Striking It Rich
Finding My Digital Story in Northern California

by COREY HARBAUGH

A century and a half after the first gold rush brought prospectors to the San Francisco Bay Area, I came to Berkeley looking for a different kind of buried treasure: personal story. And I carried a whole different set of tools with me: my pickaxe was the writing process, my gold pan was a computer, and my stick of dynamite was the inspiration and vision of the National Writing Project digital storytelling team.

This project gave me an opportunity to use media to develop and tell a story. Though I had no idea what to expect, I was excited about combining traditional storytelling with the latest computer and media technology. In my own classroom, I’ve seen what a computer can do in the hands of a student who knows how to use it, and I’ve seen what it can do to motivate a student who is otherwise reluctant. I wanted to see what a computer could do for me and my learning and the way I tell stories.

The project also reunited me with members of the Rural Voices Country Schools (RVCS) network, teachers from rural areas in six states who are documenting the teaching and learning of America’s small-town schools. For four years, our Michigan team, like the national team, had collected the stories of our schools and places and shared them in articles and poems, books and public readings, and a series of half-hour radio programs distributed across the country.

We had taken what we’d learned from our writing classrooms and our own writing practices and made it public. We had done meaningful, important work.

But this was different work. Over seven days we were each to produce a digital story, a short multimedia presentation combining video, still photography, voice-over and other audio effects, animation, and text. I brought as much of our four years of documentation as I could stuff into three bags and wondered, and worried, about how I could turn those years into a four-minute presentation.

Because we were working in a new medium, I found myself excited by the possibilities of using technology to tell a story. Every trick, skill, and strategy I learned on the computer that week opened up a million possibilities for application. But as I was becoming more skilled with the technology of digital storytelling, I was slowly getting farther and farther away from the power of the story I had come to California to tell. I wanted to tell of and honor the accomplishments of the Michigan RVCS team; I wanted to tell how we’ve drawn from the power of our place with and for our students in our individual classrooms, how we’ve become teacher-leaders in Southwestern Lower Michigan, how we’ve written and gone public with what we’ve learned.

Then there came that crisis point that always happens when I’m writing and going nowhere. Two days into the digital storytelling process, I realized why I wasn’t having success telling my story. Surrounded by the media and technology tools of the Center for Digital Storytelling, I realized I was more focused on the glamour, the polish, of the final product, than on the raw splendor of my story. The impact of my story wouldn’t come from how I dressed it up with technology; rather, the opposite was true: the impact of my story would come when I used technology to focus my audience on its simple truths.

That’s when I started using technology to tell my story, the story of an ordinary classroom teacher becoming a teacher-leader. As I told about the work of my own hands, I was naturally honoring the hands of the people who worked with me. As I got more specific about who I was and where I came from, my story became universal. By the time I’d finished, I was hooked on digital storytelling, and I was proud of what I’d done. But not for reasons I’d expected. I’d found in the process that technology can be a powerful tool for people to get in touch with their stories and make them public. Like traditional writing can be. I don’t know why I didn’t know that all along. I guess I had to lose myself in my story again, to lose control of my craft, and to have to depend on others and the process to learn my way out.

I struck gold in California, and came home to Michigan with a new way to share who I am and what I do and why. And when I show that digital story now to my friends and colleagues, I watch it, selfish as a miser, and the excitement rises up in me all over again. Digital storytelling, like gold fever, is calling me back to the hills. To once again stake out my stories. To turn the earth of my experience. To strike it rich.

COREY HARBAUGH is a teacher-consultant with the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.

Left: Caleb Paulus helps Ann Gardner of the Northern Arizona Writing Project use dissolve techniques (below) as she creates her digital story.

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storytelling institute had created a space in which I could own and construct my learning.

Laura arranged a premiere showing of our stories Saturday night to an audience of NWP staff and their families. We storytellers sat anxiously until we heard the first strand of music and saw the first title and visuals. Then we relaxed, proud and appreciative of the stories we had created, the learning we had packed in, and the opportunity we had to represent our teams.

As in all meaningful work, the learning continues. RVCS not only has a new medium with which to disseminate our research, but also a new medium to teach others. Digital storytelling will prove a powerful tool for teachers and students alike.

SUE WILLIS is a teacher-consultant with the Central Washington Writing Project at Central Washington University in Ellensburg.