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Three Cases of Unconventional Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

The narration is the art of using words and actions for the representation of the elements of a story in such a way that the listener's imagination is stimulated (Genette, 1998). More simply put, it is the art of telling a story to an audience, in order to convey important messages. Due to the technological developments, storytelling has become digital; the oral or written story is enhanced by using multimedia and hypermedia elements (Lathem, 2005). Narrations, either digital or conventional, are useful educational tools. Since narrations cause the keen interest of students, this helps them to easily consolidate and assimilate information (Coventry, 2008). They increase the oral and written skills, strengthen critical thinking and the ability to analyze and synthesize information (Ohler, 2006). When students create their own digital stories (individually or as a group), they learn to conduct research on a topic, to ask questions, to organize ideas, to express their views and to make meaningful narratives (Robin, 2006).

There is an extensive literature regarding the educational benefits when using digital storytelling (e.g., Coventry, 2008; Ohler, 2006; Robin, 2008). Disproportionally fewer studies have been conducted examining the potential of this tool in areas where the settings are not strictly instructional or the main objective is not some form of knowledge acquisition. The present study is an attempt to fill that gap, by embracing the standpoint that digital storytelling is a good method for documenting personal experiences, that it can be a form of narrative therapy and that it can help students to discover parts of their

personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011). Three case studies are presented where digital storytelling was used in a non-mainstream, unconventional way. In all, knowledge acquisition was irrelevant or an insignificant factor; instead, the emphasis was on broader issues that students, as well as teachers, face at school.

BACKGROUND

Focusing on problems that students and teachers face at school, which are not directly related to knowledge acquisition, but affect how the school functions and/or the emotional well-being of students, three areas were of interest: the poor school integration of immigrant students, young students' adjustment to school, and bullying.

In Greece, 10.35% of the total students' population are immigrants (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2011). Insufficient knowledge of the Greek language and, consequently, low performance in language lessons is a major problem (Retali, 2013). There is also a more important difficulty; that of poor school and/or social integration. Schools could play an important role, but the Greek educational system is not capable of assimilating immigrant students well (Skourtou, Vratsalis, & Govaris, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to help them overcome their adaptation problems.

Coming to primary school for the very first time marks the beginning of a transitional period to children's lives. Rules and routines are different from those they were accustomed in the kindergarten and their status and identity might be affected (Fabian, 2007). Problems may arise

that have short and long-term educational and/or psychological implications (Dockett & Perry, 2009). Behavioral problems are also common (Brooker, 2008). Consequently, finding ways that allow a smooth and quick transition to the school's environment are quite important.

Bullying is a phenomenon that is becoming more and more frequent in Greece's schools. It greatly affects students' psycho-emotional development, their school performance (Manesis & Lambropoulou, 2014) and may lead to serious psychological trauma and dysfunctional social behavior (Galanaki & Vogiatzoglou, 2015). In hypothetical situations children easily express their intentions to help the victim or to report the incident (Rigby & Johnson, 2006), but in reality, only a small percentage actually acts (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Studies, in Greece, examining interventions where students actively participated and were not just passive receivers of information are sparse (e.g., Kyriazis & Zacharias, 2015). Thus, there is a need to inform them in a more comprehensive way.

The coming sections present how these issues were dealt using digital storytelling.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Case 1: School Integration of an Immigrant Student

In order to help a sixth-grade female immigrant student, having significant adaptation problems, a short project was planned and carried out, at a primary school in Rhodes, Greece, from late October 2014, till mid-March 2015. Twenty students (including the subject) were involved. The main idea of the project was to ask her to develop and present to her classmates an autobiographical digital story, illustrating her thoughts and feelings from her transition from one country to another.

She was selected as the study's subject because: (a) she recently came to Greece from the Domini-

can Republic. There were no other immigrants from that country; therefore, no one could help her and her family during their transitional period, (b) she did not socialize with the other students, whose attitudes toward her were "indifferent", (c) she should be attending high-school, but because of her poor school performance she had to repeat the primary school's last grade, and (d) her adaptation problems had worsened because of (c). From the above, it can be argued that she reflected characteristics and problems arising from the fact that she was an immigrant, therefore she constituted a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Data were gathered from multiple sources; interviews, direct observations, drawings, and the subject's digital story.

The interviews with the subject's teacher were about her difficulties in social interaction with her classmates. The interviews with the students focused on how they view and interact with her. The interviews with the subject focused on the difficulties she was facing and the level of social interaction with her classmates. The in-classroom observations were focused on her behavior and the attitudes of the other students toward her.

The development of the story lasted for a month, with a total of nine one-to-two hour sessions. It consisted of three parts: (a) "Before leaving" (seven scenes), where her thoughts, feelings, and conversations with relatives and friends were depicted, (b) "The journey" (two scenes) where her first impressions of her new home were illustrated, and (c) "In Rhodes" (two scenes) where her situation at school was portrayed. Her favorite song when she was living in her homeland accompanied the first part, while in the other two parts she used her favorite Greek song. Even though all dialogues and thoughts were written in Greek, they were "spoken" in Spanish, using her own voice. It has to be noted that during the development of the subject's story, the researcher did not intervene in any way. This was done because guidance regarding the structure or the content of the digital story, might have resulted in the alteration of the results.

Her detachment and loneliness were strongly portrayed at the third part of the story (e.g., all students are playing, but she sits alone and no one is talking to her), in contrast to the first, which is full of dialogues with relatives and friends. This contrast, reveals the extent of the lack of interaction and communication with others and her strong feelings of isolation and solitude. Also, the story was -in some sense- bilingual. Texts were in Greek; the narration was in Spanish. This fact, together with the Spanish song in the story's first part, had an impact on students. Photos, language, and music, combined together, helped them in having a better understanding of the subject's culture, as they stated in their interviews.

In their initial interviews, the majority of students (16) expressed the view that they have no dissimilarities with foreigners, with the exception of language. However, their focus was on the language and communication problems and not on the immigrants' feelings. After the presentation of the story, students stated that they gained a better understanding of the immigrants' problems (17 cases). There was also a shift in their focus; from communication problems to the immigrants' feelings of loneliness and isolation.

From the analysis of the initial subject's interview, the strong attachment to her country became clear. Loneliness, unhappiness, anxiety and fear about whether she will be accepted, were her strongest feelings. Significant changes were noted after the intervention; she felt more accepted and, finally, she had started socializing with other students and she was quite happy about it.

The researcher's observations and the teacher's interview also confirmed the positive change in the subject's behavior and socialization. A positive change to the other students' behavior was also observed, the most important being that students acted. The communication barrier was lifted by both sides. Not only the subject was more open in joining groups of students, but also, they were more open in asking her to join them, in various activities.

Case 2: School Adjustment

In order to facilitate students understanding of the functions and rules of school and to change the attitudes and behaviors of those having adjustment problems, a short project was developed, involving the use of a technique to foster positive behaviors, combined with digital storytelling. A total of a hundred and five first-grade students participated, from five primary schools in Athens, Greece. The project lasted from mid-September (schools in Greece start in mid-September), until late October 2015.

Behavioral modeling and, in specific, mimicking was utilized (Akers, 1977). In mimicking, one observes a model that expresses the desired behavior and, subsequently, he/she adopts it (Rogers, 2003). If ready-made stories were used, it would be like lecturing students. Instead, students were asked to develop their own. Since they were not yet able to read and write (at least efficiently), they acted as the "brains" and teachers acted as their "hands". The digital stories' developing software was projected using the classes' video projectors, students saw what available choices they had, collectively determined what to do, and "commanded their teachers to execute their will. In reality, teachers indirectly guided students to certain key points, by constantly asking questions about the conditions and behavioral problems that prevail in their classrooms. The outline of the stories was "A day at school" and the idea was to develop two-part digital stories. On the first, "wrong" students' behavior and dysfunctional classes were depicted. On the second, all problems were resolved and the "ideal" students' behavior was portrayed. This stage of the project lasted for two weeks (seven two-hour sessions).

Multiple sources of evidence were to be used as suggested by Yin (1994) and Paton (1990); pre-, during, and post-stage observations together with pre- and post-stage interviews with teachers and students were used for data collection purposes. This is a form of triangulation, which allows the

verification of interviews while interviews allow the researcher to explore the internal aspects of the underlying behavior (Patton, 1990). The focus of the observations was incidents of poor school adjustment and behavioral problems. The teachers and the students presenting significant adjustment problems were asked about the observed episodes, in order to understand and clarify their intentions and/or interpretations of the events.

During the observations prior to the development of the stories, it was noted that 14 students (9 boys and 5 girls) had considerable adjustment and behavioral problems and became the study's focus students. Each repeatedly exhibited the following categories of problems: (a) lack of self-restraint/discipline, (b) lack of interest or denial of participation in the lessons or in the school activities, and (c) denial to follow rules. Also, 24 students presented some of the above problems, but these were sporadic. The rest of them did not present any problems, or they were negligible. A noteworthy finding of the focus students interviews was that, though they could understand that their behavior was wrong, they could not make the connection between wrong behavior and its consequences, except for the ones that were related to them.

Students found the notion that teachers were their "hands" and that they were the "brains" very interesting and fun, and they were constantly asking to add more scenes to the stories. In the first part of the stories they effortlessly illustrated the characters' wrong behavior at school. What was not expected, but actually happened, was students to easily portray the ideal conditions. All the basic functions and rules that govern school seemed to be understood and the same applied to what was considered appropriate behavior.

During post-stages' observations, a sharp decrease in all problems was noted, but they were not totally eliminated. The results were especially interesting in the focus group, in which the majority of the focus students (12 out of 14) exhibited only minor behavioral issues. Also, teachers and students alike, quite often, referred to the digital

stories during in-classroom conversations and/or arguments. During post-stage interviews, the matter of focus students not being able to make the connection between wrong behavior and its consequences to others was reinstated, to evaluate if any changes had occurred. Indeed, 8 students gave answers that clearly indicated that they understood that there were broader implications.

Case 3: Dealing with Bullying

Since incidents of bullying are becoming more frequent in Greece's schools, an intervention was planned and carried out in the fourth grade of a primary school in Rhodes, Greece, from late October 2015, till late November 2015 (ten two-hour sessions). Twenty-four students were involved. The goal was to inform students about bullying. The main idea was students to work in groups of four, develop bullying stories, present and discuss them to the classroom, and collectively develop one final story. The researcher offered no help or guidance and did not intervene in the process, with one exception. In the final story, he suggested three alternative endings; the victim remained silent and continued to be tormented by the bully, the victim reacted, but failed because the bully was overwhelmingly powerful, and the victim became a bully himself, harassing younger students. Following the presentation of the final story, students were asked to write a short essay, presenting their thoughts and feelings for these endings and the way they would have reacted. Research data were obtained by analyzing the digital stories and the short essays using the iterative coding process (Creswell, 2002) to identify the categories, themes, and patterns that emerged from the data. All stories were viewed once, by two individuals, to identify the main ideas. Then, they were re-viewed in more detail and the ideas were labeled with codes. This process was repeated two more times to reduce overlap and redundancy of the codes until a small set of sub-themes were identified.

Physical together with verbal bullying were the main themes in all scenarios. All stories although simplistic, accurately illustrated what bullying is: the repeatedness of the incidents, the use of violence and bad language, the abuser's overwhelming power, the victim's reluctance to report the events. Emotions, like fear, depression, loneliness, and embarrassment, were also accurately presented. Bullies in all cases were boys. In all but two cases, the victim was a boy. Bystanders were included, but in most cases, there were no dialogues or thoughts accompanying these characters, so it is impossible to know which type of bystanders were portrayed. On a story, an observer helped the victim to beat the bully. The rest of the stories ended with the victim talking to an adult (two to a teacher, two to the victim's mother, one to the headmaster).

The three alternative endings of the final story were, in essence, wrong. Students' essays were evaluated on the basis of the reasoning for rejecting them and the reasoning for selecting their own "right" course of action. The negative emotions one has when being bullied, were enough for rejecting the first two of the alternative endings. The reason for rejecting the third ending was almost totally in line with the phrase: "We do not treat others in the same way they (wrongly) treat us". There were six cases (two boys and four girls) in which students stated that they would talk to an adult only if the bullying situation becomes intolerable, while in the rest, students stated that they would react immediately. The negative emotions of being bullied were once again the reason for seeking help if they were the victims of bullying. Finally, in all cases, talking to a parent, a teacher, the school's headmaster, to a friend or a combination of the above, were considered the "right" reaction if students were bullied or witnesses to bullying.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Setting aside the satisfactory results that all had, the cases presented in the previous sections share important common features. In all, digital storytelling was used in ways that deviate from its mainstream uses, that is in a strictly instructional setting, for simply telling a story, or for acquiring literacy skills. Taking advantage of storytelling's compatibility with young students' mentality (Robin, 2008), they explored alternative uses that all of them tried to resolve issues that students, as well as teachers, often face at school. Indeed, bullying, immigrants' integration problems and problems during the first days at school, are not rare and dealing with them can be quite difficult.

The rationale behind the three cases was based on two concepts. The first was that students' active participation is fundamental. Although a researcher, and/or a teacher was present, their role was limited; offering technical assistance when and if needed, not intervening at all, or covertly guiding. Social constructivism provided the theoretical foundation. By adopting the Vygotskian perspective, teachers were the ones who -indirectly- guided and supported students (Niesel & Griebel, 2007). By adopting the Piagetian perspective, students collaborated, negotiated, and came to a common consensus on how to develop their stories (Smith, 2012). By avoiding lecturing and direct manipulation, students' stories were not the result of someone imposing his/her thoughts and views on them. Instead, students were free to:

- Visualize their thoughts when developing the stories (Regan, 2008).
- Use, as raw material, pieces of previous knowledge and experiences they might have had.

- Construct their own understanding regarding important issues and socially negotiate them (Ertmer & Newby 2013).
- Embed their assumptions in real-world situations and determine by themselves the “right” course of actions.
- Become communicants of someone else’s thoughts, feelings, and problems (by viewing the digital stories) (Cane, 2010).

As a result, they formed a more comprehensive understanding regarding the issues that were discussed in the digital stories (Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2013). Rules, instructions, good practices, behavioral patterns, and someone else’s emotions, require being deeply understood, before being accepted, applied, or become one’s own viewpoint.

The study’s second notion was that digital storytelling can be a form of a narrative therapy by helping students to discover parts of their personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011). The power of stories as therapeutic means has been recognized by psychotherapy decades ago (White and Epston, 1990) The above was considered and utilized in the case of the immigrant student. Reflection on her problems, during the development of her story, and externalizing them during the presentation of the story, held the key to overcoming her problems (Rosenthal, 2003). Reflection and discussion of an issue were also key elements in the other two cases. Literature suggests that, when it comes to digital narrations, stories have to be told directly and unfiltered in order to act as a narrative therapy but also to start a dialogue among students (Harvey & Robinson, 2012). In turn, the discussion of a narrative promotes mutual understanding between students (Caine, 2010). The digital stories offered the basis upon which the process of documenting their experiences, reflecting upon them, and discussing them, was build and facilitated.

One has to be reminded that the researchers (or the teachers) avoided intervening, for purely research reasons; for not altering the results or for letting the students work by themselves. Contrary to that, in real-life situations, the teachers would

not be restricted. Taking advantage of the close affiliation between a teacher and his students, which is fundamental (Hamre & Pianta, 2006), results of such interventions are expected to be even better. That is because students will feel more comfortable in expressing themselves and the teachers, by knowing the background of each student, will be able to guide them more efficiently.

Considering all the above, it can be concluded that digital storytelling offered a simple, yet effective, solution to issues that are otherwise difficult to deal with. This solution can be summarized in just three steps: (a) ask students to develop digital stories on an important issue, (b) let them free to reflect upon that issue while developing their stories, and (c) discuss with them the issue while the stories are presented.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The main limitation in all the cases was the small sample size. Also, they were all conducted in Greece. Therefore, their results cannot be easily generalized. Further studies are needed with larger sample sizes and from different educational systems, in order to identify differences or similarities to the findings of the present cases and to obtain more reliable results. In addition, since the duration in all cases was short, longer-term projects can be tested, examining and comparing their results to short-term projects.

It would also be interesting to conduct research using conventional, instead of digital storytelling and compare the results. By doing so, it would be possible to determine if the results can be attributed to the medium used and/or to the methods.

Finally, one has to keep in mind that bullying troubles students of all ages, immigrant students face problems regardless of the level of education they study, and the transition from one level of education to another is always a sensitive period to a young student’s life. Therefore, virtually students of all ages can become target-groups of studies similar to the ones described in the previous sections.

CONCLUSION

In all the cases that were presented, the problems that were studied were dealt efficiently. Furthermore, all projects were short in duration and can be easily applied, without altering the school's timetable. Though it is certain that long term interventions yield good results, time is a crucial factor. Short term innovative interventions are needed because results can be produced right away and problems can be dealt on the spot. In all cases, whatever results were attained, were achieved fast, probably easing the way to follow up, longer term interventions. Also, no specialized equipment was needed and software similar to the one that was used is freely available.

In addition, the simplicity of the cases' design allows similar interventions to be easily applied to kindergarten, as well as to older students. Thus, teachers, as well as policy makers, can consider using their findings when designing similar or more well-organized, long-term interventions.

In conclusion, although the small sample size in all cases constitutes a considerable limitation, nonetheless, results point toward one direction; digital storytelling is a flexible and powerful instrument, an all-in-one tool, that can be used in many and diverse situations, educational or non-educational.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bullying: The repeated use of violence (verbal or physical) and/or threats, for abusing, intimidating, or dominating others.

Constructivism: A learning theory which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Although not a specific pedagogy, is the underlying theme of many education reform movements.

Digital Storytelling: A digital form of a story that combines a conventional story (oral or written) and multimedia and/or hypermedia elements.

Mimicking: The observation of a model that expresses the desired behavior and, subsequently, adopting it.

Narrative Therapy: A form of psychotherapy in which an individual, together with the therapist, co-authors a narrative about himself/herself. Through this process, the values, skills and knowledge one has are identified, so as to effectively confront whatever problems he/she faces.

School Adjustment: The process of adapting to the role of being a student and to various aspects of the school environment.

Social Integration: The process in which all members of the society are engaged in a dialogue to achieve and maintain peaceful social relations. It does not imply or suggest forced assimilation.

E