

Stories and/of Self: Using Digital Storytelling in the Anthropology Classroom

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Digital storytelling is a computer-based media production process that holds significant pedagogical promise for college- and university-level courses in general and cultural anthropology courses in particular. Although digital storytelling is increasingly being used in third-level educational institutions, the advantages and potential problems of giving such assignments have yet to be fully considered in the scholarly literature. This article uses a case study approach to address the potential problems with and benefits of utilizing digital storytelling projects based on my experiences in teaching a “Media, Self, and Society” course at two universities in the 2010-11 academic year. Particular attention will be paid to two related pedagogical benefits suggested in the literature, increased student engagement and the facilitation of student agency. Both have particular bearing on the objectives of my course and the teaching of cultural anthropology in general.

In the fall semester of 2010 I taught a course called “Media, Self, and Society” at Duke University, where I was a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Cultural Anthropology. As a final project for the course each of the 35 enrolled students produced a short video project in which they explored the ways in which their “self” had been or was being shaped by media. The following semester, I taught a slightly modified version of the same course at Elon University. Again, the class was well-enrolled with 29 students, and students produced a short video project addressing the effects media had on them as a final assignment.

The video projects created by students for the course were produced in line with the approaches and techniques of digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is a process by which people use digital media production software in order to make video projects. These projects are often comprised of a wide range of digital assets, including images that are

either created specifically for the project or downloaded off the internet, narrative voiceovers that are recorded using audio recording and editing computer programs, background music that is sometimes altered or modified using audio editing software, video clips recorded by the project producer, and/or text written by the project producer. Digital stories are often short, averaging two to ten minutes in length, and can address a wide variety of topics. A website on the use of digital storytelling for education purposes suggests that “the topics that are used in Digital Storytelling range from personal tales to the recounting of historical events, from exploring life in one’s own community to the search for life in other corners of the universe, and literally, everything in between” (University of Houston 2012). Despite the potential range of subject matter, digital stories most often have an extremely personal element, either in addressing a personal topic or looking at a subject from a personal point of view.

As a part of the larger trend of employing information communication technology in classrooms, digital storytelling is increasingly being utilized in teaching practice at all levels. In a recent review of scholarly literature on the use of digital storytelling as a teaching tool, Patrick Lowenthal has identified at least thirteen proposed educational benefits of digital storytelling, including its ability to amplify students’ voices, leverage multiple literacies, engender student creativity, appeal to diverse learning styles, increase student engagement, and facilitate agency in students who undertake digital storytelling projects (2009:253–255). It is the last two of these proposed benefits that are most pertinent to the discussion presented here.

The increased student engagement that digital storytelling assignments facilitate is substantively covered by Mark Hofer and Kathleen Owing Swan, who characterize increased student engagement as “the clearest and most tangible benefit of undertaking a digital storytelling project” (2006:680). They claim that a major reason for digital storytelling’s ability to increase students’ engagement is that the production of digital stories allows, even requires, students to utilize skills and competencies that are associated with their lives outside the classroom context; it allows them to work in the “language of their generation” (679). “As a result,” Lowenthal suggests, “digital storytelling offers educators a new and exciting way to captivate students’ interests like never before” (2009:253).

A less clearly understood pedagogical benefit of digital storytelling

discussed in the literature is its ability to facilitate agency in students who undertake digital storytelling projects. Lowenthal suggests that “perhaps the most complicated and least understood benefit is digital storytelling’s ability to create agentive senses of self” (2009:255). Much of the literature suggesting digital storytelling’s potential to facilitate agency focuses on the recontextualizing of aspects of one’s life experience in the narrative process of producing the digital story (Davis 2004; Hull and Katz 2006). This process provides an opportunity to reconsider the significance of personal life events and reframe them in agentive ways.

I became aware of these potential benefits of digital storytelling while taking part in digital story facilitator training at the same time that I was developing the “Media, Self, and Society” course. In recent years, multiple academic and administrative units at Duke University have made a concerted effort to facilitate better teaching among faculty and graduate students. One of the major players in this push for pedagogical improvement is Duke’s Center for Instructional Technology (CIT). It was a timely CIT workshop on digital storytelling that led to the classroom practices discussed in this article. The workshop I attended was led by Duke’s Instructional Technology Specialist, Dr. Hugh Crumley, and involved workshop participants in putting together their own minute-long digital stories utilizing the audio recording and editing software GarageBand, the video production program iMovie, and other readily available digital media applications. Crumley had traveled to Berkeley and learned the techniques of digital storytelling at the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), which was founded in 1998 when the San Francisco Center for Digital Media relocated.

As I learned more about digital storytelling as a result of the workshop and related activities, I came to see how it could be effectively utilized as a pedagogical technique in the course I was developing. It was important for students to be able to apply the social scientific approaches to media covered in the class to their own life experience as a way of exercising a critical perspective in response to the media present in their lives. From the standpoint of cultural anthropology, this is in line with the mission of “making the familiar strange” that has long been a goal of the discipline. One of the major things I wanted to effect through the course was a bringing to consciousness of potential influences of media which are so often left unconsidered. Such self-awareness gives people agency by allowing them to act differently, and the personal orientation of digital storytelling is well-suited to this agenda.

In this article I will present the use of digital storytelling in my course as a case study in the use of media in anthropology courses. First, I will provide a short history of digital storytelling and its increasing presence in educational institutions. Second, I will describe how I integrated the technique into my own course with attention to both the pedagogical aspects and the infrastructural considerations behind “pulling off” a course that includes digital storytelling assignments. Finally, I will discuss what I see as the potential problems with and benefits of using digital storytelling in teaching anthropology. Despite the potential benefits, the use of digital storytelling in anthropology classes is not without its difficulties and potential drawbacks. Such problems have yet to be fully addressed in the literature.

History of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling developed out of the work of a group of San Francisco-based artists in the mid-1990s. Both the CDS website (2012) and Executive Director Joe Lambert’s book on digital storytelling (2002) discuss the impact of performance artist Dana Atchley and his multimedia performance piece titled *Next Exit*.¹ Atchley’s work in multimedia storytelling-like performances led him and others associated with the future center to develop workshops given at the American Film Institute (Lambert 2002:9–10). These workshops became a model for the three-day workshops that became, and remain, the hallmark of the CDS.

By the late 1990s, the founders had established the CDS in Berkeley, California, where they developed a curriculum for a Standard Digital Storytelling Workshop and began to work with numerous organizations and institutions to spread the practice of digital storytelling. Among the early groups with which the CDS worked were primary and secondary school teachers. They designed an Educator Workshop that is specifically aimed at K–12 classroom teachers. Largely due to these efforts on the part of the CDS, and perhaps aided by an increasing belief that digital multi-media projects are better suited than traditional paper assignments for developing learning styles appropriate to “the information age,” digital storytelling projects have been and continue to be assigned at K–12 institutions throughout the U.S. Some third-level educational

¹ For a different, and perhaps more detailed, history of the development of digital storytelling that includes discussion of the Center for Digital Storytelling, see Alexander (2011).

institutions have also embraced these methods. However, my perception is that professors and instructors at colleges and universities throughout the country have been slower to take on digital storytelling as part of their pedagogical practice.² Despite this reticence, such assignments are increasingly finding their way into courses at a number of institutions.

Digital Storytelling and My Course

At the time I took the digital storytelling workshop, I had already been asked by my department to teach a “Self and Society” course that had been on the books but not taught for several years. The professor who formerly taught the course had moved to a different university, and there was really no one expressing a desire to teach the course. I had long envisioned a “Media, Self, and Society” course I thought would be perfect to teach under that course designation and had made this known to the department. In the spring of 2010, I was given the go-ahead to offer the course in the following fall semester. It was the development of this course that was most on my mind when I finally got the opportunity to take Crumley’s workshop, which is given once each semester.

The personal orientation of the digital storytelling product was perfect for the goals of a course highlighting the potential effects of media, as widely as possibly construed, on the “self” or “selves” of the students taking the course. I wanted to make certain that throughout the course, students were attempting to apply the theories and concepts of media analysis we considered to their own personal life experience. When I designed the final “digital storytelling” project that concludes the course, I described it as a critically autobiographical video that “addresses how your (i.e., the students’) ‘self’ has been/is shaped by your media environment.” Students were asked to produce a two-and-a-half to three-minute digital story that applied the types of media analysis and theorization covered during the semester (or other academic media approaches from outside the class) to an exploration of the ways in which a form of media could affect, perhaps even effect, particular kinds of selves. I also produced a grading

² While slower to adopt the digital storytelling approaches, a number of colleges and universities have recently established programs, often spearheaded by offices for information technology or teaching and learning centers, to facilitate the use of digital storytelling on their campuses. Bryan Alexander offers a rundown of institutions of higher education that have begun efforts to facilitate digital storytelling on their campuses and/or offer degrees on the subject (2011:26–27).

rubric for the assignment in which the application of “Course Content/Concepts” was one of the major criteria. The projects were screened in class at the end of the semester.

By the time I completed the digital storytelling workshop, I had determined that a digital storytelling assignment would be a singularly effective means of demonstrating students’ abilities to apply the material covered in the course to their own lived experience. That was in some ways the easy part. What wasn’t so clear, and was in many ways much harder, was making certain that the students in the course would have the skills and resources needed to complete the final assignment I had envisioned.

Facilitating Digital Storytelling

My first step was to investigate the resources available on campus to enable students to produce their final projects. I was fortunate to find out about two Multimedia Production Studios that have been set up on the Duke University campus. These facilities include multiple workstations containing high-end, integrated hardware and software for the creation and editing of graphics, web pages, and audio and video projects. Students have 24-hour access to one of these two studios, and both of them are regularly staffed by student assistants that can help students resolve problems they encounter when working on projects.

While it turned out that the resources to complete projects were readily available, I still had to make certain that each student in the class had the basic skills and, as important, the confidence necessary to undertake the final assignment. Many students, probably even the majority, already had the skills needed to complete the project I had in mind, although a few did approach me at the end of the first class session to express their concern about having never attempted a video project. As the instructor, my task was to provide an adequate foundation so students could then utilize university resources to expand their abilities as needed to accomplish whatever it was they wanted to do in their particular final projects over the course of the semester.

To complete this task, I set aside three early class periods to hold a digital storytelling workshop during which each student would produce a 30-second class-introduction project in which they would detail one or more forms of media that they liked or that had affected them in some way. I launched this on the very first day of class by asking students to do

some “homework” and bring in three lists of three examples of media (three books, three songs, three movies, etc.) that they liked. This was to be their ticket into the second class and would be turned in to me at the end of that period.

When they arrived to the next class, their three lists in hand, I broke them up into groups to discuss the lists and determine which form of media on their list they felt best represented them in some way. Perhaps they would only come up with one form of media or even a single instance of media that they felt really defined them. Perhaps they could take one item from each of the lists that represented the different aspects of their personality. I left it broadly open to them to decide what instance or instances of media would populate their class-introduction project.

Of course, this group work on a topic of personal relevance had several purposes. Primarily, it provided material that would be expanded on in their class-introduction digital storytelling projects. As important, however, was the opportunity it provided very early in the semester for students in the class to get to know one another, to break the ice and begin talking to each other. Many friendships fostered in those early days when all the students were discussing topics that were mildly and acceptably personal were maintained throughout the semester.

At the end of this group work session I showed my own example of a class-introduction project. In it, I highlighted three of my favorite books: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and Míic Mac Gabhann’s *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*. While images of the authors and their books mixed with pictures of me passed by, my narration suggested that these three novels have had a profound effect on me. I noted that all three of these stories were about travel, which has been a life-long passion of mine. But, a key reason for their appeal was that each of them addresses the interpretations their lead characters form about themselves, those they meet during their travels, and the overall contexts in which they find themselves.

After presenting this example I declared that in a little over a week we would screen a similar project for each of the students in the class. Over the weekend following the first week of the course, the students were given the assignment of producing a 100-word script for the narration to be included in their class-introduction project, which we would record in the next class period using Audacity audio recording and editing software. They were also instructed to begin collecting relevant iMovie-compatible images (my having explained to them which image formats would work in

iMovie) to populate the video project we would produce at the end of the second week. I arranged for a mobile cart of Mac laptops (with iMovie and Audacity loaded) to be brought into the class for the remaining two in-class workshop periods. I further made certain that students would be able to access the same computers on which they started their project over the weekend after my workshop, in case (as was very likely) they were unable to complete their entire project during the final workshop class period.

At each of the workshop sessions, I first walked through the process. I showed the students how to produce a digital recording of the narration scripts they had written using Audacity in the second session, and in the third session, we used these narration recordings with the images they had collected as assets to populate 30-second iMovie projects. Again, I walked through the process, recreating the video example I had shown them at the end of the second class period, showing them how to create a story board of title pages and images with different transitions between them and insert the voiceover files they had already produced. I demonstrated how to adjust the position and timing of their images. Then, I set them to work on their projects while I circulated through the class to resolve the problems that inevitably arose. These sessions went well, with all students seeming to understand what was expected of them. The following Monday was the proof when the iMovie projects began to fill the Blackboard "Assignments" folder I had created for them. By the beginning of the third week of class, I had a 30-second video from each student in the class that demonstrated his or her ability to undertake a project of this kind.

The fifth class session was dedicated to screening the class-introduction projects. Although I cannot describe all of the 35 videos that were turned into me, here I provide a couple of examples of how the students engaged in the assignment. One video began with the creator of the project proclaiming, "I wish I could impress you with a list of three profound novels, but that's just not me." The narration goes on to suggest that television is what this student turns to in order to relax and explains what it is she likes about her three favorite television series: *The Office*, *Burn Notice*, and *Entourage*. The first thing I liked about this example is what I took to be minor dig at my own example video in its reference to "three profound novels," and I did call the student out on this. But, that aside, I highlighted the student's suggestion that she liked "*The Office* because it's funny and something my friends and I make references to." I took time during the class in which I screened this video to note media's

ability to act as a social glue for real or imagined communities, which we would later be addressing in the work of Benedict Anderson (1991) and other theorists.

A second class-introduction video I screened on that day took graphic T-shirts as a form of media that the project producer took to be important for her. While image after image provides examples of politically oriented shirts, the student claims that “by promoting various social issues a common, everyday article of clothing can pass on a message to everyone who sees it.” After screening this example, I highlighted the student’s selected topic of clothes. “Are the clothes we wear media,” I asked the class. I had already asked the students to consider, perhaps reconsider, their definition of media during the very first class session. I had given the example of dance, and most in the class had agreed that the formal and staged dance performances that comprise the American Dance Festival that had just ended in Duke’s hometown of Durham were instances of media. But, what about when the students were down at the local club shaking their booties on Friday night? Is that media? In this student’s class-introduction project, I suggested, we had another possible expansion, or perhaps problematization, of the definition of media. I noted that this project foreshadowed the discussion of clothing we would have in discussing Dick Hebdige’s (1979) work on youth subcultures when we addressed a range of Birmingham School theorists about half-way through the semester.

In addition to providing a novel way for students to introduce themselves to their classmates, these class-introduction projects allowed me an opportunity to get students thinking about the substantive theories of media we would be addressing throughout the term. After the screening session class we turned to Marshall McLuhan (1962) on the phonetic alphabet and the printing press. We went on to explore a range of media-oriented theorists, including the work of Frankfurt School theorists Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Althusser, as well as that of Hall, Hebdige, Willis, and others from the Birmingham School. This theoretical background provided the conceptual tools needed for the students to address their own media environments in their final projects.

Throughout the semester, I would occasionally have a student come after class to discuss some technical aspect of recording and/or looping a song using audio-editing software in order to have an instrumental version of a particular song playing in the background of the final project. Or, I might get an e-mail inquiring about whether flip camera

videos would be high-definition enough for interviews the student wanted to include in her project. But these were actually few and far between, and when the time came for final projects to be turned in, like clockwork, they began appearing in the Blackboard “Assignments” folder.

The Final Projects

The last three class periods were dedicated to screening the final projects each student produced during the semester. A single example on museums as a form of media will serve to illustrate the nature of the projects. The topic was one we had addressed throughout the course, and the video narration begins thusly: “When we think about things that shape the way we identify ourselves, we don’t usually think of museums, but institutions alter the ways we behave and the ways we look at others and ourselves.” The project goes on to highlight the organizational and display principles of museums and the ways in which these reinforce received categories and cultural understandings. The project also details work the student had done on a showcase exhibit of Chinese objects (jade, porcelain, lacquer, and metal items) as part of an internship with a curator at Duke’s Nasher Museum of Art. Part of her job was to write the general information labels that accompany the items to be displayed. The student found that in order to do this work she had to make assumptions about the audience members who would read the descriptions she was writing, assuming, for instance, that they did not speak Chinese languages but were acquainted with the geographic locations she mentioned in the descriptions.

In her video, this student utilized concepts from Walter Benjamin (1969) and Margaret Mead (White 1976), as well as from Mark O’Neill (2004) and Paul Valéry (1960), on museums in order to analyze the exhibit she helped to create. While Benjamin, Mead, and O’Neill had been covered in the course, Valéry’s essay was novel outside material. In line with general trends of digital storytelling and the way the assignment was written, this final project had a personal element to it as the student elaborated on the exhibit she had personally participated in constructing. The majority of the videos were similar in terms of their introduction of course and novel academic sources in the analysis presented, as well as in their inclusion of a personal element—an aspect facilitated by the digital storytelling medium in a way it would not have been in a standard term paper assignment.

It is the personal element that is at the heart of the advantages digital storytelling assignments of the type described here have for academic work in general and anthropology courses in particular. First, digital storytelling assignments increase student engagement as students bring course content to bear in analyzing their lives outside the classroom in a mode of representation typically associated with non-classroom online leisure activity. Additionally, the application of scholarly approaches and theory to life outside of the classroom facilitates critical reflection on experience that is often left unconsidered. Such agency-provoking evaluation of students' lived experience is a common objective of cultural anthropology courses.

Discussion: Challenges and Potential Benefits

So, what are the challenges of and potential benefits resulting from the use of digital storytelling-format final assignments? Challenges no doubt arise on the technical side of things. I would be reluctant to give students this type of assignment unless I was certain the resources were available on campus for them to appropriately complete it. Duke University may be particularly well-resourced in this regard. However, I also taught a version of the same course at Elon University, which had fewer relevant resources, and I was ultimately able to find appropriate facilities there as well. In the end, instructors will have to be pragmatic, looking at the resources available to them and being very careful to design the course within the constraints presented by their particular institution's facilities.

Students' technical abilities are also a potential source of problems. I am unwilling to assume that students are coming to my course with the skills in place to complete assignments of this type. I am convinced a handful of students would have dropped my course had I not made allowances for them through the class-introduction project workshop described above. This process was time well spent.

Of course, there are concerns regarding the knowledge and technical abilities of the instructor as well. Multi-day workshops to develop the skills needed to undertake digital storytelling projects, and to teach others to undertake them, are available through the Center for Digital Storytelling and like institutions. A teaching and learning center or office of information technology at one's institution might be convinced to facilitate such a workshop. If not, it would be necessary to seek out

appropriate training.

As for the potential benefits of using digital storytelling in anthropology classes, increased student engagement is a key benefit. When given at Duke University, my media class was entirely filled with a waiting list and additional students e-mailing me to see if the course would be taught in future semesters. In part, this may be a result of the course's emphasis on media, which is always sure to draw a large number of students. However, my conversations with students suggest that the fact that digital storytelling is a practice more associated with non-school leisure activity than class assignments was also a significant factor.

The integration of digital storytelling may have other benefits for anthropology classes above and beyond attracting students. Ola Erstad and Kenneth Silseth (2008) have pointed out that use of digital storytelling and similar methods of electronic media production has the effect of drawing activities students commonly engage in outside of classes into the classroom experience, thereby complicating the idea of the classroom as a space of formal learning.³ "Digital storytelling might represent a new way of integrating these (classroom and non-classroom) contexts and might bypass a categorical division between the formal and informal paths of learning" (215). The result of this complication of contexts can be to make for a more student-centered learning situation. Erstad and Silseth suggest that "when young people are given the opportunity to blend the informal 'cultural codes' with more formal ones in their own learning processes, agency may be fostered in a new way" (214). They refer specifically to a concept of "epistemic agency" that has been associated with the increasing implementation of information communication technology in classrooms and an increased focus on more active students roles in learning.

Along these same lines, in the context of European social anthropology Simon Coleman and Bob Simpson make a distinction between substantivist and imaginativist pedagogical strategies. Substantivist approaches include providing students with mastery of a body of knowledge about a given discipline or topic. Imaginativist strategies, on the other hand, are more focused on developing an

³ I have noted that a significant number of students in my classes were not prior producers of YouTube aesthetic or digital storytelling-like videos. Nevertheless, most students will be avid viewers of such projects (often with the desire to become producers of this type of material themselves). As such, the idea that integrating digital storytelling practice into the classroom draws from the domain of their non-classroom experiences is still valid.

“anthropological apperception” whereby a student is able to apply insights arising out of a body of disciplinary knowledge in their own lives. Coleman and Simpson claim that the imaginativist approach is preferable not only because of its potential to increase student motivation and retention but also because it is at the heart of anthropology as a discipline. Anthropology is about the contextualisation of knowledge, action, belief, meaning and language, and any strategy that fails to understand and incorporate student understandings into this process misses a crucial pedagogical opportunity. Thus, to integrate education into other parts of student life is not just sound pedagogically, it is also sound anthropologically. (Coleman and Simpson 2004:20)

The personal nature of many, if not most, digital storytelling assignments in my class fostered a situation in which students were compelled to think about themselves as affected or constituted, at least in part, by aspects of their society that are often taken to be mere entertainment. This critical reflection on personal life experience is an agency-provoking process that is a desirable objective of many cultural anthropology courses.

Conclusion

No doubt, there are difficulties associated with assigning digital storytelling and like audio-visual media assignments in anthropology courses. Facilities, knowledge, and competencies needed to ‘pull off’ the use of digital storytelling demand a large amount of foresight and preparation on the part of instructors and their institutions. The technical aspects of utilizing digital storytelling assignments must be pragmatically considered by each instructor in the context of his or her own particular course and institution to assure student success in completing the assigned projects.

In digital storytelling assignments, however, there is a useful vehicle for maintaining students’ motivation while they demonstrate understanding of course content. The fact that digital storytelling is an example of a computer-based media practice that is, at least at present, more associated with leisure activity outside the classroom than school work has the effect of attracting and motivating students.

For cultural anthropology courses, the emphasis on the personal in digital storytelling practice may be particularly beneficial. Digital storytelling assignments that are carefully planned and implemented to

help students apply social scientific approaches and theory to their own lives have singular potential to facilitate critical reflection on aspects of their lived experience. Digital storytelling assignments have the potential to facilitate an “anthropological apperception” that is commonly at the heart of the mission of cultural anthropology instruction. As a result, digital storytelling is a media practice that holds great potential for college- and university-level courses in general and cultural anthropology courses in particular.

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