Chapter 3

“Let Me Show You”:
An Application of Digital Storytelling
for Reflective Assessment in Study Abroad Programs

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ABSTRACT

Criticism has been prevalent around the academic rigor of coursework within study abroad programs. Stakeholders of the study abroad experience are taking a closer look at student learning outcomes from these programs. This critique suggests that more attention be given to the development of innovative and meaningful assessment practices being implemented into these programs in order for students to demonstrate their learning outcomes. The purpose of this study was to investigate the affordances of digital storytelling as a response to this critique. The focus of this study was to implement a digital storytelling assignment in four summer study abroad programs led by university faculty. Over the course of four summers (2011 – 2014), digital storytelling was implemented to help students reflect upon what they learned and through this reflective process demonstrate the knowledge they gained. This article discusses the findings of digital storytelling as a reflective assessment practice in study abroad programs.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behaviour. - M. W. Daudelin

We are living in a world of chaotic change that is evolving exponentially where we find ourselves literally drowning in a sea of information. There now exists a global environment where citizens are being challenged to think creatively, become cooperative problem solvers, and effective communicators. People need to know how to interact, engage, and collaborate with others from multiple cultures using
various types of technology. They also need to be able to match left-brain analytical skills with right-brain creative, innovative skills to be competitive and successful in today’s global market (Pink, 2006). Is our educational system preparing our students to become productive well rounded global citizens? And how are our students demonstrating in authentic ways what they are learning in diverse educational environments?

In the United States, we measure educational success based upon assessments where students are asked to recall facts taught to them in classrooms using an industrial-age model of instruction, where students sit in rows, listen to instructors, memorize facts and demonstrate their knowledge based on these high stake testing. As an educational system, we should have advanced past the information-age model, where information is readily available through technology to the conceptual age model of teaching and learning, in which students discover concepts and ideas through exploration, critical thinking and demonstration of knowledge with authentic artifacts that have meaning for students. Today’s students are primarily assessed in ways that draw only on the left-brain analytical proficiencies, rather than also tapping into the right-brain creative abilities. Why is there a need for a more engaging and creative type of assessment? The main answer is accountability. Students are working to achieve something, in this case a grade, course credit, or a degree, so there is a need to make sure they have met certain defined standards before the award can be granted. It is usually easy and more convenient to administer a high-stakes objective assessment to a mass audience on left-brain analytic proficiencies. However, it is more difficult to assess students on right-brain creative abilities, as these are more subjective to evaluate.

Today’s students are what we define as digital natives. Their natural world revolves around a digital environment. Digital storytelling used as a modality for reflective asessment could be a more authentic form of reflection over the more traditional practice of essay writing. Narratives expressed through the technological modality of digital storytelling can be a mechanism used to effectively assess not only right-brain creative abilities, but also the left-brain analytical proficiencies. Further, a focus on narratives exposes learning processes often ignored when designing research on a narrow range of cognitive skills (McEwan, 1995). For this article, digital storytelling is defined as a modern method for expanding upon traditional storytelling techniques including narratives through a variety of digital modalities including digital photography and videography. The audience can be engaged in a passive way through just watching a video or in an interactive way through commentary, discussions, or social media after watching the video (Ohler, 2013). Therefore, the research study discussed in this article investigated, the potential use of digital storytelling as an effective assessment method for students to demonstrate both personal and academic learning outcomes. The theoretical framework used for this research was constructivism, how students learn or the way knowledge is assembled in ones’ own mind. Through reflection students construct the meaning of their learning and demonstrate their outcomes with digital storytelling technological modality and techniques.

The study applied a qualitative approach for researching and collecting data from students participating in summer study abroad programs in Italy, Mexico and Rwanda held over four summers June 2010 to Aug 2014. The students were between the ages of 18 and 25 who were currently attending an institute of higher learning and were taking a faculty-led summer study abroad course for academic credit. The instruments used for this study were surveys, field observations, interviews, and the student’s final digital stories. The research questions explored the influence of digital storytelling on the learning experience and the impact of demonstrating learning outcomes through digital storytelling. The findings from this study confirmed that reflection on learning and the creation of a digital story to demonstrate what was learned was is an effective method for engaging students and assessing their learning progress. Based