Digital Storytelling:
A Beneficial Tool for Large Survey Courses in History

Julie de Chantal
Georgia Southern University

EVERY SEMESTER, instructors of general education survey classes in history struggle with the same questions as they rewrite their syllabi: How can I get my students to engage more deeply into writing and research? How can I help them develop their problem solving and critical thinking skills? How can I make history more interesting to non-history majors? The task is particularly daunting in a large-class setting where sixty or more students sit in an auditorium, especially if the instructor does not have the luxury of a teaching assistant. In classes of this size, it is practically impossible to provide detailed feedback on each student's writing, or to guide them through the process of original research. I have spoken with instructors who avoid assigning a research component in large survey classes because they do not feel that they can provide the level of support that their students would need in order to achieve successful outcomes. As a result, most large history survey courses lack important components that are more easily incorporated into a smaller lecture or seminar setting.

This paper argues that using digital storytelling in large survey classes allows instructors to add a manageable research component to

their courses while helping students to better fulfill learning outcomes associated with higher-order thinking in Bloom's taxonomy (analyze, evaluate, create). The digital storytelling process—with historical research, the production of a detailed script, storyboards, and short documentary-style presentation—allows students to hone their critical thinking skills, develop their visual and digital literacy skills, and improve their writing skills, all while deepening their engagement with historical narratives.

I have used the model proposed in this paper for the past five years in both lower- and upper-division classes that enrolled between 60 to 120 students. This model introduces students to historical research, allows for supervision of their work throughout the project, and incorporates detailed instructor and peer feedback as the project progresses. The digital storytelling projects offer opportunities for students to present the tangible results of their research efforts—a video of four to five minutes—to the entire class, engaging their peers with their research material in a way that is not possible with a traditional written paper, without the anxiety or stress that typically accompanies an oral presentation.

Background

As general education instructor, I often work with students who have no interest in history as a discipline. Many students admit shamelessly at the beginning of the semester that they "hate" history, often because they found their high school history courses difficult, dry, or as one student described, "lobotomizing." They spoke of instructors who required them to memorize and regurgitate dates and events from their textbooks, yet offered no context with which to connect to the material. Situations like this foster the development of a fixed mindset where students believe that they are not good at history and have little hope to improve.[1] As a result, students who are not pursuing history as a major often believe that the discipline adds little, if any, benefit to their primary academic or career goals. They view a general education course in history as just another box to be ticked in a long list of course requirements.

As instructors, we try to find new and original ways to make history more engaging to our students, to foster connections to source material, and to show that the skills developed through the study

of history are transferable to nearly all disciplines. For example, I assign an oral history project where students interview an older family member, typically a grandparent or someone of their grandparents' generation. This assignment helps my students to develop historical empathy, understand how historical events shaped their own family's personal history, and often deepen relationships between themselves and their elders. For another assignment, I ask my students to blog about the course materials throughout the semester. This assignment helps them develop their writing skills in a digital setting while sharing their personal thoughts about the material with their peers. In a following semester, I took the blog idea a step further with a "BuzzFeed" project, asking my students to create scholarly content for a non-scholarly audience by posting it on the popular social media site.[2] While none of the students' project posts "went viral" or received the sought-after "trending" mark, the thrill of receiving feedback from a non-scholarly audience rewarded many of the groups in my class.

These projects not only allowed my students to see that history could be interesting (let alone useful), but also offered them an opportunity to learn new skills applicable to the digital world. In addition, the projects helped students to think about the ways in which we can shape the information that we produce, and how this information, in turn, shapes the views of others. However, I still felt that my students' engagement with historical material was limited. Although they had produced a primary source through the creation of the oral interview, they rarely had a chance to work with historical documents, analyze documents of their own choosing, or visit archives. The experience for the blogging and article projects was similarly limited to the primary source analysis assigned at the beginning of the semester or to other documents that I provided to them in class. As a way to bridge this gap in engagement and provide my students with a deeper understanding of historical methods, I turned to digital storytelling.

I chose this assignment because research has shown that digital storytelling, as well as the use of digital technologies in a classroom setting, enhances students' "engagement, achievement and motivation."[3] According to Najat Smeda, Eva Dakich, and Nalin Sharda, the use of technology-based assignments increased student motivation and engagement at all levels of application. Their study found that even upper-level high school students, who were often

disengaged from school materials and ready to move on to other pursuits, were highly motivated throughout the digital storytelling process. I have found that this translated similarly in my own classrooms, where first-year and upper-level university students were both equally engaged and motivated through the entire project.

Digital Storytelling

In and of itself, digital storytelling can be defined as "storytelling that is conducted using digital technology as the medium or method of expression, in particular using digital media in a computer-network environment."[4] Digital storytelling can take several forms, including web-based stories, hypertexts, podcasts, video clips, or even computer games.[5] These methods use multimedia resources to frame a narrative imagined by the author. In *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, Joe Lambert and Brooke Hessler highlight seven components of good digital storytelling.[6] (1) A good story is self-revelatory, as if "the author is aware of a new insight that is being shared in the story." (2) It is presented in a personal or first-person voice in a way that conveys an emotional connection between the subject and author. (3) It is "about a lived experience," in that it relates a real moment. (4) It primarily incorporates photos rather than moving images to pace the narration of the experience. (5) It includes a soundtrack that adds to the "meaning and impact to the story." (6) It is restrained in both length and design. (7) Finally, a good digital story emphasizes intention. Short by design, the stories privilege the "Process over product," honoring the "individual's process of authorship, and resulting control over the context."[7] To Lambert and Hessler, digital storytelling is closer to the production of documentaries than it is to journalism; in digital storytelling practices, the author remains central to the story in its creation and interpretation through their own voice, while journalists attempt to remain unbiased in the production their stories.[8]

Breakdown of the Assignment

The digital storytelling assignment that I have developed for my courses consists of the production of a short documentary of four to five minutes in length, using video footage, images, animations,

music, and narration. I asked my students to form groups of four to five people with whom they would work for the duration of the semester. Each group could choose their own topic for their documentary, so long as it answered a pertinent historical question, showcased primary and secondary sources, and did not simply rehash the materials discussed in class.

As a semester-long project, the digital storytelling assignment is best managed in phases. Our Spring semester began during the penultimate week of January, and students were given one month to form their groups. To facilitate this process, I created a discussion forum within our online learning management system where students could post "ads" to connect with their classmates. One forum thread allowed students seeking groups to promote themselves and their skills. Another allowed groups seeking additional partners to voice their needs. Students took advantage of the forums and promoted their candidacies in all sorts of ways. Some mentioned their computer skills and their ability to handle the technical side of the project. History majors discussed their ability to conduct historical research. Others highlighted their writing skills. One student even claimed that she "underst[ood] the importance of snacks & ma[de] dope dip." Needless to say, she was one of the first students to find a group. In their post-project feedback, students related the importance of the forum in allowing them to meet new people in the class, and they recommended that the system be kept in the future. As each group formed, a representative from that group submitted a form through our learning management system that identified the group's members, their e-mail addresses, and their initial idea for a project topic. Having this information in a single location made it much easier for me to communicate with specific groups and their members throughout the project.

Our first class in March was a mandatory workshop that helped the students to familiarize themselves with the digital storytelling process. I began the workshop by distributing a packet that served as a foundational resource for the groups to refer to as the project progressed. The document provided an overview of the project phases, a model of the digital storytelling process, detailed requirements for their research proposal, and a list of helpful online and university-based resources. The first section of the packet set the outline and learning outcomes of the project—researching an

individual topic; gathering and analyzing primary and secondary sources; asking historical questions and crafting a historical argument; writing a research proposal; creating storyboards; using digital tools to produce the documentary; working in a group of peers; and, finally, creating an audio-visual documentary of four to five minutes. The document also explained the difference between a primary and a secondary source, detailed the steps that the students needed to follow for each project phase, and discussed attribution and copyright rules. The second section focused on the "Digital Storytelling Process" and described the "Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling."[9] The third section discussed the mechanics of the project for our class. It established the guidelines for the research proposal, breaking it down by paragraph (introduction, questions and argument, research to be completed, conclusion, bibliography). The packet also contained a list of links to resources available on script and storyboard writing, where to borrow equipment at the university, and the university's policy on copyrights. I included links to our university's archives, the state's archives, and the city archives, as well as lists of online archives and databases that my students could access, such as the *Historical Boston Globe*, *Historical New York Times*, or the Boston Public Library Pictorial Archives, to name a few.[10] The last portion of the workshop packet contained activity sheets to be filled out in class as a group during the workshop.

After walking my students through the document packet, I presented examples of successful digital storytelling projects. A few were taken from the "Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling" website hosted by Bernard Robin at the University of Houston, and others were student projects from previous years, shown with their permission.[11] Using the activity sheets, students wrote down the basic information about each short documentary (title of the documentary, authors/producers, topic of the presentation). They were then asked to think about the questions that the authors posed as a premise for their work, discuss the audio and visual materials used in the video, and offer their overall impression of the effectiveness of the piece. The documentaries exemplified strengths and weaknesses in the digital storytelling process that I wanted my students to keep in mind when creating their own stories. For example, the power of the audio-visual components of the documentary, the importance of pacing, and the ways that emotion can be used to keep the audience captivated.

One year, I presented a documentary from a previous class that showed how humor could serve as a vehicle for more serious questions. In a project titled "The Origins of the Masshole," the students used snippets of a *Saturday Night Live* mock-Dunkin' Donuts commercial featuring Casey Affleck.[12] The outrageous video illustrated the characteristics of the "Masshole" stereotype—an uneducated boisterous Massachusetts native who has little respect for authority or other people. They also used the popular Dropkick Murphys song "I'm Shipping Up to Boston" to lead into their documentary. A number of students were familiar with the mock-commercial, the song, or both. The others simply related to the concepts shown in the video. The authors' combination of music and humor proved to be an effective means of maintaining engagement with their audience. Another year, I presented a student-made piece titled "Donald Duck: Quacked Open," which followed the story of the iconic Disney character as an element of World War II propaganda. In this documentary, students used Donald Duck to illustrate the struggles of those who were drafted in the Armed Forces during World War II. Students loved the documentary due to its approachable nature, and, of course, the familiarity of the main character. Overall, the digital storytelling workshop set the stage for the entire project. In the last week of March, groups turned in their preliminary research proposals.

Digital storytelling has been described as "encapsulat[ing] the important pedagogical principles of restatement and translation that are central to helping students engage difficult material."[13] After combing through a large quantity of primary and secondary sources, my students needed to find a way to synthesize these materials into a story that would be both interesting and digestible. They not only had to handle the material, but also had to transform it to reach their intended audience—their peers—which differs from their usual audience—their instructor. In this sense, they must evaluate how much their peers know about the topic and then adapt their narrative accordingly.

Narrowing down research topics and research questions were by far the greatest challenges for my students. A few groups initially chose topics that were much too broad for the project, such as the history of music in America from the foundation of the colonies to the present. Obviously, this would be an unmanageable topic to

present in a four- to five-minute documentary. Others chose topics that were outside the realm of historical topics, such as proving that the moon landing never happened. In a similar way, other topics, like the Boston Marathon bombings or the Ferguson riots, occurred too recently to be viable for historical analysis. The proposal stage also posed additional challenges to students who lacked a background in American history or were not used to thinking in terms of narratives. Finally, there were students who simply could not decide on a topic in which they were genuinely interested.

Over the next two weeks, I scheduled thirty-minute meetings with a majority of the groups to discuss their research proposals and their project plan.[14] We talked about their personal interests, brainstormed ideas along those interests, and worked together to produce a few initial historical questions. I then guided the groups toward potential primary and secondary sources for their topics. One of the groups initially was interested in the prohibition era (1918-1933), but could not find a good entry point into the story. During our group discussion, a group member mentioned the connection between bootlegging and the creation of NASCAR racing, which proved to be a great trigger to kick-start their research. Another group started out with only a general interest about the role of women in the Civil War. Our brainstorming session led to discussion about sexually transmitted infections, and, ultimately, to their discovery of the legalization of prostitution in Tennessee during the war.[15] I helped them think about how they could create a narrative around the implementation of such a progressive measure more than 150 years ago.

Group meetings were exceptionally fruitful, and motivated students to rewrite their research proposals to reflect their new perspectives on their topics. The meetings also helped me to build connections with individual students early in the semester, which is often difficult to do in a large-class setting. I was able to match names to faces more quickly, which improved student participation within the classroom. The overall class dynamic changed as students saw that, as an instructor, I was there to help them improve upon their work and not simply fail them because they misunderstood a concept. One student wrote to me at the end of the semester, thanking me for "working so closely with [his] group." He added that "it was something most college professors do not do and [that

he] really enjoyed it." After the initial group meetings, students felt less intimidated about approaching me and began to take advantage of my office hours to discuss class materials.

In mid-April, students submitted their scripts and storyboards. This step proved relatively simple, due in part to the strength of the revised research proposals and the amount of research that they had completed at this point. However, I found that it was important to emphasize the distinction between the script and storyboard, as many students tended to combine the two. The script includes all of the narrative elements (narration, emotions, type of music), while the storyboards are a representation of what would be displayed on screen (sequence of images, videos, action). Students (who had already found the images, videos, and music that they planned to use) were largely quite comfortable with creating their scripts and storyboards. They could "see" the story that they wanted to tell and had a sense of how they would organize it. However, this was not always the case. One group, whose topic centered on America's fascination with outlaws and known criminals (Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Al Capone, or Whitey Bulger), had an original story to tell and had collected a lot of source material. However, they struggled with finding a way to present their ideas coherently. I met with them several times, offered different ways to improve their story, and pointed out areas lacking in information. I provided these second and third (or fourth) meetings to struggling groups as an opportunity for them to receive more feedback on their projects and to help them achieve good results on their final presentations.

Despite the digital nature of the final product, writing remains a crucial component of the digital storytelling process. As the project progressed, each group revised their research proposal and script several times based upon my feedback. With each iteration, the quality of their writing improved substantially and became more nuanced, due in part to the tangible nature of the project. Students could "feel" the impact of their writing as they superposed their narration to their chosen images and footage. Historian and digital humanities scholar Michael Coventry argues that digital storytelling "allows students to illustrate theoretical constructs—and sometimes to engage with them more deeply—as they show those constructs in action."[16] I observed this to be the case with my students, as they demonstrated a growing comprehension of the materials used in the

creation of their documentary, sometimes surprising me with the originality and depth of their analyses.

The use of computers, software, cameras, and microphones to create the final portion of the digital storytelling project encourages the development of "twenty-first-century skills"—media and technology literacy in particular—in order to achieve the learning outcomes.[17] These skills, Oksana Duchak argues, are as necessary as "textual literacy" in the twenty-first century, and allow students to develop visual literacy, the "ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages."[18] As consumers of media, my students have to constantly "read" visual representations and analyze images in order to understand their messages. In digital storytelling, my students' role shifted from being consumers to being content creators. As Tiziana Saponaro notes, the creative ways that students incorporate technology into their digital stories can be the "most interesting aspect" of these projects.[19] Through the use of music and images, my students were able to convey complex emotional layers that would not be easily translated into words; their digital story became a vehicle for emotions.

Students presented their completed documentaries during the last two classes of the semester. Initially, I had not planned on showing the presentations in class, and intended to watch and grade them on my own during finals' week. However, I realized that this would have been a missed opportunity for my students to share their projects, on which they had worked for nearly three months at this point, with their peers. To make the experience more meaningful, I incorporated a peer feedback element to the presentations. I gave each of the groups a set of large index cards and asked them to provide a constructive critique of their peers' documentaries. They were asked to look specifically at the purpose of the movie, how well the argument was presented, the choice of images, and what they found to be most interesting in the videos. Many students cited new knowledge or perspectives that they gained from the presentations, and voiced their personal impressions of the documentaries. I transcribed these comments as a supplement to the final project evaluations that I provided to each group.

As the last step of the project, I required my students to fill out a self- and group-assessment questionnaire through our learning management system. This survey asked students to assess their own

contribution, as well as that of their group members, and to indicate whether or not issues with group dynamics interfered with the completion of the project. This feedback helped to ensure the fairness of the evaluation, especially in situations where a group member might not have provided equal work for the project. Furthermore, it allowed students to self-reflect on the process, the ways in which they organized their work, and what they would do similarly or differently if they had to do it all over again. While most students found teammates who had similar work ethics, some groups faced conflicts. One student dropped the class, midpoint, without notifying me or her group partners. Other groups had difficulty planning meetings due to the limited availability of members who had other school or outside obligations. Most groups handled their tensions internally, letting me know about the issues long after they had been resolved. On occasion, the difficulties were too much for the group to handle on their own. I intervened in these cases to help the team members re-establish communication and resolve the problems. In rare instances, I have moved students between groups to resolve schedule conflicts or to balance groups who have lost members due to course drops or withdrawals.

Evaluation

The digital storytelling project accounted for 40% of the final course grade, with each of the project milestones evaluated individually. The research proposal was worth 10%, the combined script and storyboards were worth 10%, and the completed documentary was worth 20% of the total grade. When evaluating the proposal, script, and storyboards, I focused on the argument, narrative, originality, and coherence of the papers. I also considered the variety of audio and visual materials that students incorporated into their storyboards. This stage of the project often led to the aforementioned meetings with individual groups to iron out problems with their narratives or storyboards. I gave my students the opportunity to revise and resubmit these materials multiple times in order to improve their overall project outcome.

I evaluated the completed documentary based on nine criteria.[20] I shared my rubrics with my students weeks ahead of their presentations in order for them to double-check that their work fulfilled all of the

project requirements. The first of the nine criteria examined how well the students established the purpose of their documentary early in their presentation, and whether they remained focused on that purpose throughout. The second criterion evaluated how clearly the documentary presented a historical question and how well it answered that question. Most students had already met this criterion through the revisions of their scripts and storyboards. The third criterion examined the overall content of the documentary and how well it was used to create an atmosphere that supported their story. The fourth criterion evaluated the pacing of their storyline through the images, soundtrack, and voiceover. Most of my students paced their narration well, but some came across as rushed by trying to fit too many details into a single scene. The fifth criterion judged the meaningfulness of the soundtrack and its use to augment the documentary. Music plays a subtle yet crucial role in shaping a digital story, and I found that the majority of my students used music in a way that enhanced their productions. The sixth criterion evaluated the quality and relevance of the visual material used in the documentaries. The seventh criterion examined the "economy of details," or how well balanced the details of one part of their presentation appeared against the details of other parts. Since most students rewrote their scripts several times, this aspect was one of the most successful in the class. The eighth criterion assessed how the students' use of grammar and language contributed to the clarity or style of the production. The final criterion judged the relevance of the documentary to the topic of the class; in our case, this was the history of the United States.

Student Feedback on the Project

The self- and group-assessment questionnaire also included several open-ended questions about the students' personal experiences with the project process. They readily volunteered comments about their group formation, their topic selection, and the division of labor between different group members. They also commented on their time management skills, the methods that they used to do the research, the importance of effective communication between group members, and how they handled conflicts within their groups. Most students indicated that they were motivated by the project and put in effort in ways that they had not previously applied to other scholarly pursuits.

The collaborative nature of the project further motivated students toward giving their best. Group work can be challenging at any point in one's career. This is especially true in college, where students have drastically different schedules, levels of commitment, as well as academic goals and affinities. In the case of this project, a majority of the groups worked well together, but some groups did run into difficulties. In their feedback, a number of students mentioned that they would have changed one or more of their group partners, but refrained from providing greater detail as to why. Others spoke of conflicts that caused tension without necessarily impeding their progress. Many students reported that their conflicts stemmed from miscommunication or lack of communication between members of the groups. Once they acknowledged the source of their problems, most groups were easily able to remedy the issue internally.

The first year that I assigned this project, I did not put any restrictions on topics and allowed students to choose a topic even if another group had selected a similar subject. This led to presentations that were ultimately repetitive of each other, and less engaging for the class as a whole. In subsequent years, I restricted topics choices in order to avoid duplicates. I did this on a first-come, first-served basis, which encouraged groups to "lock in" their topic selection much earlier in the process. This restriction provided greater variety in the class presentations and a more enjoyable experience for the audience. In hindsight, many students stated that they regretted their chosen topic, wishing that they had picked a more "modern" topic for which they could more easily find source material. The projects covering recent topics generally received more positive feedback from peers due to their use of popular music or pop-culture references. However, many students also reported that they enjoyed the challenge of having to either locate or create their own content for topics where less source material was readily available. A few students noted that they made concessions for others in their group, agreeing to choose a particular topic even though they really desired a completely different one. This seemed to have happened more often in groups where one student was more assertive in guiding the topic discussion instead of allowing everyone's suggestions to be considered. Due to this feedback, I remind the groups that they will work with their topic for the duration of the semester and should choose a subject that all group members agree will be interesting to

research and present. Furthermore, a well-known or popular topic might be poorly received by an audience who is already familiar with the subject.

The division of labor among group members seemed to be where most of my students encountered difficulties. Some groups divided the work from the get-go, assigning the research to one student, the storyboards to another, the media gathering to another. Feedback revealed that this type of division did not work efficiently, as each part of the project needed to move together in parallel. When one group member fell behind in their work, the entire project fell behind, often leading to internal conflict. Groups who divided their labor so that all members worked together on each phase of the project were, as a general rule, more efficient and happier, and produced a more intricate, precise, and interesting documentary. This type of organization also minimized conflict between members.

Students reported that time management and communication were additional sources of tension within their groups. A majority of my students admitted to having underestimated the amount of time required for each phase of the project. One group had planned on finishing each part of the project at least one week ahead of their deadline in order to account for their other outside commitments. When one member did not produce their part on time, the other group members stepped in to help, but still struggled to complete the work before the due date. The groups who met regularly, consistently communicated the status of their work to each other, and worked as a team on the project seemed to be the most successful. Many students reported that using applications like Google Docs and GroupMe helped significantly with collaboration throughout their project.

I have made several adjustments to the structure of the digital storytelling project over the past four years. This was based in part on the feedback provided by students, but relied primarily on my own assessment of how various steps of the assignment helped to achieve learning outcomes. In the first semester that I assigned this project, I did not require that each group meet with me during the initial stage in the process. I have since made these meetings mandatory to help students narrow down their topics, streamline their workflow, and help detect problems at an early stage. In the future, I would like to increase the level of peer feedback throughout the project, and will most likely initiate this by having the groups submit drafts of

their research proposals through our learning management system. Students could then offer feedback on the work of their peers at a much earlier point in the project timeline.

Caveats on Technology

There are caveats that instructors should take into consideration prior to assigning a digital storytelling project. While a growing number of college students own personal computers, it is important to keep in mind that not every student has access to computers capable of running multimedia editing software.[21] My university's library offered meeting rooms for group collaboration, computer laboratories, and access to a digital media lab equipped with multimedia software. It also offered audio-visual equipment and computer rentals free of charge to students who needed them for course projects. In this sense, the resources available through an institution may limit the implementation of digital storytelling, and instructors should consider these limitations prior to assigning such projects.

Most of my students used Apple iMovie software to create their documentaries. Due to its simple interface and its widespread availability across our university's computer labs, this software worked really well for our needs. Adobe Premiere Pro or Final Cut Pro could be used equally as well, though these applications are usually only available in larger institutions due to the licensing costs associated with them. There are several free multimedia applications that can be used as alternatives. However, some of them will leave a watermark on the final project as a way to force users to buy a product license. I discourage my students from using video editing apps on smartphones, as I have found that the devices' small screens do not provide the editor with a good representation of how the video will appear on a large display in the classroom; resulting documentaries often appear stretched or pixelated.

Instructors should be mindful of the myth of the "digital native"—that is, "those born after 1984" and "who have been immersed in digital technologies all their lives"—which is still pervasive in the academic world.[22] The myth holds that students in classes today are more comfortable and fluent in using modern technology. However, an increasing number of scholars are finding that this immersion does not ultimately influence the technological abilities or knowledge of

today's students. As Paul A. Kirschner and Pedro De Bruyckere argue, while students "do make frequent use of digital technologies, the range of technologies they use for learning and socialisation is very limited."[23] I have found that my students sometimes overestimate their knowledge of technology. While they know how to use Google to find information online, they have not yet learned how to work with the university's library catalog or databases. They can write a paper using word processing software, but are not familiar with expanded features or shortcuts built into these applications that would make their work more efficient. They often only realize midpoint into their project that they are not as tech-fluent as they initially believed, and approach me with questions. When I could not resolve their technical issues quickly, I referred them to the various IT help desk resources on our campus. In cases where the help desk could not resolve the issue, students turned to their friends or to Google to find a solution. Improved problem solving skills, especially with regard to technology, became one of the unexpected, though positive, outcomes of the digital storytelling assignment.

The question of copyrights is another important consideration when working with multimedia resources. Due to the educational nature of the documentaries, my students worked under the Educational Fair Use rule, which states that "fair use of a copyrighted work…for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright."[24] In class, we discussed the importance of proper attribution of ownership of the materials used in their documentaries. Some students used images from the public domain, or went out of their way to find copyright-free materials, especially in terms of stock footage. Others created original materials by capturing their own photographs or video, or by composing their own soundtracks. Those who used copyrighted materials made sure to attribute ownership in the final credits and refrained from posting their final production on social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram.

Improving Accessibility

Instructors continue to improve accessibility in their classrooms in order to better accommodate the needs of a more diverse student

population. Scholars have demonstrated that digital storytelling can be used to help students with special needs or disabilities develop skills beyond the learning outcomes set for the class. For example, Tharrenos Bratitsus and Petros Ziannas discovered that the process of digital storytelling can help children with special needs, especially those on the autism spectrum, to develop empathy and social skills.[25] Although focused on younger children, their findings applied equally to situations in my own classrooms where students who self-reported as being on the autism spectrum thrived while creating their stories. They reported that while they usually had trouble with working in group-based projects, the use of technologies helped them mediate some of the difficulties that they experienced. Another student, whose eyesight qualified her for accommodations, participated fully in the project. Her input helped her group to understand the importance of emphasizing the narration and audio content as a way to convey emotions and a tightly written story. Several students who self-reported with attention deficit disorders also found the work easier, as they had a greater leeway in the development of their project. They remarked that, for once, their creativity did not have to be restrained. Others found the ability to break their work on the project into parts, jumping between sections as they pleased while developing the content, was easier and more in line with the ways in which they thought and learned.

Students who enter the university from underperforming high schools, both rural and urban, often struggle due to a skills gap. This could manifest itself as a lack of knowledge in areas where professors assume that a student should be knowledgeable, or as issues with writing or reading comprehension. These difficulties ultimately lead to a higher attrition rate among this category of students. Scholars have recommended the use of digital storytelling to address this gap and, consequently, reduce attrition rates.[26] Research has shown that the process of digital storytelling becomes a "self-empowering platform for the articulation of research knowledge and sharing personal experiences of conducting research" to students who "lack confidence in public speaking, display low self-esteem and limited linguistic competence."[27] Students who were lacking in academic knowledge were found to perform as well as their peers in terms of their research and the ways in which they developed their stories. The participation of international students, who often lacked knowledge in American

history or skills in the English language, helped U.S.-native students reassess their own assumptions about their national history.[28] I found that the digital storytelling format also helped students in my class who were dealing with social anxiety, as it mediated presentations to the class and put them less "on the spot" in front of their peers.

Conclusion

A digital storytelling assignment can be a significant tool for incorporating a research component into a large survey course in history. Based on primary, secondary, and media resources, as stated, this type of assignment allows students to hone their critical thinking skills, develop their visual and digital literacy skills, and improve their writing skills—all while deepening their engagement with historical narratives.

Beyond the research component, I have found that the digital storytelling project offers additional benefits within a large-class setting. The group meetings allowed me to provide more personalized feedback to my students in ways that are rarely possible in classes of 100 or more students. After our group meetings, I noticed that many students who were initially hesitant to speak up in the classroom began to do so more frequently. This increase in engagement within the classroom led to a positive change in class dynamics, more fruitful open discussions on course topics, and a rise in the number of students who attended my office hours. As my students grew more confident in their own abilities, their attitude toward learning about history reflected a transition from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset; they felt that they could improve and learn if they worked hard on the problem at hand.

At a time when recruitment and retention has become crucial to the survival of our discipline, it is important to consider assignments that will not only allow us to evaluate the achievement of learning outcomes in our students, but also show them that history is neither boring nor, as my student put it, "lobotomizing." Instead, assignments such as digital storytelling show them that the work of a historian (research, writing, creating a product to be enjoyed by the public) can be deeply gratifying, fascinating, and—occasionally—even fun.

Notes

1. On the growth and fixed mindset theory, see in particular Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (London, United Kingdom: Constable & Robinson Limited, 2012).

2. BuzzFeed was founded in New York City in 2006 as a website that scanned the Internet for viral content. The site later hired independent writers to produce original content and made steps toward transforming itself into a reliable news source via *BuzzFeed News*. See <https://www.buzzfeed.com/about>; <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/buzzfeednews/about-buzzfeed-news>; and Wikipedia's entry on BuzzFeed at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BuzzFeed>.

3. Najat Smeda, Eva Dakich, and Nalin Sharda, "The Effectiveness of Digital Storytelling in the Classrooms: A Comprehensive Study," *Smart Learning Environments* 1, article 6 (2014): 1.

4. Yan Xu, Hyungsung Park, and Youngkyun Baek, "A New Approach Toward Digital Storytelling: An Activity Focused on Writing Self-Efficacy in a Virtual Learning Environment," *Educational Technology & Society* 14, no. 4 (October 2011): 181.

5. Bernard Robin's Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling website is a particularly useful starting point for those interested in the process. See <https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu>.

6. Joe Lambert and Brooke Hessler, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, fifth ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

7. Lambert and Hessler, *Digital Storytelling*, 37-38.

8. Lambert and Hessler, *Digital Storytelling*, 41.

9. Samantha Morra, "8 Steps to Great Digital Storytelling," Transform Learning (blog), June 5, 2013, <https://www.samanthamorra.com/2013/06/05/edudemic-article-on-digital-storytelling/>; Bernard Robin, "The 7 Elements of Digital Storytelling," Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling <https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/page.cfm?id=27&cid=27&sublinkid=31>.

10. Boston Public Library, "Boston Pictorial Archive," Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/collections/72157623971688423/>.

11. Bernard Robin, "Example Stories," Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling, <https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/example_stories.cfm?categoryid=16>.

12. The Oxford English Dictionary defined "Masshole" as "a contemptuous term for a native or inhabitant of the state of Massachusetts." As quoted in Katy Steinmetz, "Oxford Dictionary Adds 'Fo'Shizzle,' 'Masshole,' and 'Hot Mess,'" *Time*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.time.com/3932402/oxford-dictionary-fo-shizzle-masshole-hot-mess/>. The term is widely used among the youth of Massachusetts to jokingly insult their friends who are also from Massachusetts. My students used the video section between 0:16 and 0:34 from "Dunkin Donuts - SNL," Saturday Night Live, December 18, 2016, YouTube video, 1:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSvNhxKJJyU>.

13. Michael Coventry, "Cross-Currents of Pedagogy and Technology: A Forum on Digital Storytelling and Cultural Critique: Introduction." *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (June 2008): 168-169.

14. Some groups had either already contacted me to discuss their topics, or had proposals that only needed fine tuning. I gave these groups a green light to move to the second phase of the project without requiring a meeting.

15. See in particular Jeannine Cole, "'Upon the Stage of Disorder': Legalized Prostitution in Memphis and Nashville, 1863-1865," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 40-65.

16. Coventry, "Cross-Currents of Pedagogy and Technology," 169.

17. Erin Alynn Miller, "Digital Storytelling," M.A. thesis, University of Northern Iowa, August 2009; Laura Malita and Catalin Martin, "Digital Storytelling as Web Passport to Success in the 21st Century," *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 3060-3064; Siew Ming Thang, Lee Yit Sim, Najihah Mahmud, Luck Kee Lin, Noraza Ahmad Zabidi, and Kemboja Ismail, "Enhancing 21st Century Learning Skills via Digital Storytelling: Voices of Malaysian Teachers and Undergraduates," *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 118 (March 2014): 489-494.

18. J. R. Purvis, as cited in Oksana Duchak, "Visual Literacy in Educational Practice," *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal* 6, no. 2 (2014): 43.

19. Tiziana Saponaro, "Digital Storytelling: An Efficient and Engaging Learning Activity," eLearning Industry, March 13, 2014, <https://www.elearningindustry.com/digital-storytelling-an-efficient-and-engaging-learning-activity>.

20. I developed my rubrics based on several instructors' models. Bernard Robin offers links to grading rubric models at "Evaluation & Assessment," Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling, <https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/page.cfm?id=24&cid=24&sublinkid=43>.

21. Chromebooks and tablets are common among college students due to their affordability, but are limited in available multimedia authoring applications.

22. Paul A. Kirschner and Pedro De Bruyckere, "The Myth of the Digital Native and the Multitasker," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 67 (October 2017): 136. Also see Kip Glazer, "The Digital Natives Myth," Literacy Now (blog), October 26, 2016, <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2016/10/26/the-digital-natives-myth>; Megan O'Neil, "Confronting the Myth of the 'Digital Native,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 21, 2014; Neil Selwyn, "The Digital Native – Myth and Reality," *Aslib Proceedings* 61, no. 4 (2009): 364-379; Matt Weber, "Harvard EdCast: The Myth of the Digital Native," Harvard Graduate School of Education News and Events, January 12, 2017, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/17/01/harvard-edcast-myth-digital-native>.

23. Kirschner and De Bruyckere, "The Myth of the Digital Native and the Multitasker," 136.

24. United States Copyright Office, "Reproduction of Copyrighted Works by Educators and Librarians," August 2014, 3, <https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ21.pdf>.

25. Tharrenos Bratitsis and Petros Ziannas, "From Early Childhood to Special Education: Interactive Digital Storytelling as a Coaching Approach for Fostering Social Empathy," *Procedia Computer Science* 67 (2015): 231-240.

26. Patient Rambe and Shepherd Mlambo, "Using Digital Storytelling to Externalise Personal Knowledge of Research Processes: The Case of Knowledge Audio Repository," *The Internet and Higher Education* 22 (July 2014): 11-23.

27. Rambe and Mlambo, "Using Digital Storytelling to Externalise Personal Knowledge of Research Processes," 11-12.

28. Malita and Martin, "Digital Storytelling as Web Passport to Success in the 21st Century," 3060-3064.

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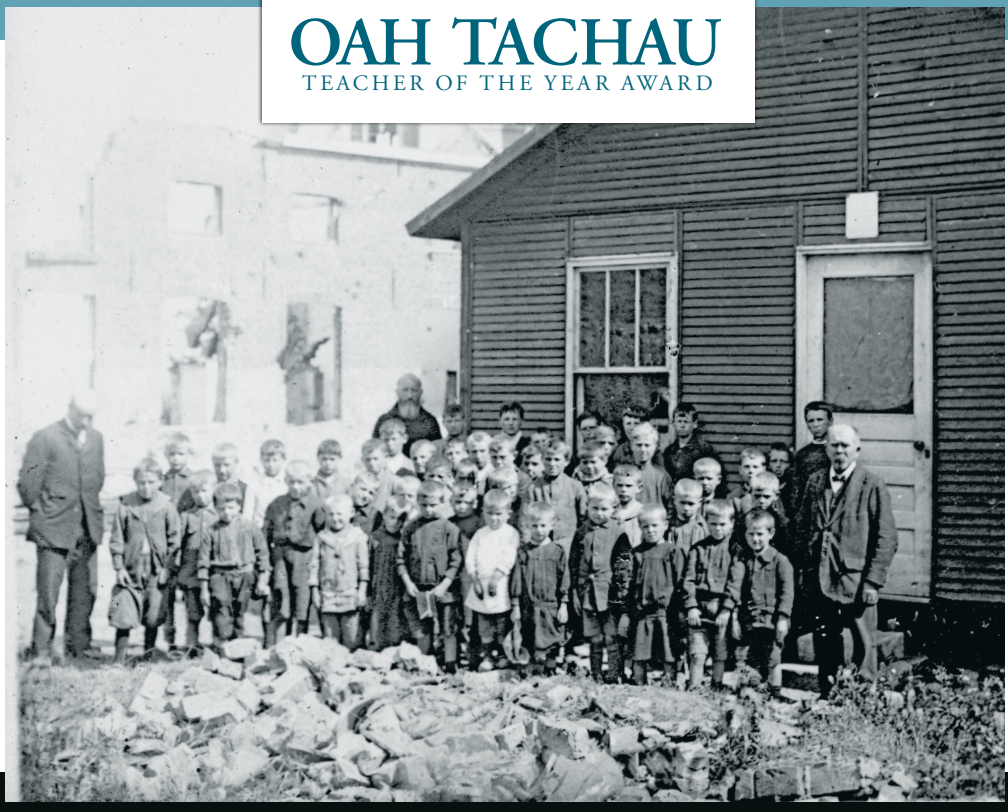

American Red Cross built schoolhouse in Dadizeele,Belgium, with schoolmasters and children, 1919. ACR, Paris Office, photograph credit, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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