

JASON OHLER

DIGITAL **Storytelling** in the Classroom

New Media Pathways to
LITERACY, LEARNING, and CREATIVITY

Foreword by
DAVID THORNBURG





Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>by David Thornburg</i>	
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiv
About the Author	xvii
PART I. STORYTELLING, EDUCATION, AND THE NEW MEDIA	1
1. Confessions of a Digital Storytelling Teacher: Twenty Revelations About Digital Storytelling in Education	2
2. Defining and Discussing Digital Storytelling: Helping Teachers See, Think, and Talk About Digital Storytelling	15
3. Digital Storytelling as an Educational Tool: Standards, Planning, and Literacy	41
4. Assessing Digital Stories: The Opportunities and Challenges of New Media Evaluation	62
PART II. THE ART AND PRACTICE OF STORYTELLING	69
5. Thinking About Story: The Story Core, Story Mapping, Story Types	70
6. Applying Story Maps: Seeing the Core, Mapping the Story	87
7. Story Planning Considerations: Tips, Techniques, Lessons Learned	95
8. Transformation Formations: How We, and the Characters in Our Stories, Change	107
9. More Story Maps: From Aristotle to Present Day	113
10. Other Kinds of Stories: Other Story Forms and Story Perspectives	124
PART III. GOING DIGITAL	131
11. The Media Production Process, Phase I: Developing the Story	132

12. The Media Production Process, Phases II–V: From Preproduction to Performance	149
13. The Digital Storytelling Toolbox: The Tools Teachers and Students Need to Tell Digital Stories	166
14. Media Grammar for Teachers: Assessing Media Expression	177
15. Copyright and Fair Use in Education: Living in the Gray Zone, Doing the Right Thing, and Protecting Yourself	192
Epilogue: If I Had a Time Machine . . .	202
Resource A. Teaching Oral Storytelling	204
Resource B. Audio Techniques for Video Recording Oral Storytelling	206
Resource C. Audio Techniques for Interviewing People	208
Resource D. Freytag’s Pyramid	210
Resource E. Grammar of Camera Angles	212
Resource F. What’s Scannable?	214
Resource G. Joseph Campbell’s Story Adventure Diagram	215
Resource H. Visual Portrait of a Story	216
References and Further Readings	218
Index	221

Preface

I have one word for anyone who wants to tell a story—whether it’s with computers, with pictures scratched in the sand, or solely with the language of the body and the sounds of the human voice; whether it’s the story of a quest to find one’s holy grail, to find oneself, or simply to find a way to tell one’s story; whether it’s a long story, a short story, or a story that never really ends; whether it’s told on the silver screen, in a circle of one’s closest friends, upon the great virtual stage of the World Wide Web, or on a hill in full view of the gathered public; whether it’s a personal story, a universal story, someone else’s story, or a story that can be understood only by the culture that tells it; whether it’s schoolwork, a work of art, art for work, or simply something that has to be said; whether it’s for you, for your friends, for your community, or for those you will never meet; whether it’s a personal journey, a scientific adventure, a fantasy of the mind, or a memory collage of one’s ancestors; whether it exists as invisible bits of a digital file, as words on paper, as a TV rerun, or only as memories in the hearts and minds of elders; whether it never changes, changes every time it is told, or changes so slowly that no one notices. I have one word for anyone who wants to tell a story, and that word is “welcome.”

Who Is This Book For?

I wrote this book so that it could be used by any teacher, regardless of technical experience, who wants help using technology effectively, creatively, and wisely in the classroom. Whether you’re a beginning computer user or a seasoned expert, this book will meet you where you are and help you take your next steps.

Toward that end, this book approaches storytelling and digital media production from a generalist perspective in ways that can be adapted for use by teachers at most grade levels in most content areas. I assume that the reader’s attitude toward the digital age classroom is a mixture of inspiration, intimidation, and confusion. I hope that by the end of the book, readers will find life in the digital age classroom more manageable, productive, and fun.

This book is particularly concerned with helping teachers do the following:

- Understand the value of storytelling in education, regardless of the media used in the storytelling process.

- Help themselves and their students create digital stories that employ effective principles of storytelling, technology application, and media technique.
- Use digital storytelling as a tool to promote the development of emerging literacies, such as digital and media literacy, as well as traditional literacies, such as reading, writing, speaking, and art.
- Help students use digital storytelling as an academic tool to explore content and to communicate what they understand.
- Understand the importance of combining the power of story and critical thinking as an approach to teaching and learning.
- Leverage students' imagination and help them develop their own voices as storytellers, digital media artists, and learning community members.
- Evaluate digital stories in ways that are helpful to students, parents, and the community, so that digital storytelling can be a valuable learning tool, as well as an effective use of classroom time.
- Develop a sense of media grammar so they can help guide students in the development of new media.
- Understand the basics of media persuasion and bias and how to make media literacy a part of new media production with their students.
- Understand the importance of copyright and fair use in protecting and incentivizing creative content developers, including themselves and their students, and apply that understanding to student use of material in new media projects.

Above all, this book is for teachers who want to better understand the world that often seems so foreign to them but that their students call normal. For those teachers who fear their obsolescence in the digital age, fear not. The more digital the world becomes, the more your students will need you, not for your keystrokes and technical know-how, but for your guidance and wisdom.

How Is the Book Organized?

I have organized the book into three parts.

Part I: Storytelling, Education, and the New Media

Are you a teacher wondering why you should consider trying one more new thing in your classroom when you're already overwhelmed trying to meet your own learning objectives, as well as the demands of your school

district and your state and federal departments of education? Are you a school administrator wondering why digital storytelling should receive your support in an era of No Child Left Behind? Are you a parent, voter, or concerned citizen wondering why art and new media literacy should be valued as literacies on par with the three R's? Part I should help address your questions. It explains how digital storytelling can be used in the classroom as an academic tool to engage digital age students in constructivist learning. In addition, you will see how new media narrative promotes traditional and emerging literacies, helps students meet academic standards in a number of content areas, and gives students a chance to demonstrate their understanding of the world in their own language.

Part II: The Art and Practice of Storytelling

Whether you consider yourself a high-tech, a low-tech, or a no-tech teacher, there is one common denominator for every successful storytelling project: a good story. This part of the book addresses ways to help students understand, plan, and tell stories that have the qualities of good narrative, such as conflict/resolution, character transformation, and audience engagement. In addition, it shows how to use storytelling as a tool for teaching, learning, and personal expression. The fundamental principles of storytelling explained in this part of the book can be used to develop stories for any purpose and are not limited to storytelling in education.

Part III: Going Digital

If you're a little queasy about using computers and other digital technology, Part III of this book should help set your mind at ease. I provide a step-by-step approach to developing media-based stories that focuses on the teacher's role as a skill manager rather than a media specialist—*as the guide on the side, rather than the technician magician*. In addition, I provide a detailed description of software, hardware, and the media production process in layperson's terms. My focus is always on using the "low end"—hardware that is commonly available and software that is free or inexpensive. What you will discover is that the costs involved in doing digital storytelling are minimal. You will also discover that your technical skill level doesn't matter nearly as much as you thought, and you can apply the knowledge you currently have about classroom activity planning to digital storytelling. I also include a chapter on media grammar that will help you provide useful feedback to your students about creating media projects that communicate effectively, as well as a chapter on copyright and fair use, to help you and your students use media legally and ethically.

How Best to Use This Book

I have written this book to be used in a number of ways.

First, you can simply read it from beginning to end—like a story. It will take you on a journey that explores the role of digital narrative in your students' lives and shows you how to plan, create, and perform digital stories that are meaningful to you and your students.

Second, it's written as a quick reference. I have separated the book into the three distinct parts described earlier and have further subdivided these into specific areas of interest. You should be able to find information quickly as specific needs arise in your classroom.

Third, it's a philosophical manifesto of sorts. This book is not just about how to do digital storytelling, but also why to do it and how it can add value to your classroom. It is about how to help students understand the opportunities and responsibilities that accompany using powerful digital technology. And it is about the important role that story and storytelling can play in the lives of your students, both within and beyond your classroom.

And last, it's a how-to storytelling book. As I said earlier, you can use what you find here to help your students tell many kinds of stories, from simple, traditional stories that use no technology at all to elaborately produced stories that use the latest gear—to everything in between. However, my target audience is the vast majority of teachers who have limited access to technology. Most of the teachers with whom I work have small budgets, very little time in their schedules, minimal training, and access to only average, conventional equipment—just like you.

What Kind of Technology Do You Need?

You need only conventional equipment, including the following:

- As of 2007, either Macintosh computers running iMovie software (which is free) or Windows machines running Movie Maker software (also free). You should have a way to burn CDs or DVDs to both show your stories to others and move your stories off the computer in order to save hard drive space and provide permanent backup copies of student work. Many conventional computers have this capability.
- A flatbed scanner (under \$100) to scan objects and documents. Ask around in your district before you buy one. They are quite common these days.
- A bare-bones digital camera (\$200 and up). Again, ask around, because they are also quite common these days, especially given that people

like to upgrade their cameras and have older ones they aren't using that are quite adequate. You do not need the latest and greatest, just a camera that will take decent pictures that you can download to your computer. Most digital cameras have these capabilities.

- A microphone (about \$20). Many computers have built-in mikes these days that work just fine. If your computer doesn't, then check around your school or district for microphones you can borrow before buying one.
- If you're doing green screen performance-based storytelling (explained in detail in this book), then you need a consumer-level video camera with an external microphone jack (\$300–\$500) and a wireless microphone (about \$100). Again, check around your district before buying these, as they are often available. In addition you need special green screen software, which is as inexpensive as \$30 these days.

If you're interested in what to purchase, check jasonohler.com/storytelling, where I post a list of inexpensive hardware and software. Check back often, as it changes frequently.

How Much Technology Do You Need?

Ideally, you need one computer and microphone per storyteller and one scanner and one camera per 5 to 10 students. If you're doing green screen storytelling, one video camera and wireless mike per classroom is sufficient.

This doesn't mean you need 30 computers for 30 students. It means that if you have only five computers, then you will need to set up your storytelling project so that only five students need them at a time. Same for scanners or cameras—set up the project so that there is not a bottleneck to use the resources you have. When equipment is scarce, planning becomes key.

Can you have students work on joint projects, so that small groups can share one computer? Yes. The world of professional media production is a very teamwork-oriented world, and having students work together helps them develop important group process skills needed for media development projects as well as many other ventures in life. But it has been my experience that students approach digital stories very personally and they will want—and should have—control over all aspects of at least their first journey into producing new media narrative. In the process, they will develop an understanding of the many facets of digital storytelling production and, as a result, will be more effective team members in group projects.

For more information about storytelling, as well as telling stories with digital technology, go to www.jasonohler.com/storytelling.

1

Confessions of a Digital Storytelling Teacher

Twenty Revelations About Digital Storytelling in Education

Once upon a time, long ago, during the early, dark days of the digital age (circa 1980), when the Internet was a secret information club for government officials, icons were religious symbols, and iPods were something peas came in, the early adopters of digital technology began using the crude tools of their day to create what we now recognize as digital stories.

Decades later, most of us are involved in digital storytelling (DST), often unconsciously, as we use the powerful new tools we take for granted to satisfy our ancient need to give voice to our narrative. Digital stories are simply the latest manifestation of one of humankind's oldest activities: storytelling. As we are continually swept away by the latest wave of leading-edge innovation, it's reassuring to know that some things don't change. From the age of prehistoric cave dwellers to the age of postmodern computer digitalists, our need to tell stories is one of those things.

My Cell Phone Tells Stories

In fact, the only thing I know for certain about the technologies that await us in the future is that we will find ways to tell stories with them. The cell phone clipped to my belt is a good case in point. When it rings, it plays music I created while displaying a slide show that tells a simple story of a trip my wife and I took in southeast Alaska. There is no question that this is something very new. In fact, if I had told people 25 years ago that I would have such a thing 25 years hence, most would have told me I was crazy. Three hundred years ago, and I would have been burned at the stake for being a witch.

But the fact that I have found a way to use my cell phone to tell a story should also seem ancient, predictable, and comforting. We are, above all, storytelling creatures who use stories to do many essential things, like teach each other practical skills, build communities, entertain ourselves, make peace with the world, and cultivate a sense of personal identity. Technologies will come and go, but stories are forever. And as we shall see, in many senses what makes stories effective has also been very consistent throughout the ages, a fact that can help ground us when engaging in a form of storytelling that involves a lot of potentially distracting technology. Part II of this book addresses how to tell an effective story, a skill that will only become more important as the technology becomes more powerful.

Revelation #1

I know only one thing for certain about the technologies that await us in the future: we will find ways to tell stories with them.

The Early Days of Digital Storytelling

Even though we were telling stories with digital technology in the early days of the information age, it wasn't easy. I think it's fair to say that early microcomputers weren't story friendly. The Apple IIe computers that my students and I were using in the early 1980s booted up in the BASIC programming language. That is, when you turned them on, a cursor sat there blinking at you, waiting for you to write lines of programming code to create a computer application from scratch. There was a good deal that needed to be created, because software as we know it today didn't really exist then.

Revelation #2

The digital revolution would have been a storytelling revolution if early computers had booted up in a word processor instead of a programming language.

Imagine Computers Without Software

It's hard to imagine, but in the early 1980s there wasn't really much software! The tool software that we take for granted today, like word processors, spreadsheets, and image-editing programs, were still far into the future. But even though programming was a calling few of us had, that didn't stop me from using computers as storytelling machines. One of the first computer assignments I gave my high school students was to write a computer program that told a story about the values and principles that guided their lives. Despite clunky keyboards, fuzzy screens, and truly inelegant software, the

light of their stories shone through. I have been involved with DST since the earliest days of personal computing, and although the tools have changed dramatically over the years, the nature of a good story—as well as the need to tell a good story—has not.

An Age of Assistive Technology Dawns

Revelation #3

Digital technology is assistive technology for the artistically challenged.

I like to think of the tools of the digital age as being “assistive technologies for the artistically challenged.” They give the rest of us who didn’t learn how to use a typewriter or play a piano or wield a paintbrush a chance to tell a story.

In fact, if I had to summarize the digital age in a sentence it would be this: Finally, we all get to tell our own story in our own way. Digital cameras, painting programs, music keyboards, and word processors—as well as all those technologies just around the corner that we can’t even imagine right now—give us new ways to personalize the methods of self-expression. We get to explore new communication forms with relative impunity, because we can try out an idea and then, through the miracle of editing, change our minds, something that’s hard to do using a typewriter or a paintbrush. And thanks to Web 2.0 (O’Reilly)—the name often used to describe the current evolutionary status of the Internet as a distributed, collaborative, participatory commons—we have an international stage for the stories we tell.

Revelation #4

The digital revolution in a sentence: Finally, we all get to tell our own story in our own way.

Art Finds Its Place as the Fourth R

In fact, it’s largely because of the Internet and the need for an international Esperanto for our global village that art is becoming the fourth R and “story” is becoming a key format for global communication. Because we now expect students to produce multimedia homework assignments, including Web pages, PowerPoint presentations, and digital stories, the language of art and design is taking center stage. Once a hard sell to a practical public, art is becoming as important for workplace success and personal fulfillment as the other three R’s.

Revelation #5

Art is the fourth R.

For more about this, I invite you to go to the Art the 4th R Web site (www.jasonohler.com/fourthr).