Using Digital Storytelling to Inform Students About Bullying: Results of a Pilot Program

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ABSTRACT

The study presents the results of a pilot program in which digital storytelling was used in order to inform fourth-grade students about bullying. The constructivist principles concerning the learning process, and in particular, the requirement of students’ active participation, provided the necessary framework. Students created their own digital stories about bullying, while the researcher, although present, avoided to intervene, to guide or to lecture students to a great extent. The intervention was short in duration and easily applied, without altering the school’s timetable. Qualitative analysis of the data indicates that, through their digital stories, students were able to grasp the main aspects of bullying and how they should react, but the role of bystanders was unclear to them. The results of the study might prove useful in the formation of a more comprehensive anti-bullying program.

KEYWORDS

Bully, Bullying, Bystander, Constructivism, Digital Storytelling, Victim

INTRODUCTION

Hühn and Sommer (2012) define storytelling as the act in which a chain of happenings is meaningfully structured and transmitted in a particular medium and from a particular point of view. In other words, storytelling is the art of telling a story to an audience, in order to convey important messages. Storytelling has been widely used throughout human history, mainly because of its ability to create strong feelings and emotions to the listeners. These emotions are – sometimes – so strong that the listeners identify themselves with a character of the story. So, through storytelling, the listener manages and communicates with his feelings (Papagiorgis, 1983). In recent years, because of the advancements in information and communication technologies, traditional storytelling has become digital. Digital stories are a combination of conventional storytelling (oral or written) with multimedia and hypermedia elements. Through this process, the written or the oral text is enhanced (Lathem, 2005). Most digital stories are personal narratives because the autobiographical element is strong (Anderson, 2010) and they are produced using cheap or free software (Lambert, 2002).

Digital storytelling is considered a powerful educational tool for many reasons. Ready-made digital stories cause the keen interest of students thus, they can assimilate information easily (Coventry, 2008). When students create their own digital stories, either alone or in collaboration with others, they become more competent in visualizing their thoughts (Regan, 2008). In addition, their ability to analyze and synthesize information, as well as their literacy, artistic and social skills, are more efficiently developed (Robin, McNeil, & Yuksel, 2011). Students also learn to voice criticism either on their own work or on the work of others, facilitating social learning (Robin 2008). All the above,
allow students to acquire a wide range of additional skills and abilities (e.g., creative thinking, collaborative skills, communicative skills, flexibility, taking initiatives, and leadership) that all fall under the term ‘21st-century skills’ (Czarnecki, 2009).

Extensive research has been conducted on the educational benefits of using digital storytelling. While researchers focus on instructional settings, the improvement of literacy skills and knowledge acquisition, at the same time they acknowledge that the benefits students have, go far beyond the objectives presented above. In addition, far less research has been conducted on examining the potential of this tool in other areas where the settings are not strictly instructional or the main objective is not some form of knowledge acquisition. Such areas might be the resolution of complex school or social problems, aiding or counseling students on sensitive matters, and the acquirement of behavioral patterns. The underlying philosophy of such uses of digital stories is that they are a good method for documenting personal experiences, that they can be a form of narrative therapy and that they can help students to discover parts of their personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011).

The pilot program described in the following sections fits in the above areas. It examines how digital storytelling can be used in raising students’ awareness on bullying, a phenomenon that students, as well as teachers, quite often face at school. Knowledge acquisition was not an important factor; instead, the focus was on helping students to understand how to deal with this phenomenon. The target group was fourth-grade students at a primary school in Rhodes, Greece. What was studied was to what extent students are able to grasp, by themselves, the basics of bullying and how to react either as victims or as bystanders. For that matter, students were not presented with ready-made stories and they were not systematically lectured. Instead, they were asked to work in groups, to reflect on bullying, to negotiate their views and knowledge and to develop their own bullying digital stories.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Intimidating and aggressive behavior, school violence, and bullying are phenomena that are becoming more and more frequent in Greek schools. They greatly affect students’ attitude and behavior, psychological development, and their school performance (Manesis & Lambropoulou, 2014) and may lead to serious psychological trauma and dysfunctional social behavior (Galanaki & Vogiatzoglou, 2015; Artinopoulou, 2009). The victim is weaker and powerless compared to the abuser. The attacks are programmed, repeated at regular intervals and the abuser’s objective is the affirmation of his power over his victim (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). School violence, as a social phenomenon, has a close relationship to social discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural diversity (Nikolaou, Thanos, & Samsari, 2014; Psalti & Konstantinou, 2007). In general, the occurrence of bullying in Greek schools is lower than in other countries, nevertheless, it becomes more and more frequent (Sapoyna, 2008; Houndoumadi & Pateraki 2001). It usually lasts for a short period of time, but for 19% of the incidents, it can last more than a year (Artinopoulou, 2010).

In a bullying situation, individuals assume one of the following roles: bullies, victims, and bystanders (Rigby, 2008). While the bully-victim pair is quite clear, bystanders’ involvement is ambiguous. Bystanders can undertake one of the following roles: (a) actively take the side of the bully and become a source of power to him (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Hess, 2001), (b) passively observe and often perceived as approving the bully’s actions (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008), and (c) intervene and help the victim or ask adults to intervene (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Those who intervene have the skills, the will, the confidence, and the sense of personal responsibility to help, whereas passive bystanders seem to lack all the above (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). On the other hand, the motives of students who take the side of the bully seem to be similar to the ones the bully has (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). In hypothetical situations children easily take the side of the victim and express their intention to help or to report the incident (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington 2002). In real situations, though, only a small percentage acts (Salmivalli et al. 1996).
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