

Digital Storytelling as a Means of Teaching Media to Preschoolers

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Abstract

Storytelling has been proved to have numerous benefits to education; some of the most crucial are: the stimulation of reflective thinking, facilitation of group cohesion, influence on the direction of learning, the linking to the empowerment of students etc (Flanagan 2015). Digital storytelling (DS) is not a new idea as its roots lie in the Digital Storytelling movement in the 1980s whose cofounders created the Center for Digital Storytelling that provided training and assistance to people interested in creating and sharing their personal narratives (Robin 2008). DS has been used widely in all levels of formal education (Blas, Garzotto, Paolini, & Sabiescu 2009), of adult education (Flanagan 2015) but also in a great variety of lessons such as mathematics and geometry (Yuksel-Arslan, Yildirim & Ross 2016). Needless to say, that digital storytelling has also been used to teach values in special education (Skouge & Rao 2009) and also to highlight media literacy in preschool education (Blas & Boretti 2009). Research has found that digital storytelling has substantial educational benefits for preschoolers such as the fostering of the ability to narrate, to work as a group, to increase the sense of self responsibility and meta-cognition of preschoolers' own performance (Blas & Boretti 2009, 49). Moreover, it has also proved to be an alternative problem-based learning tool for enhancing young children's motivation; an impetus for change in teachers' practices; and last but not least a challenging task for preschoolers (Yuksel-Arslan, Yildirim & Ross 2016).

Within this context, the aim of this study is to achieve greater comprehension of how digital storytelling, within preschool education, can contribute to enhance the media learning experience of preschoolers. DS is actually a basic function of every traditional or new medium. The combination of DS with media education will most probably prove to be a successful experiment. The research questions that the field study will focus on are the following two: Why digital storytelling is suitable for preschool media education? How can we enrich media education with teaching media ethics through DS?

Keywords: Digital storytelling, media education, preschool education, media literacy, media ethics.

Storytelling is a part of who we are as humans. [...]

Whether the story is told in LEGO bricks, claymation, puppetry, or text, all that matters is that the story gets told (Cherry 2017)

1. Introduction: Digital Storytelling

Storytelling is the original form of teaching (Sadik 2008,489) whereas digital storytelling is a new idea which forms a powerful approach to multimedia production that helps students build their own knowledge and ideas and present and share them effectively (Ibid). Digital storytelling (DS) is not a new idea as its roots lie in the Digital Storytelling movement in the 1980s whose cofounders created the Center for Digital Storytelling that provided training and assistance to people interested in creating and sharing their personal narratives (Robin 2008). As a definition digital storytelling besides a mere technological application, at its core gives the opportunity to computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional stages of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script and developing a story that is then combined with various types of multimedia (graphics, audio, video, music etc) (2008, 222). Digital stories differ from other broadcast media, in that they utilize multiple modes of meaning to create works that are usually only between two and four minutes long. These short narratives created place special attention to the narrator's voice are most often highly personal and have a strong emotional content (Kearney 2011) as they let people to represent their thoughts, memories, opinions or ideas (Kervin and Mantei 2016). Robin (2006) discusses three sub-genres of learner-generated digital storytelling, namely: personal narratives, historical documentaries and stories that inform or instruct. Nilsson (2008) uses a similar taxonomy of digital storytelling tasks, describing four 'subgenres': descriptive (usually personal) stories, argumentative (or advocacy) stories, dramatic and poetic stories (Kearney 2011). Previous research has shown that digital storytelling can be an interventionist, artistic and pedagogical process through which to challenge dominant stigmatizing representations of psychiatric disability (Eisenhauer 2012).

2. Digital Storytelling and Education

The educational use of digital storytelling witnesses nowadays a dramatic growth due to the combination of affordable technology hardware and software with the increasing need to update student's skills in a media saturated world (Robin 2008). Digital Storytelling can be a powerful educational tool for students at all ages and grade levels as students who participate in the creation of digital stories develop enhanced communication skills by learning to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions,

and construct narratives. Students who have the opportunity to share their work with their peers may also gain valuable experience in critiquing their own and other students' work, which can promote gains in emotional intelligence, collaboration and social learning (Robin 2016, 19).

In addition, research in three countries has shown that digital storytelling has a strong effect on student's motivation and enthusiasm as collaborative processes helped learn easier and raised commitment to hard work (Niemi&Multisilta 2016). Furthermore active learning methods such as learner – driven knowledge and networking proved to have positive learning outcomes for students (2016, 454). Robin (2008) underlines that the greatest benefit in the classroom emerges when students become the creators of their own digital stories and this equips them with the ability to perform a combination of literacy skills (digital literacy, global literacy, technology literacy, visual and information literacy) needed for 21st century (Robin 2008; Sadik 2008). One of the most important aspects of digital storytelling is that it can help make learning more relevant for students (Robin 2016). In particular, research shows that first and second grade students who participated in digital storytelling perceived themselves as competent writers and began to discover other creative talents such as taking photographs, creating their own visual images, adding colors etc (2016, 20).

Furthermore, integrating digital storytelling into the language curriculum can improve student's level of learning not only in writing but also reading, speaking and listening (Sadik 2008, 490). To add to this, including storytelling in the social studies curriculum develops students' understanding of democratic ideals, cultural diversity and participatory citizenship. The advantages of integrating digital storytelling in education can be seen not only in arts and humanities but also in mathematics, science, computer science and programming. According to (Sadik 2008) digital storytelling can personalize the learning experience and can provide more variation than traditional methods in current practice. Moreover, digital storytelling can be used as an e-portfolio tool of formative assessment for learning which will give more opportunities for learners to reflect and communicate evidence of their learning with others (Sadik Ibid).

As far as the educational use of DS in kindergarten is concerned, according to Yuksel-Arslan, Yildirim& Ross (2016) study on how early childhood education teachers incorporated DS in their classrooms, his study showcases on a number of benefits that DS has on early childhood education teaching. They conclude that DS can be used as an alternative problem – based learning tool for enhancing young children's motivation' and at the same time as a reflection tool in early childhood education with the use of which students and teachers can reflect on their practices and their achievements .DS activities motivated early childhood education students to remain longer in class and in that way provided evidence of student's success in performing a challenging task (438). Moreover, students who participated in a digital

storytelling activity behaved better in class and had an increase in self-confidence (Robin 2016). Digital stories are powerful representations of children's lives within communities and powerful means of self-expression. In that way they allow children not only to express themselves but also to express their understanding of the world (Kervin and Mantei, 2016). They (2016, 236) argue that the creation of digital stories proved useful for children at the age of 4-5 as they shared what they know about themselves, how they perceive themselves within a community and how they learn. At the same time, digital stories can be of great value to educators as they can be used as essential pedagogical insights into children's learning (i.e. design of learning experience, learning environment, oral language structure, vocabulary growth) and can certainly offer early year educators valuable opportunities to support children in making transitions to new communities such as kindergarten by making decisions about who they want to be within the communities to which they belong (Kervin & Mantei, 2016). Rubegni&Landoni (2018) targeted children with an age groups with no reading or writing skills in a public kindergarten in Switzerland and through an explorative study found that digital storytelling that enabled the active participation of preschoolers had a positive impact on their education of performance-related stress, the increase in attention, the training of children in overcoming individuality, the development of their emotional and social skills, as well as their improvement in communication and language abilities (Rubegni & Landoni, 2018; Sylla, Coutinho, Blanco & Müller 2015). All these aspects contribute to reinforce children's cognitive development. Furthermore, children became quickly independent in using the various applications and effectively became editors and publishers of the story (2018, 8).

3. Enrichment of Media Education in Preschool through Digital Storytelling: Media Literacy

Media culture is a form of pedagogy that teaches proper and improper behavior, gender roles, values, and knowledge of the world. Individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously. This situation calls for critical approaches that make us aware of how media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values. Media education should be linked with education for democracy, where students are encouraged to become informed and media literate participants in their societies. Critical media literacy should thus be linked with information literacy, technological literacy, the arts, and the social sciences, and the democratic reconstruction of education. Critical media literacy should be a common thread that runs through all curricular areas because it deals with communication and society (Kellner & Share 2007).

The uniqueness and peculiarity of the pedagogy of critical media literacy is that "it is not a pedagogy in the traditional sense with firmly established

principles, a canon of texts, and tried-and-true teaching procedures. It requires a democratic pedagogy that involves teachers sharing power with students as they join together in the process of unveiling myths and challenging hegemony. Moreover, the material of media culture is so polymorphous, multivalent, and polysemic, that it necessitates sensitivity to different readings, interpretations, perceptions of the complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings, and messages of media culture, which in its own ways is as complex and challenging to critically decipher as book culture" (Kellner & Share 2007, 17).

Media decoding and media production are excellent ways of integrating critical thinking about scientific issues into the classroom. In particular, "media decoding teaches a rigorous, well-reasoned, and reflective academic process, accessible to all students, that critically examines conflicting perspectives. Media production takes these skills a step further and asks students to engage in a complex and creative process of constructing their own media messages, typically after making judgments about the science and defining their own views about the issues" (Sperry 2012, 49). According to Ohler (2005, 46-47), creating digital stories is a perfect opportunity to engage students in media literacy, in learning about how the media influence our perceptions of the world. Yet, students need critical media skills in a world overwhelmed by story-based media, much of which views their age group in terms of commercial market share. We want students not only to learn with media, but also to learn and think critically about media. We want students to understand that the difference between a successful digital story and an effective advertisement is largely one of purpose.

As it is well-known, storytelling is a cornerstone of society, sharing experiences and values and in that way promoting emotional well-being especially for children as it allows them to construct meaning on a personal level (Farmer 2004). In this vein, a very popular trend in digital storytelling is interactive storytelling. A very popular application of this is the Harry Potter Project, in which children around the world collaboratively use the characters and settings of Rowling's books to create new plot lines and character development (Farmer 2004, 162). Furthermore, Mihailidis & Cohen (2013) explore the concept of curation as a student – and creation-driven pedagogical tool to enhance digital and media literacy education and utilize a case study of the digital curation platform Storify to explore how curation works in the classroom, and present a framework that integrates curation pedagogy into core media literacy education learning outcomes. Mihailidis & Cohen (3) also highlight that due to the familiarity that students in all levels of education have with digital tools and platforms; there is an increasing need to explore new pedagogical models to empower critical thinking, investigation etc. as research has shown that appropriate pedagogical methods can increase media and digital literacy (Ibid).

Media literacy can be taught through digital storytelling both in preschool but also in the rest of the educational levels. Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin Wessel- Pavell & Wohlwend (2012) investigate how literacy curricula could be expanded in meaningful ways and especially how play featuring collaborative storytelling and media production could be repositioned in a new literacy curriculum and help young children develop new literacies. In particular multimodal storytelling opens multiple pathways into text and playful media pulls children's imaginative strengths and popular culture passion. Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin Wessel- Pavell & Wohlwend (2012) highlights that when children learn to think as media producers and not just consumers of media products it is this the decisive moment that they begin to explore and understand multimedia texts as open to them and therefore competent to let them learn and perform diverse literate identities. Expanding options for meaning making moves play and filmmaking to the center, with the aim of helping children produce and critically engage popular media that characterize 21st century childhoods (2012, 91).

To be more precise, the ways media literacy can be applied and taught through digital storytelling in preschool are diverse and multiple and depend on the creativity of the kindergarten teacher. Some indicative examples are following:

1. Making a story by following certain steps of the story narration¹: this could be done orally in the kindergarten and mix all four C's that Cherry (2017) is talking about, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. Preschoolers become scriptwriters and engage with creative writing, scene design, building of characters and so on.

2. Making preschoolers get to know and familiarize with choosing and putting in a certain hierarchy photo, narration, music and boiling down in a certain plot. The brain behaves differently during a story as both the vocabulary areas of the brain activate, and the sensory areas do as well. The brain experiences the story in the same way it would as if you were inside the narrative itself (2017, 52).

3. Decoding an image/a photo/a cartoon by unveiling the semiotic meanings of the image itself. For example, discovering the aims and purposes of the advertising image if preschoolers were asked to develop a digital story to advertise a product or a service.

4. Transforming a traditional fairy tale into a new form of fairy tale by making a digital story with the same characters or with altering the story itself and possibly creating a different end or a completely different story.

What are essential in teaching media literacy through digital storytelling are seven learning principles that foster the pedagogy of media literacy and more precisely news literacy as far as Hobbs (2010) emphasizes:

1. The learning experience begins with children's interest in a news event that is contemporary, local and relevant.

2. Learners build reading comprehension and analysis skills through close reading to both understand the news content and pay attention to its form and structure.

3. Learning and discussion centers around the practice of asking questions.

4. A focus on the constructedness of news helps us examine the complex relationship between representation and reality

5. Ideas and information are presented in ways that connect deeply to the task at hand—there are no unnecessary, de-contextualized and easily forgettable facts about “things you should know.

6. Learners work together to compose new messages using media genres and forms that are appropriately challenging and meaningful for them to share their ideas with real audiences.

7. Learners benefit when they make connections between the classroom and the world (Hobbs 2010, 4-5)

Ultimately in these learning principles Hobbs highlights the power of the learning experience that is hidden in a media literacy class that adopts a news story to talk to the students about society and also encourages them to ask questions on topics that are of interest to them and that the students brought to light. Moreover, a notable learning principle is the interplay among students to produce digital stories that matter to them, their beliefs and their standpoint. As Ohler stated: “Digital stories provide powerful media literacy learning opportunities because students are involved in the creation and analysis of the media in which they are immersed. When students do the hard work of marrying story and technology to express themselves to others, they can see more clearly the persuasive nature of the digital culture in which they live. Such a metaperspective of media does not develop naturally, however. It is hard for students immersed in a project to zoom out and see the larger picture of media impact. Teachers who want to include a media literacy component in a digital storytelling project need to do so deliberately at the project’s outset” (2005,47).

4. Media Ethics through Digital Storytelling

As we have seen, media literacy represents a path for media ethics as it reinforces and enriches the ways students learn not only about media but also how to work with media in order to produce and present their own stories. In this regard, at the core of storytelling lie the moral values of empathy, collaboration and appreciation for a variety of art forms.

According to Wonderly (2009) one aim of moral education ought to be able to develop children’s senses of empathy and enhancing moral reasoning abilities. If stories foster greater empathy, then telling stories may serve to deepen students’ understanding of others (Cherry 2017). Young readers/viewers can frequently identify with protagonists in stories, imagine

themselves in similar situations and, consequently, develop feelings of care and concern for the characters in question (Wonderly 2009). Since stories create interconnectedness and community, they are a natural fit for a project – based approach teaching (2017, 52) and are very suitable for working on ethics and morality issues. Wonderly (2009) suggests that we maintain open minds with regard to children's films as instruments for moral education. Many such films, along with their intended audiences, merit respect as authentic and valuable moral entities. Still another advantage of film is that it incorporates technical effects, photography, graphic animation and music into its narrative presentation. In this way, the narrative is generally more emotionally engaging for children and may also serve to enhance aesthetic appreciation for various forms of art (2009, 13).

Moreover, digital storytelling can be used as a learning tool to foster behavior modification in kindergarten. To be more precise, digital stories which are created through collaboration with children, parents, and teachers make more sense to children than other learning materials. Digital storytelling allows them to create learning tools to modify students' misbehavior (Yuksel 2011). This means that a behavior that is closer to the values and morality can be easily learned through digital storytelling. In addition to this using digital storytelling as a learning tool makes it possible to transform the abstract knowledge to concrete knowledge. As explaining abstract knowledge is a hard task in early childhood education, such as, "saying thank you" digital storytelling is more effective in providing appropriate concrete knowledge according to young children's developmental stages (2011, 135).

As an efficient reflection tool, digital storytelling helps students see themselves and find the appropriate behaviors in the action according to their own reflections. On the other hand, for the teachers, digital storytelling is a tool for reflection on action. They see themselves in digital stories, and they are aware of their behaviors and how they acted in the classroom. Then, they can empathize how their students feel in the classroom (Yuksel 2011). Gibbons (2012) illuminates the ethics of youth media production as the interplay between media literacy and modality that fosters an ethical framework. She also adds that what is at stake is that more people should create space for youth media production but also that media literacy educators would take advantage of that and include it to their classes (2012, 265).

Besides personal values and self-morality, digital storytelling moves across media ethics when is addressing the question of truth and lies in accordance with true and fake news stories and when is working on building critical media literacy for preschoolers helping them to become citizens with an added knowledge on news as they are capable of telling the difference between a news story and an advertisement, a biased news story or they are capable of noticing what hate speech is. In that way digital storytelling equips preschoolers with the necessary media literacy skills for the 21st century.

5. Conclusion

The present article has aimed at both deepening the discussion on how digital storytelling can further contribute to the media learning experience of preschoolers but also on how the incorporation of digital storytelling in a media literacy class will enrich the class and imprint an actual creative identity. The findings shown indicate that a traditional activity in early childhood programs such as storytelling takes a new form and proves to be beneficial for the community of preschool education.

The article concludes with the current discussion on DS, its numerous ways in which relates to media literacy, not only as a valuable contribution to language, mathematical skills, arts, writing and so on but because it equips preschoolers with an explicit, comprehensible and consistent view of the world.

As far as the first research question is concerned, the research found that digital storytelling is suitable for preschool education as it can be used not only as a means of teaching a topic to preschoolers but also as a form of creation for teachers themselves to enhance creativity through learning. It is of relevance, especially for preschoolers to confront themselves and their needs and begin to discover themselves by taking the initiative for a number of decisions they should make on digital storytelling i.e. topic, plot, choice of images, choice of narration etc. For all these reasons, it can be claimed that digital storytelling exercises the preschoolers' critical literacy and when he/she works with news stories they also foster media literacy.

The second research question as to whether and how media literacy can be taught through DS, is being exposed the critical nature of media literacy, sharpening of critical judgment and making children the initiators of (news/digital) stories. Whether the story being taught is a news story or it is a story inspired by kindergarten children's imagination, the benefits of a media literacy class are both rich and valuable as preschoolers become media producers, learn to decode the meanings of images, cartoons, texts and dig even deeper as they distinguish truth from lies from a different perspective, a perspective that is closer to the social reality. In that way, media ethics could be easily taught as storytelling identifies with empathy, collaboration and can well become a reflection tool for the actions of both students and teachers. Through this methodological approach, stories can become a vehicle for behavior improvement of preschoolers but also for solving any communication problems that appear in the class.

Needless to say, this research has certain limitations as it was a theoretical approach on the benefits of digital storytelling as a means of teaching media to preschoolers and familiarize them with media literacy. What is essential is further research on the field that could delve into the media literacy experience of preschoolers and seek to discover the role of media literacy in digital storytelling and vice versa and the ways media literacy culture

contribute to the understanding of the self and the world in such a crucial educational stage.

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Notes

- ¹ For a thorough reading on the digital story process step by step the reader can read: Farmer, Lesley (2004) Using technology for storytelling: tools for children, *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p.157.

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