



DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN THE MULTILINGUAL ACADEMIC WRITING CLASSROOM: EXPANDING THE POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling is a form of multimedia where personal narratives are remixed with images, photos, and music. In this paper, I explore the questions raised by implementing digital stories in multilingual academic writing classes. I first discuss the goals of the courses for introducing students to the values and norms for academic writing, with importance given to the voice of the author and the use of textual borrowing. In the second part of the paper, I discuss the ways in which digital storytelling, which has primarily been developed outside the classroom in workshops and after school activities, can be implemented in a second language classroom. I argue that digital storytelling is one of the best forms of digital literacy for introducing students to the goals of the academic classroom. In the final section, I provide examples of student digital stories to illustrate how the students developed their voices in their personal narratives and borrowed multimedia to expand on those narratives. I conclude with suggestions that future research explore ways to help students learn to transfer the approaches they take to digital storytelling to their traditional academic writing assignments.

Digital storytelling provides multilingual writers the opportunity to explore the potential for using multimodality to produce and share their stories with whomever they wish (Lambert, 2012). Using a combination of their own writing, their choice of images, and whatever music they feel appropriate can provide a role in both participating in new forms of online literacies and understanding how these forms may be connected to the forms of print literacies they are normally expected to use. Lambert (2012) defines

KEYWORDS

Digital storytelling,
Academic writing,
Textual borrowing,
Visual literacy,
Intertextuality,
Voice

a digital story as a narrative combining visual and aural elements for telling a personal story. Like traditional forms of academic literacy, digital stories incorporate a narrative that is woven together with other, sometimes borrowed, texts, potentially both visual and aural, to further explore their meaning. The introduction of multimodal literacies into the multilingual writing classroom has been controversial (e.g. Belcher, 2017; Casanave, 2017). The implementation of extracurricular literacies—such as those

embedded in digital storytelling—into the classroom is highly controversial often because of the amount of classroom time they take to complete, the technological requirements, and lingering questions about their value in relationship to traditional assignment (e.g. Belcher, 2017). Nevertheless, these literacies can provide multilingual students the opportunity to examine key academic writing concepts from a different perspective (Bloch, 2015; Bloch & Wilkinson, 2013).

As with the implementation of any technology, the digital story affords the possibility of remixing different modes of print, visual, and aural expressions—sometimes called affordances (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988)—which are related to the different technologies used in the story. Gibson (1979) describes affordances as objects that mediate the relationship between individuals and their environments. These affordances can be exploited in the composition classroom for different rhetorical purposes (Palmeri, 2012). While these affordances do not determine strict learning outcomes, they do create a learning environment where students can explore certain possibilities for language use. A digital story, specifically, allows students to compose a narrative of an important moment in their lives, record their story in their own voices, add images, and music if desired. Many of these multimodal forms have gained prominence outside the classroom where their creators are often interested in sharing their stories for personal reasons, not because they were assigned by a teacher (Yancey, 2004).

In this paper, I will discuss the challenges of implementing digital storytelling to help students better understand specific aspects of academic literacy, particularly the weaving together of the author's voice and the texts for elaborating on that voice (e.g. Rose, 1989; Shi, 2010). Digital storytelling was first introduced into our lower level graduate and undergraduate composition courses that were given in an ESL composition program at a large research university. Their primary goal was to introduce students to the

genres of academic writing (e.g. Swales, 1991). As these students seemed to lack an understanding of academic genres, it was hoped that digital storytelling would introduce them to the key course concepts from a different perspective (Bloch, 2015).

THE CONTENT OF OUR COURSE

We offered similar introductory courses for both the undergraduate and graduate multilingual students. The content of our courses was on a discussion of plagiarism, which was seen not as a moral concept but as a rhetorical one related to intertextuality and voice (e.g. Bloch, 2015; Blum, 2009; Howard, 2007; Rose, 1989). The course focused on how a better understanding of the issue of textual borrowing and authorial voice in academic writing could help students avoid the trap of plagiarism (Bloch, 2015). Concerning textual borrowing, Bazerman (2013) explains that student writers often appear to be “written” by the texts rather than expressing their own voices, which has been identified as a possible cause of plagiarism (e.g. Blum, 2009). Digital storytelling allowed our students to utilize a variety of written, visual, and aural voices for expressing their ideas, thus helping them better perceive how this relationship between text and voice could be expressed in a print text.

In both the undergraduate and graduate courses, which were occasionally mixed depending on enrollment, the primary topic was plagiarism (Bloch, 2012, 2015). One of our primary goals for emphasizing textual borrowing was for the students to borrow or use these texts for their own rhetorical purposes with a variety of lexical and rhetorical strategies for mixing their own voices with those of other authors (e.g. Bloch, 2010), thus meeting the goals for authorship within a network of texts, as expressed in Latour (1988). We had found, however, that many students struggled with this concept of authorship.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN OUR COMPOSITION COURSES

By incorporating a digital storytelling project, we hoped by helping students gain a better understanding of these issues of textual borrowing and voice, we might also help students not only avoid being trapped by accusations of copying but also to understand how textual borrowing contributes to the rhetorical development of their academic writing (Bloch, 2012). Voice—and the lack of voice—has been long identified as a problem for multilingual writers. Matsuda (2001) found, for instance, that there were differences in how Japanese and English speakers constructed voice, which caused problems in the Japanese speakers' English-language writing. Therefore, he argued that multilingual writers must develop a variety of strategies for their L2 writing.

The courses were taught by myself and a group of instructors. Moreover, by focusing on developing writers' voices and their understanding of textual borrowing rather than on the morality of copying, we hoped to address the problems our students often face through both a digital and print perspective. This connection was explored through both the print and digital assignments. By foregrounding the voice of the students in their writing and digital stories, the intent was that students could better understand the importance of voice in choosing and evaluating texts. This paper will explore the potential of digital storytelling for meeting some of goals of our academic writing classroom, particularly those related to textual borrowing, by giving examples from student stories to illustrate this potential.

ACADEMIC WRITING GENRES IN A MULTILINGUAL WRITING COURSE

The overarching focus on academic writing genres in our courses shaped how digital storytelling was introduced, including the importance given to creating a narrative, choosing multimodal texts to develop the narrative, and using appropriate methods of attribution that conformed to the rules of the genre (e.g. Bloch, 2015). Bazerman (2013) defines a genre as a means of mediating the exchange of information between the reader and the writer and argues that the constraints of a genre can serve as a heuristic for exploring the creation of knowledge as authors gain an increasing consciousness of the various social processes in their communities of practice.

Recognizing the connections across different assumptions about genres may be difficult for multilingual students who may not be familiar with these rules and constraints that different genres contain. The addition of multimodal assignments within the academic context can help these students better understand these rules and constraints: because both academic writing and digital storytelling heavily rely on intertextuality, having students “shuttle” (e.g. Canagarajah, 2011) between these two forms of literacy can be potentially beneficial for helping them understand the rhetorical dimensions of both forms.

In this focus on genre, the role of textual borrowing has gained greater importance with the development of new viewpoints on the epistemic nature of academic writing. Bazerman (2013) argues that using intertextuality within the social context of a community of practice or a network increases the focus on the choices authors make in their use of texts. Latour (1988) proposes model of intertextuality in which the writer (actor) purposefully uses texts to situate him/herself within a community of practice (network).

In a multimodal framework, these texts could be created using whatever mode of expression the author felt most appropriate. By expanding the audience by posting online, as well as exploring alternate forms, multimodality offers the possibility for a wider use of intertextuality from different perspectives.

Differences in social contexts therefore mean that the decisions writers make can differ across texts, even if the process of making those decisions in relationship to their audiences may be similar. This view of the social context of academic writing has allowed teachers to rethink the possibilities for teaching about genre, focusing more on what Bazerman (2013) calls theories that can articulate the “complex role sets, complex activities, differential social positioning and goals, role conflicts and conflict mediating mechanisms, unanticipated consequences and other emergent social phenomena as they pertain to writing” (p. 119),

Such a framework has had a powerful effect in both discussions of genre and multilingual composition classes. Incorporating multimodality into composition teaching is not new (e.g. Kress, 2003; Palmeri, 2012). L1 composition theorists have been calling for implementing more multimodal assignments into the composition class (Palmeri, 2012; Selber, 2004; Selfe, 2009; Tendero, 2006; Vinogradova, Linville & Bickel, 2011). A similar call has come in L2 composition (e.g. Christiansen & Koelzer, 2016; Hafner, 2013; Hafner et al., 2015; Potts, 2013; Soler Pardo, 2014). Tardy’s (2016) work on “playfulness” in academic writing genres can support interest in multimodality.

THE PEDAGOGICAL TURN OF MULTIMODALITY IN THE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM

Involving students in understanding genre across both print and digital modalities may therefore help students in becoming more central participating members of their academic communities as well as the larger digital world. This multimodal turn in composition teaching rejected the idea that one pedagogy could “enculturate” the students into the dominant academic cultures in favor of a more complex view of multiple literacies that connect the crea-

tion of new knowledge in a learning community (New London Group, 1996). Bringing extracurricular literacy forms into the classroom can greatly facilitate this goal while still providing the affordances of academic writing.

The introduction of multimodalities into the multilingual classroom assumes that, as Bazerman (1988) has long shown, the relationship between genre and community is never static. The lack of stability of a learning community has problematized how different genres and forms of literacy are valued within that community. The introduction of various forms of language has furthered complicated this relationship, as illustrated in the debate over translanguaging. This lack of stability in which forms are considered acceptable, however, has opened the way for incorporating various multimodal forms of literacy, which can frame this discussion on moving between print and digital literacies.

Within a multilingual context more specifically, Hafner (2015) has argued that incorporating these out-of-school literacies into the classroom can be an important pedagogy for developing student voice. It has been argued that students often do not value their own voice when using texts, often feeling that simply citing the texts fulfills the goals of the assignment (e.g. Blum, 2009). By integrating digital stories in a multilingual academic writing classroom, Hafner (2015) found that students were better able to position their voices in a variety of ways, which could be exploited in different types of assignments. Similarly, research by Hull and her associates (e.g. Hull & Katz, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005) showed that students can express strong voices by telling their own stories. Moreover, multimodal assignments offer the possibility of expanding the audience for students’ work.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A MULTIMODAL LITERACY

Digital storytelling was initially implemented in our required post-admission academic writing courses for both multilingual undergraduate and graduate students. The assignment began with their writing a story, recording their story, and then finding or creating images connected to their story (Bloch & Wilkinson, 2013). Students could borrow whatever texts from the Internet they felt were relevant to their story (see Bloch & Wilkinson, 2013), take their own photographs or videos of their surroundings, or occasionally, create their own drawings or animations. Although students could have started with images and then created stories around them, they instead tended to write their stories before choosing the images.

Most of the students came from Asia and South America. However, we used an approach developed outside the classroom (e.g. Lambert, 2012). The Center for Digital Storytelling, which trains individuals and groups to create digital stories, has produced many stories in a variety of workshops, often addressing social issues. Hull and her associates, for example, used digital stories in an after-school program for students who were struggling in school with traditional forms of literacy (Hull & Katz, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005). Recently, digital storytelling has been brought into the classroom as both an alternative assignment or as a stepping stone to traditional papers (e.g. Bloch, 2015; Hafner, 2015; Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2015). In their study of “academically marginalized” middle school students in Singapore, Anderson, Stewart and Karchorsky (2017) found evidence that these students could take stronger authorial stances in their multimodal creations than in their other school work. Even so, teachers in college-level courses are just beginning to see the potential of multimodal projects.

Although the authors’ voices may be more muffled in an academic paper than in a digital story, these voices nonetheless remain prominent: digital storytelling and academic writing are both spaces where an actor or an author can create a narrative and situ-

ate that narrative in a social network of visual and aural texts. As Lambert (2012) has suggested, one purpose of telling stories in their own voices is for the storytellers to gain new perspectives on their own experiences, which can be enhanced by asking the authors to record their stories and thereby become more reflective about them.

The growing importance of multimodal literacies in non-academic contexts supports their inclusion especially at a time when the discussion of translanguaging has demonstrated the value of these multiple forms of literacy within a classroom. Translanguaging can refer to mixing the students’ languages to create a new form incorporating multiple forms of literacy (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2015). Multimodality remixes different forms of print and digital languages to create a similar translanguaging amalgam of literacies. Therefore, in a multimodal world, what it means to be literate can dramatically affect how new forms of literacy are valued. By exploring these different forms of expression, writers can experience these new approaches to literacy, often challenging their conceptions of themselves as authors as well as traditional definitions of genre. Hafner (2013) argues that the affordances found in multimodal composing “challenge our established notions of what it means to be a writer (p. 832),” which, in turn, can challenge language teachers to introduce these new forms into the classroom.

In all these ways, digital storytelling could be seen an alternative perspective on the problems with authorship sometimes seen in research on student plagiarism (e.g. Blum, 2009; Howard, 1999). Like other forms of multimodality, digital storytelling provides its own set of affordances that provide both heuristics and constraints for the user. Some of the affordances, especially the role of the narrative and the use of the images, are similar to those found in different forms in an academic paper although often with a similar rhetorical intent.

Digital storytelling can, therefore, have multiple roles in both introducing new literacy forms and aid-

ing students in achieving these traditional goals using traditional print forms (Bloch, 2015; Lea & Street, 2006). Digital storytelling allows students to utilize what they know best—their own personal experiences and their own selection of images and music to develop those experiences. In doing so, creating digital stories incorporates transformative textual borrowing through adding the voice of the author within the social and legal constraints on borrowing intellectual property, much like what academic writers must do when writing in their fields.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN OUR MULTILINGUAL ACADEMIC WRITING CLASSROOM

Our initial interest in digital storytelling came from its potential to foreground the students' narratives. It became apparent that the issues students faced in the writing component of the course could be similarly found in the digital component, but often with a greater variety discourses. Both contexts provided an emphasis on narratives about research, as well as the intertextuality used to develop the narrative (e.g. Medawar, 1984)—since even the most formal academic texts can be considered narratives in which authors relate the stories of their research (Hoffman, 2014).

In our academic writing courses, the implementation of digital storytelling was constrained by the academic goals of the course, which included raising students' understanding of textual borrowing, voice, and intellectual property law. In the writing components, students were asked to read a series of articles on plagiarism, identify the key issues and controversies, and then integrate them with their own opinions about the nature of plagiarism and how it should be dealt with (Bloch, 2012). Although digital storytelling can be taught in various ways, we used what is sometimes called the “standard” approach to digital story-

telling (Lambert, 2012),¹ which again seemed to best fit our goals for the academic writing course (Bloch, 2015; Bloch & Wilkinson, 2013).

Initially, digital storytelling was implemented in the lower level of these post-matriculated academic writing courses because these offered the most flexibility—students would have at least one or two more courses to work on their academic writing. In the undergraduate course, the digital story assignment focused on personal experiences that contained a major turning point in the students' lives. This assignment was also initially implemented in the graduate course; however, later it was modified to include stories about the students' fields of study and the reasons they chose their field of study. For the undergraduates, these courses were designed to prepare students for their undergraduate writing requirements; for the graduate students, courses were designed to prepare them for academic writing in their majors. Our goals and our implementation evolved as we better understood the potential of digital storytelling for the academic writing classroom; briefly, however, our goal was for students to draw upon their ability to tell stories, and then to have students choose or create images to develop the texts of their stories.

By asking students to “remix” texts, images, and music, we attempted to help students develop a metacognitive understanding of the choices they make for expressing their voices through different modes (Bazerman, 1988; Lessig, 2009). The idea that scientific writing, or any form of academic writing, is a form of storytelling (e.g. Hoffman, 2014; Medawar, 1984) enabled us to establish the link between the use of digital storytelling outside and inside the classroom. Although not the focus of this paper, this “metacognitive awareness” would be relevant to the question of transfer (e.g. Perkins & Salomon, 1988) between the print and digital assignments, which we attempted to later develop by having them reflect on

¹ See <https://www.storycenter.org/public-workshops/intro-to-ds>

the images they chose and blog about the relationship between the different forms of literacy (Bloch, 2008).

Initially, students wrote about their friends, relationships with family, travel experiences, or reasons for coming to the United States. Later, the graduate students were asked to create a story defining their major and discuss their reasons for choosing it. This assignment replaced a similar writing assignment that had frequently been plagiarized, in which students were required to identify key issues in the topic, evaluate their own perspective, and mix their perspective with the ones from other texts to develop their own ideas. Their stories often focused on finding key turning points in their narratives, which was critical for helping them develop their own voices and not simply narrate what they had experienced. The students here could choose which aspects of their lives they wanted to make public. For example, in the first draft of the story, a Korean graduate student presented a prosaic account of his major in fish studies. However, in the revised version, the student then explored how he became interested in fish as a child hanging around his parents' fish restaurant.

Bruner (1994) argues that such turning points reflect "clear instances of narrative construction that have the function of helping the teller clarify his or her self-concept (p.50)," which we hoped would be useful in developing voice. This goal seemed consistent with Hull and Katz's (2006) argument that digital storytelling is a powerful means of expressing such self-concepts, what they call "the performative self" (p.72), a concept similar to what Latour (1988, 2005) calls the "agent" in academic writing. Blum (2009) had found that a lack of agency was a reason for simply copying texts was that students seemed to feel that they just needed to demonstrate that they had read them. Our hope was that by first writing a narrative and then finding texts to elaborate the story, the students would develop an agency over their use of texts, similar to what Latour (1988) found in academic writing. Therefore, by "shuttling" between

their print and digital forms of literacy could help students develop a more powerful voice through remixing their own stories with their choice of visual texts.

There were other, more narrowly focused goals for implementing digital storytelling, regarding the use of intellectual property, which students could explore from different perspectives through digital storytelling. One important issue regarding the use of intellectual property was to introduce the rules and uses of intellectual property and their relationship to plagiarism (e.g. Bloch, 2012). The use of online intellectual property has alarmed some teachers who worry that students may illegally or unethically appropriate intellectual property: Hafner (2015) warns that one problem with bringing this remixing into the classroom is that students may tend to appropriate or misappropriate intellectual property in violation of their institutions' rules. Similarly, Howard (2007) has expressed the concern of many teachers that students erroneously feel that Internet texts do not need to be cited. For these reasons, we required a reference list at the end of the movie.

The use of images downloaded from the Internet also raises a variety of questions about the use of intellectual property, which was also a goal for the course. We also approached this problem by incorporating extensive discussions of what is appropriate usage, which may not be generalizable in different countries. One of the most important concepts we discussed was that of the "fair use" of intellectual property. In the United States, students have what are called "fair use" rights (e.g. Auferheide & Jaszi, 2012), which may allow students to borrow copyrighted texts for their stories; we felt this idea to be a better approach for meeting our goals for understanding intellectual property law.

The students were encouraged to use copyrighted materials in ways that transformed its usage from its original intent through the remixing with texts. Such transformations were considered the basis for the fair use of the copyrighted images. To

acknowledge their usage of these materials, students created a reference list of the images they used at the end of their digital stories and added their own Creative Commons acknowledgment. On the other hand, it should be noted that many teachers require students to use either Creative Commons or public domain content that are not copyrighted (e.g. Yang, 2012).

ILLUSTRATING DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM THROUGH STUDENT PROJECTS

In this section, I provide examples of the students' digital stories and how they relate to the theoretical issues previously discussed. However, throughout these student projects, there is evidence of how students met the goals for the classroom, in particular, how the students weaved their own voices with the texts they borrowed in far more interesting and more personal ways than are often found in classroom assignments (e.g. Blum, 2009; Rose, 1989),

One of the key goals was the role of student voice in relationship to textual borrowing. By providing them with their own voice to express their stories, students could gain a greater control over the texts they borrowed and not be overwhelmed by the readings as has been previously shown (e.g. Bazerman, 2013). It was hoped that this focus on voice and textual borrowing could be transferred to the print assignments, although there is no evidence to support this ability to "weave," to use Rose's (1989) term, their voices in their stories with the texts they often downloaded.

In doing so, they could go beyond simply regurgitating the texts they borrow. For example, in "The Thing I Felt Most Regretful,"² a Taiwanese student explored her narrative about the first time she broke

up with a boyfriend using a variety of images, cartoons, and movie stills downloaded from the Internet. For instance, she included stills from the American movie *Twilight*, and cartoons from Japan and Taiwan with her personal narrative. Her story illustrated the power of remixing texts from these different sources and a different culture. The images tell us a great deal about her interest in popular cultures from outside Taiwan. However, by starting with a personal story, she does not become "written" or dominated by the texts she borrowed; rather she utilizes these texts to further develop her narrative, which, for us, reflected a strong sense of voice as might be found in an academic paper.

The weaving together of text and image also illustrates the potential these assignments have for better understanding fair use, which was another goal for the course. Although the images this student borrowed were mostly copyrighted, weaving them with her story "transformed" their meaning in ways that differed from those originally intended. For example, the image taken from *Twilight* was not simply a scene from a movie could be transformed by the narrative into a scene from her relationship. Moreover, by providing a reference list of the URLs for each image, she could satisfy expectations for acknowledging sources.

There were other rhetorical aspects of digital storytelling, such as a sensitivity to audience, that may have resulted from an awareness of the expanded audience for viewing the stories.

The students' decisions of which images to use often illustrated new directions in academic writing that were not discussed in the classroom. In this example (Table 1), the digital story was substituted for a written assignment defining an academic concept, which had problems both with content and frequent plagiarism. While we had discussed in class how the images should not simply represent the text, achieving this kind of rhetorical impact was not a clear learning objective.

² See <https://youtu.be/cD1pdzmG3BY>

Table 1. Sequence of text and images describing the study of mites³

Text	Image
Most people think that mites are nasty insects that bite you.	
They live in your pillows and mattresses. So why don't we just figure out a way to kill all of them?	
Well, it turns that mites are a group of animals that have adjusted successfully to almost all environments	
And live up to	
120 degrees Fahrenheit	

Here, the student uses comic images of mites as a means of addressing the concerns an audience might have about his field of study, acarology (the study of mites). His choice of images reflects a concern that his audience might not understand the value of his research because of their negative view of mites as insects to exterminate.

Because the digital story must address a larger audience than the print assignments do, the student seems to realize the wider concerns of his audience and address them both academically in his narrative and more “playfully” in his choice of images (Tardy, 2016). Tardy argues that these kinds of humorous unorthodoxies should be an important part of genre education. This approach to the digital storytelling provided further evidence of how the students were demonstrating an often-complex view of the use of textual borrowing. In his use of textual borrowing, the student goes beyond our more limited objectives to explore his own approaches to using texts for developing his narrative. Whether he could transfer these approaches to his print writing was a question we have not been able to answer.

We found this same balance between narrator and audience in the stories where students were asked to explore their major and why they chose it. The Colombian student describes overcoming his own fear of insects—and his subsequent journey from Columbia to graduate school - to continue his studies. Using the images to describe the reasons for choosing a major was an important way to have students transform their images to express their personal narratives. The students sometimes discussed the personal choices their decisions entailed. In “The Road towards My Dreams,”⁴ a Taiwanese student weaves a discussion of the type of design she is studying with a story about how she overcame the pressure to conform to her parents’ expectations to follow her dream to study design. To further explore this relationship, she mostly downloaded images from the Internet but transformed them by integrating them with her decision about a major.

This ability to “find, evaluate, analyze, apply and disseminate information,” as Bates (2015) puts it (p.

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= aTffI05cJU&t>

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyL2SqP5LOO>

19), is itself one of the key learning objectives for using any technology. The Taiwanese student begins her story with downloaded images of hopeful-looking young children, which she connects to her concern with being limited in her culture to “practical” dreams as she reflects on her story about becoming a designer. She thereby exploits the potential of textual borrowing, including both images and photos, by remixing them with her own story about entering graduate school.

The narrative component of the digital storytelling assignment often played an important role in transforming the meaning of the images students chose to include. Sometimes our students chose a topic that was more academic. However, using the framework for digital storytelling in Lambert (2012), we wanted the students to focus on a key personal moment in their stories. Students often struggled with adding a personal dimension to their academic stories. A Korean student, for example, created a story about hoping to be a better father than his father was. His story included a haunting photo of a man, who may or may not be his father, standing in front of a ship. A Chinese undergraduate told a moving story of the day she left China to study in the United States as this moment was the first time her mother told her she loved her. The students were never required to reveal such aspects of their personal lives, but it often helped them develop their voices in relationship to their texts.

In response to the controversy over substituting digital stories for other academic writing assignments, we found that sometimes the digital stories contained the same degree of complex thinking about academic topics that was often found in undergraduate essays. The affordances of the personal narrative allowed them to foreground their own voices for academic purposes. In “Japanese Tradition,”⁵ for example, a Japanese undergraduate connects her personal interest in Japanese subcultures with imag-

es from various subcultures. She initially weaves together a variety of images and then focuses on one of the more rarely discussed subcultures that most interests her.

Here, the student demonstrates the same balance between her own story and the texts she has chosen that could be seen in her academic essays. Her narration defines and explains her interest in these Japanese subcultures. She then weaves her images to express and support her argument about their value and interest along with traditional Japanese music to create a digital story with many of the academic features found in undergraduate research papers. While her film may not be considered a substitute for an academic paper, it contained enough analysis of both the popularity of Japanese subcultures and her own interest in these cultures, as well as elements of textual borrowing and a strong narrative voice, to support the use of digital storytelling as a potential bridge to academic writing.

While the primary focus of our implementation of digital storytelling has been on the visual component of the story, the aural component was also as important, which is why students had to record their narratives in their own voice, regardless of their “accent.” Consistent with the argument for a plurilingual approach to language teaching, Selfe (2009) argues that students can draw upon aural forms of discourse, such as their own voices or favorite pieces of music. In most digital stories, the students are required to first record their stories in a podcast before remixing it with images and music. Occasionally we worked with their pronunciation, although this was not a goal of the course.

By narrating their stories in their own voices, students added aural to their written texts (e.g. Selfe, 2009) consistent with the importance of these aural/written connections in academic writing (e.g. Belcher & Hirvela, 2008). It was the goal that such narrations would help students develop a stronger voice in their texts. Most of the time music was used primarily for background but occasionally students

⁵ See <https://vimeo.com/16944288>

foregrounded it as part of their narrative. In “Leslie Chung,”⁶ for example, a Chinese graduate student explored his own loneliness and depression through recalling how his life was affected by the songs of Leslie Chung, a gay Chinese pop singer who committed suicide. As with the previous example, his story was similar to an academic essay on Chinese popular culture. His selection of images, mostly of Chung, were not as varied as the ones used in “Japanese Traditions.” However, because Chung’s songs were central to the student’s discussion of his life, the soundtrack provided him with powerful texts for exploring their connection to his own life as well as supporting his argument regarding their importance to him.

These digital stories raise questions about what counts as literacy as well as newer issues as what counts as acceptable language. In this context, digital storytelling, as is the case with other forms of multimodality, could stand on their own as writing assignments. Although posting these stories was not required, their online presence greatly expands their sense of audience. However, it is important to note that for our courses, digital storytelling was chosen because it had unique qualities that other forms of digital literacy did not: especially this remixing of the writer’s voice with borrowed texts.

CONCLUSION

In this discussion, I explore how digital stories functioned as both bridges to and substitutes for traditional written assignments. The amount of time and resources required to implement digital storytelling has forced us to consider the roles digital storytelling can play in the classroom. Our focus was on the similarity of the affordances in academic writing and digital storytelling, such as the use of textual borrowing. These examples, however, also illustrate how its implementation could substitute for other

writing assignments, such as for the definition paper discussed here.

Since the primary focus of the course was on plagiarism, we were interested in what factors might cause students to copy. Work on both first language and multilingual students have focused on how they may borrow texts with little understanding of why they were borrowing them (e.g. Blum, 2009). As a result, they may cite them primarily to demonstrate they had read the texts but with little understanding of their meaning or purpose. Our students, on the other hand, could freely express their voices in a narrative about their own lives and interests, about which they were “experts.” Unlike the articles read in the classroom where the writers often subordinated their voices to the more authoritative voices of the texts (e.g. Blum, 2009; Rose, 1989), our students chose topics of importance to them, so they usually did not experience these problems with weaving together texts with their own voices. It was hoped that this sense of voice could be transferred to their written texts, although we do not have evidence that this happened.

As illustrated in the story by the student interested in mites, this substitution involved the students in more rhetorical aspects of literacy than originally planned. This development was important for our discussion of plagiarism, for as Rose (1989) showed, there is sometimes a connection between the nature of the assignment and instances of plagiarism. In the definition paper we assigned prior to this digital storytelling assignment, for instance, students often copied their definitions from Wikipedia. However, by adding this personal voice to their choice of images related, the students could foreground their own voice in relationship to the texts they borrowed and were therefore more likely to avoid copying.

Since the course still was an academic writing course, we hoped that the students could achieve the same balance between narration and borrowed texts in the print texts. In these stories, the production of the personal story seemed to help students avoid the

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36YWhyyz3e4>

trap of being ‘written’ by the texts (Bazerman, 2013), which could have resulted from the prominence given to the narration or because their stories were voiced in their own voices. Nevertheless, this approach could help avoid what Blum (2009) called the “regurgitation” of texts found even in L1 academic writing.

There remain important criticisms of the role of digital storytelling in the classroom, which have come from academics and students who question its relevance to academic writing (e.g. Casanave, 2017). One issue frequently discussed is whether digital stories can replace academic writing assignments since they could take up a great deal of class time. This role for digital storytelling was extensively discussed in our university, although little has yet come of these discussions. Although digital storytelling did not have the impact that many at our university thought it might, our students sometimes demonstrated the possibility of using it as a substitute for academic writing.

The implementation of digital storytelling can also contribute to the discussions on language in composition classroom. For instance, van Leuween (2015) asks whether the implementation of multimodality can address student questions about language and culture as well as the rhetorical skills. In the “Japanese Traditions” and “Leslie Chung,” for instance, both students discussed their lives in the context of their own cultures. Other students addressed topics such as political issues related to Egypt⁷ or Islamophobia in the United States⁸, which reflect concerns about language and culture.

Many of the criticisms of the role digital storytelling in an academic classroom could be addressed by additional research on the transfer of key aspects of academic discourse across different domains. Issues of transfer remain salient avenues to explore considering academic skills across writing topics

(Anson & Moore, 2016; Yancey, Robertson & Tacsak, 2014) and across literacies (Lillis & Scott, 2007), as well as how students connect languages and remember the forms to be transferred (e.g. Yu & Odlin, 2015).

We implemented various other literacies, such as reflective blogging, to facilitate this transfer process. DasBender (2016) discusses the use of reflective writing with multilingual students to support the transfer process. We began to explore this potential for transfer by asking students to reflectively blog about their use of borrowed texts and their perceptions of the relationships between the print and digital assignments, an approach influenced by the work of Perkins and Salomon (1988). However, the results of this approach so far have been inconclusive for promoting transfer.

Although this paper does not answer all questions and criticisms, it has seemed clear that digital storytelling could contribute to students’ understanding of textual borrowing, the importance of voice, a sensitivity to audience, and the use of online intellectual property. The introduction of multimodal assignments in multilingual composition courses provides a new and important framework for exploring the potential of digital literacies and its possible role as a replacement or stepping stone for other assignments, particularly ones that are only read by the student and the instructor. Whether digital storytelling can play this role in the development of other, more traditional, forms of academic will require future research in a variety of areas of concern to multilingual composition teachers.

⁷ See <https://vimeo.com/36116196>

⁸ See <https://vimeo.com/17709929>



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