Why Digital Storytelling?

A Need For a First Year Digital Storytelling Experience in Higher Education

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Abstract

As we enter the second decade of the second millennium, the world of emerging technologies continues to grow and change. People are continually assaulted by a barrage of new and emerging multimedia technologies. One of the most popular of these technologies is video production. No longer is movie making restricted to big budget studios and film, rather it has become a practice that anyone with a cellphone or digital camera can participate in. While the practice of Digital Storytelling has been around for the better part of the last decade, it has been slow to be used in the classrooms. Whether due to economic reasons, or the fact that educators are unfamiliar with these emerging technologies educational institutions has been cautious in integrating it within their curricula. However, even with this gradual incorporation both teachers and students become easily frustrated in learning and applying these new technologies, specifically at level of higher education. This needs assessment proposes that by introducing a mandatory first year orientation Digital Storytelling class, that students will be better prepared for future projects throughout their undergraduate experience that incorporate video production. The findings from this assessment along with the findings from working with senior level college students with no video experience will help illustrate the need for digital storytelling, thus ultimately further proving the necessity of this emerging technology.
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A Need For a First Year Digital Storytelling Experience in Higher Education

Technology’s uses in the classrooms have become somewhat stagnant over the last few years. Traditional methods of teaching have been only assisted by technology, rather than be innovative with it. Educators seem content on using technology at the bear minimum instead of exploring the full potential available. So often in recent years have teachers accepted mediocre powerpoint presentations, with little to no creativity, watching students sum up the end of the semester by reciting bland powerpoint slides filled with direct quotations from their readings. First year students at the level of higher education are expected to be able to make these aforementioned “poor” presentations, instead of being taught new innovative and creative methods of conveying ideas.

Presentation technologies such as powerpoint has been around for over 20 years, yet educational institutions still find these presentations a foundation in student learning. Yet, what most students produce are mainly slides with too much text, poor color and graphic choices, and presentations that become a crutch that is not a good a way of expressing thoughts and ideas.

The question then becomes how can higher educational institutions help foster imagination and creativity, and apply it to student learning. The answer lies within the realm of Digital Storytelling.

Digital Storytelling is an emerging term, which is rooted in the idea of using digital tools to tell a short story which is usually a personal and true. These “digital stories” can be something as simple as an online text based story, to an interactive website (yet for the purposes of this assessment digital storytelling will refer primarily towards video storytelling). As Martin Rayala,
the art, media and design consultant for the Department of Public Instruction suggests, “There are seven ways to communicate information, and words and numbers are only two of them,” (p. 2) The other five: movement, sounds, images, objects, and spaces, are perfect ways to communicate through digital storytelling.

These alternative means of communicating information is already commonplace through Web 2.0 innovations, such as youtube and facebook, so why is it not within the classrooms? Students and teachers alike want to evolve with the times, and recognize that as the world of technology changes, so must education with it, or else be subject to fall behind.

Importance of Digital Storytelling

Students today are still so often taught through the idea of instructionism. This term refers to the recitation and memorization of information, after which the student is tested upon these memorized facts. The results are students cramming information instead of retaining information. These assumptions of instructionism is problematic in the sense that facts and memorization will ultimately not help students, in an emerging technological, knowledge-based, increasingly global world (C.Mouza, Powerpoint Presentation, February 10, 2009).

According to James Catterall’s essay, The Arts and the Transfer of Learning (2002), how we experience information is proportional to how we learn information. This transfer of learning suggests that through alternative ways of communication (other than words and numbers), we stimulate other parts of our brains that coincide with how we learn other information. (reference)

For example, hearing a single musical note for the first time has substantial impact on the brain. It causes multiple reactions within memory, linguistic and rational responses, and autonomous reactions to name a few. Thus Catterall argues that if a single auditory note can elicit
multiple pathways of the brain to work simultaneously, then a digital story with movement, audio, and visual will impact students on a much more cognitive level.

The idea of constructivist learning, or “learning by making,” suggests that students learn best when they’re actively engaged in creating something they care about (C. Mouza, Powerpoint Presentation, April 7, 2009). It is through the creation of digital stories that students learn not only about what they are telling a story about, they also learn to care about what they are making. Students who form an empathic bond with the subjects they tell stories about, turns the idea of having to learn, to wanting to learn. This increases a students engagement and commitment towards higher learning, particularly students who don’t respond well to the aforementioned instructionism methods of teaching.

Students want to be engaged, and want to learn. But in order for them to do this they need to care about what they are doing. digital storytelling enables students to care about what they are producing. Students today are more exposed to visual medium than ever before. Television, movies, video games, and the internet, are all readily available. The students comprehension of what makes a good movie, or good video game, or good TV show, is being constantly taught to them when they are watching these mediums. When students are then asked to create a visual story, the student is subconsciously already aware in the choices they make when making their story. They want to make something they would want to watch, because it’s theirs. This is what makes digital storytelling so powerful in the classrooms.

Digital Storytelling in the Classrooms

When Tom Banaszewski, asked his fourth and fifth graders at the beginning of the school year if they were writers, and sixty percent answered yes. At the end of the year, after
participating in Banaszewski’s Place Project assignment, a year long digital story assignment, which asked students to create a story based on an important place to them, he asked them once again if his students considered themselves writers. This time ninety-nine percent said yes (2002).

Banaszewski attributes this success to his Place Project, which he has “yet to find anything as motivating and influential on students’ self-expression as helping them tell stories about an important place. The added dimension of video provided a meeting place for these students and their creativity.”

Though only fourth and fifth graders, Banaszewski’s students learned not only technical elements in movie making (Banaszewski’s class used a single iMac computer with iMovie, a novice drag and drop movie making program), but also a new way of expressing themselves creatively allowing students to have their thoughts and emotions come alive. This Place Project ultimately gave Banaszewski’s students an understanding of the importance of their writing which in turn taught the students not how to learn, and how to understand why their ideas are important (2002).

The notion of creativity and imagination is not limited to elementary school students, nor strictly english students. The Pottruck Technology and Resource Center demonstrates multiple uses for digital storytelling in the Arts and Humanities, English, Social Sciences, Education, and Physical Sciences.

Projects such as Lesley University’s Masters requirement for their Science Education degree, asks students to produce a short personal narrative about their individual perceptions of motion. Students at Hamilton College’s Film Studies class are asked to develop digital stories
about their course experience. While Women’s Studies students at the University of Delaware, are asked to put together a short digital story about local women and their personal stories.

(Reference)

It is clear that higher level educational institutions have begun to recognize the importance of digital storytelling.

Why the need for first year experience?

At the University of Delaware, all first year students are required to take an introductory English class regardless of their major, in order to prepare them for any papers they may have to write throughout their tenure as a student. The idea behind this class is that many incoming students are not prepared to produce papers at the collegiate level. While not all classes that students will take between their first year and graduation will require writing assignments, it is fair to say that the average student will write at least one paper a semester, thus the importance of this first year class is shown in every paper that the student writes after their first year.

It is clear, that writing papers, however archaic it may be, is a practice that is still required by most if not all college campuses. Yet, as we enter the next decade of the twenty-first century, many educators are beginning to recognize how digital storytelling can help their students learn, and have begun to experiment with various projects in the classroom.

Carolyn Bitzer, a Women’s History Professor at the University of Delaware, opted to have her students create a series of short three minute videos that showcased various prominent Afro-Latina Women within the local community. Instead of a lengthy ten page biography about these women, Bitzer’s students were challenged to choose and condense a lifetime of experiences into a three minute video presentation. For these seniors, this was their last class
before graduation, and after four years of writing papers, many of the students, while excited by
the notion of creating a digital story, encountered many technical and creative problems over the
two month process.

Upon surveying the class after the projects had been completed, seventy-five percent of
students had expressed that a prior experience solely with digital storytelling (not another project
integrated into a different class), would have allowed the students to be much more confident and
prepared in creating their final projects. Had a first year orientation to the ideas and techniques of
video production been a part of their first year curriculum these frustrations might have easily
been avoided.

Yet despite the hardships that these students with no video experience whatsoever
encountered, the same survey showed that ninety percent of the students did gain an grater
appreciation for their subjects. This was clearly visible in their final presentations of their work.
Bitzer’s students had created engaging creative and moving work, which illustrated various
women in the utmost prominent way. Upon reflection, all of Bitzer’s students expressed how
much they took away from this project, and that unlike a paper where students usually struggle to
add information to make a lengthy paper, these students struggled with taking hours of footage
and cutting it into a three minute presentation that appropriately portrayed these prominent
women.

At the conclusion of the project all of Bitzer’s students walked away not only with an
adequate knowledge for digital storytelling, but an immense appreciation, understanding, and
knowledge of their subjects lives. These students walked away with a gift that they would not
have received had they not done this project. All of her students claimed that they had developed
an immense respect and admiration for the women they interviewed. They expressed that it was because of this respect that they wanted to produce something worthwhile, a video which highlighted their subjects in the best possible light.

Problems For Establishing First Year Digital Storytelling Experience

Despite all the advantages and insights that can be gained through the process of digital storytelling many higher level institutions have been slow to begin to incorporate it within their curriculum. It’s taken innovative educators, like Banaszewski and Bitzer, to begin to implement digital storytelling within their curricula. Yet, no matter how innovative educators are with digital storytelling projects without proper education at a foundation level educators will face the same problems over and over in students who don’t have the technical and creative foundations which are needed to create effective digital stories.

The problem most universities face isn’t financial, as all of today’s computers come with some sort of movie making software, whether it’s a PC’s Windows Movie Maker, or Apple’s iMovie, all college campuses have computer labs, which can adequately present ideal environments for teaching digital storytelling. Rather the biggest problem is what department should be responsible for this first year class.

When looking at the English first year experience model, it’s apparent that for teaching students how to write effective papers, the English department of a University is the clearly appropriate educators to teach this skill. When it comes to digital storytelling, the appropriate department is less clear.

Should it be English? After all, as Banaszewski’s students show, you need to be able to write to create digital stories. Should it be technology? One of the keywords in digital
storytelling, is the word digital, therefore, shouldn’t it fall to Computer Sciences to teach this first year experience? What about Education, or Communication?

While any one of these departments could easily undertake the education of a student’s technical needs within the realm of digital storytelling, there is only one department that can help foster a student’s creative needs in addition to their technical ones, and that’s the Art department.

English teaches English, Math teaches math, Science teaches science. But Art teaches innovation and imagination. Two skills which are needed to help foster the creative needs of a digital story. In order to have a successful digital story, technical knowledge will only take students so far, the results will be bland and uninspiring. Yet with creative and artistic guidance students will not only create better projects, but gain a deeper understanding and respect for them.

Conclusion

Youtube, Facebook, iTunes, television, the internet, digital storytelling and digital media as a whole are becoming more and more a part of our everyday culture. Educational institutions must change with the times or be doomed to churn out mediocre students with little experience to prepare them for the real world.

Digital stories have the power to reach students in ways that have yet to be measured. Deeper understanding of subject matter is only one of many benefits that students gain through creation. The idea of incorporating digital storytelling into a class’s curriculum should not be discouraged, nay just the opposite. Students should be able to use digital stories as a tool to express the ideas and concepts within a classroom. But when the technical realities of digital storytelling overshadows the core ideas of a project, a sort of technophobia develops that
discourages students and educators alike from embracing all digital storytelling has to offer. Therefore, a proper balance between technical instruction, creation and innovation must be present when offering a digital story class.

Ultimately though digital storytelling creates multiple tasks for students, giving them skills as researchers, writers, designers, technologists and artists. It allows students to create something they care about and reach an audience greater than the classroom. As Banaszewski and Bitzer demonstrate, digital storytelling is a skill that hones in on students individual skills, and builds upon them.

Whether within an elementary or higher educational setting it is clear that digital stories will become a part of student learning, it is up to educational institutions to understand the importance of growing technologies like digital storytelling and incorporate it within their curriculum. If not it will not be the educational institutions that suffer, it will be the students.
References


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