

Getting to the Heart of the Story through Digital Storytelling

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As I walked into the house after driving home from Wakonse 2004, a family member told me I needed to get over to my mother's quickly. My mother was dying from lung cancer, but as I left for Wakonse three days prior, I thought she would be fine for the weekend with my sister, and we would have several months ahead of us. We never know what our future holds, however.

I rushed over to her home. As I walked in the door and sat next to her at her bedside, she grabbed my clothes and clung to me. "You won't leave me, will you?" I assured her that I was staying with her again. She told me she had panicked because the electricity had gone out the night before and her oxygen turned off. She believed that I was the only one who really knew how to work the oxygen system for her. I assured her I wouldn't leave anymore.

Four days later, my mother entered the hospice facility. A week later, we lost her.

As I showed many of you during Wakonse my first digital storytelling attempt – a video about the strength I had found in my mother – I was reminded of how important it is for us to preserve those memories. We never know when that is all we will have of a person, a place or an event. It came home to me again of how important it is for us to tell our stories.

Everyone has a story to tell. It may be an exciting story that would make good fodder for the 6 p.m. news, or it may be a story that just friends and family enjoy. Regardless of the audience, a good story has the ability to change both the teller and the listener.

Stories in the Classroom

Teaching students to research and write stories, even if it is about themselves or others they know, can be trying for an instructor. When tasks that sometimes feel burdensome to students are tied into technology, however, often students become excited about the work.

Selling the concept to students is not difficult. All you have to do is show them a digital story and they get it, just as I did with many of you at Wakonse. They are ready to jump into creating their own story. You may have to hold them back from jumping into the digital process so that they can finish the research and writing required.

Let's take a look at a writing class using digital storytelling. The focus of an English 102 class is that of a complete research paper. Many college classes have a research paper assigned for a final project, so the project isn't confined to just English classes. The digital storytelling assignment is a perfect enhancement to the research paper.

For the college-level ENG102 class, I assign an I-Search paper. An I-Search paper is a research paper that centers around one person. The English student has to use a variety of skills to gather the information. The student can select someone living or dead. It may be a family member or friend, a member of the community or an historical person. In the case of a Martin Luther King, Jr., video (shown at Wakonse 2004) which was created by some high school students, the students selected King for the I-Search paper,

then researched his life in written, visual and audio form. They spent more than a month reading about King's history and gathering materials. The students wrote a research paper about King then adapted the paper to a video script. They selected key elements from the paper that would present themselves well with photographs they found.

When students select a living person, they can tape an interview through audio tape recording or video recording and use current photographs to add to the story. In this case, students also add an interview to the research process, bringing home the lesson that not all research is found in printed or online material.

Types of Stories

Regardless of the course or the subject matter the student selects, there are a variety of story styles that can be used:

Character stories reflect the relationships we have with others. We try to present a person through our interaction with the individual, or through the ways that a person has changed us. This type of story is very popular both from the creator and from the viewer perspectives.

Memorial stories honor people who have died. The Martin Luther King, Jr. video is this type. The story helped us understand King's greatness by viewing portions of his life and his place in history. We recall his importance to us collectively and individually.

Event stories center on specific activities in our lives or in the lives of others. They can be adventure stories, accomplishments, special places or events, or they can be a collection of images and sound that portray who we, or others, are.

Live-changing stories might tell a recovery story where we triumph over a difficult period in our lives, or it could be a love story, or even a tale of discovery, either physically through a learning experience or mentally as we plunge into the depths of our own thoughts and emotions. The focus in these stories is an inward look into our own images, a portrayal of our true selves and that of others we know well.

Organizing the Process

Students often work faster on the projects if they work in teams of two or three. Groups much larger than three tend to cause problems with some students who will avoid participation if there are enough people to handle the tasks. Since you have to assign a research paper to each student, you may create teams and have them decide whose I-Search would work best in a digital story. At the college level, students may choose to work alone. You will have to decide if there is enough time to complete a project if they opt to do the work on their own.

Once the stories are written, you will begin working with them to find the pieces that will best weave into a script. Encourage your students to look for a common thread, a theme that runs throughout the story. It may be an image, a color or a sound. It may be an anecdote shared at the beginning then summed up at the end. Once the students decide on the beginning of the script and the end, it's time for them to begin to build the supporting material in the middle, drawing from the material in their I-Search paper.

A good way to have the students map out a script is to ask them to read the descriptive parts of their research papers then find visuals that could represent them. Once they do, those descriptive sections can be removed since they will be presented visually. The narration fills in where visuals are not available or not clear. The simplest

way to add narration is through text added to the bottom of the screen in the video. It will cut out the need for microphones and verbal narrations. If you aren't familiar with how to record digital sound, asking the students to type narrative text is your best option.

Creating the Movie

In the minds of most students, this is where the fun begins. I train them in the use of either iMovie, Premiere or Final Cut Pro, depending upon the computer platform and software budget available. I also teach them how to create digital narration (optional) and import music. If you don't have time to learn one of these programs, Powerpoint can be used to create effective digital stories. Much of the work on the digital story can be done outside of class if the computers are made available to the students.

Instructions for developing a digital story are attached. When your students have completed their projects, remember that a critical element to the project is show and tell. The students have worked hard and they will want to share their works and watch the reactions of others.

Just as I shared the video of my mother with you at Wakonse, so will your students want to share. In the sharing, we teach one another and we build community. We learn more about what is important in each other's lives. If we can accomplish that and still teach a little writing, research and historical or scientific data alongside it, I really think the effort of digital storytelling will be small compared to the life-changing learning that can occur.

Getting ready

- 1. Write a story**, then locate the photos, video and music appropriate for the story.
- 2. Write a script for the voice-over (optional).** Estimate a 5-7 second "read" for each line of type, 9-12 lines of text per minute. Break up the script into single lines. Record one line, save with a file name, then read another line, save with a different name.
- 3. Create a storyboard.** Either use a storyboard document that includes a box for the sketch per main frame (keyframe), narration, music and video (for time frame) lines, OR get some poster board and yellow Post-it notes. Use the Post-it notes to represent a frame that includes your video or still images, then use one color pencil for music, another for voiceovers and another for still/video file names. Sort images and label a Post-it note with the file name and description. Mark a Post-it note for each video clip including the name, description and duration. On the poster board, write out each line of narration, leaving room above each for Post-it note space. Do the same for your music, showing a line to mark the duration of the music (students don't have to use the whole music clip). If students would prefer to sketch on storyboards, I have included an [Adobe Acrobat master file](#). (Nina, [link the storyboards file here please](#))
- 4. Prepare the media:** Scan the art/photos at 150 dpi or ppi resolution. Save the original scans and then downsize them to 72 dpi if the final result is a web or CD movie. If students want to export their movies to VHS or DVD, keep the photos at 150 dpi. The newer versions of iMovie, Final Cut Pro and Premiere will make adjustments on the screen to accommodate vertical photographs. Caution students to keep the 150 dpi

images because they may want to zoom in on a photo in Premiere and they will need the higher dpi for quality. Otherwise, anything above 72 dpi only adds file size without a quality gain.

If students have video, they should locate the clips they want to use (keep each clip at no more than 20 seconds), and digitize it.

5. Put the movie together: Place the photographs into the video editing program, organize them according to your script, type in any text that you will need, then create a title page at the front. Once you have the photos in the order you want them and all slides placed on your timeline, then import music. (If you are using Adobe Premiere, go to the <http://www.adobe.com> website to learn how to use the program. The iMovie and Final Cut Pro training can be found at <http://www.apple.com>. Each of the programs also have wonderful tutorials and help screens included in the programs.) Every person who has ever worked in video editing software learns one very important rule: Always save every time you do something in your video that you want to keep. Video programs are notorious for crashing due to the large amounts and sizes of files imported.

6. Refine the digital story: Now is where the detail work begins. You will start to work with the timing of your photographs. You will have to consider how long it will take to read text that you have placed, take the amount of time and add a little more time to it for slower readers. You also need to consider the movement of the music. Try to match the moods of your photographs to the moods of the music. You may find that you need to re-order your photos. Once you have everything the way you want it, create your credits slide at the end, save for the format you want (web, CD, DVD or VHS) and export your video.

Structure of media

Voice: The power of the human voice should not be under-estimated. Students should trust in their voices to transmit emotions within the story.

Images: Unlike traditional storytelling, not every detail needs to be described. Images can carry much of the story. Students can minimize words by relaying some of the story through the images. If the emotions in a photograph are obvious, they shouldn't be stated.

Music: Instrumentals work best because students can lower the sound digitally when they are speaking yet allow the music to keep playing in the background to add depth. Often, although lyrics tend to move us emotionally, lyrics can fight storytelling because words are clashing against images. If a student chooses to use lyrical music, warn him or her to make certain that the words conform to the story. For example, "Butterfly Kisses" is a song about a father and daughter. It would not be appropriate for a story about dating.

Sequential visual narrative: Visuals change the writing style of the story. It can affect pacing (movement and speed of images, music and narrative) and help get to the heart of the message. It is the blending of visuals with sound to create an efficient digital story.

Pacing: The natural rhythm of a story needs to be found. If the story is modern and upbeat, it may call for a fast pace. A remembrance set back in time may be melodic. Pacing within a digital story should change according to the emotion and purpose. It helps keep the viewer interested. Think of it as a CD. When a record company chooses the song sequence, pacing is a major consideration. If the CD is getting bogged down in slow music, a fast one is thrown in for interest and vice versa. Movies follow the same rule, as does storytelling.

Websites

<http://www.dsaweb.org>: Home of The Digital Storytelling Association, an international group of digital storytellers who promote the art form. They hold workshops, conferences and work with educational programs to teach digital storytelling techniques in classrooms from grade school through college. You can join the association through the website.

<http://www.digiclub.org/>: The Digital Clubhouse Network works with K12 and lifelong learning organizations to promote positive values of education and lifelong healthy practices, including cultural diversity and community.

<http://www.digitalbridge.nu/sidor/db.html>: The digitalbridge is a non-profit agency in Scandinavia that promotes digital storytelling to its region. Its focus is community and personal expression.

<http://www.fray.com/>: The Fray is a website where people come together to tell their stories by posting them online. It is a great place for students to get ideas.

<http://www.storycenter.org/>: The Center for Digital Storytelling is home of workshops. It is closely linked to the Digital Storytelling Association. The center assists people in telling meaningful stories from their lives. At this website, you will also find the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, a thorough instructional guide on making digital stories in movie form.