

# Three Cases of Unconventional Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling

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## INTRODUCTION

The narration is the art of using words and actions for the representation of the elements of a story in such a way that the listener's imagination is stimulated (Genette, 1998). More simply put, it is the art of telling a story to an audience, in order to convey important messages. Due to the technological developments, storytelling has become digital; the oral or written story is enhanced by using multimedia and hypermedia elements (Lathem, 2005). Narrations, either digital or conventional, are useful educational tools. Since narrations cause the keen interest of students, this helps them to easily consolidate and assimilate information (Coventry, 2008). They increase the oral and written skills, strengthen critical thinking and the ability to analyze and synthesize information (Ohler, 2006). When students create their own digital stories (individually or as a group), they learn to conduct research on a topic, to ask questions, to organize ideas, to express their views and to make meaningful narratives (Robin, 2006).

There is an extensive literature regarding the educational benefits when using digital storytelling (e.g., Coventry, 2008; Ohler, 2006; Robin, 2008). Disproportionally fewer studies have been conducted examining the potential of this tool in areas where the settings are not strictly instructional or the main objective is not some form of knowledge acquisition. The present study is an attempt to fill that gap, by embracing the standpoint that digital storytelling is a good method for documenting personal experiences, that it can be a form of narrative therapy and that it can help students to discover parts of their

personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011). Three case studies are presented where digital storytelling was used in a non-mainstream, unconventional way. In all, knowledge acquisition was irrelevant or an insignificant factor; instead, the emphasis was on broader issues that students, as well as teachers, face at school.

## BACKGROUND

Focusing on problems that students and teachers face at school, which are not directly related to knowledge acquisition, but affect how the school functions and/or the emotional well-being of students, three areas were of interest: the poor school integration of immigrant students, young students' adjustment to school, and bullying.

In Greece, 10.35% of the total students' population are immigrants (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2011). Insufficient knowledge of the Greek language and, consequently, low performance in language lessons is a major problem (Retali, 2013). There is also a more important difficulty; that of poor school and/or social integration. Schools could play an important role, but the Greek educational system is not capable of assimilating immigrant students well (Skourtou, Vratsalis, & Govaris, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to help them overcome their adaptation problems.

Coming to primary school for the very first time marks the beginning of a transitional period to children's lives. Rules and routines are different from those they were accustomed in the kindergarten and their status and identity might be affected (Fabian, 2007). Problems may arise

that have short and long-term educational and/or psychological implications (Dockett & Perry, 2009). Behavioral problems are also common (Brooker, 2008). Consequently, finding ways that allow a smooth and quick transition to the school's environment are quite important.

Bullying is a phenomenon that is becoming more and more frequent in Greece's schools. It greatly affects students' psycho-emotional development, their school performance (Manesis & Lambropoulou, 2014) and may lead to serious psychological trauma and dysfunctional social behavior (Galanaki & Vogiatzoglou, 2015). In hypothetical situations children easily express their intentions to help the victim or to report the incident (Rigby & Johnson, 2006), but in reality, only a small percentage actually acts (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Studies, in Greece, examining interventions where students actively participated and were not just passive receivers of information are sparse (e.g., Kyriazis & Zacharias, 2015). Thus, there is a need to inform them in a more comprehensive way.

The coming sections present how these issues were dealt using digital storytelling.

## MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

### Case 1: School Integration of an Immigrant Student

In order to help a sixth-grade female immigrant student, having significant adaptation problems, a short project was planned and carried out, at a primary school in Rhodes, Greece, from late October 2014, till mid-March 2015. Twenty students (including the subject) were involved. The main idea of the project was to ask her to develop and present to her classmates an autobiographical digital story, illustrating her thoughts and feelings from her transition from one country to another.

She was selected as the study's subject because: (a) she recently came to Greece from the Domini-

can Republic. There were no other immigrants from that country; therefore, no one could help her and her family during their transitional period, (b) she did not socialize with the other students, whose attitudes toward her were "indifferent", (c) she should be attending high-school, but because of her poor school performance she had to repeat the primary school's last grade, and (d) her adaptation problems had worsened because of (c). From the above, it can be argued that she reflected characteristics and problems arising from the fact that she was an immigrant, therefore she constituted a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Data were gathered from multiple sources; interviews, direct observations, drawings, and the subject's digital story.

The interviews with the subject's teacher were about her difficulties in social interaction with her classmates. The interviews with the students focused on how they view and interact with her. The interviews with the subject focused on the difficulties she was facing and the level of social interaction with her classmates. The in-classroom observations were focused on her behavior and the attitudes of the other students toward her.

The development of the story lasted for a month, with a total of nine one-to-two hour sessions. It consisted of three parts: (a) "Before leaving" (seven scenes), where her thoughts, feelings, and conversations with relatives and friends were depicted, (b) "The journey" (two scenes) where her first impressions of her new home were illustrated, and (c) "In Rhodes" (two scenes) where her situation at school was portrayed. Her favorite song when she was living in her homeland accompanied the first part, while in the other two parts she used her favorite Greek song. Even though all dialogues and thoughts were written in Greek, they were "spoken" in Spanish, using her own voice. It has to be noted that during the development of the subject's story, the researcher did not intervene in any way. This was done because guidance regarding the structure or the content of the digital story, might have resulted in the alteration of the results.

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