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Discover Digital Story Telling

With the explosion of ICT and digital media technology we are all encouraged to feel individually we can communicate with whomever, whenever we choose. While this vision is optimistic, the reality is that it is not easy for everyone. Be it lack of equipment, technical skills or confidence, to fully embrace the digital media revolution we need to broaden access and learning.

In the South West there is a thriving creative media industry constantly looking for new talent to build the sector for the future. This talent comes from businesses, sole-traders, universities and schools but the pool from the education sector is small and needs greater real life experience. While universities and schools individually progressively build the toolkits and own knowledge, they are time and resource challenged to share experiences and widen their own encounters. As such the universities and schools are looking for innovative methods to introduce and encourage students, pupils and staff to connect with digital media to both see the opportunities it opens, and equally as a way of building communication confidence and life skills.

In recent years a participatory model encouraging people to benefit from social media tools has evolved. Digital Story Telling is the creation of short, personal, multimedia stories uncovering and sharing moments of our lives with one another. Within a few minutes using a script of only 250 words and up to twenty pictures, incredible multimedia sonnets can born.

Encouraged by the success of digital story telling in the USA and by the BBC Capture Wales project, Knowledge West offered to support the University of Gloucestershire, and the Lakers School in the Forest of Dean, to pilot digital story telling between students and pupils.

Alison Needler (Knowledge West, back row left) with the digital story telling team

Enabling digital story telling

Joanne Garde-Hansen *(Senior Lecturer, Media, Communication and Culture, University of Gloucestershire)* prepared a digital story telling guide based on the BBC Capture Wales project and sent this to Rebekah Hooper *(creative arts teacher and Real Ideas Organisation representative, Lakers School)* to kick-off preparation for the project looking at "Childhood". Year 9 and 10 pupils were then given time and space to collect photographs and construct stories. As Rebekah Hooper explains,

'The paperwork outlining the process, was excellent and really helpful ensuring that we understood the process and has been used by me and other staff in subsequent projects.'

The next stage in the process was creating the narratives for the stories. Four 2nd year radio production and media students from the University of Gloucestershire travelled to Lakers School to mentor the pupils on the art of digital story telling.

Pupils and mentor discussing story scripts

To their surprise and delight, the pupils were very well prepared, and already part way through constructing their narratives. In fact, while the team had expected mentors to be undertaking a fair amount of guidance, they found the pupils independently, collaboratively working on their stories and using the mentors as witnesses.

This stage 1 visit was important for the mentors and pupils to meet. One mentor reflected,

'I expected the children to be slightly anxious and unwilling to communicate/participate. However, I was completely wrong. I felt that once they were introduced to the project and started discussing their photographs they were able to stay on task and not be distracted.

I was impressed that they were happy to share their photographs and stories with everyone - their peers, teachers and mentors - who were relative strangers to them.'

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A valuable lesson at this early stage was the deliberate stepping back of the Lakers School teachers to allow pupils and students to work together. Rebekah Hooper noted,

'This was helpful to the success of this project – the pupils valued the opportunity to develop new and different relationships in another context.

I was pleased by the immediacy of the process – the story telling part enabled pupils to develop a sense of what they would be doing and to break down any artificial barriers. I was impressed that they were confident and able to tell personal stories to each other and this was due to the supportive approach of the student mentors.

They felt comfortable and confident with the students who were not in the least intimidating for our pupils, who have limited contact with older students. This was a real opportunity for them to consider what it would be like to go to college or university and to step outside their world for a period of time in a non-threatening or intimidating environment.'

The pupils were inspired and quickly produced stories around their photographs without coaxing or cajoling, as can often be the case with written tasks. All pupils continued working in their own time to produce their final piece driven by their own enthusiasm to be ready for the next stage and to not disappoint their student mentors. Joanne Garde-Hansen noted an interesting dynamic related to ownership of learning spaces,

'The university students clearly felt out of their comfort zone when not in their familiar university space, and with recent memories of being at school.

The students were not quite sure whether to function as 'friends' or 'teachers'. Thus, the provision of clearer guidance on how to take on the role of 'mentoring' and 'ambassadorship' would help build their confidence.'

Pupils planning their digital stories

Creating the right mix

With stories and digital photos in hand, the Lakers School pupils with Rebekah Hooper and two technical support staff visited the student mentor team at Pittville Campus at the University of Gloucestershire, to create the digital stories. One mentor noted

'The look of surprise, by the pupils, at the size of the campus was priceless and they definitely enjoyed it. The pupils settled well into the editing suite and most of them picked up on how to use the software very quickly.'

Amazingly the pupils were producing their digital stories within half an hour and all had produced one within two hours. The University Radio Production suite proved invaluable and the students were much more in their own territory and far more confident in their roles as mentors. As pupils explained, *'I didn't think it would be that easy and we finished with very little help and it was great fun'* and *'the students were all so helpful and kind and didn't make us feel at all stupid when we couldn't do something'*.

Pupil and Mentor mixing audio and visual to create the digital story

For the mentors and pupils access to the sound recording studio and technical support for the variety of digital formats proved invaluable. Working as a team, the mentors and the studio technician were quickly able to adapt themselves to the needs of the group with one student dedicated to the recording studio and the others moving from pupil to pupil giving help to get photos into iPhoto and iMovie, and use the digital effects.

While visiting the University of Gloucestershire the pupils also got to view an exhibition at the Summerfield Gallery on Pittville campus. As Rebekah Hooper remarked,

'Our pupils loved it! They have little opportunity to get to see art work in a gallery context and it was another stark reminder that we should be enabling our pupils to have as broad a range of experiences as possible.'

The student mentors were equally inspired both by the stories and the abilities of the pupils, one mentor commented,

'The whole concept was completely alien to the pupils, but I think that is what made the whole project so brilliant. They had to be taught from scratch, and from that each pupil understood the project in different ways. As a result, each story created was completely different, ranging from stories about relatives who have died, to fun birthdays, to relationships with siblings, to the best days out they can remember.'

Student mentors built their confidence in working with iMovie and with pupils, realising that mentoring these year groups was about developing the pupils' aspirations as well as teaching them digital skills. The students have also extended their experiences beyond the project itself, as one mentor advised

'I was inspired by the creation process, and how the children interacted with the project, and how it could be used as a therapeutic/educational aid – so much so that I have recommended Digital Storytelling to a friend who works with young adults with learning difficulties.

I have also offered my skills/services to a school for children in the care system – children who have attachment disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, some of whom have learning difficulties and/or mental health problems such as ADHD.'

With the digital stories completed the Lakers School pupils went on to showcase their work to parents and school colleagues at the Viewfinder Film Festival in Cheltenham and at a special screening at Lakers School. As Joanne Garde-Hansen concludes

'I would be happy to repeat this experience with the same school, in the same way or expanded to incorporate different schools. It could also be used to incorporate teachers and parents as well. There's no reason why the pupils could not then mentor vertically by showing teachers and parents how to make a digital story.

All those involved in this project are highly professional and extremely busy people with the patience and drive to deliver results. Collaboration 'takes time and energy' and if all parties have students' and pupils' interests at the core of their work, then there is no reason why they cannot be successful and sustained. As long as time is set aside for such projects they should flourish.'

Next steps?

This flagship initiative has enabled

- Proof of performance to support school bids for digital media equipment to incorporate digital story telling across a range of learning schemes

- Demonstration of the value of learning outside of the classroom/lecture theatre – both for students/pupils and teachers/tutors.

- Pupils to develop their motivation and confidence

- Students to build interpersonal and communication skills

- Teachers to trial alternative and innovative teaching methods

- Networking with universities and other Forest of Dean schools to swap expertise and tools to build digital media skills

For further information on digital story telling see:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales.shtml

Working with Knowledge West - So what are the benefits?

- Bridging boundaries of the education sector to develop collaboration and knowledge exchange between universities and schools

- Piloting best practice learning within the digital agenda

- Raising the pupils' aspirations

- Building talent pool for digital/creative media sector

- Enhancing the university student experience

http://www.lakers.gloucs.sch.uk/index.html

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Knowledge West project is a local gateway to world class expertise from an extensive range of academic and commercial experts to deliver:

- collaborative initiatives between business and our partners to de-risk innovation challenges
- non-executive Director Development programme
- early market research via QuickMark
- Knowledge West Enterprise Awards

Knowledge West is a collaboration between the Universities of the West of England, Bristol, Bath, Gloucestershire, Bath Spa; the Royal Agricultural College and Business Link.

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