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Bringing digital stories into assessment

Abstract

Since 2007, the Geography and Development Studies department at the University of Chester has incorporated the use of student-generated digital stories into a core 20 credit, first year module 'Foundations for Successful Studentship'. This innovative approach to the fieldwork element of the module provides students with the opportunity to design and create their own digital story. This paper considers student and staff perceptions of this technology and reflects upon the practice of bringing digital stories into assessment and the techniques used.

Introduction

The modern day undergraduate arriving at university holds a tool-box of technical knowledge that prepares them for study. Students entering HE are more technologically capable than ever before and have been defined as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). Those students who have grown up with digital technology are able to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. This cohort of students has been referred to as the 'net generation', characterised by those who are digitally literate, highly Internet familiar, highly social, crave interactivity in image-rich environments, and do not think in terms of technology but in terms of activity which technology enables (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). The increasing technology available to students and staff is creating a new way of incorporating digital technologies into HE assessment. Indeed Prensky (2009), now advocates the use of 'digital wisdom' and 'digital enhancement' as a way of describing how students look at technology and what it can do for them.

Universities are being challenged to compete with the seemingly exhaustive advancement in digital and Web 2.0 technologies. Widening participation, demographic change, competition and funding are swirling together to create a 'perfect storm'. The implications of these factors for universities may be enormous as institutions need to embrace technology, rather than be threatened by it (Bradwell, 2009), as "a greater focus on technology will produce real benefits for all" (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, p24)

This article presents provisional thoughts from mixed-methods analysis of student-generated digital stories supporting a core Level 4 module. In this article, a digital story refers to a collection of still images, video and audio produced with free and readily available software. Findings will explore the use of this particular technology in assessment and how it can specifically be used to support fieldwork. These will include the perceptions and reflections of students from the University of Chester, and staff perceptions from attendees at the GEES Assessment for Learning Conference, June 2009.

Rationale

Incorporating a novel assessment method such as a digital story into fieldwork has the potential to increase student engagement and has become an integral component of the field report. The first year module 'Foundations for Successful Studentship' has on average 70 students per year and the fieldwork element takes place in February. Three locations are used; the Single Honours Geography students spend a week on a residential field course in Slapton Sands, Devon; the Combined Honours Geography students

Bringing digital stories into assessment Kelly Wakefield | Derek France

use Mid-Wales as their field area; and International Development Studies students work more locally, in Chester and Liverpool. Figure 1 shows students working in small groups on a research project particular to their fieldwork locale. With the aid of a story board and some planning, they use a digital camera and a tripod to capture the still images, video and audio required to build a digital story.

The students can choose to work in groups or individually to create their digital story from the downloaded material. Free software programmes such as Windows Movie Maker and Audacity facilitate the production of the digital story, which is advised to be around 3 minutes in duration.

Assessment criteria

The student's individual field report is a blend of the traditional written form with one digital component comprising either video footage and/or still images which are embedded (via a hyperlink) into the written methodology or results/analysis sections. The production of the digital component(s) is completed prior to the submission of the final report and is uploaded onto the institutional VLE. The digital stories, once uploaded, cannot be seen by anyone other than the student authors and staff who have access. The digital story element of the research report is worth 30% of the student's final mark, with the other 70% accredited to the individually written component. The assessment criteria for the individual field report are outlined below in Table 1, and highlight the weightings between the written and digital forms.



Figure 1: First year students experimenting with digital technologies on fieldwork in Devon

Research report (weighted 70%)	Digital component (weighted 30%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research objectives • Project rationale/justification • Methods of data collection • Analysis and interpretation • Conclusion (including critique) • Writing style • Use and incorporation of digital component 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of content • Content complements / enhances the report • Quality of presentation • Sound quality • Creativity

Table 1: Assessment criteria for the individual field report.

Student evaluation

This paper draws upon a group of 148 first year students' learning experiences of completing a digital story assessment (74 females and 74 males). Data were gathered through a bespoke pre- and post-digital story questionnaire and through focus groups. The pre-questionnaire gathered the students' previous experiences of digital technology and sought to capture how each student felt about their own competency with digital technologies. The post-questionnaire aimed to capture the students' views on digital story making and how they felt this 'created knowledge' had impacted on their personal learning experience. Surveys were anonymised using a matching code, enabling a trace of how an individual's opinion had changed. The response rates to the surveys were high, with 77% for the pre-digital story and 45% for the post-digital story. A focus group was then carried out after the students returned from fieldwork, using volunteers from the whole cohort. The focus group themes and main discussions were pulled from the initial responses to both questionnaires; these included talking about the students' engagement with the subject and enhancement of the learning experience.

Results and discussion

Pre- and post-digital story questionnaires

Data collected from the pre-questionnaire highlighted the students' confidence in their competency with digital technologies; the students were asked if they felt competent when using a digital camera. Sixty percent (all data are 2008 and 2009) reported that they totally agreed with this statement. Complementing this statistic, 62% of students totally agreed or agreed to feeling competent when using a digital camera to record video. This showed the students' perception of their competency was similar, whether working with still images or video. Students expressed their expectations of creating digital technologies in a more qualitative format on the pre-questionnaires with both excitement and trepidation:

“Never done it before, learning something new”

“Technology, I enjoy creativity”

“Depends how creative I am with these skills, I know how to use it [the technology] but I have no idea whether or not it will be good enough”

The most frequent concern from the students was regarding issues of never having created a digital story before rather than any fear of creating the

digital story or problems with using the equipment or software.

The post-digital story questionnaire highlighted that the nature of the digital story assessment had impacted on student learning. Responses were made such as creating a digital story:-

***“enhanced my learning experience of the subject”
(84% totally agree or agree with this statement)***

***“made me more interested to learn about the subject”
(64% totally agree or agree with this statement)***

***“made me more motivated to learn about the subject”
(58% totally agree or agree with this statement)***

These statements show that the students were able to identify potential enhancements of incorporating digital technology within the assessment and in each case more than half of the students agreed or totally agreed with the statement.

Student focus groups

The focus groups were facilitated with volunteers across the first year (n=7, 5 and 8) and themes that were discussed included the learning experience and the practicalities of creating the digital story in a group setting. The major concern that emerged was that the students felt nervous of filming the videos and creating the audio voice-over track. Some students expressed a nervousness behind the camera in directing the story but also hearing their own voices and being seen 'on film'. These concerns, however, were prior to any filming and once the students were provided with a tripod and digital camera out in the field, the nerves started to wear off. Student focus group discussions reported:

“Not very confident about it [digital story telling] at first, unsure, until we had a run through with what we had to do”

“Did a digital story for 3 minutes. Everyone had a go at being on the camera and featuring in it. Some were more comfortable in front of the camera, some did more recording”

The practicalities of allowing students to create their own digital story are simple. Once the students have their equipment set up, the footage can be recorded with or without audio. However, it is important to

Bringing digital stories into assessment Kelly Wakefield | Derek France

allow students time to practise this new technique and gain confidence before creating their assessed digital story. The essence of the first day in the field is therefore to allow the students to record anything - it does not have to be serious and can be a spoof. As long as the students plan their filming with the aid of a storyboard, practising the technique of creating a digital story is the most important factor.

“We did a practice digital story which helped even though we were messing about and we got into it...better to practise than just doing the serious version straight off”

“It enhanced our experience; we captured things on the podcast that you might forget”

The learning experience that the students have expressed manifests itself in the technical side to the making of the digital story.

“It was an advantage to do it [the audio voice over] again when we got back to university...If you stand in front of the camera it is best to maintain eye contact rather than reading from the paper”

“I learnt how to do digital story telling and the information stands out more...the learning is better”

Staff perceptions

At the 2009 GEES Assessment for Learning Conference, a workshop was run called ‘Feeling Creative? How to bring digital stories into assessment’. This session provided practical experience of creating a digital story for academic staff which could then be included in the participant’s own assessment practices. In contrast to the students’ perceptions prior to creating a digital story, which were almost totally positive, the workshop participants used words such as:

*Fear
Nervous
Apprehension*

Figure 2: ‘A word cloud’ (www.wordle.net) represents academic staff participants’ pre-workshop perceptions of creating a digital story; the most frequent words are in a larger font size. (All words that were mentioned have been included in the diagram, n=45).



The words in Figure 2 were related to the participant's own feelings and it is possible to see that "nervous", "interesting", "creative", "idea" and "new" were the most referred to words to describe the pre-workshop perceptions. In some cases it seemed highly likely that this anxiety will be pushed onto the students.

Post-workshop feedback was extremely positive, with a number of tangible outputs from participants. The qualitative comments were gathered from workshop respondents through email and post-workshop feedback forms. These suggest previous anxieties had been overcome: -

"It was amazing how much could be achieved in such a short space of time"

"I'm about to introduce a 'digital story' element to our first year fieldcourse"

"I really felt self-conscious about recording myself speaking..... I have now managed to get over that one."

"I came away thinking about how this type of short digital story could be used in a variety of assessment methods"

Conclusions

The use of the digital story element in the 'Foundations for Successful Studentship' module assessment can be a hook to encourage the students to engage more effectively with the subject, specifically fieldwork methodology and enquiry. Whilst the students have expressed that the technology motivates and increases their interest in the subject, evidence suggests that it also enhances the learning experience. In contrast with the staff participants at the GEES annual conference, the students concerns prior to creating the digital story were related more to the practicalities of filming the story and being filmed, whereas the staff perceptions extended to nerves and fear in relation to using the technology, and to how students might react to this novel assessment practice.

More generally, there is a sense that students are arriving into HE with a competency with digital technologies. Rather than staff looking at technology as a barrier that hinders progress, HE institutions and staff should recognise that technology is here to advance and facilitate the pedagogies already in use.

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