

Strategies for digital communication skills across disciplines:

The importance of digital stories

Table of contents

- 1: Background
- 1: Introduction
- 2: The evolution of 21st century digital communication skills
- 2: Digital storytelling for enriched communications
- 3: Integrated enrichment: digital humanities instruction and practice
- 3: English language and literature course presentations enhanced by use of Adobe CS5
- 3: Other notable digital storytelling initiatives
- 4: Summary
- 4: References

Background

This paper builds on the discussion about digital communication skills development in postsecondary educational institutions that was introduced in the Adobe white paper *Silent Transformation: Evolution and Impact of Digital Communication Skills Development in Post-Secondary Education*. The premise of that paper is that today's expectations of and opportunities for effective digital communication extend beyond the domain of graphic and visual artists, videographers, and web designers.

Introduction

One of the most profound transformations in postsecondary education is coming from the realization that digital communication skills really do matter in everyday life; therefore, it is imperative that digital skills also matter in academic life. Students and enlightened faculty alike understand that the convergence of technical and creative competencies is helping to create new opportunities for a whole new generation of creative professionals. "Imagine a curriculum that is based on achieving comprehensive goals where students must create and produce a computer game," suggests Eric Converse, CEO of ATIV Software, a mobile application development company. "This requires an understanding of physics and math, programming and scripting, story and dialog writing, cinematography, art and design, music, collaboration, teamwork, and delegation."

Digital storytelling has become an essential method of enhancing education in the humanities by making abstract or conceptual content more understandable. It engages students through images, audio, and video and provides a compelling way of sharing their work with their peers that, in turn, fosters more collaboration and accomplishment.

The availability of increasingly sophisticated audio editing, image editing and video editing tools, such as those provided in Adobe® Creative Suite® software, has given educators and students unprecedented abilities to become master composers in nonprint media and to build digital stories in the humanities that can captivate and teach an audience and connect people like never before. In addition, competencies that have traditionally been associated with art and design professionals are now expected from professionals working in such disciplines as journalism and education. Institutions are also seeing an increasing awareness of the value that subject matter experts with deep technological ability bring to the classroom and the workplace. This realization that the sum of discipline expertise plus technology expertise is even greater than its respective parts is leading to the emergence of fields of study such as informatics, instructional design, and educational technology, areas of study that claim digital proficiencies as core components.

This paper explores the impact that digital communication skills, using processes associated with digital storytelling, is having on disciplines including liberal arts, humanities, and cross-curricular humanities/technology collaboratories. In its simplest forms, digital storytelling involves the illustration of story elements using photographs and graphics tools, sometimes using nothing more than free and open source tools that can help make an abstract idea more conceptually complete. Increasingly, however, digital storytelling has evolved to include more complex forms of digital expression requiring video skills, such as micro-documentary production. In some cases, digital storytelling is dependent upon computer programming skills for application development and augmented reality.

The evolution of 21st century digital communication skills

In 2005, Adobe, in partnership with the New Media Consortium, convened an assembly of authors, researchers, policy makers, educators, and artists to identify the dimensions of a 21st century literate person: someone with a “set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. Necessary skills included the ability to understand the power of image and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms” (Johnson, 2005, p. 2).

Today the notion of 21st century digital skills has expanded to include an ever widening range of capabilities. Technology is an integral part of today's educational landscape. Proficiency with the latest technological innovations is a clear expectation for today's college graduates—even though some of those same skills may not yet be a part of their college faculty's repertoire (Smith and Caruso, 2010).

As noted in “The Silent Transformation” paper, today's digital skills are clustered in two broad categories:

- Digital communication skills—Effective digital communicators need to be able to visually share their insights and ideas in cross-curricular activities that may feature any one or all of the following practices:
 - Digital storytelling
 - Documentary and micro-documentary production
 - Design, creation, publication, and distribution of content assets, including presentations, videos, and movies for use in cross-curricular academic settings
 - Humanities, arts, science, and technology collaboratories
 - ePortfolio development
- Advanced communication digital skills—Students, faculty, and staff need to be capable of conceptualizing, designing, and producing rich digital assets and experiences, including:
 - Representations of the results of complex statistical analyses in visually compelling displays
 - Simulations of real-world decision-making situations that facilitate risk-free rehearsal
 - Multiple visual perspectives of complex scientific, sociological, and geographical relationships
 - Scientifically accurate documentation reports and publications, including electronic theses and dissertations
 - Mobile content and applications

Digital communication skills development has long been an expected part of developing expertise in core majors such as art and design, and even in adjacent fields of study like education and journalism. Today, however, with the rising popularity of digital storytelling and micro-documentaries as communication vehicles, it has become increasingly clear that digital communication skills are valuable across many other disciplines.

Digital storytelling for enriched communications

Digital storytelling has emerged as a fundamental, cross-curricular technique that provides structure for both sharing and understanding new information. It has become an essential way of providing information and enhancing education in the liberal arts and humanities by making abstract or conceptual content more understandable. Used in fields such as medicine, it helps to humanize the patient-physician experience. In all disciplines, it offers more ways to engage students and enrich learning through the inclusion of digital media that represents, illustrates, and demonstrates.

Digital storytelling brings together text, graphics, audio, and video around a chosen theme, often with a specific point of view. Bernard Robin observes that a digital story may be a personal tale, a depiction of a historical event, or simply a way to creatively impart information or provide instruction. The great value in digital stories comes from the ease with which they allow people to share powerful metaphors and analogies with their friends and colleagues. In the classroom, they can also foster collaboration when students are able to work in groups, and enhance the student experience through a personal sense of accomplishment (Robin, 2006). The National Council of Teachers of English in 2003, challenged teachers to develop instructional strategies for students to master composing in nonprint media that could include any combination of visual art, motion (video and film), graphics, text, and sound—all of which are frequently written and read in nonlinear fashion (Porter, 2008, p. 11). Included was the process of digital storytelling, where information is conveyed in a way that is more engaging than plain text.

Integrated enrichment: Digital humanities instruction and practice

The Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) at the University of Southern California is a prime example of a postsecondary education department that is escalating the growth of digital humanities instruction and practice by focusing on the use of digital storytelling.

At the undergraduate level, IML currently offers three programs (Honors in Multimedia Scholarship, Minor in Digital Studies, and Multimedia Across the College) that combine multimedia authoring and scholarly practice with hands-on labs that enable students to develop advanced digital skills, often using a variety of Creative Suite components. As noted on the IML website, the courses in these programs intend to “build fluency in scholarly multimedia with the recognition that students increasingly need these skills to be competitive in our global, media-based culture.” Most of the projects within these programs have humanities-oriented, digital-storytelling themes. For example, published project showcases from an IML 140 Workshop in Multimedia Authoring include a video portrait of a balloon artist; a documentary about Native American culture; a visual essay about a cartoon that was influenced by the Japanese style of anime; and a video remix about “Senseless Violence” cultural events, such as the Civil Rights March and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy (see <http://iml.usc.edu/index.php/minor-in-digital-studies-projects/2009/10/21/iml-140-student-projects>).

English language and literature course presentations enhanced by use of Adobe CS5

Students in an upper-level English Technology and the Humanities course offered through the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan are learning how to create presentations using Adobe Photoshop®, Dreamweaver®, and Flash® software (including ActionScript® programming). They are required to both create an individual project and participate in a group project. As noted in the course syllabus, students “will learn, study and use today’s digital tools (like Adobe Photoshop and Flash) and techniques (like networked collaboration and text analysis) to create, gather, manipulate, analyze and present new ideas in the humanities.”

For their individual projects, students must develop “a critical study of the humanistic implications of some technology as broadly conceived.” The course has enabled students to communicate complex opinions, arguments, and positions in creative, effective ways, as well as help them develop transferable technical skills using Adobe’s industry-standard presentation software. Examples of students’ work from various semesters are accessible at www.umich.edu/~mmx/humsit_coursework.htm. They include a wide variety of presentations with titles such as “The Vampire in Popular Culture,” “The Arthur Miller Project,” “Ann Arbor History,” “Shakespeare Writes History,” and “Underground Hip Hop.”

Other notable digital storytelling initiatives

The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) is an international nonprofit training, project development, and research organization that assists youth and adults around the world in using digital media tools to craft and record meaningful stories from their lives and share them in ways that enable learning, build community, and inspire justice. CDS builds partnerships with community, educational, and business institutions in order to develop large-scale digital storytelling initiatives in social services, education, historic and cultural preservation, community development, human rights, environmental justice, and other sectors. CDS is committed to the thoughtful integration of free and open source tools with Adobe products, including Adobe Photoshop, InDesign®, Acrobat® Pro, and Dreamweaver.

CDS is working with the University of Colorado at Denver to deliver a graduate-level Digital Storytelling Certificate Program that trains students in how to use video editing programs and a wide variety of other professional presentation tools. Additionally, the students learn how to integrate digital storytelling methods and processes into courses and curriculums across the spectrum of postsecondary education. The program includes a three-day intensive Digital Storytelling Workshop, a summer semester online course titled Digital Storytelling in the Curriculum, and a five-day intensive workshop titled Leadership for Digital Storytelling.

CDS documents its numerous collaborations with educators, business people, and professionals from human-services and international-development organizations through the extensive case studies posted on its website. CDS has been helping to produce these digital stories for more than a decade on an international scale. Organizations that CDS has worked with include the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Cambridge Community Television, the BBC in Wales, Evison in New Zealand, the Forum on Migration and Communications in Ireland, and the Museum of the Person in Brazil. Examples of these digital storytelling productions can be seen at www.storycenter.org/cs_instcapbldg.html.

Highly innovative practices in this field can also be found at Miami University in Ohio, where the Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies (<http://aims.muohio.edu/digital-humanities>) hosts a digital humanities research and teaching initiative that features sophisticated courses, a digital writing collaborative, a co-laboratory developing a track in software engineering about the humanities, a community of scholars whose aim is to set standards and support humanists, and a digital humanities lecture series.

At the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC), a consortium of humanists, artists, social scientists, scientists, and engineers have committed themselves to new forms of collaboration across communities and disciplines fostered by creative uses of education technology. HASTAC was created in 2002 through a collaboration between Duke University and the University of California Humanities Research Institute, its project section at www.hastac.org/projects features numerous examples of rich media, digital humanities-oriented presentations that were created with Adobe products along with many open and freeware tools.

Summary

These examples offer evidence of the impact of digital storytelling in cross-discipline creative expression. It has become an essential way of providing information and enhancing education in the humanities by making abstract or conceptual content more understandable; providing more ways to engage students through the inclusion of images, audio, and video in their instruction; and giving students a rewarding way to share and work with their peers that encourages more collaboration in the classroom. And sophisticated digital editing tools like those in Adobe Creative Suite are what help turn these stories into reality.

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