

Brett Pierce

EXPANDING Literacy

**Bringing
Digital Storytelling
into Your
Classroom**

**Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH**

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <http://heinemann.com/products/E13239.aspx>

Heinemann

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To Kerry, whose love propelled me into and sustained me during this endeavor. And to our kids—Ethan and Maya—who gave me years of excuses to indulge in stories and storytelling. All three of you form the ebullient universe that allows me to think, express, and reach. And dance . . . Bouncing Around the Room.

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The Rationale for Making Digital Storytelling a Normative Classroom Practice

The world of digital storytelling revealed itself to me in a simple incident involving my son when he was in seventh grade. He had stayed the weekend at a friend's house and they had spent the entire time making a video to post to their new Facebook accounts. This was around 2011. They posted the video, and for the first time, my son was getting likes and encouraging comments from his classmates. This meant the world to him.

Then I heard murmuring among parents in the bleachers at a middle school basketball game. Had I seen the video? Ummm, no. I went home and watched it. It was making fun of Justin Bieber and was . . . offensive. It had some clever comic edits; I was impressed, honestly, but appalled at the same time. Here I was, a producer and program developer for Sesame Workshop, the creators of *Sesame Street*. My job was to help people make short videos about curricular goals in order to educate children and youth. My job was to invest in the idea that the stories we tell in the media—the characters we create—can positively affect attitudes and behavior in our audiences. But in my own backyard, my sensitive and conscientious son had made a funny video that was increasing his popularity while reinforcing derogatory stereotypes—a trade-off that was a no-brainer to a thirteen-year-old. This moment brought to the light of day what had been slowly churning under the surface: professional media makers like myself who go through painstakingly detailed

processes to produce media that will positively affect human thinking and behavior were being replaced by a new tsunami of programming that was being created and disseminated by . . . anyone with a smartphone. The universal democratization of media creation had an emerging dark side. Was there anything I could do to address it?

The answer was yes: find a way to make meaningful, thoughtful digital storytelling a standard, best practice in schools. That's what writing a school paper is all about—organizing ideas to tell a coherent and meaningful story. So, why not transfer that complex set of skills to digital storytelling so those same standards could be applied to the emergent digital world of stories that was consuming youth's daily hours?

A simple proposition to self, and I got excited. I had spent over twenty years at Sesame Workshop as a producer in the international department. This meant that I got to work with existing TV formats—*Square One TV* (a math show), *3–2–1 Contact* (a science show), and *Ghostwriter* (a literacy show)—and adapt them to the local culture in full collaboration with local producers. These shows all saw new and distinctly different lives in countries like Indonesia, Israel, China, the United Kingdom, and Poland. And this work expanded as time went on. I was an executive producer on a series about “intercultural understanding, conflict prevention in a multicultural setting, and conflict resolution in children's everyday lives and circumstances” that targeted youth ages eight through twelve in what is now North Macedonia. I was a cocreator and producer of *Salam Shabab*, a series targeting Iraqi youth ages thirteen through eighteen that ran for three seasons and was designed to “create the foundations of peace building by empowering Iraqi youth to be confident, open-minded and participatory citizens of a diverse society.”

This proposition to self asked me to take this process of curriculum-driven media creation and bring it into the classroom, which is where I began my career: teaching high school English in Virginia.

As the first concrete step in this educational odyssey, I started Meridian Stories (www.meridianstories.com), a nonprofit with a mission “to prepare middle and high school students for the 21st century workplace by providing opportunities to collaborate, create, problem solve, and lead in the development and production of meaningful digital narratives that address curricular goals” (Pierce 2010).

That was ten years ago. The experience of this book is fed by the connections I've made to middle and high school teachers and students through Meridian Stories over the past ten years; by the continued international work I do in places like the United Arab Emirates, Somalia, and South Sudan, where we work together to create digital stories—audio and video—for social impact; and by my annual teaching in the Jan Plan at Colby College, where I have the privilege to teach a course called Developing Media for Social Change.

I am a classroom teacher but mostly an outsider to the daily dictates of life in middle and high school. However, I am a full-on educator (BA in theatre, MA in literature, EdM in communications) who hopes that in bringing this media-based perspective into the

classroom, we can allow creative sparks to fly and begin to formulate a paradigm shift to the full integration of meaningful digital storytelling into the classroom.

The Setting: A Glancing Peek into Our Digitized World

Only a few times in the history of humankind have societies shifted entirely as a result of the introduction of a new medium or communication technology. We are amid one of those times, and this book is about teaching to the new form of writing that is emerging as a result.

But let's start with some context. Way, way, way back when, we shifted from oral cultures to literate cultures. The origins of writing can be traced to the late fourth millennium BC, when, some scholars argue, it began as a result of an increasingly complex economy in Mesopotamia, where transactions could no longer be memorized: they had to be recorded in some fashion (Robinson 2007). The nature of this change is eloquently articulated by Walter Ong, a breakthrough scholar in this realm who had this to say about orality:

In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration. . . . Without writing, words . . . have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. . . . They have no focus and no trace, not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events. (1982, 23–31)

Words as actions. Not descriptions of actions, but actions themselves. I love that idea. Then came print, and here is what Walter Ong has to say about that:

Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for “objectivity” in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. . . . To live and understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does. (1982, 45–82)

Heavy stuff. But so cool. And this just scratches at the surface of how writing changed humanity's relationship to self and society. Jump ahead over five thousand years to 1450 AD and we got the printing press—the next significant innovation in the interdependence between humanity and media. With the printing press, among other things, knowledge

was democratized as literacy became widespread; the nation state was born now that laws and rules could be printed, disseminated, and enforced; and language was standardized.

Fast-forward to the start of the twentieth century, and radio, followed by TV, entered into society's mainstream, reshaping how we spent time and interacted, expanding our understanding of the larger world, and introducing the idea of culturally shared experiences: everyone growing up in the sixties and seventies knew Walter Cronkite, *Bewitched*, and *The Jeffersons*. The introduction of television and radio dramatically reconfigured the way we thought, perceived, interacted, and understood, and all of this was foreseen in the midsixties by Marshall McLuhan, who famously wrote: "For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (1964, 1).

Look at that statement. For me, those words contain an idea that is infinite in its range and therefore scary, profound, exciting, and enlightening. My translation: communication technologies universally reprogram our understanding of self and others and communities and societies, and the more aware we are of this phenomenon, the better able we are to harness and optimize those changes.

And now we have the internet, which has in turn yielded the many social media platforms of which we are all well aware.

I mention all this not as groundbreaking news, but as a reminder that (1) history has proven that the introduction of communication technologies does indeed change how societies evolve, and (2) we are currently living through one of those seismic societal conversions that used to take hundreds of years—the impact of the printing press, for example—and is now reduced to a matter of a few years.

One telling lens through which to gain a perspective on this phenomenon is through the four reports that Common Sense Media has produced between 2011 and 2020 on media use and access among zero- to eight-year-olds. The excerpts in Figure 1–1 illustrate the speed and depth with which digital culture is seeping into our lives. There are monumental changes in behavior happening every couple of years. I have chosen these reports that highlight this age group because the kids from this study are your current or near-future students. But the larger point is this: just look at the movement of media use in terms of availability and consumption over the ten-year period shown in Figure 1-1.

Figure 1–1

2011

Today a substantial proportion of the time that young children spend with screen media is spent with digital media—including computers, handheld and console video game players, and other interactive mobile devices such as cell phones, video iPods, and iPad-style tablet devices. Among 0- to 8-year-olds as a whole, a quarter (27%) of all screen time is spent with these digital devices. (Rideout 2011, 9)

2013

Among families with children age 8 and under, there has been a five-fold increase in ownership of tablet devices such as iPads, from 8% of all families in 2011 to 40% in 2013. (Rideout 2013, 9)

2017

Nearly all (98 percent) children age 8 and under live in a home with some type of mobile device. . . . The average amount of time spent with mobile devices each day has tripled (again). (Rideout 2017, 3)

2020

For the first time, watching online videos on sites like YouTube now constitutes the largest proportion of children’s total TV and video viewing. (Rideout and Robb 2020, 4)

Just how pervasive is YouTube in the lives of youth, and why does it matter to educators? According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, 85 percent of teens say they use YouTube the most of any social media platform out there (Anderson and Jiang 2018). A 2019 Common Sense Media Report confirms this: “YouTube clearly dominates the online video space among both tweens and teens” (Rideout and Mann 2019, 4). This makes sense considering that, according to YouTube itself, in 2020, it had more than two billion logged-in users per month and “more than 500 hours of content . . . uploaded . . . every minute” (YouTube n.d.).

Every minute. Simply mind-blowing. What do we suppose is one of the compelling factors driving this massive appeal among youth?

Character. On YouTube, they are called YouTubers or influencers.

Research is currently being conducted about why kids see relationships with YouTubers as more significant than relationships with the people around them. This is a real thing. Reflect on that for a beat: a phenomenon is emerging whereby kids trust and embrace their chosen influencer over the family and friends in their physical community. One reason, reports Dr. Grant Brenner in a blog post for *Psychology Today*, is this: “Arguably, for many people, asymmetrical relationships with YouTubers can be a huge saving grace, therapeutic, and potentially an emotionally and physically safer alternative than actual human beings” (2019). Here are these youth (the influencers), looking directly at you (the viewer); speaking to you in the intimacy of wherever you watch your computer or phone; helping you in how to be cool and confident and socially knowledgeable, but doing so in a way that is unscripted—that is, “real”—and that hints at vulnerability. In short, it’s what you want from a good friend: honesty, trust, and confidentiality. And all at no personal or social cost to you. It’s a huge win-win.

Let's go one step further down this road. LEGO, in 2019, in an effort to “inspire the next generation of space exploration,” conducted a survey of over three thousand kids, ages eight through twelve, about their interest in becoming astronauts. You know what the surveyors found out instead? They discovered that “today’s children are three times more likely to aspire to be a YouTuber (29%) than an Astronaut (11%)” (LEGO Group 2019). YouTubers have the status of celebrities, but here’s the catch: it’s a brand of celebrity that is within reach of everyone with a digital camera in their phone or computer. This isn’t traditional celebrity worshipping to excite and enthrall. This is celebrity intimacy to model and to which to aspire.

These select nuggets are just a few existential stars in the formative galaxy that is YouTube . . . and TikTok . . . and . . . to be determined. It is clearly a massive phenomenon in the lives of our students, but the question remains: Why does it matter to educators?

Here is the answer: YouTube is the vast Alexandrian Library for our time. For baby boomers or Gen Xers, the libraries tend to be traditional. The Library of Congress, Oxford’s Bodleian Library, the New York Public Library in New York City—these are among humanity’s great repositories of information and knowledge. However, for millennials and for your students, the great repository of information and knowledge lives on phones. It’s where they go for information, how-tos, comedy, music, entertainment, and, it appears, socializing. Now, think of your local library. What do you go there for? The answer: information, how-tos, comedy, music, entertainment, and, sometimes, socializing. Same purposes. Different destinations.

The Action: What Is Digital Storytelling?

Digital storytelling is the capacity to communicate using text, sound, music, and imagery—still and moving. You don’t have to use all of these tools, but they are the main components of digital storytelling. If we think of this in terms of primary and secondary colors, then text, sound, music, and imagery are your primary colors. Pacing, visual palette, graphics, voice, tone, and genre (comedy, game show, news, mystery, etc.) might be your secondary colors. It’s a relatively vast range of tools with which to work in order to effectively communicate. And in that range lies both its complexity and wonder, its challenge and opportunity.

Historically in the United States and throughout Western cultures, the primary source of information has been print-based. That is most of humanity’s traditional literacy. That is the basis of our entire education system. But print-based literacy, for middle and high school students, is generally exciting only for those that have a solid command

of language and ideas. And according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), that number is only about 37 percent of twelfth graders and 34 percent of eighth graders. Those are the percentages that the NAEP deems are “at or above proficient” in reading (2019). This means that over 60 percent of our students are at basic or below-basic reading. The figures are roughly equivalent for “writing,” although the latest figures from NAEP, as of the writing of this book, are from 2011.

I fully support the argument that textual literacy is an important skill set that allows us to organize our thoughts, build arguments, communicate concisely, research, and validate theses.

However, I also believe that textual literacy—the organizing of ideas through words and sentence structure; the command of language—is of equal educational value to digital literacy. The two literacies don’t compete but instead complement and energize each other.

So, what exactly is *digital literacy*? In what will be a repeating format throughout this book, I asked this question to a range of middle and high school teachers from the United States. Here are some of their answers.

Clearly, there is no simple, definitive understanding of this phrase. For me, Emily comes closest. It’s both the capacity to understand information and knowledge that is represented digitally—what is often the primary focus of the phrase “media literacy”—*and* the capacity to create information



What is Digital Literacy?

Alyssa: Yeah, that one I hadn’t really heard before; I don’t know. . . . So you’re tech-friendly, basically.

Tamiko: To me, digital literacy would be the ability to discern and use technology to get information and your perspective clearly defined to another person.

Andrea: For me, it’s they’re on a computer whether it’s alone or in a small group where they’re using some form of media to help them read or to help them comprehend . . . or something like that.

Bill: I would presume that digital literacy is, like, your ability to successfully use modern-day technology like the internet and smartphones and different platforms? Am I close?

Darren: Digital literacy . . . means to me the ability to communicate through the medium of audio and visual technology.

Todd: The first thing that comes to my mind is guiding students in how to exactly produce content across digital means.

Emily: I think digital literacy is the . . . it’s almost like, um, I have a couple of different definitions in my mind. One definition would be understanding information that’s out there and determining how it can be used and the veracity of that. But there’s also the digital literacy piece of being able to use technology in a way that you choose. Part of digital literacy is being able to push a button and not be petrified with what is going to happen.

Ell: It is the ability to use digital tools to communicate in a language that integrates many languages. An international language. That’s the gist.

and knowledge utilizing a range of digital tools. In other words, it's a new form of reading and writing.

Despite the lack of clarity about this phrase among teachers, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in November 2019, took the dramatic step of redefining what is meant by *literacy* in a position statement carrying the headline “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age.” While the definition is long with many bullet points, it begins with this introductory note:

Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and sociocultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups.

This opening statement does so much. It acknowledges technology as one of two drivers of change in our understanding of this term. It acknowledges a new and “malleable” form of literacy. It acknowledges multiple literacies. It acknowledges a literacy that “the world demands.” Think about that. The world has always aimed for a high degree of literacy, as we understand that term traditionally. But now, according to the NCTE, the world “demands” it.

I fully agree.

The writing part of this literacy is digital storytelling, the subject of this book. And this new writing opens up tremendous opportunities for vastly more than the 37 percent who are “proficient” or “advanced” text writers. Why? Because digital storytelling is visual. Digital storytelling is aural. And digital storytelling is dynamic: it moves . . . literally. In digital storytelling, swaths of new pathways to communicate effectively and meaningfully become available. And for educators, this is unbelievably exciting.

The question that propels this book forward is this: Are we preparing our kids to be meaningful contributors to this digitally literate universe? If the dialogue that propels our current culture is primarily happening inside of a digital platform that subsists on a mix of text, sound, music, and imagery, then our students need to be prepared to be productive and articulate participants on this digital platform. They need to be substantive digital creators—storytellers.

Digital Storytelling and Educational Equity

The complex issue of educational equity, which largely revolves around the concepts of fairness, inclusion, and access, is a vital and necessary framework within which to assess any new educational proposition. I believe that digital storytelling is one indispensable asset in the educational equity tool kit. The primary reason is that digital storytelling provides multiple pathways into (1) effective communication; (2) learning engagement; and (3) voice amplification.

In the first area, the simple truth is that digital storytelling does not rely on a command of the English language in order to communicate in a meaningful and substantive manner. We know that language proficiency can be an overwhelming barrier to educational equity. This is especially true for all those in the United States for whom English is not their native language. But it's also true for those for whom writing—with the complexity of its component parts, from grammar to spelling, vocabulary to hypothesis creation—is a pervasive struggle and will never be the preferred mode of communication. The “language” of digital storytelling is, on the other hand, universal: it's imagery, music, sound, and yes, words, but not words that have to exist in a formally correct sentence to be fully understood.

Second, digital storytelling is a process that naturally invites a wide range of expertise and interests. A good digital story may require a good logistics person (the producer), a storyteller (the writer), an imaginative mind (the story creator or writer), a technology person (the camera person, the editor, the sound person), an investigator to find all those royalty-free images (the researcher), a dramatic person (the actor), and a computer programmer (graphics creator and editor). In short, at the core of digital storytelling creation is a diverse set of skills that may reflect the diverse interests in your classroom. There's an inviting portal for just about everyone—a window into the possibility of academic engagement and success for all.

Third, digital storytelling is, by its very nature, a social activity. It is organically designed to be shared with a wider audience—an audience outside of the classroom. The distribution platforms and the content—the story—are component parts of a whole communication experience. This is a critical point to understand. In the practice of digital storytelling, the experience of literacy is no longer an isolated one between the student and the teacher. It's public. It's social. The very first bullet point in the NCTE's wide-ranging definition of “literacy in a digital age” is “participate effectively and critically in a networked world” (2019). It's about the participation. And where there is participation in a larger “networked world,” there is an exponentially increased chance to be heard, to have a voice: to even the playing field.

Let's unpack that idea for a beat.

Digital Storytelling and a Participatory Culture: Amplifying Student Voice

The ability to be seen or heard used to come from the top down—from the publishers and broadcasters *to* the people. Now it comes from the bottom up. Let’s go back to YouTube. YouTube is operating in our time in the same revolutionary capacity as the printing press between 1500 and 1800: it is vastly expanding ordinary people’s access to literacy. Except that in terms of impact, while the printing press democratized reading, YouTube is democratizing publishing. That’s right. Everyone can be viewed and heard—published or broadcast, as it were—free of charge. The relevance of digital literacy—digital storytelling, in particular—isn’t simply an organic consequence of the rise of technology. No. It’s a response to the creation of digital platforms where the majority of youth are residing—to be with their friends, to laugh, to find new heroes, to learn . . . and to be heard.

This new nonhierarchical media culture was anticipated back in 2005 with the publication of *Deep Focus: A Report on the Future of Independent Media* (Blau).

The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. . . . Images, ideas, news, and points of view will come from everywhere and travel along countless new routes to an ever-growing number of places where they can be viewed. This bottom-up energy will radiate enormous energy and creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers. . . . A new generation of media makers and viewers is emerging, which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and received.

Henry Jenkins, one of America’s foremost media scholars, introduced the phrase “participatory culture” back in 2006 when he glimpsed the possibilities that media creation would be flipped on its head. He wrote, “The new media literacies should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression.”

There it is, right there: digital literacy as a “social skill” and a new way of “interacting with a larger community.” Digital storytelling is indeed the primary and continually emerging way for youth to both socialize and interact with their community. The gatekeepers of storytelling have been deposed. Goodbye, CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox as the sole shapers of news. Goodbye, Penguin Random House, Hachette, and HarperCollins

as the exclusive curators of what should be read. It's a bottom-up world of publishing, and the main form of that publishing is . . . digital stories. Instagram stories are digital stories. Facebook posts: digital stories. Podcasts: digital stories. YouTube: five hundred hours of content uploaded every minute. All digital stories. Every minute!

And emerging from the leviathan that is YouTube is . . . TikTok. TikTok takes YouTube and utterly socializes it. Personalizes it. Expands it, but within a small sphere of storytelling. Whether it's the go-to place at the time you are reading this book or not doesn't matter. It's an example of a digital storytelling variant (word of the year in 2021) that has washed over youth and shifted their screen time to a new platform with its simple focus on this idea that "authenticity is king" (TikTok 2020).

Has there ever been a more all-consuming and far-reaching literacy? Has the need to teach toward writing fluency in this literacy ever been greater?

Students, for the first time in history, have a variety of media platforms to amplify their voices. It's our job as educators to teach our students to tell meaningful and impactful stories that can become significant contributions to this infinitely expanding digital universe of content. This is especially imperative in our age of misinformation and disinformation. I would argue that teaching youth how to tell meaningful stories can be a pivotal strategy against the pervasiveness of misinformation. That is a line of inquiry that won't be developed in these pages, but I believe it's an important facet of digital storytelling to consider.

In the end, the digital realm is their library. It's their communication platform. It's their social life. It's their source of knowledge. It's their language. It's a full-blown communication spectrum, the breadth and depth of which is unprecedented in history. And this communication spectrum requires literacy: the ability to read it and write for it. I repeat the question that propels this book forward: Are we preparing our kids to be meaningful contributors in this digitally literate universe? Are we teaching them to write effectively inside of this literacy?

I don't think we are. Is it even possible, given the infinitely changing nature of digital communication?

The Conflict: Can We Teach This Without Formal Training?

Digital storytelling may involve skill sets that you, the educator, may not have. There are video production and sound editing as well as rules about use of existing imagery and creative common licenses, in which you may hardly be an expert. There are apps that you may not know about or use, and there are uploads and downloads that, well, never

seem to work without bringing in the IT specialist. In short, for some teachers, digital storytelling puts them at a huge disadvantage, forcing them to yield classroom control and exposing their perceived technological weaknesses.

There actually is a simple answer to this: *you don't need to know any of that stuff*. All you need to know is what you know: the content. The answer to any question from the students about digital production and IT-related questions is this: “You figure it out.” Here’s the reality. In traditional text-based literacy, you, the educator, know the rules and you teach those rules to your students, whether you are teaching science, math, history, or literature. Text-based literacy is powered by rules of syntax and grammar, word choice and punctuation. Digital literacy is not about rules as much as it about mechanics. Digital literacy is about knowing (1) the individual operations of the different digital parts (imagery, music, sound, editing, zooms, etc.) and (2) how those different digital parts all synchronize with each other. For the students, allowing them to discover these digital mechanics—including cool apps that let letters fly or distort an image to comic effect—is like letting them loose in a playground designed just for them. Except it’s digital.

Like TikTok. One of the reasons TikTok is so appealing is that all of these digital mechanics are packaged in one place and can be manipulated with a touch or a swipe. TikTok has a Creator Portal that includes special effects, a library of sounds and transitions, editing tips, and suggestions for where to spot the latest visual trends. It’s all prepackaged. Everything you need. It’s designed like a personalized digital playground and operates as one. If you do have students that feel fully stymied by the production piece of digital storytelling, suggest that they start on TikTok: it’s the bunny slope of digital production.

Discovering the various components of digital literacy is part of the learning experience. Teaching you, the educator, what they, the students, have discovered, is also a vital part of the learning experience. We all know the power of this flipped classroom model, even in this micro format. But it still takes guts and confidence to yield that control of information and knowledge.

However, the payoff is huge.

Making It Happen in the Classroom . . . Seamlessly

At this point, you may be overwhelmed with all of the component parts that create the machinery that is digital storytelling. There is so much value in each layer of the process that it's hard to imagine all these forces working together in any degree of plausible harmony. From increasing awareness of auditory and visual cognizance to the iterative processes and time management, the pervasive problem-solving to the focus on story creation through character . . . or through a game show.

A storm is brewing. You have all these skills that we agree are vital to the students' future success in column A. And in column B are your students: Puberty with a capital *P* and Adolescence with a capital *A*. It appears to be a tragically unfortunate clash of ideals and reality.

And then, place all of those fluid elements inside the rigid structure of fifty-minute time periods . . . and you have chaos. Heather Sinclair, a seventh-grade science teacher, put it this way: "The first time is terrifying. But once you've done it, watching students take ownership over it is so beyond priceless, that *it's worth the risk.*"

Taking the Dive: The Risks and Rewards

I am *not* here to pitch you on the notion that it won't be chaotic. That would be a lie. I *am* here to pitch you on the idea that a classroom that hints at a degree of chaos is a good thing. And whether or not you already reside in this camp of classroom management, here are two reasons to further evaluate this approach.

Student Ownership: “It’s Worth the Risk”

This is a commitment to empowering the students to take control of their learning. They are doing all the content- and skills-based work; you are primarily setting up and enforcing the structure that will funnel them forward toward a final project. This is a loose interpretation of the flipped classroom model that essentially understands class time as a working period in which the teacher spends their time going from group to group, checking in on students' progress with their digital storytelling projects. While some traditional teaching can often begin each class, the model assumes that the research and exploration of content is student-led and happening with the teacher-as-coach.

So, this is not a traditional classroom. Digital storytelling is a version of project-based learning (PBL), which entails a commitment to spending real, longitudinal time challenging the students to work through an endless variety of obstacles to get to a story that communicates meaningful content. David Ross, the former CEO of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), has recently returned to the classroom to practice the project-based learning models about which he has been advocating for over fifteen years. When asked about how PBL synchronizes with traditional instruction in the classroom, he had this to say:

Some people are very successful at traditional instruction, but traditional instruction meets the needs of fewer and fewer students anymore, and it's less and less aligned to what the real world looks like. So, even if you are really good at traditional instruction, I would argue, and test scores might agree with me, that you're not as successful anymore. So, you have to change. (Ross 2020)

I am not advocating for the death of the traditional classroom, where the teacher is a storyteller of content that the students take in and then, in some way or form, retell back to the teacher. I do believe, however, in the movement to rebalance time in the classroom toward student-led learning—this combined flipped classroom/PBL model here—with teacher-led learning taking place in strategically designated segments. For many, the move along this continuum carries huge risks. You are giving up a huge amount of control. You are putting a lot of trust in your students. There will be missteps.

Short term.

Long term, though, what you are in fact investing in is a rebalancing of power that has the student taking more responsibility for their learning by doing, with you to guide them—a little more as their mentor and a little less as their teacher. Let's go back to the essence of the flipped classroom. Professor Robert Talbert, an expert in the research around the efficacy of what he terms “flipped learning,” defines it as “a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides the students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter” (2018).

OK, you are like: “The ‘dynamic, interactive learning environment’ is a clear euphemism for classroom anarchy!” And it is, partially. But that flipped learning definition further captures the core spirit of what we are after when we talk about student ownership of learning.

It's worth the risk.

Engagement Precedes Learning

In all of the work I did at Sesame Workshop, there was one truth—I will go so far as to call it an objective truth—that underscored all of our work, domestically and globally: engagement precedes learning.

In the world of *Sesame Street*, if kids' eyes aren't on the screen, they aren't learning. If they are bored, they change the channel. In the world of the classroom, many students often aren't on the same channel the moment they take their seats.

In all the extensive research that was and continues to be done around *Sesame Street* and its offspring (historically, we are talking about *The Electric Company*, *3–2–1 Contact*, *Square One TV*, and *Ghostwriter*—recently brought back on Apple TV+) to measure their impact and efficacy, the focus is always on two things: appeal and comprehension. But appeal comes first. If kids liked what they were seeing, then the chances that they also comprehended our curricular objectives went up exponentially. The same is true of the classroom, of course. If the students are engaged, they will learn. If they are not, they won't. And I think it's fair to say that years ago, this was a problem for the student: they had to figure out how to remain engaged with the content. For reasons that a whole other book could no doubt explain, that is no longer the case. It is up to the teacher to engage the student.



Student Awakening

Morgan: So, one person really liked research and they did research. One person was an amazing filmographer, so he actually captured that piece. One person might have been better at writing. That's all they wanted to do. It was just the writing part. One person was really good at speaking, so that person would be the interviewer. So, it brought a lot of different people together for an end goal and [to] work toward that end goal, which I think is very, very important for students at this level.

Ell: But at the start of this [digital storytelling] project, one, who absolutely — teachers were completely challenged with him 'cause half the time he did not attend classes, he did not turn in assignments — he was the one student who, like, seized this challenge and he was all about it 'cause he loves SketchUp. . . . And he was incredibly creative and also very adept. So I was just, like, in awe; I would watch him create his towers and change his moat, and to me, it was pretty remarkable. He was so engaged. The level of engagement is so impressive. They come to life with it.

Emily: I can think of a student that was no longer considered to be ESL but had been previously in our school. And his project for the radio dramas — which we did in chemistry — was fabulous. Because the hands-on portion of making the experiment and doing the storytelling was much easier for him than writing an essay, for example. And [it] let his personality shine through.

Does digital storytelling solve this problem of engagement for the teacher? I would argue that it does. Here's why.

Offering Multiple Pathways into the Content

As discussed in the first chapter, digital storytelling offers something for everyone: writing, storyboarding, sound editing, graphic design, acting, music scoring, researching, organizing and producing (i.e., controlling!) . . . the list goes on. The point: practically every student can find a pathway toward engagement that genuinely interests them. That makes digital storytelling extremely attractive to students, including those who simply do not thrive in a mostly print-based, analytically oriented academic environment.

Working Digitally, Inside of Students' Native Medium

We have established over and over that the digital realm is students' literacy. They own it. It's not a literacy that has evolved over the last five hundred years, since the printing press back in the fifteenth century. Digital literacy began in their lifetime and is approaching maturity. Staying up to speed on that evolution is crucial to the success and, honestly, happiness of youth. And, as we have established over and over, it's a deeply educational process to work inside of this literacy. So, let them do it and engagement will increase.

Making Content Your Friend

To tell a good digital story, you need to know the content. The more you know the content, the better your story. This has been discussed earlier.

But let's take it one conceptual step further. This construct disintegrates resistance most students have around researching content. Think about it. You're a ninth-grade student and you have to do a paper about the dust bowl. "Damn. How many sources is the teacher going to make me use? How long does it have to be? I have to come up with four causes for the dust bowl *and* four consequences? Why do I even care?"

Those are some of the organic obstacles that you need to work through and around: the perception that the content is the enemy—the muddy sludge they have to wade through to get to the end, at which point there is freedom. Digital storytelling doesn't work that way. The content is the material out of which their cool story is going to be made. The content is their ally and friend, which will allow them to create a really cool movie. This is a huge *V* for victory in my book.



On the Phrase *Engagement Precedes Learning*

Alyssa: I totally do subscribe to that phrase because if they're not engaged, if they're not interested, then they're tuning out and ignoring it. My secret is I just try to kill them with kindness. It's a bunch of moody kids and they don't want to be in school; they're miserable.

Bill: Your teacher can be going on and on and on and there can be a video playing, maybe a PowerPoint going, you can even be reading the words, but if you're not engaged, so to speak, you're probably not learning. So being able to engage kids first, you're probably right about that, is necessary if you want learning to take place. Unengaged learning just seems like an oxymoron. It doesn't seem like something that takes place.

Andrea: I think engagement has to precede learning. Because if they're not engaged then they won't absorb any information. Especially with kids this age; they need to come up and write on the board, turn and talk to a friend; they have to do all sorts of things or you completely lose them.

Darren: I have to have a successful hook. I think whatever successful introduction I have that gets that

learning fish to bite, that would be extremely helpful to me to drive whatever comes next. And it's like a magic wand. . . . What I liked about doing [digital storytelling] last year was that there was a little bit of a hook to get everybody. There was a wide enough hook. The competition pulled out my competitive kids. That drove them in the very beginning. The idea of using their cell phones and creating video—that hit the artistic kids. The research and being able to be your team's knowledge guru—that appealed to other kids. They are not as creative, but they feel that they can do a lot of information stuff. So, there's a hook for everybody on a wider spectrum.

Heather: Teaching is an art. It is just as much as about how you do in a classroom as it is what you are doing. It is a very relationship-based art. If you don't have a strong relationship with your students—if they don't feel safe, if they don't feel comfortable, if they don't feel interested—they are not going to learn. They can't learn. They have to feel safe; they have to feel comfortable—that's broader than this idea of engagement.