Telling Tales: 
A Peek into the World of Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

Digital stories combine a spoken ‘text’ with digital images, and often music or sound to create a short ‘mini-movie’. The primary focus is not on technology however, but on the script; a well designed oral ‘text’ combined with carefully selected images can create a powerful communication tool.

Increasingly VET practitioners are recognising the value of digital stories to enrich their teaching practice. In general, VET continues to focus heavily on written text; the beauty of digital stories is that they offer an alternative for those seeking or needing a more multimodal approach to teaching, learning and communication.

Our conference session provides an overview of the methodology, an outline of the basic process and resources required, some ideas on how DST might be used in a VET context and a case study of how Digital Storytelling is currently being used in a TAFE context.
Introduction

Digital Stories are short ‘mini-movies’ of around three minutes in length combining images, a narrated story and often music to set the mood. They’re constructed easily on a computer with basic hardware and software, and the resulting movie file can be viewed via CD, DVD or online. They’re short engaging multimodal messages that are both fun to make and engaging to watch.

In Australia, there is a growing interest in the use of Digital Storytelling in education and training. Teachers are using the methodology to re-engage learners and enrich their teaching practice. They’re using the concept to produce training resources and promotional materials and for project reporting. For learners, particularly those who are not confident in more traditional forms of written communication, they provide a ‘voice’, an opportunity to tell a ‘story’ or capture a process.

The journey so far

The international digital storytelling ‘movement’ is generally accredited as having developed from a group of media artists, designers, and practitioners in San Francisco over 10 years ago, who came together to explore how personal stories and storytelling could inform the emergence of a new set of digital media tools. The resulting Centre for Digital Storytelling has trained thousands of people since that time.

While Joe Lambert from the US Centre for Digital Storytelling is generally considered to be the ‘grandfather’ of all Digital Storytelling, I was lucky enough to visit another DST ‘guru’, Daniel Meadows who works for BBC Wales in Cardiff, during my Flexible Learning Leader scholarship year in 2003. Daniel and the team at the Capture Wales project run monthly workshops using Adobe Premiere in local communities where digital stories are created and edited by community members using cameras, computers, scanners and their own photo albums. Finished products are available online under the themes - challenge, memory, passion, family, and community, but some are also selected for large screen productions on the BBC Wales digital TV network.

In 2004 I was invited to participate in an interstate, cross sector project initiated by TAFE Frontiers in Melbourne to investigate how DST might be used in adult education and training contexts. We participated in formal ‘Joe Lambert inspired training’ at the Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne. The focus was very much on a final product; while everyone completed a digital story, few left with the skills and resources to build another independently.

With that realisation we set about to locate tools, resources and software that could be easily accessed and learned. Our aim was to equip people to continue the journey in their own context and time.

At this point in time no one in VET in Australia would describe themselves as an ‘expert’ in digital storytelling. We’re still learning, processes are still evolving and new improved resources and tools appear everyday. It’s a matter of networking, sharing what works and what doesn’t, and learning as we go. What is clear however is that regardless of industry area, technology plays an important role across our lives. We need to both maximise the benefits that technology offers learners and build the capacity of learners to use technology with skill, creativity and confidence. Digital Storytelling is a great ‘step in’ to the world of...
technology that develops a wide range of relevant skills while completing a relevant, engaging project.

Digital Storytelling can also be used with a wide range of learners. Lyn has been using Digital Storytelling with students who have an intellectual disability, up on the North Coast the literacy teachers are using the process with youth or English Language students, and for some indigenous communities the storytelling focus is proving relevant and appealing. I’ve also used Digital Stories with older learners from historical societies who are keen to capture the stories of older community members.

A Digital Storytelling national network has now been established within the EdNA Group facility at http://www.groups.edna.edu.au/course/view.php?id=107
It’s a simple process to register with EdNA and then join the network. We hope you’ll join us there if your interest has been whetted!

So, just how easy can it be?

Anyone with basic computer skills can quite quickly create a digital story. These days there’s some excellent free software for both PC and MAC users. Generally video editing software is used. For PCs Microsoft MovieMaker2 is good although Microsoft PhotoStory is a great starting place for beginners. The latter offers a step by step process with good effects but as with PowerPoint, the narration is linked to individual images rather than flowing behind. MAC users continue to have it easy with iMovie which is ideal. For more advanced users, Adobe Premiere continues as favourite.

To record your voice over or narration you need a simple computer microphone (or mic/headphone set) and a reasonable sound card. The recording is normally made directly into the program you are using. The freeware sound editing program called Audacity, downloadable from the web, is also useful not only for editing and mixing but also for amplifying the recording if the sound card is inadequate. For interviews in the field, a handheld MP3 player/voice recorder is a good option that captures the recording as a wav or mp3 file that can be imported into the program.

The narrative is perhaps the most important aspect of a digital story. Certainly the most powerful digital stories I have seen are those constructed in first person capturing a story that has significance to the storyteller. In traditional Digital Storytelling training a ‘story circle’ process of reading and refining individual scripts with the group is an important component. It can be quite an emotional process.

When used in an educational setting, it’s also the narrative that distinguishes DST from traditional IT training. The focus in Digital Storytelling is on storytelling; the mastering of new technology skills occurs on a ‘need to know’, ‘just in time’ basis during the process that I describe as ‘learning by stealth’.

Images incorporated can be digital photos, scanned pictures, documents, objects or video clips; and a range of music is available online for educational uses. And that’s it! Give your project a name, import the images and sounds, create a title and credits and add video transitions to make the ‘movie’ run smoothly. Export the final product as a movie file and save.
Conclusion

It’s one thing to feel confident using technologies yourself for private use, and quite another to introduce the process into your teaching practice. I’m certainly NOT suggesting that you do not need a reasonable level of technological literacy yourself before using it with learners. As teachers we need time to ‘play’, to learn the basic skills, to try ideas out with learners and to discuss issues. We need the hardware, access to suitable software and we need relevant professional development opportunities and technical support.

If the DST methodology appeals and you can see potential uses in your context with learners, my advice is to start small. Choose a software program that is easily accessible and that you feel you can master without too many grey hairs!

Learn how to scan and resize images, make sure you can manage files on a computer, and have a hunt online or in a bookshop for good tutorials with lots of pictures or screen ‘grabs’. Better still join the national network, apply for some LearnScope funding, locate an in-house IT expert who can teach you JUST what you need to know 1:1 or find a buddy and learn together.

What I can promise you is that it’s totally contagious! Once you’ve made a Digital Story you’ll be hooked.
References

