

Using Digital Storytelling as a Literacy Tool for the Inner City Middle School Youth

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Introduction

In the summer of 2004, I had the opportunity to serve as a participant/ observer in an after school program designed for inner city youth in Oakland, California. I was also able to collect interview data from students, teachers, and community participants about their perceptions of this exemplary program, Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth, (DUSTY). DUSTY is an award winning program using digital storytelling to motivate middle school, inner city youth to tell their stories through literacy, language arts, and technology. Professor Hull, co-founder, states that the word underground in DUSTY is used because the program is housed in the basement of an old Victorian house. Before sharing with you the process the DUSTY students used to create their digital stories, let me provide a brief explanation and rationale for using digital storytelling in the classroom.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a curriculum innovation that integrates technology with communication, language arts, and literacy skills. It is an approach to working with media tools and storytelling, both of which can be exciting experiences for pre-school through adult learners. The world of publishing has become more inclusive, with the integration of computer technology in the K-12 curriculum since the advent of desktop publishing. *Education Reform* defines digital storytelling in the following manner.

Digital storytelling is an emerging art form of personal, heartfelt expression that enables individuals and communities to reclaim their personal cultures while exploring their artistic creativity. While the heart and power of the digital story is shaping a personal digital story about self, family, ideas, or experiences, the technology tools also invite writers and artists to think and invent new types of communication outside the realm of traditional linear narratives.

(Education Reform, <http://applications.edreform.net/resource/10932>)

Kajder (2004) found that stories flourished in her classroom when she allowed students to see themselves in their work, participate within literacy communities and, define themselves as readers and writers. Digital storytelling allowed her students to work as readers, writers, artists and digital moviemakers.

The advantages of digital storytelling are many. It allows learners to construct their own learning, thus engaging students in inquiry and active learning processes. It helps provide media literacy for students. It also presents a narrative about life featuring the culture of the learner (Evans, 2003; Howell, 2003 and Center for Digital Storytelling, <http://www.storycenter.org/understanding.html>). I agree with Banaszewski (2002), that everyone has a story about a place that is important to her or him. With digital storytelling, learners are encouraged to create their own stories from their own experiences and express them through art, oral history, creative writing, speaking, photographs, music, news clippings, digital video, the Web, graphic design, sound engineering, or animation.

Banaszewski (2002) uses digital storytelling with elementary level students through the "Place Project". He has students to begin thinking about an important place to them. Next, they share the attributes of this place with others. To guide their thinking, he asks students to share answers to the following 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?

Next he asks learners to use art to add a visual dimension about their place. Their visuals are scanned into documents that can be added to their written accounts of their place. Finally, students add a 3-minute voice script about their place. All of this is put into an iMovie and burned to a DVD.

If you visit the Tokai University and Kai'ipiolani Community College, Hawaii's Web site at <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/IESE/MCI/digital-storytelling.html>, you will find an annotated list of technology software for creating digital stories. Among the list are Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, Inspiration, Web sites and HyperStudio. Also on the Web are tutorials and tools to guide you in planning digital storytelling for your students. For example, Nora Paul and Christina Fiebich are authors of the Elements of Digital Storymaking (<http://www.inms.umn.edu/Elements/>). This site provides you with demonstrations of the use of audio with content and movement within the content. It also has research articles, teaching resources, and innovative examples of digital storytelling projects.

BellSouth presents a rationale for using digital storytelling at this site: <http://www.knowitall.org/bellsouthdigitalstoryteller/training/index.html>. A description of their project is the following.

The BellSouth Digital Storyteller project is an opportunity for students to learn history first hand by interviewing veterans from WWII and Korea. After selecting a topic from the History Curriculum Standards, students identify veterans who have actually experienced the event(s) they are studying. Using video technology, the students interview the veterans, capture footage, edit the story, and record a living memory. During this process, the students put learning into practice while developing communication, research, and technology skills. This is an opportunity to integrate technology into the curriculum. It provides students an opportunity to produce videos of America's history while learning about the time period first hand.
(<http://www.knowitall.org/bellsouthdigitalstoryteller/>)

Notice, this project might be considered a class project, rather than an individual one. Also at this site is a tutorial outlining the steps for digital storytelling. Each step provides a template that can be downloaded to your computer disk. The digital storytelling steps are as follows:

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|------------------|----------------------|
| • Planning | • Distribution |
| • Pre-Production | • Teaching Templates |
| • Editing Ideas | • Form |

The Digitales site (http://www.digitales.us/seven_steps.php) provides teachers with "The Art of Digital Storytelling" in seven steps. These are:

- Writing a narrative script
- Planning the Project
- Organizing Project Folders
- Making the Voiceover
- Gathering and Preparing Media
- Putting it all Together
- Distribution

This tutorial is user friendly and easy to follow. These steps are similar to the BellSouth Project. The Center for Children's Book is also an excellent resource about digital storytelling, located at:

http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~ccb/about_us.html

Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY)

DUSTY is an after-school program that links university students with elementary, middle school, and high school youth in a community outreach project, in which youth and university students engage in digital storytelling about their lives and their communities (Hull 2003). This program has grown out of a collaboration effort by educators, community members, students, and youth interested in helping bridge the technology divide for inner city youth. DUSTY is co-founded by Professor Glynda Hull of the University of California, Berkeley and Oakland filmmaker, Michelangelo James. The goals of DUSTY are as follows:

- to bridge the digital divide by providing children and adults in underserved communities with access to literacy and technology
- to promote literacy learning with an eye toward determining how reading and writing can best be fostered in after-school, technology-rich settings
- to push the boundaries between school and after-school, exploring how the literate and social development of after-school learning and play can be carried into students' and teachers' classroom worlds
- to provide a forum for intergenerational communication and community building by bringing children and seniors together to collaborate on the writing and sharing of digital stories



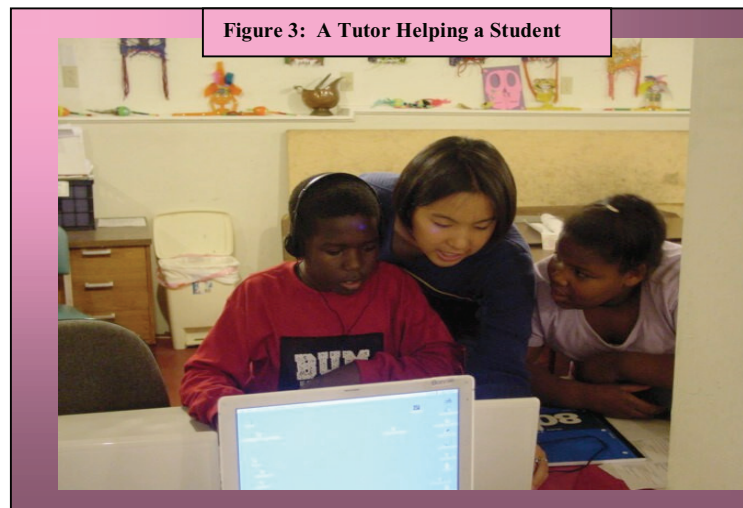
DUSTY is located in a low-income neighborhood in West Oakland. The site offers after-school digital storytelling and literacy development activities to elementary, middle, and high school students in this community. The Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley and the Prescott-Joseph Center for Community Enhancement, funded in part by a US Department of Education Community Technology Center grant, collaborate to bring UC Berkeley undergraduates to west Oakland to work with youth on their digital stories.

Of the 16 students who participated in the program when I served as a participant/ observer, many did not have access to computers in their homes and felt somewhat ill at ease when first introduced to the concept of digital storytelling. In addition, as with many after school programs, students wanted to play around and not focus immediately on the project. With a limited time schedule for the eight-week summer morning program, (8:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.), including an hour for lunch, we had to make every minute productive toward reaching our final goal. Of course, the final goal of the program is more than the “run-of-the-mill” after school program that in some cases is no more than a glorified baby sitting service. In light of the No Child Left Behind legislation, DUSTY aims to foster literacy through providing a technological setting for the inner city child to create narrations of self, which will lead to a more positive self image and negate negative, destructive behavior. In Figures 1 and 2, students are collecting digital footage.



It took a few days to capture the students' interest at a level where they were totally immersed in learning activities. From my observations, students were highly motivated in the digital storytelling process, once we began to visit neighborhoods and capture digital footage. As one student summarized his thoughts about DUSTY, "When our tutors and teachers 'took the project to the streets', to our community, I saw my neighborhood in ways that I had not considered before". This perhaps is true, because we asked students to make notes completing the statements, "I see...; I smell...; I hear...; and, I taste....

When we returned to the classroom, we asked students to begin writing about their community. Their writing was in the form of poetry, narratives, and short stories. We engaged students in the writing and publishing processes with the assistance of UC Berkeley undergraduate students, who served as tutors. (See Figure 3). After their stories were written and edited, using word processing software, students created audio files to add to their multimedia presentations. The software programs used for the "movies" were Adobe Premiere and Adobe Photoshop. Audio consisted of students recording passages from their stories, adding background music, and inserting ready-made sounds from software programs such as PowerPoint. Next, students selected clips taken with digital cameras and camcorders. The clips were added to their stories. The project staff and students were fortunate to work with a filmmaker and a media specialist.



Parent volunteers were very helpful and served as chaperones as we walked through the neighborhood. Approximately two to three students were assigned to an adult chaperone, a tutor and/or a parent. See Figure 4 of a parent chaperone walking through the neighborhood.

Figure 4: Parent Chaperone



An example of an outcome of DUSTY is “Stranger In My House,” a poem by Nicholas Veal (2001). Nicholas writes, in his own words, his perceptions of his neighborhood as he completes the statements, I hear ..., I see ..., I smell ..., and I feel.... See Figure 5.

Figure 5: Poem by Nichols Veal

Stranger In My House

Poverty's Pain
I hear kids playing
I hear gun shots
as another brother slain
I hear Miss Reid calling for lil' Jon
I hear in the street
that the brotha slain
name was Jon
I hear crack-heads crying for help
I hear rats crawling in the walls
I see kids with the flies on they heads
and sleep in they eyes
who's raising them?

I see grown man
sexually attracted to babies
I see women givin' up on their kids
and losing them in The System
I see people getting addicted to drugs
and start to look inhuman
I smell urine at the bus stop
I smell crack smoke when we walk to the corner store
I smell decaying bodies in the alley
I smell alcohol
on Mama's breath.

I feel bullets in my chest burning
I feel the Devil pull arm trying to drag me down to Hell.
I feel like dying
because it's too hard living

I feel like my ancestors
I have to learn to read so I can beat Master
I feel the pain of the dead slaves
killed for My freedom
I touch their souls
lost in the dark night
I touch the kids
crying for real homes
I touch the words that God spoke
I touch the pain
that bites at my feet
reminding me of the Motherland
the pain that brings with it
the world's hatred
my hatred

The students were creative in choosing background music for their poems and short stories. Some chose to blend and combined beats from the Internet. Others chose music from CDs. They were free to select their favorite artists. For some, it was current hip-hop. Whereas for others, it was vintage hits from the past. In figures 6 and 7 students are shown rewriting and typing their final drafts.

Figure 6



Figure 7



Conclusion

The DUSTY project was a very positive experience for students, undergraduate tutors and professors at UC Berkeley. Each of the eight students who completed the summer 2004 program created a digital story. Eight other students did not complete the summer program for various reasons. Two chose to go to a neighborhood music program. Two others had transportation problems. Two chose another summer program, and the other two transferred to the afternoon DUSTY program. The teachers involved in DUSTY found students highly motivated to participate once they became actively engaged in various aspects of digital storytelling. The trips through the neighborhood, one to the postal distribution center, and two other outings through the streets near the center, aroused the students' curiosity as seen in their rapt attention and careful noting taking as we walked.

The neighborhood immediately surrounding the center has the usual inner city landmarks, a washhouse, several "mom and pop" grocery stores, and two or three churches per block. Gathering information from their own neighborhood and going through the process of analyzing this information by putting it into writing seems to have given these students another view of themselves and their

surroundings. The enthusiasm of the students increased as they progressed through the various steps of the program, while creating their rough drafts, word processing their stories, finding appropriate images from the Internet, using voice capture, and adding background music.

In summary, the underlying objective of the program is to increase reading and writing through the use of technology. One final goal is to see a carryover of the coupling of literacy education and technology into a viable life career for the inner city student. As a program participant and observer, I noticed that there were increases in several key areas for the students who finished the program. There was an obvious increase in technical vocabulary as students advanced through the steps of the program. Writing skills were honed as they revised their stories. Reading became a fruitful necessity during searches on the Internet for images and information to complete assignments given by the teachers. In short, digital storytelling as a literacy tool fulfilled its goal and worked for the inner city school children I observed during the DUSTY 2004 summer program.

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About the Author

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