

Preparing for Digital Story Telling

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Abstract: Internet II is about to become commonly available to many educational users. As Internet I turned many of us into text editors, Internet II will cry out for many of us to become video producers. How do we prepare both our student and ourselves, especially those preparing to become teachers for this brave new world of digital video? How do we prepare for a world of viewers that will expect and demand of us high impact video communications? At Western Michigan University, with much help from the K-12 community, and the Center for Digital Storytelling, we are beginning to explore how to combine the video digital technology with the ancient art of story telling to better prepare pre-service students to meet the rigors of first year teaching and veteran teachers to better prepare and share digital media of their reflective experiences as teachers.

Introduction

In five minutes L____[female] and C____[male] describe what it's like to work as first-year teachers in the same small Michigan school district where they were once students. In five minutes R____[female] and L____[female] demonstrate for pre-service teachers and others how they call upon the power of place to teach students in different rural communities to take ownership of both their writings and the places they live. In five minutes P____[female] tells the story of her lifelong journey to name herself "writer" and the impact that journey has had on teaching and learning in her high school English classroom. These teachers, all of whom serve as classroom mentors for pre-service teachers, were able to create their five-minute stories during an institute last July on the campus of Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI, using a process called *digital storytelling*; the process combines the timeless art of storytelling with new and powerful digital multimedia tools. For these teachers, and for others who have experienced digital storytelling, it is the technology application that finally delivers to their teaching practice the real power of a computer as a teaching and learning tool.

To an audience a finished digital story looks something like a short autobiographical, documentary film. Storytellers begin the process by writing and recording a personal narrative script, which becomes a spoken-text "voiceover" for the visual (and other auditory) elements of the piece. Then, storytellers use software to layer their voiceovers with any images that help tell the story: still photos, video clips, artifacts, text and non-text animation, soundtrack, and video and audio effects. To the storyteller, a digital story is a highly personal and densely packed exploration of a topic through story. But the real power of digital storytelling is something that happens between audience and storyteller, in how the experience of digital story can bring people together for conversations about the subjects and topics a story explores and suggests. To bring audience and storyteller together, a digital story can be stored and played on any computer application that supports the software to run it: personal computers can be used for individual viewers, data projectors work for a room full of viewers, and for the world, digital stories can be carried over the internet and played on media players like QuickTime and Real Player.

From Berkeley to Kalamazoo

The Digital Storytelling Institute came to Kalamazoo when Gobles, Michigan, high school teacher and mentor teacher Corey Harbaugh made a promise in Berkeley, California, the summer before. He went out

to Berkeley in the summer of 2000 at the invitation of the National Writing Project (NWP) to make a digital story about his work in the Rural Voices, Country Schools project—an initiative of the Annenberg Rural Schools and Community Trust and the National Writing Project—that documented and celebrated the success of America’s small-town schools. He had never heard of digital storytelling before accepting the invitation, but at the end of his week in California he was so transformed by it that he promised Caleb Paull, the Education Programs Director at the Center for Digital Storytelling, that he would find the resources to bring him to Michigan as soon as he could to share the power of digital storytelling with others back home.

Several of his teaching partners on the Michigan Rural Voices, Country Schools team immediately recognized themselves and their work in his five-minute personal story, and they wept and laughed all over again when they heard and saw the story being played. Team mentor Dr. Ellen Brinkley, a WMU English Education professor and Director of the Third Coast Writing Project, recognized its power as a professional development tool for teachers and for pre-service teachers, and enlisted the support of Dr. Allen Webb, a Western Michigan University PT3 College of Arts and Sciences Coordinator and English Education professor.

The Institute

The Institute was held during a hot July week of 2001. Though the institute was scheduled to end at five each evening, most nights participants didn’t leave Rood Hall until giving in to fatigue and hunger between eight and nine p.m. Participants were glued to their computers and the other tools of the story-making process: scanners, digital cameras, audio and video equipment, and the Internet. On Thursday night, permission was secured from the university for the institute to lock up when they left, and teaching veterans of thirty years pulled something like all-nighters to finish their stories before the institute was scheduled to end the next day. Several of the teams took more than forty hours to produce those five-minute stories.

On the last day of the institute a screening of stories was held at a campus reception for more than one hundred friends and family members, teaching colleagues and school administrators, guests and supporters from the university, and members of the media and legislative communities. Teachers briefly introduced themselves and their pieces to the group, and then let the finished stories have their say. When the lights came on again some forty minutes later, people got off their feet and started having conversations with the storytellers and with each other that had been raised by the work: about teaching and technology, about standards in education, about professional development, about best practice, and about why and how teachers do what they do. The conversations lasted all afternoon.

Conclusion

At Western Michigan University, work continues to explore digital storytelling as a teaching and learning tool in the PT3-supported teacher preparation program. With additional support from the PT3 project, Allen Webb, Ellen Brinkley, and another colleague, Jonathan Bush, are teaching pre-service teachers in a wireless lab and integrating digital storytelling into their class requirements for English education students. They plan to invite faculty colleagues who work with pre-service teachers to participate in a seminar during the summer of 2002 in order to extend digital storytelling into other pre-service and technology preparation coursework.

Since last summer’s institute Corey has shown digital stories and presented on the institute to hundreds of people from across the country. He reports that each time he puts the work in front of a new audience, he experiences again the energy and excitement of digital storytelling that he felt when he was introduced to it in the summer of 2000. Audiences respond both to the power of personal narrative, and to the multimedia format storytellers have used to layer and condense each individual piece. At every conference and forum, people introduced to digital storytelling want to know how they can do it themselves, or how to bring a mentor to their site to lead a workshop.

We have learned at WMU that it takes a powerful application to get mentor teachers and faculty—especially veterans—to want to integrate technology into the classroom. They have to experience the power of technology before they will believe in it enough to use it. Yet so many technology-training programs get the most important relationship backwards, making the technology more important than the learning it supports. Digital storytelling does not make this mistake. It immerses storytellers into the process—to

condense their lives and teacher stories into five-minute pieces, teachers have to learn how to use the tools of technology—so in the end there is no difference between the technology and the learning that takes place. This result is precisely the goal of PT3 teacher preparation in the hands of learners who have experienced the combined power of technology and meaningful work: Teaching and learning can be fundamentally changed.

Acknowledgements

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