WCES-2010

Message in a bottle
Telling stories in a digital world

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Abstract

In the 21st century, we have started to tell stories using computer-based tools. As with traditional storytelling, digital storytelling focuses on a specific topic, has characters, a setting and a plot, and contains a particular point of view. But, by incorporating images, audio narration, video clips and/or music alongside traditional text, we obtain a more dynamic story, which captivates learners and enhances their creativity as well as their English language skills. In this paper I shall present the experiences and outcomes I have reached with my first year students majoring in Journalism, after a semester dedicated to digital stories.

Keywords: Digital storytelling; English; teaching; Web 2.0, 21st century skills.

1. Introduction

The present paper is based on the analysis of 78 digital stories, created during the course of one academic semester, by first year students in Journalism. The students involved in this class project mastered English at an advanced level and had good computer skills as well. Thus, we dedicated the first part of the semester to discovering and practicing basic storytelling techniques and elements, as well as the Web 2.0 tools they needed in order to build a digital story. In the second half of the semester we focused on the final task, which was to devise a story entitled Message in a bottle, using at least ten slides, including images and sound, but also written text. Other than these guidelines, students were free to improvise and play with the essential storytelling elements. Finally, they had to incorporate the digital story in our class wiki (http://jurnauvt2008.wikispaces.com/English).

After analysing the 78 “productions”, I have drawn some conclusions about using digital storytelling in the English language classroom. These thoughts will be useful to other educators aiming to blend storytelling and Web 2.0 and integrate this mix in their teaching practices.

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2. What is digital storytelling?

A digital story is a short (usually between 3 to 5 minutes) clip, which consists of a series of still images, combined with oral and/or written text. Additional music is sometimes used to invoke emotion or induce other effects. People have always relied on stories to convey information and emotion. But in the age of the “disappearing book” and the emergence of newer and newer technologies, digital storytelling is an appropriate way to communicate what we do, who we are and what we care about or are interested in.

2.1. What are its elements?

A digital story covers all the elements of traditional stories (setting, plot, conflict, theme, character and point of view). Moreover, Lambert (2006) has argued that digital storytelling adds certain key elements, namely:

- emotional content (while watching a digital story the audience is deeply engaged and its reaction is rewarding for students, it validates their efforts, creativity and individuality)
- voice and images (as students narrate and illustrate their own scripts, their ideas are put across more clearly than in traditional stories, which do not benefit from the input of photos or intonation)
- economy (digital stories are short, which sharpens the focus of the story)
- pacing (the author adds emotion to the content where he or she thinks is necessary; the rhythm and voice punctuation are a plus).

Digital stories usually adopt a first person narrative point of view because digital storytelling allows students to construct stories based on their own experiences and on their subjective understanding of a topic.

2.1.1. Why is it significant?

Stories are the bedrock of every culture. They allow people to understand someone else’s experiences in a personal way, thus creating empathy. Digital stories build on traditional stories and provide affective learning that can lead the learner to a desire for more cognitive learning. Furthermore, the resources available to be incorporated in a digital story are virtually limitless and digital storytelling can be applied effectively to any subject. Constructing a digital story and communicating it efficiently requires hard work, thinking and preparation on behalf of the storyteller. Students have to choose the images, sounds and words carefully and appropriately, taking into consideration the audience’s perspective and certain requirements as well. However, a strong point of digital storytelling is the fact that users with little or no technical background should be able to create easily digital stories, using free applications that are available online. With the technical aspects out of the way, the emphasis will shift to the content. Moreover, according to Barrett (2005), “digital storytelling facilitates the convergence of four student-centered learning strategies: student engagement, reflection for deep learning, project-based learning, and the effective integration of technology into instruction.”

2.1.1.1. What are its benefits for education?

Some of the benefits of digital storytelling for education have been touched upon at 2.1.1. Others are listed below:

- it allows students to explore and communicate their discoveries, hence putting the emphasis on the students’ personal voice;
- it provides learners with an original way to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and creativity;
- it takes students through the writing/storytelling process in an engaging way;
- it stimulates an increased interest in both creator and audience;
- it reinforces literacy and 21st century skills.

For English language learners, digital storytelling is highly beneficial. Firstly, they are required to use audio and written text (thus speaking and spelling skills are practiced). Secondly, students have to research and document their work, therefore listening and reading skills are also put to use. Thirdly, Web 2.0 stories have the unprecedented
advantage that once uploaded on the Internet, they have a potentially huge audience. This enables the authors to get feedback, comments, and potentially, new ideas. Moreover, since the emotional connection to the content they produce is greater, students are likely to be more involved in the project. Consequently, they are also more likely to assimilate new language elements etc.

Although there are numerous advantages to digital storytelling, some downsides have also been identified. Thus:

- some students may not be comfortable with producing original work, so they may find themselves retelling stories they have come across (however, this is true for traditional stories as well);
- intellectual property issues may arise (despite the fact that teachers instruct students to use images and music placed under a Creative Commons License, some may use copyrighted material without giving credit to the authors. The reverse is also possible: due to the popularity of Web 2.0 tools, basically any material can be found quickly and used illegally);
- digital stories might be difficult to assess, particularly because they integrate skills from a range of disciplines, but also because some students are better at “directing” whilst others are not (all the while being gifted students with good literacy skills);
- it may prove problematic for language teachers to correct mistakes (therefore this should probably be done while the learner is still constructing his/her story).

3. Message in a Bottle

Wikis are perfect shared writing spaces, extremely useful for asynchronous collaboration. They allow users to embed easily different types of content created on other sites, therefore being ideal platforms for class projects based on Web 2.0 applications. Students had to embed on our class wiki (http://jurnauvt2008.wikispaces.com/English) the digital stories they had created on www.slide.com, www.animoto.com or they had uploaded on www.youtube.com (some decided to use Windows Movie Maker and then upload their stories on Youtube). The title I chose for this project was Message in a Bottle because I believed it provided the learners with unlimited story threads. They had to make sure their digital story included at least ten slides, that they used written or audio text, that they used only photos under Creative Commons License or from their personal collection, and that they covered the basic elements of any story. If they matched these formal requirements, they were free to play with the content or add a soundtrack if they considered it appropriate.

Out of the 78 stories, 26 did not meet all the abovementioned criteria- either they did not have enough slides, or they did not include audio/written text, or they were totally off topic). The remaining 52 digital creations either included a literal “message in a bottle” (33), or they transmitted a message without “bottling it up” (19). All but one of the stories had a musical background, most of the students choosing songs called “Message in a bottle” (performed by The Police, John Mayer or even Machine Head). Love was the main theme in most of the stories (23), with 11 happy ends and 12 tragic endings. Interestingly, two students structured their text into poems. Nine others chose to deal with social issues in their stories. Thus, they sent messages against war, poverty, famine, addictions to alcohol and smoking, and against speeding. One student imagined Earth to be the narrator of the story and sent a message in favour of recycling. Others narrated personal events and used their own photos. For example, one student illustrated what music means to her, while another one based her narrative on the structure “In my life so far I have learned that...”. Three stories were created as animations, and all of them were particularly funny. There were other amusing tales, for instance one which narrated the love story between two cats, which lasted for “seven cat lives”.

Most of the 52 complete digital stories were good, but five were exceptionally creative and remarkably well put together. The first of these was built as a game: one had to find eight messages in eight “bottles”, namely each slide contained a question or a task. By solving them, the viewer was taken to the next bottle. The last message wrote: “Stop looking for answers you already know. Just live your life with good and bad. But don’t ver forget that you are not alone!” The story was ingenious and very elaborated. Most questions incorporated both the author’s and the viewer’s point of view. The second story that made the Top 5 is one entitled by its creator “Messages in Bottlecaps”. It was constructed like a puzzle, with the pieces being actual bottle caps with short sentences written on their inside, photographed by the author and arranged in a logical succession. The resulting story was stunningly coherent, making the project a noteworthy achievement. A third digital story I considered quite outstanding was one
comprising two poems: one penned by a lover who had been abandoned, asking for a reconciliation, and one written as an answer by the cruel lover. As a conclusion to the negative reply received, the lover who was hurting concludes: “I watched her drowning away from me that day... leaving behind just a message in a bottle”. Another great story perfectly synchronized the text with pictures of bottles, of different shapes, sizes and colours. Why? Because the idea the author wanted to transmit was: “It does not matter if you are different, even peculiar, in the end you should make a statement, take a stand, the message is the one that counts”. Finally, one student used the point of view of her baby boy and conveyed his messages through personal photos and funny captions, adapted to the voice of a 3-year-old.

4. Conclusions

Creating a digital story involved the students to a great extent, required them to research the topics, record themselves while reading a text they had produced, and review the plot over and over again until it met all the characteristics of a story, plus the demands of the teacher. After assessing their work, I can safely conclude that the project was a success and that digital storytelling enhances the quality of the teaching and learning acts respectively.

References


http://storycenter.org/

http://web2storytelling.wikispaces.com/