

Chapter X

Digital Storytelling as a Tool in Education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to discuss digital storytelling in the context of education. Two questions guide the study: What is a digital story? What is the motivation for making a digital story? I have examined short multimodal personally told digital stories published on the Internet. As a theoretical framework for the discussion, I have compared digital storytelling with storytelling traditions in the oral and the written culture. The result implies that the definition of a digital story depends on what is considered a narrative. By transcending what has traditionally been considered narrative and by defining narrative in a broader sense, digital storytelling is an innovative tool and serves as a promising activity facilitating learning and development in the postmodern society.

INTRODUCTION

Digital storytelling has become popular in the educational community (Davis, 2006; Farmer, 2004; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Hull & Zacher, 2004; Kajder, 2004; Marcuss, 2003; Ohler, 2005; Salpeter, 2007; Ware & Warschauer, 2006; Weis, Benmayer, O'Leary, & Eynon, 2002). It has been argued that digital storytelling mediates learning and development. Ohler (2005), for example, claims that digital storytelling facilitates criti-

cal thinking. Davis (2006) discusses the role of digital storytelling in students' identity formation. Several authors take a literacy perspective and claim that digital storytelling enables students to become competent and creative authors (Kajder, 2007; Weis et al., 2002). Others stress that digital storytelling gives rise to multimodal ways of making meaning (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Hull & Zacher, 2004; Ware & Warschauer, 2006).

I am interested in exploring the nature of digital storytelling: what needs it serves and how it might

facilitate learning and development. The aim is to understand and discuss digital storytelling in the context of education. The following questions have guided this line of research: What is a (good) digital story? What is the motivation for making a digital story?

The kind of digital storytelling discussed in this chapter originated at the Center for Digital Storytelling in San Francisco (<http://www.storycenter.org/index1.html>) (Lambert, 2002). In this tradition, a digital story is a 1–3 minute multimodal personally told story intended to be published on the Internet. This tradition of making digital stories will be described in detail later on in the chapter.

I will start by exploring the nature of narrative—well aware of its complexity, immensity, and thus intricacy. My position is pedagogical and the aim is to obtain a useful definition for the purpose of this study. I will do this by asking: what is narrative and what is it for? I continue the chapter with a comparison of narrative in what Ong (1967) calls the *oral-aural culture*, the *alphabet* and *print culture*, and the *electronics* and *sensorium culture* of communications media. The comparison provides a theoretical framework for discussing what constitutes a (good) digital story and what motivates a digital story. As a basis for the discussion I have, in a qualitative exploratory study, grouped digital stories by using a framework called the “seven elements” for making a digital story. I discuss how we can understand digital storytelling, and finally, I consider the implications of digital storytelling for education.

DEFINING NARRATIVE

It was in the transition from mimetic communication to oral language that the coherent narrative developed as a means of understanding the world (Donald, in Nelson, 1996). Language made storytelling possible, and as a consequence, narratives facilitated explanations and the sense-making of

experiences. Thus, narration is a fundamental and universal way of human communication (Ong, 1982/2002). Consequently, it is an essential way of knowing (Bruner, 1985, 1986).

Narrative, understood as communication, stands in contrast to the view of narrative as a literary endeavor, that is, as an artform (Abbott, 2002). In the “narrative turn” (Bruner, 2002), however, the boundary between every day narration (cf. Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001) and literary narration is vanishing. Narrative is no longer perceived of as pieces of art and objects which are created and experienced individually within a cultural/artistic context. For example, Gee (1991, p. 13) states, “narrative is fundamentally a perspective that human beings take on the way in which certain themes fall into a satisfying pattern, a perspective stemming from their social identity and the resources their social group(s) make available to them.” Gislén (2003) suggests that narrative should be understood as a process through which individuals and groups confirm, repeat, negotiate, and change their common reality in terms of what is and what can be possible to think and do. In that regard, narrative returns to its origins as a fundamental way of communicating.

What then is a narrative and what distinguishes narrative discourse from other forms of discourse? To define narrative unequivocally would of course be impossible. Johansson (2005) asserts that within the humanities, the discussion continues to be alive and intense. But in the social sciences, narrative theory and method is still in its infancy. As a representative from the former discipline, Abbott (2002, p. 12) suggests that narrative is “the representation of an event or a series of events.” The implication (p. 16) is that “narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an *event* or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented.” Abbott (2002, p. 12) asserts that without an event or an action you may have “a ‘description’, an ‘exposition’, an ‘argument’ a ‘lyric’ some combination of these, or something

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