Chapter 14

Digital Story-Making in Support of Student Meaning-Making

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ABSTRACT

Learning design is critical to success when using visual media to enhance learning. This process involves beginning with the end goals in mind and working backwards to craft a thoughtful learning sequence. Through a pair of case studies, this chapter demonstrates the role student-generated digital stories can play in helping students make meaning of firsthand learning experiences. Digital story-making engages students in a multi-modal, multi-sensory experience that deepens engagement and improves the memorability of learning. Educators are under increasing pressure to provide evidence of the impact that coursework has on student learning, and student-generated digital stories provide valuable artifacts of learning.

INTRODUCTION

Stories are the large and small instruments of meaning, of explanation, that we store in our memories. – Roger Schank

Technology speaks with a loud voice. Whether the topic is digital storytelling, ePortfolios, or online learning, one of the first questions asked is “What software do you use?” We’ve got it all wrong, and student learning suffers as a result. The first questions should be “What do the students need to learn?” “What strengths do they bring to the class?” and “What have been their greatest challenges in learning?” This is a critical distinction, because in a book dedicated to enhancing instruction with visual media, it might be tempting to focus on visual media at the expense of considering what we mean by “enhancing instruction.”

Educators often begin with an idea for an activity, select the tool, use it, and assess the results as a last step. Wouldn’t it make more sense to begin with the end in mind and focus first on our hopes and dreams for student learning? With an eye

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toward the destination, necessary steps fall into place— including the selection and use of technology— and the journey is much more meaningful for all participants (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This approach to learning design makes outcomes easier to assess and share with decision-makers who want to see evidence of learning (Brown and Diaz, 2011).

Through a pair of case studies, this chapter focuses on the role of student-generated digital stories in helping students make meaning of firsthand learning experiences. The story-making process helps students increase their capacity to reflect, assess, and shape their own learning. Digital story-making engages students in a multimodal, multi-sensory experience that deepens engagement and improves the memorability of learning. Because digital story-making combines physical and mental intensity, attention to detail and reflection, it is in itself a meaning-making endeavor.

WHAT IS DIGITAL STORYTELLING?

Bryan Alexander observes “we’ve been telling stories with digital tools since the first computer networks linked nodes” (Alexander, 2011). Even in the early days of ARPANET in the 1960s, informal narratives were transmitted as asides to formal communication. The origin of the term is unclear, but it is usually attributed to Joe Lambert, Executive Director of the Center for Digital Storytelling, whose stories combine words, images, and audio in short, three- to five-minute-long narrative videos.

Any story that can be told verbally or in writing can also be told digitally, and the technical tools required to do so have become increasingly ubiquitous and easy to use. In the web site 50+ Ways to Tell a Story, Alan Levine writes:

It was not long ago that producing multimedia digital content required expensive equipment and deep levels of technical expertise. We are at the point now where anyone can create and publish very compelling content with nothing more complex than a web browser (Levine, 2012).

In 2010 Jim Groom, Director of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington, founded ds106, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Digital Storytelling. The site has since grown to include a repository of assignments contributed by faculty from a range of institutions of higher education (DS106, n.d.).

A review of current resources on Digital Storytelling confirms that the major emphasis is usually placed on the way that a story is produced from a technical perspective, rather than on the pedagogical process of infusing student-generated digital storytelling into the learning experience. One notable exception is Georgetown University’s Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, whose Digital Storytelling Multimedia Archive poses three research questions:

1. Multimedia Distinctive: What about student learning in digital storytelling is distinctive to the media?
2. Social Pedagogy: How does the explicitly social aspect of this process change student learning?
3. Affective Learning: How does the emotional aspect of this process work to improve learning? (CNDS, n.d.)

According to Joe Lambert, humans are “overwhelmed by stories that we can’t process. Our minds construct a sense of memory immediately after being part of an experience, and unless we … recite the story of the experience, it slowly diminishes in our memory” (Lambert, 2010, p.1). Ellen Goodman, a Simmons College professor who participated in Lambert’s Digital Storytelling workshop, made the following observations about her story-making experience:
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