Multimodality in the FSEM Classroom:
Digital Storytelling and ESL Students

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I teach one of the "hybrid" FSEM courses (also known as "iFSEM") in which half of the students are domestic and the other half international. These courses are designed to benefit both groups by facilitating cross-cultural student interaction in a particular academic area and intentionally addressing issues of language and writing proficiency in a multicultural setting. While these courses are not necessarily writing intensive, there is a particular emphasis on working towards proficiency in academic, creative, professional and/or civic writing, as informed by the topic of the course.

In my course, "Immigrant Stories: Theirs and Ours," we examine the various ways in which individuals displaced by emigration and exile have chosen to tell their stories. We discuss texts by 20th and 21st century Chinese, Middle Eastern and Latin@ immigrants to the US in a variety of genres, from literary memoir and film to digital story and performance art. For their final project, students explore their own stories of displacement (ancestral, familiar, individual or collective) in the form of a literary essay, short memoir, collection of poems, digital story, performed monologue, or documentary film. Each of these options is explored through a dedicated workshop--often facilitated by a guest speaker--in which we study the conventions of each medium and explore how the form enhances content. Therefore, by the

time students are required to make a decision about medium for the final project, they will have had some exposure to the different options, both informally, through content -- immigrant stories created in the various media--and formally, through dedicated readings and discussions about the form.

In the two years that I have taught an iFSEM, I have observed that most domestic students opt for working in essay form for their final projects, a choice that seems to correlate with their academic writing experience in high school and comfort level as informed by this experience. On the other hand, international students seem much more open to exploring multimodal writing projects, perhaps as a way of leveling the field in terms of language proficiency. These students favor digital storytelling in particular, as they find the form meaningful in its succinctness and semantic possibilities. Regardless of what initially motivates their openness to alternative narrative forms, it soon becomes apparent that multimodal writing projects--digital stories in particular-- are an effective tool for ESL students to gain confidence in their writing while acquiring valuable skills in terms of revision, audience identification, editing, and metacognition. In my particular iFSEM, digital storytelling has also proven a valuable medium for ESL students to explore issues of displacement, cultural identity and otherness by making

connections through text/image/sound in aesthetic ways that would have been challenging in traditional narrative forms in a second language.

The Nature of Digital Stories

In general terms, a digital story is a short, digital media-writing project grounded in a first person narrative. It combines a narrated piece of personal writing with digital photo or video, and it is often set to musical soundtrack. Unlike most writing for social media, digital stories are self-contained pieces, with a beginning, middle and end. These story projects are often meticulously planned, as the orchestration of visual and audio components is designed to contribute a layer of meaning to the narrative.[9] They can be technically complex--incorporating audio and visual effects--or quite simple in structure, as long as they privilege story over technical mastery.

There are certain conventions about length, as most digital stories will range between 3 to 4 minutes in duration and will be based on a script of 350 to 400 words[10]. Such succinctness requires a labor-intensive process of revision in order to distill a narrative to its essential components, while keeping it grounded in the personal, yet open enough to allow interpretations beyond it. In other words, making it transcendent. While this may seem a lot to ask from first-year ESL

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[9] Although there is a subgenre of digital storytelling using iPhone or other video capable small devices, these projects are more spontaneous in nature and are often done in one take.

[10] While still open to much debate and interpretation, the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California has helped define the conventions of this genre through their "Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling," which addresses emotional content, point of view, a dramatic question, and decisions about voice, soundtrack, economy and pacing, and sharing (Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, Berkley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2010).

students, those who opted to do a digital story for their final project not only achieved the goals of the assignment, but also reported a great feeling of accomplishment from having completed a work that was intensely personal, creatively critical, and aesthetically pleasing. To their surprise, they also acknowledged having spent many more hours writing, revising, editing and thinking about what creates meaning than they had originally expected.

A digital story requires methodical planning to go from idea to finished product, which makes it an effective instrument to convey that writing assignments are often multi-step projects that should not be left to the last minute to complete.

Process

Before committing to a particular genre or medium for their projects, we work on refining ideas through exploratory writing assignments. These assignments usually take the form of informal writing exercises in which students are asked to connect class readings to their particular story of displacement. Often, an idea with enough potential to be developed into a story emerges from these exercises. At this point, more free-writing exercises follow in order to clarify the idea and to explore the pertinence of a particular genre or medium as a vehicle for the story. Therefore, in addition to the practical value of exploratory writing (having an idea to develop and a genre or medium to work in) students learn to recognize pre-writing as a valuable first step towards the completion of a writing project.

The next step is shaping the idea into a story that is grounded in the personal (defining what makes this particular story "my own") and to explore its emotional resonance. While some students may complete this step through freewriting, others opt to jump right into scripting, hopefully with an understanding that scripting at this point will

require considerable revision to adjust to the length and content requirements.

A script will normally go through several iterations before a student is able to tell a personal story with an identifiable dramatic moment and the potential to transcend itself and resonate with a culturally different audience. At this point, a student will consider what visual elements will enhance the emotional content of the story and suggest additional avenues for interpretation. While the selection of visual material may begin with explicit imagery (images that mirror or merely illustrate the accompanying script) as they begin to assemble their story, many students will consider using implicit imagery and juxtaposition to contribute an additional layer or layers of meaning. This process is usually accomplished through storyboarding, which allows students to see how the visual and audio narratives complement each other.

The process of orchestrating the visual and audio components is an arduous one, requiring not only precision in timing the various components, but also aesthetic decisions about voice, intonation, pacing, visual transitions, volume, etc. I leave this part of the process completely open to the student, emphasizing that their project will not be graded based on how well they manage the technical aspects of their story, but on content and metacognition. I have found this last point--the reflection about their own thinking process in making connections between the course content and their personal stories and assigning semantic value to the orchestration of the multimodal resources--to be essential to the learning process.

Reflection and Assessment

Therefore, I ask all students who choose non-essay forms for their final projects to include a separate short narrative in which they address the structural choices they made and their semiotic value. Some of the guiding questions I include for this part of the assignment are:

> What is the "transcending" theme of your story? How does it relate to the overarching theme of the class? Why did you choose this particular medium to tell your story and how does it add a layer of significance? What meanings did you assign to the orchestration of multimodal resources? (Provide specific examples).

For this part, one student reflected on the benefits of working on a digital story project versus writing an essay with the following:

> The format allows for a more open expression of emotions and a true reflection of the experience through photos, voice intonations, and text rather than a hollow description . . . . It allows for creativity. Emotions and an experience are hard to explain in the traditional, full-sentence, essay-format way. This format allows for the expression of emotion through creativity with photos, text, and the script. It is much more flexible.

Some students also take this as an opportunity to convey the challenges of the form (from technical aspects to putting their personal stories "out there"). All the while, however, they are not only considering their learning from a variety of angles, but also do so through writing--something they may have been initially resistant to do. Throughout the course of planning, writing and assembling their digital stories, students will have produced an impressive amount of formal and informal writing with a variety of goals and audiences in mind.

I must add a few words about assessment of digital story projects. While there are many rubrics specific to digital story projects, I wanted to develop a common rubric for assessing all final projects, regardless of the medium/genre chosen by

the student.[11] I also wanted to keep it simple, so students tempted to work in technically complex forms would not be discouraged from exploring them for fear that non-mastery of the form would affect their grade.

Students also receive separate homework grades for exploratory writing assignments, revisions, in-class presentations, and integration of feedback from peers, all of which reinforce the *process* of writing a multi-step project.

Course Grades
25%   Focus (theme; connection to course; integration of research; tightness of prose)
20%   Medium (pertinence to story; exploration of semantic possibilities)
30%   Thought-provoking (transcendence and universality of story; analysis)
25%   Ancillary materials and reflections (annotated bibliography; reflection on learning/writing process; conclusion)

In conclusion, as multi-layered, multi-step projects, digital stories help students find value in the processes of writing (planning, drafting, revising), promote creative critical inquiry (through the semantic exploration of multimodal resources), and deepen their engagement with the course material. For ESL students, digital storytelling has the additional benefit of promoting confidence in their writing and providing the satisfaction of being able to express complex personal stories in a meaningful and aesthetically pleasing manner in a language in which they are not yet proficient.

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[11] However, I make available a rubric developed specifically for digital story projects (http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli08167b.pdf) for their reference. Students can use the detailed descriptions as a checklist for editing their digital stories.