The Effects of Digital Storytelling on Reading and Writing Proficiency
For Students in the K-12 Classroom

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Introduction

In today’s classroom the focus on technology needs to transfer to how the technology can enhance the way teachers teach and improve the way students learn (Robin, 2008). It is important to know the tools we are utilizing in the classroom are impacting our students’ learning in a positive way. One way to do this effectively is by introducing digital storytelling into the classroom.

Throughout this paper the main question I focused on was: How does utilizing digital storytelling in the classroom affect the students’ learning? The reason I chose to research this topic is because I have always had a connection with digital storytelling. I love creating a digital story I am proud of and can share with others. I wanted to see if using digital storytelling software would be a beneficial pedagogical tool that could be deployed to different classrooms. The main reason I chose digital storytelling over another tool was its ease of use and its versatility in the classroom.

Yang and Wu (2012) clarify the advantage of digital storytelling is not just that we will be working in a technology-infused environment which supports and expands the students learning, but it allows for collaboration to occur. This allows the students to develop their problem solving abilities, develop their creativity, and focus on goal-oriented learning. Right now there is a dramatic growth occurring on the use of digital storytelling because of its affordable technologies and the ability to transform the product to fit into today’s contemporary classroom (Robin, 2008).
Digital storytelling is a gateway activity which will allow teachers to introduce their students to using technology in the classroom without overwhelming them with a tool that is too difficult to manipulate (Green, 2013). This paper will focus on the benefits of utilizing digital storytelling, different ways to use the tool, the limitations associated with creating a digital story and the implications for the future. The benefits seen throughout this paper will encourage classroom teachers to utilize digital storytelling in their lessons to enhance students’ motivation, writing, reading, and 21st century skills; hopefully then the students will apply their understanding to all content areas.

Analysis and Discussion

Benefits

Self-Evaluation. One skill that is important for our students to develop is self-evaluation. It is valuable for the students to constantly evaluate their work so they can check for understanding, evaluate the quality of their work and ensure their final product will meet the objectives. Morris (2013) found when students were working on their digital stories they would conduct mini-performances to evaluate the work they had created so far. When the students would play back their videos other students would often join the viewing to help critique the video and gain ideas for their own videos. Teachers should use the fact that students are naturally self-assessing as an opportunity to guide the process, which will help the students grow as self-directed motivated learners in all areas of education (Morris, 2013).

Students are not always going to want to evaluate their own work. The classroom teachers and librarians can use the digital storytelling project to help guide the students in self-reflection, critical thinking, and metacognition (Morris, 2013). Hopefully once the students see
the benefits of evaluating their work with digital storytelling they can begin applying it to their other work.

If the instructor is having a hard time guiding the process of self-reflection, Morris (2013, p. 66) has outlined a set of steps to take, “Direct explanations of the rationale for self-assessment; modeling of prompts and self-talk; and scaffolding students' critiques and viewing of their work into suggestions for revision.” The teacher should then take these steps and encourage the students to continue to evaluate their work. After following these guidelines students should apply these techniques in other areas of the classroom.

**Literacy.** In today’s classroom developing the literacy skills of the students is very important. One significant concept that has recently become important is transliteracy. Thomas et al. defines transliteracy as ‘the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks’ (as cited by Sukovic, 2014, p. 207). It is important to teach transliteracy skills to students so they can connect and switch between different types of literacy they come into contact with. When students are in an environment where the teacher expects and encourages the development of transliteracy skills, they experience a higher level of engagement and transfer of knowledge (Sukovic, 2014). The teacher should try to introduce the students to as many different multimedia texts to help stimulate their writing process. This will allow the students to explore the use of different literacies when creating their video (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

Digital storytelling is a great way to encourage struggling writers. The students are able to become storytellers by going through the traditional stages of researching the topic, writing the script and then developing a captivating story (Robin, 2008). Once students create their
stories, they can begin the process of thinking about text and how it can be used to convey meaning. As they write their stories students communicate their messages through visuals, their voice and text within their videos (Sukovic, 2014). This tool has the capacity to motivate struggling writers as they experience the satisfaction of creating stories enhanced by multimedia, additionally it can guide them from struggling writers to competent writers (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). If the student is having a hard time developing their story and they are only able to create a one-dimensional piece of writing, digital storytelling can be a way for them to transform and develop the product so it can be published and shared (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

When students are having a difficult time with the writing process it may be because they do not know any strategies to help guide them through the process. Storyboards are one tool writers can utilize to help develop their story line. If a student is having a hard time writing a script, they may start by creating a storyboard with little to no text at all (Sukovic, 2014). The storyboard and visual elements are very important when producing a digital story, because they help develop the outline for the video. “The process of storyboarding facilitates the introduction of events in a logical and orderly sequence thereby illuminating gaps or omissions. Photographs, clip art, or other graphics may visually compensate for the details that the struggling writer inadvertently omits” (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009, p. 291). When the students review their storyboard they will be able to find gaps or inconsistencies to make a more complete story. The students will then be able to take the strategies they learned and apply it to other writing areas.

One of the students Sylvester and Greenidge (2009) studied recorded her voice because she wanted to import it into her digital story. After playing it back she realized it was too fast and she did not convey enough expression. She choose to rerecord it without teacher direction until
she was satisfied with it. This demonstrates how digital storytelling can help with fluency, tone of voice, accuracy and rate when practicing and recording their script.

Sukovic (2014, p. 226) also points out, “Listening to other people’s stories and making constructive comments extend student ability to listen and empathize, adding another layer to student literacy skills.” This is an important skill to develop when watching and listening to the other students’ videos.

**Learning English as a Second Language.** When students are learning English as their second language and create a digital story with English as the language for the video the activity becomes even more useful and beneficial. The students know their work is going to be published and possibly viewed by others so they are motivated to create their best work (Yang & Wu, 2012). The students will go through the process of creating a digital story where they create the script, storyboard, rough draft and final product. It is important to note Yang and Wu (2012) found digital storytelling had a significant effect on the academic achievement in English.

When the students are introduced to digital storytelling they are introduced to tools for artistry that help them create and share their developed personal stories (Green, 2013). The students enjoy being able to create this fun, exciting story that allows them to use their imagination and visuals to help develop their stories. Teachers and librarians should look for ways to incorporate interesting and challenging digital story assignments when working with students whose primary language is not English. Yang and Wu (2012, p. 350) explain why it is important to utilize this tool, “The potential of digital storytelling as an approach for fostering collaborative second language learning in an environment that fosters higher order thinking and learning motivation.” This is important because not only will it help foster high order thinking and motivation of the students, but it also helps build collaboration.
Motivation. There are many reasons teachers and librarians should incorporate digital storytelling into their classroom; one of the most important reasons is because it motivates the students in the classroom. Sadik (2008, p. 502) found that, “Digital storytelling enriched the classroom learning environment, the curriculum, and student learning experiences by providing an open-ended, creative and motivating productive tool in the classroom.” By creating this environment where the students can create, they are motivated and want to construct a product they are proud of. The teachers in Sadik’s (2008) study perceived the students to be motivated and excited to use the different technologies that came with creating digital stories, including digital camera, computers, the Internet and the software for building the story, especially when it connected to a real world problem.

There are two roles students play when working on a digital story. The first one is the role of the viewer, where the students are engaged with stories for entertainment or to learn specific content. The second role is as the editor, where students focus on the development of the story, edit the video and are concerned about the overall quality. Morris (2013) found when the students were actively participating in the role of the editor they were demonstrating self-assessment and giving comments and good reflections. When actively participating in the roles the students are motivated to create a better end product. Digital storytelling can improve the students’ motivation, engagement and learning achievements, which will have a huge impact on their learning (Hung, Hwang & Huang, 2012; Sadik, 2008). It does this by creating a unique way for students to tell their story and message. With digital storytelling the teacher acts more as a facilitator and helps guide the students when necessary. Sukovic (2014) found the students really enjoyed the freedom teachers were giving them by allowing them to do their work and only providing guidance when needed.
When students are asked to create a digital story they are given a real reason for writing, which makes them more conscious of their audience. This reaches beyond just writing for themselves or their teacher and motivates them to write more clearly and include more detail (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). One of largest self-motivators is when the students take pride in their work and want to create a better end result, which creates a sense of accomplishment (Sukovic, 2014; Di Blas & Paolini, 2013). Other factors that increased the students’ engagement were the atmosphere, peers, self-motivation and interest (Sukovic, 2014).

**Technology Skills.** Digital storytelling provides a way for students to learn how to use technology effectively while they are still learning about their content. It is important to provide appropriate digital resources with usable tools to help motivate them to learn about the tools and create quality stories (Sadik, 2008). During Yang and Wu’s (2012) student students noticed the technology skills they were learning were applicable in other classes they were taking, such as an art class.

Students participating in the program iTell, which was a digital storytelling initiative, developed computer skills gradually while working on their stories and expressed a satisfaction in learning something new (Sukovic, 2014). The students commented on developing the new computer skills and having a deeper understanding of the digital environment. If the students in the iTell program used pictures protected by Copyright they were not able to publish their stories. This created a real-life lesson where they were able to see how Copyright can affect them. This created dialog about Copyright, although it is not a normal topic discussed in a younger classroom, it is a topic that is very important for them to learn about (Sukovic, 2014).

**Uses**

Digital storytelling has many free software’s online that can be implemented in the classroom. Also operating systems on the computers generally come with a movie creation
application already installed. The software has a tremendous ease of use and can easily be integrated into the classroom. If the teacher does not feel confident in the technology there are many how-to videos or help guides on the Website they can view. Teachers can also view different YouTube videos that help troubleshoot any issue they may come across.

There are many ways to integrate digital storytelling in the classroom. Personal narratives are the most popular videos created, where the author tells a story from their personal experiences. Stories that inform or instruct are another way to incorporate digital storytelling into the classroom, and can be used to convey instruction material from different content areas. Historical events are a way to incorporate this tool in the classroom by recounting events from history (Robin, 2008). Using digital storytelling as an e-portfolio tool is a unique way to assess the students learning. When using this tool as a reflective portfolio the students will be able to collect, organize, reflect and communicate their learning with other, especially the teacher. This is an important concept and can raise the achievement more effectively than any other strategy (Sadik, 2008).

Limitations

When introducing new technologies into the classroom there are always going to be people who are skeptical of using it and there are going to be some negative aspects to the tool. Sukovic (2014) found four major issues which inhibited student learning at times with digital storytelling, they were: problems with the technology, the organization of the students’ work, the students’ confidence and group members not working well together on the project.

One of the problems that often occur in the classroom is individuals place the emphasis on the technical skill without considering the subject matter, teaching strategies and real world applications (Robin, 2008). It is important to develop the lessons focusing on the transfer of
understanding instead of focusing on the tools being used. There were also teachers who were running into technical and computer issues that required additional technical assistance from individuals outside the classroom. An additional limitation seen in some schools were a lack of equipment and limited Internet use (Sadik, 2008). This can become a huge problem when trying to implement digital storytelling in the classroom causing frustration for the teachers and students.

The amount of time needed to implement digital storytelling is another limitation when wanting to use this tool in the classroom. Teachers may run into this when creating technology integration plans. The teacher must take the time to plan and prepare the lessons, learn the software and troubleshooting strategies, find appropriate resources and then teach the students how to use the software. These steps need to be completed to ensure the students are benefiting from the production process (Sadik, 2008).

Some teachers are reluctant to introduce this tool into the classroom because of their lack of competence or confidence on the topic. Even if they were comfortable using the software, they do not feel comfortable guiding a large class through the process. They were afraid of a loss of classroom management, technical glitches and the time pressure. Normally media and technology specialist are eager to help support a lesson that is integrating technology into the lesson or classroom and should be taken advantage of as much as possible (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). The software may intimidate teachers but the majority of teachers are not aware of the free and powerful tools already available on their operating systems (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

Sadik (2008) found the majority of students (75%) had a difficult time working in the small groups. The students had a difficult time planning together, keeping the information
organized and developing their stories. Developing the small learning communities will need guidance and support when students begin to create their stories.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

**Current/Future Practitioners**

The next step for current and future practitioners is to begin using digital storytelling in the classroom. Teachers can start by learning which software they can take advantage of and the tools that accompany it. It is the teacher’s responsibility to look at the different digital storytelling tools and choose which one they would like to first try with their students. After understanding the tools and some troubleshooting strategies start with a small digital storytelling project and let the students really take ownership and craft their own stories. It is important the teachers implements all of the different aspects of digital storytelling, including writing the script, creating the story board, composing it on the software, enhancing it with photos, videos, text and audio, and then showing the final product at a viewing. A great idea for implementing this in the classroom is using it for cross-curricular purposes so the students are taking away as much as they can with this tool. Furthermore, teachers themselves can create stories about their classrooms and then connect with teachers in other schools to build a collaborative learning space (Sadik, 2008). The teachers can also create videos to hook the students’ attention or convey content they want them to know.

**Administrators**

The most important element administrators need to consider is how to get this pedagogical tool into the classroom. The first step in doing this is setting up professional developments where teachers can learn about the tools and strategies to implement digital storytelling successfully. When deciding which professionally developments to provide the administrators must ensure it shows the teachers how to align the technology with curriculum.
This time should also be used to collaborate and learn from other teachers who are already implementing this tool successfully in their classroom (Sadik, 2008). Additionally, the administrators must establish continuous opportunities for learning and improvement with this tool.

**Researchers**

It would be beneficial to see more studies done on this topic. There are different possibilities the researchers could look into. One study that would benefit individuals is if they looked at the way digital storytelling affects different age groups. Teachers could then take this knowledge and construct their lessons around it. Researchers could also look at how to continue the use of digital storytelling in the classroom without using it too much and burning the students out with the use of the tool. The more research conducted on the benefits of using digital storytelling in the classroom the more it can be supported by administrators and teachers and brought in for the students to use.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this paper we have seen the benefits of utilizing digital storytelling, different ways to use the tool, the limitations associated with creating a digital story and the implications for the future. It is important that we are able to use this as a pedagogical tool to achieve mastery of the content, not just as a way to use technology with the students. Digital storytelling affects students learning in a positive way including the students’ motivation, writing, reading and 21st century skills, proving it should be used in today’s classrooms. Students are now going to be able to work in a technology-infused environment where students’ learning expands and collaboration and communication prosper.
References


