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A digital storytelling project in a multicultural education class for pre-service teachers

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Technology integration in teacher education courses

Technology integration is an approach which has been stressed in higher education in the USA for several decades. Many colleges and universities now offer online courses and encourage faculty to incorporate technology into courses. Technology integration in teacher education courses is particularly important. In general, pre-service teachers are not very anxious about technology (Lambert and Gong 2010). If the faculty demonstrates how technology can be used in a classroom students are more likely to incorporate technology in their future classrooms (Brush, Glazewski, and Hew 2008). In the present study, 38 pre-service teachers taking a multicultural education course were asked to create a digital story for their final projects. Although digital storytelling has been discussed in previous research (e.g. Czarnecki 2009), the approach is not one widely used in school classrooms. It was expected that the project would give student teachers an opportunity to learn not only the technology but also how to incorporate digital storytelling into the curriculum.

What is digital storytelling?

Digital storytelling is an electronic presentation of storytelling on a specific topic. Current advanced technology makes it possible to create storytelling in a digital format more easily than in the past. While digital storytelling is relatively a new idea in the field of education, storytelling has been used to help students to understand complex concepts (Sadik 2008). Matthews-DeNatale (2008, 3) states that ‘storytelling and learning are inextricably intertwined because the process of composing a story is also a process of meaning-making’. By working on digital story projects, students can develop effective communication skills as well as technology literacy (Czarnecki 2009). Past research also demonstrate that digital storytelling can be incorporated into any grade levels and various subject areas, such as language arts, social studies, mathematics and science (Matthews-DeNatale 2008; Tsou, Eang, and Tzeng 2006), and promote student’s self-reflection (Fredricks 2009). Hofer and Swan (2006) have identified the role of the teacher in digital story projects and

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what kinds of skills and knowledge are necessary to support students. They suggest that teachers should have school pupils take ownership of their story, while providing necessary structure and guidance. It is essential for teachers to have the technology skills for creating a digital movie, such as scanning and saving images and adding audio. Simply having experience and knowledge in their subject areas is not sufficient. They also emphasise that successful storytelling projects require advanced planning and well-structured instruction.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) recently updated the USA's national educational technology standards for teachers and students. These new standards focus on higher order thinking skills and identify digital citizenship as an important concept to learn (ISTE-NETS-T 2008; ISTE-NETS-S 2007). Digital storytelling projects can help students to meet those technology standards and acquire the twenty-first century skills addressed by the USA's Department of Education (Czarnecki 2009).

Creating a digital story for teaching tolerance and multicultural perspectives

The study described here was conducted in spring 2011 on a course required for all elementary education majors. The digital story project was one of the major assignments in a multicultural education class for pre-service teachers. Throughout the semester, students discussed multicultural education and how they could reduce various forms of prejudices and discrimination in schools and society. There were 38 students in class, mostly sophomores and juniors. Before the instructor explained the project in class, she asked students about their prior experience with a digital story. Only two students out of 38 knew about digital storytelling and had created their own digital stories.

Digital story projects generally involve five steps (Cennamo, Ross, and Ertmer 2010):

1. writing a script
2. developing a storyboard
3. locating images
4. creating a digital story
5. sharing with others.

The instructor encouraged students to brainstorm before writing a script and emphasised that developing a storyboard was an important process to produce a quality movie. In this project, students were asked to create a five-minute digital story for elementary-grade pupils so as to teach tolerance and multicultural perspectives. In addition to an explanation about the project during class time, the instructor gave students a handout and provided links to various websites introducing digital stories. First, students selected a topic and grade level for their stories, then they wrote a script and developed storyboards. To create a digital story, students were allowed to use any software that they were familiar with. Most of students chose to use PowerPoint to create digital stories and added narrations to slides, while some students used iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Since the majority of students did not know how to add audio to movie clips or slides, two class days were used for
instructions on how to insert narrations. On the last day of class, students presented their digital stories to small groups.

Although some students struggled with adding narration, all 38 students were able to complete the projects by the assignment due date. Two stories are outlined below, intended to teach children respect and appreciation for differences and promote understanding of different cultures.

One student created a movie, entitled *Penguin Playmate* (Figure 1). This is a story about three penguins who meet a new friend from the Galapagos Islands. At first, the three American penguins are afraid to become a friend with the new penguin because she speaks Spanish, a different language, but eventually they realise that being different is a good thing and they can have more fun together.

The second example of a digital story made by a student was *Sea, We’re All Different* (Figure 2). In an elementary school under the ocean, a hammerhead shark is continually teased by his classmates because of his funny-looking head. He is very sad and asks his mother why he has such a strange head. His mother tells him that we are all different and there is nothing wrong with the shape of his head. At the end, his classmates learn that they should not make fun of him just because he looks different and they apologise to him.
What students said about the digital storytelling project

At the end of semester, the students were asked to respond to the following question: ‘Do you think that you would use a digital story for your future class? If yes, explain how you would use it. If you say no please explain the reason for not using it’. Of the 38 students, 32 said that they would incorporate digital storytelling in their future lessons. One student said:

I could use digital storytelling on many different subjects to further understanding and knowledge of a subject through association of pictures and spoken word.

Another student commented:

I would like to use digital storytelling in my class because students are so into technology now, I think they would enjoy listening/watching a book in movie form.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of students had no prior experience with movie making. Some students were concerned with use of technology at the beginning and experienced technical problems while working on the project. However, it seemed that the project brought them a feeling of accomplishment at the end. One student said:

At first I wasn’t sure whether it [digital storytelling] was something worthy, and I wasn’t sure how it would work, but I think a lot of good information would be given to students … I was actually glad I learned how to make a movie. It wasn’t easy and took a lot of time, but I think it’s valuable information.

Most of the negative comments were associated with technical difficulties they experienced. They felt that making movies was too complicated and they would prefer to use regular books. In addition, one student felt that digital storytelling lacked the interaction between storyteller and audience present during live storytelling.

Summary

Overall, the project was successful and most students had a positive feeling about digital storytelling and expressed their intention to use it with their own pupils. Because students were allowed to use any software to create movies, their frustration about using technology was minimised. However, the survey results indicated that some students had a significant misconception about digital storytelling. They thought that teachers always create digital stories, and they simply show them to the children to teach class materials. As discussed earlier, there is a variety of ways to use digital storytelling in classrooms. With the teacher’s support, elementary pupils can create movies to express their understanding of what they have learned in class.

Since the main focus in this class was not creating digital stories, the instructor did not spend much time on discussing the concept and value of digital storytelling. Although the instructor shared several movie samples created by children and teachers, some students needed further explanations about the concept in order to understand fully digital storytelling. To reinforce skills and knowledge about digital stories, student teachers should be exposed to a different format of digital stories in other education classes too. Providing an opportunity for additional practice should
increase confidence in using digital stories in their future classrooms. As the project indicated, to create a digital story, students and the instructor do not need to have a high level of technology competence.

In this project, most students used PowerPoint, which requires a relatively low level of technology skill. One of the major barriers to technology integration is faculty’s lack of confidence in using technology (Bengimlas 2009). It is important for educators to stay current with the latest technology and be able to use it effectively. However, if the instructor and students are not confident in their technology skills they can always start with a low level of technology and gradually shift to a higher level. Using a low level of technology does not affect the quality of instruction. Banaszewski (2002, 4) states that in digital story projects, ‘the technology is always secondary to the storytelling’. This can apply to any technology-based assignments. Successful technology integration is not about what type of technology is used, but what students have learned with the technology.

References