

**Digital Storytelling:  
An Integration of Participatory Culture, Education and Narrative**

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

It wasn't the dull glow of the computer screen that mesmerized me. It was the thought that there were people on the other end. Perhaps hundreds, even thousands of them. Tuning in to the same force. In that moment, I experienced a taste of what the parents of the Internet must have felt—like I had tapped into another dimension. I had joined the digital revolution. And the revolutionary tool I cut my teeth on? A box on a screen in which words appeared out of nowhere. It was 1999, and I was a freshman in college. I had just joined my first chat room. It turned out to be a complete waste of time. But not a complete waste.

My friend, Dom, suggested chat rooms as a way to connect with strangers around the world. He knew I'd find it intriguing, as I was keen on social experiments, especially those that involved meeting new people. I logged on and started following conversations. I tried to interject, but I couldn't get past the veneer of platitudes, screen names and vulgarities. Nevertheless, I was determined—or hypnotized—and spent the next five hours chasing conversations. I didn't find a single one worth catching. Mostly I found lewdness, trolls and small talk. I wanted to know where people were coming from. Why they were logged on. How we could all change the world together. I was eager to participate in a shared experience, but what I found was the opposite of engagement. I logged off in the early hours of the morning, feeling empty. The experience continues to deter me from chat rooms. But I made a powerful discovery during my wasted chat time. Without ever having met someone in person, it was possible to participate in his or her life.

Since then, the spread of technology and rise of the Internet has cultivated a strong participatory culture—one that engages freely with strangers and familiars alike—connecting, creating, stealing, remixing and sharing. Our participatory culture includes people who embrace the low barriers to expression and civic engagement;

people who rely on shared knowledge and collaboration; people who thrive on creation and sharing those creations with others (Jenkins 5–6).

Fueling this participation is greater access to technology and virtual platforms. We connect through social networks (Facebook, Twitter, message boards and online gaming, to name a few). We easily create, remix and share digital media like photos, music and video (Flickr, MySpace, Vimeo and YouTube). We express ourselves through podcasts, blogs and citizen journalism. We organize for knowledge-sharing and collaborative problem solving (through Wikipedia and the Instructables websites, for example). And, as we've seen with the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring, we can even organize a revolution. Digital tools in the hands of people with a strong desire to connect will continue to shape the ways we engage with one another.

In the wake of such rapid change, our higher education institutions have not kept up. Participatory culture has taken off, while education remains grounded. Higher education is built on knowledge acquisition. But without experiential learning that prepares students for the world outside of academia, knowledge is not enough. With vast amounts of information now accessible through a few mouse clicks, knowledge acquisition is easy for anyone with an internet connection. Facts and figures are obtained instantaneously online, and they're free to anyone. Crucial to students' personal and professional growth in this age is the ability to take these facts, envelop them in context and deliver them with emotional impact. Doing so, I believe, begins with encouraging them to become good storytellers.

To bring education up to speed, we need not only the desire to embrace technology in order to participate in our increasingly connected world, but also the ability to harness a fundamental unit of understanding: Story. There is no instrument in existence to measure the value of story. We rely on it to explain and express ourselves. We use it to illustrate our understanding and to share understanding. Narrative is the essential building block of human communication—whether we talk

about what we bought on a recent shopping trip, describe how we were cutoff driving to work or type up a review on Yelp, we are composing (short) narratives.

The writer Joan Didion in her book *The White Album* (1979) expresses well how essential to our existences stories are: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live. We live... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (11). Stories are crucial to the understanding of self and our relationships with others. Through narrative, we make sense of the world and make meaning of our lives in it. Narrative has become so pervasive that we don’t often realize that it is the unifying element combining the events of our lives into a comprehensible whole. We are hard-wired to rely on it.

This is why I propose an activity called Digital Storytelling to address this deficiency in education. Digital Storytelling (DST) combines media literacy instruction with the age-old skill of storytelling to produce unique media content—or what I call participation with a purpose.

Digital Storytelling is an updated form of the ancient art of storytelling, with the added benefit of digitized components. It is a modern version of cave drawings and word-of-mouth tales passed from generation to generation. A digital story can be described as a short digital film that weaves together narration, digital and still images and audio to share one’s personal experience. The definition is intentionally loose to allow for each creator to decide how to string it together, and to allow for wide application across disciplines.

The use of these digital media narratives in higher education will better prepare students to be media literate while strengthening the fundamental human skill of storytelling. The goal of this project is to detail its potential in helping students develop participatory media literacy skills. I will illustrate these ideas with works completed by students during digital storytelling workshops, examples used in

professional practice and my own digital stories. In addition, I will provide techniques and technological resources for educators to develop their own DST portfolios. Through these activities, the field of education can harness the power of narrative by teaching storytelling skills through digital technology. Not only does this activity improve overall media literacy, it also produces better writers, communicators, listeners, technologists and, ultimately, participators with purpose. I believe more can and should be done to integrate storytelling with digital tools for productive learning in our complex and rapidly changing world.



## Chapter 2:

### PARTICIPATION WITH PURPOSE

*“Educators must work together to ensure that all young Americans have access to the skills and experiences needed to become full participants, can articulate their understanding of how media shapes perceptions, and are socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and participants in online communities.”*

(Jenkins xiii)

A Pew Internet and American Life Project study conducted in 2004 found more than half of teens were creating media content. Content creators as defined by the study are “online teens who have created or worked on a blog or webpage, shared original creative content, or remixed content they found online into a new creation” (Lenhart and Madden 1). Many of these 12 million content creators (who were aged 12–17 at the time of the study) have entered our higher education systems—some of them still enrolled. They arrived in college classrooms aware of the ability to participate in various forms of media online, having already built networks around this participation. They brought with them the desire to share original art, be it music, images, writing or video. They arrived as active bloggers and many knew how to create their own websites. Computers have long been essential to students’ daily routines, and today’s students have taken that use to the next level, expecting to be online at all times.

Using the Pew study and research on media education, Henry Jenkins, a professor of communications, journalism and cinematic arts at the University of Southern California, has written extensively about participatory culture. Expanding on his definition of participation, I will show how DST contributes to building media literacy skills to thrive in a participatory culture. Jenkins defines participatory culture as one with:

1. low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement

2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. members who believe that their contributions matter
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another.

(Jenkins 5–6)

It could be argued that all cultures with the infrastructure for mass internet access are participatory cultures. Greater access combined with readily available technological resources allows for new media creation at an unparalleled rate. Higher education's role in this landscape is to foster skills in a manner that takes advantage of technology, while also teaching users to deploy them purposefully for student development and lifelong learning. We must bring these informal learning experiences into formal learning settings, being careful not to strip the benefits that come with informality. The advantages of media participation "out in the world" are versatility, mobility and a lack of barriers—facets that most slow-moving, rigid, bureaucratic education systems cannot accommodate.

In other words, the world created inside higher education institutions struggles to fully represent the world it hopes to send students out in to. American higher education is burdened by the weight of tradition, inexplicable budgets, bureaucracy, inefficiency and curriculum that, in many departments, is out of date by the time a student graduates. Because of this weight, higher education cannot keep up with the rate of change, no matter how much administrators strive to innovate. The world outside the halls of higher education will always develop more quickly and adapt more readily. What our institutions can do, however, is produce individuals who are able to keep up. Who have been given skills to navigate the rapidly changing participatory culture for their own wants and needs. As we march toward what several scholars believe is technological singularity—the point when technology advances so rapidly that it is beyond human comprehension, changing how we make meaning of our lives—higher education better serves students by equipping

them with adaptation skills for an increasingly complex world. It is a world in which participation is a necessity, and that participation depends heavily on technology.

### **Participating Through Digital Storytelling**

I introduce DST not as the magical single activity to address this learning gap. However, it serves several media literacy goals, while also exposing students to learning tools that will continue to serve them long after they've left campuses. In short, DST instills the importance of narrative-making, sharing stories, interpreting media and collaborating online and in real-time. It provides an experiential learning activity that ensures rich participation. It shows that the value of technology doesn't lie simply in the tools themselves, but in our ability to use technology to connect with others. As Jenkins found through his research, "We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced" (Jenkins 12).

The rate of media use among even our youngest citizens provides a glimpse into the future. A study released in late 2011 from Common Sense Media polled families about mobile device and computer use among children aged 0–8. They found that more than half of them accessed mobile devices. In addition, 22 percent of 5–8 year-olds were reported as using a computer regularly, and another 46 percent used one at least once a week. The study reveals that, on average, children first use computers at 3½ years of age (Rideout 9). Our reliance on technology ensures that each subsequent generation will be raised with digital proficiency and media awareness. Educational institutions will have to mold pedagogy to this cultural trend. As one DST instructor puts it: "For many, digital is the language they speak, media is the environment in which they feel comfortable and the multimedia collage is the new global language" (Ohler 11).

Participation in producing media is empowering, but it's also a great responsibility. What does the product of this participation contribute to the world? With children

at such early ages becoming computer and mobile device literate, how do we ensure that their participation is spent productively? Herein lies the importance of integrating media literacy into education. Instructors force their participators to consider these questions. What constitutes meaningful participation to them? Does it enrich peoples' lives or does it have the potential to detract? College-aged students engage in an incalculable number of media exchanges each day. In emphasizing the use of intentional media participation, educators are able to guide students towards purposeful civic engagement. They can instill the importance of respecting intellectual property. And they can show students how to harness the power of open source, while also showing them how to contribute their own resources to help others.

As Jenkins points out, students often arrive in class knowing more about the media environment than their instructors. This is not a deficiency on instructors' part, as it's nearly impossible to remain well-versed on the shifting media landscape in addition to all other responsibilities. Rather than a hindrance, it's an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about students' media experiences. It's an opportunity to address issues of access, the need to reflect on media experience and consider ethical issues arising from media participation (Jenkins 14).

It's important to clarify at this point that I'm not accusing higher education *spaces* of being out of date—or accusing educators of not attempting to innovate. American institutions have spent a lot of money to equip their classrooms with the latest technologies. What I'm questioning is the effectiveness with which we use these resources for activities that directly bolster media literacy.

### *Story time*

I worked with a university student name Joe in my first DST workshop. Of all the participants, he was the most nervous about the technological aspects. Despite being a senior and using computers almost daily, he had no experience with photo or video editors. He had never recorded audio before. He had never done DST

before. But he was a gifted writer, and he was intrigued by the act of taking his words and animating them with imagery from his study abroad experience in China. Joe labored intensely to finish his story—completing it twice, actually. His first version was lost in a computer crash, just as he was polishing it. He persisted and, having just learned all he needed to know about DST, was able to recreate it in a fraction of the time it took to build the first version. I encourage you to see what Joe Came up with here:

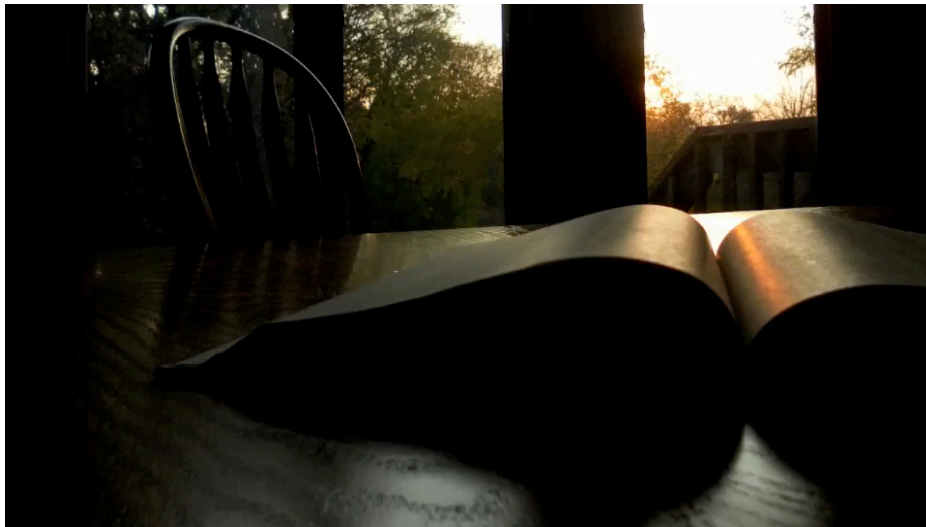


Figure 1: Joseph Miller's Digital Story (taken from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7n\\_pNRgVx0&list=PL68F86FF486B32646&index=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7n_pNRgVx0&list=PL68F86FF486B32646&index=1))

## **New Media Literacy**

In his MacArthur Foundation report on Digital Media and Learning, Henry Jenkins and his team identified eleven core skills students need to develop in order to be media literate in today's participatory culture. Of these eleven core competencies, DST directly touches upon nine of them. I will use nine of Jenkins' competencies as a framework for illustrating how DST is crucial to students' futures:

**Play:** The capacity to experiment with the surroundings as a form of problem solving.

**Performance:** The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery.

**Appropriation:** The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content.

**Multitasking:** The ability to scan the environment and shift focus on salient details.

**Distributed cognition:** The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities.

**Collective intelligence:** The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal.

**Judgment:** The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources.

**Networking:** The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information.

**Negotiation:** The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

(Jenkins xiv)

*Play:*

Creating digital stories is like assembling a puzzle. The problem to be solved: communicating something to an audience by creating a visual representation of words on a page and ideas in the creator's head. Experimentation is essential both to ensure clarity of the message and to appease the creator's artistic vision. For example, Joe found it crucial to synchronize his images of China with his script, ensuring that viewers knew what Tiger Leaping Gorge was and explaining a reference to "flying noodles" with an image of hanging noodles. For him, the puzzle was laborious, causing him to tinker back and forth between the script and the images he had to work with. Digital storytellers make numerous creative and clarity decisions as they engage in the DST process.

*Performance:*

Alternate identities are not always part of DST, but I would argue that performance is built into the process. Narration is performed and recorded for use in the story. Telling a story orally—whether for recording or telling live—is a kind of performance. When you recall a story from the distant past, you also assume the role of a younger you—a different version of yourself.

Furthermore, an instructor could assign a digital storytelling project in which students need to assume the role of a real or fictional person, telling the story from that other person’s perspective. Or perhaps the perspective of a plant, animal or inanimate object. Yet another scenario could involve giving voice to a story already written, interpreting another author’s experience. This challenges participants to not only empathize with a person but to visually render that empathy in a digital medium.

*Appropriation:*

The ability to sample, borrow and mash up media is at the heart of the skill of appropriation and at the heart of a DST project. Borrowing visual imagery from the vast repositories available online is often essential to creating an effective story—likewise when borrowing pieces of an audio track, whether they are sound effects (like the sound of rain or a train passing a platform) or musical pieces in the background. Digital storytellers borrow their puzzle pieces from various sources to complete a narrative arc. Embracing the collective nature of content, rather than dismissing it as mimicry or plagiarism, also opens the door for educators to address intellectual property rights and the ethical implications of borrowing content.

By integrating reflection and personal experience, DST also ensures that creators contribute unique, self-generated content, which helps combat the “copy/paste” syndrome that assignments can fall victim to.

*Multitasking:*

Digital storytellers are not only scanning the folds of their brains for details of an experience, they are also searching photo databases that will provide them with images that match up to the ideas in their heads. At the same time, they must consider whether to incorporate feedback from peers or instructors. They must assess for clarity as they put the pieces together. At certain points during DST creation, the creator needs to be simultaneously writing, editing, visualizing, recording, fact checking, etc. And, depending on their level of engagement, they could also be creating their own soundtrack, recording new video and shooting photos that lend to the story.

*Distributed cognition:*

Distributed cognition refers to the idea that intelligence is spread across people, environments, situations and technological tools. It goes beyond absorbing static knowledge to how people think through their tools and resources (Jenkins 65–66). Gamers exercise distributed cognition regularly, needing to know the rules of the game, how to react to certain characters and how to deploy new knowledge as they figure the game out. DST forces participants to study the resources of the form, watch examples, consider other participants' advice and draw from any pre-existing experience or knowledge—all while attempting to construct a story. And the use of video editors, audio editors, photo editors, recording devices and other tools expand participants' mental capacities and provide them with skills that will serve them for several other uses beyond DST.

By constructing a learning environment where students are forced to exercise distributed cognition, instructors require collaboration with people and tools that are physically present, as well as people and tools accessed virtually. In this environment, “knowing how to act within a distributed knowledge system is more important than learning content,” Jenkins says. “Because content is something that can be ‘held’ by technologies—databases, Web sites, wikis, and so forth—the



curricular focus is on learning how to generate, evaluate, interpret and employ data” (70).

*Collective Intelligence:*

Related to distributed cognition is collective intelligence, which is the ability to pool ideas from various sources and collaborate with others toward a shared goal. It is an environment in which “everyone knows something, nobody knows anything, and what any one person knows can be tapped by the group as a whole” (Jenkins 72). In our modern workplace, this skill has become increasingly important. The ability to cooperate, compromise and collaborate are essential ingredients to a successful career. The Arab Spring provides a poignant example of the importance of collective intelligence to civic engagement. In Egypt’s case, protesters rallied through social media and were able to sustain their connections even after the government’s attempted internet block. While the state of government leadership remains tumultuous in Egypt, the protestors achieved their revolution, and they did so via collective intelligence.

Participants in a DST activity collaborate with each other on ideas of story but also on applications of technology. They might share the best way to insert transitions between images. They might pool their existing knowledge while also using tutorials online to expand knowledge, or they might teach themselves Final Cut Pro if they desire to use a more robust video editing interface. In addition, grouping participants together to collectively produce a single digital story would force them to rely on their collective intelligence.

*Judgment:*

With so much data at our fingertips, exercising careful judgment has become increasingly important. The ability to assess the quality and credibility of information and information sources is crucial. In a library, we operate under the assumption that the contents of the place are reliable and useful. The staff is looking after our best interests. Today, much research is conducted online, where there are

no guides or barriers to steer students in the right direction. They need to be aware of selecting “facts” carefully; they need to scrutinize sources; they need to attribute photos; and they need to understand intellectual property rights. It’s important to know how Wikipedia was built and how its contributors contribute, rather than either using it as a primary source or writing it off as an unreliable resource.

Contrary to appearances, composing stories digitally often involves conducting research. Stories come from our imperfect memories, so our knowledge needs to be supplemented as we go. In addition, digital storytellers crop and manipulate photos, so they need to be aware of the implications of doing so. For borrowing photos online, they also need to assess the quality and accuracy of images, as well as the copyrights attached to them.

#### *Networking:*

As the “ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information,” networking has become an essential social skill (Jenkins 91). It means being able to tap into socially constructed realms like Google’s search engine, wikis, image sharing sites (like Flickr), social bookmarking sites (like Delicious.com, Read.it and Instagram) and self-created news feeds using RSS technology.

Networking is used in DST to navigate across different resources for story content, synthesize that content with personal experience and disseminate the final product as a video file. Social media can also be used to disperse the story when it is completed—for friends and family, co-workers, potential employers, graduate school admissions boards or any other self-selected audience. Joe, for example, posted his China story to his LinkedIn page. Participatory culture is all about sharing, so knowing they will have a self-created artifact to share when they’re finished provides added motivation for students. It also provides an opportunity for instructors to emphasize the implications of sharing—of unleashing their content out into the world where they no longer have complete control of it.

*Negotiation:*

Negotiation deals with the successful navigation of diversity and multiple perspectives, and the importance of learning about and respecting alternative values and ways of living. Being online has the potential to connect people from opposite ends of the earth—interaction that often leads to cultural exchange or cultural collision. Once-segregated groups of people are suddenly in contact. “Everything about this process ensures that we will be provoked by cultural difference,” says Jenkins. “Little about this process ensures that we will develop an understanding of the contexts within which these different cultural communities operate” (98). This statement illustrates why it’s important to incorporate media literacy into education. Classrooms provide an excellent setting for exploring issues of race, religion, sexual orientation, social status and other cultural markers.

DST allows students to address differences in values and perspectives on their own terms, revealing as much about their own identity and values as they are comfortable with. And DST can help students acquire skills for understanding and respecting difference. In sharing stories with fellow storytellers, they are challenged to wrestle productively with viewpoints that may conflict with their own. The process of considering others’ stories and creating their own can lead to a better appreciation for difference and a recognition of how those differences may contribute to a broader experience that everyone can benefit from.

\* \* \*

I have attempted to lay out these skills in the most straightforward manner possible. However, I also recognize that some of the activities that support these skills run counter to how higher education institutions operate. Borrowing media from online sources; openly sharing resources and ideas with other students; and engaging in processes that do not yield definitive answers may be a challenge to many long-standing educational traditions. In the end, schools must give out grades. Individuals

must turn in “their own work.” Students submit answers that are either correct or incorrect. Yet, I agree with Jenkins that these activities need to be integrated into curriculum across disciplines: “Media change is affecting every aspect of our contemporary experience,” he says. “Every school discipline needs to take responsibility for helping students master the skills and knowledge they need to function in a hypermediated environment” (109).

Each instructor in each department has a stake in ensuring students are prepared to participate meaningfully in modern American culture. It is a larger issue than can be solved by simply introducing DST in the classroom. However, the versatility of DST projects and the low barrier to entry make it an ideal activity for approaching media literacy instruction.

## Chapter 3:

### THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

*“Stories have the felicitous capacity of capturing exactly those elements that formal decision methods leave out. Logic tries to generalize, to strip the decision making from the specific context, to remove it from subjective emotions. Stories capture the context, capture the emotions. . . . Stories are important cognitive events, for the encapsulate, into one compact package, information, knowledge, context and emotion.”*  
(Norman 146)

The people of Garretson, SD, showed me the power of the stories that surround us. Just out of college, I landed a job in my field as editor of a small newspaper there. I was proud to represent the town and believed it was step number one on a career ladder that would make me a top-notch print journalist. Knowing I'd have to work my way up in the industry, I was thrilled to have earned a role in which I'd get my hands on all aspects of production—right down to delivering papers to newsstands. I soon found my energy spread across writing, copyediting, layout, design, photography, reporting, editorializing and news chasing.

I was at first perturbed by all the “Social Notes” and fluff that demanded precious page space in “my” newspaper. I fielded handwritten notes from elderly residents who expected me to transfer their wobbly cursive to newspaper print—notes about their granddaughter’s visit to the area and how they enjoyed a picnic at Palisades State Park. The obituaries, located just above the “Social Notes” in a prominent place on page three, also posed a problem. I understood the importance of death in a small community where everyone knew everyone. But I would occasionally receive obits in the 2000 word range when I'd allotted only about 500 words of space. In addition to the space issue, there was a fairness issue. It was much easier to give everyone the same space, rather than fielding questions like “Why did so and so deserve 2000 words, while my father was only worthy of 350?!” I made the mistake of “overediting” one obituary, only to endure heavy backlash from the family. I printed

the obit in full the following week, along with an apology. It was a powerful learning moment.

These experiences shifted my perception of my role as a newspaperman, and they also revealed the importance of seeing the significant in the seemingly mundane situations of everyday life. It taught me that the more I was willing to learn about Garretsonians, the more interesting material I could uncover. I had little interest in police reports, ambulance chasing and breaking news. And as a weekly newspaper, there was very little news we could actually “break.” So I let the larger regional news sources take care of that business, while I dug into features about the locals. I turned out unique stories about interesting people—stories that would never have met an audience had I not sought them out. I became a conduit for stories, and I relished the responsibility of capturing the richness of peoples’ lives through narrative.

Working in Garretson exposed me to what community journalism was all about, which is essentially that stories are everywhere. My best moments weren’t spent catching a lead on a CB radio or being the first on the scene for a meth lab bust. I found more joy in covering a story about a family who had been marooned in the Ukraine for two months while trying to adopt a child. Or the group of volunteer firefighters who trekked out to the Black Hills to battle forest fires.

That first job for the *Garretson Weekly* continues to shape my relationship with story. It taught me that through story, the random strands of life can be woven into colorful tapestries. It taught me that stories are the substance of life—the essential building blocks of human communication. Of all the creatures so far discovered, we are the only ones that convey meaning through narrative. By nature, we are storytelling animals, so it is imperative to hone this unique gift.

### **Teaching with story**

The allure of DST is difficult to explain, but for me it strikes the “everyone has a story” chord. The contribution of the form to teaching and learning is difficult to

qualify. I can only grasp at ill-fitting words to describe the emotional and intellectual power of working with and viewing digital stories. Before I overwhelm myself (and risk overwhelming the reader), I'll take a step back to remind us both that it all starts with story.

My interest in DST stems from my work at the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center. The office spends considerable time and resources building programs, recruiting students and facilitating learning overseas. However, the Learning Abroad Center struggles with how to support students upon their return from our programs. Engaging returned students is a common problem in the field of education abroad. In recent years, a few institutions nationally began offering DST workshops to assist students with making sense of their experiences and better articulate what they gained from their time abroad. Inspired by a presentation delivered in 2010 by Doug Reilly and Tom D'Agostino of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, I sought to construct a DST workshop at the University of Minnesota for our returned study abroad students. When I began working with undergraduate students, I was surprised to find that the storytelling aspect of the project posed a much greater hurdle than the new technology. Being trained to write term papers and deliver presentations had done little to boost students' narrative skills. I adapted my workshops accordingly, devoting a large part our initial meetings to identifying elements of compelling stories.

I began to dive further into modes of narrative learning, finding several theoretical models that support reflection and storytelling in a higher education setting. Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio in their informative book *Learning Through Storytelling in Higher Education* provided a great starting point.

McDrury and Alterio identify (with a massive list of examples) scholars of all stripes—psychologists, historians, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, therapists, educators, etc.—who have written about the importance of storytelling in making meaning of our lives and enriching education. The necessity of storytelling to

communicate and understand the human experience, along with its “international, transhistorical and transcultural usage” make it a powerful tool for learning (7). Some scholars even believe narrative could be a discipline itself (Denning 10). Yet, storytelling remains an unheralded tool in higher education. Among lectures and labs, it gets lost. The gap between theory and practice is difficult, yet important, to bridge in higher education. Reflective learning can assist in this endeavor, allowing educators to connect the two creatively, using students’ experiences.

Sterile learning environments are the norm in higher education, and instruction is meant to be unemotional. Intellectual pursuits are at the fore. Yet to deny or downplay the personal and emotional is a failure to approach learning holistically. Boud, Cohen and Walker have written extensively about the importance of reflection in education, making these five declarations about experience and learning:

1. Experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning.
2. Learners actively construct their experience.
3. Learning is a holistic process.
4. Learning is socially and culturally constructed.
5. Learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

(8-14)

Students’ realities, regardless of discipline, are crucial to their learning processes. Their experiences, biases, backgrounds—all of their positive and negative cultural baggage—come along with them to the classroom. So why not make use of this baggage?

To further my theoretical argument for story, I’ll shift to Vygotsky (1987), a Russian psychologist/educator who emphasized social context as being crucial to learning. The setting in which students aim to learn and understand allows for a social encounter that propels learning forward. Furthermore, since the setting of learning is a social construct, it can be modified. The social and cultural resources we carry around as individuals are potential learning tools. Through personal storytelling,



these tools can be put to work. Reflection in a formal education setting moves beyond an individualized activity and becomes a social process. By involving others, reflection becomes more productive as a learning activity. In the context of DST, it allows participants to move beyond the “journal entry” version of story to one that allows them to assess their experiences, interpret their actions and draw new conclusions. The dynamic of a classroom setting extends these learning processes into a dynamic social setting that contributes to greater educational gains.

Furthermore, DST aligns well with McDrury and Alterio’s five-stage “Reflective Learning Through Storytelling” model, which draws heavily from several reflective educational theories. Borrowing those stages (titled Story Finding, Story Telling, Story Expanding, Story Processing and Story Reconstructing), I’ll show how DST activities align closely to their model (47–50).

### *Story finding*

With stories everywhere, the challenge in this stage is choosing which stories to focus on. It’s important to identify stories that resonate. Deep reflection on story ideas often yields a story that seems to choose the teller, rather than the other way around. It’s common for a participant in a DST workshop to show up with a specific story idea, and, in going through the writing process, come up with a story completely different from the one they had intended to tell.

### *Story telling*

The second stage is about content and clarity. DST participants put their thoughts to paper (or screen) and share them. In a “workshop” setting, participants share their drafts. Listeners provide feedback, ask questions and force the teller to strive for clarity. For the first time, the teller is paying attention to how their story sounds and if their intended meaning comes through.

### *Story expanding*

This represents the revision stage in a DST process. The participants have tested their stories with one another. Now it's time to identify strengths and weaknesses. Contrary to the name of this stage, it usually means reducing the text of the story to hone in on intended meaning. Participants may continue to bounce ideas off of each other, typically in a more informal way. At this point, it's important for the facilitator to work directly with participants to help revise their stories.

### *Story processing*

The story processing stage involves deeper reflection and takes up the most time. By incorporating listener feedback, as well as instruction from the facilitator, DST participants finalize their drafts. They begin associating imagery with their story. They may create a story board to help visualize their narrative path. They read their stories aloud and assess them for clarity, asking "Does my intended meaning ring true in a compelling way?" When the answer is "yes," it's time to record a script.

### *Story reconstructing*

Story reconstructing is about bringing all the pieces of the story together. With a script finalized and recorded, participants begin matching up their imagery with their story. When done effectively, completed digital stories can have a transformative effect—both for the teller and listener. For the teller, the process changes how they view an experience. Or perhaps it transports them back to the setting of the story. It allows them to learn something new about themselves. For the listener, the experience changes what they may have thought they knew about the teller or the teller's topic. The story provides insight about the teller's perspective of the world and his or her place in it.

In my experience with undergraduate student workshops, I was at first surprised to find the writing and reflection portions of the workshop to be the most difficult. Challenging undergraduates to reflect and write well is not a priority for many disciplines—especially in disciplines outside of the humanities. Through this

activity, students not only gain relevant skills for a modern workforce, they also reach new levels of awareness about their identities and place in the world. It empowers them to write their own histories. Take the example of Xue, who composed her digital story about studying abroad in Laos. She had downplayed the significance of the experience by stating she had been abroad for a short period of time (less than a month). Her initial ideas were vague, but she kept coming back to her interaction with people in local markets. With language being a barrier, she struggled to negotiate with shopkeepers, until she discovered a shared language could be forged by using a calculator. Other participants in the workshop were intrigued by the use of the calculator and encouraged her to explore the theme. The calculator became the catalyst for further reflection. By writing, revising, receiving peer feedback and reflecting some more, the calculator helped lead her to this story:

*As a natural list-maker, I was confident I had everything packed and ready to go. This was, after all, my very first trip abroad through a May term course and I wasn't going to be unprepared for any of it. Yet who was to know I had forgotten to pack something? Something that played an expectedly vital part in my three-week journey to Laos. This something was a calculator. I had no idea how something so insignificant could play such a vital role.*

*In Laos, a calculator isn't just a calculator. It breaks down barriers; it finds a commonality. It tells a story through the plethora of numbers pressed. It's a common exchange from two vastly different worlds, and it is a language and culture in and of itself. It was useful to have our own calculators, but many locals at the markets carried their own. They understood that this tool was the key to communication between the locals and the tourists.*

*Through our calculators we created our own language. We called it calculator talk. All the lists of translations that I meticulously created were not nearly as effective as a simple calculator. Soon after arriving I realized that there are two*

*universal languages, numbers and laughter. Both were prevalent when we were meeting with young people as well as meeting older people in markets.*

*(\*speaks Laotian)*

*“How much?”*

*While extending my calculator the vendor would punch in the amount and hand it back to me. I would glance at it, quickly do the conversion and offer a lower price. This process continues until we both come to an agreement or I leave to find the product elsewhere. In the US, a calculator is no more than a tool used to help with homework, or when one is too lazy to actually do the math. But in Laos, it's a culture.*

*I can't help but see myself on both sides of the calculator, experiencing two worlds. One of me would be born in the US, who has everything going for her. A good family and friends, who supports and loves her, an education that will take her places and a job that will ensure she has food on the table.*

*And there's a second me, skinnier and shorter with rough hands from hard labor and sewing. The little frame of a body that is desired in the US but is essentially a sign of poverty. A girl trapped in a world of limited options. Education is rarely offered to her, and often times looked down upon. A girl who learns that the only form of income is serving tourists.*

*That girl could've been me. That girl would've been me, if my parents hadn't escaped during the war and made it to America. On numerous occasions I would be in a market or restaurant and while purchasing an item hand over money and the calculator, and during that brief exchange, while both of our hands were grasping the calculator, I can see myself in her. I can see what I would look like, be like, if I was born and lived in Laos. I saw a potential version of myself that is so impossibly real it's terrifying. Even though being in Laos I*

*was constantly reminded of my status and privilege as an American, this calculator served as a bridge of unity between these two different me's, making me appreciate what I have.*

*Coming back and unpacking, I can't help but feel a warm sentiment towards my battered and beaten calculator. It reminds me of all the wonderful experiences, as well as what I have learned along the way. This object, this calculator, symbolizes me, my life, and my opportunities.*



Figure 2: Xue Xiong's Digital Story (taken from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gR5XGYmODY>)

While earning an education and planning for her future, Xue was forced to consider an alternate version of herself: a “what if” scenario that led her to consider the collision of her heritage and the culture she was raised in. She gained a better understanding of the challenges her parents faced and the difference between their perspective of their homeland and her perspective of it. Xue’s experience illustrates the ability of DST to transform students emotionally and intellectually. Her self-selected themes of second-generation immigrant identity and Laotian culture, along

with her references to Laotian flight and the tourist industry in Laos today all provide topics ripe for further educational exploration.

Rina Benmayor, who uses DST for instruction in the humanities, does just that, forcing her students to “theorize their own identities ‘from the flesh’ using their ‘situated knowledge’—through speaking about, reflecting on and analyzing their lived experience—to produce new social/cultural/historical understandings” (189). Furthermore, Benmayor reinforces each act (“conceptualizing, writing, performing, selecting, imaging, integrating and signifying”) as an act of meaning making, or “creative theorizing” (195). Xue illustrates this theorizing in the construction of her story. She is empowered as the author of her own experience—the creator of her own history, in a way—a history that incorporates ancestors from Laos and an alternate version of her upbringing there. The aesthetic choices she makes add layers of creative complexity to the story. For example, while it’s common to add a soundtrack, Xue chose to omit a soundtrack, feeling that the sound of her voice alone would lend gravity to the story. Her photo choices lend to this gravity, since she has chosen not to only illustrate the picture-postcard version of Laos but also the poverty of the country.

Xue’s story also illustrates the ability of this story form to creatively address differences in race, class and culture. Exposing the rest of the workshop participants to her unique perspective opened the door for further discussion on these complex issues, as well as discussions of cross-cultural understanding.

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### **Setting the stage**

To make the most of the learning opportunities presented by DST, the setting, the participants, the facilitation and the structure need to be well-organized and adapted for the workshop’s specific goals. In the next section, I turn to the logistics of DST workshops in order to maximize learning outcomes.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **FACILITATING DIGITAL STORYTELLING ACTIVITIES**

#### **The Fisherman and the Investment Banker**

An American investment banker vacationing in a small, coastal Mexican village walked out to the pier one morning, where he noticed a small boat with a single fisherman aboard. As the boat docked, he noticed several yellow-fin tuna inside. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The fisherman replied, "only a little while."

The American then asked why didn't he stay out longer and catch more fish?

The Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs.

The American then asked, "but what do you do with the rest of your time?"

The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take siesta with my wife, Maria. In the evenings, we stroll into the village where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life."

The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the profits from the bigger boat you could buy several boats. Eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA and eventually New York City to run

your expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But, how long will this all take?"

To which the American replied, "15–20 years."

"But what then?"

The American laughed and said that's the best part. "When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You could make millions."

"Millions? Then what?"

The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

\* \* \*

I chose to begin the section with the Fisherman and the Investment Banker because I enjoy it immensely but also to reiterate that if you don't start with a good story, digital storytelling is a struggle. The technology cannot save you if you don't first have a compelling story to share. As Jason Ohler, an accomplished DST instructor, explains, "The point of technology is not for it to tell stories for us but to allow us to craft stories that engage people on many levels . . . Find a topic you want to share with others and convey that topic as richly as possible, engaging not only the conscious mind but the emotions as well" (Ohler viii).

In addition, the parable above makes a profound statement about values. It also illustrates different paths to an outcome. DST activities are very much like this.



What you should know about DST projects is very similar to what I learned early on as a journalist: there are no hard and fast rules for anything. The only question is “Does it work?”

What follows are guidelines that may help you organize DST activities, but they are not comprehensive by any means. This information is straightforward in order to assist facilitators regardless of your level of technical literacy. I aim to speak generally, knowing that we can all rely on the growing community of digital storytellers and facilitators out there. I will not be providing a “how-to” of each piece of hardware and software used in DST. I will, however, provide an overview of what I have used and why.

Digital storytelling resources in print and online continue to proliferate, with several standards of practice and instructional guides made available by the growing number of digital storytellers willing to share their journeys. I encourage facilitators to seek these out as you structure your own DST activities. I hope what I’ve written thus far has inspired you to take the next step. What follows is a guide to get you started on that next step, so you can determine the subsequent ones needed to spread the DST gospel in your own way.

### *Equipment*

The only true equipment requirement is a computer. Smartphones and tablets now also have capabilities for the creation of digital stories, but I choose to focus on creation using computers, as this is still the preferred method for most practitioners. Two software programs stand out: iMovie for Apple computers and Windows Movie Maker for PCs. I choose to focus on these two programs because they are stable platforms with long track records, and they are free. In addition, because their use is widespread, several tutorials and troubleshooting guides are easily accessible online. For use with Macs, Garageband software is also my recording program of choice. In addition to iMovie, it comes with the purchase of an Apple computer.

Digital still and video cameras may also be necessary for collecting story content. Access to these tools varies greatly, but even the photo and recording quality of most smartphones has improved enough to be sufficient for DST activities.

The only other piece of equipment I use is a simple USB microphone to record the script for each story, as it dramatically raises the quality of the audio above the on-board microphones of computers. I use the Audio-Technica ATR2100-USB microphone.

*Be a guide, not a guru*

There are few requirements for facilitators of DST activities. Careful organization and enthusiasm will get you two-thirds of the way there. There is no need to be an expert storyteller or a technological guru. However, one requirement for leading that I strongly recommend is the creation of your own digital stories before instructing others. Like our Mexican fisherman, you need only enough information for your immediate needs, not a wealth of cross-platform, multi-device knowledge. Develop enough skills and resources for your specific DST activity and audience. Completing one or several digital stories on your own will enable you do this.

It is your guidance, patience, wisdom and experience that students need, rather than someone who purports to have all the answers. Students will have had the benefit of coming up in the digital age. They are familiar with informal learning communities to draw from, and they are comfortable with new technology. What is important is that facilitators serve as the “guide on the side rather than the technician magician” (Ohler 13).

The Center for Digital Storytelling arranges several trainings for facilitators across the US. These workshops require considerable time and monetary commitments, but are immensely helpful for incorporating DST into your lives. For their current offerings, visit <http://www.storycenter.org/what-we-offer/>.

### *Versatility and flexibility*

Digital Storytelling activities are well-suited to education because of the versatility of the form. However, this also challenges facilitators to be flexible—for all the preparation, DST workshops will often head in directions you had not planned for. Be prepared to adapt on the fly and adjust according to participant behavior. Your participants will be at various levels with their writing and technology skills. Tailor instruction to account for their specific needs. In some cases, participants will require more time for story crafting and writing. I have conducted impromptu writing activities in the middle of workshops, to allow for participants to fine tune their stories or explore new ideas. In other cases, you may have your hands full of accomplished writers who cringe at the prospect of working with new computer software or interfaces. In this case, you may need to provide more individual instruction during the story construction phase of the project.

Assess constraints and adjust accordingly. It's easy to get overwhelmed in the planning stages. Don't bog yourself down with logistics just yet. Begin by answering some important guiding questions:

- What were the greatest challenges I encountered when creating my own digital story?
- What are the end goals of the activity I'm proposing for students?
- How many participants can I handle?
- Is there sufficient access to computers for these participants and a comfortable setting in which to work?
- How much time do I need to set aside for the activity?
- Will this be a for-credit activity? If so, how will I assess students' work?

## The DST Process

Before diving in (and in order to make it a little less daunting), I've broken down the DST process into 13 general steps as follows:

1. Identify participants and purpose. Inform the participants of the activity and what is expected of them.
2. Begin with introductions (of each participant and introduction to the form).
3. Deliver a process lecture.
4. Initiate a Story Circle: Sharing ideas and drafts with the group, soliciting feedback from participants as you go.
5. Facilitate revising process: Participants take feedback—both from others in the group and the facilitator—and incorporate any new insights into a final draft.
6. Help participants visualize the digital story and introduce story boarding.
7. Assist participants in recording the final version of script.
8. Help students gather and organize imagery.
9. Assist participants in assembling DST in software program of choice.
10. Allow for the fine-tuning of the story (with a title slide, credit slide, additional audio and transitions).
11. Ensure they export the final video correctly.
12. Schedule a screening to show the finished pieces.
13. Assess the participants' performance.

### *1. Participants and purpose*

Limiting the number of workshop participants will allow for a richer experience for each participant. Having more than 15 participants poses a challenge, unless you have several facilitators who can break the participants into smaller groups. The greater individual attention you can provide, the better you will be able to instruct.

To begin each workshop, I show a digital story. I firmly believe that each workshop or presentation or any kind of meeting about DST must begin with a screening of a digital story. Set the tone by showing the power of the form you're about to dive into. There's no better way to explain what DST is about than by showing an example. Even better if the topic of the example you choose is relevant to the group you're working with.

Initially, I also downplay the use of technology. I approach DST as storytelling first, technology second, emphasizing to participants that their stories should be able to stand alone without visual enhancements. Glaring flaws in a story are often magnified when attempting to render that story digitally.

I wrap up the introduction of the DST form with a brief discussion about goals. There are intended goals that the instructor has for each project, but I also believe in involving participants in this process. Ask them about their specific goals for the project. Who do they feel is their intended audience? What follows are a few possible goals for instructors:

- Hone writing and storytelling skills.
- Exhibit understanding of issues and concepts through a visual medium.
- Develop technological skills.
- Improve media literacy skills.
- Bolster creativity and critical thinking skills.

## *2. Introductions*

Introductions are fairly straightforward. If participants don't know each other well, it may help to begin with a creative exercise or an "icebreaker" question. It can be as simple as "Tell us what you hope to get out of this digital storytelling activity."

Another useful exercise is to go around the room and force each participant to summarize their idea for a digital story in a sentence or two.

Consider the setting of the activity carefully. Digital storytelling activities need to be organized at a comfortable place and time. Lay ground rules for participants, emphasizing the importance of listening intently and respecting each participant. Create a neutral space where all participants are on equal footing. Digital stories can be deeply personal and emotional—in fact, the more personal, the greater the learning outcomes and the more compelling the story. Because of this, it's important that the setting be one in which participants are comfortable being vulnerable.

### *3. Process lecture*

During your introduction to the process of DST, an explanation of the activities and storytelling instruction creates a level of comfort among the participants for the activity they are about to launch in to. How much time you allot for narrative instruction depends on your audience (and their attention spans) and the time constraints of your activity. The lecture may take 10 minutes or it could fill a full hour.

Joe Lambert of the Center for Digital Storytelling uses the lecture time to introduce the activity through seven basic steps. What is most useful about his instruction are the guiding questions that come out of each step. I've chosen to distill his lecture into a series of useful questions for engaging students during the lecture. These questions could be presented as slides in a presentation or may be more helpful as a reference handout for participants to use as they go through the process.

#### Step 1: Owning Insights

- What is the story you want to tell?
- What do you think the story means?

### Step 2: Owning Emotions

- As you assemble the ideas of your story, what emotions did you experience? Were there contrasting emotions?
- As you share your story, do different feelings emerge?
- Can you pinpoint specific parts of your story that evoke specific emotions?
- What emotions/feelings will help the audience understand the story?
- Is there an overall tone you can use to capture the theme?
- Can you convey emotion without using “feeling” words or relying on clichés?

### Step 3: Identifying the pivotal moment

- Was there a pivotal moment in the story? When did things change? If not, when did you first become aware of change?
- If there are several moments of change, which one most accurately conveys the meaning of the story? Can you describe the moment in detail?

### Step 4: Seeing your story (creating a visual narrative)

- What images come to mind when recalling/assembling your story?
- Why these images? Is the meaning implicit or explicit?
- How can you use images you have to convey meaning?
- Do you need to create new imagery to convey intended meaning?

### Step 5: Hearing the story

- Beyond recorded voice, would the story scenes be enhanced by additional layers of sound?
- As you add sound, ask yourself “Does this enhance the story or detract/distract from it?”

#### Step 6: Assembling story

- How are you structuring your story? Would it be helpful to create a story board?
- How are layers of visuals and audio elements working together to add meaning?

#### Step 7: Sharing your story

- What do you want to say when introducing the piece for the first time?
- Why did you choose this story to tell?
- How have you changed as a result of this process? What have you learned? What would you change?

(Lambert 53–69)

For DST in English or journalism classrooms, where students have been studying various narrative forms, you may only need to spend a short time on concepts of good storytelling. For math and science classes, however, you may want to take more time. Below I offer a few story forms to draw from.

#### *Joseph Campbell*

In his highly influential 1949 tome, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell assesses several of the world's myths and narratives, arriving at a common story form that he called "the hero's journey." His theory is broken down into three distinct phases of the hero's journey:

1. **Departure:** the hero is called. S/he usually resists the calling, but eventually crosses into the new world that's calling him/her.
2. **Initiation:** the hero faces stiff challenges, stares into the abyss, but s/he encounters mentors along the way.



3. **Return:** the hero returns a master of two worlds (his/her life before departure and his/her new life as a hero) and is committed to improving both.

Since *Star Wars* was the earth-shattering visual narrative of my youth (much like *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* have been for subsequent generations), I often use it to illustrate the three phases of the hero's journey. The original trilogy (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*) serves the model well, as each film represents Campbell's three phases of a hero's journey:

1. Departure: *A New Hope*
  - We meet our hero: Luke the farm boy.
  - Our hero is called into an intergalactic civil war.
  - He crosses into a new world: taking on Darth Vader and the Death Star.
  - He discovers that the Force is with him.
2. Initiation: *The Empire Strikes Back*
  - Stiff Challenge: Darth Vader and the bad guys.
  - Stares into the abyss: Vader is really his father. He's not sure if he has what it takes to be a Jedi.
  - Receives help from mentors along the way: Yoda, Obi-won Kinobi, etc.
3. Return: *Return of the Jedi*
  - Luke masters the Jedi arts.
  - He is committed to using the Force for good.
  - This translates into defending the universe, exemplified by his fight to protect several planets, including the one of his birth as well as one full of furry things called Ewoks.

While Campbell's model may not always translate well to new media projects, as Ohler (72) explains, it does distill the construction of a compelling story into three

easily recognizable phases that assist storytellers. Should you use Campbell's model, try to include a concrete example your audience will resonate with.

### *Ira Glass*

Ira Glass of the National Public Radio's *This American Life* also boasts extensive experience with story. Since the audio stories he highlights closely relate to the construction of a script for DST, I often share his insights to assist storytellers.

Anecdotes (with action) and moments of reflection become essential building blocks to a story, he says:

1. Begin with an anecdote: A sequence of events/actions.
2. Bait your audience with this anecdote: raise questions in the listener's mind. They'll get hooked trying to answer along the way.
3. Then insert a moment of reflection: This is the larger point of the story. This is why we're listening.
4. Flip back and forth between the two: an interesting anecdote leads to a moment of reflection that supports it. Repeat as needed.
5. Then make it better by "getting rid of the crap," Glass says. "You have to be ruthless."
6. Sometimes it takes someone else to help you identify the crap, which is where peer feedback/reliable editors come in.

(Glass, 2009)

### *Gustav Freytag*

Freytag's Pyramid (from *Die Technik des Dramas*, 1863) in the diagram below, is a relatively self-explanatory structure of story. Illustrated as triangle, the three main points (in chronological order) are the "inciting moment," the "climax" and the "moment of last suspense."

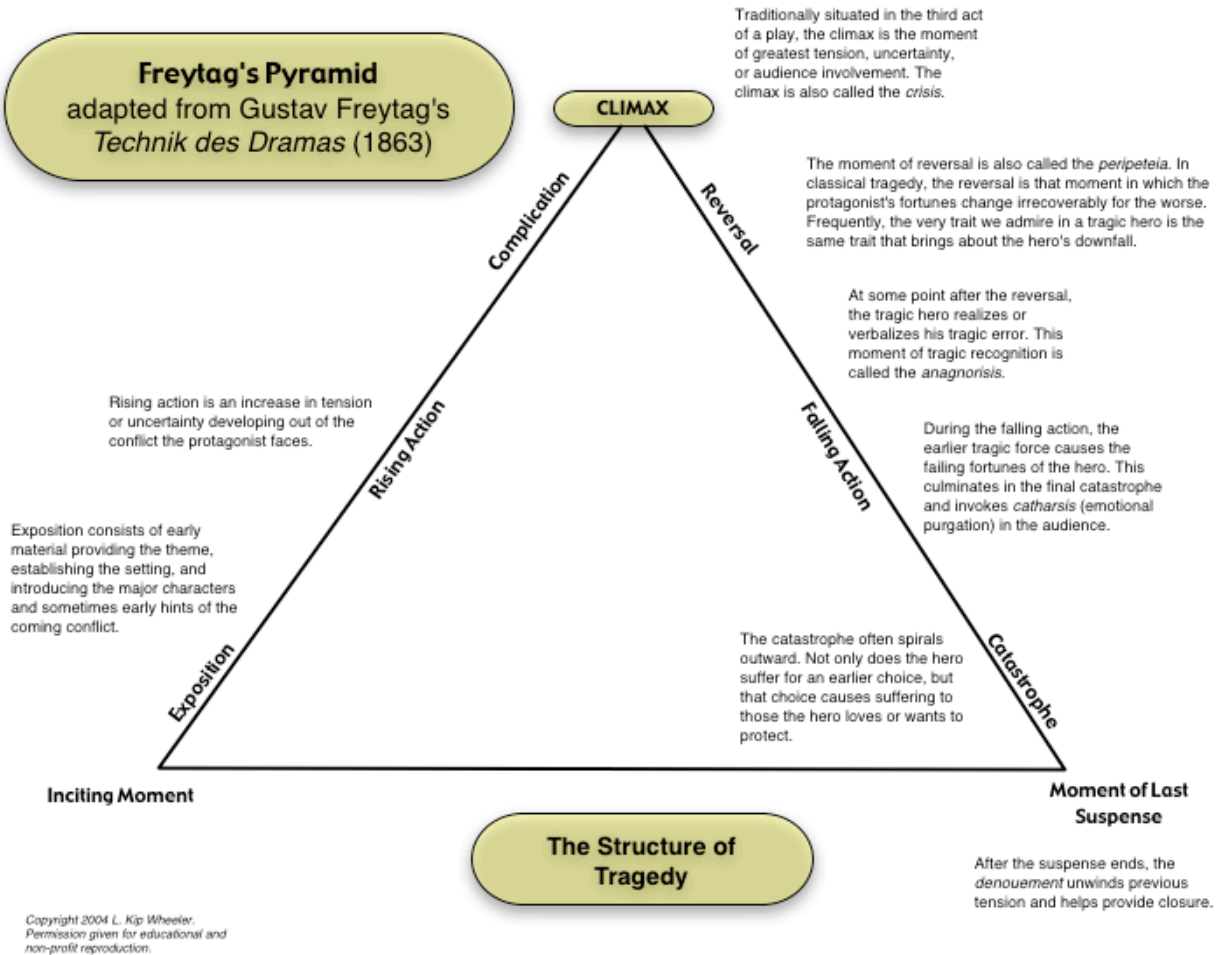


Figure 3: Freytag's Pyramid (accessed from <http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/freytag.html>)

### Story Covenants

An alternative, if you have neither the time nor the need to elaborate on theories of storytelling, a simple outline of “story covenants” may suffice. What follows are five straightforward guidelines adapted from Ohler (70–71) that describe the relationship between the teller of stories and the listeners. By keeping these covenants in mind, participants will be more successful at crafting compelling stories:

- The listener cannot wait to hear what's next. (And ideally, this feeling is perpetuated throughout the duration of the story.)

- The listener believes that what happens next makes sense, yet isn't predictable.
- The teller stays on point, not straying with irrelevant information or events that do not support the story.
- The teller commands the listeners' attention from beginning to end.
- The story is the appropriate length—that is, the payoff at the end for the listener was worth the time, trust, and attention s/he put in.

#### *4. Story Circle*

To truly understand what a story circle is, you have to experience one. However, I'll do my best to describe it through my experience facilitating DST workshops. It was at one such workshop, in which I was coaxing a group of study abroad professionals to get involved with DST, that the power of the story circle became evident to me.

I had given participants pre-workshop assignments, which included bringing story drafts. When it came time to sit in our story circle and share ideas, I was blown away by the depth of emotion the participants were willing to share. A few participants were moved to tears as they recounted their stories. The need for them to share was evident—and it moved the rest of the group. This experience illustrated to me the importance of the story-sharing aspect of the activity and the importance of being heard. To sit in a circle—often with relative strangers—and share deeply felt experience is not only cathartic for the tellers but also inspiring to the listeners.

The story circle also ensures the activity remains a group process. Building digital stories can be misconstrued as a solitary effort, with participants hammering out stories solo in front of a computer. It is the collaborative aspects of the process, especially the story circle, during which much story exploration and learning takes place.

What follows are guidelines for organizing a successful story circle, paraphrased from Lambert (77–79) and expanded upon by my own experiences.

- Establish a tone of mutual respect. Do this by instilling the importance of listening carefully and staying on topic. Each speaker gets equal consideration.
- Feedback should be given as constructively as possible. Suggestions are welcome, but phrasing feedback in the form of a question can make the feedback more constructive.
- The role of the facilitator is to ask guided questions to both the speaker and the listeners to keep conversations going. Prod the speaker to ask questions of the group. What are they concerned about? What do they want help with specifically? As much as possible, the speaker should take charge of their own feedback session.
- Inevitably, the sharing of stories and ideas spawns new ideas among listeners, but these need to be kept in check. Each participant will get a turn as speaker, so they need to contain their own anecdotes until it is his or her time to speak.
- Devote 10–30 minutes per speaker (depending on available time).
- Try to complete the story circle in one sitting. Momentum for ideas grows as you go around, as does the level of comfort with each other.
- When giving feedback to individuals as a facilitator, try to do so in a manner that may also be applicable to all. (For example: scripts often come in at lengths that would produce digital stories in the 5–10 minute range. When a participant shares a story that extends longer than it should, I take the opportunity to remind everyone that brevity is a challenge of this form—that it's important to get their point across more succinctly.)
- Sincerely thank the participants at the end of the story circle. And remind them of the continued support they can expect from you and the other participants.

## *5. Finalizing Drafts*

As much as time allows, provide writing/reflection time for each participant to work at his or her own pace. After taking feedback from the group, each participant should mold their stories into a final draft. At this point, the facilitator should review each draft and offer his or her advice/suggestions to assist participants with their final script. As you edit each script be careful to rework or subtract what is there, rather than rewriting. Any rewriting needs to be done by the participant. Offer suggestions and guidance, but avoid putting words in their mouths. In addition, facilitators need to serve as a shepherd as much as an editor. The editing process can go on forever. Based on the time available, set deadlines for the final script. Our stories are never finished, as we are complex and evolving human beings. Instill in the participants/students the importance of getting their scripts to a point in which they are comfortable “cementing them in time” by recording. Ideally, the story will be anywhere from two to five minutes in length (with three minutes being the “sweet spot”).

## *6. Considering imagery and creating story boards*

Going back to Lambert’s Step 4 above, it’s time to consider how the story should be seen. What images come to mind? How can you use them to convey meaning? You do not need all your images gathered at this point. Simply think about the kinds of imagery you would like to use.

Creating a story board can be helpful for mapping the chronology. The story board is a planning document created to assist in keeping the story on track—making sure it flows logically and that the imagery gibes with the narrative. Some participants prefer to forgo the story board and begin visualizing their stories in the computer software immediately. This is especially the case with shorter stories. I consider

story boards an optional activity, but it is still useful to provide examples for students who prefer to plan the story longhand before rendering them digitally.

At this time, the instructor should address fair use images and open source content. A description of Creative Commons and intellectual property rights is warranted. Students are part of a copy and paste culture that often overlooks issues of intellectual property. I encourage participants to only use what they can obtain permission for, but each facilitator should decide whether or not it is a requirement for your assessment goals. Students will use found images from Google Images, Flickr, etc., as well as audio from their favorite artists, unless instructed otherwise. An overview of Creative Commons licensing can be found at [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org). In addition, you can search for a variety of Creative Commons files at [search.creativecommons.org](http://search.creativecommons.org).

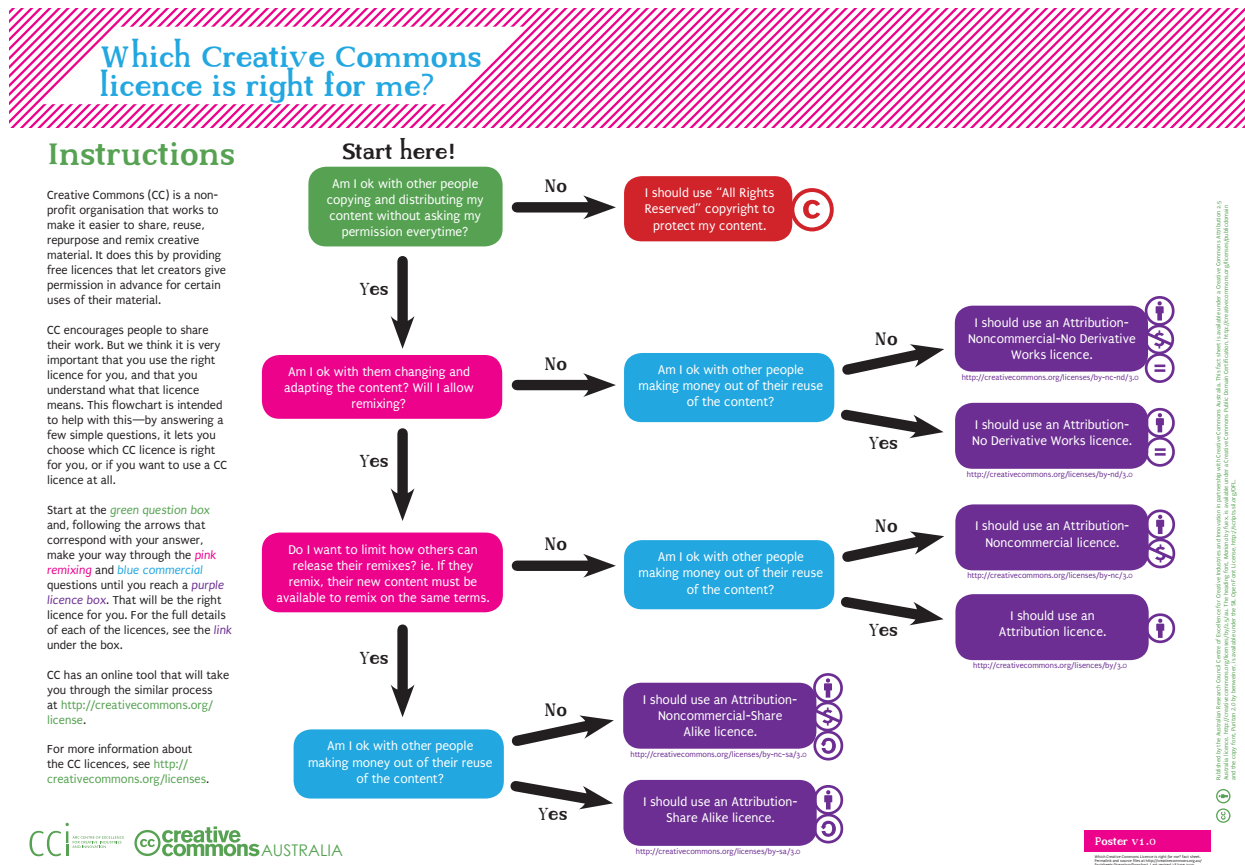


Figure 4: Creative Commons Flow Chart (accessed from <http://creativecommons.org.au/content/licensing-flowchart.pdf>)

## *7. Recording*

When it comes time to record a script, I encourage participants to practice reading their stories aloud, paying attention to the tone and inflection of their voices. It may also be helpful to time the length of their story before recording. The recording process is akin to a performance, so pacing and clarity are also important. A carefully placed pause or sigh can add depth to a story. On the other hand, overacting can put the listener off, so the voiceover should sound natural. And as anyone who has endured a droning lecturer knows, monotony is to be avoided.

There are several choices for audio-editing software available. Choose those which you and your students are most comfortable and allow you to export the files to the necessary file format. Garageband for Apple computers is a favorite. The open source program Audacity is also extremely popular (and can be downloaded at [audacity.sourceforge.net](http://audacity.sourceforge.net)). Again, an external microphone is recommended as the internal mics on most computers pick up too much ambient sound.

## *8. Gathering and organizing final imagery*

Now that participants know how they want the story to be seen and what it will sound like, it's time to gather visual artifacts together. The images should enhance understanding of the creator's piece, rather than distract from it.

At this point, participants may need to ask themselves, "Do I need to create new imagery to convey intended meaning?" If necessary, participants create new video/images/content that may be needed to round out their story. Or they may need time to edit their artifacts in Photoshop, [Gimp](http://www.gimp.org), or other editing software.



## *9. Building the DST*

It's finally time for participants to dig in to assembling their stories. However, instill in them the importance of organizing materials first. For example, iMovie relies on native Mac programs like iTunes and iPhoto to import files. For students using this platform, ensure that they have imported images into iPhoto and all audio files into iTunes. Once that is done, incorporating them into the digital story is as easy as dragging and dropping on the screen. You can find several iMovie tutorials at [ssl.apple.com/findouthow/movies](http://ssl.apple.com/findouthow/movies), as well as by doing simple Google and YouTube searches.

Windows Movie Maker is slightly more straightforward. It does not require the gathering of audio, image or video files in corresponding Windows software. Simply locate the files needed on your computer and bring them in to Movie Maker. There are several tutorials available for Movie Maker at [windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows-vista/getting-started-with-windows-movie-maker](http://windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows-vista/getting-started-with-windows-movie-maker). Again, an Internet search will yield several tips, tricks and tutorials for the use of this program.

Your students will likely take to the process quickly, but a brief demonstration of the editing software can be helpful before cutting them loose. In addition, encourage collaboration among the participants as they go.

## *10. Fine-tuning the story*

By "fine tuning," I'm referring to any formal components that you may require students to include in their project. For the workshops I lead, I require a title slide at the beginning and a credit slide at the end. The title slide introduces the story and who created it, while the credit slide is intended to include references to any resources that may have been used to compose the story (audio credits, photo credits, etc.). Both iMovie and Movie Maker provide templates for both of these slides.

At this point, if time permits, participants should consider the addition of a “soundtrack” and transitions between images. While it may be a goal of students to have these components at the outset of the project, I feel that it’s easier (and more efficient) to integrate these components if the essential building blocks are in place first. Background audio should be done carefully so that it lends to the story, rather than detract from the meaning. Transitions should be done simply and tastefully—I tend to avoid the campy “ripple” and “mosaic” effects, in favor of the more subtle “fade to black” and “page turn” effects.

### *11. Exporting*

Once complete, the digital stories should be exported at the highest quality possible. It takes longer to do, but it is easy to reduce the size of a digital file, while it’s impossible to convert a low-quality file to a higher quality one. If necessary, multiple file sizes can be exported to accommodate for posting on YouTube, viewing on mobile devices, etc.

### *12. Screening*

Built into your deadlines for the project should be a viewing event for the digital stories. Make time to reconvene the group and allow them to commiserate over challenges faced during the process and revel in their accomplishments. Allow them to reflect on the process and have each participant introduce his or her story as s/he sees fit.

### *13. Assessment*

How you choose to assess your students depends on the goals you’ve set for your specific project. Jason Ohler provides several assessment traits (summarized below) to consider when crafting a rubric for assessment.

<b>Story</b>	How well did the story work? This trait can address structure, engagement, character transformation or any of the other qualities of story. (An entire rubric could be devoted to evaluating the quality.)
<b>Project planning</b>	Is there evidence of solid planning, in the form of story maps, scripts, storyboards, etc.?
<b>Media Development Process</b>	How well did students follow the media development process?
<b>Research</b>	Was the student's project well researched and documented?
<b>Content understanding</b>	How well did the student meet the academic goals of the assignment and convey an understanding of the material addressed?
<b>Assignment criteria</b>	Did you require stories to be under two minutes, use no more than 10 images and 30 seconds of music and provide citations in MLA format? Whatever your criteria, be clear and stick to them.
<b>Writing</b>	What was the quality of the student's written work exhibited in the planning documents, research, etc.?
<b>Originality, voice, creativity</b>	How creative was the production? Did the student exhibit an original sense of voice and a fresh perspective?
<b>Economy</b>	Was the information presented through the story sifted, prioritized and told without bird walking or detours?
<b>Flow, organization &amp; pacing</b>	Was the story well-organized? Did it flow well, moving from part to part without bumps or disorientation?
<b>Presentation &amp; performance</b>	How effective was the student's actual presentation or performance? This includes burning a DVD, posting the story on the Web site effectively, performing it before an audience or whatever the assignment required.
<b>Sense of audience</b>	How well did the story respect the needs of the audience?
<b>Media application</b>	Was the use of media appropriate, supportive of the story, balanced and well considered?
<b>Media grammar</b>	How "bumpy" was the story? There are many facets of media grammar, and you may want to choose a few to focus on.
<b>Citations, permission</b>	Has everything that is not original been credited? Have permissions been obtained where necessary? Do citations appear in the format required by the project?

Figure 5: Digital Storytelling Assessment Traits (Ohler 68)

(Ohler also provides several helpful examples of assessment rubrics used by other practitioners at [www.jasonohler.com/storytelling/assessment.cfm#traits](http://www.jasonohler.com/storytelling/assessment.cfm#traits).)

A sample rubric broken down into a point system totaling 100 might look like this:

<b>CONTENT (50 points possible)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the story clear, compelling and did it lead to understanding of the topic?</li> <li>• How well did it contribute to the academic goals of the project?</li> </ul>
<b>Media/Technology/Creativity (30 points possible)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear thought and effort was put into assembling the story.</li> <li>• The use of media contributes to the overall goals/meaning of the story.</li> <li>• The voiceover and visual elements complement each other well.</li> <li>• The story exhibits a creative expression of meaning on the topic.</li> </ul>
<b>Language Use (20 points possible)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant exhibits clarity and correctness in use of language.</li> <li>• The narration should be clear and articulate.</li> </ul>

Figure 6: Sample Assessment Rubric

\* \* \*

How much time you spend on each step depends on the time you've allotted for the DST activity. A DST workshop can be completed in a day, with advanced preparation. The CDS model is a three-day workshop. For the purposes of higher education, the activity can be stretched to a week, to a month or to an entire semester, depending on your goals.

## Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

*"I haven't seen an activity that allows students to blend design, creativity, thoughtful expression, and technology skills as well as DST does. It compels students to think out of the box while focusing on goals that have real human value."*  
(Ohler 13)

Despite having been around for a few decades, DST remains a relatively limited activity in our higher education systems. I imagine many institutions are in the same boat as the University of Minnesota, where I worked for six and a half years. There exists great enthusiasm for the form from staff and administrators, but much work must be done to integrate it into the curriculum. With ever-increasing responsibilities to teach, advise, research, develop curriculum, etc., engaging in what is often perceived as a fringe activity best suited for the humanities hardly becomes a priority for faculty.

I hope this paper has illustrated the necessity of digital media activities for educating media literate citizens—citizens who are able to harness our burgeoning technological resources for making meaning of their lives and connecting with others—rather than falling into the trap of isolationism that can come with being “plugged in” at all times. I truly believe that everyone, without exception, has stories to tell and is capable of learning to tell them well. We owe it to ourselves and the people we share the planet with to deliver these stories. The key delineation between DST and other common stories created with digital media is the focus on personal elements—the focus on claiming and owning our stories. By remembering and wrestling with our own personal content, we relive our experiences and learn from them in a creative way. Presenting these stories to others allows them to be engaged emotionally and intellectually as well. As C. Gordon Wells stated in a book titled *The Meaning Makers*:

"Constructing stories in the mind—or storying as it has been called—is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning, as such, it is an activity that pervades all aspect of learning. When storying becomes overt and is given expression in word, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others" (194).

### *Shining a light*

One writing activity I'm fond of using to convince people to record their stories comes directly from my favorite magazine, *The Sun*, a non-profit magazine printed in North Carolina by a small, dedicated staff. As much as I enjoy reading it from cover to cover, my favorite section by far is titled "Reader's Write." *The Sun* editors assign a topic for readers to write about for this section. Then they select a number of mailed in responses for publication in each month's "Reader's Write" section. The responses are powerful, provocative and occasionally hilarious. I have acquired the habit of viewing these stories as digital story scripts. I begin story boarding in my head about what they might look like and my imagination opens up into my very own theater—screening these short stories on the private canvas in my brain.

I borrow *The Sun's* "Reader's Write" topics for workshop exercises in order to get participants in what I call their "write minds," showing them that a simple topic, enlivened by a few examples, is enough to awaken their own stories. So, I have them read a few excerpts from the magazine, and I assign a topic like "Going Home" or "Eyes" for them to write about. Depending on the time available, I'll either assign it for homework or have them do free writing on the topic right then and there. This entry is typical of the depth and quality of what is to be found in "Reader's Write," this one dealing with the topic of "Eyes":

*"Stand up and face the class," ordered my junior-high social-studies teacher. Startled, I got up and stood with my back to him.*

*"Look at her slanted eyes," he began.*

*I could smell his after-shave as he pointed to my Japanese face.*

*"See her flat nose, her straight black hair. Look at her high cheekbones. See*

*how different she looks from the rest of us?"*

*This was in the 1970s, and he was teaching a lesson about World War II, using my thirteen-year-old features for show and tell. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he said, the government had to send citizens who looked like me away to camps to protect them from angry white Americans.*

*I fixed my gaze on the clock on the back wall, hoping not to make eye contact with any classmates, lest I burst into tears. My cheeks burned with embarrassment. Slanted eyes. Flat nose. High cheekbones.*

*Wasn't it good to have high cheekbones? Not today.*

*In art class I made a watercolor painting of the Breck Girl from a shampoo ad: round blue eyes, a perky nose, and flowing blond hair. That's what I wanted to look like.*

*I had long been teased by kids who used mocking gestures and bucktoothed jibes and racial slurs like "Jap," "Chink," and "gook." One kid would pull the corners of his eyes back with his fingers while the others laughed.*

*My parents said some children just didn't know any better. But shouldn't my teacher have known that it was wrong to give everyone permission to stare at me?*

*I never told my parents what had happened in school that day. If I had, my mom would have tried to comfort me by telling me how lovely my eyes were, and my dad would have marched up to school to demand an apology. I didn't need more humiliation or more stares.*

*I kept quiet for almost thirty years, until the day my daughter came to me with an anguished look I knew too well. She'd been bullied for being Asian. How little the world had changed. As I rocked her in my lap, I wiped the tears from her eyes and whispered, "I understand." Then the reticent girl inside me became the bold mother who began loudly to protest. For my daughter. For myself.*

(J.F. 34)

I introduce "Reader's Write" to reiterate that this project and DST projects are more about the process and the stories created than the product or the digital

technologies used to create them. Stories record the happenings of our lives, but they also serve as tools for shaping our futures. It is through crafting our own narratives that we are able to mold an understanding of self—and wrestle with our relationship with the world that often leaves us void of understanding. Even if understanding is unachievable, stories are there to shine a light. If you harness the power of story well enough, you'll endear yourself to those around you. Perhaps you'll even educate, influence and inspire others. Just look at how much we were able to learn about J.F. through a short, focused anecdote.

I'll leave you with one last example from my recent experience. My commitment to Story has sent me down a path in pursuit of a vocation that will allow me to explore new stories and encourage others to share stories. This has led me to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation (HMWF). The HMWF is dedicated to preserving the site of a World War II Japanese American concentration camp located near Powell, Wyoming. Our goals include, "Educat[ing] the public about the history surrounding the tragic and illegal imprisonment of Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain during World War II and support[ing] inquiry and research so that future generations understand the still relevant lessons of the Japanese American incarceration experience" ("Dedicated to Sharing," 2013).

When I applied for their executive director position, I wanted to show them how their work had impacted me, and how I was poised to return the favor with passionate leadership. I felt compelled to attach a story to my application materials, even though it wasn't a requirement. I felt confident about my experience and qualifications but wanted to show (not tell) them about my character.

A few months later, I was invited for an interview at their Interpretive Learning Center. Taking my seat at the interview, I met 16 sets of eyes—15 board members and the executive director I was hoping to replace—wondering how my answers could possibly satisfy such a dynamic group of people. The first question came more as a commentary on the "Heart Mountain story" I had submitted with my materials,



and I was immediately put at ease. I knew they enjoyed the story, and I simply approached the rest of the interview as an elaboration upon it.

This is the story I told:

*My Heart Mountain story begins with a bell. A massive, unmarked chunk of metal that lived on our back porch. I passed it hundreds of times growing up. A curiosity when it first arrived that soon became commonplace, bearing witness silently in the backyard to my ball playing, lawn mowing and pool swimming. Little did I know the miles it had traveled and the stories it could tell. That long before me, it witnessed what I believe to be one of the most overlooked injustices of American history: the systematic herding of Japanese Americans on the west coast into concentration camps during World War II.*

*As a kid, the bell's significance to me was that it belonged to my grandparents. My grandfather salvaged it from what was left of the Heart Mountain Internment Camp after the war. As veterans homesteading in western Wyoming, they were allowed to collect resources from the ruins of the camp. Unfortunately, the land they settled was ultimately deemed unfit for cultivation. They had to abandon their dreams of a family farm there. But for some reason, they did not abandon the bell. In it I came to see their resilience and resourcefulness, as well as their respect for the past. My grandfather saw something in that bell. Something more than scrap metal. And something even more than a memento of a dream never realized.*

*I'm almost ashamed to admit that I learned more about the oppression of Japanese Americans while traveling in Japan than I did in my 16 years of formal education on American soil. As much as I didn't want to believe it, I discovered that Wyoming was home to one of the largest internment camps. When I returned from Japan, the bell took on yet another form, representing my former ignorance of the injustices the government perpetrated on our own soil.*

*Nationwide, we've failed to fully educate people about the racial prejudice Japanese Americans faced during World War II. It's a history that risks falling through the cracks. One that has been buried under several other layers of World War II history—in part because its complexities defy simple explanation and classification. All the more reason this history requires a community of people to represent it, which makes me incredibly thankful for the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.*

*On my first visit to the site of the internment camp and the Interpretive Learning Center that the foundation built there, I was fortunate to hear a former internee speak about his experience. I then strolled into the museum for a reunion with the old fixture of my childhood: the bell. Back where it belonged. My parents had delivered it to the foundation a few years prior, despite their attachment to it. More than 50 years later, it returned to the place where it stood watch over people who, because of a complete denial of liberty, toiled in the shadow of Heart Mountain.*

*The Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation has succeeded in preserving this important site and creating a much-needed space for teaching and learning. Helping to illuminate a darkened past and ensure a brighter future. Providing a point of engagement. A place for people to interact and share their Heart Mountain stories. Through our collective narratives, we wrestle with the complexities of this history. To transform a setting of injustice into a site of community-building is an incredible feat.*

*I wish my grandparents were alive to have their own reunion with the bell and to tell their Heart Mountain stories. (My grandfather would no doubt tell one with more color and charisma than I can muster.) But I'm thankful that this seemingly innocuous act—scavenging an old bell—connects me to the beautiful and bewildering land of my birth.*

*This is my “Heart Mountain story” but in reality, it’s just a shred of a larger narrative I’m still composing. Each individual’s origin stories are vastly important, and I’m thankful mine includes connections to that bell and to the mountain the Crow Indians believed looked like a buffalo heart. Through these connections, I have a greater understanding of where I come from. Of my grandparents’ service in World War II. Of my mother’s upbringing on a Wyoming homestead. I have a greater awareness of a dark chapter in our history—one that I’ll continue to explore. And perhaps most importantly, I feel a greater sense of purpose to ensure that we shine more light on that dark history, for the sake of our future.*



Figure 7: Brian Liesinger’s Digital Story

Each time I create a digital story, I’m reenergized by the form—inspired by what it has taught me and its ability to teach others. It sends me off chasing another story for which I need to assemble artifacts, shoot photos, record video, record music, collect data or all of the above. I’m fascinated by the possibilities available: choices in artifacts used, software choices, editing choices, audio choices, etc. Yet, I am also

amazed at how accessible—due to the rapid advancement of technology—the DST process has become. My hope is that it grows from a fringe activity in higher education to an integral part of curricula. Consider this: economists posit that professions relying on persuasion—advertising, counseling, consulting, sales, etc.—account for about a quarter of the U.S. gross domestic product. If we estimate that Story is worth about half of those persuasive efforts (Pink 107), Story was worth nearly \$1.9 trillion to the U.S. economy in 2012. (And I believe that to be a conservative figure.) To ignore the importance of story and media literacy education is to hinder students' ability to thrive in whatever post-graduation path they choose. So deep is our reliance on story that it pervades all aspects of personal and professional life.

We all have stories to tell and a multitude of tools at our disposal for sharing them creatively. It is through sharing stories that we come to better know ourselves, to learn from each other and to make meaning together. I turn to Salman Rushdie to punctuate this point: "We are storytelling animals. As far as I can tell, there is no other species on the planet that uses the act of telling a story in order to understand something about themselves . . . [Stories] have a deep connection to our most fundamental nature as human beings" (Rushdie, 2007). This fact cannot be ignored and should not be taken for granted.

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