Tips For Digital Story Telling

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Not too long ago very few educators had ever heard the term "Digital Storytelling" and probably thought that "DST" just meant "Daylight Savings Time." But last month I attended a conference featuring over a dozen presentations on the topic. While many educators are now aware of the theory and concepts, a number of people are apprehensive about taking the plunge into DST because they are not sure about the specific "nuts and bolts" of coordinating a project for students. Through trial and error, I have found a set of strategies that streamline the process and permit students to achieve the best results.

Experts note that "Classic" DST focuses on seven elements for creation: Point of view, Dramatic Question, Voice, Pacing, Soundtrack, Economy, and Emotional Content. While most teachers easily recognize these elements, the true challenge emerges: how to get students to display them in their own stories. The first step a teacher must take is to develop a sequential set of steps, and promote specific expectations for each step.

**Developing Story topics: "You do have something to say"**
Most young, and even old, people feel that they have nothing extraordinary to tell. Overcome this by showing students several examples and having them participate in cooperative sharing activities, allowing them to gain confidence in sharing their own experience. Certain prompts can elicit ideas: (1) Think about a time you had to grow up, made a friend, lost a loved one. (2) Tell a "bike" story or the story of your name. (3) Pay tribute to a family member—these all can inspire students to begin thinking about their own experiences. A word of caution. Often times, a popular topic is a sports story, but if the story merely consists of "winning the big one," consider another idea. Sports stories usually work only if two conditions are met: one, if the person gains or learns something from the experience; and two, if the story focuses on a specific moment or person. Students should be discouraged to explain the whole season, or else all we have is a highlight film.

**Writing the story: "show, don't tell!!"**
Economy is one of the most important elements of DST. One of the best way to write economically, and at the same time vividly, is to master the skill of showing, as opposed to telling. That is, encourage students to write using "observations" instead of "inferences." We experience the world through our senses, and we achieve effective storytelling through creating vivid pictures with words. Instead of telling the audience, "I was scared" an effective narrator shows fear with observations such as "sweaty palms," "shaking knees," and "trembling arms." Once again, peer revision is critical at this stage.
Images: "quality, not quantity"
When students begin collecting pictures to accompany their story, emotion often overtakes them, and they come to class with dozens, and dozens, and dozens of pictures that all have sentimental value. If all the pictures are used, the result is a digital scrapbook, not a story. For a three-minute story, limit students to a maximum of fifteen images. This achieves two goals: first, it forces students to make value decisions on the photos, and results in only the "best of the best." Second, it focuses the attention back to the story. Students must rely on the story driving the images, instead of the images driving the story.

Digitizing: "Size does matter"
To supplement their own pictures, students may search for images online. Although the standby search tools, such as Google or Altavista, work, I recommend Flickr.com for vivid artistic images. No matter where images are harvested, make sure the size exceeds 640x480 pixels. Any smaller, and the images look like a scene from Cops. This is especially true if pans or zooms are utilized. Also, if the story is to be published, make sure to emphasize ethical use of artistic property, and always adhere to copyright laws.

Storyboarding: "the visual outline"
Storyboarding allows students to "structure" their story and "sync" images to words. One advantage is that it enhances revision of the story once students see how the words work with the images. At times, it is wise to trim, or even omit, narration altogether if the image creates enough of an impact. There are several effective methods of storyboarding. Powerpoint can render a quick and easy version, or a template from Word using text and image boxes can also suffice. All students need do is insert images in order, and copy and paste the corresponding narration. Storyboarding "software" is also available. However, I have found these to have a few too many options, thus complicating the process. The most important advantage of storyboarding is that it creates an efficient blueprint for the movie once students finally get to the lab; and if your school is like mine, days in the studio lab are precious.

Digital editing: "more power?…not necessarily"
There is a balancing act when selecting video-editing software. On the one hand, students need the freedom to utilize a variety of effects; however, they also can't spend an entire quarter-semester learning software. Adobe's Premiere is one of the benchmarks of professional editing software, but its price tag and relative complexity make it a poor choice for students (editor's note: consider Adobe's Premiere Elements 3, a much-less expensive full-featured easy-to-learn alternative. It is to Premiere what Photoshop Elements is to Photoshop CS). On the other end, Windows XP comes loaded with Moviemaker, which is free and easy, but only allows for one audio track. Two of the better mid-priced programs are iMovie for Mac users, and Pinnacle Studio 9 for PC. Both offer a good combination of flexibility and ease of use. New on the front is: Microsoft Photostory 3, a free download from Microsoft. It offers: pan and zoom, transitions, two soundtracks, "packaged" background music, and visual effects – all presented with a step by step wizard to render stories very efficiently.

Recording voice over: "Sloooow Dooooown"
Most of us get nervous when we speak to an audience, and our heart rate and blood pressure rise. Imagine what this does to a student's rate of speech. To get students to slow their rate of
speaking, I record an excerpt from a documentary containing narration. Next, I transcribe the narration and ask students to read that aloud while a partner watches the clock. Then we play the actual excerpts. Students are amazed to hear the voice-over take at least twice the time to read. Explain to students that their audience needs time to process images, and that a slower pace – at least most of the time – is much more effective. Also, blocks of time with no narration can be even more poignant at certain times. Be aware that today's students will, at first, resist the slow, deliberate, articulate pace of narration. However, with practice, they will improve.

**Choosing a soundtrack: "Instrumental vs. lyrical"**
A carefully chosen soundtrack can have a dramatic impact on the entire story. Pacing, emotion, point of view, and dramatic question are all enhanced with appropriate music. Imagine *Jaws* without its signature "Prowling shark" music. Conversely, a poorly chosen soundtrack can be distracting and confusing. The question remains, "What makes a powerful soundtrack?" The first rule, is that lyrics during narration is an ill-advised idea. However appropriate lyrics with no narration can be very powerful. Many editing software titles contain "packaged" music that can be easily dropped into the story. Often, however, students want to bring in their own favorite music, which is fine, as long as the tone is appropriate. Movie soundtracks are excellent places to look, but, again, be aware of intellectual copyright issues. Also, encourage students to select only one piece of music. Abrupt, frequent changes do little more than confuse the audience.

**Visual Effects: "Less is more"**
To help my students understand this, I use the metaphor of adding salt to food: a little improves taste, but too much just makes food salty and raises blood pressure. Similarly, overuse of visual effects raises my blood pressure! The rule of thumb is that if an effect is used, there must be a reason for it.

- **Transitions** between images help tell the story. Students need to know what different transitions imply. I use a punctuation metaphor to teach transitions. A "cut", or no transition, is like a comma or no punctuation mark, and serves to quickly move between two closely related ideas. A "dissolve" resembles a period, and suggests a change to a related idea. A "fade" is like a new paragraph and suggests a change of topics or passage of time. A particularly effective technique is the use of a black screen for several seconds: with or without sound. Beyond these, most transitions are superfluous and distracting and should be discouraged.
- **Pans and zooms** can add movement to static images, focus the audience, or give a sense of place for an object. In most cases, slow movement is best so as not to distract the audience.
- **Text as art** can be an effective method for focusing the audience on a particular line, by using actual text on the screen. Select lines that are particularly important and use a plain font. Text can be used in lieu of narration or in addition. Printed words can also be used to emphasize song lyrics.

Remember that each of these techniques creates a different effect. There are of course thousands of other effects such as manipulating color, contrast, lighting, use of split screens, overlays, green screen animation. However, less is more. The common denominator is that effects should enhance the story instead of dominating it.
Production and presentation: "show time!"
For a story to be a story, it must be shared. At minimum, classmates should view all stories created. I tend to make quite a "production" of the whole experience. Students spend a moment introducing the story, and after the film and a hearty round of applause classmates give positive feedback to the storyteller. DST is also a great medium for presentations to literary clubs or even at an all-school assembly. In "Digital Stories", the people at Niles Township HS District 219 present a venue for viewing and posting digital stories. This allows students to post their stories to the world. Give it a look; it's quite impressive.

For educators new to DST, the task can appear daunting. But following some of the above strategies will help students get started. Once they get the idea, there's no stopping them.