TECHNOLOGY WHITEPAPERS

Digital Storytelling

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What is digital storytelling?

Digital storytelling is the practice of using software tools to craft a narrative composed of a mixture of audio and graphics. There are a wide variety of forms, but the archetypal form has a voiceover telling a tale, as one image blends into the next. It's a form of digital media production that can incorporate full-motion video, still images, or some other digitized content, typically blended into a personal narrative, in order to tell a story or present an idea. (Think Ken Burns and his famous Civil War documentary.) In higher education, digital stories tend to be on the short side, around two to ten minutes in length. Storytelling is an ancient practice. Digital storytelling is an extension of the ancient art of storytelling that utilizes the tools commonly available in our digital age. Similar to "narrative" or "argument," it is an extremely flexible modality that can be applied in countless ways in one's teaching.

What is the value of digital storytelling?

Digital storytelling empowers students to seek their voices and to craft a narrative. The multimodal work enables a variety of strengths to come to the fore that might not be used in more traditional academic work. Students report that digital storytelling helps them become better writers, editors and storytellers. They become better at articulating argument and narrative. They also report that being capable digital editors is satisfying and empowering.

How is digital storytelling used at Vassar?

Faculty in Vassar's French and Japanese departments have assigned their students to use digital storytelling techniques to create digital "books," as exercises in language mastery. Anthropology professor Candice Swift assigned her students the task of creating digital stories as a form of digital ethnography, utilizing methodology taught in her class. Education professor Erin McCloskey is an enthusiastic advocate for using digital storytelling in her field and developing the voices of adolescent learners.

Many classes use digital stories as alternatives to traditional in-class presentations. Prof. Mark Cleaveland asks his Evolutionary Psychology student groups to create digital stories to summarize their research projects. The professor wants students to have the opportunity to become experts in an area related to the subject matter. He also wants the students to share that knowledge with the rest of the class, but there just isn't enough class time for each group to present. The digital story presentation solves this problem by "canning" the presentation. It then becomes an assignment for all of the students to watch all of the presentations outside of class time. There are a couple more advantages. Presenters can provide media-rich summaries of their research, which tend to be more stimulating and engaging than traditional slide presentations. Also, if during the recording the narrator makes a mistake, one simply re-records! Stage fright jitters are taken out of the equation, thus putting student expertise in the best possible light for sharing with their peers. This worked well for the 2019 Media Studies symposium, where the seniors created digital story videos summarizing their senior capstone projects. During the symposium, they presented the videos, followed by Q&A. The students were poised and relaxed and the event was very successful.

How does one create a digital story?

You can create digital stories on your smartphone, a tablet, a laptop or a desktop computer. You can create digital stories with your own photos or videos, or remix media you find online. There are many software platforms that can be used to create digital stories. Any video editing tool can be used to create a series of images mixed with narration and possibly music. At Vassar, Final Cut Pro or Premiere is often used, but iMovie is perfectly adequate. Here's a minute-long story made with Final Cut Pro: https://vimeo.com/76155342 Some nice photographs were enhanced with some narration to tell the story of a child's first day of school. A fair-use song was added, as was a template for the opening scene and the credits. The finished file was uploaded to Vimeo.

What are the downsides?

It does take time to rethink a curriculum to utilize digital tools. Larger projects require more scaffolding, which can be a problem if students leave things to the last minute. Class workshops, useful for training students in the required skills, can take time away from other instruction. Sometimes students get frustrated by technical issues or question how video editing relates to the subject matter.

How do I get started?

WeVideo is a neat online browser-based platform where you can upload images and mix in music and video. iMovie on iOS and OSX devices is great and simple tool. If you search "digital storytelling" in the Mac Store or on Google Play, you'll find a bevy of free tools with which to experiment.
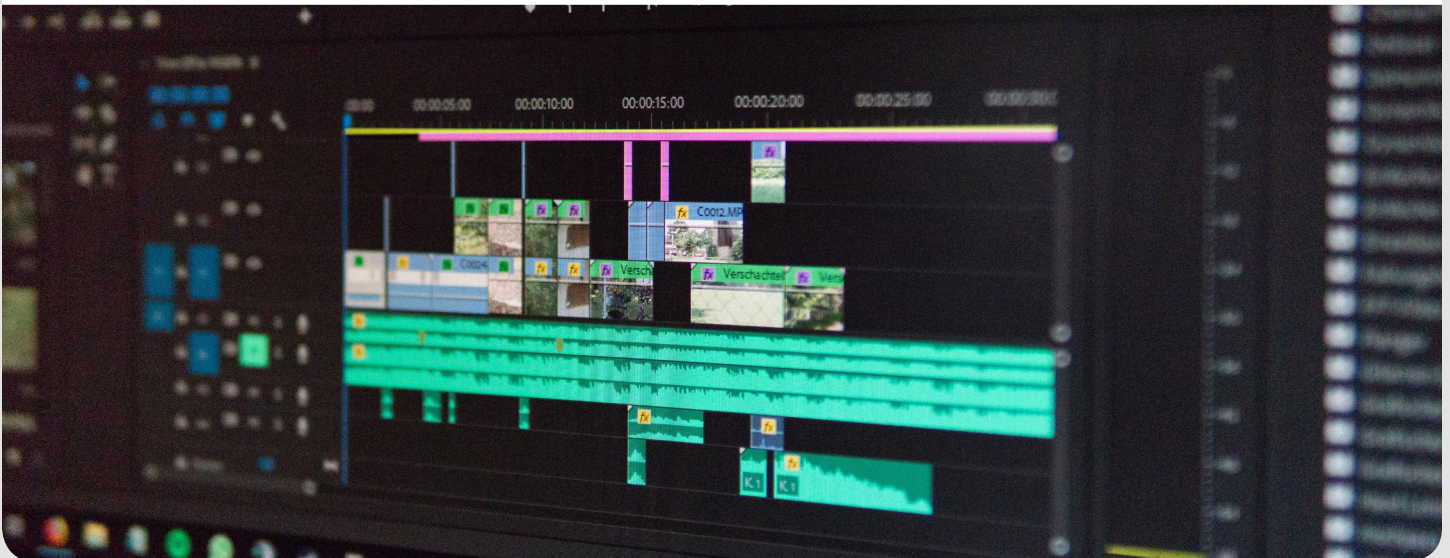
Where do I go from here?

Email acs@vassar.edu and we will work with you to develop a great plan to have digital storytelling support your learning objectives.

The possibilities are endless!