



Digital Storytelling and Technology in the Classroom

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Abstract

This essay recounts a first year TEP student's experiences with student teaching in a second grade classroom and her attempts to engage and expand her students' literacy, intrinsic motivation and self-expression through digital storytelling and technology.

The imovie project "Courage" by the 2nd grade students mentioned in this essay can be viewed at the XChange website: www.centerxchange.org

Digital Storytelling and Technology in the Classroom

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I've always been a firm believer in using as much technology in the classroom as possible. All students—especially those in traditionally underserved communities—need as much exposure to technology and media literacy as possible starting at a young age to keep them competitive. But even more than that, I realized in my student teaching that using technology in the classroom is one of the best ways to keep students engaged and self-motivated.

As a student teacher in a second grade class in downtown LA, I found that Open Court Reading (the required scripted reading program) often left me struggling to keep my students focused or interested in their work. I knew that for their sake and mine, I would have to find a different way to capture their interest and engage them in literacy. I wanted to create a project with my class that involved using iMovie to incorporate their writing, art and self-motivation. The first step involved letting my students know what our goals for this project were going to be. The goals included all the steps of the writing process, from brainstorming to drafting and revising and publishing. Another goal was to share the students' final product with other classes and the principal.

We discussed how we would need to do our best effort in order to make this movie and everyone agreed that all students should be involved. They were very excited and we talked about what our movie would look like and what we needed to do to

achieve all the steps in making the movie. As a class we talked about what elements they wanted in our movie. Students suggested that we have music, and they all agreed they wanted end credits like they do in “real movies.” We made a deal that I would add these elements to our class movie if they did the hard work to meet all our goals. From the beginning, I stressed to my students that this project was going to involve a great deal of hard work and that each phase of the writing process had to be met in order to get to the next step. Our unit in OCR was courage and the class began this project by reading some stories out of the OCR anthology as well as other books about courage from the school library. Using a circle map graphic organizer, the class talked about courage and we charted our discussions. Students focused on: (1) their ideas about courage; (2) where they had seen courage; and (3) times when they themselves had shown courage. These three themes became the focus of our inquiry project and movie.

The students were asked to choose one of the three themes about courage and we began the writing process by brainstorming. This process involved using a bubble map to come up with details and examples that answered their inquiry. After two days of pre-writing activities, the students began to draft their paragraphs. They spent several days writing, editing and revising their paragraphs. My concern was that some students would fall behind during this portion of the project. One of the major obstacles I encountered with my students working on writing or independent work time, was that many of them were not experienced at working independently and several of my students would not complete their tasks. Keeping them working was a huge challenge for me and even more so when the task involved several days of independent work. I was pleasantly surprised to find that all the students were able to stay focused and worked to complete each task,

motivated by the fact that they were contributing to our class movie. They were excited and always asked if we could work longer or if they could have more time later in the day to work on the project. Of course some of the students needed more help than others, but nobody “fell by the wayside;” they all achieved the goals we had set.

The next step was to have the students choose a visual medium to create an artistic piece that represented their writing. The students were given options to draw, paint or color using markers or colored pencils. The only guideline they had to follow was that their art had to represent what they wrote about. This required they transfer their writing into a visual art piece, creating very interesting interpretations. Most of the students chose to paint, giving the overall product an abstract and beautiful quality. I felt it was important the students were able to decide what medium they wanted to use so I gave them several options. I wanted them to take as much ownership as possible and feel that they had shaped the direction of this project.

Initially I had some concerns about all the students completing each of the steps, but again the process went surprisingly smooth. I found my students highly motivated and engaged in the project. Before I knew it, they had indeed met all the goals and requirements that we had established and it was time for me to fulfill my part of the bargain. I took their artwork and completed paragraphs home to photograph and upload onto my computer. Since the students had all chosen one inquiry topic, I was able to create “chapters” based on their topic of choice. I then created slides with the inquiry questions and added the music they requested.

It took me a half-day to record each student reading their poems, but they *loved* this part. They took it very seriously and each of them practiced reading their lines out

loud so they could read and record with inflection. To record their voices, I simply used my laptop's built in microphone, and chose one student at a time to record.

Using iMovie, I pieced together students' artwork along with their voices. Since iMovie is highly intuitive, it is an easy program to use. Everything I know about iMovie I have learned on my own by simply playing with the program and trying things out. One does not have to be a computer guru or master to do digital storytelling projects in the classroom.

After our movie was complete, we invited several of the other second grade classes and the principal to watch our presentation. We talked about how important it was to share our hard work. For a final part of the project, we elected two class representatives—one to welcome the visitors to our presentation and one to explain the process and work we put into creating our movie. I was absolutely thrilled by how seriously they took the entire process. The class told their representatives what they thought should be said and the two students were given time to write their speeches.

The next morning the class presented their movie. The representatives gave their speeches and my class was so proud of themselves they were positively beaming. The looks on their faces were priceless. After showing their movie we invited the other classes to ask my students questions about the project. My students were able to answer most of the questions because they each had been involved in every step of creating the movie. I was surprised and completely caught off guard to find that I was so emotional during the actual presentation of the movie. I hadn't realized what effect this project would have for my classroom. When I looked around the room and saw the faces of the students, both the students in my class and those who were invited to watch our

presentation, the sense of pride and astonishment was immense. I can't describe the look on their faces or shy smiles as we watched the movie and as they listened to their own voices reading the paragraphs they had worked so hard on. It was remarkable to see the sense of accomplishment they felt and worth every minute I had spent putting it together and worrying about running out of time to complete it before my last day of student teaching.

The following week, I returned to the school and presented our class project to the parents during Open House. Again, I found myself unprepared for the rush of emotion that washed over me. As the parents watched and listened, I could sense the overwhelming satisfaction that each of my students felt and the admiration and swelling pride that the parents experienced as they listened to their own children's voices. For many of the parents who did not speak English, this event provided a wonderful opportunity for them to hear their own children speaking eloquently the words they had written. We gave each parent a copy of the movie project on a DVD for them all to take home and treasure. The parents were moved by this and thanked us, as we stressed the hard work their sons and daughters had invested to make this project possible.

As I reflect upon using digital storytelling and these types of technology in the classroom, I am impressed by the potential to promote academic literacy, improve intrinsic motivation and create opportunities for self-expression. My students were engaged and motivated to complete this project. We were able to integrate many standards into the Open Court theme while at the same time, genuinely engaging the students in the work. Since the writing focused around them and their lives, it was easy

to scaffold using the prior knowledge and experiences that each one of them brought into the classroom.

In regards to the different English Language levels in my classroom, this project was ideal because all the students could participate at their own developmentally appropriate level. This project also helped lower students' affective filters through building their confidence as they found success communicating with different media. I believe each and every student was motivated and remained committed to the tasks required of them because they were invested in this digital storytelling project. My experiences using technology in the classroom have convinced me to continue doing these kinds of projects in my own classroom in the future and I hope by reading this, others will be inspired to try these types of projects in their classrooms as well.