2014

Where writing happens: Elevating student writing and developing voice through digital storytelling

Jane M. Saunders
Texas State University - San Marcos, janesaunders@txstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol3/iss1/8
The Roots of Digital Storytelling

An increasing body of research is surfacing about the power of digital storytelling as a pedagogical and learning tool for developing student writers (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis 2011; Hull and Katz 2006; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/January 2006; Robin 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010). Defining digital storytelling is a complex endeavor; typically digital stories include two distinct processes. First, authors write (or type up) a story they want to convey and that they suspect could be matched well with images, music, video, or audio. Authors go through a writing and revising process to hone the story into a short and tightly knit piece and record themselves reading it. Using movie making software like FinalCut Pro, Moviemaker, or imovie, authors drop in the recording and then enhance this by adding images, music, etc. to deepen the viewers’ experience and understanding of the story. With increasingly available movie-making programs arriving in students’ digital spaces. We discovered that where writing happens is not just the English classroom, as many secondary teachers might assume. And, if we want to increase students’ efficacy in writing, it could be useful to look for alternate spaces for writing to occur so that students can better examine their lived experiences, find their voices, and strengthen their writing.

The Power of the Soundtrack

Music and sound effects undergird and strengthen the story. These steps are invaluable in providing a roadmap for the writing process in a digital environment, and offering guidance for students while developing, audio-taping, and piecing together their digital stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Point (of view)</td>
<td>The story the author is attempting to relate through the movie-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Power of the Soundtrack</td>
<td>Music and sound effects undergird and strengthen the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Emotional Content</td>
<td>This universalizes the experience and helps the viewer connect with the digital story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Gift of Your Voice</td>
<td>Our voices convey who we are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interesting Questions</td>
<td>This correlates her experiences and help the viewer connect with the digital story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Economy</td>
<td>The use of a short enough written text and related multimedia to keep the audience interested without dragging on too long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pacing</td>
<td>Both pauses and movement help pace the movie and make it easier to understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These steps are invaluable in providing a roadmap for the writing process in a digital environment, and offering guidance for students while developing, audio-taping, and piecing together their digital stories.
The project represents a partnership between the National Writing Project (NWP), a professor, and a Central Texas English/journalism teacher. Developing a mini-grant from the NWP Urban Sites Network, they have been able to purchase computer equipment like cameras, digital recorders, headphones, and memory sticks. I, a university professor of reading/literacy education) approached several NWP-affiliated English teachers to gauge their interest in creating digital stories with middle and high school students to augment the traditional aspect of the writing process. The goal was to infuse creativity and innovation into what was in many of the schools a “bland and scripted” writing process curriculum (C. Vera, personal communication, March 20, 2010). The focus of this article is English and journalism teacher Clara Vera and her students at Central High School, a culturally and linguistically diverse school within a large urban school district. Over a third (34%) of the student population at Central High School is economically disadvantaged; in fact, half of the student population is non-white; 8% are African American and 44% are Latino according to the most recent state agency report. These demographics roughly reflect the students involved in the digital storytelling project. Of the fifteen in her Journalism I course, two were African American, four were Latino, and nine were White. Two were international students with full proficiency in English; one was formerly in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses prior to coming to Central High School.

Central High School is one of the oldest schools in the district and has a long history of drawing from some of the wealthiest families in the city. Morell (2008) describes this area: “The teachers and students of this diverse school are faced with the pedagogical decisions of school and district personnel in their attempts to increase scores on high-stakes tests. Originally, I posed the idea of making digital stories to several other English teachers on campus to participate in the project; we were dismissed by several over concerns of time commitment and a feeling of pressure to “cover” the curriculum. The resultant work reflects a case study approach that documents the process of digital storytelling, student reflections, drafts of scripts and other elements of the writing process, and the students’ final film shorts.

Data Collection and Analysis
The case study described here is part of a larger study involving three teachers in two separate school districts, and spanning the 2010-2011 school year. Using purposeful sampling (Merriam 1998), the teachers – each of whom are affiliated with the National Writing Project – were selected in part based on their stated commitment to equity and culturally appropriate teaching practices (Villegas and Lucas, 2002) and their receptiveness to notions of progressive teaching and critical theory (hooks 1994; Morell 2008). While each of the participating teachers employed digital stories for a variety of purposes (to inform, to explain, to reflect), the work at Central High School seemed to stand out in terms of offering the most benefit to students on both an academic and personal level.

This paper draws from three separate pools of data to develop the portraits that follow. Data from Clara includes: (a) planning conversations before, during, and after the project; (b) handouts and activities that structured the process; (c) personal correspondence, such as email and text messages; and (d) samples of Clara’s own writing that occurred throughout the project’s span. Data from students includes: (a) brainstorming and written work developed from seed ideas (Buckner 2005); (b) reflections produced before, during, and after their development of digital stories; (c) informal conversations with students during the writing and movie-making process; (d) written transcripts of students’ digital stories; and (e) the digital versions of the stories produced by the class. A third set of data includes notes from an observation journal I kept throughout the project and samples of my own work while participating in class writing activities.

Through an examination of the writing process, the ensuing negotiations with technological tools, and the digital stories themselves, this portrait offers a roadmap for educators interested in working with similar projects in schools or other teachers. Additionally, this study seeks to document the efficacy of digital storytelling as an effective tool for developing students’ capacity for equitable and multidimensional expression while concurrently cultivating the writing and multimedia skills students need to flourish in media-rich technological worlds.

Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Winter/Spring 2014
Findings

In the section that follows, I include detailed descriptions of the digital storytelling process as Clara and her students confronted their projects and their ensuing fears, frustrations, and successes. I begin with how students engaged with both the viewing/reading of digital stories available online and relate this to the writing process employed by most writing teachers. I then include details of the challenges the students and Clara confronted while using technology as a classroom tool. Finally, I discuss the possibility and potential for using digital storytelling as a means of developing student voices and agency inside schools.

Engaging With The Process

“The thing most difficult about this project is finding something to write mostly, then getting started and putting it together.” – Jose

As is noted earlier, the writing focus for most students in secondary schools in our state is that which is tested on end-of-year, high stakes exams. To that end, the tests have varied over the years; an earlier push toward persuasive writing evolved into narrative and synthesis essays. The common element across the grade levels is the appearance prompts that guide student writing. This limiting capacity of student writing to “what is testable” (Bomer 2006, 366) seems to have produced an unintended consequence: a diminishing capacity for students to create writing sans the prompt. Clara and I noticed early on that students floundered when confronted with choices – given the option of writing about whatever they wanted served to stymie many student writers. We confronted with choices – given the option of writing about whatever they wanted served to stymie many student writers. We...
Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

For a few of the digital stories, we did not render until after they were rendered for the back-up copy of the digital videos. Sophie wrote “the software was frustrating and I was never able to use the software and the game of "stuff" (M. Wiatrek, reflection, May 30, 2011). In the case of Marisol’s movie, both students had to become familiar with how to use the digital tools, which is why they used the main digital story editing software. In our case, collaboration was a necessary part of our work, both in developing and strengthening the digital story artifacts. Sophie’s grandfather came of age in Communist Poland, later immigrating and working as an engineer in the United States. Like Kristen’s partner of her sister, Sophie discusses the many lessons she received from time spent together with her grandmother.

She taught me where to find every country on the map and the names of every tree in our favorite park…how to hearken to the sound of a bell ring…how to keep my eyes open for the effect of Kristen’s story.

As is noted earlier, Jose had difficulty finding a topic for his digital story. In addition to the Topic Graph activity, Clara led the class in writing about “tiny moments” in their lives that turn out to have significant meaning. Jose responded to only three of the words: “proud (“winning school president”); tough (“becomeing [sic] school president in 7th grade”); and rewind (“Wishing I code [sic] rewind back to middle school moments – the last day of school in 3rd grade”).

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

66 67

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were not what the students had in mind. The effect of Kristen’s story.
I think has no meaning.” Jose’s movie highlights his lived experience as a struggling student. With a background of classical music and as a keen follower of children’s books, ukulele, and instrument for learning. My school [sic] is a learn-as-you-can school where you can take a brake [sic] at anytime and come back; you can learn when you’re ready as long as you learn what’s necessary….my school [sic] has small classes so it makes it easier to learn in class. There [sic] are lot’s of help and assistance by teachers.

He goes on to recommend the incorporation of cutting-edge technology to assist those struggling to learn, including a computer for each student. Unlike most of the students in Clara’s class, who were able to conceive of and develop their movies in discrete parts, Jose was somewhat overwhelmed by the process. His writing seemed hampered by the absence of a prompt, and he acknowledged that “Jose’s reflective essay ‘I was not happy with my story that I did not really feel had something to do with me.’ He also admitted he would have spent “more time thinking about what to write about” and linking that to pictures and images in order to enhance his movie making.

Clara and the other students in the class felt differently; they talked to students about it, as they understood in the right way. When she talked to him earlier in the year, “They were like, ‘Awww, I’m going to get paired with Jose?’ They were a little apprehensive” (C. Vera, interview, June 9, 2011). In short, and she said that most saw him as shy and non-participatory. When she paired students with him earlier in the year, “You were like, ‘Well, I’m going to get paired with Jose?’ They were a little apprehensive” (C. Vera, interview, June 9, 2011). In short, and she said that most saw him as shy and non-participatory. When she paired students with him earlier in the year, “They

Jose continues by fleshing out recommendations for a better learning environment for students like him. While this study considers the work of one teacher in one classroom, it is emblematic of the kind of literacy instruction and learning that are imperative for students to gain access to in schools if they are to flourish in our increasingly inter-connected, technological world. In tandem with this kind of teaching, we would benefit from more research that examines such practices as a tool for growth in reading and writing. If we were to welcome in the diverse and interesting voices of students and teachers attempting to harness these new technologies, our field would grow exponentially. Like Clara, teachers (and researchers) exhibit fear in opening that portal; the reality for our students is they have already crossed over the threshold while we are lagging behind them. In her poem, “No ideas but in things” published in The New Yorker, Jessica Greenbaum (2011) writes “We name life in relation to whatever we step out from when we open the door, and whatever comes back in on its own. As we move forward in the field of literacy instruction and learning, we might well put aside these fears and consider new ways to teach and study the technologically savvy students of today, lest we find ourselves left behind.

This work was supported by the National Writing Project through the Urban Sites Mini-Grant Program, which provided funding for multimedia equipment to aid in the construction of digital stories.

Works Cited


Winter/Spring 2014
Writing and Learning Online: Graduate Students' Perceptions of Their Development as Writers and Teachers of Writing

Kelly N. Tracy, Roya Q. Scales, Nancy Luke, Western Carolina University

In the last decade, online learning has moved from the fringes into the mainstream as a viable approach to higher education. The number of college courses and full-degree programs offered online continues to grow rapidly. One survey found over 60% of institutions in the United States offer fully online degrees and around 32% of students take at least one course online (Allen and Seaman 4). Recently, faculty in the elementary and middle grades program made the decision to move our Master of Arts degree (M.A.Ed.) to a completely online format, joining our already fully online post-baccalaureate program, which is designed for students who are seeking initial licensure in middle grades but already hold a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education. As we began this transition, we wondered about the influence on our students’ learning in our graduate-level literacy courses. Specifically, we wanted to focus on our online graduate course in elementary and middle grades writing pedagogy because of the increased attention to writing that the Common Core State Standards bring for K-12 teachers (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 18) coupled with research indicating that teachers are underprepared to teach writing (e.g., Graham and Wisley 348; Street and Stang “Improving the Teaching” 37).

As in our face-to-face classes, this course required students to write extensively based on the premise that teachers of writing should write themselves (Arwell 18; Augsburger 548-552; Graves 36; “About NWP”; Routman 35-50; Watts 155); however, because the predominant method of communication, collaboration, and shared understanding in this online course was also in written format, the amount of writing students completed extended well beyond our typical expectations. Given the writing pedagogy content and the online context of the course, we wondered what changes in beliefs and perceptions would occur for the graduate students participating in the course. The purpose of this paper is to share what we learned about the changes in self-perception and how these life experiences develop as writers and teachers of writing after completing our course. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explain how to design an online course, several useful sources are dedicated to this topic including current articles (Andrew and Arnold 110-111; Singleton-Jackson and Colella online) and more in-depth books on the subject (Ko and Rossen; Warnock).

Relevant Literature

Teachers’ beliefs in their ability to teach writing are shaped, in part, by their perception of themselves as writers, and both positive and negative experiences affect this perception (Daisley 161). Those who are anxious about their own writing abilities struggle with teaching writing, and lacking confidence means a higher likelihood of giving up when faced with student writing challenges (Bletcher and Stroble 83; Pajares and Johnson 326; Street and Stang “Teacher Education Courses” 83). Teachers’ personal beliefs about their own writing shortcomings can lead to reluctance about teaching certain concepts. For example, Hall and Grisham-Grown found that pre-service teachers who struggled with conventions were hesitant to teach about them (156). Additionally, if teachers think that writing is a talent rather than a learned skill, it influences the value they place on writing instruction (Norman and Spencer 34). Conversely, when teachers have ample opportunities to be successful writers and receive formal preparation on writing instruction, they feel more positive and confident about teaching writing (Chambless and Bass, 159).

How people perceive their own competence is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy, or a person’s belief that he/she is capable of achieving a specific goal (Bandura 3). As one researcher explains, “[Self-efficacy beliefs] influence the choices people make and the course of action they pursue. Most people engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not” (Pajares). Self-efficacy affects motivation, achievement, and attitude (Ashton and Webb; Brown; Graham and Weiner, 75; Guskey) and plays a role in how teachers teach writing. For example, teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adapt instruction for struggling writers than those who lack confidence in their ability to change student behaviors (Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe 177). Similarly, self-efficacy helps teachers overcome challenges that they face as writing teachers, such as reaching reluctant writers (Tracy and Headley 182).

When teachers have opportunities to learn to teach writing among “supportive and committed colleagues,” their perceptions of themselves as writers can evolve, and they can gain confidence in their ability to write and to teach writing (Streut and Stang “Teaching Education Courses” 91). These sorts of communities can be accomplished within graduate courses (Streut and Stang, “Improving the Teaching” 43), including those that are taught in part or completely online through sharing of personal experiences on blogs and discussion boards, frequent feedback loops between students as well as instructors, and...