

Digital Storytelling as Narrative Pedagogy

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Abstract: This paper explores an understanding of digital storytelling as a narrative pedagogical methodology. Through a review of literature, the authors situate the background, current application, and power of digital storytelling as an educational tool. Next an overview of a narrative orientation to teaching and learning as applied to digital storytelling is presented. Finally, the authors explore epistemological implications, process issues and appropriate learning outcomes for digital storytelling when embedded in a narrative pedagogical framework. Their primary premise is that an understanding and consideration of the narrative orientation to teaching and learning will enable educators to make more discriminating and effective use of digital storytelling.

Interest in educational applications of digital storytelling has burgeoned in recent years. A growing body of literature has explored types of digital stories, purposes of digital storytelling, and ways in which digital stories enhance student learning. However, what is lacking in the literature is a clear articulation of the narrative perspective in which digital storytelling is necessarily grounded. The central thesis of this paper is that the effective use of digital storytelling as a pedagogical method lies in an understanding of narrative learning and pedagogy. We argue that an understanding of the narrative orientation will enable educators to make more discriminating and effective use of digital storytelling.

History and Practice of Digital Storytelling

Background and Application

Dana Atchley first used the term *digital storytelling* in the 1980's as he experimented with the use of multimedia elements in storytelling performances. In 1990 Atchley began offering workshops at the American Film Institute in digital storytelling. In 1994, Atchley, Joe Lambert and Nina Mullen founded the San Francisco Digital Media Center that later became the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS). CDS served as the early catalyst behind the digital storytelling phenomenon and continues in that capacity. The BBC award winning *Capture Wales* project was the product of an early CDS workshop attendee, Daniel Meadows. Over half of the attendees at the 1999 Digital Storytelling Festival represented businesses who saw the power of using personal stories in advertising (Stepanek, 2000). Steven Denning (2009), leadership guru, made a special place for narrative, "Storytelling... supplements [analytical thinking] by enabling us to imagine new perspectives and new worlds, and... communicating change and stimulating innovation."

Societal issues found a voice through digital storytelling. *Silence Speaks* gave survivors of domestic violence the opportunity to share their stories to promote violence prevention (McLellan, 2006). Public health advocates employed digital stories addressing maternal depression in the Cambodian population of a community (storybuilders.org). Grassroots organizations and researchers found in digital storytelling a powerful means by which unempowered populations could make their voices heard. A variety of grants supported efforts at empowering people through the use of digital storytelling to capture their story and enable their sense of efficacy (Hull and Katz, 2006; Alexandra, 2008).

Higher education has also been caught up in the promise of digital storytelling. Digital stories have been proposed as alternatives to traditional term papers (Burkholder and Cross, 2009). American Studies faculty have employed them as a vehicle for cultural analysis (Coventry, 2006). Benmayor (2008) engages students in the production of unique individual *testimonios* in multimedia format. Since 2005, the University of Houston has been an advocate for the use of digital storytelling in teacher education courses. Digital storytelling as a reflective tool for teacher education portfolios has been explored (Barrett, 2008; Kearney, 2009). Undergraduate students create digital stories in activities ranging from support for a technology-integrated unit under development (Robin and Pierson, 2005) to completing the story of *Angela's Ashes* as a digital diary (Hofer and Swan, 2006). Graduate students craft digital stories that set the context for art history periods, historical documents/figures, literary genres, etc. One faculty member sums up the enthusiasm, saying, "Digital storytelling can be seen as the signature pedagogy for the new Humanities in the 21st century" (Benmayor, 2008).

The Power of Digital Storytelling

Given the unbridled enthusiasm across disciplines for digital storytelling, wherein lies the power of these multimedia productions? Storytelling is seen as perhaps the oldest means for communicating ideas, sharing meaning and developing community (Mello, 2001; Egan, 1995). It is unique to the human species and conveys aspects of the individual, the other, and the world – both real and imagined – that they inhabit (McDrury and Alterio, 2002). Bruner (1991) posits that narrative is one of the cultural products utilized by the mind to construct its sense of reality. Later he extends this concept of personally constructed narrative into the shared experience of storytelling thus allowing the merging of individual private experience into culturally negotiated universals (Bruner, 1996). More recently, researchers have explored the efficacy of storytelling across subject areas (Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006). Behmer (2005) notes that the *intent* of storytelling has remained constant despite the influence of new technologies.

Digital storytelling enables the user to easily integrate different media into the telling of narrative. Bolter (1991) envisions a time when such multimedia products would address all the readers' senses and put the reader into the situation described. Digital storytelling fulfils this vision as the storyteller may utilize a "...palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music, and sound...with the author's own story voice" (Porter, 2004, p. 1). The production of digital stories engages students and their potential audience as well. The use of all of the tools available and their integration into the storytelling process is novel for the majority of students, regardless of their age. The combination of the novelty of learning the technology, the challenge of framing a meaningful narrative, and the selection of relevant images and sounds, creates noise as the mind works to reconcile them with pre-existing schema

The interest in digital storytelling comes from a multiplicity of perspectives. Standley (2003) notes that the impact of digital storytelling increases exponentially as it reaches an audience of millions via the Internet. Researchers working with under-represented populations reference Friere's tenets of empowerment, voice and dialogue to support the use of digital storytelling in their disciplines (Oppermann, 2008; Alexandra, 2008; Benmayor, 2008). Cognitivists and instructional designers cite dual-coding theory and cognitive theory of multimedia learning to address the impact of simultaneously accessing the visual and verbal information processing systems (Paivio, 1986). Those who see value in the use of storytelling as a means for reflection build on the work of Donald Schön (1988) who states, "When we get into the habit of recording our stories, we can look at them again, attending to the meanings we have built into them and ... to our strategies of narrative description" (p. 26).

Digital stories serve as a popular pedagogical tool employed by educators from many fields working with students of all ages, educational background and ethnicity. The significance of digital story telling is affirmed by reaching back to the roots of storytelling, citing the multi-dimensionality afforded by the digital context, exploring the reflective nature of the article produced, and recognizing its potential to present the voice of the underserved. However, in the literature reviewed thus far, we see few linkages to the foundations of narrative pedagogy that must necessarily be understood to optimize the effectiveness of this pedagogical tool. In the next section, we offer a brief overview of a narrative orientation to teaching and learning that begins with the recognition that narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making.

Narrative Learning: A Theoretical Foundation

Narrative Meaning

Human beings make meaning of their experiences by ‘storying’ them. As Irwin (1996) says, “People make sense of their lives by emplotting their actions and the sequences of the events that make up their lives in stories....” (p. 109). To make meaning narratively means that we understand the raw material of our lives in a storylike form. A few minutes of reflection on our interactions with other people brings this into focus and makes clear that stories are ubiquitous in human affairs: At the dinner table, in the courtroom, in the doctor’s office or at the tavern – whenever and wherever people share their experiences with one another, stories are told. We make sense of life through the storying process. Further, this narrative impulse is innate, not learned. Throughout life, our natural tendency is to create stories to give coherence and meaning to the whole of lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Irwin, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1988). Storying of lived experience represents the *construction* of meaning, not simply the conveyance of information. That is, we choose what kind of story to construct from any particular experience. Our narrative interpretation represents our own process of meaning making.

Given that we make meaning narratively, it is clear that we also understand our *selves* in narrative terms. As Kenyon and Randall (1997) put it, “to be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to *be* a story” (p. 1). McAdams (1985) proposed a model of the narrative self some three decades ago. He outlined a view of identity formation in which the self is not set by the time one reaches early adulthood, but instead is an unfolding story across the life span. In his words, “*Identity is a life story*” (p. 18, emphasis original). When we understand the centrality of narrative to human meaning-making and identity processes, we begin to grasp the significance of the narrative in teaching and learning at all levels.

Narrative Knowing

The narrative orientation implies a way of knowing that is epistemologically distinct from scientific knowing. Bruner (1986) outlines narrative knowing in contrast to what he terms the paradigmatic way of knowing. He notes that the two ways of knowing are complementary, but distinct. They represent separate orientations to knowledge, have different purposes, and are assessed according to different criteria. He points out that the two ways of knowing have different ends: “...the paradigmatic mode results in... good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument and empirical discovery...the narrative mode leads...to good stories, gripping tales, believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts” (pp. 12 – 13).

Narrative knowing focuses on the relationships of elements of a whole to one another, human intentionality, and coherence while paradigmatic mode of knowing focuses on categorization, causality, and logical consistency. While the paradigmatic or scientific way of knowing has been privileged in much of formal education, it seems clear that the educational use of digital storytelling shifts the emphasis to the narrative mode of knowing as described by Bruner (1986).

Narrative Pedagogy

How do we apply the narrative orientation described above to teaching and learning? The work of Richard Hopkins (1994) offers a beginning point for a consideration of narrative pedagogy. The ‘narrative schooling’ he proposes is deeply grounded in the philosophy of John Dewey, with its emphasis on the role of the learner’s experience in the educational endeavor. Dewey, of course, believed that “education must be conceived as a continuing restructuring of experience...” (Dworkin, 1959, p. 27). In his view, the focus of the educational process should be on personal meaning and the social context within which a learner lives. Educational content needs to connect with the prior experience of the learner, and learners need opportunities to actively engage with the content on the basis of their lived experience.

What Hopkins (1994) added to Dewey’s conceptualization of the role of experience in learning is the basic recognition that *narrative* is the process through which learners make meaning of their experiences and educational content. Hopkins advances a ‘narrative proposal’ for school-based learning on the premise that narrative is the

means through which content can and should be connected with the lived experience of students. He states, “The schools, to the extent that they bar consideration of experience, interrupt the deep human impulse toward narrative. Without openness to experience, there cannot be narrative. And narrative is the indispensable process through which emplotment and meaning-attribution flow ...” (p. 10)

Most simply, the reasoning is this: If we acknowledge that narrative is a basic structure of human meaning-making, and, if we see that learning has something to do with making meaning, then, it seems clear that narrative methods are not only appropriate but necessary to foster learning.

We turn our attention now to the basic components of narrative pedagogy, which, we should note, goes well beyond the idea of storytelling. Rossiter and Clark (2007) have identified three general areas of narrative application in teaching and learning, two of which are germane to this discussion. The first and perhaps most widely understood is the use of stories in the classroom. As any teacher knows intuitively, stories are effective tools to illustrate content and underscore particular points. Stories capture learners’ attention and can convey substantive information related to the curriculum. In addition to supporting content, good stories can have a powerful impact on the learner’s attitudes, worldviews, and sense of connection with others.

A second narrative application comes under the heading of autobiographical learning, or helping the learner to make autobiographical connections with the content. The effectiveness of autobiographical learning comes from basic premise that the self is an unfolding story, and that identity development is in large measure a matter of constructing a life narrative. In the educational setting, autobiographical learning provides opportunities for the learners’ construction and reconstruction of their own narratives of meaning – ever modified and enlarged by the learning process.

In sum, a narrative orientation to teaching and learning involves an understanding of the human narrative impulse as integral to meaning making, identity formation, and learning. Learning itself is conceptualized as a narrative process in which the learner strives to construct expanded narratives of meaning that encompass new content information.

Why Narrative Matters in Digital Storytelling

Again, our premise in this paper is that digital storytelling can be most effectively used when understood through a narrative lens. In previous sections, we have reviewed some of the current applications of digital storytelling for educational purposes, and we have laid out an overview of a narrative orientation to teaching and learning. In this section, we attempt to answer the question: Why does a narrative orientation matter to our educational applications of digital storytelling? We offer three considerations in response to that question.

Epistemological implications

First, digital storytelling as rooted in a narrative orientation derives from a fundamentally different epistemological framework than that which is traditionally favored in educational settings. This narrative knowing as outlined above is a fundamental human capacity that should not be shuffled to the sidelines of education, or considered as an add-on to the ‘real’ knowledge of scientific logic. Nor should narrative be eclipsed by the gleam of technology. Narrative knowing in its own right is an increasingly essential capacity for today’s students. Thinkers and writers across disciplines are calling our attention to synthesis, creativity, play, and passion as mindsets that will enable learners to succeed personally and professionally. (Gardner, 2006; Pink, 2005). Pink explains that a major shift in the world is now underway as we move from the Information Age to the Conceptual age. Storytelling, meaning-making, big-picture thinking, and pattern-recognition – all closely aligned with narrative knowing – are among the capacities that will be essential in this new age. Understanding digital storytelling as a means of developing narrative knowledge is key to its effective use. Digital storytelling, like other narrative methods, moves us away from the focus on rational, objective, scientific knowledge.

Process issues

The use of digital stories in the educational setting requires an appreciation of this constructive, interpretive, and contextual nature of narrative. A story is neither a fact sheet nor a chronology. It both represents and invites the construction of meaning. Educators need to bring to the teaching and learning encounter a basic trust that the learners can construct their own meanings from a story. This means letting go of some control of the learning process and realize that not everything students learn from a story can be transmitted from teacher to student fully formed. Some of what students learn will be their own constructions of meaning, based on their own interpretations of the content. This requires sufficient faith in the meaning making process to let it happen.

Whether learners create their own digital stories or watch/listen to a teacher-prepared story, they need interpretive space in which to draw their own meanings. Interpretation involves both the object of interpretation and the interpreter. Interpretation does not suggest that the interpreter has license to re-invent the object of interpretation, but it does mean that the interpreter brings her or his own store of meaning and knowing to the interpretation. The role of the teacher is to bring the learner into interpretive relationship with the content. Too much information given by the teacher leaves no room for questions. Too little information leaves the learner with insufficient grounding for questioning and understanding. The interpretive space lies somewhere in between.

Narrative learning is profoundly contextual. Events take on meaning only in relation to the rest of the story. For example, the statement, “The mother bought a new dress for the daughter” does not mean much unless we know the surrounding circumstances. Did the daughter wish for the new dress to wear to a dance? Or, did the mother buy the dress for the daughter to wear to a family wedding on the day of the daughter’s softball tournament? We do not know what meaning to make of the statement outside of the narrative context. So it is with narrative learning.

Learning outcomes

The outcomes of digital stories address different constructs than those of objective educational methodology. This difference must be considered as faculty determine whether it is *the* methodology to be employed in a given circumstance. We submit that narrative methods, including digital storytelling, are appropriate for selected – not all – learning outcomes. Robin (2008) has pointed out that when students create their own digital stories, the learning experience results in strengthening of what some have called 21st Century Skills. He describes those skills in terms of five literacies – digital, global, technology, visual, and information (p. 224). We agree, but would add three additional types of learning outcomes that are particularly appropriate for digital storytelling – empathy and perspective-taking, self-understanding, and community-building. Each is discussed briefly below.

First, stories evoke empathic response and enable perspective-taking. How does that happen? Consider that empathy involves both a cognitive aspect, i.e., *knowing* how someone else feels, and an affective aspect, i.e., *caring* how that person feels. This is the strength of stories – they engage both cognitive and affective processes. Through the information contained within a story, the listener can gain a cognitive appreciation of the teller’s situation. But having knowledge of the other does not itself constitute empathy. It is the vivid imagery, the unique details, and the human intentionality revealed through the story that evoke an affective response to the other. Paradoxically, through the particularity of a story, we are drawn into relationship with the more universal dimensions of the human experience. Stories are the medium through which we can enter into the experience of another and open our own experiences to others. To the extent that digital stories enable us to take the perspective of another, they enlarge our own perspectives. This is a key capacity for tomorrow’s citizens.

A second learning outcome of digital stories is self-understanding. Whatever kind of digital story – personal narrative or stories focused on some aspect of the curriculum, stories that are student-produced or those that are teacher-produced – they have this in common: They all express, overtly or implicitly, the storyteller’s self and perspective. To tell our stories is to reflect upon ourselves and our knowledge in relation to the meanings we make of what we encounter in life. When we move beyond rumination to telling, we externalize our stories. We put them in a format that creates some distance between ourselves and our own stories of meaning. When we share those stories with others, we invite their response, our reflections on our meaning schemes are enriched, and we come to see ourselves with new eyes. In this way, the narrative learning process fosters self-understanding.

A third learning outcome appropriate for digital storytelling deals with community-building. Narratives are not just personal stories. Sharing stories is a means of locating ourselves within larger familial and cultural narratives. As we

share our individual stories of experience, we find connections with others. Together we co-construct the meanings that extend beyond our individual experiences, and create a sense of community and group identity. Stories of common experience – e.g., the flood of 2007, growing up on a farm in the Midwest, serving the military in Iraq – build a sense of community among those who share that experience. Each story is different and unique, yet they bond us together in a community of shared experience.

Conclusion

The central thesis that we have laid out in this paper is that the effective employment of digital storytelling in education requires some appreciation of a narrative orientation to teaching and learning. Digital stories serve as powerful tools to lead students to expanded narratives of meaning that encompass new content information integrated into existing narratives. They can serve to engage the storyteller and the audience in a shared experience as well as create a medium for negotiation as a community about that experience. However, without sufficient regard for its narrative epistemological framework, the impact of digital storytelling may be in danger of overuse and abuse as it is domesticated to fit all settings, all students, all situations.

In summary, narrative meaning-making – the impulse to ‘story’ experience – is innate in human beings. Narrative describes a way of knowing that is constructive, contextual, and interpretive. It serves a different set of constructs than does paradigmatic knowing and supports an alternative methodology of assessment that values its strengths and purposes. These considerations have implications for both the processes of teaching and the outcomes of learning. Whatever else we might say about digital storytelling, it is a *narrative* method of teaching and learning.

We have suggested that certain learning outcomes are especially well-served by narrative methods. Given this, educators must consider carefully the desired outcome prior to selecting digital storytelling as an instructional strategy. For example, if assigning a “digital story” to set the context for a historical period, the faculty member would consider that the story will be constructed by students in reference to their previous state of knowing and will be interpretive in its nature. Should an outcome be envisioned that is chronologically and factually accurate, the educator could select an alternative strategy or elect to require a parallel cognitive construct to the story. Alternatively, that educator could make the desired outcome explicit to the student – in which case the student is creating a documentary not a digital story.

We submit that teacher education in particular sits at a fulcrum point. On the one hand it is buffeted by calls for the application of strategies that are linear, logical, computer-like and reminiscent of the transition of a society from the industrial to information age. Others point to the need for learners equipped for the conceptual age who are inventive, intuitive, and capable of constructing meaning from a burgeoning field of data. The status quo adequately supports the former while the latter may be informed through an expanded knowledge and understanding of narrative learning. Digital storytelling can serve as a pivotal opportunity for both teacher educators and their students to become familiar with narrative pedagogy and its k-12 classroom application.

We have argued that a narrative orientation to teaching and learning provides the cornerstone on which the use of digital stories is laid. As the cornerstone it supports the intersection created by the affordances of digital technology and the established power of storytelling. The acknowledgment of narrative pedagogy as that cornerstone serves to strengthen the core of digital storying and frames its appropriate and effective use. We hope that continued dialogue in the field will further explicate the confluence of technology and narrative in education.

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