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# Using the principles of digital storytelling for student engagement and assessment

Jon Curwin

## Background

This paper describes how the principles of digital storytelling have been used with a group of first-year Business Studies students to engage them with their studies and provide a challenging way for them to evidence the development of their business skills.

## What is a digital story?

A digital story is just a piece of multimedia created using pictures, video and sound for others to see or hear. Like all stories, a digital story needs a storyteller and provides individuals with an opportunity to share their ideas, hopes and fears. They can record and reflect on what they have done, explore the consequences of past decisions, tease and entertain others. A story provides a powerful mechanism to string together a series of events or experiences in some related and potentially creative way; all important characteristics when asking students to reflect on their business skills development. There is a developing literature on how the storytelling approach can effectively engage students and provide a robust means of assessment (see for example Alterio, 2003 or Gravestock & Jenkins, 2009).

Technology need not be a barrier and offers students a chance to play with software other than Word, Excel or PowerPoint. All that is needed is a way of bringing together images and sound. A package like iMovie or MovieMaker is ideal. These have the advantage of being easy to use, provide a way of exploring the issues of media literacy (see for example Ohler, 2008), are of interest to students, and typically, in a Business School have not been seen by students before. Combining the ideas of telling a story with the creative scope of new technologies is in itself an opportunity to develop and evidence important skills.

## Working with digital stories

You only need to browse a few of the digital stories produced as part of the BBC Telling Lives project ([www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives)) to see the possibilities for sharing experience and insight with 'everyday' technology. A good story is one that is valued by others. It will grab attention, develop a plot or theme and signal an ending. These are all important characteristics we look for in a student presentation. So why only use PowerPoint? A digital story can effectively present a message in perhaps four to five minutes, offer many students a chance to be creative

with multimedia for the first time and provide the lecturer with an alternative form of assessment.

The existing skills module was already regarded as innovative. In groups, students were required to design, manage, deliver and evaluate an event, with each event offering clear benefits to the 'customer' group. Each student group would be both suppliers of an event and customers for an event (very different experiences). The events have included the creation of a cultural trail around Birmingham, a demonstration of making healthy, non-alcoholic cocktails and an outdoor challenge. An important element was understanding the realities of working with a customer group; a football match might be acceptable to some but not others.

Lectures and online materials would give guidance on developing ideas, making a case, assessing risk, project management techniques and methods of evaluation. The existing assessment required a group presentation and the submission of a portfolio to evidence student work. Like all assessment it could be challenging to the groups and could offer a real sense of achievement. Submitting portfolios and 'doing' a PowerPoint presentation was not new for most students and would be repeated in other parts of the course. There are clearly benefits in continuing to develop such skills, but there are also the lost opportunities of developing different skills such as multimedia messaging. The presentation of multimedia has a different time frame; the final product is no longer immediate and 'live' like the traditional PowerPoint presentation but crafted and revisited with the use of recorded voice. Students reported that working with their own recorded voice was a very different experience, requiring a new confidence and new skills. It is possible to video a PowerPoint presentation but this is still a different process, giving students less ownership and choice (though this may change with easier access to low cost video devices). The digital story format produces an artefact that students can share in a variety of ways: students from this group have posted their work on YouTube and even sent it home as an email attachment for parents to see.

The concept of a story did provide a useful reminder that that the beginning needed to engage, the middle should be content rich and the end acceptable or in Ohler's terms a call to adventure, conflict or growth and closure or 'life' resuming (Ohler, 2008). As they developed their ideas, researched possible events, negotiated what they would do and planned

for delivery they also needed to manage a parallel process of collecting evidence, typically with digital photos. Sound was then added. Most used a simple MP3 recorder while others used the open source software audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>). The typical outcome was four to five minutes of video, bringing together images and voice explanation, the outcome being an artefact that required the creative skills of production and content, showing students active in their event management.

### A digital story as a means of assessment

In this particular module, 50% of the marks came from the portfolio and 50% from the newly introduced digital story which replaced the PowerPoint presentation. The early experience of tutors suggests that most of the value is in the digital story and that this weighting should be reviewed. It was thought that the existing assessment framework for the PowerPoint presentation could be easily adapted but the digital stories exceeded expectations in a number of ways. Students were advised that they only needed to use entry level technology but typically they chose to exceed this with a more creative range of images, including photos, mind maps and original artwork. Most included transitions and effects and some used their own music. As with any presentation, there is a judgement between strength of content and strength of presentation. In practice, students did need reminders about the importance of communicating content.

As an assessment mechanism, a digital story offered the course team a number of benefits. Students were able to submit their work online. The submitted work could be viewed in four to five minutes and shared with the course (contrast that with a typical 20-minute PowerPoint presentation with a further ten minutes allowed for questions) with a permanent record remaining for internal or external moderation. If permission is obtained, these digital stories can be viewed by other students, adding an additional means of feedback where learning comes from your own work and seeing the work of others.

Students did need guidance on the meaning of copyright and this may remain a problem area. One of the observed benefits of students having limited access to the images and sounds produced by others is that they had to find more imaginative ways of producing their own.

### Student response

In general, students were very positive about making more imaginative use of their laptops and producing their own 'bit' of video. All the 'common sense' indicators of student satisfaction, like student attendance, engagement with content and enthusiasm in class, were supportive. To compare the current group submitting a digital story with the previous group making a PowerPoint presentation, the results from the Business School module feedback were tabulated as follows:

**Table 1: The use of digital stories: a before and after comparison of module feedback**

Question/Year	2008		2009	
	Strongly agree	Strongly agree + agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree + agree
The work was sufficiently challenging	53%	90%	55%	90%
The module was enjoyable	50%	79%	60%	90%
The module was relevant to my degree	33%	79%	45%	90%
Would recommend to other students	35%	80%	40%	90%

These figures can at best be regarded as indicative and need to be understood in the context of this feedback mechanism. In 2008, this module was seen as having good student feedback anyway (when compared with other modules). The figures for 2009 show feedback to be at least as good, if not better, but caution is advised given the methodology applied.

Once they had submitted, students not only wanted to know their mark but also wanted to see the digital stories produced by others. As a consequence, a showing of all the digital stories was arranged in the last week of term, which most students attended. This provided a unique opportunity to provide individual and collective feedback, and would be incorporated in future module design.

## Conclusions

Gravestock and Jenkins (2009) provide four case studies showing how digital storytelling provides a potentially powerful tool for supporting teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. We have also found that it is possible to use the principles of digital storytelling to engage Business students more effectively with learning and assessment. This recorded narration of images can evidence a range of student work, particularly the development of the skills valued by business. Experience suggests that students welcome the opportunity to use technology, will explore the creative boundaries of the technology and will be reflective on a more innovative activity.

## References

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Gravestock, P. & Jenkins, M. (2009) Digital storytelling and its pedagogical impact. In: Mayes, T., Morrison, D., Mellar, H., Bullen, P. & Oliver, M. (eds) *Transforming higher education through technology – enhanced learning*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/learningandtech/Transforming-18.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/learningandtech/Transforming-18.pdf) [Accessed April 2010].

Ohler, J. (2008) *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: new media pathways to literacy, learning and creativity*. Corwin Press.

## Web resources

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

[www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives)

[www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/digitalstorytelling](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/digitalstorytelling)

[www.jasonohler.com](http://www.jasonohler.com)

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