Monica Jane Dierken, Georgina Molly Kepferle, and Madeline Wenberg

Book Review

Brett Pierce's *Expanding Literacies: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom*.

Monica Dierken and **Georgina Kepferle** are pre-service teachers and graduate students at the University of Montana. **Madeline Wenberg** is a third and fourth grade teacher and Learning Support Specialist in Montana. Madeline is also a graduate student at the University of Montana.

The authors of this article, Monica Dierken, Georgina Kepferle, and Madeline Wenberg are all current graduate students at the University of Montana. Monica and Georgina are pre-service teachers within the K-8 licensure program. Madeline is a third and fourth grade teacher and Learning Support Specialist at a small school in Missoula. She sits on several boards within her school community, allowing her to view literacy through an array of different lenses. All three authors are also currently pursuing a literacy endorsement.

We have all personally gravitated towards the area of literacy with a similar goal of completing a literacy endorsement because we share a love of literature and believe that literacy has the power to transform lives. Reading can also act as an outlet in which we reflect and explore ourselves, our world and our imagination.

As you can imagine, we students are brimming at the seams with curiosity, enthusiasm and eagerness. When an appealing and exciting professional publishing opportunity arose in the form of a book review, we had to say yes. The book we were invited to review is Brett Pierce's (2022) *Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom.*

Brett Pierce is currently teaching an annual course at Colby College about Digital Storytelling and Media for Social Change. He has taught at the high school level. Pierce has a BA from Kenyon College and Masters Degrees from Middlebury College (English) and Columbia University (Education). His extensive career has spanned multiple decades in the domestic and international fields of education.

In Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom, Pierce (2022) equips teachers to use digital storytelling as a tool with their future or current students. Pierce defines digital storytelling as this: "If we think of this in terms of primary and secondary colors, then text, sound, music, and imagery are your primary colors. Pacing, visual palette, graphics, voice, tone, and genre (comedy, game show, news, mystery, etc.) might be your secondary colors. It's a relatively vast range of tools with which to work in order to effectively communicate. And in that range lies both its complexity and wonder, its challenge and opportunity" (Pierce, 2022, p.6).

The 21st century integration of technological tools in classrooms has the inclusive power to bring anyone's narrative to life. The projects, lessons and activities encompass collaborative and individual creative writing with visual and/or audio arts that facilitate student autonomy and creativity to its fullest potential.

In this book review of Brett Pierce's 2022 *Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom* pedagogical book, we aim to summarize chapters one through five, in which the author lays out the personal experiences that

M. J. Dierken, G. M. Kepferle, & M. Wenberg

he used to develop his own digital literacy curriculum, how digital literacy plays a role in students' lives and what we can do to incorporate his ideas in our classrooms. We then discuss our key takeaways and pose remaining questions. We conclude with an interview we conducted with Brett Pierce in which he gave further insight into his work with this curriculum.

Chapter One Overview

In the first chapter, **The Rationale for Making Digital Storytelling a Normative Classroom Practice,** Pierce discusses at length his first-hand professional and personal experiences that led him to write this book. These experiences include teaching high school English and producing and co-creating international projects for teenagers worldwide through the international department at Sesame Workshop. "He also established Meridian stories, an NGO to help students prepare for a 21st century workplace."

Next, Pierce recaps the evolution of literacy and how the digital age is now "increasingly seeping into our lives" (Pierce, 2022). The question is, can educators be ready to teach a form of digital literacy without technological background knowledge? Pierce responds by proposing that educators bring the content, and the students bring their generational technology skills. He encourages teachers to be open to new understandings of knowledge, narrative, and insightful perspectives.

Standing out from this chapter are the long-term, equitable opportunities that accessible storytelling can provide. Assessment data detailing students' current levels in reading and writing invite new and different approaches to literacy instruction, including incorporating digital tools and practices. Furthermore, shared experiences from friends, family and peers reveal past frustrations and negativity over rigid and traditional schooling practices that have seen little change. As Pierce explains, the accessibility,

advocacy and amplification of student voices and participatory culture show the wealth of what our students have to gain from digital storytelling. This sets the scene for the chapters to come. As Pierce excitedly declares at the end of his first chapter, "Let's get started." (Pierce, 2022).

Chapter Two Overview

In the second chapter, **Preparing Youth for a Culture of Omnipresent Change**, Pierce infers that in an inevitably changing world, certain skills are needed– creativity, collaboration, bravery, storytelling, flexibility, problem-solving, and imagination, for example. The two "human skills" he introduces are visual and auditory skills. Pierce believes that connecting to our emotions will allow us to use open-ended thinking and have a stronger sense of self. By being aware of the sensory elements within digital storytelling—sound, imagery, words, and music—we can communicate more effectively and surpass external educational standards. He claims that using digital storytelling is a win-win because it delivers space for students to construct human skills while also probing deep curricular content and issues of identity development.

Pierce writes in a personable and relatable context as he uses his voice to emphasize meaning. He shows his excitement for digital storytelling, stating "this is where the fun begins." He calls digital storytelling an empowering experience, one that lets creators take ownership.

When having students create, Pierce suggests we encourage them to play with fun vocabulary and to play around with language, as they craft words outside of their everyday usage. He also encourages students to think about the effect sound has on our experience, quoting from the philosopher, Walter Ong: "sounds enter deeply in human beings' feel for existence."

When it comes to imagery, it's suggested for students to think about how they want the image to convey meaning - such as a couch alone in a room could be symbolic of loneliness, or how a mural could hold a cultural significance. Finally,

M. J. Dierken, G. M. Kepferle, & M. Wenberg

when it comes to music, Pierce states that this is *the* vital element to shape the tone and mood of the narrative experience. He explains that within hearing a few seconds of music, you can communicate whether or not the scene is tragic, funny, playful, tense, mysterious, sad, or callous.

Chapter Three Overview

In the third chapter, **Processing Learning: Research, Creativity, Development, and Production**, Pierce focuses on the process of learning through creating digital stories. Pierce brings up the discussion of process vs. outcome, stating how educators tend to traditionally value process, while formal education as an institution is more driven by outcomes. Pierce affirms that a goal of the book is to help shift the dynamics of the classroom toward a rebalancing of outcomes and processes. The process is about actively doing rather than absorbing. Pierce's main argument here is that process *is* content.

This chapter concludes with another set of activities to use in the classroom that immerse students in the "process" part: "Brainwriting" which was formalized by a German author, Bernd Rohrbach in 1968, allows students to have fun with creative possibilities as they are given prompts to write to (p.57); "Location Scout" which asks students to scout a location connected to a literary, scientific, or history story they are studying as they take pictures of their location; and, finally, "Four Frame Storyboarding" which is designed to indicate a sixty-second digital story. This latter activity helps students find the most important images that will communicate the essence of their story and what the movement of the story will be through these images.

Pierce makes a remark that I've always aligned with, which is to not be passive in your education. The future of learning happens when you do it yourself. It happens when you seek out answers and take action in your own learning and understanding. If we encourage and push our

students to do their best, they can hopefully take a strong interest and passion in their work. When creating digital stories, Pierce describes this learning as a workout of the brain. He states that this "process" is a commitment to time and perseverance.

Chapter Four Overview

In the fourth chapter, **The Curricular Ecstasies of Stories and Story Creation**, Pierce explains the "why" behind his belief in digital storytelling by describing the micro and macro importance of the format. Pierce reminds us that stories are "emotional and personal; they are universally understood" (Pierce, 2022, pg. 84) and can connect to challenging and complex issues in a way that humanizes the subject matter. This is the macro viewpoint of digital storytelling.

Pierce also recognizes that educators are often asked to provide substantial, detailed reasoning behind our teaching choices. This is where the micro viewpoint comes in. He breaks down the building blocks of digital storytelling into separate content areas and specific subsets of related ELA skills, including structure and organization, research and exploration.

Pierce then provides examples for teachers, showing how they might structure and immediately implement digital storytelling in the classroom. He suggests the use of several digital narrative formats, including game show ideas, vlogs, commercials or PSAs, radio dramas and podcasts. He also provides teaching guides and prompts for each avenue of digital storytelling, along with questions to facilitate student work and discussion.

Chapter Five Overview

In the fifth chapter, **Making It Happen in the Classroom…Seamlessly,** Pierce lays out a model of four categories to measure assessment. In most school systems, assessments drive our work. These include content mastery, storytelling

M. J. Dierken, G. M. Kepferle, & M. Wenberg

mastery, digital mastery, and human skills mastery. Pierce reminds us that too often classroom-based skills are measured in rudimentary and black and white ways, with no room for skills that are impractical to assess with objective paper-based forms (i.e., human skills). Pierce hopes that these four categories of assessment will communicate to the student that "content and process are on equal grounds" (Pierce, 2022, pg. 140) and that there is value in skills that translate to the real world.

Pierce offers several thoughts about incentivizing student motivation in the classroom. He suggests that some competition in a friendly, supportive and safe environment will improve student work. Additionally, he suggests bringing respected professionals from the community into classrooms. These professionals should be coming from a field other than education to provide feedback and validation on class projects in their area of expertise, which is often enormously valuable in both motivating and engaging students. Finally, Pierce suggests creating educational events for students to share their learning with their peers. This student information sharing can also be pushed beyond the classroom and into the digital world.

Digital storytelling is a creative and contemporary educational development that redirects the attention, time and focus of youth to accomplish meaningful and unique content. Pierce's sprinkle of personal and professional experiences along with statistical research, add depth and context to this modern interpretation of storytelling.

As educators in varying stages of our careers, we are no strangers to storytelling. This book not only offers creative and practical suggestions for project-based learning but also helps define and navigate digital storytelling as an artform that can be implemented with all of its benefits for our use in the field. The book's pedagogical approaches are successful in addressing multiple frameworks, content standards and classroom demographics. With the current rate of ever-growing technology, Piece provides us with realistic practices for shaping our future classrooms. A common struggle that teachers face is getting their students to be motivated, and he offers many ideas to help students engage and be excited about their work in a digital era. The helpful activities and projects provided to teachers are much appreciated, especially because teachers are often short on time! Finally, we enjoyed the personal and opinionated writing from Pierce. This definitely makes a piece not only easier and entertaining to read, but more attainable.

Additionally, digital storytelling affords students the opportunity to explore how narratives and ideas might be communicated through various formats and presentation modes. Format and mode are recognized in CAST's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework that seeks to remove barriers to students' learning. Including various means of engagement, representation and expression improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn (*CAST,* 2018). Building inclusive classrooms that support all learners and value multiple ways of learning and showing knowledge are paramount.

Author Interview

After reading Pierce's *Expanding Literacy* book, we were motivated to reach out to the author with some asynchronous questions. We wanted to learn more about his perspectives regarding online safety, multimodality, the exponential growth of Artificial Intelligence, and best practices for supporting multilingual learners. With a new era of digital learning happening right in front of us, we reached out to Pierce with our current probing questions.

QUESTION 1. As current and preservice teachers, we have the responsibility of keeping

M. J. Dierken, G. M. Kepferle, & M. Wenberg

our students safe, not only in the classroom but also online. How do you suggest supporting teachers in keeping their students safe online while implementing digital storytelling?

Brett: There are so many organizations – most prominently, NAMLE (National Association of Media Literacy Education) – that has research-based guidance on Internet safety and practices, to which I would recommend turning for guidance in this area.

QUESTION 2.   We believe in allowing students access to multimodal avenues of learning (videos, hardcover literature, interviews, community connection, etc.) Do you see this format being appropriate or able to be adapted for mid or upper elementary?

Brett: The sources of information from which an elementary school child is understanding the world is ...multimodal. So, tapping into those various avenues of communication to guide learning is essential. For elementary, using multi-modal forms of expression in small bites may be the way to go. Think nothing longer than sixty seconds. And then build from there. And here's the fun part: elementary school kids love stories. Everyone knows that. So, opening them up to stories – as teachers do – while also revealing the inner mechanics of what makes a story work, is not a huge stretch.

QUESTION 3. With the current state of AI and applications such as ChatGPT, where is the future of digital literacy heading with these Assistive Technologies?

Brett: My fundamental argument is that there are two full-fledged literacies and digital storytelling is the 'writing' of digital literacy. ChatGPT can't touch a digital story, really. It could write the script. But it can't choose the music, shoot the video, create the best edits, and add the sound effects.

QUESTION 4. How can we best support multilingual learners in their digital literacy experience? What kinds of projects would be helpful to them or what are the best ways in which they can create?

Brett: Digital storytelling gives the ELL learner a way to powerfully communicate by taking full advantage of the other communicative tools - music, sound, and imagery - while also excavating words and their usages and meaning. I would like to think that digital storytelling can make the ELL student not feel 'less than' in the arena of communication. Because ultimately their cultural identity may best be captured in these other elements - music, sound, and imagery - and not in words.

QUESTION 5. How did your international work specifically prompt an interest in digital storytelling?

Brett: It began in Iraq in 2010. We produced the first of three seasons of a reality game show for teens called *Salam Shabab*. I learned that this age, in that country in that time, were highly marginalized and feeling deeply frustrated and voiceless. And these short films, put simply, gave them a voice. Gave them visibility. And challenged them in fun and energizing ways. And their stories were infused with Iraqi poetry, war horrors and kidnappings, traditional music, and nationalistic fervor. It was explosive. That experience began my journey into the personal power and educational potency of digital storytelling for youth.

QUESTION 6. What future implications do you hope to see from the students involved in your digital storytelling projects?

Brett: Kids are creating a lot of content for social media and myriad platforms. That content can be social, self-serving, frivolous, and fun, and that's fine, but ultimately, benign and at times, harmful. But the content can also be social, thoughtful, impactful and make a difference; can change their

M. J. Dierken, G. M. Kepferle, & M. Wenberg

lives and others who follow them. Once students experience this– and the learning experience stays with them forever – then, I'd like to believe, their capacity to positively impact their community and beyond, increases exponentially.

Final Thoughts

Pierce briefly acknowledges the concern with using digital platforms and tools. However, with this new-found creative outlet, it is vital that educators remain critical and reflective just as they should with anything new or unfamiliar. Even with younger generations, educators are still aware that the application of digital storytelling may not come without precautions or concerns for internet safe-guarding. To allow students full freedom and agency to express their ideas, professional development, current research articles and educational blogs can offer additional aid and support for educators with ongoing hesitations or digital queries.

As current and preservice teachers, we have the responsibility of keeping our students safe, not only in the classroom but also online. While Pierce notes the potential pitfalls of social media, we cannot help but feel the need to pause and consider more deeply the potentially harmful situations we are exposing our students to by encouraging (and facilitating) social media use. While we do not think this should prevent teachers from engaging in digital storytelling, we do think it is important to consider adding a layer of internet safety education for students.

One example of such a program has been created by Google, called "Be Internet Awesome." This program encourages students to be internet-safe with games and interactive lessons while exploring the online world. This platform, or something similar, would not only support Pierce's digital literacy but also prepare students for the ever-evolving world of technology.

We conclude this review by undoubtedly recommending *Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom* for in-service teachers, teacher educators, teacher

candidates and anyone interested in digital storytelling. Pierce writes in a personable sense that makes it easy for teachers to relate to, especially coming from his background as a former teacher. He writes in a passionate way which is empowering for preservice teachers thinking about the disciplines they want to thrive in. The pedagogical approaches are founded in research and classroom experience which make it a relevant and useful teaching resource. Finally, we want to take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to Brett Pierce for this opportunity and in taking the time to respond to our interview questions.

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Monica Jane Dierken is a graduate student at the University of Montana. To contact Monica, please email monicadierken@gmail.com.

Georgina Molly Kepferle is a graduate student at the University of Montana. To contact Georgina, please email georgieginamoody@gmail.com.

Madeline Wenberg is a graduate student at the University of Montana. To contact Madeline, please email madeline.wenberg@gmail.com.