

ASSIGNING ACADEMIC REFLECTIONS IN THE FORM OF DIGITAL STORIES IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Ramona Tang

National Institute of Education, Singapore
ramona.tang@nie.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

What it means to be “literate” in today’s society is very different from what it meant a few years ago. As a teacher educator, I am always mindful of the need to make sure that my teaching and assessment reflect the 21st century educational landscape that my teacher trainees will be facing in the near future. It was with this in mind that I introduced a digital story assignment into my undergraduate text analysis course. Robin (2006) has pointed out that “Digital Storytelling by students provides a strong foundation in many different types of literacy, such as information literacy, visual literacy, technology literacy, and media literacy”. I wanted my undergraduate students to learn about the potential of using digital storytelling for educational purposes, and so introduced the genre to them as part of our discussion of “new genres” of texts. At the same time, I wanted them to experience actually creating a digital story for themselves, and so assigned all of them to produce an end-of-semester academic reflection in the form of a digital story.

KEYWORDS

Digital storytelling, academic reflections

DIGITAL STORYTELLING – PART OF THE NEW “DIGITAL” LANDSCAPE

Prensky (2001) makes a distinction between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”. The former are people who “have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (p. 1) and the latter are people “who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in [their] lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology” (p. 1).

I introduced for the first time in 2011 a digital story assessment component into my undergraduate Text Analysis course at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. The experience confirmed for me that I am very much a “digital immigrant”, one who enjoys and sees the educational potential of new technology, but who considers its tools “new” rather

than “natural”. A surprising discovery for me, however, was that my undergraduate students (who are also trainee teachers) were not entirely “digital natives” either. While fluent in the use of most things digital, their digital literacy for the most part did not extend into the educational sphere. For instance, while many had experience using programs such as Photostory and Windows Movie Maker, hardly anyone had used these in the context of academic work, and the notion of producing an academic reflection (inclusive of a focused argument, well-supported claims, and references to the literature where appropriate) *in the form of a digital story* was alien to them.

I felt it was important not only for my students but also for *me* to start considering the educational potential of digital stories. Brown et al. (2005) have argued that “[t]he concept of literacy ... has become more differentiated and more expansive in the wake of the technological revolution”. What it means for a person to be “literate” in today’s society is vastly different from what it meant even a few years ago. Increasingly, coming through our university doors will be students for whom a plain text written on paper will no longer be the norm, because so much of what they read, write and view will not be plain text on paper.

Some of my trainee teachers were apprehensive about my assignment. But I am sure of two things: (1) The pupils they will face when they start teaching in the near future will not share their apprehension, and as a teacher educator, I need to prepare them for the realities of teaching 21st century children. (2) The young adults that I will see in *my* class in perhaps as little as five years will not have such an apprehension either, and I need to prepare *myself* to engage my students in the kinds of meaning-making to which they are accustomed.

SOME OF THE CHALLENGES THAT I FACED

There were three main challenges that I faced:

- (1) It was not easy managing the different levels of prior knowledge (of digital storytelling and of digital storytelling software) that my students brought with them to the course. For example, while some fully appreciated being walked through the basics of a software program like Photostory, others expressed the view that the level of our hands-on workshop was pitched far too low.
- (2) Although I took pains to explain my rationale for introducing this assessment component, some of my students were resistant to the idea of putting the time in to try something new.
- (3) As someone who teaches academic writing as well as applied linguistics courses, I typically make it a point to explicitly spell out for my students all my expectations for their written assignments, and I also try to alert them to potential pitfalls based on the work submitted by previous students. In this case, however, because it was the first time I had assigned my students to write their end-of-semester reflections in the form of a digital story, I had no exemplars which I could show them, and I was also thus unable to predict the problems that they would face.

FEEDBACK FROM THE STUDENTS

At the end of the semester, I carried out a feedback exercise to find out how my students felt about the digital storytelling assignment. There was a mix of positive and negative feedback. The recurring negative sentiment was that working to create a digital story was time-consuming. A surprising number of students also wrote that they found the assignment difficult because they were “not tech-savvy”. On the positive side, students felt that it was new and interesting, and that it allowed them to be creative. A good number of the students also appreciated the fact that they were being given the opportunity to learn something which they could use in their classrooms in future.

REFERENCES

- Brown, J., Bryan, J., & Brown, T. (2005). Twenty-first century literacy and technology in K-8 classrooms. *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 1 (3).
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 1-6.
- Robin, B. (2006). The educational uses of digital storytelling. In C. Crawford et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2006* (pp. 709-716). Chesapeake, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).