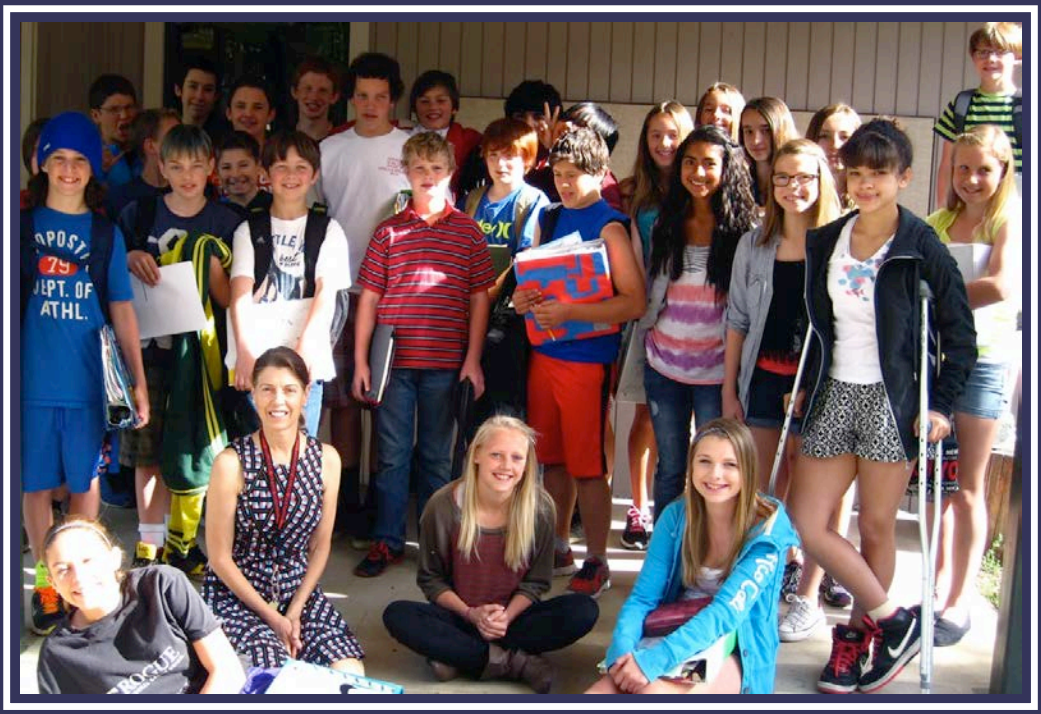
REPORT TO RUCH SCHOOL PTO:

Digital Storytelling Project 2014



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Report to Ruch PTO

Ruch School Digital Storytelling class (Spring 2014)

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Digital Storytelling project, sponsored by the Oregon Writing Project at Southern Oregon University, merged technology and writing skills in alignment with Common Core State Standards. The project had three main objectives:

1. Offer the seventh grade students at Ruch K-8 Community School an engaging supplement to their classroom curriculum.
2. Strengthen school-community connections.
3. Improve the ability of the regular classroom teacher, as well as four pre-service teachers from Southern Oregon University, to teach literacy using digital technology.

The curriculum was directly tied to the following Common Core standards in English language arts:

- W.3 (write narratives)
- W.5 (develop and strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting…)
- W.6 (use technology to produce and publish writing)
- SL.5 (strategic use of digital media to communicate information).

Funding from the Ruch School PTO in the amount of $5393 covered the costs of instruction and materials for all the students in Mrs. McDonald's 7th grade language arts class in spring 2014.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Lead teacher and digital engineer Abram Katz, assisted by four SOU interns, initially spent time creating an environment where students could feel comfortable sharing personal stories. Students were encouraged to create an "artist name" to feel more comfortable in the creative process. The theme of the unit was *change*: students analyzed a change that had occurred at some point in their own lives.

Students spent two class sessions writing and developing their personal stories. Mini-lessons helped students incorporate metaphors, descriptive details, and dialogue into their stories. The lead teacher and four SOU interns gave students constructive feedback and offered writing strategies to help students transform their thoughts and emotions into writing.

Each student created a short movie to accompany his/her story using Windows Movie Maker. Visual images included student-created, digitized art as well as other images. With professional assistance, students recorded their voice-overs, added music, and then edited their short films.

Students shared their completed digital stories with the school and the community at the Art and Curriculum Fair on May 29, 2014 at Ruch School. A table was set up near the entrance to the curriculum display, where families and community members could view and listen to the stories.

ASSESSMENT

Students completed pre- and post- questionnaires about their confidence with writing, confidence with visual art, and skills/confidence in their use of digital media technology. Students explained how the use of digital technology contributed to their story, or their storytelling process. In addition, students wrote an "acceptance speech" in which they imagined their digital story had just won an award; these written documents were analyzed to better understand students' experiences with the project.

The SOU interns (pre-service teachers) self-assessed their ability to teach writing using digital media before and after the project, in written reflections. The classroom teacher, who was present during all of the class sessions, documented what she saw as the "highlights" of the project, and how she sees it carrying over into students' work in other classes/subjects.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROJECT

Of the 32 students who began the project, 29 (91%) successfully completed the entire project, including writing multiple drafts of their story, creating or selecting appropriate images, and creating digital movies that included audio and visual components. The project met all three of its primary objectives:

Objective #1. Provide an engaging supplement to classroom curriculum, with a clear focus on CCSS standards W.3, W.5, W.6 and SL.5.

Student engagement. Students' written comments showed a high level of engagement with the digital storytelling process; comments like the following appear on 83% of the post-project surveys.

> "Being able to use our voices behind our own pictures and telling our stories gave us a chance to really express ourselves."
> "It was different because we used our voice instead of just writing."
> "Technology can explain your story better."
> "I learned I am sort of good at using technology and I am an OK story writer."
> "I LOVED IT!"
> "I am able to make movies now."
> "People got to really feel what we feel in our voice."
> "Technology made my story 'alive'!"
> "Technology added more excitement… I learned I could tell people my personal feelings."
> "You can make your own movie!"
> "The interns helped me stay focused when I was off task."
> "Right when I met Mr. Katz and the interns I knew it was going to be fun."

Confidence in writing. Although a large percentage of students (61%) reported no change in their confidence as writers, these were the students who said they were "confident" or "very confident" writers at the beginning of the project. More significant is the fact that while five students (15%) reported feeling "not at all confident" or "somewhat unconfident" at the outset, just one student (<1%) reported still feeling that way after the project. Of the 29 students who successfully completed the project, 97% rated their confidence as writers 3 or higher (on a scale of 1-5) by the end of the project.

Writing process (W.3). 75% of the students (based on work collected over the course of the project and evaluated by the OWP director) used revision strategies to develop their writing, making two or three substantive revisions of their text on their way to a final draft. Students often revised in response to interns' comments on their drafts. One student expressed her growing trust in the writing process this way: "The hardest part was writing the story and what I was going to say, but when I finished it was a huge relief to finally know what I was going to say!" This is the voice of a writer coming to know what it means *to write*; it is an insight that will serve her well in any writing she tackles in the future.

Confidence in expression through visual art. A large percentage of students (72%) reported feeling "confident" or "very confident" in their ability to express themselves through visual art at the outset. However, all the five students (15%) who reported that they were "not at all confident" (1 on a 5-point scale) with visual expression at the beginning gained enough confidence in this area to rate themselves "3" or higher (on a 5-point scale) by the end. The 7th grade teacher noted that "having a few students use their original art" was a highlight of the project, and several students commented that the ability to incorporate their own art with their writing was a highlight for them personally.

Strategic use of digital media (SL.5). 100% of the students who completed the project were able to locate (or create) and incorporate relevant digital content into their presentation. Several students commented in post-project reflections that their "favorite part about this class was searching for pictures and music" to help tell their story. Like the ability to incorporate their own art, the strategic use of digital media (both audio and visual) made the writing process engaging for students in a way that many had not experienced before (see "Use of technology" below).

Use of technology to publish writing (W.6). All students who completed the project showed progress in this standard, as assessed by lead teacher and digital engineer Abram Katz; all were able to produce an audio recording (with professional assistance) and combine audio with video to create a digital story. Most students' reported having very little prior experience using digital technology for a creative

project; 41% said they had never used digital technology to do a creative project before. Another 47% reported using PowerPoint or word processing software to create a presentation or type an essay. Only 12% said they had previously used digital technology for a creative project (these students cited graphic art, a video, an online scrapbook, or a game). By the end of the project, 90% reported feeling "confident" or "very confident" (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) with the technology they had used in this project. Several wrote comments such as: "The most important thing I learned was the technology." The 7th grade teacher observed that the project "integrated technology in a way that [will have] carry-over for all their subjects," and will help their "presentations move beyond PowerPoint."
(See Appendix 1 for the specific skills students needed learn in order to complete this project.)

Sharing of videos (W.5). The classroom teacher noted that students' sharing their movies with each other (in class and at the art & curriculum fair) was an important part of the process, building students' confidence in their skills (see "Discussion" below.)

Objective #2. Strengthen school-community connections.

By bringing together the school, the Oregon Writing Project at Southern Oregon University, a local digital arts professional, the SOU interns, and the 7th grade students, this project provides a model of a community-school partnership that strengthens school-community relationships in multiple ways.

Twenty nine digital stories were showcased at the Ruch School Art & Curriculum Fair on May 29, 2014. Lead teacher and digital engineer Abram Katz reviewed each project and compiled an archive of the digital stories that was available for families and community members to peruse.

School-community connections were also enhanced by relationships between classroom teacher, visiting teachers (digital engineer and SOU student interns), and 7th grade students. The classroom teacher reported that hosting the SOU interns was "a highlight" of her year, and that the interns were "a key element of the process." Students wrote appreciative comments about the interns, (e.g., "None of this would have happened if it wasn't for Mr. Katz, Rachel, Jake, David, and Kendra!").

The SOU interns (preservice teachers) gained hands-on experience in a local school, and benefited from seeing the routines and practices of an experienced classroom teacher as well as getting a chance to design and teach whole-class and small-group lessons themselves. Excited about their experience at Ruch School, the interns created a poster presentation for Southern Oregon University's Art & Research conference (SOAR) in spring 2014. The poster (see Appendix 3) has been on display at various school functions, helping build awareness of just one of the innovative projects taking place at Ruch School. The students' presentation generated excitement and interest among other SOU students and faculty, who have asked to be involved if this project is repeated in the future.

Objective #3. Improve ability of classroom teacher, and SOU pre-service teachers, to teach literacy using digital technology.

Classroom teacher's learning. The 7th grade teacher participated in the entire process and was able to use the students' finished products for one of her required spring 2014 work sample scores; this was possible partly because the project was aligned with Common Core Standards. The teacher is currently looking forward to integrating the project into her curriculum next year, and has begun thinking about possible ways to focus the project on a particular unit of study, such as World History, Sustainability, or Physical Science. The school will be receiving a set of Chromebooks for student use next year, and the teacher is looking into their potential as a platform for the project.

Interns' development as teachers. The four SOU interns (education and English education majors) all reported significant learning from their participation in this project. Specifically, they reported growth in classroom management, responding constructively to student writing in support of revision, community-building in the classroom, organizing exhibitions of student work, and learning "how to engage children to write meaningfully about their lives, personal hopes, and visions for the world."

Interns' learning about digital media. The four interns all reported that the experience helped them, as one put it, "learn how to work with digital media to help students better communicate with peers and teachers." The interns reported that the "process of learning to use audio recording devices to match spoken words and images" was an important skill they needed to master in order to help the students create their digital stories. (See Appendix 2 for other specific skills interns learned.)

OTHER OUTCOMES & FINDINGS

Beyond meeting the three main objectives, this project led to several additional important findings. Perhaps most noticeable was the social and emotional learning that took place for the 7th grade students. Asked to comment on their experience, more than 20% of the students specifically mentioned the impact of the project's social/emotional dimension, in observations such as:

- "This was a great experience for me because it helped me open up and be more honest about my true feelings… Coming from a shy person, I can say that it really does help."
- "I liked that a lot of people were shy about sharing their story, and when their story was presented it was amazing! I also liked that the stories were so deep and meaningful."
- "I think that the hardest part was sharing my story with the class because I am really super shy! Some advice I would give to future students is do not give up on what you are making because it might impact someone else."
- "My favorite part through this whole experience was finishing the movie and watching everyone else's and learning more about them than I already did."
- "My favorite part was being able to give appreciation to my sisters for being there for me when I needed them."
- "I liked listening to other people's stories and experiences."

This is a significant project outcome, because when positive social/emotional experiences are part of learning, students are more invested in developing the skills necessary to accomplish a task.

A second issue that emerged during the project was potential of the digital storytelling process for helping students develop *voice* in their writing. A challenging concept, *voice* is often what 'makes' a writer/piece of writing. The investment of the writer in the topic, his/her connection with the audience, and his/her rhetorical choices (vocabulary, sentence structure, etc.) are all part of this elusive but critical aspect of writing. Digital storytelling lends itself well to helping students become more conscious of these choices, as they ultimately read their writing out loud as their voice-over. Because the final product is heard as well as seen by an audience of peers, family and community, students' investment in their written *voice* was heightened.

The classroom teacher found that "hearing students' own voices" read their writing, "with all the self-consciousness and vulnerability" was a highlight for her, as well. In other words, her engagement with, and understanding of, her students was enhanced by focusing on their *voice* in a different way. On the other hand, a few students disliked the experience of recording their own voice (e.g., "I have always hated the way my voice sounds when it is recorded"). Future projects might make the connection between *voice* and rhetorical choice more explicit to students, and need to take into account some students' initial reluctance to record their own voices.

Finally, as the project neared completion it became clear that eight weeks would have been preferable to six; some students needed more time, especially students who were challenged by writing or technology. This would allow for additional differentiation during instruction, and students who mastered the basics would have a chance to "do more 'glitzy' stuff" with the technology, according to lead teacher and engineer Abram Katz.

Students and families alike appreciated the PTO funding that allowed them to participate in this project. As one wrote in a final reflection, "Special thanks to the PTO and Ruch School for letting us do this. All of you should try this sometime. It was fun and a great learning process. Thank you!"

APPENDIX 1

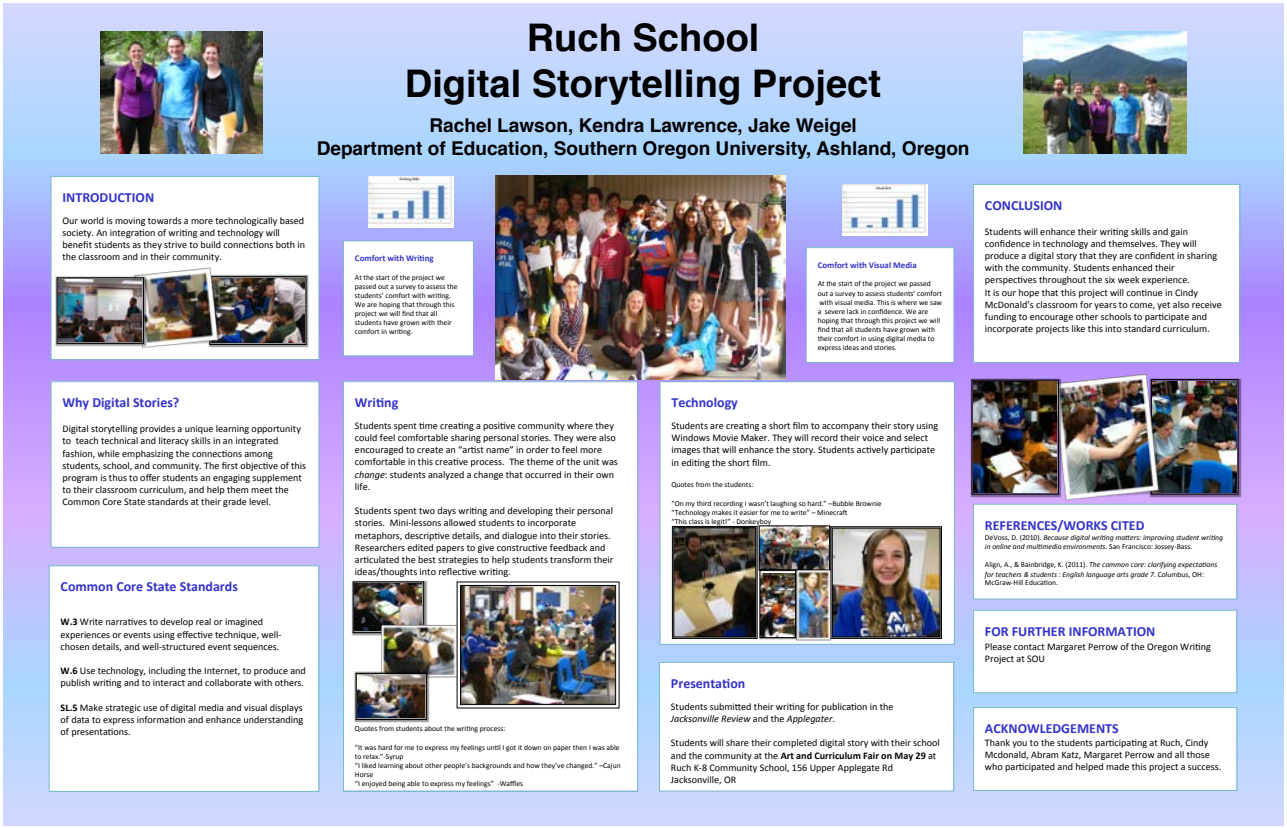
Digital media skills students learned in order to successfully complete the project included:

- Audio voiceover (VO) recording
  - Reading: delivery, projection, emotion
  - Positioning: distance, angle of incidence
  - Awareness: body posture, breathing technique
- Importing VO into movie project
  - Operation and navigation within computer's operating system
- Positioning of VO on timeline
  - Linear time alignment
- Asset Management
  - Gathering assets for movie
  - Subfolders – organizing image files, audio files, etc.
- Syncing visual imagery to VO
  - Creative decision making
  - Technical accuracy within Movie Software
- Movie transitions and effects
- Movie titles and credits
- Finalization of media
  - Compression ratios, codecs
  - Source quality rule

APPENDIX 2

Skills interns learned in order to help students complete the project included:

1. Audio:
    a. Recording, editing and normalization
    b. Sample rate and bit depth accuracy
    c. Importing/exporting
    d. Mic placement
    e. Room acoustics
2. Video:
    a. Same as "Students." (see Appendix 1)
3. Synthesis:
    a. Multi-media (A/V) digital story – "putting it all together" - personal narrative > VO audio recording > video software > final product.
4. Multiple platforms (Mac/ PC)

APPENDIX 3

Poster created for Southern Oregon Arts & Research conference (SOAR), May 2014