Telling the Story of America: Digital Storytelling Projects in American Literature

We all have stories. As our abilities to combine image and text become more sophisticated and ubiquitous, digital storytelling is a powerful means for sharing those stories. Storytelling has entered a renaissance in American popular culture with the popularity of radio shows and podcasts such as *This American Life* and *Serial*. These shows capture the stories of everyday Americans and continue America’s long history of storytelling in the same way that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) captured the narratives of former slaves and the work of Studs Terkel captured the stories of everyday Americans and made us feel like a part of history. Organizations such as StoryCorps and StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling) carry on their work by capturing these stories and encouraging all of us to tell our stories. StoryCenter founder Joe Lambert says that digital stories are how we are telling stories in the 21st century (Lazorchak). In addition, one of the ways in which we are creating art in the 21st century involves remixing: connecting different forms of media to tell a story. Digital storytelling is a perfect way to remix our stories.

After my students complete their digital storytelling projects, I ask them to reflect on their work and also to give me feedback about the process. Helen, who came to America from Greece when she was eleven, said, “This project is a lot of fun to put together . . . even when you don’t think you have a story to tell. It fits for everyone.”

In my experience, I found that students often seemed disconnected by the chronological approach to American literature. Earlier in my career, I was convinced that students would not understand the context of the literature or the influence of literary movements on American writing unless I taught chronologically. I realized over time that the stories my students found most relevant were often squeezed in late (and out of chronological sequence) at the end of the year. I shifted my framework from chronological grounding, looking instead to emphasize literature as both a mirror and a window through showing our stories and seeing the stories of others. My students, however, had difficulty seeing how they fit into this larger narrative fabric of American literature. They could see through the window but not into the mirror. While they could not always feel a personal connection to the American Transcendentalists or the Southern Regionalists, storytelling and the desire to be heard connected them firmly to the writers they studied. Now, though, instead of being presented in anthologies, my students’ stories were being told on Twitter and Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube—media that are given little attention in either curricular guides or teacher instruction.

**Designing a Multimodal American Literature Curriculum**

To present American literature as relevant to their lives, I rewrote my curriculum using backwards design and created essential questions centered around three main themes: defining what an American is; exploring the concept of the American Dream and its accessibly (or lack thereof) to all;
American Life also expanded students’ ideas of what storytelling and American literature could be. And students were able to make many connections to the more traditional American literature we studied. For example, many students enjoyed an episode titled “The Leap,” in which William Cinillo, a New York City bus driver, decided to drive the bus to Florida one day (www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/539/the-leap). Students connected the story to the wanderlust seen in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, when Huck decides to “light out for the territory ahead of the rest,” and also with Gatsby’s attempt to grasp the American Dream by stretching his hand across the bay.

While some students initially found it a challenge to listen to a program, as attuned as they are to visual media, they soon came to class recommending episodes to their peers and discussing the episodes they listened to. Many students enjoyed an episode titled “If You Don’t Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS” (www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps), which explores online bullying, and the two-part episode “Cops See It Differently” (www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/547/cops-see-it-differently-part-one), which examined police officers’ views of race and law enforcement. One student memorably wrote that he felt all his peers should listen to a particular episode titled “Switched at Birth” (www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/360/switched-at-birth), which he found in a list of favorite episodes on This American Life’s website, “even if they don’t prepare an assignment about it.” He explained that he chose it because it was similar to a television show in his home country of Turkey, adding, “I think that this story is really interesting because there are lots of things inside it. There is mystery, secrets, and families. There are lots of other baby switching examples in the world and this one is good to hear.”

Listening to This American Life offered my students access to stories and storytelling techniques and considering how American literature reflects Americans and differs from the literature of other countries. Using these themes as a framework, I constructed essential questions: What is an American? What is the American Dream, and how has it influenced America? How does American literature reflect America and Americans? And what makes American literature uniquely “American”?

Many of my students are international students studying abroad and living on campus. They often have little experience with American culture, history, or literature before they arrive at our school. Though immigrants come to America from all over the world, early American literature often does not reflect the diversity in our society today. I wanted my students to see themselves in the literature we read. I also wanted them to see the ways in which they continue and extend the stories of the writers they studied: they had their own stories of America and Americans.

Along with the literature we studied as part of the American literature curriculum, students also honed their narrative writing skills. NCTE has developed position statements, including “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” and “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments,” that encourage students to develop multimedia composition skills. I wanted my students to see the wide variety of American narratives available to contribute their own. To help students get a feel for narrative, I introduced them to the NPR radio show This American Life. Each episode centers on a theme, but at its heart, the show examines what it means to be American in these times. Students selected one episode per month and wrote reflections on either the story or the technical elements. Students connected the episode to events happening in the historical context of the episode’s presentation, discussed the effectiveness of the episode’s production values (for example, music and editing), or connected the episode to our class readings or discussions.

This American Life episodes are published on their website, and students can also subscribe through iTunes or similar software. I encouraged students to select episodes that interested them, and they could go deep into the archives or listen to the most recent episode. In addition to allowing students to learn more about digital storytelling, This American Life also expanded students’ ideas of what
that work well with digital stories. They were able to apply what they learned from *This American Life* when writing and producing their own digital stories after paying careful attention to the way in which the producers of the show pace the episodes, use music to help tell their stories more effectively, and edit the stories.

StoryCenter conducts professional development workshops for educators, and their process for teaching educators how to create digital stories is similar to the process I adopted for teaching my students. After writing several narrative pieces, students were introduced to digital storytelling through models created through StoryCenter (www.storycenter.org) and shared on their YouTube channel, which houses a large collection of digital stories created by people from all over the United States.

I selected several videos that I felt demonstrated an important aspect of storytelling: good editing or pacing, a compelling theme or moment of change, visual artistry, or a provocative story that evoked strong emotions. We discussed what made the stories work (or not work). We also discussed what the storytellers wanted us to hear and how they hoped listeners might respond to their stories. We looked for a moment of change, a pivot around which the entire story revolved. For example, one video was about a woman with a hearing impairment and facial disfigurement. In our discussion following the video, I asked students what they felt the moment of change was—the point at which they connected to her story. Several students said that the moment when she showed her disfigured ear to the camera and explained how it made her feel was the moment when they connected to her. She had made herself vulnerable on camera, and the students, rather than being discomforted by her appearance, saw her in a new way and opened themselves to her story.

After viewing several models, students brainstormed a list of potential topics. I gave them a list of prompts that included describing a favorite place, the best day of your life, or a decisive moment. Students circled the two or three ideas that had the most potential for a digital story. Which idea did they think they could turn into a three- to five-minute video? Did they have images they could use to help them tell their story? Which idea intrigued them most?
Students brought their ideas to a writing workshop. In writing workshop, each student shared his or her ideas and obtained feedback. Julia shared that she could not decide whether to tell the story of her parents’ nickname for her or whether to share her story about her relationship with her much younger brother, especially in light of the fact that she would soon be graduating and leaving him behind. Rachel suggested she might find a way to combine the two ideas, and her final project was a digital letter to her brother that not only explored her nickname but also her advice for him. Ahmed was torn between telling the story of being a passenger in a car accident or a wrongful accusation of domestic terrorism when he was obtaining his visa to study in the United States. As he described his harrowing ordeal in a hot jail cell in Djibouti, it became clear to him that the dramatic impact of this event captivated his peers and should be the story he selected for his video.

After deciding on a story, students wrote script drafts of 300 to 500 words, about the length of a three- to five-minute video—enough room to tell a story without being unwieldy as students assemble media such as images and video. I conferenced with each student about the scripts, and once their scripts were approved, students gathered images and video that they could use to tell their stories. Some students created stories for which they had a variety of images and even video clips to use, while others struggled to find images that could help them tell their story. I shared resources that help students find images, music, and video available in the public domain or under a Creative Commons license. I asked that the students keep track of credits for each image that did not belong to them as they worked, and before they began putting their stories together in film editing software, they showed me their image collection, which helped prevent them from becoming stuck if they discovered they did not have enough images or video to tell their stories. For a list of sample projects, see Figure 1.

Students recorded a voiceover using podcasting or sound editing software, such as GarageBand or Audacity. Students were able to create voiceover tracks using podcasting software that were independent from their movies and easy to edit, including trimming parts they find they don’t need, or easily cutting the voiceover into several parts. Many video editing programs are available that make digital storytelling production relatively easy and also ensure that all of our students have the same access to the tools. My students used iMovie to create media libraries on their devices that included images, voiceovers, and soundtracks, and they pulled all the media into a project. Students used the iMovie editor to arrange the images and sound to create the story they wanted to tell. Similar programs are available for other types of computers and tablet devices as well.

After assembling their stories, students were encouraged to find music that struck the appropriate tone for their story. Many resources for public domain or Creative Commons–licensed music exist online. For example, Aomsin’s digital video focused

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**FIGURE 1. Sample Projects**

- **Ali: Frankenstein**: Ali describes her relationship with her soccer coach, who nicknamed her Frankenstein.
- **Helen: The Train Is Leaving for the Waterfall**: Helen tells her story of a very special place that she will always remember.
- **Tobore: Go for Gould**: Tobore shares his challenging quest to remain on the varsity swim team under Coach Gould.
- **Carly: Dog Days**: Carly remembers a beloved pet who died.
- **Kaz: Family Time**: Racing NASCAR is family time for Kaz, but the one race his parents couldn’t attend also included his worst accident.
- **Michael: My Grandfather**: Michael interviews his grandfather, an immigrant from Italy, about his experiences after he came to America.
- **Aidan: Dad and Me**: Aidan’s identity as an adrenaline junkie is something he shares with his father, but their strong relationship was strained after his parents’ divorce.
- **Jamie: Teaching a Man to Fish**: Jamie describes how he and his father have bonded over a shared love of fishing.
- **Christa: Wishing to Be Back in 2013**: Christa describes the devastating loss of a friend.
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on her visit to Japan, and she was looking for music that had a traditional Japanese feel to it. In browsing one of the Creative Commons sites, she found the perfect piece that conveyed the sense of wonder and beauty seen in the photographs she had chosen to tell her story. Students are often tempted to use copyrighted music, but I require students to select music that composers and artists approve for use, which helps students learn both responsible media use as well as proper attribution.

Students are encouraged to critique each other's digital story drafts, and I conference with each student and offer advice about how to improve their stories or provide encouraging words about what is working well. For example, many students have difficulty aligning their voiceovers with the images. Students often need advice from their peers about how the voiceover can be edited to tell the story they want to tell. Once students are happy with their drafts and have corrected any issues, such as giving proper credit for images, video, and music they use, they share their videos on our YouTube channel. This intensive project often involves working with elements of storytelling; students have not tried before, from selecting images to using video editing software, and it is important to celebrate their hard work. On the day the projects are due, we celebrate with a “movie day.” In addition, the students' digital stories are published through the school’s social media accounts, offering a large public audience. Knowing they will have an authentic public audience encourages students to put care and consideration into their projects, from selecting topics that will interest others to writing a compelling narrative and choosing media to support the telling of their stories. From the start of the project, we discuss what makes us watch a video when we are bombarded with compelling media. One question we asked many times during the process was, “Would you click on this?”

Many students commented that creating their digital story was their favorite project. Some have used their digital stories as inspiration for important narrative writing such as college essays. Peishan’s digital video told the story of how she gave up dance because of the amount of time and dedication it took. She discovered, however, that dancing was central to her identity and shared her struggles as she took up dancing again and discovered she needed to practice to attain her previous levels of proficiency. She wrote her college essay on rediscovering her love for dance. Digital storytelling allows students who have difficulty with writing to communicate their stories in a different way, allowing for instructors to differentiate instruction. The biggest challenge my students faced with the project was unfamiliarity with the software. Several students indicated they had never used moviemaking or digital recording software. While many teachers consider students to be digital natives who can create video projects with little guidance, my experience has shown that students often do not know how to use the software, and expecting students to navigate unfamiliar software is not only unrealistic but also unfair. I offer explicit instruction on starting the editing process—showing how to add video segments, embed words, use transitions—but students really learn as they experiment with the software and test its capabilities. It is important to offer a fair amount of class time for students to work on these projects with the guidance of a teacher. Teachers who struggle with technology themselves may elicit the help of a tech-savvy peer or technology integrator. I also ask students who feel like they are anywhere on the spectrum from competent to expert users of the software to identify themselves and be willing to help as technology issues arise. Usually there are two or three students who are familiar enough with the software that they are able to lend a hand on busy class days when it’s difficult for me to conference with everyone.

Some students do not have images of their own to tell their stories. Jonny’s digital story focused on a horrible car accident, and while he had some images of the wrecked vehicle and police report, he feared he wouldn’t have enough images to tell his full story, so he shot video of himself driving using his cell phone mounted to the seat behind his head. The resulting video worked well, and many of his classmates applauded the clever solution he devised. Quan wanted to describe his special
relationship with his home in Ho Chi Minh City and had no photographs of his own, but he was able to find images in the public domain and licensed by Creative Commons to help tell his story.

Another challenge students face is deciding on what story to tell. One of my students was staring at a blinking cursor in Google Docs. His script for his digital story was already overdue, and he was clearly in trouble. I checked in with him to discover that even though he had chosen a topic—his love for baseball, which he shared with his older brothers—he had no idea how to start. I sat down beside him and asked him to tell me. Why did he like baseball? Why did he decide to play? How did baseball connect him to his brothers? Fairly quickly, the story was spilling out. I showed him the paragraph I had typed, which was the story he had been telling me. A grin spread across his face, and he said, “I think I know how to start now.” This student’s final assessment was perhaps the most useful feedback I received about the project. While he experienced many frustrations, including difficulty scanning photos and arranging them into his digital video, he ultimately described the project as “a great project” but advised that “learning how to use the different applications on [his] computer” was “frustrating,” and that being “taught throughout the year how to use these different sources” would have made creating the final project “much more enjoyable.”

It’s important also to make sure that students are using updated software, as technological difficulties often arise when software is outdated. This first project typically takes about three weeks; some may need more time, as they are not only completing a project but also learning to use unfamiliar technology. It is also important for students to see models of good stories from other students. The second year of the project, I had many student models, and the quality of students’ work increased a great deal.

In my experience, digital storytelling provides a link from American literature to the stories of our diverse students living in America and allows students to see their own stories as part of a larger body of American literature. However, digital storytelling could be adapted for any humanities curriculum. Students can create digital stories in a second language for world language classes or connect to historical events through interviewing in history classes. Digital storytelling can be adapted for a variety of curricular purposes while offering students an engaging and increasingly necessary way for communicating in the digital world. It is a student-centered activity that allows students to be leaders of their learning. It offers students another writing genre in which to work. Students connect to and contribute to the body of literature and stories through telling their own. Through telling our stories and listening to the stories of others, we understand one another, and we learn more about ourselves and the world in which we live. 

**Works Cited**


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Paradox and Dream,” a 1966 essay on the American Dream, John Steinbeck writes, “For Americans too the wide and general dream has a name. It is called ‘the American Way of Life.’ No one can define it or point to any one person or group who lives it, but it is very real nevertheless.” Yet a recent cover of *Time Magazine* reads, “The History of the American Dream—Is It Real?” In this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org, students explore the meaning of the American Dream by conducting interviews, sharing and assessing data, and writing papers based on their research to draw their own conclusions. http://bit.ly/2bsSzwR