

A self on a screen: Visioning community and context through digital storytelling

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Abstract:

This article enters the decade-old field of digital storytelling and demonstrates its capacity for teaching and learning, particularly when teaching politically volatile topics and integrated curricula initiatives. My research provides not only a rationale and commentary on the potential of digitization, but demonstrates effective methods to embed digital storytelling process in the classroom. The risks to and for disempowered communities are revealed alongside the value of students claiming their own voice and views.

Keywords:

Digital storytelling, visual literacy, sonic media, sensory history, social media, interface cultures

My father Kevin, at the spritely 87 years of age, has a strategy to manage difficult family conversations about people, politics or religion. Whenever particular topics become too uncomfortable, he responds with a flourish: “let’s talk about something important. Let’s talk about me.” Such a rejoinder is less about ego and more about reducing the disquiet that emerges when confronting emotional issues and disparate views.

Teaching and learning are derived from intricate and difficult personal experiences and reflections but must transcend them. Teachers and students – at their most powerful – welcome differences and disquiet, while respecting what we can learn from them. Demanding knowledge about race, nationalism, colonization, gender and sexuality are integral to learning in and for a multicultural nation. The key question in our Facebook age is how to grasp the textures and filaments of our lives, but also how these threads connect with the wider tapestry of history, geography and knowledge. The pivotal challenge for teachers is finding strategies that motivate students to seek and connect information from the past with their lives in the present. The read write web reveals powerful opportunities for the development of a productive and creative relationship between students and scholarship, ideas and interpretation.

Stories are part of human history. They carry ideas through time. In analogue environments, parents tell stories to their children about rules and responsibilities, offering context and warning. Digitization has transformed how we shape and structure the tragedies and joys of life. Selfies record a special hairstyle, new eye shadow or interesting shoes. Instagram marks the minutiae of life and identity for a (small or large) audience. Snapchat performs the ephemera of digitization, sharing and then dissolving a visual message. Songs, YouTube videos, photographs, tweets, blogs and Facebook posts assemble a version of a lived self. Through social networking sites such as YouTube, Flickr, Tumblr and Pinterest – the online pinup board – we not only consume stories, but produce them.

Telling stories and sharing experiences are not new. Hardware and software have changed how these stories are constructed and disseminated. Conversely, Kay Teehan argued that students, rather than software, have changed.

Digital Storytelling is a tool that was created to integrate the newest technology in the classroom. It has proven to be a powerful tool indeed. I believe the reason for its power lies with the type of students we teach each day in our schools. Students today are multi-taskers, creative, and visual learners. They have grown up in a world of multimedia and respond to audio-visual in positive ways (2006, 3).

Teehan wrote these words in 2006. This was the period of the emerging literature about the google generation, digital natives and the changing nature of learning

through the read write web. Rebooting the generation gap and technological determinism is not an excuse to underprepare teachers for complex and conflictual classroom experiences or to make assumptions about a particular cohort of students. Certainly, software and hardware are now more intuitive with simple interfaces for use, and the price of these products has reduced. Domestic technology can create professional outcomes. When academics work – in a careful and considered way – to translate domestic media into a scholarly environment, the effort may be both productive and stimulating. Assumptions about students and student development are minimized. Collaborations are more authentic and democratic.

This article investigates digital storytelling as a strategy to connect life with learning and experience with expertise. The link between these states and terms is narrative, enabled by digitization and the domestication of high quality software and hardware. This article commences with a discussion of visual literacy, which has a long theoretical history, and then sets photographs in motion through digital storytelling.

Visuality and visual literacy

Our senses – touch, taste, smell, hearing and vision – gather information. Yet the gathering is not – in and of itself – valuable. It is through decoding sensory information that knowledge is gleaned from our daily lives. The great challenge being confronted in schools and universities is the disconnection between digital experiences at home and mobile liminal spaces, and the fixed analogue standards taught and examined in schools (Sherian and Rowsell, 2010). Through schools and universities, particular modes of decoding are valued, assessed, examined and rewarded (Hadjoannou and Hutchinson, 2014). The capacity to hold a pen and create the shapes recognized as cursive writing is an assessed skill (Oxbrough and Gordon, 2014). Holding a knife and cutting the crust of bread is not an assessable act. In daily life, it is rare that our senses are isolated, that we only experience sound or vision or smell. The engagement with the world is multimodal. Yet digitization is selective, cutting away smell and taste, thereby reducing the emersion in screen environments.

If there is an Empire of the Senses (Howes, 2005), then visuality is the colonizer, dominating hearing, touch, taste and smell. Through schooling, visual literacy is taught through reading words. Writing is also a form of visual communication. The digital environment has increased the integration of text, images and sound, navigated through the hypertext link (DeSimone and Williams, 2014). Therefore, literacy – and literacy education – is extended beyond the typographic. Visual literacies in analogue and digital environments confirm the distinction between seeing and believing. Our eyes are an ideological organ. We see, select and frame a reality that fits into our lived experience and literally cuts out or blocks what makes us uncomfortable. One mechanism to marginalize uncomfortable visual material is to close our eyes. Clichés such as he or she ‘sees things’ suggests that seeing is not real, but personally self-affirming. As John Berger’s career has shown, seeing is a literacy, a subjective interpretation of the world (1990).

We frame our world in a way that verifies our ideologies and represses dissent and differences. Teachers frame a world – through curriculum – for students. These frames – these borders and boundaries – matter. Photographers capture this significance by choosing particular subjects, perspectives, colours and focus. Yet even when particular lighting and subjects are selected, a plurality of visual interpretations is available. The question is how students through their formal education are encouraged to see differently and move beyond personal expression. Such a process requires not only looking, but doing. One of the great strengths of user generated content and the read-write web is that images can be made, and through that process reveal the arbitrariness of visual literacy. Therefore,

through the last decade, emerging definitions of visual literacy include not only reading and writing, but the ability to both understand and produce visual texts. Gunther Kress is a leader in this interdisciplinary field (2010).

Visual literacy is our most advanced media literacy. The printed word – even before the Gutenberg Press – required visual literacy to decode back squiggles, dots and lines into standardized, encoded and decoded words and sentences. Similarly, photography predated the moving image. The history of film spans over 120 years. ‘Talking pictures’ emerged much later in cinematic history (Fleeger, 2014). Digitization, particularly carried through YouTube, increases the number of sites in which the moving image can play. YouTube fragments the audience and blurs the division between the present and the past. Images can move through space and time, being recut and discovering new audiences as they move.

Each visual medium is unique, with its own set of codes, building into its own language. Although television has movement and oral components, photographs are silent sources that soak in surrounding meanings. Every photograph offers multiple and contradictory reading choices, as they detach from their context. Photographs are ambiguous. As John Berger suggested, “One can play a game of inventing meanings” (1982, 86). There is always a gap between the moment recorded by a photograph and the present moment of looking at a photograph. Digitization has minimized that gap. The space between taking a selfie and viewing it may be seconds. Uploading it for an Instagram audience may only take a few subsequent moments. Yet the longer the gap between taking and viewing, the greater the ambiguity.

Digital storytelling collapses this ambiguity through placing isolated images into a narrative (Branigan, 2013) and shaping meaning through editing, sound and a voiceover. Anchorage is provided through personal experience and research. Therefore it is important when introducing digital storytelling to students that teachers ensure that every photograph is given time to resonate, to activate many stories and readings. Every photograph has a story to tell. The primary story is one of survival. A fragment of the past lives in our present. Even the dead continue to live through photographs. There is power in a photograph, but it is loaned to it via a camera. While cameras are now embedded in mobile phones, there is potency through the production of images. The camera transforms social relationships. In the analogue era, the verbs used to explain the actions of a camera – such as ‘loading’ film and ‘shooting’ a photograph – conveyed aggression and power. In some ways, the mobile phone camera is more insidious. It sits in any social experience and can take (a picture) without permission. Such a change adds complexity to Susan Sontag’s maxim that, the photograph “help[s] people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (1979, 9). Instagram and Snapchat are theorized differently when applying her interpretation (Porter, 2014).

Photographs have two roles: to convey subjectivity and to build and perpetuate ideologies. As photography has been democratized, these two functions have intensified. The subjectivity and ideology of photography must be recognized with consciousness and care. When combined into digital storytelling, these mobile photographs do not present reality or a life, but an argument. Digital storytelling is a genre of activism, building personal stories into a desire for social and political change.

Moving Pictures

The last decade has witnessed the creation and deployment of an innovative range of hardware and software that have enabled digitally literate men and women to make and disseminate new ideas in innovative ways. Often termed digital storytelling, this phrase is becoming increasingly stable in its definition: narratives developed by amateurs, not professionals, and built through the creation and selection of digital objects such as photographs, stills from video footage and sounds. Digital objects that were not previously connected, aligned or tethered are linked by the selection and shaping of a creator and the capacities of software. These ‘born digital objects’ are shaped into a narrative that presents and resolves an idea, argument or experience. Flexibility is also possible, particularly with regard to length. As with podcasts, the limitations of commercial broadcasting are not considerations within the digital storytelling discourse. Certainly, the techniques of digital storytelling have spread to business: the social activism that was present at the core of its foundation has been diversified if not displaced. Now a mature genre,

digital storytelling has leisure, workplace and educational applications. Artists, health agencies and community activists, alongside an array of businesses, can use this genre. Digital storytelling has advantages when capturing the experiences of family and friends, logging important birthdays, weddings and anniversaries. But it is also of great value in education for staff and students. A photographic series can be overlaid by an academic voice-over, making an event, building or idea meaningful for new audiences, including peers, teachers and parents.

Through the last decade, particular characteristics have formed the digital storytelling genre.

- Non-fiction stories about an event, place or person.
- Socially activist.
- Based in personal stories derived from lived experience.
- Composed with still images rather than footage.
- A spoken word voiceover, with music as a secondary accompaniment.
- Short, often under five minutes.
- Expressing content is more important than the calibre of the form.
- Intent more important than abstract determinants of 'quality' (Lambert, 2013).

The last point is an important one. Built on thirty years of popular cultural studies, including theorizations from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture alongside community media theorizations, notions of 'art' and 'quality' are displaced in digital storytelling, reducing the power and importance of gatekeepers and critics. Small audiences, in a careful and compassionate context, generate new modes of community through storytelling beyond reified, abstract and often arbitrary theorizations of quality. The imperative and focus is relevance, connection, community and communication, rather than a separation of art and interpretation, culture and commentary. It is – from its foundation – a democratic process, product and outcome. There is – perhaps without (postmodern) irony – a desire for authenticity (Grossberg, 1988, 43). It operates against commodification and the reification of mainstream media.

There is an irony resonating through digital storytelling, particularly when positioning it in universities. Higher education has been, through much of its history, an institution of the elite, the fortunate and the rich. With the widening participation agenda and the creation of new universities outside of global or second tier cities, a greater diversity of students now occupy university classrooms. Joe Lambert recognized the significance of this change and how digital storytelling can both capture and channel it for an audience.

As I travel around the world, often to universities or other kinds of places of relative privilege, I am drawn to people who are using story to negotiate these distinctions in rank and opportunity ... People who, though perhaps successful as media storytellers themselves, see in every single person a tremendous potential for sharing insight, for wisdom, for teaching us a bit about what it means to be human (2013, 2).

It takes confidence to give power away to others. Schools and universities are integral to the process of creating, validating and credentialing the powerful, the successful and the rich. Yet by rendering the personal more complex, the political outcomes are more ambivalent and provocative. Knowledge is broadened. Truth is tempered. Reclaiming 'the ordinary' operates against dominant views of progress, success and achievement.

A fine example of how digital storytelling can assist diverse university students in their movement through our degrees emerged during 2014 in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University. As part of a programme to assist first year students in their transition from school to university, digital storytelling was used to provide motivation, inspiration and aspiration. The transition coordinator, Dr. Lena Danaia, used the question 'Why do I want to become a teacher?' to enable students to reflect on their university experience. The resultant films were remarkable and presented each of the student's backgrounds and the rationale for their study. During a time of

increasing surveillance and regulation of Australian teachers, these stories provide a reminder of the soft yet powerful propulsions that move men and women into the teaching profession.

This single example was evocative, but it is part of a much wider movement. The literature on and for digital storytelling and storytellers is captured through the multiple editions of Joe Lambert's key book: *Digital Storytelling: capturing lives, creating community* (2013). First published in 2003 and disseminating the work from the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, history, methodologies and ethical considerations are maturing this genre and field. It began as a way to work with local communities through shifting power relations in theorizing authorship. With the attention on authorship and experience, the fear and threat of cultural appropriation and claiming the voice of others remains a constant threat and concern. Therefore robust ethical considerations must be addressed. Particularly potent and important when considering the use of digital storytelling in formal education, the relationship between production and dissemination is discussed overtly and clearly. The making of the digital story is important. Through this process, content can be shaped, media skills gained and abilities to manage and mobilize evidence verified. Learning outcomes can be demonstrated.

After the production of a digital story, the subsequent question is how the project then moves. Does it require an audience and how is this dissemination regulated and managed? The circulation of digital stories is particularly important. As Lambert realized, "the lived experience of people or peoples who have faced systematic forms of discrimination and oppression must be honored as authoritative perspectives on their own lives" (2013, 117). In other words, consideration and care emerges when moving these private stories into diverse publics. These are intimate and personal stories. The circulation of these stories must be monitored. By embedding these stories into curriculum via focusing on a problem to be solved, personal concerns are framed by scholarship. Movement in thinking is the key. An idea, an experience and problem is resolved, moving an audience into a new way of thinking.

Digital storytelling is not an abstract theory. It is applied knowledge. Rubegni and Sabiescu describe it as "an emerging research and practice area, and focuses on modalities of bridging the gap between research-based innovation and implementation in formal education" (2014, 55). To create the best work in this emerging genre, students work through a series of ten stages.

1. Students develop an idea, argument, problem or question to resolve.
2. They storyboard their idea, creating a narrative arc to move an idea from beginning to end.
3. Students define an audience and explore how this group is best reached through the project.
4. Predict, track and map ethical considerations.
5. Create, capture and organize varied media, including photographs, films, audio and sound effects.
6. Select the most appropriate software and hardware.
7. Address all copyright concerns.
8. Explore whether or not a voiceover is appropriate for this project.
9. Titles are written to create the transitions between the disparate sections of the project.
10. Editing and alignment of all media into a narrative and pattern concludes the project.

The goal of this process is to shape and sculpt narratives from the building blocks of digital objects, including sounds, still images, moving images and digitized text. Digital storytelling invests information with meaning, movement and emotion to develop warmth and engagement. It also connects texts with their context. The goal is to find a way to organize knowledge. Problem-based storytelling positions a central challenge or question. This problem gives the propulsion of a narrative. The use of hypertext in digital stories also creates some alternative navigation modes. References and evidence can be presented to verify the data.

The implicit question that emerges from the 10 steps in building digital stories is the relationship between the

teacher and learner. In digital storytelling, the teacher's role is one of advisor or guide. Jason Ohler describes this function as "a skill manager rather than a media specialist ... a guide on the side" (2013, xii). Authenticity matters to this process. The technology is important, but it has an assistive role in enabling the creation and dissemination of stories. In this case, a teacher is a database of answers to questions that may emerge. Each student's story will be different. They will require different assistance with the structuring and shaping of stories, writing, editing, sound production and the creation and alignment of visuals, alongside the use of citations and referencing.

Guide questions can create a tissue of connectivity – a guided relationship – between teachers and students.

What question or problem will I ask and resolve?

What is my point of view?

What is the origin of this perspective?

How will I balance emotion and argument, experience and expertise?

What parts or components will structure the content?

How will I engage an audience and move them through the narrative?

How will I use my voice and a voiceover?

Will music or sound effects be required?

What relationships will I build between sound and vision?

How will I limit content and time?

Is there a coherent alignment between the beginning and ending, problem and resolution?

Besides teaching staff, librarians also have a key role in digital storytelling (Ballew, 2014). Digital stories hold an evocative outreach role for librarians to explain the role of libraries for students and the community (Fields and Diaz, 2008), and revealing the collections that may not be available on the main shelves or revealed through a google search. But librarians can also show how research can be disseminated sonically and visually through digital storytelling. The collection can be accessed and deployed in new ways. The research process becomes part of the story. Digital storytelling allows libraries and librarians to create new ways to discover, retrieve and use content.

There are key moments in the production of a digital story where this 'guide to the side' may be required to intervene. The first and most important teaching task is to configure the guide question. This transforms a shared experience into a problem to be solved. These questions may include:

Why did I decide to become a teacher?

How do I manage privacy in a digital age?

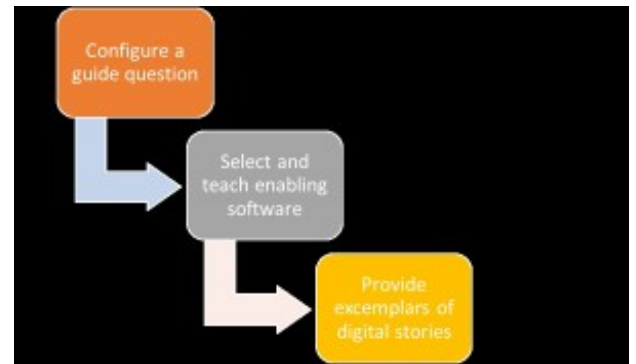
Is my nation multicultural?

Is feminism relevant to contemporary life?

How is climate change effecting my community?

The second decision is how to select and teach the enabling software. An array of online tutorials can be provided so that the students learn in their own time and as required. Thirdly, it is necessary to provide a selection of outstanding digital stories, so that students can observe and understand the genre.

From these three initial stages, a more complex process of research and production can be implemented. Many mitigating stages can break down this process into a finer grain, but these seven steps will create a product, and a reflection on the knowledge created.



Through such a process, not only can diverse disciplines be accessed (history, media studies, cultural studies, law, information studies, internet studies, sociology), but an array of curricula is aligned. Indeed the process can be disruptive to disciplinary knowledge (Cowie and Khoo, 2014). One of the great challenges in a highly regulated school and university environment is how to build relationships between what are often disparate subjects. Digital storytelling can be the method for project based learning. Lambert revealed this process.

Educators from K-12 schools as well as colleges and universities have been an integral part of our practice from the start. The leading proponents of educational technology for project-based learning identified Digital Storytelling as one of the most obvious and effective methods within a broad cross-section of curricular areas. Writing and voice, reflections on civic processes, oral histories, and essays on major subject areas are just some of the ways the work has been integrated into curriculums across grade levels (2013, 133).

Educators have talked up Lambert's challenge. I have found digital storytelling particularly appropriate to assign for student assessment when exploring emotionally and politically volatile topics such as colonialism, terrorism, war, racism and migration. These abstract and controversial ideas can be rendered real and personal, yet also thoughtful and rigorous. Students translate and migrate other histories and experiences into their context and their lives. For migrant communities, digital storytelling can capture and convey stories outside of national narratives. The invisible is rendered visible. Further, Pamela Sullivan and Natalie Gainer show how pre-service teachers use digital storytelling and blogging to integrate literacy throughout the curriculum (2014).

Academics see the world differently. Our gaze is mediated, shaped and translated into scholarly protocols, footnotes and institutional guidelines and regulations. Cameras are a companion on research journeys, capturing evidence, developing memory texts for later referral, creating book covers or images for online articles. While many disciplines deploy photographs to supplement written text, visual ethnography enables writers and researchers to assemble a method and theory for our visual mediations. Anthropology, history, cultural studies, sociology and media studies all provide disciplinary opportunities for new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking. While cultural studies has focused – too often for my taste – on issues of representation, other topics are also worthy of discussion. Sarah Pink

has chartered a path through visual research. She sharpens our scholarly eye and connects what we see with what we write. Her second edition of *Doing Visual Ethnography* appeared in 2007. While acknowledging how photography and video are part of our practice, Pink has also probed the hypertextual new media environment (2013).

An important new subject of development for Pink and many of us inspired by her work is how the use of cameras and audio recorders either enables or stifles our scholarship. Does the intuitive interface of web 2.0 software oversimplify the configuration of an interpretation? The pervasiveness of images in our non-academic lives often means that visibility is taken for granted, assumed and naturalized. In creating opportunities to prise open spaces for interpretation, a range of theories can be activated. Intense questions emerge about the right to conduct research, switch on a camera and own and use the resultant footage.

The relationship between the digital storytelling genre and community and the PhotoVoice movement is still in negotiation. Both spring from the font of democratic education. PhotoVoice, by definition, hands the cameras, microphones, hardware, software, voice and views to disempowered individuals or groups. Men and women with disabilities, migrant groups, women and children have all used PhotoVoice to craft a distinctive path through society and culture, presenting views that may be unpopular, but are also distinctive and important. It is part of the participatory media movement, with specific resonance in and for public health. Therefore, PhotoVoice is part of Digital Storytelling, but can be a 'top down' process, where the (more) powerful claim, sculpt and sell the stories of the disempowered, particularly through the proliferation of the software. However it can also be a process whereby the disempowered tell their own stories, revealed through the software. There is also a fertile middle train, of collaboration, investigating diverse subjectivities and roles. The question of power is an important one, particularly when working with men and women with impairments. Elaine Bliss and Janelle Fisher explore how digital storytelling is used – as a participatory research methodology – to investigate the success of Interactionz, a community development programme based in Hamilton, New Zealand (2014). They see digital storytelling as a way, "to document and analyse the organisational transition of Interactionz from a service driven model to a person driven model; and to facilitate the creation of an empowering community narrative for people with disabilities" (2014, 93). As with all disempowered communities, the question is who has the right to speak, and whose voice is dominant. In a digital storytelling process, there are multiple moments of power, choice and decision making, involving storyboarding, photography, sound recording and speaking. Therefore, there are very delicate ethical considerations to address in such collaborations. Who decides? Who speaks? Who photographs? Who edits? If men and women with impairments are the 'objects' of study – images in the narratives of others – then the ambivalence of digital storytelling in terms of power and relationships emerges. Such ethical considerations do emerge in PhotoVoice, but there is a greater imperative to handover the software and hardware to participants.

Negotiations are required. Particular challenges have emerged in the literature. In the case of colonized people, it is important to ensure visual sovereignty and visual self-determination through the digital storytelling process. Such a discussion is important for all communities confronting oppression, discrimination and theft of intellectual property.

One of these disempowered groups is students. As governments regulate, mandate, test, rank and judge literacy and numeracy standards, school quality, teachers and teaching, the voices and views of students are absent, disempowered or lost as politicians, teachers and parents dominate the educational discourse. Consider the consequences of Lambert's realization.

What struck me is how a third-grader is prepared for her entry into rank, into a sense of either being advanced, or being left behind. I understood how completely dedicated the dominant system is to this premise. The students are racing to college; some will win, some will lose. Those that lose will be nobodies, and conversely, to be somebody you had better win. This creates monsters out of both categories. Selfish investment bankers and raging gangbangers. Educational reform is the endless attempt at making this unpalatable system seem bearable (2013, 3).

These challenges not only exist in primary and secondary education. The issue of 'under-preparedness' not only

emerges in the transition to university (Arum and Roksa, 2011), but also with the movement from undergraduate to postgraduate education. A study of a South African university has revealed how a research skill 'gap' can be addressed through digital storytelling to increase retention and target library intervention programmes. Patient Rambe and Shepherd Mlambo stated that

Since inadequate socialization into postgraduate research and limited supervisor support contribute to the articulation gap and attrition rates at South African universities, digital storytelling (DST) potentially addresses these challenges. DST tends to foreground rigorous research, script writing, collective engagement and public expression of subdued voices to ensure effective participation in higher education (2014, 11).

This strategy not only captures, externalizes and performs the postgraduate journey into higher education, but then provides a record and pathway through this transitional period for other students. Digital modelling and mentoring emerge. Therefore, experiences are shared and even amidst the isolation of postgraduate research, observations can be shared.

Such competition and ruthlessness has only increased since the global financial crisis, with the rise of the precariat, a group of 'workers' who will never experience permanence or stability. If Guy Standing is correct in his theorization of the precariat (2013), and there have been critiques of his argument, then the (too simple) progression from education to the workplace corrodes. Digital storytelling is a potent opportunity to hand back the power and create spaces for alternative modes of speaking, thinking and writing. The potential and possibilities of education beyond the workplace can be revealed. But such a decision requires both courage and imagination from teachers. With standards and levels of achievement 'measured' by standardized tests, thinking about the curriculum and learning in an expansive and deep way becomes difficult. David Thornburg presented this challenge.

As these words are being written, the United States is adapting to a new set of Common Core standards that apply to the things all learners should be able to do, no matter where they live. Standards have their challenges, and while the Common Core does not mandate the kind of pedagogical shifts some of us would like, neither does it block them. In this environment, storytelling is even more important as a tool to humanize teaching and learning and to make the learning even more relevant to the students (Thornburg in Ohler, 2013, vii).

Learning requires motivation. Extrinsic motivations from politicians, parents and teachers may create fears of failure and unemployment. Intrinsic motivation fuels curiosity, hope, optimism, creativity and imagination. Content can be owned through anchoring it to a relevant context. Information can become knowledge. This desire for communication is a need for connection, a creative and critical engagement with their own lives, and the relationship with others. There is a passion and electricity that emerges in those rare but potent learning moments where students – and their teachers – situate their personal experiences, hopes and expectations into the broader sweep of history and geography.

There has never been an easier time to use digital storytelling in education. There are so many options for hardware and software. PowerPoint is one choice, perhaps the least flexible and customizable. If presentation software is to be used in the sequencing of narrative, and then automated at the conclusion, then Prezi provides a greater array of options and because its construction moves from a macro view of clustered topics through to a focus on individual sequence of ideas. Other options include Apple's Keynote, iMovie or Window's Movie Maker. Digital scrapbooks provide other options, developing shards of ideas through the combination of digital elements. Blogs, hanging on the content management systems of either Drupal or WordPress, are useful as they enable the embedding of screen shots, sound files and YouTube videos. But intuitive software with precise interfaces such as Magix's Digital Storytelling automate many of the functions, such as synchronizing sound and vision, and offer templates to create polished films from beginners. These films can then be uploaded to YouTube for embedding in an array of websites. From YouTube, privacy functions can also be managed so that students can make decisions about the size and identity of their audience, from teachers and peers through to a public presentation. Comments can also be controlled, to avoid trolls, bullying and unwelcome and inflammatory abuse.

With the proliferation of mobile phones, almost every event in our lives can be photographed or filmed. The question is how to render such material fresh and relevant for formal education. The software for editing images includes Adobe Photoshop, iPhoto for Apple and – for video editing – Apple’s iMovie, Windows Movie Maker and Magix PhotoStory. Hosted by YouTube, Google Search Story is a video-creating tool that transforms Google searches into a video presentation. Such a tool has great use for students thinking about and reflecting on their information literacy.

These are simple methods through software to create integrated packages for sound and vision. A possibility, using hardware rather than software, is Fotobox. Looking like a USB stick on steroids, the SD memory card is inserted in one end, with a USB connector on the other. When attached to a computer, the programme runs from FotoBox. Software is resident on the platform. Themed templates are available. Voiceovers may be inserted, pictures edited and background music attached. The resultant videos can be converted into MPEG4 for mobile devices, uploaded to social networking sites or burnt to a DVD. Being based in hardware rather than software, Fotobox moves between computers and is ideal for laptops. There are more professional Photostory options available, but for convenience and mobility, Fotobox is effective. For students in schools and universities who are beginning to create and shape digital material for assignments, this is a fine option.

Photographs can be taken through an array of cameras and phones. Analogue images can be scanned and digitized. Free images without copyright restriction are available from The History Channel, Edutopia, NOVA teachers and the Internet Archive. A diversity of sounds is available from Freeaudioclips.com and the Internet Archive. Examples of already existing digital stories are found at Digitales, the website for the Center for Digital Storytelling, and In the Fray: Online Stories.

While much of the attention in digital storytelling focuses on visuality, sound is also important. While what we see dominates what we hear, listening to the voices and views of others can frame and shape photography and film. The software for editing sound includes the open source Audacity, but there are other options, including Acoustica’s Mixcraft 5 and Apple’s GarageBand, which now has an application for the iPad. It is the voice and the narrative that creates a digital story, rather than an automated slide show. The narrator’s voice creates a connection with the lived experience expressed through the visuals. Therefore, the script requires careful writing and editing, but the voice – and how life is expressed through it – matters.

It is worthwhile to ask what students gain from digital storytelling. Media literacy expertise, built through media practice, can leverage a wider understanding of information literacy. Beyond learning to use software, students gain new skills when thinking about sound. If a voiceover is deployed, then students must create a precise script and focus on the delivery of those words, adding emotion. Therefore it is necessary that students learn about their voice. Students explore how to make sounds attractive and compelling for listeners, while building productive relationships with images.

Through such hardware and software, digital storytelling provides teachers and learners with great gifts. Teachers and students can bring the world into the classroom and the classroom to the world. Digital Storytelling expands communication skills, project development and media production strategies, applying academic ideas in new ways. While ‘new media’ may distract students from core skills in reading, writing and thinking, digital storytelling grants students the ability to learn and apply knowledge. The personal can be made political. The abstract becomes applicable. The goal is to find ways to gather empirical evidence and shape considered interpretations from the media platforms that are available. The creation of digital visual objects is enhanced through a range of hardware and software opportunities. The best and most advanced technology is not always the most appropriate. The question is if and then how this democratized and domestic platform can be deployed in academic environments.

Narratives matter. They are a way to explain and understand new ideas. The propulsion – while often creating reified causalities and linearities – is a powerful scaffolding strategy. But precise editing is key. Indeed, one of the underestimated and unacknowledged skills derived from digital storytelling is meta-awareness about editing. The combination, the order, the configuration are all relevant. Cultural differences can be logged and recognized.

Digital storytelling gives students and teacher great gifts, beyond the management of hardware and software. Thoughtful connections and reflections can be created between students and their environment. Cheap, domestic equipment can expand the world of visual scholarship. Digital storytelling is an evocative way to explain the world through narratives. It is an organization of knowledge through digital objects. The outcomes are clear: storytelling skills, capacities in hardware and software, information literacy, project management, media production, ethics and applying academic ideas for new audiences. Emotion is balanced by research. Life is contextualized through learning.

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