Digital Storytelling as web passport to success in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Through digital storytelling (DST) students develop a plethora of skills, necessary to be effective in the 21st century. DST can successfully be used also by students during the difficult period of job search. Even we consider social networking as DST, resumes, cover letters; ePortfolios etc., DST are considerate Web Passport to Success in the third millennium and an effective way to engage students in their learning. As DST networking and ePortfolios became the new literacy of this era, this paper will focus on how students could use them in order to successfully and properly access the job market.

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1. Introduction

We are now a couple of years into the Web 2.0 (the second generation of Internet based applications) era, the era of social networks, wikis and blogging the era of collective intelligence and the era of the relationship revolution. According with a general agreement, Web 2.0 is charged as a set of applications, technologies and user roles and the Web 2.0 social media applications provide users with the technology to consume, produce and distribute information (the so called Read-Write-Web by Tim Berners Lee). These technologies allow for collaborative writing (e.g., wikis), content sharing (e.g., text, video, and images), social networking (e.g., Facebook), social bookmarking (e.g., ratings, tagging), and syndication (e.g., RSS feeds). Moreover, there are numerous applications for each purpose. In addition, Internet and especially the emerging wave of Web 2.0 have expanded access to information. The web has to a large degree become the most important medium for many of us to gain information about news, company facts, organizational goals, product costs etc. We also use the web to keep in touch and find new as well as old friends or business partners.

Thus, we can assume that people in the 21st century live in a technology and media-suffused environment, marked by various characteristics, including: access to an abundance of information, rapid changes in technology tools and services, and the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale.

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2. The digital storytelling (DST) evolution and educational context

Storytelling has been around for thousands of years as a means for exchanging information and generating understanding. Throughout history, storytelling has been used to share knowledge, wisdom, and values. Stories have taken many different forms and stories have been adapted to each successive medium that has emerged.

Storytelling and learning are inextricably intertwined because the process of composing a story is also a process of meaning-making. Through storytelling, students are asked to reflect on what they know, to examine their (often unquestioned) assumptions, and – through a cyclical process of revision – to record their “cognitive development in process” and to provide students’ thinking. Thus, narratives are increasingly being used in higher education because they help students think critically and understand factual content. Storytelling is increasingly found in the study of history, sciences, philosophy, religion, social sciences, business and medicine. It is found to be a significant factor in bringing people together in families, schools and society, to create a common bond and learning environment.

In our technology rich society of the twenty-first century, a new mode of passing along stories has emerged. Digital Storytelling (DST) is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling, being also an emerging term. DST is the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound and video. The purpose of a digital story is the same purpose of the stories of oral tradition – to invoke an emotional effect and/or to communicate a message to its audience. Digital stories can range from the simple use of slides and pictures that correspond to a narrative to the complex use of advanced sound, visual, and transition effects. But digital storytelling is more than just using technology. It is a medium of expression, communication, integration, and imagination. Moreover, DST has an amazing pedagogical and social potential, being an assets-based social pedagogy. DST is at the crossroads of the creative and the analytical, both product and process empower students to find their voice and to speak out, especially those marginalized by racism, educational disadvantage or language. DST is also a powerful tool to intercultural learning because students can compare their “stories” with those authored by people from other culture and other life experiences. People with diverse life experiences can also collaborate across great geographical distances to co-author digital stories that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

However, the deeper impact that digital storytelling brings comes from students thinking critically about effective combinations among audio and visual components. Each story requires students to gather evidence to support their story and to assemble and organize them in a way to achieve a desired effect, being two of the hardest concepts for student writers to grasp when writing papers on their own. Through digital storytelling, students begin to comprehend how all the elements of writing a narrative work together and how to manipulate them for the best effects in readers and viewers (Jonassen et al., 2008). Also, digital stories that are created and have had hard work put into them, could be shared. The sharing and evaluating of digital stories among peers is an excellent way to foster self-expression and tolerance, and to create an engaged community of learners. In a collaborative and somehow new learning environment, students are actively engaged in the exchange of ideas, the asking and receiving for feedback, the learning in an informal and, concomitantly, in a familiar way about their topics of interest, from peers, (older) colleagues. Thus, through DST students develop communication skills, learn to ask questions, express opinions, construct narratives and write for an audience, improving also their language and computer skills by using software that combines a variety of multimedia: text, images, audio, video and web publishing. Also, when digital stories are created, students not only become more technologically literate, but they also become designers, listeners, interpreters, readers, writers, communicators, artists, and thinkers (Kajder, 2004).

3. The ePortfolios and their Web 2.0 characteristics

ePortfolios (or e-portfolios) are also known as ‘electronic’ or ‘digital’ portfolios, ‘webfolios’ and even ‘on-line personal development plans’. Likewise, other people referred to as the Digital notebook.

It is important to remember that an ePortfolio is best defined by its purpose, i.e. the objective for which the ePortfolio owner has developed his or her ePortfolio. Thus, we can consider: assessment ePortfolio, presentation ePortfolio, learning ePortfolio, personal development ePortfolios, multiple owner ePortfolios working ePortfolios etc. Moreover, from another perspective, according with Ravet we can spread the ePortfolios into: individual ePortfolios, community ePortfolios, organizational ePortfolios, territorial ePortfolios, sectorial ePortfolios etc. On the other part, ePortfolios can be divided into: developmental ePortfolios, assessment ePortfolios and showcase ePortfolios. Anyhow, we can consider ePortfolios as a combination of: archives (heterogeneous, distributed, e.g.
learning outcomes, reflections, testimonies); views (multiple presentations, according to the objective and the reader, e.g. achievement, assessment, job finding) and services (transactions and processes, e.g. cross-referencing evidence with competency standards, profile matching, getting feedback from peers, sharing knowledge across communities).

In the context of a knowledge society, where being information literate is critical, the ePortfolio can provide an opportunity to support one's ability to collect, organise, interpret and reflect on his/her learning and practice. It is also a tool for continuing professional development, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for and demonstrate the results of their own learning. Furthermore, a portfolio can serve as a tool for knowledge management, and is used by such as web and social software. The ePortfolio provides also a link between individual and organizational learning. Accordingly, Ravet presents more an evolution of ePortfolios rather than a classification as: the paperless portfolios, the managed portfolios, the social portfolios, the knowledge portfolios and the territorial portfolios. Thus, in its short and dynamic history, the ePortfolio has rapidly moved from the status of simple paperless portfolio to sophisticated ePortfolio Management Systems and now social software. So, using Web 2.0 tools and technologies from today for the designing of ePortfolios 2.0, we can access them from anywhere, can benefit from their interactivity characteristics, and we can be actively engaged and can develop lifelong learning and computational skills as they derive from the ePortfolios functions (Ivanovna, 2008): free text input: annotations, online content editing, internal/external links, upload documents; publication: access control, types, publish to web, commenting, syndicate, internal/external communication, searching; organize: collecting space/document management, categorization, selection, tracking; analysis tools: tracking, comparing, assessment; templates: advice, reflection, evaluation, presentation, modification of templates by user, assessment, flexibility and usability; knowledge capturing and sharing; community-wide reflection and communication; and knowledge collaboration.

The rise of ePortfolios in Europe, from Wales to Austria, from Italy to Finland, is a major opportunity to regain the momentum required to achieve the 2010 Lisbon goals. It is also a unique chance to promote the single transparency framework for qualifications and competencies called for by the decision of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 December 2004 through the establishment of Europass. ePortfolios, as a tool to support Europass initiatives, will benefit citizens by facilitating mobility, transparency and recognition for lifelong and life wide learning and work experience. Beyond transparency and mobility the ePortfolio is the medium of choice for the 21st century lifelong learner and knowledge worker - a tool for planning, developing and recognising learning achievements. Thus, without any doubt, we agree with the Chronicle of Higher Education (2002), where ePortfolios are seen as “the next big thing” in higher education.

4. The Net generation of students, their needs in higher education

Young people from European higher education of today are faced with multiple challenges, experiencing the effects of constantly changing political regimes and economic systems, period of recession or economical development of a wider society characterized by information society, knowledge economy, globalization and internationalization. According with Murray and Sandars (2009): “Our current undergraduate students are members of what has been called the ‘net generation’. This group of young people has grown up with a variety of new technologies as an integral part of daily life and learning. The net generation has not only become more technological savvy but it also appears to learn in fundamentally different ways to previous generations”. They prefer environments that are rich in multimedia images, especially visual and audio, are preferred to those that are predominantly composed of text. They also prefer to be actively involved in tasks that use multimedia and like working in groups and they also have high ownership of mobile phones, use of media sharing sites (such as Flickr or YouTube) and a profile on a social networking site (such as MySpace or Facebook).

In an opposite perspective, the realities of the 21st century include youth and students disaffection, lack of civic participation, social exclusion and isolation and the decline of the community. Moreover, the recent economic crisis stressed recently graduated student’s unemployment. So, for the graduating students or students looking for a job it is perhaps more hard than ever to success on the job market. They must use every tool they know to express them and to reflect their knowledge, competences and skills. In the third millennium dominated by an explosion of digital technologies which most of them are familiar, they must construct their (digital) identity. This identity (known also as identity 2.0) could be used in such ways in order to successfully access a proper job. In order to develop their digital identity they can use ePortfolios. Even ePortfolios aren’t a new concept; they demonstrated their potential and positive role for both teaching and learning.
With the hype of the Web 2.0 technologies, ePortfolios entered into a new generation, called ePortfolios 2.0. Thus, the “new” ePortfolios could reflect the self-directed learning of students, their “voice” and “choose”, their creativity and potential for innovation, the communication and collaboration skills, their technology operations and concepts, their critical thinking, their capacities for problem solving and decision making, even for an employment application. Apart from the visible features of collaborative capturing, interpreting and sharing of experiences both in and out of the educational settings, both DST and ePortfolios possibly offers an innovative way of dealing with the problem of students’ unemployment. Thus, the students must be aware that the learning, innovation and creativity skills are being recognized as those that separate students who are prepared for a more and more complex life and work environments in the 21st century, and those who are not. A focus on creativity, critical thinking, content knowledge, communication and collaboration is essential to prepare students with adequate life and career skills, in order to successfully and properly access the job market.

5. ePortfolios as DST; DST and ePortfolios as networking

As we already mentioned, we can see ePortfolio as a digital story. Both of them are made around a “digital archive” containing digital artifacts like: documents, pictures, audio/video files etc. This “collection” of artifacts could be stored on one of the online storage system in order to access them for a variety of contexts. If we are speaking about individual ePortfolios or digital stories (as most of them are), the digital archive belongs to the user and should be under the control of the user throughout their life. In addition, each artifact of the digital archive should have a unique identifier, so that the user can access and use for different purposes, systems and contexts. Moreover, each of the elements of the digital archive should have the capacity for meta-tags and for searching by keywords (tags), by the date when they were created or changed etc. Thus, a user can select and access their artifacts (certain pieces, depending on the purposes, audience etc.) by creating a link to the work that is saved in the digital archive and introduce a reflection on why those pieces of artifacts were chose. In this respect, we can underline that the relation between digital stories and ePortfolios emerges even by reflection. Thus, if the digital stories focus on reflection over time, ePortfolios are a space for reflection, a space where users/students construct meaning from their knowledge, experiences, purposes, developments etc. As most of the ePortfolios doesn’t include voice, but by using voice we can assume that digital stories can humanize any model of ePortfolio. By using voice in a DST, it is introduced an identity and emotional element, which represent a real and alive person, with a unique personality.

When a digital story or ePortfolio is created, it can be shared with the world. This creative method of expression needs an outlet from which to be shared. Today, the explosion of new social practices emerging from the use of new media, such as social networks and what is commonly referred as Web 2.0, tends to blur the frontiers of ePortfolios or digital stories. Thanks to social networking and video sharing sites such as Facebook, Ning, Twitter or YouTube, DST and/or ePortfolios are becoming increasingly more popular in our society of today. The power of social networking is great due to the notion that over 1 billion people are now online worldwide, and now people are more willing to share their lives across the Internet than ever before (Richardson, 2009). Likewise, as more digital stories and ePortfolios are being created, social networking and video sharing sites, which rely on compelling, humorous, educational, and intriguing content, are ultimately attracting more and more users around the globe (EDUCAUSE, 2009). Thus, the social software tools and applications that permit users to review, reflect, collaborate and share on what they have done, experienced or learnt, supports students not only to acquire knowledge and information, but to create the artifacts and develop skills necessary to engage with social and technical change, and to prepare them to be actively and continuously involved in learning, to be self-organized lifelong learners.

6. The L@jost context

The L@jost project is a Lifelong Learning Transversal Programmes, Key Activity 3, which has been start in 2008. A more detailed description of the project is presented in Malita (2009). This project will try to put together all educational actors in order to benefit from the implementation of the ePortfolios and DST in the educational and occupational context. The project tries also to find a possible solution to this problem, by bringing together youngsters that are going to graduate, with the ones graduating recently, and already employed, and facilitating learning from the older colleagues’ digital story telling about job finding. This idea responds also to one of the quality criteria universities have to prove, regarding evidences about insertion into labor market of their graduates.
By making functional in this way the alumni community (in fact in the last few years, Alumni spaces developed very much, and the majority of faculties and universities have such a platform), the universities have indirectly the opportunity to check the relevance on labor market of their offer.

On the Ning platform of the project', we offer a space for interaction for all the educational actors involved in this area. Thus, especially graduated students and already employed who find proper jobs are welcome to share their job finding digital stories. Having those kinds of examples, youngsters that are going to graduate (and even ex-students recently graduated, but still unemployed) can learn and benefit from the older colleagues’ (peers) experiences. Moreover, they can learn even by being actively engaged in this community, by asking and receiving for feedback about specific questions, according with their domain of interest. In this respect, the entire alumni community of the university could benefit by the spirit of mutual aid. On the other part, employers which are interested to find on the labor market highly qualified graduates, according with their expectations and without a great effort or time consuming, could also be actively involved i.e. by giving some feedback or respond to the specific questions. Moreover, on the L@jost Ning platform will be exemplified some ePortfolios already filled for the educational sciences area, in order to offer & find some good examples, recommendations and tips. Thus, youngsters that are going to graduate (and even ex-students recently graduated, but still unemployed) can learn how to construct a better ePortfolio (even developed as a digital story) in order to access successfully and properly on the job market. Moreover, on the L@jost Ning platform, the social community of users is from the entire European area, which offers a broader perspective. Apart from the technical and educational skills, the users will develop even the language skills. Thus, they will develop skills necessary to engage with social and technical change, and to prepare them to be actively and continuously involved in learning, to be self-organized lifelong learners.

7. Conclusion

In the third millennium there are still students with low technical skills, even most of them are technologically literate. But they must be aware of the reality that in order to be effective in the 21st century, citizens and workers must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills related to information, media and technology. Moreover, DST and ePortfolios can successfully be used by students during the difficult period of job search and they are also considerate Web Passports for the 21st Century and an effective way to engage students in their learning. Thus, taking those aspects into consideration, the bigger challenge will be socio-cultural, not technological. For the educational actors the questions are about the efficacy in supporting teaching and learning, about the impact on student achievement in education, acceptance by employers and by the entire social public. Accordingly, the universities and educators must to manage the curriculum in order to prepare students to find proper jobs, after their graduation or even during the study programme. Another important challenge is about acceptance by employers for the use of ePortfolios in employment application and/or personal evaluation.

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