

## Digital Storytelling as a Method of Reflection in the First Year Experience Course

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### Author Biography

Barbara G. Tucker is Professor of Communication and Chair of the Department of Communication, Performing Arts, and Foreign Languages at Dalton State College. She has spent 42 years in higher education teaching and administration. She holds master's degrees from Ohio University and the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, and earned the Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership from University of Georgia. She has extensive practical and research experience in faculty development, open educational resources, communication education, online teaching, and SoTL. Dr. Tucker is a published author of seven novels and speaks frequently on creative writing. She and her husband live in Ringgold, Georgia.

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Literature on High Impact Practices lists First Year Experience as one of eleven practices that lead to greater student engagement and completion (Kuh, 2008). In the past few years, I have taught such a course as a theme-based, one-hour section that combines exploration of an important question with application of academic skills such as information literacy and goal setting.

My particular course, Perspectives in Liberal Arts, explores the place of liberal arts in higher education and the students' futures. The four learning outcomes of the course, set institutionally, focus on factors related to critical thinking, perspective taking, support of one's own perspective, and issue identification. Specifically related to this essay, students are to 1) demonstrate an enhanced ability to critically evaluate information and its sources, and 2) demonstrate an enhanced ability to support his/her perspectives related to an issue or problem.

Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) explained that an activity labeled "High Impact" does not achieve that standard unless it meets most or all of eight "quality matrices." The fifth is "Faculty provide for and prompt students to engage in periodic, structured opportunities to reflect on and integrate their learning." Reflective practice figures prominently in guaranteeing the high-impact nature of experiential learning. However, offering students opportunities to reflect does not ensure that students will understand, engage in, and produce evidence of reflection at a deep level. The reflection can seem like an obligatory writing exercise proving to the instructor that the student "got something" out of the experience. Additionally, first year students may be unprepared for the kind of reflection that achieves integration of learning, especially in written form. Reflection is a learned process for which students must be trained.

Reflection has at least two distinct parts: the *process* of reflection, which may involve journaling, group discussion, self-talk, or even visual art; and the *product* of reflection. Yancey delineated three stages: reflection-in-action; the identity-formation processes that accumulate over time; and reflection-in-presentation, a formal text written for "the other" (Fiscus, 2017). Here I argue for a non-traditional, non-written reflection product: digital storytelling.

### Digital Storytelling

Our students have spent most of their lives in the digital age and take for granted the ready accessibility of audio, visual, and interactive digital media. The term "digital storytelling" appeared in the 1990s. It is defined on the University of Houston's website (2020) as "the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories." Ruppert, Adcock, and Crave (2017) citing Skouge and Rao (2009) stated, "One of the strengths of using digital storytelling...is that it employs a wide variety of strategies including standard storytelling,

multimedia publication, audio and video recordings, image production, and shared mediated events” (p. 33). The literature on digital storytelling typically focuses on its use in K-12, preparing pre-service teachers, and ESOL instruction.

In my case, I use the digital storytelling assignment as the final reflective product of the course in order to meet the outcomes of 1) demonstrating enhanced abilities to critically evaluate information and its sources and 2) support their perspectives related to an issue or problem. By expressing themselves through digital storytelling, a kind of text distinct from standard writing assignments, the students choose visual and musical materials, recognize the correct use of Creative Commons and fair use materials, and utilize digital materials that answer one of these topics related to the college learning skills:

- What do my five “strengths” (from Strengthsquest) mean to me?
- Who am I?
- What would I do if I weren’t afraid?
- My obituary
- My first semester of college

They are informed their digital story will be assessed on these characteristics:

- Answering their chosen question, visually and through plot.
- Length at least three minutes long.
- Use of animation/movement.
- Incorporation of sound (music/voiceover, preferably both).
- “Credits” shown at the end.

I use a more detailed rubric for assessment. Students may use their choice of digital tool. Many use PowerPoint because of its familiarity, and it can create an excellent digital story; however, this project creates a self-contained program that runs without student help. Other students create edited videos on their computers or use online animation tools that offer “freemium versions,” such as Powtoon, RenderForest, or Animaker.

I frame their showing of their projects as a festival competition. We watch the stories together, and each storyteller orally explains the creation of the digital story—another way of showing evidence of reflection. Fiscus (2017) recommends the use of a written text to accompany multi-modal projects such as digital storytelling, an addition I plan to make to the assignment. After the viewing, the students vote for a winner, who receives a restaurant gift card.

### Student Responses

I provide here two comments from students:

*I absolutely loved the digital storytelling project. It was a great way...to share a story through our creative talents that related back to our course material.... The support we all had for each other and their project was amazing, I actually made some new friends after I finished my presentation. It was a truly unforgettable project!*

*The idea of the project was definitely not something I looked forward to during the semester. However, when it actually came time to put it all together, I really had a good time with it. It was not only fun to give a glimpse into my life to the class, but was also nice to reflect on myself and take time to create a project based solely on me. I especially loved the aspect of not having to stand in front of the class to present it. I would say it is a good assignment to keep in your future classes.*

## Conclusion

I find digital storytelling a productive way for students to use visual rhetoric; understand source citation, fair use, and copyright; organize the images and sound thematically and creatively; meet the course outcomes; and reflect on the personally relevance of the course. The project also engages the students in a different modality of reflection and creation.

## References

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