



# Digital Storytelling: Using Technology in the Classroom that is Context-embedded, Inquiry-driven, and Socially Negotiated



By Fred Mindlin

The term “digital storytelling” can be used very broadly, to encompass any use of computers to tell a story. That would encompass almost all current Hollywood film making, but as a catch phrase it refers to short (three to five minute) first-person narratives, voiced by the author, and illustrated primarily with still images. The filmic quality of the final product depends largely on software manipulations, especially the “Ken Burns” effect: zooming and panning around a still photo creates a remarkable feeling, placing the viewer in a scene in a way more powerfully than a video image can.

Burns was interviewed recently and tells the story of the premiere of his first documentary about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, based on photographs of the stones being lifted up onto the towers of the bridge. A woman in the audience refused to believe they were not from newsreels (the bridge was built between 1867 and 1883) (Burns, 2008). He emphasizes that movies are really a series of stills, frame after frame, and that a still image allows the mind to rest and process in a way not possible with video.

It was the ease of use of Apple’s iMovie, incorporating not only the Ken Burns effect, but also filmic transitions between scenes, a second audio track for background music, easy manipulation and import of images through iPhoto, and export to QuickTime and DVD, which formed the basis for the digital storytelling movement. Of course, there are other free programs for digital story creation, like PhotoStory for Windows, and within the past year Web-based story creation tools have proliferated (Levine, 2009). It’s not the platform that matters, it’s the process.

What excites me about the form is its use as a tool for writing instruction. It resonated with my approach as a “writer’s workshop” elementary school teacher, where reading one’s work aloud to a circle of peers was an essential part of the process of writing. Negotiating the content of digital

story scripts in a group situation gives authenticity to the editing process. Most importantly, reading a script aloud gives weight and meaning to the word “voice” that no amount of instruction about “finding one’s voice as a writer” ever can. When students begin to feel the power they have, using their writing to give literal voice to their unique points of view, and then get credit as the writer/director/producer/editor of a short film, it’s not just an “elevation” of self-esteem but a real transformation, from a fixed mindset—I can’t write—to a growth mindset—I made a movie! (Dweck, 2006).

One of the many ways a growth mindset helps the digital storytelling process is in dealing with technological problems. Without developing a high degree of adaptability, those who deal with technology in schools soon burn out. So a readiness to think of other ways to cope when one approach becomes problematic, rather than become frustrated and back off, is a key ingredient to success with digital storytelling. An example is when Apple switched out iMovie 6 for “version 7” as part of iLife ’08, it was not really a version upgrade, but the introduction of an entirely different program. Many of the detailed editing controls were gone, and most importantly for digital storytelling uses, it was no longer possible to start with an imported voiceover file and add images afterwards.

The change made sense from Apple’s point of view—it aimed to provide a simple yet powerful way to edit and publish user-created video. However, the digital storyteller’s use of the iMovie program starts with the story and then adds images. One workaround is to import a still clip, assign it a play length that corresponds to the length of the pre-recorded voiceover, then reduce the play length of the clip back to what’s needed for illustrating the story. To use digital storytelling for writing instruction, scripting for the voiceover needs to be the beginning of the process. Hav-

*Continued on page 14*

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING

continued from page 12

ing the ability to record the voiceover as a file and edit it has many advantages, but recording on top of a clip can work as well, as long as students work from a script and have ownership as authors or collaborators.

"A Question of Balance" by Peter Kittle, associate professor, Department of English, CSU, Chico (Kittle, 2008) is a wonderful example of digital storytelling work from a college teacher who had never done "mul-

timodal writing" himself. His context is opening himself and his learning process to his students, so that they can follow along as he discovers how to teach something he's only just learning himself. His inquiry is finding best practices for supporting his students in their process. And the entire process involves an open give and take between him and his students.

The most challenging aspect of integrating any technology into a classroom

of 30 to 35 students is the management of time and resources, and there are tremendous advantages to small classroom situations. The structure I would recommend to a lone classroom teacher is centers, with the roles of facilitator at stations along the process of story-creation being filled by students. Recruiting a parent volunteer to add another adult to the mix can be a great boon to a project.

While many elementary school teachers are familiar with the use of rotation through centers as a management strategy, they may be challenged by the seeming chaos of a project-based learning experience. Mechelle De Craene, a special education teacher in Florida, describes how she adapted the roles of the literature circle approach to manage digital storytelling projects (De Craene, 2006). However the teacher chooses to define the tasks, having students take responsibility for different roles in the process both helps in articulating the steps along the way and fosters a sense of ownership in the process. It is those feelings of empowerment and pride that I see blossoming in my students that continue to build my enthusiasm for digital storytelling. ■

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