

Developing 21st Century Communication Skills Using Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

The purpose and aim of this study were to provide a digital storytelling summer workshop for local, underprivileged, middle school students in order to help them develop effective communication skills. Graduate students from the local state university helped participants develop enhanced literacy skills by facilitating the workshop and leading small groups in which participants learned how to organize ideas, express opinions, and construct narratives using a digital storytelling platform. Participants learned how to create stories for an audience and presented their ideas and knowledge in unique ways, which benefited their communication skills. The program was supported by a funded grant and dedicated resources from the local state university, public library, and independent school district.

1. Introduction

As communication skills begin to decline despite the fact that the world is more connected than at any other time in history, students are in dire need of developing skills that will help them be successful in whatever path they choose to pursue. It is necessary for educators to provide students with authentic and relevant opportunities for them to develop these much needed communication skills. Students benefit greatly from educational experiences that facilitate knowledge construction and build and support important literacy skills that will allow them to communicate effectively using a plethora of media platforms. Using a medium such as digital storytelling provides students a relevant, interactive, and engaging format to build skills that are integral for success in the global 21st century.

Many students struggle to develop the critical literacy skills necessary to meet the demands of the complex ways in which individuals communicate in the 21st century. In Paul Barnwell's [1] article, "My Students Don't Know How to Have a Conversation," the Kentucky English teacher laments the loss of his students' ability to communicate effectively in a variety of settings, mainly in person. While anecdotal, his

experience captures the widespread concern and pervasive issue of the decline of interpersonal skills in digital natives. In a world that demands that people communicate effectively in face-to-face interactions, brief emails, text messages, Tweets, and a variety of other formats, helping students develop varied and effective communication skills has been challenging for educators. At this point in history, students not only need to be literate when reading both digital and print texts, but they also must be adept at interpreting and using a range of visual images and sounds that create an intended message. One avenue to assist in the development of literacy and communication skills is through authentic activities such as narrative storytelling using a digital format.

The purpose and aim of this study was to provide a summer digital storytelling workshop to develop and enhance communication skills in underprivileged public middle school students. Graduate students majoring in an education-related field from the local university assisted in designing the curriculum and facilitated the workshop groups as well as participated in an action research project. They collected and analyzed data pertaining to the following: Do students who participate in the creation of digital stories develop enhanced communications skills by learning to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions, and construct narratives in a digital format?

2. Literature Review

Countless studies have concluded that storytelling supports literacy skills and discuss the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for helping students with language development and comprehension [2]. In addition, storytelling can help in the development of students' vital communication skills. According to Purnima Nandy [3] in the online article "Top Companies Use Storytelling to Drive Results," there has been "a tangential shift" from the formal directive style of the past to the more informal, shorter, and often conversational style of the present. As the workforce becomes more geographically

diverse, equitable, and less structured, the focus has shifted from “systems” to “people,” and with this shift, come increasing challenges in effective communication. Nandy [3] states that not only are the actual messages important, but equally so are the sender’s and receiver’s emotions and feelings and their interpretation of each other’s emotions and feelings. This has resulted in communication challenges for companies and institutions, and some have been utilizing storytelling techniques to boost employee’s communication skills. Nandy provides four reasons storytelling development assists in organizational communication: (1) Storytelling activates neuro coupling in the brain and makes communications more personal. (2) It builds motivation by helping people have shared empathic experiences. (3) Emotions elicited by storytelling can trigger the release of dopamine which helps people remember communications in more detail for longer periods of time, and (4) shared experiences and relatability can help people feel connected and safe, which can trigger the release of oxytocin resulting in feelings of empathy and cooperation.

With this in mind, digital storytelling holds great potential in helping students become more effective communicators. Not new, digital storytelling has been around since the early 2000s; however, its potential for helping students develop skills, specifically communication skills, is relatively untapped.

StoryCenter, located in Berkeley, California, is a leader in digital storytelling and its mission is “to help build a just and healthy world” through digital storytelling workshops that provide participants “the skills and tools that support self-expression, creative practice, and community building” [4]. The previously named Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) is credited for the seven elements they identified to create an effective digital story: (1) point of view, (2) a dramatic question, (3) emotion content, (4) the gift of your voice, (5) the power of the soundtrack, (6) economy, and (7) pacing. Following the CDC’s pioneering work, others have adapted and adopted the original seven elements of digital story, including the often cited University of Houston College of Education’s revision and development of ten elements for educational settings [5]:

1. The Overall Purpose of the Story
2. The Narrator’s Point of View
3. A Dramatic Question or Questions
4. The Choice of Content
5. Clarity of Voice
6. Pacing of the Narrative
7. Use of a Meaningful Audio Soundtrack
8. Quality of the Images, Video & other Multimedia Elements

9. Economy of the Story Detail

10. Good Grammar and Language Usage

Lambert [6] also published a revision of the original seven element both renaming and reordering the elements while reframing the process as a series of seven steps: (1) owning your insights, (2) owning your emotions, (3) finding the moment, (4) seeing your story, (5) hearing your story, (6) assembling your story, and (7) sharing your story. For the purpose of the digital literacy summer workshop, a combination of these previously mentioned digital storytelling steps and formats was utilized. We adapted our approach and process to meet the needs and demographics of the specific students who attended the workshop.

McAdam [7], with reference to the work of Delgado [8], posits that stories can be transformational by providing people with a voice, especially those who have experienced marginalization and oppression. The sharing process provides opportunities for questioning and reflection on the expressed needs and concerns of individuals and their communities as expressed through the storytelling process and the stories themselves. For the digital literacy summer workshop, an adoption of Delgado’s [8] and McAdam’s [7] call to create opportunities that will “give voice” to students, and the Story Center’s emphasis on creative practice, self-expression, and community building provided a strong foundation for the students to develop as communicators.

In the workshop, students composed a personal story related to their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. The workshop provided an experience in which the students could create, construct a digital story while building confidence through gaining literacy skills, key components of effective communication. They filtered information they had taken from their personal experiences over the past year to produce their own unique representations of reality. While not a focus, the workshop provided the participants an opportunity to develop new technology skills as well. As Banaszewski [9] states, digital storytelling provides students an opportunity to hone important 21st century skills and represent their voices in a way that is typically not provided by state and district curriculum.

3. Methodology

A descriptive and exploratory inquiry was conducted using a case study method to analyze participants’ digital storytelling abilities with the end purpose of determining if the digital storytelling process enhanced participants’ communication skills. Within the case study, an action research method was conducted with a focus on participants’ growth and

development of communication skills over a four-day time period.

3.1. Participants

This qualitative case study consisted of a small focus data set of one male and five female participants between the ages of 11 and 14 years from a local Title I public middle school. Faculty at the state university applied for and received a grant to provide the four-day digital storytelling workshop free of charge to the participants. State university faculty and graduate students provided instruction for the workshop, the school district provided the Google Chromebooks for use, and the local library provided the space and internet capability needed.

Upon voluntary enrollment in the study, participants were given an anonymous identifier used to code responses and report results. All electronic documents (data coding/analysis) are stored on one faculty member's office computer which is password protected and only accessible to principal investigators.

3.2. Methods

Researchers collected data through mixed methods. Action research is a significant distinction to make as it is intended to address a problem with the intent of improving future practice [10]. In that light, it is our hope that our findings will inform educators and practitioners of the benefit of digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach in the employment of developing students' communication skills. A case study design was particularly appropriate due to the small focus set of participants, which allowed the graduate student facilitators an opportunity to analyze, in-depth, descriptive data and gain insight into participants' digital literacy storytelling narratives and, ultimately, their communication skill development.

The case consisted of a small focus data set of six middle school participants. The local school district provided one-to-one devices for participants to complete workshop activities. The graduate student facilitators created a virtual classroom for participants to join in order to view assignments and activities, submit work, and collect data. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected by graduate student researcher/facilitators throughout the four-day digital literacy workshop. Pre- and post- Likert-scale, 18- item surveys, including some open-ended questions, were conducted on the first and fourth day of the workshop. The surveys provided graduate student facilitators the opportunity to evaluate participants' growth in communication skills, through observation of the participants' confidence and "voice." A qualitative participant quick check was administered on the third

day of the workshop. The quick check consisted of five open-ended questions for participants to self-reflect on their personal narrative story status and development to that point. It was used to address any questions or concerns the participants had about their stories in time to adjust the instruction as well as data to inform the study. In order to gain better insight, graduate student researcher/facilitators gathered descriptive data on participants from day one to day four of the workshop through handwritten and typed reflections of participants' development in the creation of digital stories, communication, and technology skills. Lastly, workshop participants uploaded their personal narratives to the virtual classroom platform, which were used by the graduate student researcher/facilitators to complete a discourse analysis. This process involved graduate student researcher/facilitators analyzing participants' published personal narratives, focusing on participants' creativity, self-expression, voice, and use of technology skills as well as examining the surveys, questions, and notes that were collected throughout.

3.3. Research Question

The following research question guided the investigation *Do students who participate in the process and creation of digital stories develop enhanced communications skills by learning to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions, and construct narratives?*

4. Data Collection

On the first day of the workshop, participants were assigned devices and introduced to the digital classroom platform that would be utilized for the workshop. Participants were given an online pre-survey; graduate student facilitators were on hand to clarify the meaning of words and phrases used in the survey for those who struggled with reading and comprehension. Participants were instructed on the timeline of the workshop, the steps of digital storytelling, and the focus of the narratives they would develop. On day two of the workshop, graduate student facilitators taught participants how to use circle and flee maps as brainstorming strategies to classify, group, and arrange the content of their story ideas. Participants then began narrowing the focus of their narratives. Graduate student facilitators observed participants planning their stories using the maps and took observational notes on participants' proper usage and overall understanding of the strategy. On day three of the workshop, participants assembled their personal narratives while the graduate student facilitators

monitored and observed the participants working to finalize their narratives and conducted individual conferences with each participant. At the end of day three, participants completed a “quick check” through their digital classroom platform. This quick check consisted of five open-ended questions concerning individual progress on their narratives to that point. Throughout the workshop, group sharing occurred as participants opened up about their background knowledge in digital literacy, confidence in having their voices be heard, understanding of the steps in developing a digital story, and the purpose/benefits of the workshop. During this time, graduate students recorded observational notes. These observations were gathered through handwritten notes as well as typed reflections on the part of the facilitators. On the last day of the workshop, students shared their final personal narratives in the digital format and completed the post-survey.

5. Analysis

At the beginning of the workshop, participants began to reflect on all persons’ COVID-19 lifestyles through digital articles, videos, and small group discussions in order to make personal connections with others and to consider their own stories and experiences. Graduate student facilitators and students shared their various experiences and feelings at home, work, and school. At the end of sharing their COVID-19 stories, participants began making instant personal connections in small group discussion such as, “That’s how I felt, too!”, “Yeah so many of my friends went on vacation and just turned their screen off when they joined in”; and “No wonder my teacher looked so grumpy all the time, she must have been just as tired as I was.”

When participants moved into the writing process they were able to build on the ideas they had generated and the sharing helped them to build connection with an audience, all of which are vital in effective communication. Using the circle and flee maps, which were modeled by the facilitators, helped participants organize and hone their ideas into a narrower focus, and provided them two tools by which to plan, organize, and be concise and mindful about what message they want to convey. Once finished, the completed circle maps were shared among the participants, and they focused on various topics: participants’ feelings related to loneliness, need for survival, a skateboarding adventure, a new baby sister being born, and adapting to a new, unpredictable lifestyle. During the sharing, the participants noticed that while diverse, many shared similar emotions and experiences related to the isolation of the pandemic. This allowed participants

connections that allowed for deeper conversations about their experiences.

After students found a particular focus for their narratives, they began the drafting process. Participants started by organizing all thoughts and ideas written on their circle maps into three areas: a beginning, middle, and end. At this point in the workshop, the digital storytelling software was implemented and participants began creating digital rough drafts of their narratives. Graduate student facilitators observed during this time that participants were working diligently and were eager to share the stories they were creating. Instead of sharing the narratives at this point, graduate students facilitated a discussion session centered on participants’ confidence in creating their narratives and messages using the digital storytelling process and format. The facilitators observed that students were gaining confidence communicating with one another and were actively listening to each other’s experiences drafting and creating their stories.

When it came time for participants to publish their personal narratives, self-confidence in student communication skills had increased astronomically. “I observed the most growth in participant four,” says graduate student B, “at the beginning of the workshop he was timid, but as the week went on he was more open to communicating his voice with the group.” Participants now had to use their written personal narrative and create a recorded presentation. Immediately graduate students made note of hesitance that arose from participants’ fear of hearing their own voices. “I think my voice sounds weird, so I don’t talk as loud so that no one else can hear it either,” expressed participant two. A plan of action was immediately put into place. Participants were told to choose a secluded spot in the room to practice solely recording their narratives aloud and become comfortable with hearing their own voices in a recording. Graduate students shared their own personal experiences to help ease the tension. “I have to practice recording a lesson several times before I am satisfied with my final product.”, said graduate student A. “Being able to confer with each participant as they were practicing summoned individuals’ confidence,” stated graduate student B. At the end of the day, participants were eager to share their recordings with other group members. Participants stated that through the process and creation of digital stories their confidence and ability to express their voice had increased, “I feel more confident, because I got used to it,” stated participant one. “[Digital storytelling] help(s) your story come together in a way that we don’t normally use,” participant two declared with confidence.

6. Conclusion

Guiding students through a strategically planned storytelling workshop provided them with an opportunity to express their voices while enhancing their communication skills that are essential in the 21st century. Results indicated that participants felt more confident in sharing their voice through a creative digital outlet when given a variety of ways to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions, and construct their narratives. Graduate students interpreted that students became more comfortable communicating with other participants when given opportunities to make personal connections to others' pandemic narratives. Due to the pandemic, overall student participation in the digital storytelling workshop was lower than expected. Future studies should re-conduct the study post-vaccination implementation to have a larger sample size.

7. References

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