

Developing Digital Storytelling Projects with Students

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Digital Storytelling

Digital stories are short, 3-10 minute videos that incorporate imagery, sound, music, and spoken word to tell a short narrative. Digital storytelling is popular for telling personal stories they are often compelling and emotionally engaging. Digital stories can also run a spectrum of topics; popular ways to include digital storytelling in the curriculum include assigning students to create instructional videos, reflective pieces, interviews with experts, or narratives collected from a population group of interest.

Examples:

Professor Krause's Anthropology student digital stories

<http://blogs.umass.edu/anthro397mm-ekrause-2/digital-stories-2/>

Center for Digital Storytelling

<http://www.storycenter.org>

Digital Storytelling at University of Maryland Baltimore County

<http://www.umbc.edu/oit/newmedia/studio/digitalstories/index.html>

The Process

The process for creating a digital story can take many forms but a successful project will include the following stages:

- Formulating a solid idea for a story
- Creating a script and storyboard
- Collecting images
- Recording narration
- Editing together narration and image

Where to Start

Before asking students to create digital stories it is important to research what materials are out there already. Consider showing several stories to your class and discussing the relative strengths and weaknesses. Creating your own digital story may be an important step in understanding the process as well as allowing you to have an example to share with your students.

Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling

The Center for Digital Storytelling has assembled the “Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling” which emphasize the strengths of digital storytelling but also serve as an important starting point for consideration for individuals looking to create digital stories.

Point of View

What is the perspective of the author and how does that add to or enhance the message presented in a digital story.

Dramatic Question

Many stories pose a key questions that holds the viewers attention and will be answered by the conclusion of the story.

Emotional Content

The format of digital stories makes them a popular medium for personal stories with strong emotional content.

The Gift of Your Voice

Spoken word narration provided by the author of the story adds a level of personalization and performance above and beyond that usually seen in written form.

Soundtrack

Music or sound effects can support and embellish the story told through voice and images.

Economy

The combination of text and images can be a powerful but economical way to tell a story without overloading the viewer with content.

Pacing

A good story has an appropriate rhythm in terms of how quickly or slowly it progresses, set both by the narration and visuals.

Best Practices for Digital Storytelling with Students

Set Expectations

Sharing examples of digital stories (ideally including one of your own creation) can be critical for setting student expectations for what these types of projects entail and what the final form will be.

Focus on the Writing

The heart of digital stories is not in the technology tools used to assemble them but in the writing. Without a well-crafted script the final product will inevitably fall flat. Students should invest a substantial amount of their total time spent on any digital story drafting and revising a script (usually 200-300 words) that will be the foundation of their digital story. Ideally, the script is shared with the instructor or other students as part of a graded assignment. Students should practice reading their scripts aloud to get a feel for the tone and pacing, and edit their writing as needed based on this experience. The stronger the script and overall concept for the project, the easier it will be to assemble the actual digital story.

Stay Organized

Creating digital stories involves incorporating many different pieces of media and staying organized is critical. Once the script has been finalized, students can begin assembling the different components that will piece the story together. The narration can be recorded with an inexpensive USB microphone or a digital voice recorder. Images can be scanned from photographs or located from sources on the Web. Some students may wish to include sound effects, music, and possibly even video. Keeping all these files organized is critical, and student will likely need some sort of storage device (such as an external hard drive or thumb drive) to store their files if they will be using computers on campus to build their stories.

Know your resources

No matter which type of project a student is creating, she or he will need to consider their resources (e.g., software, equipment, and even a place to record.) For most first time digital stores we recommend using iMovie or MovieMaker. These free and user-friendly pieces of software are available in OIT's Computer Classrooms. For recording narration or voice overs, students will want to use USB microphones. Access to microphones and a quiet place to record are important things to consider.

Making things takes time

Whenever students are learning a new piece of software (or even new features in software they're familiar with), it can take more time than they expect. Remind students to plan ahead and give themselves plenty of extra time to avoid unnecessary stress and aggravation as they get close to the final deadline.

Technology Tools for Creating Digital Stories

Once the script has been finalized, you can begin assembling the different components of your digital story. The narration can be recorded with an inexpensive USB microphone or a digital voice recorder. Images can be scanned from photographs or located from sources on the Web. You may wish to include sound effects, music, and possibly even video. Keeping all these files organized is critical, and you will need some sort of storage device (such as an external hard drive or flash drive) to store your files if you will be using computers on campus to build your stories.

Tools like Microsoft's MovieMaker and Apple's iMovie allow one to assemble pictures with sound and narration to construct digital stories. These free pieces of software are available in OIT's Computer Classrooms. Though these tools are relatively user-friendly, it will take some exploration and practice to get up to speed with them. In order to make the most of the process it is important that you finalize your script, and ideally the majority of your media collected, before you get started with these tools.

Access to Software

OIT has documentation on a range of software tools that can be incorporated into digital storytelling including, as well as access to software via the Learning Commons and Computer Classrooms:

Video Editing Software

- Final Cut Express (Mac)
- iMovie (Mac)
- Microsoft MovieMaker (Windows)

Audio Recording/Editing Software

- Audacity (Windows)
- GarageBand (Mac)

Image Manipulation and Editing

- Adobe Photoshop (Mac and Windows)
- Apple Preview (Mac)
- Microsoft Office Picture Manager (Windows)

Access to Equipment

Through the reserves desk in the Learning Commons students can check out a variety of equipment that may be useful for creating digital stories including: digital audio recorders, USB microphones, and video cameras.

<http://www.library.umass.edu/services/reserves>

Evaluating Digital Stories

The University of Houston has suggested these ten elements (based on the Center for Digital Storytelling's seven) that may serve as a useful set of guidelines for criteria by which digital storytelling projects created by students might be evaluated:

1. The Overall Purpose of the Story
2. The Narrator's Point of View
3. A Dramatic Question or Questions
4. The Choice of Content
5. Clarity of Voice
6. Pacing of the Narrative
7. Use of a Meaningful Audio Soundtrack
8. Quality of the Images
9. Economy of the Story Detail
10. Good grammar and Language Usage

Sample rubrics:

<http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/rubrics.html>