HOW DO I TAKE STORYTELLING INTO THE DIGITAL WORLD?

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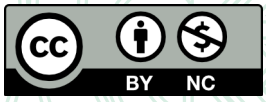
Pedagogy / Covid-19



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TE WHARE WĀNANGA O WAIRAKA

ABSTRACT

Stories are what we humans tell to make sense of the world (Lambert, 2012). They are how we come to understand the events we encounter and environments that we live and work in. This project came about as I recognised the changing teaching contexts of the past few years and reflected on how I continue to engage in storytelling, as I always have done in my teaching practice, in the blended and online environments in which I now find myself working. The intention was to explore whether and how the process of storytelling could be taken into the digital world or whether it was so dependent on being part of a relational, person-filled, face-to-face classroom that this crucial element of my practice must be left behind. It was initially an inquiry into personal practice and so was clearly consistent with self-study methodology. The methods used were a reflective journal, a group of critical friends and an anonymous survey to gather feedback from the students. The findings showed that it is possible to continue using this age-old strategy, however it is in a different style and format. The 'time' issues of putting teaching online in the short space of time demanded by the first Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 impacted on being able to more fully explore this topic but also offered an impetus to 'try things out' more quickly than might have otherwise happened.

KEYWORDS

storytelling, digital storytelling, self-study methodology

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is part of the way humans interact with each other (Smeda et al., 2014). Lambert (2012) explains: "We are perpetual storytellers reviewing events in the form of relived scenes, nuggets of context and character, actions that lead to realisations" (p. 6). These traditions, both oral and written, have long been the way important events have been held in memory and folk lore. Schwartz (2012) also emphasises the human element, reminding us that "humans are the only species known to write and rewrite the story of their lives depending on evaluation of past events, the present and the anticipated future" (para. 3).

BACKGROUND

I learned about telling stories first from my father and grandmother, as they used stories to teach me about their families and the context and environment in which we were living. They produced many early photographs of life for them from the later years of the 19th century onwards. It had the effect of making me feel as if I belonged in a place where I could situate myself in time and history. Second, and at the same time, other people told me stories from their work as teachers, in their interactions with learners as well as the content they were trying to get across. These streams of narrative have influenced how I use stories in the classroom with colleagues and student teachers over the years. I have told such stories to explain, give examples in practice, or to introduce something new, in many classrooms. What I have come to know about this process is that always, somewhere in the room, one or two people start smiling and nodding and wanting to tell me similar events from their own lives. But more, they make eye contact and there is an instant sense of connection and familiarity from the same experiences.

What this shows is that I am a storyteller, I have always used stories and they are an integral part of the act of teaching for me. They aren't something I necessarily plan for as I consider the lesson, but in the discussions and amongst the content, they emerge as I remember parts of my practice I can use to better explain. Such stories have also been used as examples to teach about and learn from previous events. Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) tell us that "storytelling is a process where students personalise what they learn and construct their own meaning and knowledge from the stories they hear and tell" (p. 69).

However, in recent years, the move to online learning, where I am not engaging in physical classrooms in one-to-one conversations, has taken over the way that I operate as a teacher. It has led me to question and to reflect at length about how to take storytelling, as I have always used it, into this new way of being. As I began my investigation into the best way to digitise the stories I told and how to then narrate them, the world was swept up in a pandemic and New Zealand went into the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature for this topic focuses on a number of themes, including: first, the definition of the term; second, the crucial link to the human experience; third, the creation of 'the other'; fourth, memory and sense making; and, finally, the digitisation process itself. In all of it, the important point is that storytelling is not new and is a core part of our social history and the way we learn in our societies and cultures.

First, the literature focuses on different elements of digital storytelling in developing definitions for what a digital story is. Normann (2011) suggests a "digital story can be viewed as a merger between traditional storytelling and the use of multimedia technology" (p. 125). Christiansen describes them as "short, personal narratives that use still images and music captured through the use of digital media" (2011, p. 290). She goes on to describe digital stories as "a learning resource … an emotional resource … a reflective experience … a transformative experience" (p. 291). Ohler, however, situates digital stories in their much older, very human history when he explains:

> … we use the powerful new tools we take for granted to satisfy our ancient need to give voice to our narrative, digital stories are simply the latest manifestation of one of human kind's oldest activities: storytelling. (2013, p. 9)

A second major theme in introducing this topic is its positioning as part of what it is that makes us human. Christiansen describes storytelling as "a uniquely human experience through which people make sense of past experience, convey emotions and ultimately connect with each other" (2011, p. 289). Kandal (2006) links stories to personal and collective values from the past that are applied to now and the future and new ways of living. In this point, he links together the stories of our pasts and how they have combined to create a personal identity. Hessler and Lambert also acknowledge stories that:

> … come from a place of deep insight, and with a knowing wink to their audience, and stories that tease us into examining our own feelings and beliefs, and stories that guide us on our own path. But most importantly, stories told as stories, that honour the simple idea that we want to relive what the author experienced in time and space. (2018, p. 54)

A third area in the literature is that the use of both storytelling and digital storytelling is strongly linked to documentation of social justice and the creation of 'the other' (Condy, 2015; Marsden et al., 2011). Engaging with digital stories also enables us to consider how understanding our sense of 'the other' impacts what we do in many areas of our lives. Documenting both the process of creation and the story itself leads to this new knowledge emerging. Carr calls this the "impact of social dislocation" (2010, p. 12) and a part of both our "rooted identity" and our "global identity" (p. 12). We encounter cultures and identities that are perhaps very different to our own, and in creating narratives of these events we "reframe how we see ourselves and our personal worlds" (p. 12). Christiansen also describes how digital stories can "draw us into the world of another [through] unsettling emotional experiences" (2011, p. 290), and in this way we come to see 'the other' through different lenses. Ladson-Billings describes this process with digital stories enabling "teacher candidates to reflect on their practicum experiences in

diverse classrooms" (2000, p. 209) and on the way they create themselves in terms of 'the other.' This links to how digital stories add to the way we remember, reframe and make sense of our lives. Stewart and Gachago suggest that "at the core of the digital storytelling process is the belief that telling stories can impact how people engage with each other across difference, which can lead to wisdom, compassion and awareness" (2014, p. 531).

Fourth, Ohler suggests that "stories allow us to take snippets of life and put them together in ways that make it possible for us to learn and remember new things" (2013, p. 9). More specifically for the teaching and learning process, Lynch and Fleming explain:

> … the flexible and dynamic nature of digital storytelling, which encapsulates aural, visual and sensory elements, utilizes the multitude of cognitive processes that underpin learning, from verbal linguistic to spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist and body kinaesthetic. (2007, p. 7)

In other words, it is not just the single voice narrating the events, but many other elements drawn in to give the story depth and breadth and to reach out to the affective in the audience. Kandal reminds us that learning is partly about creating retention of the content, and that it is "stronger with affective connections" (2006, p. 9). Finally, educator Daniel Meadows suggests, "In a digital story, photographs discover the talkies, and the stories told assemble in the ether like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle." He goes on to say that digital stories are a "gaggle of invisible histories which, when viewed together, tell the bigger story of our time." The beauty of them being digital is that we can share them all over the world and in this way they "define who we are" (Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling, n.d., para 4). Condy (2015) also describes digital stories as characteristically just a few minutes long but able to reach a wide audience.

The seminal work on digital stories came from Lambert (2012) when he put forward the idea that digital stories lend themselves to capturing small individual stories but the patchwork of multiple stories that can then be pieced together creates history, tradition and community. He suggests that such stories are a one-way process in which one side is a passive receiver of content, ideas and concepts that need to build in a step-by-step process that sticks closely to the message being given. However, in reviewing this idea of passivity in the process, it may be possible to see digital storytelling more as a two-way process, with the creator telling the story and the audience listening and reflecting on the events and creating meaning for themselves.

In this way, for both narrator and audience it becomes more of a synthesis of emotion and individual, personal change as the listeners make connections to their own experiences and recognise the familiarity of responses in the story. In this process, the listener creates and recreates their identity as they reflect on and describe experiences to others. Carr also suggests that:

> … the process of identity construction in the 21st century will be accelerated, fluid and dislocating as has been virtually all aspects of our current economic and social experience within our societies. Digitizing the process of storytelling then adds wider layers of possibility where once the only canvas was imagination. (2010, p. 12)

He goes on to describe a process of "reframing personal myths" (2010, p. 12) in many different possible identities that are very much open to personal choice and perspective.

In summation, the literature supports the idea that digital storytelling, part of the storytelling tradition, can open new perspectives, content and ways of seeing the world that are useful in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a system of ways of finding out something and is chosen to support what the investigator wants to know. The intention with this project was to explore an area of my own practice. The focus was on whether and how the process of storytelling could be taken across the divide between face-to-face and online classrooms. I wanted to find out whether storytelling, this crucial part of my practice, was either too dependent on being part of a face-to-

face classroom to survive the move to online learning or whether I could develop a strategy to enable the move. The project was then about my practice and adding elements to it that would improve it moving forward. This made it consistent with self-study methodology. Loughran and Northfield (1998) explain that:

> Reflection on practice and self-study are becoming important components of the push for close scrutiny of an individual's pedagogy in teaching about teaching, and they are linked to ideas about the development of knowledge through better understanding of personal experience. (p. 7)

Samaras suggests that building such knowledge "may be initiated when teachers pose purposeful and applicable questions about their practice that empower a reforming change in the first person" (2011, p. 42). She goes on to say that "self-study teachers initiate questions about their own practice, which they generate from observations of and personal experiences within their classrooms" (p. 43). My focus on exploring how to take stories into the digital environment was also supported by Hamilton and Pinnegar, who explain, "Research on teaching practice by teachers holds invaluable promise for … producing new knowledge about teaching and learning" (1998, p. 243).

The research question was: "How do I take storytelling into a digital world?" At the start of the lockdown I added a sub-question: "What is the best way to create digital stories to support teaching and learning in fully online environments?"

I used a research journal to capture my thinking about the process I was working with and how I evaluated it. Research journals are an important element of self-study as they enable the practitioner to capture what happens and subsequent reflections on the events (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). As self-study methodology focuses on a single perspective, critical friends added their voice to the conversation about the best process to enable storytelling (in the way that I engage with it) to work in the digital sphere. They also empowered critical questions about what I was thinking, instead of just accepting my own perspective. I also invited feedback from the students through an anonymous survey, to answer whether what I was doing had some validity for their learning. Ethical approval for the project was given at the end of 2019.

PHASE ONE: WHERE TO START

Narrative of the cycle

Having worked out what I wanted to know and how to find out, the next question became where and how to start. I knew there were probably many different pieces of dedicated software but, given the speed of the pandemic's impact and the very short time-frames until teaching online began, I wanted something simple and familiar. PowerPoint seemed the easiest, as I used it all the time and knew how to make it into a video. I started with one person's learning journey as an example for one of the students' assignments. The topic was a story I knew about and had the still images that Christiansen (2011) importantly talks about and so it was simple to chose the ones that might fit into the PowerPoint. However, it took a whole day to get the animation and the design right for one two-minute video, which seemed a long time for something so short.

Findings

As I played the video back and reflected on what I could see, I journaled what I knew at that point:

- "I hadn't really planned it so it took a long time to create" (Research Journal [R. J.], p. 16).
  This was important, as there were many other demands both at that particular time and in preparation for 'normal' teaching, so it needed to get faster to be useful.
- "The story was in my head but clearly not in the video" (R. J., p. 17).
  Meadows (Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling, n.d.) discusses the importance of the story itself, and it was very clear at this point that I needed to make it all much more systematic and the elements of the story clearer.

My role as a storyteller in a physical classroom meant I could add and change things as I went along depending on the response of the audience. I needed to think very carefully about the elements that made up a story for the online environment as there would be no visible immediate response to guide me.

- "It was very flat. I usually tell stories using tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions that reach the affective zone for my listeners and make it three-dimensional" (R. J., p. 19).
  That clearly wasn't present in that first video, which was nothing like I had imagined. In terms of my research question, I had not really given enough thought to the differences between the physical and online classrooms in terms of storytelling. It was clear that I needed to think the whole story through, decide on the important points and find relevant pictures before I began.

PHASE TWO: THE ELEMENTS OF THE STORY

Narrative of the cycle

Based on the first cycle, I went back to the same PowerPoint, but before starting anything, I planned what I wanted it to look like. The process of 'storyboarding' was simply to think about each part/slide of the video as an individual element. For this video, I wanted to introduce a content topic so we could get into discussion straight away in the online session. To do this, I went back to how I teach this part of the class and the questions I usually start with in a face-to-face environment. As a result, I used the 'callouts' in MS Word Shapes to add a narrator or 'voice' for the story on each slide, and as a simple way of actually 'telling' the story. The learner was a doodle character who added the voice and emotions of the audience responding to the narrator (Rohde, 2012). Music was also part of this video, which made a noticeable difference to the finished article (Ohler, 2013).

Findings

My journal entry for this moment focuses on my response:

- "By adding a 'voice' element, music, and beginning with storyboarding the story element came through and the final artefact was much more three-dimensional" (R. J., p. 24).
  In some ways, in thinking about the way I told stories in the classroom, it occurred to me that I had not considered the process I went through to develop them. I only knew that this process consisted of a lengthy telling and retelling of the story in my head to choose the right words in each part.
- "It still took a very long time to make something really short in the overall teaching plan" (R. J., p. 26).
  Time was still very much an issue in a very pressurised environment.

Returning to the research question at the end of this second cycle, it was becoming evident that the process of creating a story for the online environment was a precise and conscious one. This was very different from the face-to-face versions that emerged to give examples or to explain, and then faded back into the conversation. Online stories would have to stand alone.

PHASE THREE: HUMAN VOICE

Narrative of the cycle

One weekend I found some very evocative digital stories using single photographs and a human voice to tell personal stories about family. To try out this idea, I wanted to use a topic where the personal voice would be very important to the story. I decided on making a mihi (a formal Māori greeting) into a digital narrative so that I could

introduce myself to my new learners if we were still online at the beginning of the next semester. In this phase, I started with single photographs, including one of me, and added quiet music and my own voice.

Findings

My journal at this time records the following:

- "Creating a video with two audios was by far the most complex to accomplish and, yet, it seemed the closest to traditional storytelling that I had found" (R. J., p. 28).
  The two audios made the finished product very personal and exactly how I would want my mihi to be. The impact of the human voice made the digital story dramatically different.
- "In this version, I was consciously aware of using all of the traditional elements of telling a story" (R. J., p. 28).
  In terms of the answer to my research question, realising this was very comforting as I could now see that storytelling could be brought into the digital environment, but it was going to look different. In particular, it needed to be incorporated into the content but also to stand alone and have enough included for learners to be able to follow easily. It couldn't be the more dynamic version that I often changed as I went along.

THE STUDENT VOICE

The research plan had also involved an anonymous survey of the students to gauge their thoughts about the little videos, at the end of the first semester of teaching and learning online. There were 30 students in this Level 4 class, with many different age groups (school leavers to grandmothers) and ethnicities including Māori, Indian, Chinese, Sāmoan, Fijian and European.

I asked one question in the survey:

- "Did the videos help you to understand the content of the class?"

I received eight replies to the survey, and although this was a small sample the range of feedback was similar in content:

- "The video presentation about Dispositions is really helpful to give more understanding about it" (Student 1)
- "It was simply and easy to understand" (Student 2)
- "Videos are very helpful and a more exciting way of gathering information instead of having to read things all the time" (Student 3)
- "I loved them, they were amazing, easy to understand and delightful" (Student 4)
- "It was nice to experience more outgoing things" (Student 5)
- "Very informative! Also the pictures with the words is great" (Student 6)
- "I enjoyed it and found it helped for me to have a better understanding" (Student 7)
- "[I]t was good and made my understanding more clear and easy" (Student 8)

It was clear from the positive nature of the comments and their focus on how much the learners understood from watching, that the videos helped them better understand the content for the class. Importantly, this was the very reason I have always used stories in physical classrooms. Although it was still taking time to make something quite small it was clearly a valuable way to support understanding.

DISCUSSION

In this project, the importance of the findings for my practice were really clear. First and foremost, I had found a way of recreating the same little stories that I had always used in practice. However, now they looked very different. Instead of emerging from the unplanned flow of conversation as they had done in physical classrooms, they were now a very specific, intentional and planned process, much as Hessler and Lambert (2018) describe. They emerged from a different part of the planning process in the time before the class, rather than as the class went along.

Second, stories could still be utilised as examples of content-in-action as previously but, again, they had to be part of the pre-session planning, not something that just emerged from the conversation. In this way, they could be set up for specific points in the lesson: at the beginning as the introduction, for example, the first part of flipping the classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), or at the end as a synthesis of the session. They also didn't need to be tied to the students' Learning Management System. As short videos they could be sent to the students using mobile technology.

Third, the important point is that the use of 'voice,' or, as Alismail calls it, "the gift of your voice" (2015, p. 127), really personalises the point the story is trying to make. The human voice brings back the idea of the human narrator and links back to what storytelling has always been before the digital environment invaded classrooms.

Fourth, stories also met the needs of learners with different learning styles, as the feedback from the students indicated. The visual nature of the presentation of the content seemed to help the students understand what the sessions were about better than just reading. Ohler suggests that "they combine traditional and emerging literacies" and, in this way, reach out on many levels to the students (2012, p. 12). As Christiansen suggests, "Their creation requires patients [learners] to actively engage in making sense of their experiences but also enables them to present a point of view to be communicated" (2011, p. 290).

CONCLUSION

This research project was about an integral part of my practice that was changing as the digital world gradually emerged in my classroom. However, storytelling was more than just a teaching approach, it was a core part of both my personal and teacher identities and without it, both would be devalued. The first lockdown of 2020 meant that the project took on new importance as teaching moved fully online. Drawing from the literature for some guidance, it was clear that digital storytelling was just the newest reinvention of an age-old tradition, and one that could add many more layers of nuance with music and visuals stitched together in different ways to act on the physical, cognitive and affective responses. It could also engage with issues of 'other' by reimaging personal perspectives. The three phases of research showed the importance of the elements that make up a story and how the story itself must be clear enough to easily engage with. There were also ways of reaching out to affective responses from the listeners, as with the effect of adding music. However, more than anything, the continuing use of the human voice talking to the audience created the most powerful version of this teaching tool.

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