Digital Storytelling Finds Its Place in the Classroom

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My fourth and fifth graders may never say so, but the Place Project was all about storytelling. At the beginning of the school year, students answered a survey about writing that asked, "Are you a writer?" Sixty percent responded yes. After the Place Project, they responded to the same survey. "Are you a writer?" Ninety-nine percent said yes. Nothing is foolproof, but I have yet to find anything as motivating and influential on students' self-expression as helping them tell stories about an important place. The added dimension of video provided a meeting place for these students and their creativity.

One student captured it best: "This year I have learned that places are not just physical matter but emotional places in peoples' hearts. iMovie has made all my thoughts and feelings come alive in an awesome movie." The project confirmed my belief that everyone has a story about a place that is important to her or him, and that by using multimedia to develop and share those stories, we strengthen our understanding of our communities. As Barbara Ueland wrote in her book *If You Want to Write*, "Everyone is talented, original, and has something important to say," and that certainly holds true about an important place.

Structuring the Story Writing

For the first time in my teaching career, not one student wrinkled a brow and declared, "I don't have anything to write about!" I stood in awe of their response to my asking them to write about places where they felt comfortable, safe, or happy places where they could just be themselves. Their responses represented the customary places—bedrooms to backyards to ball fields—and intangible places like their imagination. Fifty percent of the battle of student writing was won. They were committed to a topic.

Structuring the second half of what to say and how to say it required an outline, a variety of pre-writing activities, and iMovie, the novice video-editing program from Apple.

• *MMS* Online Extra •
iMovie Tips:
Managing the iMovie-Infused Classroom

I recently spent over an hour scouring the Web for iMovie teacher tips for a class I am teaching for my colleagues. Dozens of iMovie tip sites provided excellent tutorials and sample iMovies, but not one took the role of the teacher in mind. As with many technology workshops, the focus is on learning the software, but what is running through most teachers' minds is how to teach with the software or how will it look in their classroom. I have used the iMovie program for over 2 years with fourth and fifth graders. Whether you have only one computer or a 20-plus computer lab (Count your blessings if you do!), the following suggestions should keep your projects from becoming your entire curriculum.

Advanced
• Record voice-overs on a digital camcorder, import them into the student's iMovie, then extract the audio from the video clips.

Intermediate
• When students are scanning images, be sure they each have a folder into which they can save the scans.

Novice
• Use the buddy system. It makes the most sense when students are new to a piece of software. They can answer each other's questions, coach each other, and provide important feedback regarding editing choices.

• Introduce iMovie to the students by creating a simple iMovie about someone related to your

Step by Step, the Journey Begins

Before I could expect them to write a story that had a clear beginning, middle, and end, students needed preparation. I directed them to orally answer questions from an outline with a partner. The outline prompted students to introduce their place by telling where it was, what it looked like, and why it was important. The body of the story needed to answer several questions:

- What is your earliest memory of your place?
- What are your feelings when you are there?
- What difference does your place make in your life?
- What do you see in your place that no one else sees?

Adding the Visual Dimension

From there students moved to visually representing their place by drawing, painting, creating a collage, or using KidPix on the computer to uncover more details about each place. I have found that asking students to select one image that best represents her or his place provides an anchor for the story and helps anyone coaching the story along to elicit more information from the student.

Although upper elementary students are expected to write compositions that traditionally contain at least four five-sentence paragraphs, the place stories were ready to move into the production phase when the outline questions were answered in sufficient detail. Due to many constraints (computer memory and the amount of time required to record voice into the computer), digital stories need to be restricted to approximately 3 minutes in length. Requiring students to include a hook to their introductions helped avoid the pitfall of creating merely a simple slide show.

The story writing did not end when students had a clear beginning, middle, and end, or when they were ready to begin using the scanner or digital camcorder. Peer coaching occurred throughout the production phase. Without prompting from me, students asked to see each other's place stories throughout the production and editing phases. Every student was genuinely interested in all of the student places and offered helpful suggestions on how to improve hooks or conclusions. Each time I heard a student ask, "What's your place?" it reinforced the positive impact of the project on the classroom community.

social studies curriculum, such as Martin Luther King Jr. [Click here to view movie]

Shortcut to Quick Voice-overs

While the iMovie program has an easy interface for recording your voice, voice-overs are the most time-consuming part of an iMovie project. Even in a computer lab setting, only one student can record at a time. Otherwise, the "background noise" can be overwhelming. In a classroom, everyone must be quiet while a student musters the courage to speak into the computer's microphone. As much as the kids enjoying hearing "Quiet on the set," it is not always feasible to make the entire class work around one iMovie project. You need time for recording voice because 9-year-olds and adults alike make plenty of public speaking mistakes. Capturing a student's voice is the real power behind using digital storytelling in the classroom. It is the most critical part of any iMovie project. If you are familiar with importing video clips into iMovie, try this shortcut to simplify the voice-over process.

Step 1. Ask a parent volunteer who's comfortable using a digital camcorder to tape students reading aloud their scripts.

Step 2. Find a quiet closet or hallway for taping. Set the camcorder on a tripod. Leave the lens cap on and record students reading their scripts in three to four sentence chunks, stopping and starting the camcorder after each chunk. Do not rewind if a student makes a mistake. Keep recording until the entire script is recorded. While one student is being recorded, have the next student listening or rehearsing his script.

Step 3. Connect the digital camcorder to the computer with the Firewire cable. Open the student's iMovie. Import the video footage. You do not need to stop and start the importing. You should see only black, empty video clips. Delete any clips you know are mistakes.

Step 4. Drag and drop the clips onto the video track.

Select all of the clips by holding down the shift key and clicking once on each blank clip. Under the Advanced menu at the top of the screen

Community Building Through Storytelling

Asking students to write about an important place requires trust. All must value each other's ideas and support the belief that hearing place stories from everyone benefits the entire class. Using a story-coaching approach I learned from storyteller Doug Lipman, I got the students to share in a way that quickly instilled a positive classroom environment and empowered student voices. When an author/teller shared her story, she received appreciations, then suggestions from the class, and finally had a chance to ask the audience any questions about her piece. The teller did not defend or explain during appreciations or suggestions. I have used this approach for all types of sharing, but found it particularly effective in helping students see themselves as authors with a purpose and an audience for writing that was greater than the immediate classroom.

Sharing a story about an important place involves many risks for students. The teacher needs to take those same risks by sharing a place story of his own. I shared with them how I saw the classroom as a place where I always felt at home and showed them pictures I had drawn to help convey some of the feelings about my place. I used the digital story I created about my place in the classroom to help students practice the story-coaching model.

As a class, we discussed the effectiveness of my hook, the images I selected, the tone of my voice, and the music that accompanied the story. Every wise teacher knows it's important to create a model of what you expect the students to complete. It is paramount in the case of using digital storytelling in the classroom. By doing so, you will learn more about time horizons, modifying expectations, and avoiding painful technical difficulties than I could ever hope to share with you in this article. You will also see how you are teaching *storytelling* and not just how to use the iMovie program.

Creating a digital story as a class is also a valuable way to introduce the iMovie fundamentals. We developed a digital story on Dr. Martin Luther King to celebrate his life that was not only powerful but unique, in that we created it collectively. I strongly recommend starting with a class story, not necessarily about place. It will spark student interest in digital storytelling and provide several opportunities to model the basic skills of the iMovie program.

select Extract Audio. After a few minutes you will see the voice-over green bars under the video clips.

Deselect by clicking anywhere inside the viewing screen. Now select all of the video clips again and delete them. Be careful not to select the voice-over bars. If you accidentally delete them, select Undo under the Edit menu at the top of the screen and click on each of the bars to deselect them. You should be left with just the green voice-over bars for students to arrange according to their accompanying images.

The students are still responsible for aligning their script with their images. I spent about 2 hours total importing and extracting the clips. It may seem like overstepping the boundary of maintaining student ownership of the project, but if 2 hours of my time saves 6 months of class time, then the advantage is obvious.

The Joys of Digital Video and iMovie

The moment my principal told me my classroom would soon include an iMac DV with the sleek, novice video editing program, iMovie, I gleefully began plotting the many ways I would integrate it into my fourth grade classroom. A few months earlier, I had attended a weekend boot camp in nonlinear video editing at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California. I was eager to put iMovie to the test to see if fourth graders could meet its learning curve and tap its much-touted tools for self-expression and media production. The students had no problem figuring out the iMovie drag-and-drop interface. Though we only had one iMovie-capable computer and it took several months, each student created an amazing digital story about a special place. That was 2 years ago, and I have been standing tall on the iMovie bandwagon, giving my testimony to the interested and skeptical that media creation has a vital place in today's classrooms.

CLICK HERE
to view Dr. Martin Luther King iMovie
[approx. 27MB — Click icon at left to get QuickTime]

Gearing Up for the Journey

The first year I introduced the Place Project I had two iMac DVs, a PowerPC with a UMAX Vista scanner, and handful of Macintosh Performas in my classroom. There were 24 students, meaning 24 stories had to be produced. It took 6 months, but every student completed his digital place story. This past year, I still had 24 students, but I also had an entire computer lab of iMac DVs ... and it still took 6 months. Two computers or 20, students needed to share their computer skills. Students were eager to assist their peers and would also seize any opportunity to ask a classmate to share her or his place story. Despite the remarkable citizenship among the students, the project required an extraordinary amount of flexibility in how I organized class time. Often students were not workingon the same task, so I could rotate them on the computers.

Managing the Technology . . . and the Learning

The teacher must surrender a great deal of control in embarking on digital storytelling with students. Part of what makes writing/storytelling/movie-making with technology so rewarding for students is that they are in the director's chair. Writing the story, illustrating and collecting images, and selecting music to match the feeling of the place could all be completed in a month and a half. So, what takes so long to scan images into the computer, record your voice, and edit it on the computer? Individually, a student could create a digital story in a week, but managing an entire class of digital storytellers presents a difficult pacing problem. Students will progress through selecting images, scanning, importing them into the computer, recording their voices, and adding transitions and text at varying rates. Timetables and due dates were not effective because some students needed more time to learn how to navigate the iMovie program.

After you create your model digital place story, you will see that students need to learn two major iMovie skills: how to bring images, music, and voice into the computer (importing) and how to sequence them according to their story (drag and drop). There are many features about the program that students figure out on their own. I spent very little time teaching direct iMovie skills. Students felt more like authors/producers when they were deciding what music to use or how to transition from one image to the next.

The Dimension of Sound

The Place Project brings each student's voice into the limelight. Voice recording is the single most time-consuming part of the project. A 3-minute script could take an hour or a week to record, depending on the student's confidence in his/her voice. It is always worth the extra time. Nothing compares to the power of the student's spoken word. Because you can only have one student record at a time, this creates a class management nightmare. I had five students in the computer lab at a time and ran it like anair traffic controller, ensuring that another student was ready to record as soon as one had finished a take. Parent volunteers were essential in the computer lab at this time to assist students with routine questions.

Using iMovie to create digital stories does not require a digital camcorder. Most students used photographs and images that they drew by hand or on the computer. Students stored their iMovie project folders on the hard drives of the lab computers and returned to work on the same computer each session. All of the computers were connected to a network server, which made importing scanned images easier. Students who had scanners at home were willing to take home images for their classmates' stories and have their parents scan them. They then e-mailed them back to me or sent them back on a disk. (A logistical note: Be certain to instruct students on how to determine where and in what format scanned images are being saved/stored by the

scanner software. Students squandered a lot of time by not paying attention to or understanding these details. I tried to model for them how to trouble shoot situations when glitches arose, and they learned how important patience really was when working with technology.)

Conclusion: Storytelling First

It's vital to note, of course, that the *technology was always secondary to the storytelling*. Scanning photographsand hand-drawn images into the computer, using a digital camcorder, importing music, recording voices, and composing and editing their stories using Apple's iMovie program comprised a technological process that enabled students to develop and share a clear, structured, effective story. Technology's place in the classroom has always challenged teachers to maximize their time and resources while proving its worth. The Place Project demonstrated how technology can be instrumental in the perennial student struggle to find voice, confidence, and structure in their writing.

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