

Sara B. Kajder

Enter Here: Personal Narrative and Digital Storytelling

Through the creation of a digital story, urban high school students gain confidence and a new understanding of literacy. Sara B. Kajder offers a step-by-step plan for replicating this project, grounded in sound theory and research about how adolescents expand their literacies.

Hanging on the door of room 173 is a black-and-white photograph of the door to my grandmother's house.

Students regularly question its placement and content, as most of the doors down the hall are either covered with construction paper (so others cannot see in) or covered with flyers announcing school events. I simply reply, "It's an invitation."

Sometimes I am prompted to share a story about that door, about why the photo shows it half-open and how that makes me feel secure and welcome. Sometimes I ask students what they see in the door, asking them to consider how it might be a part of what they know. No matter what story I share, it is paired with an opening (much like that door), invoking and evoking students' stories and welcoming them into our shared learning space.

Stories abound here, allowing students to see themselves in our work, to participate within our literacy community and, often, to take huge strides in

defining themselves as readers and writers. Teaching in a culturally diverse, socioeconomically challenged suburban school ten minutes from Washington DC, I encounter a rich and staggering mix of students. The thirty-seven stu-

dents in period two, English 11, were the first to tell me that they were not readers or writers—and their test scores and student files reflected several years of that thinking. I countered that they were. Each time they picked up a manual, jumped online to instant

message a friend, or got on the Metro and headed into town, they were readers. Culturally, there is an argument that holds that the competition has intensified for reading as a source of story. Students are captivated instead by the Internet, television, film, and video games. I believe that these media support and promote reading.

Recently, I offered a new challenge, designed to evoke students' stories, extend their literacy skills, and provide a multimedia environment that allowed them to work not only as readers and writers but also as directors, artists, programmers, screenwriters, and designers. They each created a digital story that conveyed a three- to five-minute personal narrative in response to a significant question of their choice. The project took two weeks of instructional time and required the development of a sustained community. It was not an easy sell. Students lacked trust, rarely having had space that was their own within a classroom. They all read below level and were used to worksheets rather than invitations to be seen. We started with the reality Rich describes, that "when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (199). Each student had to look into the mirror and see through different eyes than before.

Big Ideas

In designing the task, there were several larger ideas that I needed to frame and discuss with students. First, we needed to define what it meant to be literate. To

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Joscisa and Sahar, it meant “the ability to read and to write what you’re thinking.” Niko countered that literacy was “all the stuff that we don’t learn in school that allows us to be who we are.” Tamyra offered that “literacy is about knowing what tool I need to use to share my thoughts.” Together, we agreed that literacy requires knowing how and when to use “the most powerful cultural tools available for making, communicating, and enacting . . . meaning” (Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube xviii). Today, that includes online technologies, communication technologies and tools (like email or instant messaging), and software tools that allow us to visualize thinking and represent it in multiple ways.

Our second big idea targeted story. Students shared and discussed family stories, books from their childhood (though only three of thirty-seven students had actual “artifacts” to share), and stories about their experiences in school. As I crafted the lessons and activities, I was driven by Langer’s idea that “[a]ll literature—the stories we read as well as those we tell—provides us with a way to imagine human potential” (5). Students were sounding their stories and balancing them against the authors we read (Frank McCourt, Anne Lamott, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, Lucy Grealy, Gary Soto, and others) in an attempt to validate, understand, and problematize their experiences. Bruner writes that “[l]anguage is . . . a way of sorting out one’s thoughts about things” (72), and story provided an entrance into writing for those students who wrestled with putting the right words together to communicate exactly what they wanted to express.

As writers, students were actively working as readers of their written text and the writing of their peers and exercising new muscles as they took on the published texts in our curriculum. We know that students are more motivated when they are given the choice and the latitude to include texts that interest them (Ivey). In working with story and personal narrative, these formerly unmotivated readers dove into the bookcases and read actively in the library after school. Equipped with strategies we had modeled and explored in class, students struggled to find entrances but did not quit. As Lashawna put it, “writing that’s real and that matters” challenged student comprehension in the sense that Harvey and Goudvis mean when they write that “[c]omprehension means that readers think not only about what they

are reading but what they are learning” (9). Students read not to glean what the color green meant in a text but what significance that story had in terms of their own understanding and experience. The combination of story and student interest allowed me to challenge students to demonstrate that they knew what to do with texts beyond just saying the words.

I felt the need to consider our district’s idea of “rigor,” knowing that the task would be challenged by some in the building who argued that student choice was a curricular luxury when working with lower-level students or that technology integration was about play as opposed to learning. Rigor is about challenging students to learn in new, evocative, and meaningful ways. Students were not merely reading for information. They were reading to relate, to understand, and to transform their understanding of the texts. Further, this was a task steeped in connections, a requirement for learning, as Dyson explains:

[C]hildren must . . . link new material . . . to old material, with its familiar frames of relationships and purposes; without such linkages, they cannot approach the new with any sense of agency, with any sense at all. . . . Old material must be recontextualized within—transferred to—new systems of relationships and uses . . . as new material enters into and transforms old relational rhythms, and old material reverberates in the new. (162)

New understanding shaped and drove a revision of former ideas and practices. Content and writing drove this assignment. The technology was simply a delivery tool that ultimately provided a hook that tapped into students’ existing visual and technological literacies.

The Task

Nuts and Bolts

In a district curriculum packed with required tasks designed to address local and state standards, I had two weeks (five ninety-minute blocks) to work with personal narrative, excite student reading, incite student writing, and lead them through the process of creating a finished digital story. We did not know if

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we could realistically bring it all together and filled each class, lunch, and after-school period to the brim. As long as students were willing to work, I was willing to make the tools available. This was not a school or a classroom with abundant technological tools. We worked with five outdated iMac computers (two in our classroom and three housed next door) running an early version of iMovie. (Newer operating systems come with digital video editors bundled in—iMovie in OSX for Mac and Windows Movie Maker in Windows XP.) We learned iMovie together as I raided the shelves of the local bookstore for manuals and guidebooks and as students navigated their way through the fairly intuitive interface. Further, this was an experience that required me to work as a coach, recognizing that the development of the students' work would be a dynamic, nonprescribed process.

Step One: What to Say?

Students worked through several stages of construction after a reading scramble and full-class discussion on the differences between personal narrative and memoir. First, they needed to identify specific stories "worth telling." This was initially problematic, as students struggled against the voice of an internal editor who argued that their stories were not worth sharing. Several exercises helped:

- > Students drew a detailed map of the neighborhood in which they grew up. This included the layout of the streets, homes of friends and strange neighbors, schools, local hangouts, and so forth (Roorbach 21–34).
- > In a journal exercise, students were asked to respond to the following: "Think of your favorite childhood coat. What is in your pockets?"
- > In another journal exercise, students were asked to respond to the following: "Write about a decisive moment (one where you ended up heading in an unanticipated direction) in your life."

The results were surprising. Students understood that the personal narrative needed to be a window into a moment, a self-contained story set in one

particular place and time. They chose to tell rich stories that were about discovery and understanding. Dahabo, an immigrant from Somalia, wrote the story of the first day she wore pants, explaining what freedom and America meant to her. Niko wrote about reading the job market, wanting security and possibility or, to use his words, "the ceiling of America and the floor of Greece, my family's home." Though they were all locked in on the logistics of writing, each student submitted a draft of between one and one-and-a-half pages, double-spaced. The length was short but required packed, precise language and provided an entrance for struggling writers who were intimidated by the blank page. The trick was to develop voice while exercising economy.

Step Two: Artifact Search

Students' digital stories were built from an assortment of still images. While I had assumed that this would be the simplest part of the process, it was the most difficult. Students simply did not have photos to use. We used a Parent-Teacher-Student Association minigrant to purchase disposable cameras that students could take home to photograph the places and objects that would help to tell their stories. The media center specialist also allowed students to check out overnight the school digital camera (a three-year-old Sony Mavica acquired by Giant Eagle's Apples for Students money). Students printed images and then scanned or created a copy by photographing each image with the digital camera. This was quick, as most student movies used fewer than fifteen images.

Step Three: Storyboarding

Students were required to map on paper each image, technique, and element of their story by constructing a storyboard. This visual story had two dimensions: chronology—what happens and when—and interaction—how audio information interacts with the images (Lambert 61). Using a template supplied by the Center for Digital Storytelling, students arranged and rearranged images that were listed on sticky notes. The storyboard also required the writer to consider how effects, transitions, and sound would be sequenced. I conferenced with students, reviewing the finished storyboard and using it as an "entrance ticket" to use a classroom computer. Students worked

REVISION EXERCISES STUDENTS COMPLETED

Option 1: Highlighting

Students marked up their scripts, highlighting all of the action in green and all of the reflection in pink. Too much pink indicated too much preaching. Too much green indicated that the writer was telling an anecdote with no implications.

Option 2: Timeline

Students rearranged the order of events, making them either more or less chronological (Heard 99).

Option 3: Exploding Sentences

There were two possible plans of attack here. First, writers worked to explode the sentence into a slow-motion retelling (helpful to the text that will be read aloud). Or, writers thought of the explosion as more of a magnifying glass, focusing on pinpointed, targeted specifics (Heard 32–38).

at different paces and the instructional time was scaffolded and individualized, allowing some students to work with the assigned reading while others worked to construct their stories.

Step Four: Revision

In creating the storyboards and examining their scripts closely, students discovered that their scripts needed rewriting and reseeing. I set up revision stations around the classroom to provide prompts and writing exercises designed to assist in revision. As Heard explains, revision “involves changing the meaning, content, structure, or style of a piece of writing rather than the more surface changes that editing demands” (1). To that end, students’ work centered on bringing voice to their pieces or on helping the events to come alive for the viewer-reader. Each student completed at least two revision exercises, providing different entrances into their writing and more fuel for our daily conferences (see sidebar).

Step Five: Construction

To build their digital stories, students needed to import or digitize their photos, add transitions and special effects to how they played, record narration, add soundtracking, and burn their finished work on a CD. Students had limited time using the classroom

computers but were able to come in after or before school, use computers in the media center, or work from home or the community library. Because several students had better tools at home, they built from home, bringing in work to meet my checkpoints on their progress.

Central to the construction was a rule that emphasized content over presentation, setting the balance at 80 percent content and 20 percent effect. Without the rule, students might have been caught up in zooms, pans, and special effects that showed knowledge of the tool but little control of the story. By putting the story first, students were selective about effects, choosing those that drove the story farther as opposed to those that mimicked what might be seen in films or television.

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Step Six: Screening

At the close of our work, we screened the finished products, complete with popcorn and student-written responses. Shared responses celebrated students’ attempts to reflectively add meaning to past events and often requested more detail. Others explored technical suggestions for both the presentation and the content, referring to cinematic terms or texts that we had read. We had discussed those strategies for reading film that translated well to reading print text. These early conversations marked the start of a collaborative interpretive community that was a safe, supportive structure for their talk and interaction as readers and as writers.

The Story Continues

Kylene Beers writes in *When Kids Can't Read* that she wants “to teach students how to struggle *successfully* with a text” (16; italics in original). I firmly believe that engaging readers is my critical teaching responsibility. While I was working here to lead students to understand published personal narratives, my goals were much bigger. Not satisfied with having students only read someone else’s words or experiences, I wanted students to struggle with their words and experiences, to work as writers and readers, and to reinvent their understanding of how they functioned within that role. I wanted them to tap

into powerful communication tools to tell their story verbally, visually, and powerfully. By allowing each student to see that “all ways of saying have silences and exuberances” (Myers 134), I hoped to create a starting point from which they would see value in their work as scholars.

Rochelle’s digital story spoke to and about her mother. Their relationship was strained, and this had led to Rochelle’s rebellion in the form of many piercings and detentions. Rochelle had tremendous capacity; she just did not see where to start. In her three-and-a-half-minute movie, Rochelle’s voice told

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the story of her mother riding her bike down the dirt paths that were the initial construction sites for I-270.

The images rotated from black-and-white shots of her mother at age fifteen to those of a grinning Rochelle in brilliant color, riding her bike with her mother trailing close behind. Taking full advantage of the images, she balanced the use of her voice with moments where silence allowed the image to communicate. She closed with the words, “I would have liked to have known the girl with the wind in her hair.” This was Rochelle’s entrance into our interpretive community. Not every day was a great day, but several days marked triumphs in her work as a reader and a writer. She explained in a journal entry late in the year, “We started class with where I was in-

stead of starting with everything I didn’t know and because of that, I’m starting to know where to begin.” That same day, Rochelle placed a sign underneath the image of my grandmother’s door. It read, “Enter here.”

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