

Chapter 7

Exegetical Commentary

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About Digital Storytelling

The prominence of digital storytelling in the practice and research literature in the last decade or so has been quite striking. On the face of it digital storytelling is a simple approach that employs what is now everyday technology. In a sense that is the strength of it, that the seemingly banal technology of PowerPoint has been re-invented to support young people's media literacy. In Prue Wales' case reported here the technology has been used to provide students that have been marginalized by society and the education system they inhabit a voice to speak out. In this brief response I thought I might open up a dialogue about the approach from my own perspective as a researcher and teacher in drama education and technology. I'd like to start by discussing some appealing aspects about this approach to learning, before moving to some of the challenges for this approach to learning and where I see some of the gaps before making some suggestions about how digital storytelling might be extended and enhanced through the employment of drama education strategies to deepen and enrich the process.

The Strengths of Digital Storytelling

The case study presented in this piece provides some obvious benefits of this approach for students who are not "academically successful". Perhaps it is the accessible and everyday technology or the use of the aesthetic through the images that are projected that all at once act as an illustration of the story and an aid to memory. In the case of *Youth Tell* young people who have been silenced by a

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system that at times does not value what they have to offer. The chance to tell their stories perhaps for the first time provides an apparent catharsis and is an important part of these young people's understanding that in a civil and democratic society their voice can and should be part of the broader conversation. So in this sense digital storytelling not only provides an important (though under-researched) link to literacy learning but also creates the opportunity for cultural citizenship and a more agentic way of seeing oneself in the world. As Stevenson argues (1997, 2003) initiatives such as digital storytelling have the effect of promoting cultural citizenship through developing and embodying creative and self-expressive work. Participants in these programs use a variety of techniques to imagine and re-create the future. By creating their own stories young people express diverse aesthetic preferences and reconnect the 'self' with the 'other' in a global community (O'Toole 2006). If cultural citizenship is the attempt to "...foster dialogue, complexity and communication in place of silence and homogeneity" (Stevenson 2003, p. 345) digital storytelling is an ideal process to examine agency and how young people can actively evolve as cultural navigators.

Another strength of this approach is the opportunity for young people to engage with multiple art forms in the making of these narratives. Chris Anderson (2012) argues that we "are all Makers. We are born Makers", and that:

Projects shared online become inspiration for others and opportunities for collaboration. Individual Makers, globally connected this way, become a movement. Millions of DIYers, once working alone, suddenly start working together (p. 13).

Anderson's argument provides some important implications for young people in these kinds of projects. Not only is there an opportunity to make for themselves and their peers, in C. Anderson's terms the opportunity to broadcast themselves as active artists or Makers is also a potent opportunity. This moves beyond mere engagement or absorption of an art form. This process encourages young people to engage with multiple art forms to weave narratives that could be potentially shared with international audiences.

Some Challenges for Digital Storytelling

One of the issues that arose for me in this case study was the extent to which these young people were vulnerable and exposed in the process of telling their stories. One of the "gifts" of process drama is its understanding of the importance of metaxis – of simultaneously inhabiting a role and one's actual identity (Boal 1995; Bolton 1979). The work here while powerful and cathartic allowing young people to tell their own stories, offers some risks to student wellbeing. I have no doubt that the team involved in *Youth Tell* were acutely aware of this issue and handled this aspect of the process sensitively but in the hands of less experienced practitioners without the benefit of metaxis understanding the potential risks to a young person's wellbeing are significant.

The potential for the form to be extended through the uses of framing and metaxis where a distance is put between the stories and the self has an opportunity to allow young people to gain some of the same benefits in terms of literacy and cultural citizenship without some of the attendant personal risks. In this sense the work that the *Youth Tell* team have engaged with has great power but all of those involved in digital storytelling need to be mindful of the risks and opportunities that this allows.

The Way Forward and Conclusions

The approaches that have been demonstrated and analysed in the article that accompanies this response have enormous potential for learning and teaching. Their processes provide young people with access to agentic, engaging ways to learn and make a contribution as cultural citizens. The everyday technology at the core of this work makes it immediately accessible to many young people in many places. There are also opportunities that arise from this work with innovations in technology. There are opportunities in the emergent and accessible tools of digital animation (such as xtranormal) and motion capture technologies (Xbox Kinect) to push the boundaries of what we currently understand as digital storytelling. Whichever path this approach takes what is apparent is there is still much to be researched and explored in digital storytelling for learning in diverse contexts. The case study presented here gives us a glimpse of what might be possible when we can engage with narrative through these kinds of technologies.

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