



Where Can Storytelling Take You? Student-Created, Digital, Multimodal Compositions

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Reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the English language is quickly changing in response to the emerging technologies and the new literacies they afford. Outside the classroom, children's literacy practices entangle with diverse representations of meaning that include multisensory consumption of information and rapidly advancing technology. They are reading, writing, and producing dynamic multimodal and multimedia texts for numerous audiences and authentic purposes. Yet, printed text is privileged in classrooms. Despite classroom tradition, technology integration and the 21st century skills have established a presence in the Common Core Standards and the Colorado Academic Standards and are appearing in classroom teaching and learning across the nation. Classroom learning doesn't benefit much from inserting the use of a few new technology gadgets or applications (apps) here and there. Teachers need to engage students in learning and make content accessible to diverse students by utilizing everything they can get their hands on. Technology tools support learning processes, but they need to be purposefully weaved together with the content to add value to the students' learning. How can teachers support their students' experiences with content so students are creating, communicating, and collaborating in deep and meaningful ways?

Brown, Bryan, and Brown (2005) discussed the need for technology literacy:

In response to the new demands of the information age, teachers now integrate technology across the curriculum. Traditional literacy instruction involved the use of textbooks, skills lessons, ability groups, numerous worksheets and workbook pages, as well as writing that only the teacher read. In contrast, literacy in the 21st century requires that children not only communicate with classroom peers, but also read e-books, receive and send e-mail, locate and evaluate online information, prepare reports with presentation software, establish dialogue with learned individuals in other regions, and write for both a local and global community. (p. 3)

Emerging technologies, particularly those available on mobile devices, and the new literacies they enable provide opportunity for teaching literacy skills to students in dynamic ways. Student-created, digital, multimodal compositions are one technology-rich learning activity with compelling implications for enhancing students' learning of literacy, technology, and 21st century skills (not to mention the potential for integration of other subject matter). Crafting multimodal compositions requires students to examine how they become authors to produce, distribute, invent, explore, persuade, and create impact with multiple

modes designed for a specific audience. Doing this in conjunction with productivity media allows students to leverage the multiple modes of communication available and audience participation to yield collaborative and creative productions of meaning making. This article specifically discusses one multimodal composition idea that leverages the unique capacities of video- and image-making tools: digital storytelling.

What Is Digital Storytelling?

The simple definition of *digital storytelling* is the practice of using digital tools to tell stories. The main premise revolves around the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of multimedia, including illustrations, photography, digital graphics, narration, sound effects, video, and web publishing. My work with digital storytelling in educational settings developed out of the work of Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley at the Center for Digital Storytelling at University of California, Berkeley, which was established in 1993. The community of practice that has grown from this work over the years is based on the supposition that everyone has a story to tell. Digital technologies offer particularly powerful means of leveraging the multimodality to convey these stories.

The structure of a digital story mirrors traditional storytelling; most stories focus on a specific topic and point of view. It also incorporates elements of the writing process, but because it integrates digital elements, it takes on a slightly different look and feel. It incorporates exploring mentor texts, including text-based and digital stories, storyboarding, script writing, lots of revision, and production. Stories can vary in length, but most of the digital stories I've used in education typically last between 30 seconds and 10 minutes. Purpose and grade level are the biggest determining factors of story length. Genres and topics used in digital storytelling range from personal tales to the recounting of historical events, from informational text or public service announcements to poetry, or small moment narrative to documentary and everything in between.

Common Core Connections

Many of the Common Core Standards identify technology as a key component in the processes used by students to achieve learning goals outlined by the standards. For example, the K–5 writing standards include “use a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 19). Technology can enhance many aspects of instruction, but the Common Core Standards ask teachers to think purposefully about technology integration and how pedagogy, content, and technology in

teaching practices can come together to support student learning. This interaction of teacher knowledge is also known as Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) and can provide a framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) for teacher reflection on planning and implementation of technology-rich integrated lessons such as digital storytelling. The Common Core Standards embrace technology as a means to developing content knowledge and enriching learning processes. This can be most effective when teachers engage students in using technology tools in ways that facilitate deep engagement with content and draw upon collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity skills. This approach allows teachers to unpack the standards to identify and understand the rationale for the concepts, foundational understandings, and skills associated with a particular content. This can allow teachers to establish guiding questions and inquiry approaches with students that motivate discovery and learning within authentic contexts.

Digital Enhancement

Bringing the technology to the beginning of the process allows students to explore ideas of representing knowledge and conveying meaning to various audiences using multiple modes. If students first draft on paper and then move to the technology, text is privileged above all other modes of meaning making and technology remains an add-on with the value it affords the learning process lost or diminished. By including digital technologies on equal ground with pen and paper as a tool, the writing process integrates digital literacies and provides creative options for students to convey meaning and engage in authentic writing opportunities that mirror 21st century writing. This approach better represents the writing and design choices students have available in environments beyond the classroom and embraces multimodal and multimedia aspects of learning and sharing of knowledge. Students are afforded opportunities to use voice in creative ways and leverage the digital tools to allow for audience impact to shape their writing. This engaging process potentially influences students' perceptions of storytelling from class assignment to authentic life experience. It also helps teachers achieve technology integration in classroom instruction where the tools are seamlessly a part of the teaching and learning.

An online chart titled “Why Digital Writing Matters: Common Core ELA Standards & Digital Writing” posted by Joe Wood (2011) is a great resource to better visualize the connections among digital writing and the English Language Arts Common Core Standards; it can be found at <http://digitalis.nwp.org/resource/3201>.

Table 1. Digital Story Narrative Character and Setting Lesson Considerations

Character Development	Setting Development
<p>Designers can ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will I draw my character? • Will I film my character? • Will I construct my character in some other medium? • Do I want to use a variety of image clips that depict examples or a collage of my character? • Do I want to film myself? • Do I want to do a voiceover to narrate my story? 	<p>Designers can ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I using a real setting? • If it is real, can I take a picture of it? Or can I videotape it? Can I find usable images online? • Do I want to draw a picture of this setting? • Do I want to create a graphic for this setting? • If characters are filmed live: Is my setting appropriate? Can I film on a green-screen background and insert a photo for the setting? • If characters are drawn or built: Do I want to mix media to incorporate the setting? (for example, illustration of character on top of a photographed setting)

What Could It Look Like in a Classroom?

There are dozens of ways you can incorporate multimodal compositions into your classroom practice. In order to promote the benefits of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity, and to fully leverage the digital tools within students' learning processes, I've embraced a workshop model for developing digital stories. It includes six aspects of digital storytelling: mentor texts, narrative development, storyboard, image construction, production, and sharing.

Although there is a starting point (mentor text) and an ending point (sharing), the process is not linear. The order of the six aspects are influenced by each other and utilized often through the composing process. For example, working with an image may influence a revision in the narrative or crafting a scene in production may warrant inquiry into the mentor texts. Additionally, story writing and digital literacy knowledge can be emphasized differently if teachers develop different aspects with students before others. For example, if students begin their story with image construction, the visual aspects will likely influence student production of a different narrative than if students started with writing a script or narrative text.

Mentor Texts

While investigating the genre that will become the focus of students' compositions, students review an array of mentor texts. If you're not familiar with the term, a mentor text is an established text that the students and teacher read and examine during a writing lesson that

either demonstrates a writing skill or serves as a model for students who want to write something creatively similar. When creating digital stories, mentor texts should be multimodal and provide an array of models for approaching the genre. For example, if students were constructing small moment narratives as their digital stories, the mentor texts would include small moment narratives in an array of formats: picture books, student writing samples, published digital stories, images, narrative slideshows, blog posts, and so on. The mentor texts should be discussed and deconstructed by students in order to identify and understand the writing, design decisions, and design characteristics found in the texts. They serve as a model and motivator to inspire students' story creation. Mentor texts also help students to become independent writers. When students question their next steps or need to make design decisions, they are able to turn to the mentor texts for possibilities rather than turning to the teacher for answers. Visit <http://digitalstory.mkwilliams.org/mentortext> for small moment narrative mentor texts.

Narrative Development

In its most simple form, the narrative development aspect is *writing* the story. But in order to embrace the digital design of the stories, teachers need to understand that the narrative may be in the form of a script, scene outline, written text, or audio-recorded dialogue. The essential part of this aspect is students' development of story features.

Writing lessons still need to include orientation, character development, setting development, conflict/resolution, and closure. However, a teacher needs to consider the possibilities of character development, for example,

within a *digital* format. See Table 1 for considerations in support of setting and character development. When developing the writing lessons, these can become the crux of teachers' learning objectives. Are students focused on developing dialogue among characters to advance the plot-line? Great! Could that be in the form of an audio-recorded dialogue? Of course it can.

Storyboard

The storyboard is a graphic organizer used by students to lay out the multimodal aspects of their digital stories. It might be a large piece of paper folded in thirds or sixths; it might be a printed storyboard from an online resource like <http://digitaless.us>. The objective of the storyboard is to bring all of the modes together in a plan. If students are working within a computer lab setting, storyboards can be worked on outside the lab and used as a blueprint to ensure that time in the lab is used efficiently. If students have mobile devices, the storyboard may be embedded in the tools being used to produce the story. See <http://digitalstory.mkwilliams.org/storyboard> for an example of a digital narrative storyboard.

Image Construction

The significance of the image construction aspect of digital storytelling extends beyond illustrating the story or adding visual interest. The images can be powerful conveyers of meaning and information within digital storytelling. Image construction also provides opportunities for instruction on design features and digital literacy strategies and concepts. In an image-dominated world (Kress, 2010), students need to see image and other semiotic resources as meaning systems in and of themselves. Students need to learn that image and text do very different work when student designers are communicating to various audiences. It is important for teachers to begin to make a shift to talk about image and text possibilities, not image as an add-on or as a reward when the text is written.

Images within the digital narrative could be student-created drawings that are scanned or digitally created in a drawing application as well as photos or graphics. Students could also utilize photos or graphics that are available online if they apply fair-use guidelines of copyright. Image construction also includes capturing or incorporating live video. Video adds complexity and multimodality to the visual aspect of the story. It can also add a complexity to the production process and classroom procedures. All images students incorporate into digital stories should be purposefully constructed to enhance and/or carry the storytelling experience.

See Figure 1 for a modality checklist that outlines some options for students when constructing a 6-Word

Figure 1. Modality Checklist

Narrative Script:	
Audio	<input type="checkbox"/> Voiceover <input type="checkbox"/> Music <input type="checkbox"/> Sound effect <input type="checkbox"/> In-media sound/dialogue
Text	<input type="checkbox"/> Titles <input type="checkbox"/> Headings <input type="checkbox"/> Narrative <input type="checkbox"/> Captions
Visual Images	<input type="checkbox"/> Clip art <input type="checkbox"/> Internet graphics <input type="checkbox"/> Self-created graphics <input type="checkbox"/> Internet photos <input type="checkbox"/> Self-created photos
Video	<input type="checkbox"/> Externally created <input type="checkbox"/> Self-created

Memoir. This checklist can be enhanced for longer narratives and other digital possibilities. This checklist is important as it presents the modes simultaneously for consideration as they are all available from the beginning to be used as resources for communication.

Production

The production aspect of the process is putting it all together. Typically, students can utilize one of a variety of options of video editing software. Depending on students' level of expertise, teachers may need to incorporate mini-lessons to support production. As with all writing projects, it is important for teachers to initially create a digital story themselves. This is important for many reasons. First, teachers need to live the life of a designer so they understand the challenges of this type of writing. Second, conversations and teaching that comes from someone who writes and designs is much more informed and can speak from the "inside" of designing rather than telling about it. This type of knowledge builds trust. Third, it provides a template for modeling. Teachers will be able to use their project to write/design in front of students and think aloud the process of designing. As a part of production, students will also need to consider and design the peritextual features of the story such as the title slide, ending credits and recognitions, or background music. See the review of digital storytelling apps in the "What's New" section of this issue for possible production software and apps—perfect for summertime exploration.

Sharing

Sharing is always the most exciting part of digital storytelling! Students share their compositions with others. This can be done as a parent, community, or classroom event. You can “go big” and host a red carpet screening, or “go small” and have students share their stories with small groups or the whole class. Because they are digital, these stories can also be shared electronically on student or classroom blogs or web pages, published as a collection on mobile devices, or embedded into other work such as iBooks. The end goal is that they are shared because that is what stories are for.

What Next?

Digital storytelling is an exceptionally alluring way of integrating literacy, technologies, and 21st century skill development, such as collaboration. It also provides alternative and authentic means for students to present their knowledge and demonstrate their literacy beyond text on paper. Digital storytelling is an imaginative means of expression where technology in the hands of students can allow them to craft masterpieces while meeting numerous learning objectives constructed by the teacher. This article has focused on literacy development, but what if teachers took digital storytelling beyond the writing lesson? How could these storytelling ideas be used to explain a concept in math? Capture a scientific experiment? Explore varying perspectives of a historical event or leader? Where can storytelling take your students?

Digital Storytelling Examples

The following examples highlight digital narratives across grade levels and contexts. Outlined are the standards and tools used for each. Readers can view these examples at <http://digitalstory.mkwilliams.org>.



Grade Level 1

Common Core Standards: Write narratives in which [students] recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.

Tools:

Desktop computer/lab setting

Pixie 2 (an app for artwork)

GarageBand (an app for narration)

iMovie (an app for production)



Grade Level 5

Common Core Standards: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences; recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work; and provide a list of sources.

Tools:

iPad or iPod touch/mobile in-classroom setting

Camera (for images)

iMovie (app for narration and/or production)

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