

OUR EXPERIENCES WITH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

by

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Introduction

Our interest in Digital Storytelling has come about due to the International exchange Program between TAFE NSW Riverina Institute, Charles Sturt University and the Maricopa Community Colleges in Phoenix, Arizona USA. The Inbound exchange last May/June focused on Digital Storytelling. The Digital Storytelling Project Team consisted of Hana Patetl and Peta McGrath from TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute and Linda Hicks and Rachel Woodburn from Scottsdale Community College USA.

- For full details go to <http://detwww.detnsw.edu.au/pdn/news/ns07.htm>

What is Digital Storytelling?

In a nutshell, Digital Storytelling is the “production of a short video story on a computer”. It takes people through the “process of mining stories from their personal archives.” (Lambert, Atchley & Mullen, 199? p1). It is a multi-layered means of communication that powerfully brings together a number of key elements: a written story, a collection of images that supports the telling of that story, a voice track recorded by the writer to personalise the story and a music or sound track that adds to the story’s telling on another level.

The interplay of these four layers results in a powerful communication medium that has been shown to connect individuals quickly and deeply. As an audience we identify with the values, feelings, emotions and experiences portrayed in the story: that which we share as humans. We not only understand and connect with the storyteller but with the ‘self’ - our own feelings and issues.

Importance of Story and Voice

The two most important elements of the digital storytelling process are the story itself, and the teller's voice. The digital technology is secondary and needs to be viewed as a tool that gives the story an innovative expression. This is evidenced in an experimental Digital Storytelling course that is being delivered at Scottsdale Community College in Phoenix, Arizona. In a 16 week course that runs for 6 hours per week over 16 weeks, 8 weeks is devoted to the creative, group process of identifying and writing the story.

Voice, in the context of Digital Storytelling, encompasses two aspects of vocalising the story. Firstly, it is about the writer finding their 'voice' and putting into the public arena something that they have come to know as a valued truth, something they give worth to and wish to share with others. Secondly, voice is about the author giving personal 'voice' to the text of their story. According to Lambert, Atchley & Mullen, 199? p8, "our voice is a great gift ""because it tells everyone so much about who we are, both how strong we are and how fragile". Giving personal voice to our story is what makes our stories powerful. No one can tell our stories, give life to the experiences, feelings and emotions, in the way we can ourselves. Our stories read by others do not connect with our audience in the same powerful way. Much is lost by introducing a second party to the telling.

Using your Voice

The word that has to be the focus in 'Digital Storytelling' is *Storytelling*. Storytelling is about using the power of the voice so that others can connect to, and share the story that the individual is telling.

So whilst a series of images and a music soundtrack can convey a story, it is *not* Storytelling. Storytelling is about using the teller's own voice, and in Digital Storytelling, the teller records a voice sound track. This could be done a number of times and then you can choose the one that you like best.

Recording the voice is an interesting experience, and most people do not like the sound of their voice when it is heard back. However, the teller of the story is the one who has chosen it for a reason.....it may be a personal story , or just one that is liked or needs to be told ...but it is the teller who has the connection and it is their voice that will do the best job of conveying the emotional content of that story, and it the emotional content that connects others to that story. The teller uses their voice to place value on the story by choosing to tell it.

It is also important to note that the voice changes significantly when reading a story. Storytelling is an art where the story can evolve and change over time with each audience, and Digital Storytelling captures one of those Storytelling moments. When recording the voice soundtrack, you may have some key words next to you to act as a prompt, but the telling of the story gives it power, rather than reading a script. It's your story that you are giving voice to, so just tell it like it is!

The Technology

Those without expertise in digital computer technology should not be excluded from producing a digital story. This is a fundamental philosophy imbedded within the teaching of digital storytelling. The technology used to produce the story is kept at its most simple. Students with little or no computing skills can be guided through the process to produce a very powerful digital story. The power is in the story and the voice – not the technology. It is for this reason that it is highly recommended that the simplest software programmes be used.

After the writing of the story, images need to be gathered from personal archives or created, using a still digital camera or digital video camera. Film based images need to be digitised by scanning. Images for scanning go beyond photographs and can include artefacts such as letters, documents, jewellery, and objects of significance to the story. Anything that is not wet or scratchy can be scanned. Photoshop or some kind of image manipulation

software needs to be used to prepare the scanned images for use in the story. The video production software brings together the images, the voice track and the sound track.

As part of the International Exchange program, our first experiences with the video creation process were Macintosh based using the iMovie program. Linda Hicks and Rachel Woodburn, our digital storytelling mentors from Scottsdale Community College, deliberately chose it for its simplicity of use. Linda and Rachel work in a Macintosh based environment. As part of our current Digital Storytelling LearnScope project we will be experimenting with the use of the Moviemaker program that comes as part of the new Windows XP operating system. The reality is that our environment is PC based so Windows based programs need to be explored to facilitate the teaching and learning of Digital Storytelling here.

Finding the Right Story

Experience has shown that one of the hardest parts of the digital storytelling process is finding the right story to tell. Students need a great deal of assistance to find their stories. They need to do a lot of preparatory work: reflecting, committing ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences to paper. They need to speak their ideas in response to innovative strategies. They need to be encouraged to journal, to create word lists, to gather images, objects, colours and sounds. They need to share their writing and get group feedback. They need to build a group dynamic that engenders trust and will allow risks to be taken. And only then might a story emerge.

Students need ideas for the kinds of stories they can write:

- An event in My Life: adventure stories, accomplishment stories
- The Story About Someone Important in My Life:
- The Story About A Place in My Life
- The Story About What I Do
- Recovery Stories
- Love Stories
- Discovery Stories (Lambert, Atchley & Mullen, 199? p22 -24)

Students need speaking and writing triggers to respond to:

- I should smile today because...
- I remember when...
- My strongest sense of home has been....
- Tell me of an instance you felt important.

Ask students to respond verbally to:

- An object that is special to them.
- A series of random objects
- A piece of music or a particular sound.
- A piece of artwork
- A colour
- A smell

The ideas listed above are nothing new. They are an indication only of some of the strategies that could be used with students to help them identify their story. The ideas indicate the commitment to the writing process that is required. This initial identifying and writing of the story takes considerable time and is difficult for many. It is best to experience this creative process as part of a group. The sharing of ideas and the stimulus provided by others is invaluable.

The Storyboard

A storyboard is a plan of the Digital Story that aims to show the co-ordination of the key elements of the voice, the archives and images and the music soundtrack. Storyboards are frequently used in visual media such as advertising, and are often very prescriptive in terms of the vision that should be with particular words and/or music. In Digital Storytelling, it can be looser than that, but is still important in terms of the order of your images. This makes it much easier when you start putting the elements together in the software programme you are using. This may also be a good time for thinking about the transition between each piece of vision e.g. should it fade to black, would it look good to have a dissolve into another piece of vision etc.

When constructing our stories, we just had three columns: one for the key words of the story, another for the vision, and the third for the music that was being used.

Practical Issues – Using a Music Soundtrack

Being new to the digital storytelling process, we can only identify the practical issues that we need to deal with as they arise. The biggest issue thus far has been the choice of music soundtrack and associated copyright problems.

As part of the Maricopa Exchange Program -Digital Storytelling Project, two digital stories were created. Peta McGrath created 'The Magic', a story about how the people involved in the Digital Storytelling Project came together. Peta chose a commercial soundtrack and has received copyright release on the music by way of one phone call and an email. Hana Patetl created 'Viluska', a story about her mother, and also chose a commercial soundtrack to assist in the telling of her story. Hana's experience in trying to gain copyright release has proved problematic. Lengthy negotiations with the company that holds the licensing and publishing copyright on the soundtrack has resulted in a minimum quote for \$500 for the use of the sound track for a five year period.

This copyright issue has arisen because whilst the story was originally produced for a private audience (Hana's family), the request for publishing to a website for this conference puts the story and the music into a public forum and invokes breach of copyright.

As our experience demonstrates, the use of commercial music to accompany digital stories is a big issue. Our advice is to use as much original material as possible, and to encourage students to create their own images, sound and music tracks where possible. Where this is not possible, explore the use of copyright free music and images. There are libraries of copyright free music available for purchase.

The Future of Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling is a strategy that can be used in most circumstances when connection with others is the desired outcome, so its applications are only really bounded by the imagination. TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute successfully applied for Learnscope Funding to further explore Digital Storytelling, and one of the project's key objectives is to look at applications for Digital Storytelling. There seems to be a lot of interest and this has led to the article in the PDN zine (web site listed below), this paper as part of Networking 2002, and in the Riverina approximately eighty people attended workshops and a dinner on the subject.

In addition, the opportunity to write a course in the area is being pursued within TAFE NSW.

Bibliography

Lambert, Joe; Atchley, Dana; & Mullen, Nina: 199?, *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, Centre for Digital Storytelling, UC Berkeley, California.

Hicks, Linda & Woodburn, Rachel: 2002, *Digital Storytelling Resource Book*, Scottsdale Community College, Phoenix, Arizona.

Some Resources

- PDN zine article <http://detwww.detnsw.edu.au/pdn/news/ns07.htm>
- For further information about Digital Storytelling and the process of putting a story together go to www.storycenter.org which is the link to the Digital Storytelling Center in Berkley, California
- Some other interesting Storytelling websites are :
www.home.aone.net.au/stories (Website of the Australian Storytelling Guild(NSW) Inc)
www.storynet.org (Website of the National Storytelling Network USA)
[There are many others when you just search under the term Storytelling]

- Some books that have some good information to get started are :

Helen MacKay and Berice Dudley About Storytelling

Hale & Iremonger , 1996.

Donald Davis Telling Your Own Stories : For Family and Classroom
Storytelling, Public Speaking , and Personal Journaling

August House , 1993

Linda Spence Legacy : A Step by Step Guide to Writing Personal
History

Swallow Press , 1997

If you would like a copy of a Digital Story from the Digital Storytelling Project
please contact Peta or Hana :
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