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Content Area Learning: Teaching in an Online World

Middle School Students as Digital Composers

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Include Context/Theory/Rationale for Your Lesson/Presentation/Technology Talk

In the words of digital humanist, Jason Ohler, an educational technology specialist for over 25 years, digital storytelling—or as I prefer the broader term digital composing—“allows students to blend design, creativity, thoughtful expression and technology skills” and “encourage[s]...students to think creatively while demonstrating their ability to communicate and solve problems”. I have been privileged to witness these truths firsthand in my work with middle school students enrolled in Prairie Lands Writing Project’s middle school writing camps I facilitated this past summer and during the summer of 2005. My panel presentation will walk participants through the process we followed in the camps to have students take a poetic piece from its traditional print form into the digital realm.

Include Nuts/Bolts of Lesson/Activity Talk

See *Digital Composing in Middle School Writing Camp – Steps in the Process*
And *Digital Composing Presentation Website References*

Include Follow ups/Extensions/Cautions?

See “Points to Keep in Mind” on the *Digital Composing in Middle School Writing Camp – Steps in the Process*

Some site resources to further help you:

Definitions of Digital Storytelling:

<http://www.coe.uh.edu/digitalstorytelling/>

<http://www.digitales.us/>

http://www.jasonohler.com/storytelling/storyeducation.cfm#DAOW_of_literacy

Resource Sites:

<http://www.atomiclearning.com/moviemaker2>

<http://school.discovery.com/edtechconnect/halldavidson/resources.html>

<http://www.storycenter.org/canada/index.html>

http://projects.educ.iastate.edu/~ds/Behmer/frame_5.html

Digital Composing in Middle School Writing Camp - Steps in the Process

1. We started camp by taking surveys about the campers' reading, writing and computing skills, interests and comfort levels.
 2. Quite a bit of looking at poetry and discussing it to get comfortable with it as a genre and to really learn and see some strong examples of common devices and techniques used in composing it. A couple of examples of these: "On Turning Ten" by Billy Collins and "The Death of Santa Claus" by Charles Harper Webb.
 3. We looked at the kinds of choices and decisions writers might make and what they might take into consideration when working in this genre. I used one of my own poems that went through several drafts and did a think aloud about it to demonstrate this.
 4. We moved into doing some activities to help students compose poetry such as poem sketching and found poetry.
 5. Then we started talking about the treatment of text to help convey messages. We looked at children's books and magazine ads and movie posters and a couple of examples on the Creativity Portal's typography pages to really see how type can communicate a simple, powerful message via color, font selection, italics, boldface etc.
 6. Then we moved into discussing and finding examples of how images and text work together in many ways in contemporary culture to convey messages and brought sound into this discussion as well. We looked at the Visual Journaling site, MTV, Video games, websites, picture books etc.)
 7. Then I showed them a quick demo example of a brief poem I had worked on to put into a digital format. It included just a snippet of sound, a couple of images, some text effects, transition effects and color within the composition just so they could see the extent of additional choices they might be making with the 'translation' of poetic forms to the digital format. We followed up the viewing with discussion of its various elements.
 8. We worked on exercises and activities that had them marrying images and text throughout the camp so they would be familiar with that process by this point:
Self-Definition essay, The Truth About... one pager etc.
 9. Finally, we worked with Moviemaker itself. We gave them a brief tour of the program and just had them mess around with the program and some brief excerpt or quotes from a favorite text or their own writing. It was important to just let them play and do some intuitive, spontaneous work with its various components before they really got any hard and fast info about it, primarily by going to the Atomic Learning site and working their way through the tutorials on Moviemaker.
 10. By this time they needed to decide on some piece of text to work with in the medium and we encouraged them to use one of their poems, at least to get their feet wet.
 11. Before they returned to Moviemaker to work on their piece they had to do "grunt" work—the thinking and planning and preparing to create their piece. This entailed "chunking" their text, working up a storyboard for their piece with rough sketches or descriptions of images they would like to include in it and answering a set of questions about their piece to ensure they had a clear focus and direction in mind. The reasons for this approach were several:
 - a) I wanted them to remember digital composing is still a form of composing and they were still functioning in a process mode.
 - b) Also, once people get into the program itself and start composing it is easy to get distracted from your original intent if you don't have a clear focus and direction.
 - c) I wanted them to (hopefully) keep in mind all that we had looked at and discussed up to this point as far as messages communicated via images, text, sound etc. and apply that knowledge as they began using this tool.
 12. Once they showed us their completed planning and prep work, they could go back into Moviemaker and create their compositions. At this stage, all we did was stand back and let them go for the most part and provided critiques, suggestions or guidance when asked or when we felt they might be losing their way.
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Points to keep in mind:

1. Before you work with digital composing in any setting, I advise you to be pretty comfortable with it and familiar with some of the common missteps or problems that might occur. I would also work with it once I knew my students and their capabilities and comfort levels pretty well, too.
2. This is a good way to teach and have students apply knowledge in a way that engages them but still shows that they need critical thinking skills, composing skills, communication skills, visual and media literacy skills etc.
3. It can provide good lessons and examples about avoiding plagiarism and copyright infringement.
4. This is a type of composing that could work in a variety of disciplines to tell the story of a concept, process, theory or idea.
5. Students will discover resources and tricks of their own once they begin working on their pieces.
6. It heavily reinforced the idea that good composing in any medium takes thought, time, effort and lots of choices and decisions.
7. At younger levels you might have more success doing a somewhat less sophisticated whole class composition over a period of time to break up the steps and the work down to a very manageable size.
8. This is a medium that your students are immersed in and should not be ignored or avoided because of a lack of comfort level on the part of the teacher or because of the "they are just playing around on computers" perception some people might have or because of the time it might entail to do a good job with it—your students need to be working in this realm. It will provide them with many more of the skills they will absolutely need for their futures than bubbling in test answers ever could☺

Websites Referenced in the Digital Composing Session

- Fall Finish 2008

1. **Digital Storytelling Resource Site Western Massachusetts Writing Project** - <http://www.umass.edu/wmwp/> (Go to Resources in the Menu and then visit the link to **Kevin Hodgson's** page on digital storytelling)
"This website has been developed for educators seeking to infuse traditional writing instruction with new emerging technologies in such a way as to excite young writers through the composition of personal narrative stories, integration of family photographs, recorded voice narration and multi-media production."
2. **The Creativity Portal** - <http://www.creativity-portal.com/>
<http://www.creativity-portal.com/becreative/activities/wordtype.html>
"Since its launch in 2000, the Creativity Portal™ (CP) has been an inspirational how-to Web resource for artists, writers, crafters, and creativity enthusiasts. It features creativity and life coaching perspectives, light humor, free prompts and projects, insightful articles, and hand-selected instructional Web resources on hundreds of topics to encourage the exploration and expression of personal creativity while promoting awareness for unique self-care issues facing creative individuals."
3. **Visual Journaling** <http://www.visualjournaling.com/>
"Visual journaling is a process that encourages students to get to know themselves on a deeper, intrinsic level. This is an effective way to break down walls of communication by using the visual journaling process as a form of self-exploration and visual communication. Visual journals serve as a record of how we think, which moves us out of the world of reflex and allows us to look beyond the immediate situation and pay closer attention to the process. Teachers need to understand that during this process, the experiences gained are not only valuable in helping students establish connections to the art-making process, but also towards literacy."

4. **Edutopia** - <http://www.edutopia.org/digital-storytelling-resources>
"The George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF) was founded in 1991 as a nonprofit operating foundation to celebrate and encourage innovation in schools. Since that time, [it has] been documenting, disseminating, and advocating for exemplary programs in K-12 public schools to help these practices spread nationwide. The foundation publishes the stories of innovative teaching and learning through a variety of media."

5. **Found Poems** - <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5780>
<http://www.slate.com/id/2081042/>
The first link is a site that defines and describes the found poem format and the second link contains some examples of found poems composed from official Dept. of Defense transcripts of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's words at press conferences, briefings etc.