article on "Digital Images in the Language Arts Classroom" (Kajder and Swenson) in that issue. We provide a more detailed examination of this process in the current column.

The Wellsprings of Digital Stories

A digital story consists of a series of still images combined with a narrated soundtrack to tell a story. Ken Burns used this technique to good effect in his popular series of documentaries for PBS. Although short video clips are sometimes included, students can create digital stories without access to video equipment.

Digital storytelling as we practice and teach it grew out of the work of Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley at the Center for Digital Storytelling at U.C. Berkeley in 1993. The community of practice that has evolved from this work is based on the premise that everyone has a story to tell. Digital technologies offer particularly powerful means of conveying these stories.

We have adapted their work for school settings. Two technical advances have made this feasible. The first is inclusion of digital video editors with operating systems offered by Apple and Microsoft. A decade ago, digital video editors were relatively new and

costly, required specialized hardware, and were complex and difficult to master. Today Movie Maker is included at no additional charge with Windows XP, and iMovie is provided with the Macintosh operating system. With appropriate support, students readily master these tools.

The second technical advance is the ubiquitous presence of digital cameras and digital images. Last year the tipping point marking the transition to digital cameras occurred—for the first time, more digital cameras were sold than film cameras. This year several manufacturers, including Kodak, are discontinuing sales of many of their film cameras. The presence of these tools is already affecting and altering society. They allow students to capture visual images from their lives to tell their personal stories.

Although technical advances have made digital storytelling practical in today's schools, connections to the language arts classroom should remain grounded in the curriculum.

In particular, the story should be in the foreground and the technology in the background. The focus in the language arts classroom should be on the writing and communication process rather than technical effects. The K–12 students and teachers with whom we have worked center their efforts on the practice of the storyteller, with the computer serving as a tool for eventual publication and sharing.

Technology has the capacity to amplify the writer's voice in a well-written story. In particular, digital storytelling can be used to engage struggling readers and writers who have not yet experienced the power of personal expression.

The Seven Elements of Effective Digital Stories

Lambert identifies seven elements of effective digital stories based on more than a decade of work in this medium. The distillation of his experience has fueled much of our own work in school settings. The seven elements of digital storytelling include:

1. a point of view
2. a dramatic question
3. emotional content
4. economy
5. pacing
6. the gift of your voice
7. an accompanying soundtrack

Joe Lambert generously provides an extended discussion of these elements with illustrations in a slightly different order and format in the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* available in PDF on the Center for Digital Storytelling Web site. (***Editor's note:*** Find this and other URLs in Resources, p. 49.)

We like to group these elements, focusing on the phases of writing (1–4) and construction (5–7). Dur-

ing the writing and planning phase, students draft and revise scripts and design storyboards. They decide what the story will say and how the story will look during this stage. Once the script and accompanying storyboard are completed, they use a digital video editor to construct the story.

Point of View. Scholarly writing attempts to achieve objectivity by distancing the writer from the material. In contrast, the goal of digital storytelling is to allow a writer to experience the power of personal expression. Therefore, students' digital stories need to be constructed from their own experience and understanding. Using the first-person pronoun "I" rather than the more distant third-person point of view is essential.

This separates the digital story from the third-person PowerPoint report that sometimes replaces or supplements the traditional research report. The digital story reveals the writer, as opposed to offering facts about a distanced topic. Script revision often involves an effort to bring the focus of the story back to the writer.

Dramatic Question. A story that holds the attention of the audience has a dramatic question that is resolved by the end of the story. This characteristic distinguishes the digital story from a travelogue. A neighbor's vacation slides may have an accom-

panying narrative, sprightly music, and cutting-edge transitional effects. However, it does not hold our attention in the same manner as a well-constructed digital story.

Narratives that lead the reader to become invested typically pursue a compelling question that evokes interest and commitment. This sets the reader up for the eventual payoff at the close of the story. Student writers often bury the question too deeply in the story, or the story structure may fail to articulate a clear question. Story circle activities allow students to shape their stories into a text that rewards and surprises their audience.

Emotional Content. The most effective digital stories evoke an emotion from the audience. We often see laughter, tears, and expressions of pleasure from the audience when digital stories are screened. This can be tremendously rewarding to student writers, validating the effort and investment they have made.

Some Web sites have begun to offer digital videos that document the progress of a class through a unit or project. Although these digital documentaries offer an effective use of digital video, they are not digital stories in the sense that Lambert employs the term. An effective digital story works

to pursue, discover, and communicate new understanding that is rooted in who we are as humans.

Economy. Economy is the most difficult element for both novices and experienced writers to attain. The art form of the digital story as practiced in the Center for Digital Storytelling consists of a short two- to three-minute vignette. This limits the script to a single double-spaced page or the amount of text that can be printed on one side of a standard note card.

Limiting the scope of the digital story has two practical benefits. It makes the construction process manageable in a school setting, and it makes it practical for an audience to view the stories of an entire class in a single session. From the perspective of the writing process, the discipline involved in achieving this sharpens the focus of the story, requiring the writer to decide what is essential to the story.

Economy is equally important as the digital story is assembled. Modern digital editors offer a plethora of special effects and transitions. It can be tempting to replicate the visual onslaught of music videos on MTV. However, the curricular objective in the language arts classroom is to encourage writing and storytelling. We have found that the effective digital story uses only a few images, a few words, and even fewer special effects to clearly and powerfully communicate intended meaning.

Pacing. Monotonous refers to an unvaried inflection and pace. The word has become synonymous with boring because an unvaried pace will not hold the audience's attention. You

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may remember childhood hours sitting up with a parent whose stories would unfold with a rhythm and energy that led you to cling to each word spoken. That is the art of the storyteller.

There is an important interaction between economy and pacing. Novice storytellers often attempt to shoehorn several pages of script into a two-minute digital story by narrating it as rapidly as they can. This is achieved at the expense of pacing, because this approach does not allow them to pause or vary the pace. For student writers, pacing means pulling back or racing forward when the story calls for it, as opposed to when the time limit approaches.

This may require tough decisions about what parts of the story can be omitted. It is important to confront these decisions during the script revision process to allow a natural pace and varied flow when the digital story is constructed.

The Gift of Your Voice. Many of our classrooms have unheard and unseen students who enter, submit work, and leave at the sound of the bell without participating in discussion, group activities, or any task that asks for their voice. The process of digital storytelling allows students to record themselves narrating their own scripts.

The pitch, inflection, and timbre of the storyteller's voice convey meaning and intent in a very personal way. This has proven to be one of the most essential elements that contribute to the effectiveness of a digital story. There is no substitute for using your own voice to tell your story.

Soundtrack. Music is an important element of the professional cinema. Lambert also incorporates music into the stories developed at the Center for Digital Storytelling, and lists it as one of the seven essential elements. Properly employed music can enhance and underscore the accompanying story,

adding complexity and depth to the narrative.

We place addition of the soundtrack to the story at the end of the construction process for several reasons. When time becomes an issue, the story can be screened in a draft format without music, allowing this element to be added at a later date. Also, in some instances, students have successfully made the case for digital stories that rely on voice alone. This can be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

It is important to address copyright when music is employed. Some sites such as the Creative Commons offer music that can be legally downloaded and used for educational applications. For example, the Magnatune record label offers a license that states "No paid license is required for non-commercial use." Regardless of the source of the music employed, it is important to provide students with a lesson in music copyright in an era of file sharing.

Classroom Strategies

The staff of the Center for Digital Storytelling have worked with thousands in many settings and countries who have found this to be an invaluable means of expression. Adapting these methods to the classroom requires some thought. We have found that the twin constraints of limited class time and limited access to technology are always factors in a classroom setting. Therefore a planning sequence for working with 20 students and a limited number of computers is essential.

We have found that the following sequence of steps works well:

1. Write an initial script.
2. Plan an accompanying storyboard.
3. Discuss and revise the script.
4. Sequence the images in the video editor.
5. Add the narrative track.

6. Add special effects and transitions.
7. Add a soundtrack if time permits.

Establishing a sequence of steps to follow offers two central advantages. First, students will maximize instructional and lab time when the tasks are well framed and specific. The order is designed to tap into the organic process of storytelling as well as to work around some of the quirks found in different digital video tools. In addition, teachers can easily track individual progress using a chart placed on a blackboard or classroom whiteboard.

Summary

Digital storytelling is a particularly appealing use of an emerging technology for several reasons. It can provide a voice to struggling readers and writers who might not otherwise find an authentic means of expression. It places the technology in the hands of the learner, allowing him or her to control its use within objectives carefully constructed by the teacher.

The school setting offers significant logistical challenges, but they are manageable with proper planning. Some of the lessons learned in a variety of settings will be the subject of future columns on this topic.

Resources

Center for Digital Storytelling: http://www. storycenter.org/cookbook.html
Creative Commons: http://creative commons.org
Magnatune: http://magnatune.com

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