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Digital storytelling: Reinventing literature circles

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Digital Storytelling: Reinventing Literature Circles

Literature circles have been widely used since the 1990s, combining reading and writing strategies in a malleable activity originally geared toward fictional texts (Daniels, 1994). Since then, literature circles have been successfully modified for use with nonfiction texts as well, due, at least in part, to the increasing emphasis on expository passages in many state standardized tests at the middle and secondary levels (Straits & Nichols, 2006).

In addition, research has proven that middle school students benefit from interacting with technology in the areas of motivation and engagement (Grisham & Wolsley, 2006). Given the prevalence of technology in the middle school classroom, updating the literature circle format to include a multimodal, technological component seems long overdue.

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Rationale

The underlying importance of incorporating literature circles into a middle school language arts curriculum is that it engages students concurrently in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking (Day & Ainley, 2008). These practices support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that students who participate in meaning-centered and socially centered activities are more successful at learning. An essential component of this theory is the idea of creating a "community of learners" through social interaction and the manipulation of concrete and abstract tools. In addition, the collaborative nature of literature circles—or in this iteration, Digital Storytelling Circles (DSCs)—supports Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional theory and allows for both discussions about the text and active engagement with the text to create meaning.

Only recently have digital stories made their way into instructional settings. With that milestone came several variations to the original model—personal narratives using graphics, songs, video, and animation (Davis, 2002; Bull & Kajder, 2004). Many English Language Arts (ELA) classes already use various permutations of digital storytelling as a classroom or home-learning activity. Creative writing lessons, too, can culminate with original narrative digital stories that showcase student understanding of literacy devices (Ware, 2006). As an alternative, at the conclusion of a literature lesson, students can create video adaptions of the works they have read in class, showcasing their comprehension and interpretation of the text (Young & Kajder, 2009).

However, just as literature circles transitioned from fiction to nonfiction texts, so have digital stories, adding to both the excitement and the versatility of the activity. Classroom uses for digital storytelling now include book trailers, digital essays, and documentaries (Kajder, 2008). With book trailers, students produce short vid-

eos or podcasts designed to creatively entice their peers to read favorite books. Content area teachers can also use digital storytelling to have students create digital documentaries, persuasive essays, or hypothetical news reports based on the information texts read in class. No matter what genre of digital story the teacher chooses, the versatility of the activity couples well with the existing framework of literature circles, providing a multimodal upgrade to this well-established classroom activity.

Digital Storytelling Circles

Digital Storytelling Circles (DSCs) can be easily adapted into the post-reading phase of a directed reading lesson. DSCs are small, student-led collaborative groups composed of 3–5 students reading the same text and then creating a digital representation of the text. During the activity, group members exchange ideas and establish a purpose for the story, using specialized language to discuss digital moviemaking, software, and technology. Once all the students in the DSC have read the text, group members are assigned specific roles and assume specific responsibilities during the production of the video (director, writer, producer, and editor; see Table 1). The division of labor provides coordination of the activity and gives each participant a directed purpose for their interaction with the text they are reading as a whole class. This collaboration allows for thoughtful and personal discussions of the primary text within the context of an assigned role.

Likewise, taking on specific roles aids students in generating their own ideas about what they have read and engages students in discourse with their peers. Through the process of selecting words and producing multimodal representations as a group, students gradually assume responsibility for their own comprehension, interpretation, and understanding of the text, guided by the roles assigned to them. Thus, a DSC provides a social context in which students utilize multimodal tools to construct personal interpretations of text and to externalize their interpretations through collaborative activity. The structure of a digi-

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Table 1. Roles and responsibilities of digital storytelling circle members

Director	This person is the group leader and is ultimately responsible for the success (or failure) of the digital story. He or she is also responsible for making sure that the final product has direct links to the primary text. **Responsibilities:** making final decisions, supervising all editing and writing, coordinating all production photos and videos.
Producer	This person should be very organized. The producer keeps track of the equipment used (cameras, computers) and makes sure that the digital story is completed on time and that the storyboard represents meaningful information extracted from the primary text. **Responsibilities:** keeping everyone on task, making sure all group members are involved in the moviemaking process, keeping track of the paperwork—the outline, storyboard, and scripts.
Writer	This person should enjoy writing. The writer generates all written words in the digital story—from subtitles to spoken dialogue. He or she also has the task of interpreting the primary text through written words. **Responsibilities:** creating the script, creating the end credits, making sure the script matches the storyboard.
Editor	This person should be good with computers. The editor is responsible for using the movie-making software to assemble the digital story from start to finish. This person also has the task of interpreting the primary text through visuals, sounds, and transitions. **Responsibilities:** editing the movie, making sure the images match the storyboard.

tal storytelling activity directs student attention to metacognitive processes, such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on the accomplishment of multimodal tasks. DSCs also provide social support that helps students acquire additional reading knowledge and skills.

Teachers don't often equate inquiry with the language arts, but rather with the sciences (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Yet at its core, a DSC is an inquiry-based group activity, and the first step in the inquiry process is to ask questions, either about the narrative or about the subject matter of the central text. Personal knowledge, knowledge systems (history, science, politics, etc.), and sign/symbol systems (art, music, etc.) are typically the sources for student inquiry (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995). However, in a DSC, the principle source of inquiry is the text that the students are reading. Whether a fictional or nonfictional text, the DSC framework is adaptable, leaving the DSC itself to determine the nature of their digital story through discourse, planning, and the manipulation of tools. The beauty of digital storytelling is that the nature of the activity fos-

ters a culture of inquiry within the classroom and within each DSC, which is found to have practical implications for engaging students in talk and significantly improving the quality of classroom conversation (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

After the class has read the text and been divided into groups of 3–5, roles are assigned and each group is given a storyboard to complete (see Table 2). With their storyboard in mind, groups engage in discussion about the text and use their knowledge of the text to plan their digital stories, often making links between the text and their personal experiences, outside media (such as relevant songs), and images. (See Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 for examples of student-created storyboards). The storyboard also serves as a guiding framework to keep groups on track, helping them to set manageable goals for the scope of their project.
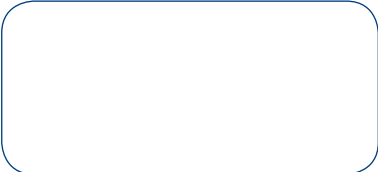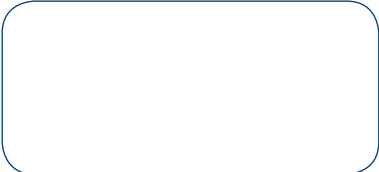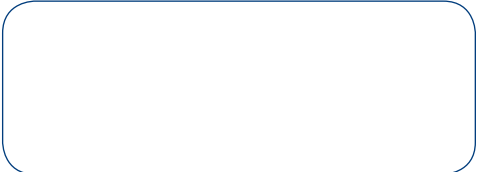
It is also important that group members have access to the necessary technological tools: a computer and Internet access. Should they choose to take pictures or video, the group will need appropriate cameras. Groups with limited techno-

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Table 2. Digital storytelling circle storyboard

A storyboard is a useful planning document for all types of film makers. It is made up of frame-by-frame sketches that show what shots will be needed in order to complete the scenes. These sketches describe the pictures, words, and music you will be using in order to create your digital story. Your sketches do not have to be perfect—stick figures will do! You will be using these to stay organized and to get ideas about what you want your digital story to look like before you go searching for pictures or music or before you begin shooting any video.

Use this storyboard as a guide and try to visualize what the individual scenes and final digital story will look like.

Lights! Camera! ACTION!! Bring your best ideas to life.

	Scene Sketch	Description	Music/Voice-over Script
1.			
2.			

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logical access may choose to create a slideshow of still images found by searching the Internet for pictures, graphics, and sound files. DSCs may use Microsoft PowerPoint, iMovie, Windows MovieMaker, or any other software available to them. Given the increasing prevalence of these technologies, the scope of the digital story can rest with the proficiency and access of the group members. The intra-group exchange of technology offers the added benefit of enhancing the sociocultural and transactional principles of this activity. However, the unifying thread among all
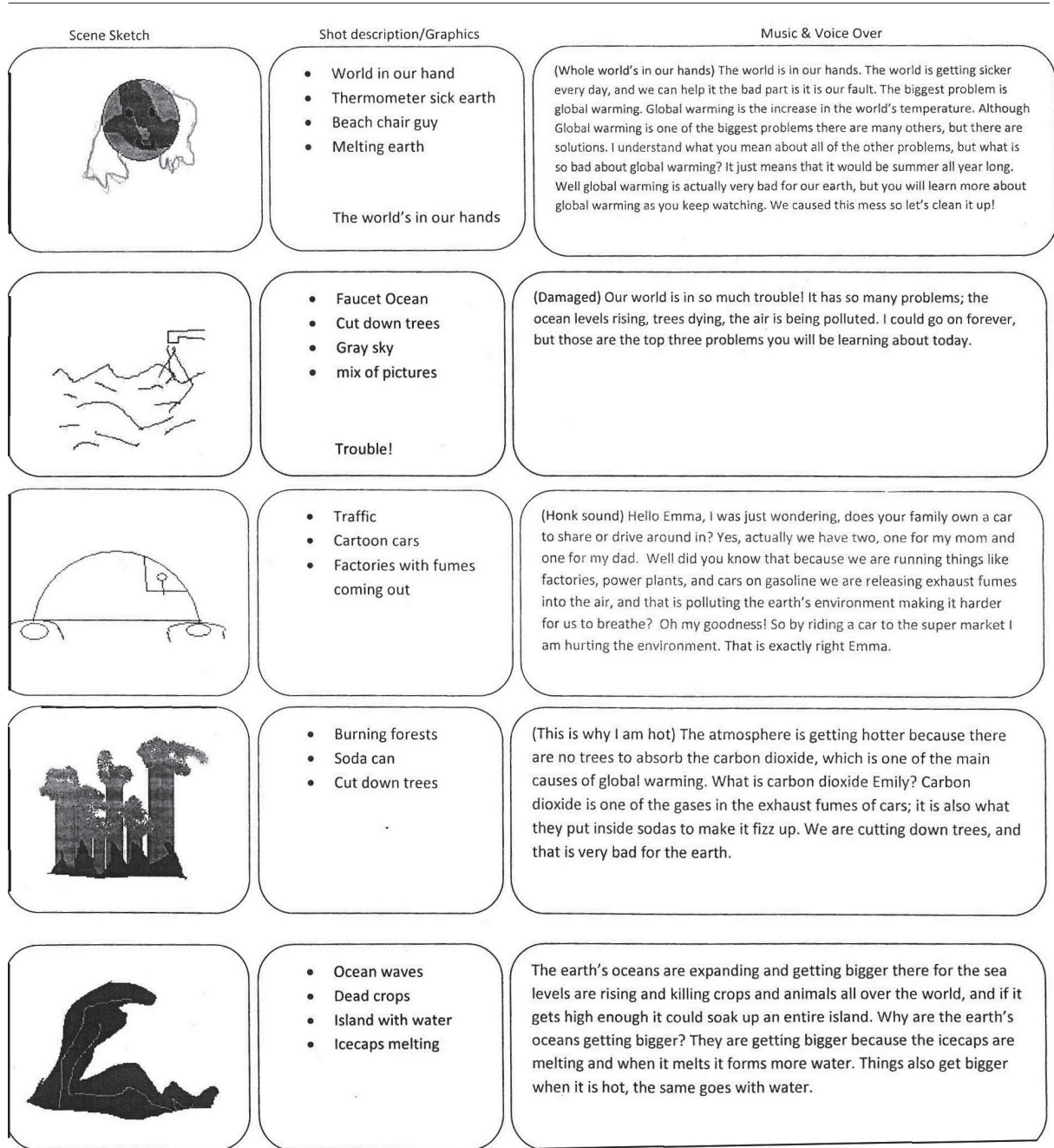
Scene Sketch	Shot description/Graphics	Music & Voice Over
	• World in our hand • Thermometer sick earth • Beach chair guy • Melting earth The world's in our hands	(Whole world's in our hands) The world is in our hands. The world is getting sicker every day, and we can help it the bad part is it is our fault. The biggest problem is global warming. Global warming is the increase in the world's temperature. Although Global warming is one of the biggest problems there are many others, but there are solutions. I understand what you mean about all of the other problems, but what is so bad about global warming? It just means that it would be summer all year long. Well global warming is actually very bad for our earth, but you will learn more about global warming as you keep watching. We caused this mess so let's clean it up!
	• Faucet Ocean • Cut down trees • Gray sky • mix of pictures Trouble!	(Damaged) Our world is in so much trouble! It has so many problems; the ocean levels rising, trees dying, the air is being polluted. I could go on forever, but those are the top three problems you will be learning about today.
	• Traffic • Cartoon cars • Factories with fumes coming out	(Honk sound) Hello Emma, I was just wondering, does your family own a car to share or drive around in? Yes, actually we have two, one for my mom and one for my dad. Well did you know that because we are running things like factories, power plants, and cars on gasoline we are releasing exhaust fumes into the air, and that is polluting the earth's environment making it harder for us to breathe? Oh my goodness! So by riding a car to the super market I am hurting the environment. That is exactly right Emma.
	• Burning forests • Soda can • Cut down trees	(This is why I am hot) The atmosphere is getting hotter because there are no trees to absorb the carbon dioxide, which is one of the main causes of global warming. What is carbon dioxide Emily? Carbon dioxide is one of the gases in the exhaust fumes of cars; it is also what they put inside sodas to make it fizz up. We are cutting down trees, and that is very bad for the earth.
	• Ocean waves • Dead crops • Island with water • Icecaps melting	The earth's oceans are expanding and getting bigger there for the sea levels are rising and killing crops and animals all over the world, and if it gets high enough it could soak up an entire island. Why are the earth's oceans getting bigger? They are getting bigger because the icecaps are melting and when it melts it forms more water. Things also get bigger when it is hot, the same goes with water.

Figure 1.1. Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 depict three different student-created storyboards for a project on pollution.

Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.3.

DSCs is the planning of the storyboard, which provides the text-to-project link and the planning framework, thus allowing student creativity to take off from there.
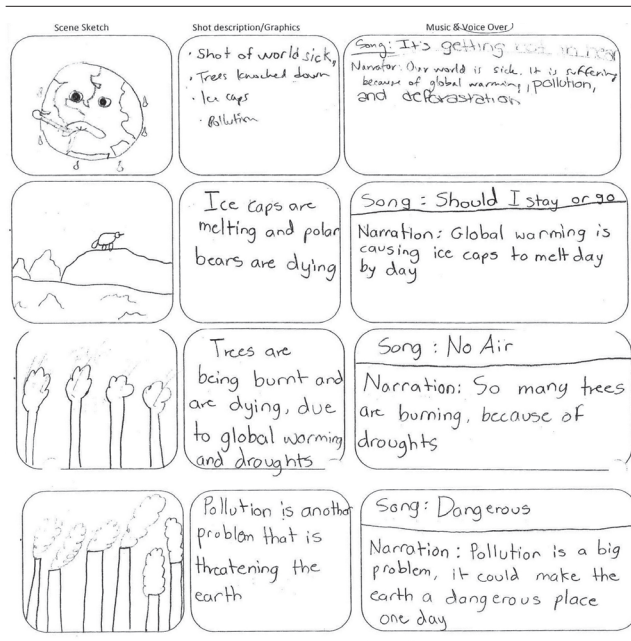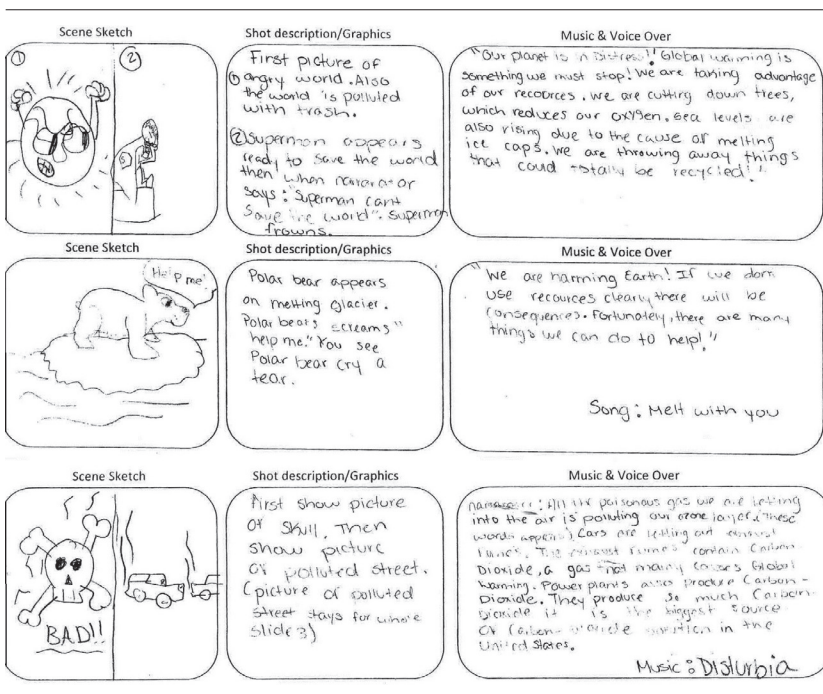
Managing DSCs

Grouping Strategies and Roles

The purpose of any activity drives the nature of the activity group, and the social interactions that take place during a DSC are critical to its success. Deep comprehension relies on students' ability to verbalize known content, listen to differing viewpoints, and synthesize the new information (Burns, 1998). The versatility of digital storytelling is such that DSCs may be grouped heterogeneously or homogenously, depending on the nature of the lesson. Teachers wishing to approach this activity in a more controlled, teacher-scaffolded group may consider homogenous grouping, which would allow for the texts to be group-specific and level-appropriate, as in a guided reading group setting. While homogenous grouping allows teachers more control over the text selection, it limits the proclivity for a zone of proximal development to occur. Heterogeneous grouping is more appropriate for teachers who choose to assign a single text to the whole class and allow the groups to complete their own digital stories based on that common class text. This grouping practice fosters discourse among students of different ability levels and background knowledge, which is a desired outcome of cooperative activity (Tatum, 2009).

Just like literature circles, DSCs allow for student choice, self-management, and variety grouping, which promotes a more cooperative and responsible classroom climate (Burns, 1998).

Allowing students to make decisions and choices based on their roles provides "a sense of empowerment, and empowerment leads to engagement" (Seely-Flint, 1999, p. 17). Research has also shown that students feel an increased sense of ownership about their own learning, coupled with a responsibility to their groups, when a specific role is assigned to them (Wilfong, 2009).

Role of the Teacher

The most important role of the teacher in DSCs is to monitor discourse. At the outset, just as in the traditional literature circle model, teachers facilitating DSCs should work collaboratively with the students and then reduce the level of scaffolding as students demonstrate independent learning and assume responsibility for their own learning within the roles assigned to them (Brown, 2002). With technology as the added component in DSCs, teachers are also responsible for monitoring and scaffolding the students'

technological proficiencies (Mills, 2010).

Students engaged in a multimodal activity of this nature may be prone to distraction, especially given that basic digital stories are primarily image montages set to music, requiring students to search the Internet for appropriate stock photos and graphics. Novice digital storytellers can often get lost in the Internet "thicket." A recommendation to the teacher is that, during the students' first attempt at this activity, the class be permitted access to only a limited repository of teacher-selected images (e.g., a shared drive folder or CD containing subject-specific pictures). This will limit Internet wandering and focus the students' attention on the craft of digital storytelling. Once students have mastered the making of a digital story, they can move on to more advanced techniques, such as recording their own videos, voice-overs, or even original music.

It should be noted that some current classroom teachers may not be comfortable with the

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CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Digital Storytelling

This article provides several ideas for integrating digital storytelling into the classroom. Here are additional suggestions from ReadWriteThink.org:

- **Digitally Telling the Story of Greek Figures**
Learn about Greek gods, heroes, and creatures through digital storytelling produced by students who have learned research techniques.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/digitally-telling-story-greek-30805.html

- **Teaching with Zooming Slideshows through Prezi**
Through Prezi, a web application, students create "zooming" presentations for various purposes, such as presenting research, defending an opinion, or sharing a digital story.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/teaching-with-zooming-slideshows-30886.html

- **Blending the Past with Today's Technology: Using Prezi to Prepare for Historical Fiction**
To prepare for literature circles featuring historical novels, students research the decades of the 1930s to the 1990s and share their information using Prezi, a Web application for creating multimedia presentations.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blending-past-with-today-30887.html

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

technology, despite the fact that today's K–12 students are "digital natives" (Prensky, 2005).

> **Digital Storytelling Circles are rich, versatile group activities in which students can engage with both narrative and expository texts.**

It is not uncommon for students to be more tech-savvy than their facilitators. This should not be a cause for concern. The role of the teacher is to provide access for the students and then to monitor the appropriateness of the results—images, sound files, dialogue, and story and subject matter.

Assessment

The conclusion of the activity is a "film festival" in which students present the digital stories to their classmates and parents. This is the culminating social exchange of the activity, as language learned during the students' movie-making experience can be imparted to outsiders. The end result is the epitome of Vygotsky's theory that learning is best experienced when shared with others.

Nevertheless, teachers also need criteria with which to grade a digital story. Table 3 provides an example of a digital storytelling rubric, modified from work by the Kamehameha Schools (*n.d.*). As with literature circles, students should engage in a self-assessment of their performance after completion of their digital story. This information can be useful to classroom teachers as it helps inform future instruction and grouping assignments (Seely-Flint, 1999). Table 4 provides a self-assessment for DSCs, modified from Lapp, Flood, Ranck-Buhr, Van Dyke, & Spacek, 1997. However, it is important to note that self-assessments should align with the instructional goals of the particular DSC. A teacher may elect to add open-ended responses that encourage deeper reflection.

Merits

In an age of increasing multimodal learning settings, DSCs provide a much-needed update to traditional literature circles, as well as a sound grouping strategy for middle and secondary learners. Grounded in the principles of sociocul-

Table 3. Digital story rubric

Creativity	The digital story is completely original in composition and delivery, and conveys new ideas.	The digital story contains some original elements; however, there are some clichés and previously used ideas.	The digital story is unoriginal and did not convey any new ideas or concepts.
Planning/ Storyboarding	The storyboard is detailed and shows consistent evidence of planning throughout.	There is some evidence of planning; however, the storyboard is incomplete.	There is no evidence of planning. Storyboard sketches are minimal and inconsistent.
Photography/ Videography	The images/video are relevant and add to the overall impact of the presentation.	Some images/video added to the presentation; however, a few are distracting/unrelated.	The images/video do not show relevance to the digital story.
Editing	Transitions, effects, and edits are appropriate, well-timed, and do not distract from the digital story.	Some transitions and effects are distracting or ill-timed and do not add to the flow of the digital story.	There are little to no edits and those that are there are poorly timed and distract from the digital story.
Writing	The script adds to the overall quality of the digital story by successfully conveying a message.	Parts of the script add to the digital story; however, other parts stray from the topic.	The script is poorly conceived and does not aid in conveying the message of the digital story.
Content/ Connection to Text	The content is relevant and the message is clear. The content has a strong connection to the primary text.	The content is mostly relevant and connected to the primary text; however, there are some confusing points.	The content is not relevant and there is no connection to the primary text.

Table 4. Digital storytelling circle self-assessment

Name: _____

Role: _____

Digital Story Title: _____

	Always	Usually	I need to improve in this area
I participated in my group to the best of my ability.			
I fulfilled the job description assigned to me.			
I went above and beyond the job description assigned to me.			
I listened respectfully to the other members of my group.			
I contributed to group discussion.			
I brought my expertise to the group and shared my knowledge with them.			

How do I think the group functioned as a whole?

_____

_____

_____

How can I be an even better group member?

_____

_____

tural and transactional theory, yet modified to use current, differentiated classroom tools, Digital Storytelling Circles are rich, versatile group activities in which students can engage with both narrative and expository texts. In the course of this activity, they also develop not only a deeper understanding of a specific text, but also technological savvy, activity-centered discourse, responsibility, and critical thinking skills.

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