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# Using short films in the classroom as a stimulus for digital text creation

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# Using short films in the classroom as a stimulus for digital text creation

## **Abstract**

Reading and creating stories is a longstanding pedagogical approach to literacy learning in elementary school classrooms because stories offer personal and human experiences to which students can relate and respond. Stories, including digital forms such as short films, offer accounts of what it is to belong to a community and its worldviews and practices. Opportunities to identify, challenge, and respond to these views in the creation of their own texts develop in students broadened understandings of themselves and others. This teaching tip reports on Australian grade 6 students responding to messages they identified in a short film. The students used iPads to plan, create, and share stories that convey alternative perspectives on the messages they identified.

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## Using short films in the classroom as a stimulus for digital text creation

Jessica Mantei and Lisa Kervin

[Teaser Text]

What are some strategies for supporting children to plan, create and share multimodal stories using iPads?

### Abstract

Reading and creating stories is a longstanding pedagogical approach for literacy learning in elementary school classrooms because stories offer personal and human experiences to which children can relate and respond. Stories, including digital forms such as short films, offer accounts of what it is to belong to a community, its worldviews and practices.

Opportunities to identify, challenge and respond to these views in the creation of their own texts develop in children broadened understandings of themselves and others.

This teaching tip reports on Australian Grade 6 children responding to messages they identified in a short film. The children used iPads to plan, create and share stories that convey alternative perspectives on the messages they identified.

### Short films and storytelling

Like short stories, short films use storytelling traditions to share fundamental experiences of humanity. These stories can have profound effects on their audience as they explore universal themes like love, loss, and belonging, and develop understandings about themselves and others. Kathy Short (2009) says stories teach us what it means to belong, who to be, what to do and how to 'fit'. These stories hold the taken-for-granted worldviews held by certain groups (Short, 2009). They shape our interactions with other texts (Rosenblatt, 1982), and with other people and groups (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

But if the views of our own social and cultural groups remain uncontested, we are in danger of holding our own culture as the "barometer" (Flanagan, 2011) against which we measure beliefs, practices and values of others. And so, the opportunity to identify the views conveyed in a story as just one perspective and to imagine and explore the views of others allows us to understand increasingly diverse people and groups. Creating and sharing new stories means alternative perspectives can be explored.

Short films for children have increased in volume, accessibility, quality and popularity (Dallacqua, Kersten & Rhoades, 2015), from professional bodies such as the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and studios like Pixar and Disney. But the range of applications, software, sharing and dissemination opportunities available also mean anyone can be an author. Short films convey their messages in complex and sophisticated ways. Image, sound and movement combine with language to convey the worldviews and perspectives of that author. With an understanding of how these modes interact (Kress, 2010), and supportive pedagogy and technology, our students can author multimodal digital stories that convey their own worldviews and perspectives.

### Children respond to film through their own text creation

This Teaching Tip shares a pedagogical approach developed for 50 Grade 6 elementary school children (aged 12-13 years) in two Australian schools. Grade 6 is our final year of elementary school. The children at each school participated in two-hour literacy workshops, twice per week over three weeks, with a final sharing and

reflection workshop held in the fourth week. The workshops focused on reading and interpreting messages the children perceived present in a short film, and representing their responses through their own digital multimodal stories using iPad technology.

We worked with the children as a whole class and small groups as we viewed, explored and challenged the messages they perceived in the short film. As they moved to create their own stories through digital multimodal texts, the children chose to work in pairs or alone, and each pair/individual had access to an iPad throughout the construction process.

### **Pedagogical framework for creative digital text construction**

We drew and extended on Mills and Levido's (2011) iPed model for creative digital text production because it allowed us to engage children as consumers and creators of digital literary text by starting with the *known* (e.g. What do you know about this story?) to the *unknown* (e.g. Is there another way we could think about that message?). The iPed model comprises four recursive pedagogic principles: Link, Challenge, Co-create, and Share within which teachers can use a range of strategies to support student learning. An extended account of the iPed model is shared in an earlier edition of this journal (Mills & Levido, 2011). However, this teaching tip focuses on the ways we used each principle to achieve our teaching aims.

In extending the iPed model, the children were supported to make connections to a short film as they examined and challenged its messages. They created new digital stories that moved beyond the written mode (such as blogs) to emphasize the audio, visual and spatial modes. And these were disseminated using the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies.

We selected Ruhemann and Tan's *The Lost Thing* (2010) short film, an Oscar winning 15-minute animation whose synopsis states,

A boy discovers a bizarre looking creature...Realising it is lost, he tries to find out who owns it or where it belongs...met with indifference from everyone else...the boy sets out to find a 'place' for it (<http://www.thelostthing.com/>).

*The Lost Thing* is recommended to Australian teachers for addressing issues of culture, gender, and popular and youth cultures (BOSTES, 2012). Therefore, it was considered appropriate for Grade 6 at a key educational and personal transition point.

### **Our teaching approach**

Our workshops are summarized in Table 1 using the iPed principles as an organising frame. Key questions, focus points and materials are identified in the subsequent text focused on each principle as the teaching process is described in connection with student work samples.

Table 1: Summary of workshops

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **Principle 1: Link**

Mills and Levido (2011) promote the *link* principle as providing opportunities for viewers to make text to self, text to culture, and text to world connections.

Making connections to the film continued as a focus throughout our workshops. With multiple viewings of *The Lost Thing*, the children made initial connections using image and text. These were quite literal, for example, “The story is sad. So are the colours of the people”. However, reflection and refinement following multiple viewings developed deeper understandings and interpretation, for example, “It is ironic that the lost thing is huge and red but invisible”.

The children identified *The Lost Thing* as a story about belonging, where the viewer was expected to consider the “bizarre looking” creature to be sad, lost, and in need of the boy character’s help.

We used these connections to develop understandings about what led them to these conclusions. As we deconstructed, or “pulled apart” the film we examined how images, text, sound, movement and audio conveyed the messages in different ways. Questions such as “How do you know the red creature is lost?” drew the children to make connections between their interpretations of the message and the modes through which they were conveyed.

In using the *link* principle, our focus was less on making specific connections to text, culture and world (Mills & Levido, 2011), but to understanding the story and the ways the film was designed to evoke the connections the children had made.

### **Phase 2: Challenge**

Mills and Levido (2011) associate the *challenge* principle to tenets of critical literacy by focusing on critique and an examination of the ways texts are constructed to convey their messages.

We wanted the children to challenge and critique messages in *The Lost Thing* about belonging and the notion of everyone having a “place”, so we used Luke and Freebody’s (1999) text analyst questions: “What does this text want you to believe?” “Whose perspectives are heard in this story?” “Who don’t we hear from?”. With these, the children considered new, diverse and inclusive ways of thinking about belonging. For example, one student observed, “You don’t have to look like everyone else to belong in that place”.

A focus on discussion encouraged the children to listen, respond to and challenge the views and interpretations of others as they built their own understanding about the challenge they wanted to make. These were expressed as questions and became a prompt for the telling of their new story, for example, “What if the lost thing wasn’t lost?” “Why doesn’t the lost thing decide where it wants to go?” and “What if the boy is the one who is lost?” In understanding the power of alternative perspectives, the children were preparing for the creation of their own texts, ones that conveyed alternative ways of thinking and being.

### **Phase 3: Co-create**

Mills and Levido (2011) propose *co-create* as a shift toward audience and purpose where students explore the affordances of an identified technology and its suitability for the creation of their new text.

Multiple viewings of *The Lost Thing* allowed the children to imagine new messages. Important here was time spent talking about the goals for the new story and planning

the ways the messages would be expressed. In co-creation, the children drew on resources of digital technology, of pen and paper, and of discussion. They then used *PuppetPals Directors' Cut* and *iMovie* to create their stories. These apps afforded authorial autonomy by allowing import of backgrounds, images, sound and language; hence, each child's unique story could be shared. The teacher, researchers and other children acted as experts and critical friends as they shared knowledge about the ways messages could be conveyed using the selected technology.

While all children used the same apps, the uniqueness of their creations was evident across the modes. For example, imported hand drawn images and photographs conveyed something personal (Figures 1 and 2). Colour was manipulated to emphasize aspects of the story (Figure 3). And sizing, salience, proximity and placement on the screen were manipulated in the development of the message (Figure 4).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Hand drawn speech bubbles and characters create a cartoon scene

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: Photographs generate a sense of connection

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3 Black and white backdrop accentuates the (bright yellow) main character

Figure 4 shows four screen captures from one story where the “lost” creature is small and centred. Glancing left and right, it moves out of the shot, perhaps conveying a sense of alienation.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Figure 4: Using size, placement and movement to convey a message

Language and sound are harder to capture in an article such as this. However, we also saw clear connections in the oral exchanges between characters and their position on



the screen. It was also evident in the backdrops, character positioning, oral narration and background music to the overall effect of the story.

Feedback was critical to co-creation as authors sought opinions about the power and clarity of their message in connection with the ultimate goal of the new texts. After many drafts and rehearsals, redrafts and recordings, and interactions with others, the children were ready to share their stories.

#### **Phase 4: Share**

The final phase in Mills and Levido's (2011) iPed model promotes the sharing of new texts, in formal and informal settings, and the provision of positive feedback.

The children shared their stories within a bound online repository through the schools' Intranet with peers, younger students, parents, school principal and interested teachers. Audience members made observations, critique, and gave feedback on aspects of the children's stories in relation to their understanding of the message being conveyed, the modes they found engaging in the creation of the message, and recommendations for improvement and refinement.

Given the innovative nature of the task and the excitement created through the launch, this was a positive and enjoyable experience for all children, however, it was in the constructive feedback that children could identify areas for future development.

It is important to note that the Intranet also provided the capacity for broader sharing with the children's extended networks. This created further opportunities for feedback and positioning of these children as authors.

#### **Reflections**

This project drew on the interactions and expertise of a stimulus short film text and peers and adults over time. Repeated viewings provided children time to consider and interrogate the messages presented. The invitation to create a new story enabled them to investigate alternative views as they identified new perspectives, supported by the expertise of the teacher, researchers and peers.

The design of the workshops informed by Mills and Levido's (2011) iPed model provided structure that gave children time to focus on aspects of digital text production. The initial focus on the message and time to explore it with peers and adults enabled the children to develop a clear message informing their response to the task. Further, opportunities for feedback and constructive critique redirected the children to reflect on their modal combinations in conveying (or not) the intended meaning.

The use of digital technologies afforded new ways to represent meaning through unique modal arrangements. The children combined language, image, sound and movement to communicate their meanings. Web 2.0 technologies offered convenient avenues for sharing as potential audiences were expanded through the capabilities of the technology.

#### **Acknowledgement**

Figures 3 and 4 include images with permission from *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2000.

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<b>Purpose:</b> For children to plan, create and share stories that convey alternative perspectives on the messages they identified in a short film.	
<b>Principle:</b>	<b>Together, teacher and children:</b>
<b>Link</b> (Workshops 1-4)	View <i>The Lost Thing</i> Interpret messages they perceive across multiple viewings Make connections between the film, own experience and beliefs Examine multimodal structural features of the film to understand the way the messages are conveyed
<b>Challenge</b> (Workshops 2-5)	Challenge messages perceived during the “link” phase Explore alternative messages or ways of thinking Explore resources (personal and physical) and their potential for text creation using iPads
<b>Co-create</b> (Workshops 4-6)	Plan and draft stories in pairs or individually Give and respond to feedback of drafts with peers and teacher Review, revise and publish final digital texts
<b>Share</b> (Workshop 7)	Launch digital texts in a public forum using the school repository Give and respond to feedback by identifying strengths and future focus areas Reflect on learning and on the design of the text in achieving intended purpose Set new goals for text creation

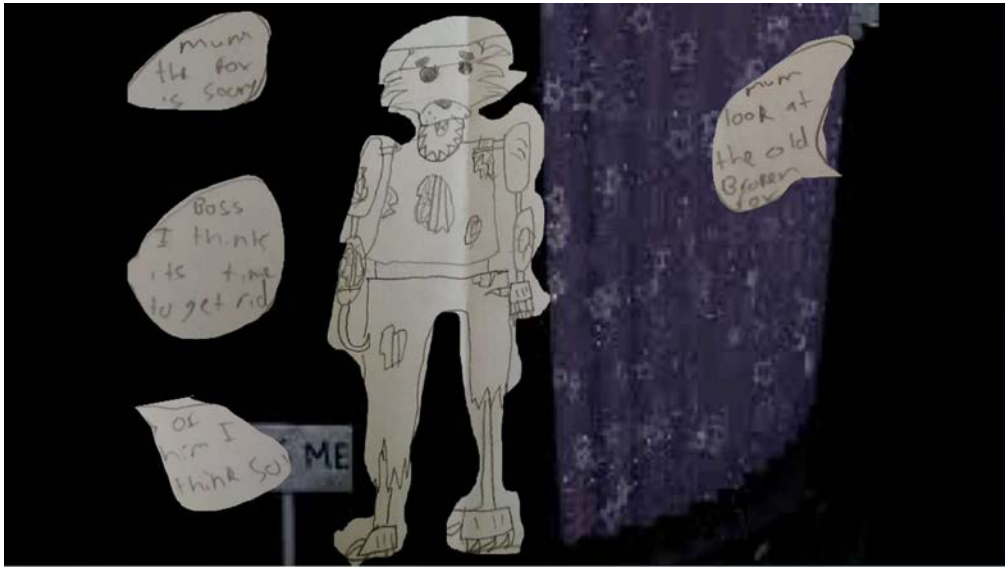


Figure 1: Hand drawn speech bubbles and characters create a cartoon scene  
INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE  
565x318mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 2: Photographs generate a sense of connection  
INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE  
422x255mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 3: Black and white backdrop accentuates the (bright yellow) main character  
INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE  
450x254mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 4: Using size, placement and movement to convey a message  
INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE