The Art of Digital Storytelling

With
Hall Davidson and
Bernajean Porter

Digital storytelling, according to **Bernajean Porter**, the author of *DigiTales: The Art of Telling Digital Stories*, takes the ancient art of oral storytelling and engages a palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music, and sound mixed together with the author's own story voice. It is both personal and educational, and, like the best stories, the process of digital storytelling can be hard to define, simply because it is not formulaic. **Hall Davidson**, the director of the Discovery Educator Network, recently had this conversation with Porter to try to get at the essence of what digital storytelling is and how it can be used in the classroom.

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What Is Digital Storytelling?

HD: What is digital storytelling?

BP: To do good digital projects of any kind, it's about designing information. Storytelling differs in that it comes from a personal angle—you have to engage in the data and information personally.

HD: When you use the term "designing information," do you use it in the broadest sense of what we have in the digital universe? So there might be digital stills, audio, video clips…

BP: …animation, sound, your voice, scanned artifacts like your grandmother's calico skirt or a newspaper clipping…

HD: And you put all those together in an information product that we could call a story?

BP: Yes. On my web site, we list six elements of a good story. The first one is to live in your story—if you are connected to the events or the information, you are a conduit for the other people who are listening to the information. The second one is about lessons learned, and that's what goes beyond summary reports. Now that you've reported and told me about whatever the topic is, make a personal, reflective connection to yourself, to your community, or humanity. Help me see the point of knowing this information.

HD: This is very different than the conclusion in a summary report that says, "Therefore the factors leading up to the First World War were such and such." Would you say that what you're looking for is why the story is important to you, the teller of the tale?

BP: Correct—or you might say, "How does this change your understanding of the world?" By doing that, students have to reach deeper to make meaning out of it, and that provides "enduring understanding." We have a lot of data in our schools. One of the ways we move from data to understanding is by telling the story.

PowerPoints of View

HD: One of the things that a predominant technology tool like PowerPoint does is flatten out information. It does not lend itself to multiple points of view, but is more suited to summary reports. Does that mean teachers shouldn't use PowerPoint for digital stories?

BP: A summary report talks about a topic or an issue. It lays out the facts. They are fairly common in our school structure because, in the past, being a good information consumer was how you demonstrated being educated. Designing information means going beyond the facts. What point are you making, what perspective do you want to present that hasn't been thought of before? Kids are perfectly capable of doing that; it's a matter of asking them to. The goal is not to say "no slide shows," but it shouldn't be the whole communication toolkit for kids.

HD: Can you still tell a good digital story with PowerPoint?

BP: Yes, if you work hard to build in the six elements of storytelling—you're living in the story; there's a lesson learned; you're creating dramatic questions that keep interest for the audience; you're economizing; you're developing craftsmanship; and you're showing, not telling, the information.

HD: You say that point of view is one of the hallmarks of a digital story, while a documentary should have multiple points of view. How do these differ from a summary report?

BP: One, a documentary uses an abundant amount of primary sources. That could be artwork of the time, music of the time, images of the time, newspaper articles of the time, journals. Two, multiple points of view are presented. If you're talking about a coal-mine explosion, you get the point of view of the inspector, the men, the government.

**HD:** What would make a documentary like that a digital story?

BP: You make a personal connection between this event and yourself, your community, or humanity, and make meaning out of it. There are many examples of kids stepping into the role of being the soldier on the Civil War battlefield or being the immigrant child who comes over with their parents.

Bernajean Porter's

Elements of a Good Digital Story

6

1. *Live Inside Your Story*

2. *Unfold Lessons Learned*

3. *Develop Creative Tension*

4. *Economize the Story Told*

5. *Show, Don't Tell*

6. *Develop Craftsmanship*

For details, see Take Six: Elements of a Good Digital Story, at:

www.digitales.us/resources/story_elements.php
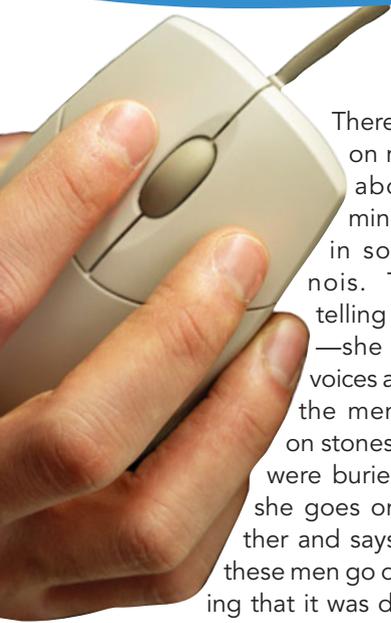
There's one story on my web site about a coal-mine explosion in southern Illinois. The storytelling is beautiful—she uses guest voices and tells how the men scratched on stones where they were buried. But then she goes one step further and says, "Why did these men go down, knowing that it was dangerous?" She concludes that John F. Kennedy said that ordinary heroes are the people who, in the face of danger, still do the things they need to do to take care of their families or to be loyal to their country, and that these men were heroes because they knew the danger and went down there anyway. It could have ended with the "telling about," but she went one step further and made the connection to why these men went down there, to what the "lesson learned" was.

How Do You Prepare for Digital Storytelling?

HD: What might a teacher do before going on a field trip to prepare to construct a meaningful digital story out of the experience?

BP: Before people go on a field trip, whether it's a real one, a virtual one, or one that might be in the archives of *unitedstreaming,* you first form your questions. As you move through the experience, you ask: What's a defining moment of this experience? There could be many, but you sort through them in terms of how it touched your life or gave you an insight you didn't have until you were immersed in the experience. It's an "a-ha" moment—but out of all of them, what's one that's worth telling? Then you begin to sift through the archives of photos or video. You

have to take that experience and craft a piece of communication so we can walk in your shoes. If a student investigates, say, a historic figure, he can also begin to walk in their shoes and say, "Here is something I am learning from this person that connects to me."

HD: Can you give us an example?

BP: A person in my digital-storytelling camp chose a slave named Fountain Hughes—she found images of him and audio of his voice, as well as a transcript of some interviews. He was 101 when he died. His grandfather was owned by Thomas Jefferson. Rather than write a biography, she created a digital story, and part of that was the "lesson learned" element—hers was that he paid a high price for freedom, one that we may never have to pay. She walked in his shoes; she imitated his voice, including a kind of soft dialogue, stuttering a little bit, and used pictures and images to talk about how the freed slaves were turned out like cattle and were under the stars with no place to live. Yet he said, "Some were sorry they were free, but not me." She made it come alive, made him real, and made meaning out of his life for those of us who take for granted our freedom.

Crafting Digital Stories

HD: How does the technology change a story or the storytelling process?

BP: This should really be emphasized: You don't go to the technology until your script and storyboards are robust. This is not about learning the technology skills. It's not, "Can I get an image into a product?" whether it's video editing or PowerPoint, but "Why would you put it there?" and "How does it serve the communication?" and "Is it decorating, illustrating, or illuminating your message?"

HD: So, whatever your assets are—different fonts, music, digital stills, software

that can transform images or sounds—all those things are on the table, and as you begin to do a digital story, you take elements that have meaning to you and put them together in a way that will share your meaning with other people. Is that the key to sorting through assets, whether they're from *unitedstreaming* or a primary source, like an interview with a veteran of World War II?

BP: Right, all of those need to be in service to the message.

HD: One of the things that attracted me to the *unitedstreaming* site was the one, two, three-minute segments, and when you see the little video clapboard at the bottom that indicates that it's an editable clip, you can download those, put them in a folder on a computer desktop, rearrange them, and then join them together with a narration, or with music, or a point of view. And now there is going to be a place where teachers can share those resources online at discoveryeducatornetwork.com. Do you think this kind of resouce helps kids learn through digital storytelling?

BP: Discovery brings us a great opportunity with that. If kids can make meaning out of information, it's enduring to them. If there's a deep understanding and they package it for others, others can receive that, and even though they didn't investigate that one topic, they also feel more connected to that information. There's no question that it helps their kids with basic skills as well as other higher-order thinking. ●

Hall Davidson is nationally known as a teacher, author, and lecturer, and recently joined Discovery Education, where he is a director of the Discovery Educator Network.

Bernajean Porter is the author of *DigiTales: The Art of Telling Digital Stories* and a writer, teacher, and consultant. For more resources and information, go to www.digitales.us.

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