

Dan Baker

Dr. Gwen Tarbox

English 630

26 November 2002

### Enhancing Language Arts Curriculum with Digital Storytelling

Within all of us exists a story and there is nothing more important than showing students how to tell stories about themselves. In his book, Crafting a Life, Donald Murray says it is through story that people “remember, understand, instruct, entertain, celebrate,” and that stories “contain and reveal our beliefs, our fears, our hopes, our knowledge of how the world works” (Murray 77). For educators like Murray, storytelling’s greatest strength as a focus of study in a language arts classroom is that it involves the process of creating, writing, and sharing stories, a process that ultimately challenges students to consider their writing, and how they view themselves and others. This strength is at the heart of a language arts teaching strategy called “digital storytelling,” a unique and compelling combination of multimedia and creative writing. By participating in the creative process of writing and sharing life experiences through digital storytelling, not only do students develop meaningful writing and critical thinking skills, they are also provided the means to explore, strengthen and share their voice while discovering the voices of others.

The original idea for combining personal stories, storytelling, and information and communication technology (ICT) was conceived in 1994 by Joe Lambert, Nina Mullen and Dana Atchley, who originated the process while working collaboratively for the San

Francisco Digital Media Center, now known as the Center for Digital Storytelling (“History”). The Center for Digital Storytelling originally defined digital stories as short-form, multimedia pieces “edited on a computer, using still images, voice, video, music, sound, and/or animation to communicate with an intended audience” (Paul 8). To some, digital storytelling now refers to a “range of products and practices involving computer and narrative (generally with some combination of textual/spoken and visual elements)” (7). Definition notwithstanding, all digital storytelling involves students participating in a group process that attempts to create first-person accounts detailing the important events, people and places in their lives by directly connecting “images that one collects in a life's journey” to “thoughtful and emotionally direct writing” (“Understanding”). Undoubtedly, it is the Center’s belief that everyone has a story to tell, and the combination of creative writing and multimedia leads to a powerful learning experience.

For educators looking to make digital storytelling a part of an existing language arts curriculum, the creative process is not terribly difficult. Whether conceived in weeks or in days, creating digital stories generally involves three-steps: introducing digital storytelling to students; asking them to write stories about themselves; enhancing their stories using multimedia resources and computer manipulation.

To introduce digital storytelling to students, instructors should show examples of digital stories and explain the seven elements of digital storytelling. According to Caleb Paul’s “An Introduction to Digital Storytelling and Rational for the Study,” the seven elements serve “to help with some of the conceptual and practical challenges” of

### Baker 3

combining scripting and multimedia (Paul 11). Some of the seven elements include: “Point of View,” the idea that digital stories are subjective stories told in the first person; “Dramatic Arc,” the idea that good stories create “dramatic tension and movement” by including the literary effect of “desire-action-realization or a question in the storyteller’s life, followed by related events”; “Voice” and “Emotional Content,” or the storyteller’s ability to tell a story in his/her real voice with “personality, emotion, and authenticity” (12-13). Paul says discussing each element before writing is helpful because it offers a “useful reference point in working with students to help them construct and revise,” and provides “a common language that often helps the students discuss their pieces and what they are trying to accomplish” (11). He also feels showing examples of digital stories helps teachers explain the seven elements and model what students must accomplish. For examples of digital stories, information regarding the seven elements, and suggestions on how to implement digital storytelling, teachers are encouraged to visit the Center for Digital Storytelling’s website, <http://www.storycenter.org/desc.html>.

### Baker 4

With a better understanding of what digital storytelling involves, students then begin the process of drafting personal stories in script form. Script writing often starts with students responding to a writing prompt, such as “My life story could best be described as . . .” Once written, students collectively share scripts, discuss ideas, and receive feedback from classmates and the teacher. Following group discussion, students begin

recording voices, looking for multimedia resources, and revising scripts. Ultimately, successful script writing requires group interaction and feedback. It is important, therefore, that teachers utilize a workshop approach during this process, an approach that allows students and teachers to work together to plan, write, share, edit, review, and apply multimedia resources to scripts.

It is also important to understand that script writing is an on-going process that asks students to re-assess and alter scripts as they search for ways to illustrate their narratives. Because digital storytelling requires that students bring written scripts to life with recorded “voice-overs” and multimedia such as music, personal photos, videos, or sound effects, students must make critical decisions about which written ideas to include in their scripts, and consider appropriate “representational resources to express themselves” (8). A student storyteller detailing the importance of family, for example, may include electronically scanned family photos instead of words; instead of writing a description of a brother with sentences, the storyteller may decide that a downloaded image from a taped family reunion makes a stronger impression. Script writing is not just about writing. It is the first step in a collaborative adventure requiring students to analyze, reflect, and synthesize as they write and select media, thoughts, images, and sounds to express their personal stories.

Admittedly, the most difficult and time-consuming part of the digital story process requires that students combine, digitize, and manipulate their various media resources by using computer hardware and software. Employing special software such as “Photoshop,” or computer hardware such as digital cameras and scanners, each piece of video, sound, or voice needs to be transformed into digital information, changed into

computer language, and entered into a computer (15). Once all resources have been digitized and saved as files, students then use software like “Adobe Premiere” to combine and manipulate the digital pieces to create a cogent digital story. Adobe Premiere offers students an endless amount of creative possibilities. With Premiere, students can accentuate presentations with special effects like zooming in and out of visuals and text; they can animate objects to make them move, fly, fade in, or fade out; they can also cut, edit, and re-arrange music or vocal passages. Again, the process of digital manipulation can be time-consuming and challenging to students and facilitators. However, once students become familiar with the software and how to edit, revise, and finish their digital stories, the end results are often quite special. Finishing the process rewards students with a sense of accomplishment and pride, not to mention a unique final product – an emotionally powerful digital life story to share with class, family, friends, and others by email, CD-ROM, or on an Internet web page (9).

As education evolves, all educators must look beyond simple computer and software applications in their classrooms and explore the many ways educational technology improves teaching. Collaborative and clearly designed to demonstrate learning, teaching strategies like digital storytelling appear promising, particularly to educators like Ann Heide and Dale Henderson who understand the importance of harnessing the “power of information and communication to enable and enhance active learning,” and strengthen student performance and teacher effectiveness (Heide 1). According to Heide and Henderson, education must embrace new technologies and move beyond pencils, papers, and books; in their book, Active Learning in the Digital Classroom, they examine several important reasons why. Both feel, for example, that

educators have the responsibility to prepare students for the realities of a technological world, a world that demands that students “make intelligent decisions about the relationships among humans, technology, and the natural environment” (7). Also, due to an unlimited amount of valuable learning information available on computer software and the World Wide Web (WWW), ICT allows teachers to improve curriculum to help address a variety of student learning styles and strengths. Finally, not only does ICT increase student motivation and self-esteem, it also promotes valuable problem-solving and workplace skills such as reading, writing, reasoning, and self-management (8-11). No doubt, Heide and Henderson feel that once teachers begin examining the benefits, they will quickly realize that information and community technology leads to more creative, authentic curriculum.

Some language arts instructors like Tom Banaszewski, Constance Mellon, and Richard Jester, are already turning Heide and Henderson’s vision of technology integrated classrooms into reality. Embracing the idea that technology-enriched curriculum affords “the possibility of expressing oneself through all resources, avenues, and modalities” (Paul 8), all three successfully utilize information and multimedia technology to help students master several important language arts learning outcomes such as enhanced writing, critical thinking, and empathy skills. Banaszewski, for example, uses digital storytelling in his fourth and fifth grade classrooms. Referring to it as “motivating” and “influential,” he feels having students tell stories using digital storytelling provides a “meeting place” for students and their creativity (Banaszewski 1). Further, he believes “everyone has a story about a place that is important to her or him,” and that using multimedia to develop and share these stories helps strengthen

student understanding of the importance of community (1). Aware that technology should always be secondary to the storytelling, he uses digital stories to help students find “voice, confidence, and structure in their writing” as they “develop as authors with a purpose and an audience for their writing that is greater than the classroom” (2-3). Banaszewski’s approach suggests that regardless of content or grade level, teachers can successfully implement digital storytelling into their classroom to build community and enhance writing skills.

Like Banaszewski, Mellon also makes digital storytelling a part of classroom instruction. In her article, “Digital Storytelling: Effective Learning Through the Internet,” Mellon says using digital stories in her college storytelling class makes “an important and unique contribution to storytelling instruction” (Mellon 47). Results from her class indicate students generally enjoying the experience. One student, for example, calls the experience “deeply personal” (49); another says “I think digital storytelling enriched the class and provided a unique medium for storytelling” (50). Mellon also makes it clear that when used in conjunction with oral presentation, digital storytelling can be an effective approach for teachers looking for ways to help students overcome fears often associated with storytelling. For her, multimedia strategies like digital storytelling helps students create and share stories that reveal “their deep personal feelings” (50), feelings some students have difficulty sharing with just spoken or written words.

Although not exactly digital storytelling, Jester also combines information technology with language arts instruction to help students learn, specifically to enrich their writing and reading skills. In an assignment for sixth graders that asks that they develop ideas about books they have read and what they know about the literary

elements of the novel, he integrates reading, writing, storytelling, and grammar instruction with multimedia presentations. During publication, Jester believes multimedia helps students delve deeper into their writing, arguing that it provides natural “divisions (slides or cards)” that help students “organize ideas more clearly” (86). Instead of using pieces of paper, students create, format, and divide slides into main topics and supporting details; it is the “concreteness’ of the division provided by slides” that helps students understand the importance of relating, connecting, and developing ideas (86).

He also feels language becomes more “malleable for revision and editing” through technology (86). Students often worry more about the neatness of finished projects than revision, editing, and creativity. To Jester, computers not only allow students to alter writing without the fear of “messing up,” but also challenges them to consider the “how’s,” “when’s,” and “why’s” as they delete, add, and revise (86). Further, with multimedia, he claims students can “differentiate between important words and ideas through the use of color, text size and font, and position on the page” (87). By using color or style, students “consider and highlight their meaning more readily” (87). Lastly, for students raised on video games, DVD’s, and the Internet, he feels multimedia is more engaging than traditional media and print assignments (88). Again, even though it may not match the definition of digital storytelling exactly, Jester’s approach to helping students with information technology and multimedia appears to be working. Emphasizing that it is the “message, not the tool, that’s key in writing” (88), his case for pairing technology and process writing shows that with careful planning, students can demonstrate mastery of writing skills using educational technologies.

Beyond reading and writing, one of the most valuable lessons young adults can learn from digital storytelling and the storytelling experience is the importance of empathy. Storytelling makes students look beyond their own world and is an important part of what Linda Christensen calls a “curriculum of empathy” (Christensen 5). In her article, “Building Community Out of Chaos,” she writes that classrooms must become communities filled with real people, not just students. To do this, students need to be invited to share the lives of others. As a result, they learn how to go beyond stereotypes or plain old facts; they begin to look for and reflect on common feelings, ideas, and experiences. Whether through literature, writing, or listening to someone’s digital life story, it is obvious that Christensen understands the power of storytelling, making an insightful point that once students see how people get hurt, once they share stories of laughter or pain, they will be less likely to treat people as “objects to be kicked or beaten or called names” (7).

Similarly, Connie Rockman also believes in storytelling’s ability to teach students about themselves and others. For her, storytelling not only “increases attention spans, creates more imaginative writing, builds good group dynamics, and enhances self esteem, but also allows students a way to share hopes and disappointments with others,” which focuses students on their role in humanity (Rockman 1-2). Like Christensen, Rockman believes in the idea of reaching students by connecting them through a world of language, literature, and story (Christensen 8). As a result, she feels teachers build community and leave students with a heightened sense of themselves, others, and a deeper understanding of the importance of empathy.

Because teachers play an integral role in maintaining society’s well-being, they

must continue to offer students curriculum that is challenging and relevant. Clearly, digital storytelling is both, a technology-rich teaching strategy that language arts instructors can use to bring student stories and issues into classrooms. To be sure, implementing digital storytelling involves challenges and it may not be right for everyone. However, with time and patience, teachers who use digital storytelling can transform classrooms into learning communities where students think, perform, and participate in a collaborative experience that not only enhances writing and thinking skills, but also invites young adults to consider and reflect on the importance of culture, tradition, and the many ways humans are connected.

Works Cited

- Banaszewski, Tom. "Digital Storytelling Finds Its Place in the Classroom." Multimedia Schools Jan.-Feb. 2002: 1-3. 16 August 2002  
<<http://www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/jan02/banaszewski.htm>>.
- Christensen, Linda. "Building Community Out of Chaos." Reading, Writing, and Rising Up Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2000.
- Heide, Ann, and Dale Henderson. Active Learning in the Digital Age. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001.
- "History." Center for Digital Storytelling. 28 October 2002  
<<http://www.storycenter.org/history.html>>.
- Jester, Richard. "If I Had a Hammer: Technology in the Language Arts Classroom." English Journal 91.4 (2002): 85-88.
- Mellon, Constance A. "Digital Storytelling: Effective Learning Through the Internet." Educational Technology 39.2 (1999): 46-50.
- Murray, Donald M. Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1996.
- Paul, Caleb. "An Introduction to Digital Storytelling and Rationale for the Study." Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 2002.
- Rockman, Connie. "Tell Me A Story." School Library Journal 47.8 (Aug. 2001): 46-9.
- "Understanding Digital Storytelling." Center for Digital Storytelling. 28 October 2002 < <http://www.storycenter.org/understanding.html>>.

