Technology Transforms Stories of Teaching

by Sue Willis

Six months ago, I didn't know what a digital story was and wouldn't have known who to ask. Now I smile at myself as I share my first digital story with friends, family, students, colleagues, and the Rural Voices Country Schools (RVCS) team from Washington. In fact, our team plans to use the story for inservice opportunities and at conferences. How did this unlikely transformation come about? What is it about digital storytelling that can grab a teacher who claims no artistic and few technological skills?

I had worked with our RVCS team for three years, documenting our classrooms across Central Washington, exploring this primary question: How do we address state standards and still keep the child at the center of the curriculum? In the fourth year of the project, we published our insights in a collection of student writing and teacher reflection called Our Washington Journal. We had also produced a video that illustrates our teaching practices. Last spring, NWP Program Associate Laura Paradise proposed digital storytelling as yet another medium through which to share our findings.

Reassured by Laura, and Caleb Paul and Susan Campbell of the Center for Digital Storytelling at UC Berkeley, that I did not have to understand any of the technology or techniques in order to make a digital story, I agreed to join a week-long institute in Berkeley this summer. I certainly knew our team's work and could rely on the institute to teach me the rest. I gathered photos, videos, news articles, our Rural Voices Radio CD, music, and ideas. I drafted a script and packed for the trip to California.

Caleb opened the institute in typical writing project fashion: We wrote and immediately established a vibrant community. We encapsulated our diverse research projects, shared our ideas for audience and purpose, and presented our documentation.

Colleen Meyers of Pennsylvania showed us her teacher/parent journals revealing first-graders' processes as they learned to read; Sharon Bishop of Nebraska told us of the power of writing about place for students and teachers; Cory Harbaugh of Michigan shared his appreciation of the teacher empowerment made possible through the RVCS project; Ann Gardner of Arizona reflected on her students' awakening to the poetry of place; Beth Calloway of Louisiana experienced digital storytellers. They reminded us that our finished stories would run just two to five minutes. As though crafting poetry, we pared down our writing to only what was essential.

Once our scripts neared satisfaction, we began scanning and sizing images and digitizing video. We learned and applied the software, relearned and applied the software, recorded our voices, experimented with effects, and shared our successes and anxieties. Our work proved intense and compelling, holding Caleb and half of us late into the night Thursday. We felt lucky to find Mel's Diner open for dinner at 11:30 p.m.!

While we each crafted our stories tirelessly, sometimes without a lunch break, we nevertheless stayed available to view each other's pieces and offer feedback. With skillful insights, my peers and teachers helped me open doors to the particular power of digital story technology. Iana Rogers, program assistant at NWP, joined us, adding invaluable support. Susan nudged me as I let the artistry of visual images replace my intellectual goals.

And somehow, as all good teachers do, Caleb gave me permission to experiment. What if I took out the audio clips that I had spent half a day digitizing? What if visual images, text, and music portrayed the teams classroom practices? What if I let my music run through the entire story rather than only through the introduction?

At that moment, my creative self emerged. I finally got the magic of digital storytelling! I surrendered to the medium, and suddenly the script, the images, and the music began to move together in a cohesive flow. Having brought no prior experience with me, I had gone through the struggles and cognitive dissonance I observe in my third and fourth grade students as they find their way to understanding. Our digital

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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 to others. Digital storytelling will prove a powerful tool for teachers and students alike.

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