

7 things you should know about...

Digital Storytelling

Scenario

David's sociology professor assigns the class a culture study to be completed over winter break. Based on what they have learned over the semester, each student is to create a project that captures something specific about either himself or his family. Project format is relatively open-ended, and David, a computer science major, decides to make his a digital story.

After considering what seems like a thousand topics, David decides that what he should do is tell a story about his passion (aside from computers): blues guitar. He interviews his parents about the Buddy Guy record they used to play, the one that ignited his interest in blues guitar—the music that he loves and still plays as part of a weekend band. David digitally scans the record jacket, collects audio clips of Guy's performances, and digitally records himself talking about what the music means to him and playing original compositions on his own Buddy Guy Fender Stratocaster. Working to make his digital story come alive, David teaches himself many of the ins and outs of graphics and audio-editing software. Unlike his usual sleep-late-every-day breaks from classes, David is up early every morning, working on his story, learning how to incorporate interactive elements, and getting feedback from his parents and others who know about his love for the guitar.

In the end, David's digital story includes many sophisticated multimedia elements, as well as a photograph of David and his parents meeting Buddy Guy backstage in Minneapolis when David was in high school. He finds himself relishing the opportunity to present a side of himself that many of his classmates don't know. When they see his digital story, some initially wonder if it's a joke. When they see the clips of David playing, however, and hear him talk about this music, they ask him where his band will be playing next—and if he can get them in for free.

What is it?

Digital storytelling is the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound, and video, to create a short movie, typically with a strong emotional component. Sophisticated digital stories can be interactive movies that include highly produced audio and visual effects, but a set of slides with corresponding narration or music constitutes a basic digital story. Digital stories can be instructional, persuasive, historical, or reflective. The resources available to incorporate into a digital story are virtually limitless, giving the storyteller enormous creative latitude. Some learning theorists believe that as a pedagogical technique, storytelling can be effectively applied to nearly any subject. Constructing a narrative and communicating it effectively require the storyteller to think carefully about the topic and consider the audience's perspective.

Who's doing it?

One of the earliest large-scale digital storytelling projects is sponsored by the BBC to capture and share stories from around the United Kingdom that reflect different local histories and cultures. A similar initiative out of San Francisco public radio station KQED solicits digital stories from high school students about how they came to live in California, exposing them to the tools and skills of short-movie creation while eliciting a compelling personal story.

Faculty in the College of Education at the University of Houston lead a digital storytelling effort that strives to expose instructors and students to the educational opportunities that the technique provides. Among the initiative's stated goals are, for faculty, to facilitate various learning styles and connect to students' interest in technology, and, for students, to develop their ability to appropriately evaluate and use online content and electronic tools as a means of personal expression. Carleton College sponsors educational uses of digital stories and has developed a rubric to help faculty evaluate the various aspects of a digital story. The college has also applied digital storytelling techniques to present critical analyses. Many institutions, including Maricopa Community Colleges, offer courses in digital storytelling, and the College of Communication, Information, and Media at Ball State University offers an MA in telecommunications with an emphasis in digital storytelling.

How does it work?

Although groups of students can collaborate on digital stories, the form is well suited to projects by individual users. Most digital storytelling programs promote the notion that users with little or

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no technical background should be able to create digital stories. Indeed, a number of simple applications can get someone started making digital stories, though more complex applications can be used in sophisticated stories. Depending on the elements included in the digital story, a student might need a recording device and microphone, hardware and software to manipulate images and video, or tools to take pictures and video. Some digital storytelling applications are available free online.

A digital story typically begins with a script. The storyteller then assembles rich media to support the ideas and emotions in that script, including music or other audio effects, personal or public-domain images, animations or video, and other electronic elements. The storyteller pieces together and edits the digital story, creating a short movie, usually about two to four minutes long, in one of various file formats.

Why is it significant?

People tell stories to teach beliefs and values to others. The oral tradition of knowledge transfer and exchange has served as the basis for education since humans began teaching one another, and digital stories build on this model by incorporating rich, dynamic media. The process of creating a digital story forces storytellers to choose a topic that can be appropriately conveyed to a particular audience, with electronic elements, in the time available. This dynamic creates an opportunity to reflect on life and find deep connections with the subject matter of a course or with an out-of-class experience, such as a trip abroad. Digital stories let students express themselves not only with their own words but also in their own voices, fostering a sense of individuality and of “owning” their creations. At the same time, digital stories give students an opportunity to experiment with self-representation—telling a story that highlights specific characteristics or events—a key part of establishing their identity, a process that for many is an important aspect of the college years.

Recent data suggest that a majority of U.S. teens use various tools to create digital media, and this proportion is growing. Today's students don't think twice about generating original electronic content and sharing it online, and digital storytelling dovetails well with these modes of student expression. Students creating digital stories develop proficiency with multimedia applications, but the deeper impact comes from their thinking critically about effective combinations among audio and visual elements. Each story challenges a student to cull—from personal collections or from other resources—artifacts that meaningfully support the story and to assemble them in a way that achieves the desired effect. In doing so, students develop a discerning eye for online resources, increasing their technology and media literacy.

What are the downsides?

Many people find that piecing together a coherent narrative is considerably more difficult than they thought, and students not comfortable producing original work are likely to find themselves simply

modeling their efforts on digital stories they have come across. Moreover, the multimedia technologies used in digital stories can be extensive, requiring considerable support and storage space for programs or institutions.

Faculty might find digital stories difficult to assess, particularly because they integrate skills from a range of disciplines, from the creative to the purely technical. Faculty and students both need to be aware of intellectual property issues that arise if digital stories include copyrighted images, music, video, or text.

Where is it going?

Digital storytelling is fundamentally the application of technology to the age-old experience of sharing personal narratives. What's new is the growing availability of sophisticated tools, as well as a maturing infrastructure to disseminate such content. The ongoing refinement of multimedia applications will place greater power into the hands of more people, allowing richer digital stories. The rise in digital storytelling will in some ways parallel the emergence and growth of social networking and video-sharing sites—these sites benefit from compelling content, and digital stories need an outlet.

For digital storytelling to be an important component of higher education, it must provide what other tools lack, including an effective integration of technology with learning, an emotional connection to content, and increased ease of sharing content. The tide will shift toward infusing digital stories with stronger, more thoroughly developed narratives. Techniques not available through other forms, such as interactive and nonlinear means of sharing a story, may become increasingly important.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Despite the proliferation of technology on campus in recent years, students in some majors continue to view technology as tangential to their academic work. By the same token, students in technical fields sometimes have difficulty seeing how technology can be applied to nontechnical disciplines. Digital storytelling can serve as a bridge between these groups, encouraging a historian, for example, to delve into multimedia applications while exposing a computer scientist to the ideas of narrative through family lore. Creating and watching digital stories has the potential to increase the information literacy of a wide range of students. Moreover, digital stories are a natural fit for e-portfolios, allowing students not only to select representative artifacts from their academic careers but also to create compelling resources that demonstrate the student's learning and growth.