Digital Storytelling and the Tools that Make Them

Humans naturally connect through stories, either by producing or consuming them. We learn about most of our history on Earth from stories. Religions are based on stories that teach something and stick with people throughout generations. Ancient civilizations wrote stories on walls. Egyptians used hieroglyphics to tell their history. Storytelling is what humans do. It is part of who we are. We watch movies, read books, and watch plays in the theater.

Why is storytelling part of our lives? When we tell stories, we activate parts of our brain that remain dormant when we're just listing facts or giving general information. We have no empathy when reading facts, hearing a lecture, or viewing a PowerPoint with bullets if we cannot connect to the topics. When we tell someone a story, the listener uses his or her own ideas and experience to relate. A different part of our brain is affected as we imagine the emotions and senses brought on by the story.

Years ago, I went to an event to see Philippe Cousteau speak. Cousteau is a hero of mine because I love his research on the ocean. He, like his grandfather Jacque, brings a deeper understanding of the ocean and other parts of the world to everyday humans like me. I think I have learned more from the two of them than I have from any book, study, or website. When Cousteau was talking, he stated that he was not an educator but a storyteller like his grandfather. He said that he takes what he sees in the world and educates others through stories. He also said that all good educators are storytellers; they take facts and bring them to students in entertaining and relatable ways. This idea has stayed with me over the years, and I understand the importance of not only telling stories, but also guiding students to tell their own stories.

Today's society, just like in the past, revolves around telling stories. Our stories are just told differently. In our digital world, we tell stories with pictures and video. We live stream rides on vacation and Instagram our breakfast. We tell our story to hundreds of people as it happens. This behavior is a huge part of our lives and our students' lives. So it's important to harness what we know about storytelling and digital media and use these tools to teach our students and allow them to share what they know.

Digital storytelling uses video, pictures, music, and even words to convey information. We know that stories allow people to connect to content. When you add in images or even videos

that can capture your audience's attention, stories can become more meaningful. You can tell stories through slideshows, websites, online posters, and animation. We will look at some of the free and easy platforms to use for creating incredible stories.

When starting out, teachers might have questions about how to turn their lessons into stories. While telling stories in some subjects, such as a language arts class, can be easy (students can retell a story they are reading or write a story from scratch and add pictures and music), telling stories in other subjects can be more difficult. In social studies, for example, think about how students can imagine living during a certain time and create a story of what life was like in the past. In science classes, get students to imagine what it's like to be a landform or a planet and relate the story of how they formed. They can narrate the process and add interesting pictures and music. In math classes, which aren't touted for their creativity, get students to make up a story about geometric shapes and give the shapes a personality. I saw a digital story once about solving for X. X was trying to figure out who he was. The journey went through the steps of solving the problem, which helped students better understand the subject in a fun and entertaining way.

When grading student's stories, remember to focus on content. Try not to focus on the aesthetics as much as on whether or not they shared the information we wanted them to learn. Create rubrics that focus on standards. Use tools that are easy for their age group so that they focus on the product. Encourage humor and fun, and your students are apt to create more memorable stories.

Where to Start

Making digital stories can be overwhelming for students. They can get so bogged down in the details of how their story looks that they forget to tell the story. The best way to prevent this problem is to use storyboards. Once students have composed the story, they must determine the order and imagery for each page. For every video, slideshow, or story my students created, they worked with a storyboard. I noticed that when my students storyboard their ideas, they spend less time creating the project and brainstorming.

Storyboard That is a great online storyboard site that allows students to plan their stories. With the backgrounds and characters, Storyboard That can actually be a great digital storytelling tool in itself. There are also other sites that I will mention below that have printable board templates for students to use.

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Books and Slideshows for Storytelling

The first tools we will look at are slideshow tools that students can use to tell a story. PowerPoint or Google Slides with pictures and animations are great platforms, but often when someone starts creating in one of these tools, they get sucked into bullet points and clip art. The tools below allow for more creativity and provide an option for a global audience.

Little Bird Tales is one of my favorite "online book" creators for younger students. I love that students can create stories with pictures and record their voices. The website is free and easy to use and offers a premium version that provides more space to create stories.

Once you have an account, the site routes you to a "create a tale" page to start your story. You can upload pictures for the background, and then add words to the picture with the draw feature. Once you have the picture the way you like it, you can add your voice reading the story. You can also add your story's text. There is an option to add a class and lessons, but you don't have to take advantage of that feature. Once you have finished this page, click save and start the next page. When the story is complete, you can watch the book and listen to your audio. Here is an example of a Little Bird Tale (without the audio). You can pay to download your books as an MP4 or embed it into your website for free.

StoryBird is another fun book-like tool. StoryBird is also free, easy to use, and allows you to add your class for student accounts. My favorite thing about StoryBird is the beautiful artwork your students can use. To create a book, pick your artwork, put it on your pages in order, and then add your text to the pages. The artwork that goes with the original art you choose is available so that your book has a common theme. Once you have finished your book, you can publish it and choose if you want to display it publically or privately. For a fee, you can even print out your story as a book. Here is an example of a StoryBird book.

Powtoon is a great animated slideshow creator. It is a little different from the book-based tools above, but it still can tell your story. Powtoon has a edu version that is free and can be upgraded for a price. You can also connect to the service through your Google Drive app.

To create a Powtoon, sign up for an account or sign in with your Google account. Once you click create, you can choose from a variety of fun themes. Once you decide on your theme, you can start creating your story. Your slides are on the left side like in Slides or PowerPoint and you

can choose if you want your story to display in Movie or Slideshow mode. Movie mode moves on its own and you can add music to the background. In Slideshow mode, you have to manually click from slide to slide. The tools to create your slides are on the right side of the screen. It is fun to play around with the many options. When you've finished your story, you can share the link or embed it on a website. Here is an example of a math story created in Powtoon.

Comics for Storytelling

When I assign students projects, I always give them multiple options for how they can share their information. Those options always include posters or slideshows, but I also provide other options for my students who hate the typical projects. One year, I decided to give students the option to create comics about the eight (well, it was nine back then) planets. I was very surprised at the outcomes. I had five typically low-performing students excel at this assignment. Since they only had to write a sentence at a time, they used their everyday language, not the proper writing they typically had to use on other assignments. When they presented their comic to the class, other students laughed and cheered for them, which boosted their confidence. Below are a few comic sites that I have found over the years that offer easy platforms and iPad apps for students to tell their stories.

Toondoo is free and fun to use. The site is full of cartoon images that appeal to students. I also love the professional look of the completed products. Once you sign up for an account, click on "toons" then "create." Afterwards, you can pick your layout (which is why that storyboard is important before you start!), characters, background, speech bubbles, and any other items from their item bank. Once you finish, save your work and choose whether you want your creation to be public or private. You also have the option to print your cartoons or create a book of them. Here is an example of a math story created in Toondoo.

Pixton is less cartoon-looking and more like the adult comic strips from the newspaper. There is a free public version and a paid edu service. I have the free service, and it does what I need it to do. To use the service, sign up once you decide which kind of account you want. I like that you have many different options to choose from when making a comic, such as comic grids, graphic novels, storyboards, and more. Next, choose your background theme and number of characters.

I also love that you can customize your character to look like you. In your first square, pose your character and write in the speech bubble. Keep adding new squares until you have completed your story. Here is an example of a Pixton comic.

Make Belief Comix (MBC) allows you to create a comic on the site without an account. The site has great characters and backgrounds to choose from and even lesson plan ideas. When you finish creating your comic, you can e-mail or print it. Here is an example of a MBC.

Storyboard That, which was mentioned above as a storyboard starter, is also a great comic tool to use.

Online Posters

Online posters allow you to put information online in a clean format. You can tell a story with pictures, videos, and links. My students loved presenting their stories in a way that would get the attention of others as if they were selling something. Sometimes they would present their facts in a story context, all while using the poster makers.

Tackk is my new favorite tool. The site provides so many different options and it is easy to use. I have used this system successfully with my 2nd graders and my middle school students. You can use this system to push out a lesson or to get your students to tell you what they learned. Once you sign up for a free account, or log in with your Google account, you can choose whether you want a ready-made template or to start from scratch. You can click to add links, pictures, videos, embedded documents, and even map locations to your poster. Here is how to make a Tackk. I have also included a math story.

New Hive is fun to use. It is similar to Tackk, but you start with an open canvas instead of a structured column. You have options to add text (there are so many fun fonts to use), pictures, videos, music, and backgrounds. You can move these elements around on the canvas to create your story. Here is an example of a hive.

Other poster sites, such as Smore, which is very similar to Tackk, and Glogster, which is more like New Hive where you create on a canvas, are not free but do offer education accounts. Check to see if your school or district has any active accounts before registering for these services.

For Your Convenience

We know that embedded links may break. For your convenience, the URLs for each embedded link are provided here along with an archived link, when available. You can use these URLs to search for the sites suggested.

Embedded Link	Original Site	Archived Link
Storyboard That	http://www.storyboardthat.com/	
Little Bird Tales	https://www.littlebirdtales.com/	
Little Bird Tales Example	https://littlebirdtales.com/tales/view/story_id/544359/	
Story Bird	https://storybird.com/	
Story Bird Example	http://storybird.com/books/olivers-music/	
Powtoon	http://www.powtoon.com/	
Powtoon Example	https://www.powtoon.com/online-presentation/bf3MuIOyUlq/	
Toondoo	http://www.toondoo.com/	
Toondoo Example	http://www.toondoo.com/ViewBook.toon?bookid=596561	
Pixton	https://www.pixton.com/ca/	
Pixton Example	https://www.pixton.com/comic/ln4v573o	
Make Belief Comix	http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/	
Make Belief Comix Example	http://innovations2010unco.pbworks.com/f/1287456600/Comic%20%233.png	
Tackk	https://tackk.com/	
How to Make a Tackk	https://tackk.com/jefcoedtackk	
Tackk Example	https://tackk.com/findingx	
New Hive	https://newhive.com/	
New Hive Example	http://newhive.com/rrmchaffie2020/seasons-project?q=project	

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Glogster	http://www.glogster.com/	