

Transcript for Teaching Talk #12: Digital Assessments: Digital Storytelling

Christie Stewart: Good afternoon, everyone. We are now at 1:30, so we're going to go ahead and get started. So, welcome to the Office of Teaching and Learning Teaching Talks. I am Christie Stewart, an Educational Developer with the Office of Teaching and Learning and I'm going to be helping to moderate today.

Before we get started on our session, I want to start off by acknowledging that we are in various places today that are governed by different treaties and relationships to the land, as we consider those relationships, it's important to remember our collective responsibilities to each other as we consider how we can enact inclusion and respect in our daily lives and actions. We do have a few housekeeping items. So just to note that this session is being recorded the first 20 minutes and then I'm going to pass it over to Shehroze to talk about the rest of the housekeeping technical items.

Shehroze Saharan: Hello everyone, my name is Shehroze, and just a couple of things to remember: this webinar is going to be running a little differently than our previous ones; so instead of your video and audio being turned off for the duration of the session, this time you will have the opportunity to raise your hand at certain points during the session, where you guys will be able to open your microphone or a camera and directly ask the panelists questions. Just be aware of those times when the panelists do make it aware that those options are available to you. The chat box has also been disabled but will be enabled for some part of the session, so also look out for that. Other than that, please always remember to stay respectful and ask some questions and with that I will pass it off to our panelists.

Lindsey Robinson: Hello, thank you so much for joining us today, I'm just going to take a moment to share my screen. I'm Lindsey Robinson and I'm the Digital Learning Specialist at the library. I help instructors integrate digital assessments into their courses and I also oversee the media studio in the library when it's open. The media studio assists campus community with creating digital media. Brendan Stewart will be joining us as well and we'll be sharing some of his experience of integrating digital storytelling assignments into his courses, but to start off with, I'd really like to get an idea about what you think digital storytelling is. So you can share your thoughts in the chat box, just a word or a short phrase about what you think digital storytelling means... and then if I could get someone to share that with us that would be great to read over.

Christie Stewart: So, we've got one reply of “narrative”.

Lindsey Robinson: Yes, so there's definitely a narrative element to it. Does anybody have any other elements that they'd like to share?

Christie Stewart: That comprehension is easier via story?

Lindsey Robinson: Yeah, so, we communicate through story, it's been kind of a way of communication for forever. So, thank you for those who shared, we can move on. So digital storytelling can be a lot of different things. So, one of the definitions that I have is digital storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital storytelling sort of - sorry, digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative, and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, experiences, and insights. So digital storytelling can be very simple, or it can be a lot more complex depending on how many of these different components you want to bring in together. So generally speaking, they're shorter videos, usually five minutes or less, that are put together and we will kind of go over a little bit more about - if you're thinking about integrating a digital storytelling assignment into your course. I tried to put together some questions that you might want to ask yourself as you're coming up with those parameters, so what are the course learning outcomes that you aim to meet with the digital storytelling assignment, what type of story will the students be creating? So, this is a big one because it could be personal; so, a more reflective story - it could be more of a documentary, a report, or an essay. How long will the digital story be? So, is it going to be very short? Sometimes they're only a minute long, sometimes they're longer up to five minutes. Will there be specific components that it must include? Will it be individual or group? What tools will the students be required to use? How will you evaluate this final submission? And, if you are interested in seeing what this kind of looks like, I do have sample assignments and rubrics available, if you want to request those from me, I'd be happy to share them. But, just like any assignment there's a lot of fun that goes into them - into the process, but these are just some of the things that can help guide you and thinking about how big or small a digital storytelling assignment can be.

So, for the students, what does it look like to create a digital story? So, like any assignment, they would have to go through some planning and brainstorming, researching and narrowing their topic, and then from there they would need to script and storyboard. So scripting what is going to be said through the story, but then partnering them with that, being able to visualize that story, so bringing back - bringing in the words and the images that are going to be represented on screen. Usually through this process we also recommend doing some type of peer review. We strongly believe that people can improve their writing through storyboarding, through getting feedback from their peers, because you better understand how things are getting perceived through other people's eyes, when you get that feedback. So they may also have to create and gather media; they won't be able necessarily to create everything, but they can find other media, either through various databases that they can find in terms of images, video, or sound. They would then need to edit the media together, so that would be recording audio and then putting it together in a video format, and then we usually like to talk about accessibility. In terms of videos, that's things like captioning or a transcript as well as copyright consideration.

Lindsey Robinson: So, where they're getting that media, it might be copyrighted material, so how much of that copyrighted material can they use within their project? The complexity of the assignment will determine the length of time each of these components takes, but as you can see, there's a lot of steps, and with these types of assignments you can't really rush through them, it takes a lot of planning, a lot of creating so it's always a good idea to think about how you can stagger these due dates throughout to make sure that students aren't falling too far behind in the creation process. So, in terms of creating, they would need to make an audio recording, so they could use their phone, the computer, headphones with mics. So, they don't have access to professional equipment, it would be whatever they have with them, so their phone, computer, camera potentially. For finding media, we have a remixing guide that has a bunch of different databases linked from there, from places to find their video or images or sound that are either public domain or licensed under Creative Commons, which allows them to use them in these types of projects, and then there's also using copyrighted materials. So, because we are an educational institution, people are using these for research or educational purposes, there is the option of using some copyrighted materials within the project. We have a video about what is Fair Dealing which explains a little bit about how to use those materials in a fair way and there's also more information under Scholarship and Publishing on the library homepage about using copyrighted material in these types of works.

So, the tools to create a digital story; so audio editing, we recommend using Audacity. So, Audacity is an open source, free tool that anybody can use. It's for PC and for Mac, and on Mac, there's GarageBand. It comes free with every Mac, so those are both supported by the library's media studio. We also have a lot of resources available online about help guides and tutorials that people can use to work through their editing process, when they're recording and editing sound. For video editing, we have a license at the library for WeVideo, an educational license which allows us to create classrooms for different groups, and we have a certain number of licenses to use per semester, and we like it because it's web-based, which means that anybody can use it and it's great for collaborating across teams, because it doesn't live on one person's computer, and you can access it from multiple places. iMovie - also free on Macs and really easy to use, and also both of these tools are supported by the library's media studio.

So, I've also had a lot of questions from instructors about how to assess this type of assignment for people who are not experts in video-making or sound. What does that even look like, how can you assess what a good video is? So, I came up with a few questions to help kind of guide that: so, does it have a consistent look and feel? Do visuals enhance the script without becoming too cluttered and overwhelming? Is it engaging? If text is used, is it large enough, is there enough contrast to actually read the text? Does it pop up from the background? Does the video create movement? Are there smooth transitions between scenes? And, for audio, audio is probably easier to pick up whether or not it's good enough, but there may need to be a little bit of forgiveness over this semester, if you are getting people to record sound, because they don't have access to professional equipment.

Lindsey Robinson: Sometimes it's harder to be able to record a really good quality sound, but we generally recommend that people test out whatever they're using to record their audio, before they commit to it. So, they could look at using their computer, like I said before, their phones, and lots of people have headphones with microphones built in. So, in terms of what good audio sounds like: can you hear the voice, is it clear? Is the volume consistent throughout? Was it recorded in a quiet space or is there a lot of background noise? Is the voice expressive? Does the speaker pause, vary the speed, and pitch to enhance engagement? Do the music and sound effects overpower the voice? Is there a good balance? So, examples of this within a rubric might be things like audio: so, recorded in a quiet place, the voice is clear and understandable. Video is consistent, has a consistent look and feel, smooth transitions that work with the audio voiceover, media, images, video and music create a distinct atmosphere tone that matches the story, and creativity: approach to the video was original in its composition and delivery. So, some people, some instructors group all of those categories under kind of a production and delivery category.

So, some considerations and limitations for this type of assignment moving into the fall, especially thinking that we will only be online, is that students will only be able to use what they have. So, access to equipment is basically what they have on them. So, you can't necessarily expect them to have super polished or professional things, but it's amazing what actually people can do with what they have. They're using equipment that they already know how to use, so they might just be learning to use it in a new way. So then collaboration: so, is this a group assignment, how will they be able to accomplish it together? We have so many tools available right now that allow for collaboration online, even just using a tool like Zoom – or everybody has access to Microsoft Teams that they can you know bring up a project that they're working on together, someone can screen-share, provide feedback, and they can make live edits together. It's also thinking about scaffolding skill development, so not giving everything all at the same time, but letting them work through things like scripting and storyboarding before moving on to audio and making sure that everything has kind of staggered due dates, so it doesn't become overwhelming. Yeah, and they can learn at a decent pace.

But don't worry, we also have help! So, for instructors I do offer consultations on assignment design, we have sample rubrics, I can also tailor a course guide for you, with all of this help content available on it. We also have WeVideo and PowToon classroom accounts available for the semester to set up for courses. For students we have online appointments with staff for troubleshooting and selecting a tool as well as finding media, and if they have copyright questions, I've also created a self-directed digital storytelling tutorial, available online that goes over kind of what digital storytelling is: introduction to scripting and storyboarding, as well as finding media and a tool for learning Audacity to record their audio. In addition to that, we have help guides and videos. I've added the link to the tutorial on this slide, which obviously you can't access now, but I will be sharing my slides after the presentation and so you can click and explore that way as well. So now, I'm going to stop sharing my screen again, and I'm going to let Brandon share.

Brandon: Thanks, Lindsey. So yeah, I've just prepared some high-level remarks to share, maybe to give the audience a sense of the range of experience I've had so far, that maybe helps you think about follow-up questions. I do think getting to the Q&A will be really valuable. So, a bit about me: I'm going into my fourth year as a faculty member at the University, I teach in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development in Landscape Architecture. I've now done two digital storytelling assignments, one in the fall of 2018, and then I did one this past winter semester. Interestingly, the one in the winter semester was affected by the COVID pandemic and our transition to online. The assignment was essentially due within those last three weeks and so a lot of the student work was happening in that period when students were working from home and having to collaborate, you know, virtually because it was a group assignment. So, if there are questions about that I have some insight and some sort of lived experience there. The assignments that I've done have also covered - the most recent one was actually first-year undergraduates and the previous one was third-year undergraduates and master's students, so sort of a range of levels, and we are going to screen a video at the end and that'll maybe also give people time to think about follow-up questions. So, in terms of - Lindsey touched on, you know, the sort of type of assignment and how it might be framed and what you're really trying to assess. I guess the two that I've done, the first one and the one that I'm going to screen an example of was more of a sort of research-based assignment and it might fit into sort of the documentary category. So, in that one, essentially, you know, the students sort of self-selected into small groups and they were tasked with producing a narrative about a practitioner of landscape architecture. It could be anybody around the world, it could be a historical figure or a contemporary figure, and really the idea was to sort of pull together a sort of compelling story. It could be just based on, sort of, the numbers, the facts, it could be an interpretation of their philosophy, it was somewhat open-ended, and you'll see an example of that.

The second one that I did was much more open-ended, and it was interesting in terms of the experience, of the student's reaction, and also the sort of learning trajectory that happened. So the second one I would describe it more, I guess, as a personal essay and interestingly, that this was done for first-year undergrads, so kind of a tall order for beginning university students, but the idea here was that I was trying to get the students to sort of exercise a spirit of inquiry in how they sort of navigate the world, and to try to really work on kind of practicing their curiosity and cultivating their attention to the world around them. So instead of giving them a topic, I kind of gave them the assignment to spend time walking outside on their own or in groups and to develop a topic to sort of discover something that they were curious about, from that practice of walking around and from observing and actually trying to focus their time walking, not from getting from A to B, but to paying attention to the environment. So, it resulted, I think, in interesting projects but I have to say a lot of the students struggled with understanding what I was trying to get at, and it took the whole process of doing it and then them seeing some of the work that their peers had done, for it to really start to click, because I think a lot of them are, you know, coming out of high school, a lot of them are much more used to being told exactly every step to sort of, you know, get the grade, but I do think it was a worthwhile exercise, because I think a lot of them did sort of understand the value ultimately, and sort of unplugging and taking that time and then reporting back on what they had found. So that's just some quick thoughts about the type of project that you might assign and those sorts of various approaches.

Brandon: In terms of process, I would really sort of reinforce a lot of Lindsey's recommendations and Lindsey really helped me the first time around in particular, in setting up the assignment and, you know, drawing on resources from the library, like rubrics that I sort of tinkered with and altered, as well as, you know, storyboard templates that I could hand out to the students, as well as having Lindsey and some of her colleagues come into the class and actually provide an introductory workshop and show examples. So, in each case, I've broken the assignment up and had, you know, an initial deadline where students had to had to sort of sign up, identify their group and their topic, maybe two weeks after the assignment was assigned, and then maybe two or three weeks later, they'd have an interim where they would hand in a draft storyboard, really sort of forcing them to start working on this and not leave it to the last-minute and focus on the sort of iterative process, and the self-critique and also feedback from myself and my TAs, and then finally the assignment would be due toward - maybe another three weeks later.

In terms of length, the one you'll see today is about three minutes, the second one I did was about 90 seconds, it was shorter. In a way, the shorter it is, the harder it is to do, I would suggest. A lot of this comes down to developing skills in sort of - obviously communication but writing a script and figuring out how much you can say, and how to pace it, and communicate effectively. Three minutes is not a long time and 90 seconds is obviously even a bigger challenge, but a lot of the students rise to the occasion and it's remarkable how much they can pack in, in a way that lands. In terms of the length, there's an interesting correlation there, I think, when you're planning this, in terms of how - one of the big opportunities, I think, of doing an assignment like this, is the ability to then share the work, sort of like a class Film Festival, and I've done this both times around, and so I've sort of geared the length to some degree, and the group sizes to the class length, and trying to sort of fill, you know, whatever class module I have, when this is going to happen, toward the end of the course in both cases, with a film festival where this could all be screened. The first time I did this was in class the second time was over Zoom because of the pandemic, but I think the public screening becomes a really interesting context for the students to work in, because they know that their work will be shared publicly. I think that's a big motivator and I think it's also a really great opportunity for them to see a diversity of approaches to interpreting the assignment. It's not so often that students get to see the work of their peers and so I think that's a really exciting aspect of this type of assignment. I think that I'll leave my thoughts there for now, I happy to get into more of any of this in the Q&A, and just to quickly set up the video, we're going to screen.

So, this one was done by some graduate students, the first time I did the assignment in 2018, and this was the one that was more of a, sort of, documentary. So they were tasked with – as I mentioned earlier - sort of, doing some research and then communicating their findings about a Landscape Architecture practitioner, and I chose this one for a number of reasons, but just to sort of highlight a few, I was really impressed with how this group - first of all, they composed their own music, which I thought was really impressive. They happen to have a musician acquainted with the group.

Brandon: They also get into some interesting techniques, using animation in addition to video and still-footage, but most of all, I was impressed with the content; in their approach to the content, they really went well beyond just providing a bunch of facts and getting into trying to understand the motivations and the philosophy of the person they were profiling. So maybe with that, I'll hand it back to Lindsey to screen the video.

Video (student-made): My name is Piet Oudolf and I'm not a landscape architect. If you want to make a four-season garden, you have to learn to accept decay, and you have to see the beauty of it. It's about the texture and shape, seed heads, and skeletons. Instead of using scissors, you just use your eyes. A plant is only worth growing if it also looks good when it's dead. The moment you say "I love plants that are dead" then you have a problem because people don't like dead plants. I choose plants for their structure. If you could see my gardens in black and white, you'd still see plenty of character in the design. The structure is far more important than colour. I covet plants that hold their structure for longer because colour is just too temporary. When planning a garden, I'll use pieces of trace paper and I sketch by hand. The trace allows me to explore the layering of plants and the seasons within each design. I use the landscape to help the architects tell their story. The High Line, for example, part of the story is a series of changing landscapes with unique plant palettes. It's like a stage play and we have this act, and it needs so many people, and someone plays that character and the other plays that character; that's how I put it all together, with plants. It's a bit of a complex process and it all depends on the story that you're trying to tell. I try to show people that you can see beauty in things that are not normally considered to be beautiful. I see beauty in ugliness and in death, in decay; I see beauty in the unexpected, and I think that has made up a big part of my life too, you know. I just try to create. I think it's the journey in your life to find out what real beauty is, I mean of course, but also to discover beauty and things that are, on the first sight, not beautiful, and in the end, I let the plants tell that story.