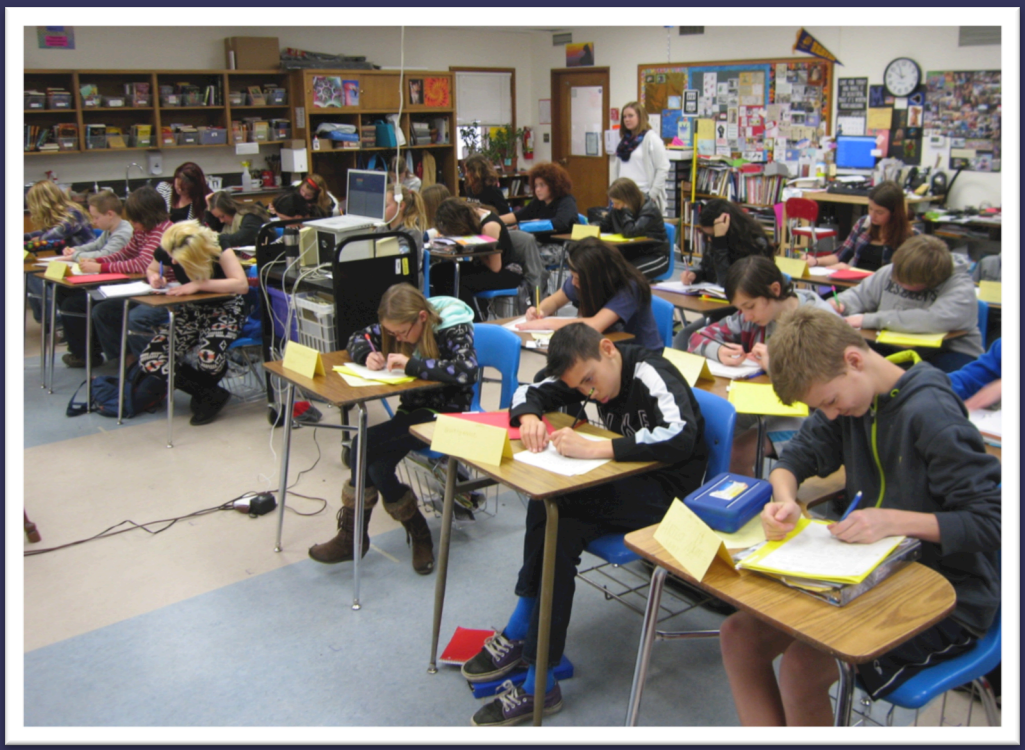
REPORT TO RUCH SCHOOL PTO:

Digital Storytelling Project 2015



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Report to Ruch PTO

Ruch School Digital Storytelling class, Spring 2015

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The spring 2015 Digital Storytelling project took place over eight weeks (16 class meetings), and built on our successful experience with a similar project in 2014 (see 2014 report). *The project's main objective was to offer one class of Ruch middle school students an engaging supplement to their regular classroom curriculum, to help them meet the Common Core State Standards in Language Arts at their grade level.* Merging technology, visual arts, and writing skills, the project sought to build students' skills and confidence in each of those areas. The curriculum was directly tied to the following Common Core standards in English language arts:

- W.3 (narrative writing)
- W.5 (planning, revising, editing, and rewriting)
- W.6 (use of technology to produce and publish writing)
- SL.5 (strategic use of digital media to communicate information).

General oversight was provided by the Oregon Writing Project at SOU. Funding from the Ruch School PTO covered the costs of instruction and materials for all of the 31 students in one of Mrs. McDonald's middle school language arts class.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Lead teacher and digital engineer Abram Katz, assisted by four undergraduate interns from the SOU School of Education, created an environment where students could feel comfortable sharing stories about things that mattered to them personally.

Students spent several class sessions writing and developing personal stories. Mini-lessons helped students incorporate metaphors, descriptive details, and dialogue into their stories. The lead teacher and interns gave students constructive feedback and offered writing strategies to help students transform their thoughts, experiences, and emotions into writing. These stories became the 'voiceover' soundtrack for the students' short movies. (They also became the basis for more formal written arguments after the digital storytelling project was over; see "other outcomes and findings," below.)

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

Students shared their completed digital stories with their class and community members in late spring. Students' video projects were on display at the Art and Curriculum Fair in late May 2015 at Ruch School. And five Ruch students attended a session at SOU's Arts and Research Conference (SOAR) in Ashland in May 2015, representing the Ruch digital storytelling project, which was featured in a panel presentation.

Students' digital projects, as well as the written arguments that the students subsequently developed based on their initial stories, are published on the website "Ruch School Writers": https://ruchschoolwriters.wordpress.com/ (password: spring2015).

PROJECT RESULTS

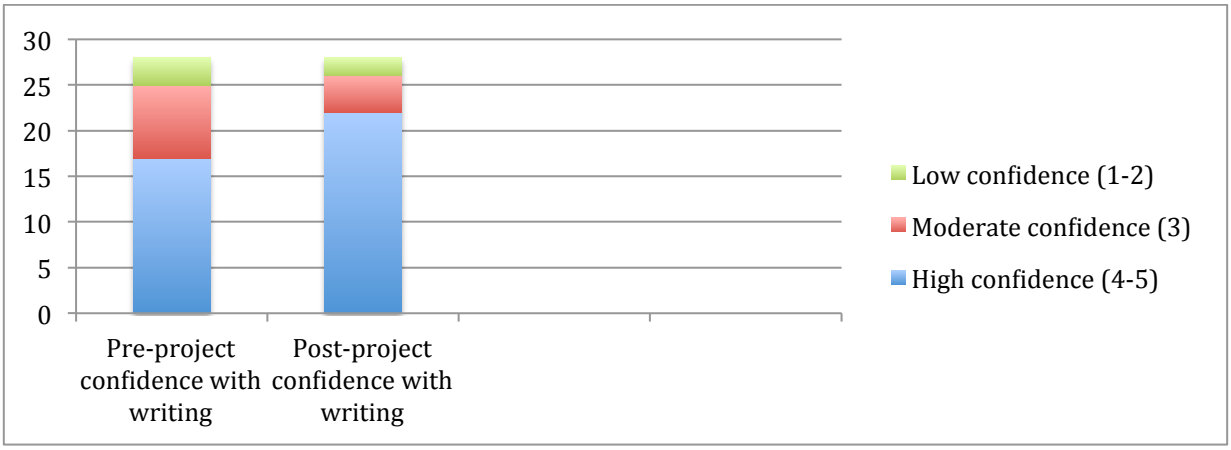
Thirty (out of 31) students successfully completed the entire project, including writing multiple drafts of their story, creating or selecting appropriate images, and creating a digital movie that included audio and visual components. Students completed pre- and post- questionnaires about their confidence with writing, with visual art, and in their use of digital media technology. Students were asked to explain how the use of digital technology contributed to their story, or their storytelling process. The SOU interns (pre-service teachers) completed written observations after each class session. The classroom teacher, who was present during all of the class sessions, documented what she saw as the "highlights" of the project, and how she sees it carrying over into students' work in other classes/subjects. As discussed below, these data show that the project met its primary objectives.

Student engagement. Students' written post-project comments showed a high level of engagement with the digital storytelling process; 86% of students explicitly stated that they "liked" or "loved" the class, and provided a reason. For example:

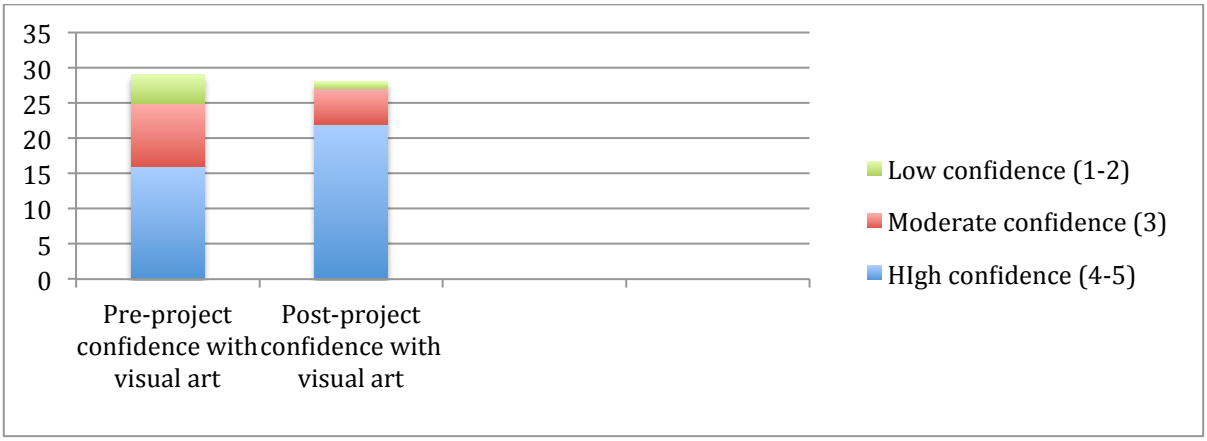
"I liked this class because it was writing about something important that I already knew about."
"I loved it! We aren't just writing, we're having fun!"
"I liked it better than other classes because you are more involved."
"I loved it. We got to be creative."

Combining writing instruction with visual arts and digital technology (voiceover) motivated students to write and revise. Writing on topics they cared deeply about also contributed to students' engagement.

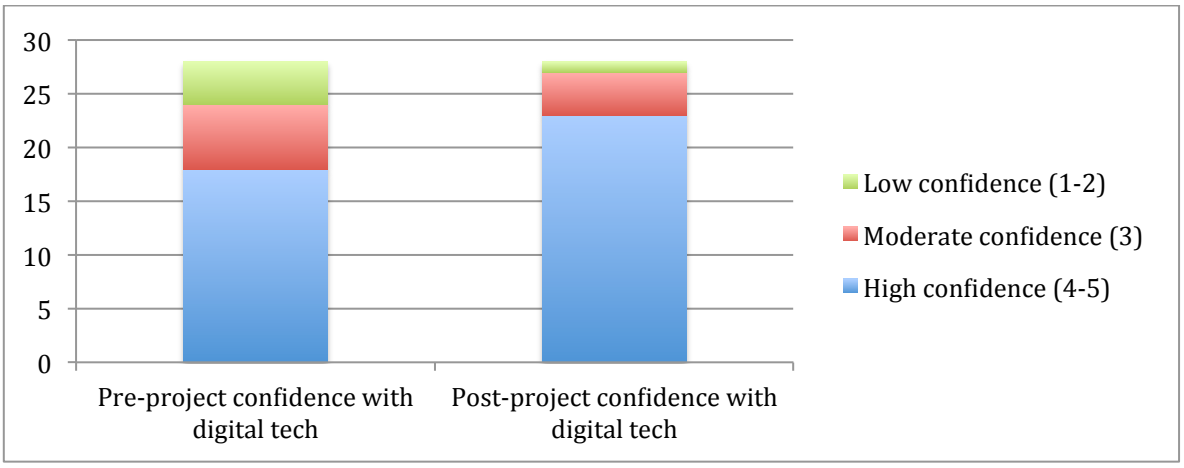
Skill and confidence in writing (W.3, W.5). At the outset of the project, just 25% of the students said they felt "very confident" in writing. After the project, that number had risen to 54%. Likewise, the percentage of students who felt low confidence as writers dropped from 40% to 20%. Part of this shift is due to the engagement noted above. As one student wrote, "The digital story helped me realize how much I *love* writing. I think that digital storytelling would help people realize how amazing writing is!" Because engagement and confidence are linked to a willingness to practice writing skills and to revise writing, this is a significant shift.



Confidence in expression through visual art. Many students (57%) reported feeling "confident" or "very confident" in their ability to express themselves through visual art at the outset. However, the percentage of those rating themselves low in confidence shrank from 43% to 20%, and the percentage of those rating themselves as "very confident" rose from 18% to 43% by the end of the project. Students repeatedly mentioned that incorporating pictures made their stories "come to life," "soak in," or "show more emotion." Incorporating visual art required students to link their writing to images; "it enhances my story," wrote one student. Another wrote, "The most important thing I learned is how to express myself with words and images."



Use of technology to publish writing (W.6). Although 65% of students expressed high confidence in their use of technology at the outset of the project, most said their prior experiences had been limited to PowerPoint presentations or word processing software. The digital story format was new to virtually all the students. All 30 students who completed the project showed growth in this standard, as assessed by lead teacher and digital engineer Abram Katz; all were able to produce an audio recording (with professional assistance) and combine audio with video to create a digital story. (See Appendix 1 for a list of digital media skills this project required.) As one student noted, "The videos had a polished final look that couldn't have been achieved without" technology. Others remarked that the voiceover (audio recording) enhanced their stories: "It could be my voice," one wrote. "The voiceover made all the feelings come back," wrote another. Technology enhanced the look and feel of students' stories, which they clearly valued.



Strategic use of digital media (SL.5). All of the students were able to locate (or create) and incorporate relevant digital content — images and music — into their presentation. Matching images and music to their words, to enhance the meaning, makes this use of digital media *strategic.* Many students commented in post-project reflections that they liked the process of selecting images that would best enhance their words. The strategic use of digital media (both audio and visual) made the writing process engaging for students in a way that many had not experienced before (see "Use of technology" below). Presenting their digital stories to an audience of peers, teachers, and community members put the students' strategic use of digital media to the test; the audience's rapt attention and appreciation for each student's work attest to the students' mastery of this standard.

OTHER OUTCOMES & FINDINGS

Time frame: The eight week period (two classes each week) proved to be much more functional than the six weeks we allocated to the project in 2014. However, even with the additional two weeks this year, the classroom teacher found it necessary to devote further class periods during the week to the writing and revising processes. Clear communication between the project lead teacher and the regular classroom teacher is therefore essential, regarding deadlines and expectations.

Social growth/social-emotional component: More than 70% of the students specifically mentioned the impact of the project on their social/emotional growth, in written observations such as:

"I liked it because you got to share things with others."
"I learned that going out of your comfort zone sometimes helps."
"I liked it cuz I got PERSONAL."
"I learned to make myself vulnerable."
"I learned that I have people's respect."
"I learned that people care."

This is a significant project outcome, because when positive social/emotional experiences are part of learning, students are more invested in developing the skills necessary to accomplish a task. When students see their peers as an authentic audience for their writing, they are more motivated to write. Also, when students feel a sense of belonging in a connected community, they are more likely to take risks that lead to learning.

The classroom teacher had initially anticipated "that the biggest outcomes of the Digital Storytelling project would be in students' comfort with technology and their ability to use technology independently for enhancing schoolwork. Nevertheless, the major benefits appear to be more on the interpersonal level: trust in others, acceptance of self, willingness to try."

And these impacts appear to have staying power in the classroom: The students, notes the teacher, "are now exhibiting more openness and acceptance…It's as if the trust built in the project has had a carryover in their relationships to each other and to me." In other words, the social and emotional growth fostered by the Digital Storytelling project is not a separate category of learning, but is integrally tied to the development of academic skills and knowledge.

Digital stories as a platform for argument writing: Initially, we had hoped to tie the Digital Storytelling project to the schoolwide focus on argument-writing. Argumentation, Common Core State Standard W.1, is one of the most challenging rhetorical modes for students to master. We thought that students might be more motivated to produce argumentative writing if they were encouraged to turn their narratives into arguments about topics that mattered to them personally.

It quickly became clear that teaching the elements of argument-writing simultaneously with digital storytelling would result in 'cognitive overload' for students. However, *after* completing their digital stories, students used their written narratives as the basis for an argument, complete with claim, counter-claim, and counter-argument. That is, instruction in argument-writing, including how to incorporate competing points of view, took place after the Digital Storytelling project was over, with the digital stories serving as a springboard for more formal written arguments. The classroom community and climate of trust that was developed during the Digital Storytelling project helped students productively consider and respond to hypothetical 'personae' who might hold contradictory points of view, to strengthen their arguments. This experience suggests the power of using personal narratives as springboards for argument-writing, especially for understanding multiple perspectives and developing counter-arguments. (Read students' arguments at https://ruchschoolwriters.wordpress.com/ password: spring2015).

Looking forward: One student summed up the experience of many when he wrote, "This year's digital storytelling process was a great experience and it is a privilege to do it. I hope to do digital storytelling again next year. I recommend other schools should do this fun, creative process!!"

APPENDIX 1

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

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