Integrating Digital Storytelling into the English Learner’s Curriculum

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April 12, 2009
This paper proposes a new vision for the integration of digital storytelling into the subject of language arts in an English language learning environment. It is argued digital storytelling should be integrated into the language arts curriculum of the Primary Years Program (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate (IB). This paper explores digital storytelling’s effect on the linguistic English skills, technical skills and authorial voice of English Language Students (ELS) to support the integration of digital storytelling into the PYP. Challenges related to integration of digital storytelling are considered at the end of the paper. To clarify for the reader, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the study of English by non-native speakers living in a non-English speaking environment (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008). English as a Second Language (ESL) is the study of English by non-native speakers living in an English speaking environment (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008). English Language Learners (ELL) are defined by the Ontario government of Canada as students in English-language schools whose first language is not English or is a dialect of English that is significantly different from the variety used in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Due to the inclusive vision of this paper, the term English Language Students (ELS) is used to refer to all EFL, ESL and ELL students collectively. The term digital storytelling refers to the use of technical tools to manipulate images, music, sound, graphics and the author’s voice to express and explore the author’s artistic expression (Porter, 2004).

Author’s Educational Context

I am an elementary (ages 6-13) teacher with a decade of English language teaching experience. My interest has been in the convergence of pedagogy and educational technology for the benefit of young ELS and their teachers. I am interested in how educational technology can
improve the linguistic skills of writing, listening comprehension and oral expression, as it introduces students to multiliteracies and provides an outlet for their authorial voice.

Integrating technology into the ELS’ classroom is not a new idea: effects on English pronunciation when repeating after the phonograph were studied in 1918 by Clarke (Salaberry, 2001). However, due to rapid technological evolution, new approaches to pedagogy through the use of Web 2.0 applications need to be studied (Salaberry, 2001). One application that is understudied in the context of English language learning is the integration of digital storytelling in to the ELS’ classroom. I argue ELS’ gains through digital storytelling should prompt the International Baccalaureate (IB) to integrate this educational technology into the Primary Years Programme (PYP).

I currently teach at a Hong Kong International Baccalaureate World School™ which educates students through the Primary Years Program (PYP). ELS are exposed to subjects across the curriculum in two languages: Mandarin Chinese and English. Currently, the PYP program only integrates the subjects of language arts, social studies, science, general arts, physical education and mathematics for students aged 3-12. The curriculum directive of the PYP is that all schools must use two languages to teach six key subjects and English is used by the majority of schools as one of the instructional languages (IB, 2007; IB, 2009). The PYP curriculum is based on educational theories of constructivism resulting in a curricular focus on inquiry as the leading pedagogical approach (IBO, 2002). The PYP recognizes that language learners must acquire skills in context and be able to make connections across disciplines, to integrate different subjects and to relate what they learn to their life (IBO, 2002).
A major shortcoming of the PYP curriculum is in its approach to educational technology: technology is not a subject area (IB, 2009). I have been asked to contribute to a team composed of PYP educators in Hong Kong to make recommendations to the IB concerning the area of educational technology integration across the six subject areas. My contribution will focus on educational technology integration in the language arts. This paper is relevant to my current teaching context because it addresses the integration of digital storytelling into the subject of language arts to encourage multiliteracy, improve the linguistic skills of reading, writing, listening comprehension and oral expression and to provide an opportunity for ELS to democratically express their authorial voice.

Digital storytelling is the mixture of oral storytelling and technical tools to create and publish personal stories using a variety of media: graphics, music, sound effects, visual stills and video (Porter, 2004). Digital storytelling broadcasts the authorial voice through a new type of communication that is beyond the limits of traditional narration (Porter, 2004). The process of digital storytelling involves connecting the events or information in the story to the audience through personal reflections that help others to see the point of knowing the information presented (Davidson & Porter, 2005). According to the University of Virginia, digital storytelling technically involves writing a script, planning a storyboard, revising the script, sequencing images, adding narratives, adding transitions and adding music (Kajder, Bull & Albaugh, 2005). Digital stories are usually three minutes long and include four elements in the writing process: a point of view, a dramatic question, emotional content and economy to limit the scope to a 2 or 3 minute vignette (Bull & Kajder, 2004). Students use basic digital cameras, non-linear editing software, and computers to create a multi-media digital story (Meadows, 2003).
I believe students would benefit from the integration of digital storytelling into the PYP language arts curriculum because it supports creative expression and communication using English, encourages technological skill development and encourages critical thought across disciplines (Porter, 2004; The University of Houston, 2008). Students engage in multiliteracy and use their authorial voice and critical thinking skills with digital storytelling (Nelson, 2006). Digital storytelling and its effect on communication, technical skill development, the authorial voice and challenges associated with integration for ELS are discussed herein.

Effects on English Communicational Skills

Educational technology is incorporated into the PYP program based on autonomous decisions by the classroom teacher. As a result, students are exposed to educational technology in differing amounts. In a knowledge society, learners need liberal arts skills but they need them integrated with specialized knowledge in information technology and the sciences (Bates, 2000). It is argued that digital storytelling be integrated into the language learning curriculum because research has shown its integration can lead to improved English skills (Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006; Sadik, 2008; Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, English skills for ELS are identified by the Ontario government as speaking, listening, reading and writing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Tsou et al., (2006) compared traditional storytelling practices to digital storytelling in the language arts curriculum to assess the listening comprehension gains of 5th grade elementary ELS in Taiwan. Students exposed to the digital storytelling website significantly improved their English listening comprehension skills: They recalled more words, phrases and sentences than the control group who were exposed to traditional storytelling practices (Tsou et al., 2006). After
listening to the stories, the digital storytelling group used more target vocabulary, included more
detail and created more complex sentences than the control group during story recalls (Tsou et
al., 2006). Story recalls involved reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Tsou et al.,
(2006) found the integration of digital storytelling into the language arts curriculum led to an
improvement of general language proficiency in reading, writing and speaking due to improved
listening comprehension skills.

Sadik’s (2008) mixed-methods study explored the impact digital storytelling has on
Egyptian high-school students’ learning and engagement across the curriculum, including
language arts and English language classes. Triangulated data revealed students who created
digital stories showed significant improvement in engagement levels and learning outcomes
(Sadik, 2008). Students used oral narration more than text and expressed personal connections to
the topic, indicating increased engagement through the use of authorial voice (Sadik, 2008). One
implication of Sadik’s (2008) study is digital storytelling may encourage oral expression due to
personal engagement with a topic. Increased oral expressive opportunities through digital
storytelling may result in improved oral communication skills.

Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte’s (2007) quasi-experimental study investigated the
effectiveness of digital storytelling on the understanding of spoken English by elementary
Spanish ESL students. Students exposed to the digital storytelling scored significantly higher on
listening comprehension measures than students who listened to stories told by the teacher
(Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). Visual images in the digital story and student interaction
with the application helped students focus on the oral language (Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte,
2007). Previous research has shown that the integration of digital storytelling may lead to
improved reading, writing and oral skills due to improved listening comprehension and levels of
engagement (Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006; Sadik, 2008; Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). There is a strong case for digital storytelling integration into the PYP language arts curriculum based on improved English communication skills.

Encouraging Technical Skill Development

All students use the skills of conceptualizing, writing, performing, signifying and imagining in a process of meaning making during digital story construction (Benmayor, 2008). Digital storytelling involves a seven step process as identified by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS): Script writing, storyboard planning, script revision, sequencing images, adding narrative (oral expression), adding transitions/effects and adding music (Bull & Kajder, 2004). In my experience, script writing, editing and oral presentations are excellent ways to help English language learners practice their written and oral skills in the language arts. The addition of word processing programs, as a technical skill, can be used to help ELS with the mechanics of script writing. Previous research supports the integration of word processing programs into the ELS’ curriculum to improve writing skills (Santiago, Nakata, Einwaechter, Marschmeier and Shimada, 1996). Computer applications that correct grammar also assist in document presentation and spelling which motivates ELS to write in English (Santiago et al., 1996). The digital storytelling process can integrate word processing applications to draft, edit and present a final script. Although research is needed, it is not hard to imagine how utilization of word processing programs during digital story script writing in the PYP language arts curriculum would motivate ELS to write.

The PYP curriculum does not identify information technology as a key subject, leaving technical skill development as a variable factor related to teaching practices. Current PYP
students are memory-stick carrying members of the Net Generation, a generation swept up in the communications revolution (Tapscott, 2004). The digital story creation process blends the development of technical skills with the creative process of story writing, factors supporting its integration into the PYP language arts curriculum. In his general action research involving the integration of digital stories into the grade 4 and 5 curriculum, Banaszewski (2002) identified the technical skills students quickly mastered as: recording voice-overs, scanning, using a Camcorder, importing files to iMovie, and using a drag-and-drop interface. Interestingly, students were exposed to very little direct iMovie skills teaching and instead were paired in a buddy system to learn from each other and through experience how to use the technology (Banaszewski, 2002). From the perspective of a teacher, it is noted that digital technologies are becoming easier to use and more affordable, further supporting the integration of digital storytelling by bringing technological skill experience into the ELS classroom (Lasica, 2002).

Increasing Authorial Voice by Encouraging Multiliteracy

In their discussion of pedagogy and multiliteracy, The New London Group (1996) argued for a broader view of literacy, where a pedagogy of multiliteracies focus “on modes of representation much broader than language alone” (¶11). Modes include visual design, a variety of text, visual images and the relationships between visual images, text, audio and spatial representations (The New London Group, 1996). In the author’s opinion, digital storytelling provides students with a variety of modes that they can use to find and use their own authorial voice through multiliteracies. Digital storytelling is an application used to explore multiliteracy and can be applied to the ELS context (Nelson, 2006; Kajder, Bull & Albaugh, 2005).
In case study research of five post-secondary students, Nelson (2006) found digital storytelling has great potential for increasing the volume and the quality of ELS’ authorial voice. Research reveals that ELS feel they communicate meaning more effectively through the multiliteracies of transitioning, sequencing images and merging text with visual stills (Nelson, 2006; Benmayor, 2008). Digital storytelling affords the ELS author the freedom to communicate and negotiate meanings that are usually not tangible or concrete (Nelson, 2006). The process of creation and producing a final story are a source of empowerment for students (Benmayor, 2008). In a technology mediated environment, physical appearance and cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds are becoming irrelevant (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Students can find their authorial voice through digital story creation and speak out even when they are marginalized by language (Benmayor, 2008). If computer technology is the “great equalizer” that Palloff & Pratt (1999) theorize it to be, then digital storytelling may have a significant impact on democratizing media production and authorial voice for those who are linguistically marginalized.

In relation to authorial voice, ELS are excited to connect their digital stories to real world problems and teachers feel students are more motivated in lessons which integrate digital storytelling (Bull & Kajder, 2004; Sadik, 2008; Tsou et al., 2006). Digital storytelling may enhance PYP language arts curricular understanding because it gives students the chance to analyze material, apply their multiliteracy skills, interpret new meanings, reflect on their creative process and use their authorial voice while addressing relevant social concerns (Benmayor, 2008; Bull & Kajder, 2004).

Challenges
This paper has explored the benefits of integrating digital storytelling into the language arts curriculum for the purpose of influencing the IB to envision a new role for educational technology in the PYP. However, there are challenges associated with the process of integration.

English teachers report ineffective training and time conflicts as being reasons for not integrating digital storytelling (Sadik, 2008; Tsou et al., 2006). Tsou et al., (2006) informally surveyed 180 elementary English language teachers in Taiwan who reported not using traditional storytelling because of lacking time in the curriculum and lacking training in storytelling techniques. Sadik’s (2008) mixed-methods exploration of learning engagement through digital storytelling also investigated eight teachers’ integration of digital storytelling. Teachers reported struggling with technology integration because of the lack of vision for its potential and their lack of training (Sadik, 2008). In general, teachers initially feel traditional and digital storytelling take a great deal of their planning and preparation time, despite students’ learning gains (Sadik, 2008; Tsou et al., 2006).

Despite identifying issues of concern for teachers, Tsou et al.’s (2006) research reveals a silver lining. Although generalizability is limited because Tsou et al., (2006) interviewed only one elementary teacher with little previous digital storytelling experience, the selected teacher felt less anxious and more confident using a digital storytelling website then traditional face-to-face storytelling techniques. Despite difficulties involved in integration, five out of eight teachers interviewed by Sadik (2008) would transform their pedagogy and curriculum to include digital storytelling because they felt digital storytelling increases students’ curricular understanding and improves collaborative and communicative skills more than traditional storytelling techniques.
Digital stories can be written with a certain audience in mind and can potentially reach millions on the Internet. Lasica (2002) identifies three broadcast strategies via the Internet for digital stories: pointcast (sending to a specific person), narrowcast (sending to a group of people) or broadcast (sending to a broad or global audience). The IB must consider the risks associated with broadcasting students’ personal thoughts and images. It is highly recommended that pointcast (to a teacher) and narrowcast (to the class) be used, yet this may limit the range of the authorial voice. One way to overcome this challenge is to narrowcast to the entire school and pass-word protected parent-members of the school’s learning management system. In addition, IB World Schools™ could create an institutional “code of good conduct” to protect student privacy and intellectual property rights.

Conclusion

Digital storytelling is a powerful medium to introduce ELS’ to analysis and critique according to Benmayor (2008). Stack and Kelly (2006) argue “the media is a central if not primary pedagoge” and media critique and production opportunities must be modeled by educators across the curriculum to promote the democratization of media production and interpretation (p. 6). Digital storytelling is an excellent application in the ELS context to promote democracy in media as it puts the tools of production and critique in the hands of the marginalized: the language learner. Digital storytelling improves on traditional storytelling techniques, basic word processing programs and social software by incorporating multimedia and multiliteracies resulting in increased levels of engagement, analysis and critical thinking skills (Benmayor, 2008; Sadik, 2008). Digital storytelling can be applied in the ELS context to explore multiliteracy (Nelson, 2006; Kajder, Bull & Albaugh, 2005). Importantly, digital storytelling has been shown to increase learning engagement and improve English reading,
writing, oral expression and listening comprehension skills (Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006; Sadik, 2008; Ramirez-Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). The IB should integrate digital storytelling into the PYP language arts curriculum to provide ELS these essential learning opportunities.
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