

Reconsidering Student Inquiry through Digital Narrative Nonfiction

As an alternative to the traditional research paper for an English 11 class, a digital narrative assignment positioned students as multimedia storytellers.

Media literacy education provides a toolbox for helping direct students' attention to the way we shape information for audience and purpose. The National Association for Media Literacy Education defines the core skills of media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, and evaluate information, as well as the ability to create and act on information ("Media Literacy Defined"). If we believe that narrative is essential to the way people make meaning out of everyday experience, then media literacy can serve as a powerful framework for exploring how to read and write factual stories.

In this article, we reflect on a project that Fawn developed with her high school students in an effort to invigorate a research unit and encourage them to explore the methods of journalism to compose multimedia stories. This reflection was guided by our collaborative exploration of the students' stories. The Digital Storymakers project, stretching over a seven-week period, was—at the core—a research assignment. Students conducted research, composed multimedia, and published factual stories imbued with literary elements. What the project did differently, however, was challenge the concept of who gets to make stories as well as how they are made, repositioning students as researchers, journalists, and multimedia storytellers.

The project described here was taught in an urban, public high school in the American southwest within a magnet program designed for career and technical preparation. With a lottery system for enrollment, the school maintains a 51 percent

minority enrollment and is currently ranked as the second best high school in the state in terms of academic performance. Fawn taught English 11 Honors and Journalism (which was an elective open to all grades, 9–12). The school's project-based learning approach allows for interdisciplinary opportunities to flourish. It is within this context that the Digital Storymakers contest inspired teachers and students to experiment with research and writing.

A LUCKY BREAK: DISCOVERING MULTIMEDIA NARRATIVE NONFICTION

As the World Wide Web continues to evolve, opportunities for narrative nonfiction have continued to change, too. While there have been many examples of multimedia journalism before and since, a significant moment occurred in 2013 when a Pulitzer Prize was awarded to John Branch of *The New York Times* ("The 2013 Pulitzer"). His 2012 longform article, "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" (Branch), was published as an online-only piece, specifically designed for reading (and *experiencing*) on a tablet computer in which "media add-ons work to hold reader attention rather than scatter it to external Web sources" (Dowling and Vogan 209). As the first-of-its-kind online publication, "Snow Fall" provides an excellent narrative nonfiction experience for students as readers and, potentially, a mentor text for them as multimedia authors.

Fawn was inspired by immersive stories like "Snow Fall" as a way to reconsider the traditional research

paper assignment. As she searched for platforms, she stumbled on the Digital Storymakers Award contest. The contest was a call for “new emerging writers and visual artists whose work makes use of new forms of nonfiction digital narrative” and included a high school category (Finkel). Cosponsored by Pearson and supported by top journalism schools, the contest featured a \$5,000 grand prize and a trip to New York to refine the winning story with editors at Atavist Magazine. Entries were multimedia narrative nonfiction or longform journalism—and, luckily, a natural fit for a research project. Online publication meant that in addition to research, students would have to consider copyright and journalism ethics. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) provided guidelines for reporting the truth, minimizing harm, acting independently, and ensuring accountability and transparency (“SPJ Code of Ethics”).

OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

Since the Digital Storymakers unit was designed around the contest, which focused on multimedia longform journalism, all entries had to include at least three forms of media, including text, audio, video, photos, illustrations, animation, and interactive graphics. Fawn used the contest rules to plan instructional activities that reinforced ELA research and writing objectives. The unit consisted of activities, group work, and workshops. The activities began with developing ideas, then reinforcing research skills, synthesizing information, and working with text types, including multiple modes (e.g., images, sound, and movement). Students also learned about creating narratives from research. We believe that because technology tools change, the emphasis should be on the process of composing.

The students built the stories in Creatavist, a Web-based platform that enabled them to include multiple modes such as video, images, and sound but also “extras” such as hyperlinks, maps, and pop-outs (for paratextual information, such as images or timelines). While Creatavist is now defunct, other options for composing these types of stories include Weebly, Wix, WordPress, Adobe Spark, or ReadyMag. All of the completed digital stories were entered into the

contest and, consequently, were published on the Web. Therefore, “student work” cited in this article is the work of published authors.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Teachers often shy away from media-intensive projects because they feel they do not have the expertise to assist students. To support students’ ability to use a variety of media, Fawn enlisted the help of teachers with multimodal expertise. She held an informational meeting on the project, after which she recruited three teachers whose programs aligned with the Digital Storymakers project: art, digital video (DV), and photography. The high school media specialist/librarian also agreed to provide “just in time” instruction in media literacy and the use of the library for the seven weeks of the project. The library provided space for students from all three classes to work individually or in groups, with access to computers. The other teachers led lessons based on their expertise, such as choosing media (i.e., paint, charcoal, pencil) for artwork or editing digital video. We continually modified the instructional design based on the needs of the students, working in a flexible and responsive manner.

ITERATIVE INSTRUCTION

Throughout the Digital Storymakers unit, there were ample opportunities for Fawn, the librarian, the art teacher, and the digital video teacher to help students as they composed in a variety of modes and on a variety of topics. We relied on two types of instructional support: good-of-the-group (GG) and need-to-know (N2K). GG instruction was whole-group instruction similar to “efficient and effective minilessons [which] last about ten minutes and utilize a predictable structure or architecture” (“Minilessons”). GG lessons were preplanned as part of the project, but they could also be offered on demand. For example, we knew that the students would need instruction in research skills, information literacy, narrative writing, and multimodality, or composing with different kinds of media. We planned lessons to address those needs. GG time became routine, almost daily, and was also occasionally expanded to accommodate three

peer-led workshops on developing an idea, identifying media, and the composing process.

Unplanned GG topics were generated by the students throughout the unit. We included a link to a Google spreadsheet on the project website (fstewar1.wixsite.com/digital-storytelling) so that students could post questions or locate helpful information. Anonymously posted questions ranged in topic from skills such as how to be creative in nonfiction and how to choose appropriate media and use ethical journalism practices to negotiating the demands of group work (e.g., How do we bring everyone's ideas together?). We monitored the spreadsheet and identified which of us could best teach a lesson on the topic and develop additional resources for our website.

Much of the class time was spent in student-directed small groups. After brief, daily GG sessions, students outlined group tasks and goals for the day and then set to work. At the end of class, designated time allowed them to meet, revisit tasks, assign work to take home, and think through next steps. The peer-led workshops followed faculty-led GG sessions and focused on generating and organizing initial ideas, providing feedback on written drafts, and preparing media for the story.

N2K instruction was also iterative and offered as on-demand support for individuals or groups. Composing questions abounded: Would the media be part of the narrative (e.g., embedded video or images)? Or, could media be added to the story as paratext (e.g., a timeline, map, or hyperlink)? In this process of figuring out when, where, and how to employ media, students also “contracted” work to their peers with expertise in different media. For example, a group researching the infamous Area 51, a secret US Air Force facility noted for extraterrestrial alien sightings, contracted with photography students to superimpose UFOs onto images of desert landscapes. To avoid copyright concerns, the students generated original work whenever possible.

In another instance, a student writing about the Warped Tour, a travelling rock tour, wanted to use social media posts as her primary source. Even in our smartphone-saturated world, none of us were absolutely sure that she could use social media for her storyline *and* publish it to the Web. So, the media

specialist, the student, and Fawn agreed to research the issue and reconvene the following class period. After the day's GG minilesson, we invited any groups who might have a similar issue to join the three of us at an N2K table to discuss our findings. In this way, we could address specific questions that might not pertain to everyone and still engage the students in finding solutions for themselves. As it happens, we discovered that changes in media outpace copyright law and the recommendation was to simply ask—via social media—to use content (Simpson 143). Alternatively, features in the software allowed her to embed active links to outside content. The student was able to continue her work knowing that she could, indeed, link or redirect to Instagram posts in the interactive Creatavist format and count them as appropriate—and accurate—sources.

LITERARY ELEMENTS AND NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Organizing research in a narrative form was by far the most difficult aspect of the assignment for the students. They struggled to conceptualize how to tell nonfiction stories in a literary style. An anecdote of a student's frustration illustrates this difficulty: after a small-group consultation, the student stood and threw her papers in the air, shouting, “I just want to write a research paper!” Luckily, most of the stories and multimedia components came together and the students, including this one, were proud of their work.

The instruction on creative nonfiction started small, beginning with introductions. Once students knew the ending of their story, they could write compelling exposition to hook their reader. We used two mentor stories for introductions: “Lifted” (Ratliff) and “Agent Zapata” (Cuddehe), both of which were published in *Atavist Magazine*, the platform students used to publish their own stories. An excerpt from the beginning of “Agent Zapata” illustrates how people are introduced almost as characters in a story about a murder on the US–Mexico border:

Jaime Zapata was behind the wheel. Thirty-two years old, reedy and loose limbed, he was known for his wide grin and practical jokes around the ICE offices in Laredo, Texas, where he was based. Victor Avila, riding shotgun, was his near opposite: a serious, even

intimidating veteran agent with a wife and two children. The men had similar backgrounds. Both were Mexican-American, were bilingual, and had been raised in Texas border towns, where, it is sometimes said, a kid growing up has two career choices: become a cop or become a criminal. (Cuddehe)

After students drafted their own introductions, Fawn met with them in small groups. One group writing about Hitler's youth was struggling; the students brought a piece of writing that read like a typical research paper you might find on the Internet. It began, "Hitler was born on April 20, 1889." After we reviewed "Agent Zapata" as a mentor text and participated in a lesson specifically on exposition, Fawn was temporarily stumped about how to communicate the difference. She asked them, "What did the village look like?" Questions about character and setting can be answered with research, Fawn insisted. They came back with a draft that was similar to the mentor text, leading to this paragraph that was ultimately published on the Creatavist site:

The valley below is peaceful and vibrant, the village, Braunau am Inn [includes map pin here], the only presence of humanity in the region. Its quaint appearance misleads those unbeknownst of its tumultuous past. The village is quiet, a usual prospect as many retire. But in one home, a mother was in labor, bringing upon this world an entity that would impact the world forever. (Hoff et al.)

Once the students understood how to use literary devices to organize factual information, they transformed their stories. The multimedia features enhanced the narratives and included maps, timelines, and images embedded in the story, such as the image of Hitler's mother that would appear above the text when a reader clicked on the link (see Figure 1). The student authors had the choice to include images as part of the text or as a pop-out, depending on what worked for the narrative.

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WORK

Assessment is one of the most intimidating aspects of multimedia projects. As Troy noted in the conclusion to his book *Assessing Students' Digital Writing: Protocols for Looking Closely*, "[w]hen assessing and evaluating digital writing, we must account for

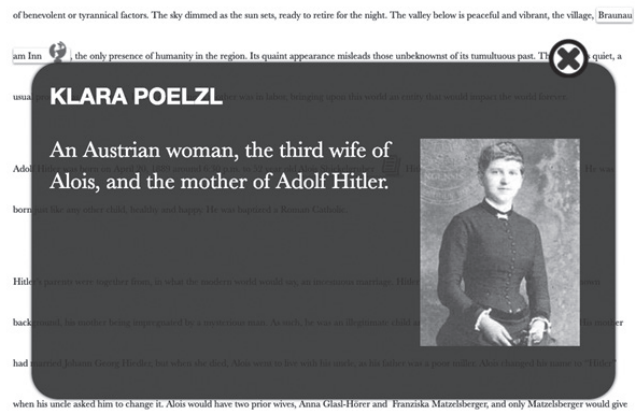


FIGURE 1.

The published story "Evil Rising: Hitler's Path to Power" included a pop-out feature.

both process and product" (Hicks 130). To that end, the Digital Storymakers unit assessment focused primarily on the process. Various checkpoints over the seven weeks included an annotated bibliography, research notes, outlines, and conferences about media, providing an opportunity to assess students' use of appropriate sources. In creating an annotated bibliography, for instance, students were able to justify the use of all sources by providing full bibliographic information and the purpose for the selection of the source; this step was especially important for those sources that were not typically considered scholarly resources, such as social media.

In addition to process-related summative assessments such as the project checkpoints, formative assessment came through peer feedback and self-reflection before the final multimedia text was submitted. Students used a rubric to review each other's stories, reflecting on four elements: introduction, exposition, multimedia, and conclusion. Then, at the end of the project, a self-reflection helped students focus on process and personal growth with questions such as "What do you wish you had done differently?" and "What did you enjoy or least enjoy about this project?" One student wrote in his self-evaluation that creating a story out of facts and balancing that with his desire to please an audience was difficult. This sentiment resonates with what research suggests about sharing stories using digital tools and across various networks. The stories we tell are at once a reflection of our own identity and an

attempt to connect with people whom we imagine to be like us (Marwick and boyd).

PUBLICLY PUBLISHED STUDENT WORK

There was a wide range of student projects, from stories about Area 51, including one on Bob Lazar, the former government employee who claimed to have seen evidence of extraterrestrial life, to a fictional piece called “Silent House” based on research about mental illness, which also included original watercolor artwork. “Silent House” placed as a finalist in the Digital Storymakers contest (Dobrzyn et al.). Other finalists in the contest included “Evil Rising” (Hoff et al.) and the winner of the contest, “Wallis and Edward” (Lung et al.; see Figure 2).

“Wallis and Edward,” a story written by Kylie Lung, Emily Spiller, and Samantha Guerrero about the British king and his romantic involvement with an American divorcee, earned the grand prize in the competition. It begins, “The affair between Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson is the equivalent of a



FIGURE 2.

Kylie Lung, Emily Spiller, and Samantha Guerrero’s “Wallis and Edward,” which included Guerrero’s drawings, won the grand prize in the Digital Storymakers competition.

contemporary romance between a married woman and the world’s biggest celebrity” (Lung et al. 2). Illustrated with pencil drawings by Samantha Guerrero, an art student, “Wallis and Edward” exemplified how literary devices could enhance a well-researched, non-fiction story. Primary sources figured prominently in this piece, such as the use of a quote from Edward’s private secretary to support the assertion that the Royals were reluctant to “hand over the throne” to Edward: “for some hereditary or physiological reason his normal mental development stopped dead when he reached adolescence” (Lung et al. 3). As it turned out, Edward abdicated the British throne to marry Wallis, making for an intriguing story that attracted the attention of the three student writers.

The biggest challenge for the project was time. Students initially struggled with the difference between research for an expository essay and narrative nonfiction. They noted in their feedback that they spent a lot of time on the writing but did not have enough time to devote to the more technical aspects, such as developing media and figuring out the platform to publish, in time for the contest. In keeping with our belief that technology not be the primary focus of the project at the expense of inquiry and writing, we only did a brief overview of the technology for the GG lessons and posted video tutorials for the Creatavist platform. The platform itself was in beta, so many of the students’ issues stemmed from glitches in the website. However, technology issues can cause enormous frustrations for students who are already pressed for time, quality, and up against a “real” publishing deadline.

Of the twenty-eight groups who undertook the project, only two did not finish. Because the grading was based on the writing as part of the process, students were not penalized for incomplete submissions. The personal reflection counted as the culminating grade; if they could articulate what they wished they had done, or could have done with more time, this explanation of the potential contributions to the piece sufficed. For example, one group worked on developing a documentary on hygiene. They were disappointed that they could not enter the contest, but the substantial work they *did* do in research, writing, and planning was documented in this reflection.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

As we both look for future opportunities to engage high school students and their teachers in similar kinds of projects, we are inspired by the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. ACRL argues for a stance where “[s]tudents have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically” (2). The framework offers six guidelines, two of which are critical for English teachers to consider: “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” (highlighting the importance of *all* kinds of sources and their role in knowledge-making across contexts) and “Information Creation as a Process” (noting the highly iterative nature of reading, writing, and inquiry) (see Figure 3).

In retrospect, we think that inviting students to work on smaller chunks of the project over a longer period of time, as well as developing multimedia as part of the writing process, would have eliminated the

mad dash toward publishing. In follow-up conversations about the project, we also discussed the idea of having the research be part of a service learning project—as a way to document field experiences—and of pairing multimedia mentor texts with literature and other narrative nonfiction.

Through the Digital Storymakers project, students familiar with writing a traditional research paper were, instead, forced to have their thinking, reading, and writing disrupted. As they crafted their digital stories, they reconsidered the role of facts, objectivity, and argument. In their reflections, many students said they most enjoyed the research process and seeing their work come together to form a cohesive story. Rethinking research writing as multimedia *storymaking* rendered the “familiar strange,” reinforcing student inquiry while also cultivating important skills for composing using multiple modes. More importantly, the students in Fawn’s classroom were researchers, journalists, and multimedia storytellers with an authentic audience. Writing does not get any more “real” than that. [EU](#)

Frames	Description
Authority Is Constructed and Contextual	Information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.
Information Creation as a Process	Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences.
Information Has Value	Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.
Research as Inquiry	Research is iterative and depends on asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.
Scholarship as Conversation	Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.
Searching as Strategic Exploration	Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.

FIGURE 3.

The Association of College and Research Libraries for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL) offers a framework to consider when designing digital assignments.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

As students read a novel, many important issues from the time period are evident. This unit asks students to focus on one issue as it applies to the novel. Working alone or with a partner, students create artifacts in a variety of genres for a museum exhibit that will demonstrate important facts about the research topic and its significance to viewers. The unit begins with a brief overview of the time period or era before students conduct research using an online tool. They then explore an online, interactive museum to gather ideas for their own exhibits. After reading the novel, they create exhibits using artifacts that represent issues from the novel and then display them for the class. <https://bit.ly/2D1mrPx>