DIGITAL STORYTELLING REVISITED

An Educator’s Use of an Innovative Literacy Practice

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What happens when you take a traditionally trained fifth-grade teacher, furnish her classroom with lots of new technology, and provide training and support? Transformed teaching and learning!

In presenting an accurate representation of what it means to be literate in our world today, one would be remiss if the description did not take into account the need to be well versed in multiple forms of new media. “Being literate no longer only involves being able to read and write. The literate of the twenty-first century must be able to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blog, Skype, IM, and share” (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008, p. 66). Therefore, definitions have broadened to encompass new forms of literacy that incorporate strategies needed for interacting, comprehending, and responding using various information and communication technologies, or ICTs (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). This rapidly changing technological environment has impacted educational institutions overall and teaching in particular. The changes are factored into new standards of what it means to be informed, literate global citizens. Participation in new media demands the acquisition and honing of new literacy skills and requires familiarity with the unwritten rules and etiquette for functioning within a given media environment. With the growing popularity of smartphones and the integrated capability to contribute to social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vine, people of all ages routinely “integrate these new media forms into a single narrative, or ‘media collage’, such as a webpage, blog, or digital story” (Ohler, 2009, p. 31). Recently, global social actions have been fueled and reported by average citizens using nothing more than cell phones and Twitter accounts. It is imperative that as educators and researchers, we examine the breadth of new literacy practices with an eye toward student engagement and further development of the strategies needed for full participation in these highly interactive environments.
Digital Storytelling Revisited: An Educator’s Use of an Innovative Literacy Practice

Discussions surrounding adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) draw attention to the claim that ICTs are integral to teaching and learning and that being literate now encompasses technological skills (Dalton, 2012). In addition, the CCSS emphasize students’ ability to create both print and nonprint texts through integration of traditional and new literacy practices (Dalton, 2012). Similarly, a revision to Bloom’s Taxonomy places students’ ability to create (generating, planning, producing, etc.) as a central outcome of engaged learning (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001; Krathwohl, 2002). It is notable that this assertion was made prior to the development of many of the ICTs that are currently being used in classrooms and daily life. We must continue to press students toward high levels of achievement and seek out opportunities to actively involve students in tasks that expand their repertoire of new literacy practices and cultivate their capacities for creating and producing while combining the old with the new.

Serving, guiding, and collaborating with 21st-century learners means that we must be willing to take the virtual leap and equip them to participate in global conversations by imparting a mindset that embraces new media forms and ICTs. It requires an acknowledgement that such a mindset is pivotal, as these learners must be prepared to use digital tools that may not even exist today. If we are going to fully engage students and prepare them to be literate, active participants in our technologically driven world, then it is also imperative that we delve into the technologically mediated narratives that students are creating and work in ways that develop them as tools for learning (Ohler, 2009). It is not only necessary for us to tap into their ways of knowing and using media; we must also work to broaden their understanding of basic functions for technology while seeking ever more engaging, innovative ways to use these tools to enhance and transform teaching and learning.

As new literacies educators, we act as design consultants, resource managers, and co-learners while examining biases and beliefs about literacy and reframing those assumptions and adjusting our instruction (Lapp, Moss, & Rowell, 2012). We perform these roles and guide students in blending traditional and new literacies as we use ICTs to engage students in experiences that call for them to explore issues of social justice by creating graphic novels; visit websites to explore topics presented within a given text; respond to a text in a virtual environment; publish online; participate in online book clubs; create remixes of poems or songs; explore stories and other online texts; use Twitter to construct tweets from a character or historical figure (and thereby develop their Twitteracy skills); use laptops, tablets, iPads, and SMART Boards; and produce digital stories (Barone & Wright, 2008; Castek, Bevans-Mangelson, & Goldstone, 2006; Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Greenhow & Gleason, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lapp et al., 2012; Leu, Castek, & Henry, 2004; Saine, 2012; Scharber, 2009). Each of these instances offers examples taken from real classrooms in which teachers have taken the virtual leap. The aforementioned activities provide a glimpse into how we might meaningfully incorporate ICTs into instruction.

In this article, we describe the instructional practices of Bethany, the third author, in her exploration and use of digital storytelling in her fifth-grade classroom. She engaged in turn-around pedagogies (Alvermann, Hutchins, & McDevitt, 2012) as she critically examined her beliefs about literacy and reframed literacy instruction in a way that moved her from a place of technophobia to one of using digital storytelling to transform teaching and learning. By coupling new literacy practices with a focus on traditional comprehension strategies and targeted minilessons, she was able to use ICTs to effectively impact learning. It is our hope that in reading Bethany’s story, other educators may see themselves and be inspired to take the virtual leap.

From Hieroglyphs to Vines
Humans are natural storytellers. The evidence of our reliance on narrative accounts can be traced back to drawings found in European caves and the high plateaus of Peru. Throughout history, myths, fables, legends, fairytales, folktales, and pourquoi tales were used to explain natural phenomena, entertain, explore other cultures, and fill readers and listeners with a sense of mystical delight. Fast forward to the
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year 2014, and it is no coincidence that we are still telling stories and devising more sophisticated methods for doing so. One can observe this practice in any given home or classroom, kindergarten through college. The stories that are being told, how those stories are captured, and the purposes for which they are captured and shared are a form of shared literacy experience.

In this practice of capturing and sharing life stories, there is an opportunity to give voice to many people. Digital storytelling has emerged as an innovative practice that allows students deeper engagement with content while encouraging the use of critical thinking and technological skills needed to navigate the ever-changing digital terrain of the 21st century. It has been defined as “the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound, and video, to create a short movie, typically with a strong emotional component. Sophisticated digital stories can be interactive movies that include highly produced audio and visual effects, but a set of slides with corresponding narration or music constitutes a basic digital story” (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007, p. 1). The University of Houston’s (2011) digital storytelling site states that, in the most basic sense, “digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories” (para. 1–2). In this explanation, the possibilities for merging traditional and new literacy practices become more evident.

Digital storytelling is more artful and purposeful than average photography or moviemaking. The practice has been hailed for its potential to motivate students to write while improving the skills needed for media literacy, thinking critically, and composing expository pieces (Ohler, 2005; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). Students use and enhance their reading and writing skills during the creation of a story that ultimately plays out as a digital movie. Lambert (2002) identified seven elements that are characteristic of effective digital stories:

1. **Point of View** Intentionally told from the point of view of its creator
2. **Dramatic Question** An attention-getter that works to pique viewers’ interest
3. **Emotional Content** A storyline that draws the viewer in and stirs an emotional connection
4. **Economy** Carefully crafting a script that relays the intended message while adhering to a time limit of two to three minutes for the entire story
5. **Pacing** Maintaining a rhythm that keeps the audience interested
6. **The Gift of Voice** Using your voice to tell your story
7. **Soundtrack** The use of music to produce an emotional connection to the story

Stories that are crafted in line with Lambert’s seven elements attend to the personal connection between the storyteller/maker and the audience. But, how might a traditionally trained classroom teacher make the leap into incorporating digital storytelling? There are many notches on the digital storytelling continuum on which one might land in one’s attempts to create a digital story. Bethany embarked on a mission to incorporate technology into her classroom—a mission that ended, or began, depending on how you look at it, with the creation of a digital story.

**Tale of One Teacher**

Bethany’s tale began in 2009, when she was a recipient of the Enhancing Education Through Technology (E2T2) state grant. Through the grant, her fifth-grade classroom was outfitted with a SMART Board, laptop, document reader, Flip cameras, and other technology. Admittedly, she was, like many other teachers, reluctant to incorporate technology into her teaching. Bethany prided herself on having made it through a teacher education program without ever having done so much as a PowerPoint. “If there was a choice between doing something technology-related like PowerPoint and some other option that may have even required more work, I always chose the other option” (B. Jenkins, personal communication, March 9, 2011).

Bethany regularly involved students in literature circles, Readers Theatre, and the use of various graphic organizers to aid in comprehension and vocabulary development. It was time

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for Bethany to embrace technology and the limitless possibilities that it had to offer both her and her students. “After receiving specific training regarding teaching and engaging students with various software and technology, I was required to identify inventive lessons that would make use of the various tools that I had received” (B. Jenkins, personal communication, March 9, 2011). How could she meaningfully integrate the tried-and-true teaching strategies that she knew worked well for her students with the newly acquired technologies in a manner that would be beneficial to student learning and enhance her teaching? Digital storytelling was the answer.

Reframing Literacy Instruction
Bethany decided to focus her efforts on teaching her students about literary elements, sequencing, and summarizing. She taught minilessons throughout the reading of a novel and the creation of a movie based on the novel. Though each of the minilessons focused on a skill or strategy that students needed for comprehending the story and completing the project (summarizing, sequencing events, dialogue, how plays are written, story elements, creating a script, editing, etc.), the lessons were meant to extend learning beyond the immediacy of the focal text. In figure 1, fifth grade students are participating in a shared reading of Elisa Carbone’s Blood on the River: James Town, 1607. Realizing that many of her students used their cell phones outside of school to record videos, Bethany was looking for a means to bridge traditional school-based literacy with her students’ out-of-school literacy practices. She “hoped to get students motivated without simply having them write things down or just from listening to [her] talk” (B. Jenkins, personal communication, July 20, 2012). It was important to involve the students in hands-on engagement with both the content and the technology. After discussing ideas with her students and expressing the desire to use the technological tools they had received, Bethany decided that students’ suggestions to make a movie would help accomplish these goals.

Over the course of six weeks, Bethany’s fifth graders participated in a cross-curricular literature focus unit centered around Elisa Carbone’s Blood on the River: James Town, 1607. The class explored Old English and various dialects as well as historical events presented in the novel. As the text complexity was beyond the reach of some of Bethany’s students, she scaffolded their experience by having students follow along as she read the story aloud. In figure 2, Bethany reads aloud as students follow along. Relying on an instructional strategy that she had used before, she organized students for literature circles and assigned roles accordingly. On alternating days, literature circles met to discuss the novel to ensure that each student had a firm understanding of the plot. Within her multilingual, mixed-ability classroom, Bethany emphasized vocabulary development. The chosen instructional strategies worked in concert to strengthen students’ understanding of the focal text.

Following completion of the novel, attention turned to more practice and application of the strategies and skills addressed during the minilessons. Small groups and pairs of students were each given two scenes from the story. Bethany pulled names from a hat and assigned each student one of 24 main events from the novel. Students had to illustrate the event, with each illustration contributing to the whole-class discussion about sequencing. Students created the image in figure 3 to illustrate one of the main event from the text. The image was later used as they...
practiced sequencing events. The next step was guided practice, in which students worked to retell the story by physically arranging the student-made drawings onto a timeline that was taped to the wall. This activity was followed by a minilesson on summarizing, during which students were instructed to choose 10 of the illustrations that would adequately represent the story for someone who had never read it. Once identified, the 11 scenes (students argued for the inclusion of the 11th scene) became the basis/storyline for their movie. Students used the illustrations from the sequencing lesson as prompts for summarizing the main events of the story.

Blending the Old With the New
Once the summaries were completed, Bethany focused instruction on the elements of literary writing. Two plays from students’ basal reader, Wings for the King by Anne Sroda and The Stormi Giovanni Club by Lydia Diamond, served as mentor texts that modeled how to write dialogue and stage scenes in the creation of a play. Students experimented with writing dialogue (see Figure 4). The movie began to take shape as students worked in pairs and groups of three to re-create selected scenes. With the summary of a particular scene in hand, pairs and small groups of students teased out the details of each scene. Bethany provided further scaffolding to students’ learning by giving them an advanced story map that prompted them to identify the setting, purpose of their scene, and characters as well as the characters’ thoughts, actions, and words. Students reread pertinent sections of the text and used their story map outline as the basis for creating the dialogue for a chosen scene. Bethany used writing conferences to guide her students through the writing process. Groups were responsible for revising, typing, and printing the final version of the script. This process lasted approximately one week. Finally,
students assembled the script booklet by sequencing the typed scripts.

Students anxiously anticipated filming as they took ownership of every aspect of the project. In addition to writing the script, groups were also responsible for identifying needed props, staging scenes, and making casting decisions. Many students contributed props from their homes, and Bethany and her student teacher were happy to provide the remainder of the needed supplies. Students identified all the roles that needed to be filled in order for filming to go smoothly, and casting decisions were made based on students' interests and class consensus. Those students who expressed a desire to work behind the scenes were responsible for building the set, filming, staging props, creating cue cards, and directing. One student contributed by examining the script, selecting all the dialogue for the cue cards, and making sure each character knew his or her lines. During this phase, Bethany decided that her primary role was to offer suggestions and press students to think critically about their work and the decisions they made.

Consistent with the guidelines for digital storytelling, the technology employed was used simply as an implement to tell the story. The digital retelling occurred in sequential order of the scenes and included several takes of each scene. Lasting between 10 and 35 seconds each, scenes were recorded using the recently awarded Flip camera and Bethany’s personal digital camera. In between scenes, students rehearsed their lines. In essence, Bethany’s students recorded 11 individual digital stories that were ultimately streamed together to create the movie. Two students created a part for a narrator, found relevant still images to bridge the transitions from one scene to the next, and used iMovie to record the voiceover narrations. FlipShare software was used to upload the recording from the Flip camera to a MacBook, and iPhoto was used to create an album of the still images that were made available for use in iMovie. The entire digital story was then pieced together using iMovie. Bethany’s students completed the filming in just one day. Individual students worked with Bethany to edit the work and put the finishing touches on what became Blood on the River: The Movie (view at www.schooltube.com/video/5414a077fc418e78db30/Blood%20on%20the%20River).

Weighing Risks vs. Benefits
Cavanaugh’s (1997) assertion that digital cameras could be incredible assets to any classroom only scratched the surface by recommending their use. Since that time, there have been numerous technological advances that compel even the technologically illiterate to take the virtual leap. Educators have responded to calls to examine the literate lives of their students, to embrace the new literacy practices in which students engage, and to leverage those practices in ways that support and enhance classroom-based teaching and learning. Ferriter (2010) believes that the success of American schools will be measured by their ability to meet the needs of all learners through curricula customization. Ferriter maintains that technology integration is the key to deconstructing the standardization practices that are seen in most schools.

The creation of a digital story affords an opportunity for students to take information from traditional formats like books, newspapers, and magazines and turn them into digital works of art using innovation, creativity, and research (Czarnecki, 2009). Through digital storytelling, students learn to research, develop a point of view, and create an emotional connection to the content they are learning about. In addition, they are able to collaborate with others to create a digital representation that reflects their understanding of the content. When combined with photovoice or participatory photography methods, digital storytelling has the potential to provide insights into students’ experiences and the communities in which they live their literate lives. As students engage in reflection about their own experiences and communities, teachers are given another avenue for connecting with students and their families. Bethany was able connect with families when they attended a district-wide technology event in which Blood on the River: The Movie aired. Digital storytelling is an opportunity ripe with possibilities for educators who want to tap into it and make use of literacy practices in which students may be engaging outside of the classroom. In addition, digital storytelling presents an opportunity to expand the horizons of students who have limited or no access to digital technologies.
outside of the school environment. In this instance, students’ out-of-school literacy practices (acting, moviemaking, narrating) were reflected as they worked to create the digital story, and their families were able to experience the connection between those practices and school-based literacy. Students who may have otherwise been silent during discussion of the text were given a voice through the creation of this digital story. Bethany’s students applied their expanding knowledge of the technology, expressed their creativity, and revealed the contextual lens through which they viewed the story.

Possibility of an Amplified Digital Divide

While we do not view technology integration as a panacea for existing gaps in achievement, we strongly believe that the lack of such has the potential to amplify the achievement gap and contribute to, at least in terms of knowledge and know-how, a generation of digital haves and have-nots; those who know and those who know not. “Students with limited experiences on the Internet have more difficulty developing positive dispositions” (Castek, et al., 2006). In this regard, there exists the possibility for a Matthew-like Effect to take root (see Stanovich (1986) for original explanation), something that we’ll call the Matthew E-effect. As it may go, students who have access to technology and have developed both a proficiency and an interest in using technology have a propensity to further cultivate that interest and ability, whereas those who lack technological know-how and access may not have as much interest, which leads to less technology use. This creates a cycle in which those with higher technological competence tend to grow in their interest and skill level, while the skill level and interest of those with low technological competence and interest further diminishes. The Matthew E-effect is a cycle that contributes to widening the digital divide.

Previous discussions linking new literacies with the Matthew Effect have centered solely on issues of access. However, the issue here moves far beyond being a question of access, though access is certainly a major contributor. It raises questions as to what happens when there is access to technology minus the needed technological know-how. It is a matter of knowledge and willingness, on the part of teachers as well as students, to engage in technology use that enhances and transforms teaching and learning. The Matthew E-effect, as described here, places the onus on school boards and administrators to not only ensure that there is access to various digital technologies and online capabilities in the schools, but also ensure that there is support and encouragement for teachers’ endeavors to become technologically literate and savvy and to create classroom environments in which their students have an opportunity to do the same.

Multiple factors worked to stifle the Matthew E-effect in Bethany’s experience. First, she and her students benefited from the training and ongoing support that she received as a grant recipient. The award forced Bethany to move beyond her comfort zone and into a space of having to demonstrate appropriate use of the technology given. Next, Bethany made a point of connecting with the students to gain their buy-in. This simple act of inclusion motivated them to participate in the process. Last, her district actively encouraged teachers to apply for the grant, ensured sufficient resources and training for access, and held an event to showcase the teachers’ and students’ technology use. Without acknowledgement of the existence of the Matthew E-effect and proactive solutions for addressing it, we will continue to see and experience amplification of the digital divide.

Was It All Worth It?

Initially, Bethany was hesitant (as many teachers would be) to delve into what she presumed was a lofty project that should only be undertaken by an extremely computer-savvy teacher. The risk was great for this admitted “type ‘A’ personality” technophobe. She knew that the success of this project called for a relenting of authority and sharing leadership with her students. Bethany contributed her
expertise in teaching comprehension strategies, while students were happy to share their knowledge of and willingness to use various digital technologies. As she dove headlong into the project, the increased student engagement and their enthusiasm for writing and editing worked to quell any lingering uncertainties. Sylvester and Greenidge (2009) highlight the benefits of using digital storytelling with struggling writers. In line with their findings, Bethany found that those writers who struggled benefited from the support of working in a group and seemed to work extremely hard to ensure that the scripts were accurate for the classmates who would be reading them. Struggling readers benefited from hearing Bethany read aloud and from the opportunities to practice repeated readings while rehearsing lines. As well, there was an advantage to receiving feedback from their peers during rehearsals. The focus remained on teaching students comprehension strategies and strengthening comprehension skills. The use of digital storytelling combined with Readers Theatre reinforced information shared during minilessons and facilitated the fifth-grade students’ understanding and application of the strategies and skills.

With very little nudging, students were motivated to take ownership of their assigned tasks. Students were eager to contribute their thoughts, ideas, and words because they were able to express themselves in an interesting and familiar format. Students were allowed to assume casting and production roles based on their interests and expertise. In essence, Bethany combined elements of a standard curriculum and customized it by adding a literature focus unit. She further customized the curriculum by adapting how students interacted with and responded to the material. One gets a sense of the kinds of curriculum customization that Ferriter (2010) spoke of when one considers how Bethany designed learning that aligned with students’ interests and abilities and allowed them the space needed for personalized learning. This project bridged a gap between students’ out-of-school and school-based literacies as several of the students in the class experimented with acting, video creation/narration, and scriptwriting outside of school. For other students, the project provided a guided space to explore the possibilities of technology. Subsequently, at least one of the students who participated in this project joined a stage company and has starred in a number of plays; a recent endeavor was Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Other students from the class have produced short films, and at least one student contributed to an article about those experiences.

TAKE ACTION!

Four steps for getting started:

1. **Learn More** Explore online digital storytelling resources to learn more about the process.
   - Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling: digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu
   - Center for Digital Storytelling: storycenter.org
   - 8 Steps to Great Digital Storytelling: www.edudemic.com/8-steps-to-great-digital-storytelling

2. **Start Small** Consider using technology that is readily available, like a cell phone or handheld gaming system with a camera and recording capabilities. Bethany’s students who have gone on to pursue creation of other digital stories have all done so using their cell phones. You would be surprised how many students have cell phones locked away in their backpacks. Make alternate arrangements for those students who don’t have a cell phone or handheld gaming system.

3. **Think Big: Go Global** Use digital storytelling to have students report on or advocate for matters that impact their lives. Partner with other educators (locally or online) to share ideas and possibly get help with implementation.

4. **Be Frugal** Take advantage of the multitude of free resources that can be used for digital storytelling.
   - Windows Movie Maker and iMovie: video editing software
   - Audacity: free software used for recording and editing sound (audacity.sourceforge.net)
   - Vuvox: free online slideshow creation tool that allows the user to add, video, audio, links, images, and content (www.vuvox.com)
   - YouTube and TeacherTube: Free video sharing websites that allow for the uploading of digital stories (www.youtube.com and www.teachtube.com)
   - Vine: a six-second moviemaking application for smartphones (vine.co)

**A Word From Bethany**

You don’t have to be very good at something for it to turn out great. You don’t have to be strong at technology for this to work. I don’t consider myself very strong at technology, not even now. You can read all you want about using technology in the classroom, go to lots of
conferences, and talk to mentor teachers. The only way to become more comfortable with something like digital storytelling and using technology with students is to immerse yourself in the process and learn by doing. Until you actually try it yourself, you have no idea the impact it will have on your students, the motivation it can inspire, the excitement it will create.

Knowing what the results will be and what will come of it, I would absolutely do this again. I would jump in with both feet. I’ve learned that I’m much more flexible than I thought and that there is nothing I can’t do when my students are really motivated. With one project, my students went from passive observers, learning what I told them to learn, to active participants, taking control of their learning. The transformation was incredible and worth every minute I spent on this project. This project turned out better than my wildest imagination. I have repeated this project and others spent on this project. This project turned incredible and worth every minute I spent on this project. This project turned out better than my wildest imagination. I have repeated this project and others spent on this project. This project turned out better than my wildest imagination.

Final Thoughts

Educators have an opportunity, an obligation, to equip students with the requisite skills to be both consumers and producers in the ever-growing digital landscape. Educators who choose to introduce digital storytelling into their classrooms provide a platform that can be used to expand the conversations surrounding literacy instruction, what it means to be literate, and what “counts” as literacy in current times. Digital storytelling allows for the blending of traditional and new literacies practices in designing a highly creative end product. Digital storytelling is an innovative practice that revitalizes the common practice of storytelling while leveraging and expanding students’ technological competencies.

REFERENCES


MORE TO EXPLORE

- Digitally Telling the Story of Greek Figures: www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/digitally-telling-story-greek-30805.html
- The Art of Telling Digital Stories: www.digitales.us

www.reading.org