



Meshing the Personal with the Professional: Digital Storytelling in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper chronicles a yearlong journey of learning about digital storytelling and leading the creation of five digital stories within a higher education community. We bring two complementary perspectives to guide this inquiry: as a faculty member in teacher education and as the University of Wisconsin system representative for the Learning Technology Development Council as well as director of our educational technology center. Our passion for the arts, aesthetics and education bring us to extend an inquiry into teacher identity and reflection by connecting our colleagues' stories with the art of digital storytelling. We see its place and value in an academic environment; although not always currently clear, the roots of personal insight permeate the lives of professionals within the academy. Digital storytelling spans the artificial divide between the experiences of the past and our professional identities. The myriad uses of digital storytelling in higher education are explored as a reflective tool for practice, to highlight academic projects, interests or initiatives, and most importantly, to simply reflect on how we are shaped by the stories we live and how we in turn share our diverse identities.

Link to video abstract: <http://gallery.me.com/mfranceswright/100021>

Keywords: digital storytelling, teacher identity, self-study, reflective practitioner.

Our Digital Storytelling Journey Begins

This paper chronicles a yearlong journey of learning, sharing and experiencing the creation of five digital stories within a higher education community. This study yields two complementary perspectives: as a faculty member (Mary) in teacher education and leader for digital storytelling on the University of Wisconsin – River Falls campus and as a representative (Karen) for the University of Wisconsin LTDC (Learning Technology Development Council) and director of the Educational Technology Center. Together, a passion for the arts, aesthetics, communication and education fuel a deep understanding and appreciation for the art of digital storytelling in an academic environment. Dana Atchley, who died in 2000, coined the term, “digital storytelling,” and referred to his “video campfire” as transforming “the oldest of performing roles, the campfire storyteller, and updated it for the 21st century. Dana demonstrated that you could sustain the charm and intimacy of the ancient oral art form of storytelling while painting a backdrop with the magical new palette of digital imagery” (taken from a memorial, <http://www.nextexit.com/memorial/obit.html>). Technology is indeed the new campfire for the digital storyteller and the glow of this campfire has the potential to ignite a global conversation, as listeners/viewers engage from afar.

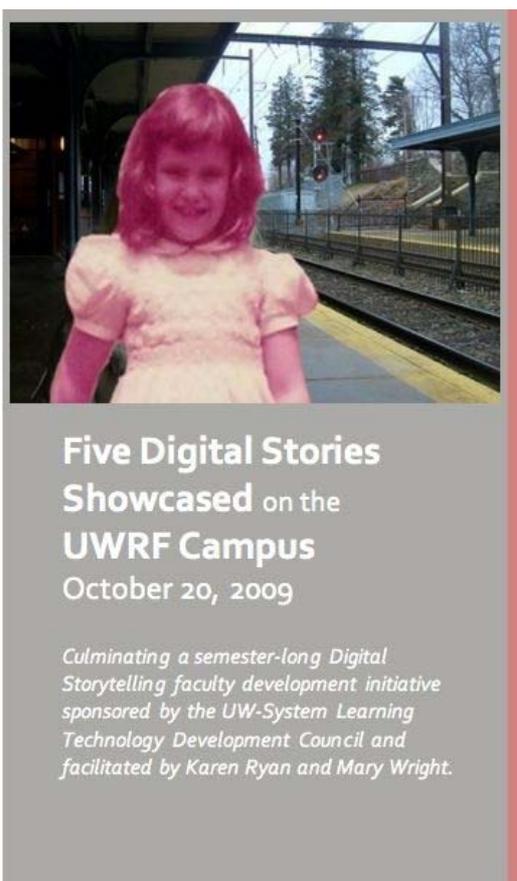


Figure 1. Showcases of Five Digital Stories.

I (Mary) taught language and literacy through the arts as a middle school teacher, often bringing in video response as a format for students to exhibit their understanding. As a doctoral student in literacy education, I created documentary films and digital short films as part of a self-study in coming to know myself more deeply as a teacher. Retracing memories of childhood, my teacher self and my teacher educator self, I used the medium of film in part to “tell” my story.

As an English educator for four years at the University of Minnesota Duluth, I worked with digital web tools for teaching and creating literary blogs for students to post digital videos as a response to literature. As part of what is now known as the “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002), digital tools such as podcasting, wikis, blogs and online photo galleries are tools in the classroom that engage students in critical thinking and creative ways of expressing and exhibiting information. As an English educator, I realize that digital forms of communication are now an integral component of classroom reading, writing and learning.

There is a new authorial voice emerging that Rushkoff (in Richardson, 2006) refers to as a “society of authorship” (p.5). Teaching content area literacy and adolescent literature at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls (UWRF),

digital video cultivates the authorial voice as a creative vehicle in course assignments and expectations. I firmly believe in the power of story to empower faculty members with a clearer understanding of who they are as teachers, researchers and people.

I (Karen) came to the UWRF campus in 1997 to serve as the Director of the Educational Technology Center, a facility which provides teaching/learning and technology support to faculty and students on the University of Wisconsin-River Falls campus. My prior multimedia experience includes teaching Media Design, 35mm Photography and Photo Essay and Layout in the Communication Department at St. Louis University. I also directed a Media Center that served faculty and students, and taught Instructional Technology and Desktop Publishing at Harris-Stowe State University. Since 1999, I have directed student members of the Technology Leadership Cadre, who provide “just in time” personalized technology assistance to faculty and students on the UWRF campus. From 1998 through 2009, I have enjoyed the role of UW-System campus representative to the Learning Technology Development Council, from here on referred to as the LTDC. “The Mission of the LTDC is to encourage System-wide collaboration and individual campus efforts which promote professional development in the effective use of learning technologies and explore new teaching and learning applications of existing and emerging technologies.” (<http://www.uwsa.edu/olit/ltdc/>)

In the fall of 2008, the *University of Wisconsin Digital Storytelling in Higher Education Project's* goal was bringing together faculty and technology experts from each campus to learn about the process of digital storytelling. This first annual UW-System LTDC conference regarding digital storytelling was entitled, “*Digital Storytelling in Higher Education: It's Not Just for Kindergarten Anymore.*” The title suggests that there is a resistance to storytelling as part of the academic milieu. The questions guiding the study were, “What are the uses of digital storytelling in higher education?” and “Will there be a place for digital storytelling in the academy?” The DST faculty leaders were expected to return to the individual campuses to inform, recruit and engage fellow faculty members in telling their own digital stories.

The University of Wisconsin Digital Storytelling Initiative

In November of 2008, we attended a three-day workshop at the University of Wisconsin Madison. As in the story of Noah's Ark, we came two by two, one LTDC representative from each campus (Karen) and a chosen faculty representative from each campus (Mary). There at UW-Madison, leaders in the emerging field of digital storytelling explored the place of narrative as a valuable tool in higher education. Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California and author of “*Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*” (2006) who led the three-day workshop, taught us the process of leading a digital storytelling workshop. Roger Schank, author of “*Tell Me A Story: Narrative and Intelligence*” (1990), presented his views regarding storytelling's place in education.

There are many reasons for creating a digital story as seen by viewing the diverse array of stories from the Center for Digital Storytelling's website: <http://storycenter.org/index1.html>. While the stories of social justice, stories from academia, stories of personal change, stories of philosophy as well as those of reflective practitioners differed in subject, perspective and knowledge base, they all shared qualities of good digital storytelling. A digital story is like a poem; it is brief, essential and a crystallized experience expressed in narrative, image, sound and motion. The reflexive process of writing, rewriting and reflecting energizes the storyteller's vision. As he/she conjures and selects images, photographs, video clips and music, multi-dimensional layers of meaning enrich the emerging story. Although the digital storyteller in

higher education addresses professional identity, the writer/storyteller's voice is authentic to the extent that it is essentially personal in its perspective.

We learned from digital storytelling by experiencing the process. Joe Lambert taught us to scaffold the story using seven elements of good storytelling: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of voice, the power of the soundtrack, and economy. Narrative economy became a central focus as Lambert (2006) explains, "Storytelling with images means consciously economizing language in relation to the narrative that is provided by the juxtaposition of images" (57).

Story concepts are written on 4 x 6 index cards, using Joe Lambert's four C's of storytelling: *Context, Crisis, Change and Closure*. This exercise takes the listener/viewer to the moment by jumping into the context of the story. Using this simple storytelling tool, we saw how personal voice emerges immediately, beckoning the listener to pay attention. Listening to the voices of our colleagues as they read their stories illuminated how this deceptively simple device empowers the writer to launch a genuine story concept. Every good story contains some crisis or conflict that institutes change, has a resolution and, hence, closure. For the faculty member uneasy about writing from a personal perspective, writing on a small index card eases tension. As Lambert (2006) suggests, "The card is small. It is finite. It seems possible, perhaps even easy to fill. So for the novice, it is saying just get this much down, and we'll work from there" (34). The seventh element is pacing, and we were reminded that just as in natural conversation, stories have pregnant pauses, a vocal pace that invites the listener to lend an ear to the story being told.

As the index cards were completed and story concepts shared, Joe Lambert modeled the story circle (Lambert, 2006; Ohler, 2002) as a safe environment, a place of mutual respect and trust in which participants were empowered to share very personal narratives. After active listening, story circle members provided collaborative editorial feedback. Implied within the story circle is the intrinsic value of peer review: to share what is heard, note what is confusing and suggest images or sounds to help the author with the artistic layering of his or her story. Witnessing firsthand the magical power of shared stories, we realized that in a world filled with superficial dialogue as daily exchange, the story circle validates the voice of the individual.

The three-day workshop culminated in a hands-on multimedia practicum involving digitizing images, selecting audio and video content, exploring special effects and creating titles and credits. Pondering a timeline for unfolding our digital storytelling project on campus, we thought we would first introduce the idea to faculty, invite the submission of story concepts, hold a Story Circle and see the project through to production with a three-day multimedia workshop.

Leaving the University of Wisconsin – Madison campus, our goal was to bring the digital storytelling project to the UWRF community by engaging interest, inviting participants and supporting colleagues in telling digital stories. Easing the technology burden, our campus offered "just in time" and customized technology support provided by Karen's specially trained student team, the TLC (Technology Leadership Cadre). Inspired by the conference, we were confident that our dual areas of expertise (technology and literacy education) would serve our campus well. I (Mary) prepared to lead the faculty in this storytelling project, and I (Karen) organized all aspects of multimedia support including the training and supervision of the students in the TLC.

Bringing It Home

In January 2009, we developed a plan of action for our UWRf digital storytelling project. I, (Karen) wanted to prepare the members of the TLC with a comprehensive understanding of the digital storytelling process so that they could better support the faculty later in the semester. The TLC students assist both students and faculty with integrating technology in a teaching and learning context. On February 20, 2009, we conducted a *Digital Storytelling in Higher Education* informational session open to the campus community. In February, 20 colleagues found time to attend the session and out of the 20, 10 story concepts were submitted for consideration. Our final working group consisted of five faculty members and one outstanding student who served on the university's Sustainability Committee and was co-president of the campus Eco Club. Next, we were to meet for a two hour Story Circle in April of 2009.

A testament to the power of storytelling was the fact that all the participants voluntarily sacrificed a Saturday morning in April to assemble for the Story Circle. As we learned firsthand, digital stories have personal roots, and storytellers are vulnerable as they read stories for the first time. The storytellers have what McDrury and Alterio (2002) call "primary ownership," the understanding that the tellers own their stories, and thus within the Story Circle, it is imperative that the listeners "have some sense of empathy with the tellers" (156-157). To break the ice, I (Mary) talked about the sensitive process of sharing stories, the importance of deep listening and giving appropriate feedback. As the first writers began reading, the silence in the room signaled the mesmerizing impact of the personal storyteller. There is a sacredness to sharing personal stories and a risk in opening up one's personal voice to the public. At first, the participants exuded a certain timidity or reluctance, but as the stories were read and the voices were heard, a spirit of trust elicited constructive editorial feedback. Excitement escalated as the group talked about what they "heard," "saw" and "felt" while listening. Suggestions for imagery, word choice, music and moving images spurred a spirited conversation about ways to further refine the stories. The next and final step in the project timeline would be the three-day multimedia workshop scheduled for June. Storytellers had two months to gather artifacts (photos, images, artwork), choose the music and finalize the narrative.

Finishing Touches: The Three-Day Multi-media Production Workshop

We had been in touch by e-mail and phone with the storytellers since the April Story Circle, helping with revisions and ideas. In mid-June, the group arrived as promised, armed with final drafts of their stories, artifacts, digital images and music selections to accompany their narratives. Just as the first few minutes of the Story Circle had shown us, there again was an air of uncertainty and discomfort. The small group of five (one had dropped out due to a family emergency) now looked to us and the members of TLC to facilitate the final telling of their stories.

We began by pairing up and listening to stories, using our ear to polish the craft of language, reminding participants of the quality of their voice as being integral to the authenticity of the story. Reminding the participants of the natural flow of voice, we asked them to pretend they were addressing a one-person audience and not to rush through or over-dramatize, but instead to read the narrative as if you were actually telling your story. The final readings were transformative and emotionally engaging. The work resulted in five uniquely powerful stories connecting personal with professional knowledge. At the core of all the stories was the message that personal experiences in life help to shape a professional identity. The diverse range of meaningful writing and the variety of perspectives surprised and delighted us.

Five Digital Stories: Five Distinct Ties to Teacher Identity

Unlike traditional oral storytelling, digital stories are a multimedia art form layered with a vocal narrative, music and both static and moving images. In addition, they can be archived and accessed by an unlimited audience. Digital stories are best understood through viewing and listening, so web links follow each story along with a brief description of the authorial voice. Even though each writer tells his or her own unique story, there are common elements among the five. Of the five stories, three were memoirs, two were tributes to people who had a major impact on their professional identities, two shared a sustainability thread and one was both a memoir and philosophical exploration of adolescence. We noticed that five themes emerged: *Etchings in Adolescence*, *Personal Role Models*, *Professional Role Models*, *A Sense of Place* and *Dual Identities*.



Digital Storytelling in Higher Education

A 2008-2009 UW-System wide LTDC (Learning Technology Development Council) initiative, began at UW-Madison in the fall of 2008, and was launched in January 2009 on the UW-River Falls campus by Karen Ryan, LTDC campus representative and Mary Wright, campus leader for digital storytelling. This semester-long faculty development project culminated June 2009 with a three-day video production workshop supported by student members of the Technology Leadership Cadre.

Special thanks to:

- The UW-System Learning Technology Development Council for sponsoring this faculty development opportunity .
- UW-Madison for bringing the expertise of Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling, and Roger Schank as keynote speakers for the three day Digital Storytelling in Higher Education training workshop in November of 2008.
- The TLC (Technology Leadership Cadre) for providing hours of individualized multimedia production support.

View Stories:
<http://www.uwrf.edu/dots/tlt/digitalstorytelling.php>

Figure 2. Digital Storytelling in Higher Education.

Levi Super Slims – Etchings in Adolescence

A reluctance in telling was clear among all five. A consummate oral storyteller, the social studies/educational psychology educator selected a story he orally told students nearly every year. His story, *Levi Super Slims*, reflects upon understandings acquired in adolescence in addition to the platform that provides for the teaching of adolescents. While addressing a universal adolescent rite of passage, his story hinges on a 12-year-old's identity based on a fixation with obtaining a pair of Levi Super Slims to attract the girl of his dreams. Using pictures from his wife's high school yearbook, the fantasy girl becomes replaced with the woman he married. The dance of love/life is symbolically represented with a brief video clip of this professor dancing through stacks of the university library to the narration, "Where I've been waltzing ever since." As a professor of educational psychology, he is able to use archival family photographs and music from the era to highlight both his personal and professional voice. This digital story, [SEE web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720463>] masterfully conveys the concept of adolescent angst and the pressure to fit in.

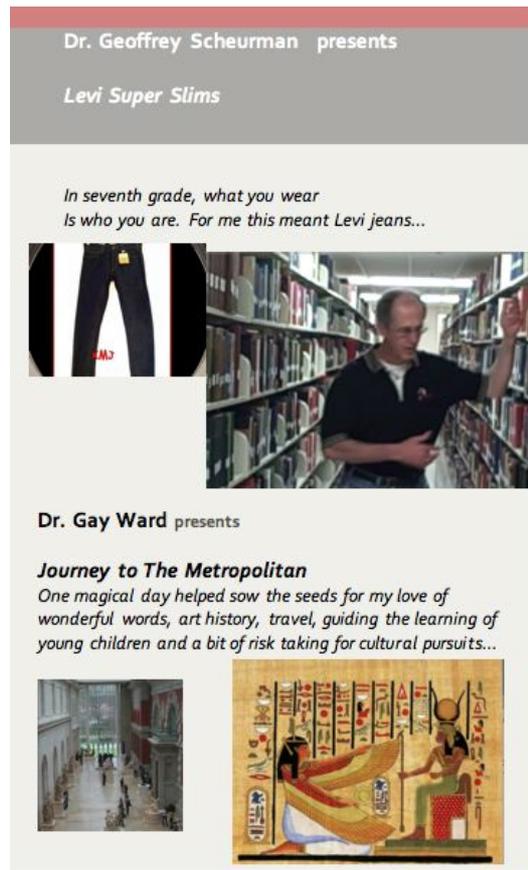


Figure 3. Levi Super Slims.

Personal Role Models

An early childhood education teacher recounted a childhood memory in, *A Trip To the Metropolitan*, which deeply shaped her professional identity. An 80-year-old friend of the family with whom she is still in contact returned to school for a second masters degree and took herself on an excursion to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. This experience is crystallized for us in the digital storytelling as memoir, making a clear connection to her lifelong interest in art, cultural pursuits and learning. Her story began as a very brief vignette: [Web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720479>]. Rewriting and retelling her story through narrative, photography and music, she meticulously aligned her narrative with carefully selected archival images representing memories in vivid detail. According to Mitchell & Weber (1998), almost nothing has been written about the significance of the culture of childhood in relation to teacher identity and teacher education. The tenacious thread of experience that holds and stores memories allows us to model ourselves after those who captivate our souls and stretch our imaginations. This story conjures those exemplary people in our lives that helped shape our teacher, artist and researcher spirits.

Professional Role Models

The director of our Principal Licensure Program composed a tribute to a man who forever influenced her concept of school leadership. Her story, *Jerry's Story: Servant Leader*, focused on concrete examples of the role of the servant leader within a school, which addresses special student needs. Her story was never turned in as a digital narrative; it remained handwritten and only minor changes were made prior to her arrival at the workshop. Choices for symbols

to convey emotion and meaning were very deliberate and critical decisions for the storyteller. She physically returned to the site of the story to take photographs that could visually represent the poignant memory that took place over 20 years ago. Her story describes the loss of a consummate “servant leader” who cared about his faculty in emotional, spiritual and professional ways. Up until this time, this particular storyteller found technology daunting. However, with the “just in time” and respectful support provided by the TLC, her uneasiness surrounding unfamiliar technology tools was assuaged. Getting past her reluctance, she created a seamless video that would help her students appreciate the concept of a principal in the role of “servant leader.” Once again, this very personal story [see web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720484>] finds a place within the professional scope of this professor’s world. The imprint of those who stand before us as professional role models is universal in the telling of who we are and how we teach.



Figure 4. *The Land Tells Us.*

A Sense of Place

What are the places and spaces that increase our understanding of what it is to be human and engage in a human science such as education? Coming from our university outreach center and working with land use specialists in the area and around the state, this story, *The Land Tells Us*, reflects on a sense of place and ties to the land that area farmers had experienced. Bringing forth narrative voices of a husband and wife as they share memories of struggling to keep the land they love and work on, this digital story presents interviews and faded photographs of the land as it was long ago. Fresh new pictures of the same land today show the transition through time. As an historical piece, the story [web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720489>] informs the viewer/listener,

chronicling a lifetime of work. In a university where sustainability has come to stand as one of our core themes, this digital story also speaks to the storyteller's professional field of land use. Coming to the Story Circle with many ideas for imagery, sound effects and music, the piece evokes the importance of places that shape our personal and professional identities.

Dual Identities

A student brings out a personal journey by bridging his love of hockey with a new understanding of sustainability. He traces his development from the days of growing up and playing hockey in rural Manitoba to his carefree days as a college student at Northland College in Wisconsin, where a strange encounter with a "hippie" type introduced him to a new passion, ecology. As president of the Eco Club on the UWRF campus, Bo's initial story focused strictly on sustainability. The Story Circle's editorial feedback broadened his vision as he discovered that it was really the value of the dual identity, his love of hockey and the natural world that labeled him as "an eco jock." After several revisions, his story went from strictly having an environmental focus to the people, places and experiences that shaped this identity [see web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720475>]. This story focuses on a shared love for both ecology and hockey as the primary determinants of a life path. Just as in our life experiences, the intersection of the arts and our evolving pedagogy are inextricably connected.

Final Thoughts

From the start of this initiative, we noticed a symbiotic relationship between those fluent in the use of technology tools and the storyteller's imperative to tell a story. The roots of personal insight permeate the lives of professionals within the academy. Digital storytelling spans the artificial divide between the experiences of the past and our professional identities. There is a recursive process to writing and reading narrative stories that moves the writer to think in a multi-dimensional way. Just as Clendenin et al. (2006) recognized while co-composing a relational research text, we saw how the digital storytelling process: "... scaffolded new identity threads within us as well as new wonders and hopes about ways in which relational narrative inquiry, both in the living and in the telling, holds promise for further understanding interruptions in stories to live by as well as the deeply interwoven lives of teachers, children, families, administrators, and researchers as our lives meet on school landscapes" (39).

Our project was successful because of immediate access to technology tools, respectful expertise and enthusiasm for what Ohler (2008) calls the fourth R in education: "Art has indeed become the fourth R, a literacy in a very practical sense, as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic" (56). The digital storyteller becomes keenly attuned to the critical relationship of word, image and sound, bringing the audience directly to the moment of the experience.

It has been almost a year since this initiative was launched. On October 20, 2009, we hosted a "red carpet premiere" [see Fig. 1] honoring the five digital storytellers with a public viewing and celebration. On October 28-30, 2009, we gathered again at the University of Wisconsin - Madison campus for the LTDC Fall Conference: *The Artistry of Engagement: Reaching Learners in the Age of Technology Workshop*. As an invited panelist, I (Mary) co-led a discussion with three other faculty representatives in a session titled, "*Ripple Effect: Embracing Authentic Learning and Digital Storytelling in Higher Education*." The title of this session intimates momentum within the academy. Storytelling is not just for kindergarten anymore; it has been

expressed, interpreted and well received by some of our most esteemed colleagues. We reflect on our collective videos as we ponder the myriad uses of digital storytelling in higher education: as a reflective tool for practice, to highlight academic projects, interests or initiatives, or to simply reflect on how we are shaped by the stories we live and in turn share our diverse identities. We recognize how professional paths are influenced by personal experience and that there are more stories to be told. We believe that the ripple effect of digital storytelling will reach others who wish to affirm the vital link between the personal story and the professional life.

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 - The Land Tells Us web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720489>
 - My Journey as an Eco-Jock web link: <http://blip.tv/file/2720475>