

Developing Core Communication Competencies Through Storytelling and Mobile Technologies

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Abstract

Language is the predominant mean of human communication. A natural human activity, storytelling in the form of narratives is a primary mode through which individuals and communities use language to communicate ideas and emotions, evident from fields of design and anthropology among many others. Stories can be simple or complex, real or make-believe, long or short; but regardless of their form, stories resonate and have the power to bring people to together, give life to ideas and support the continuation of cultural norms and practices. Research has demonstrated that regardless of age, individuals can use stories for their own ends e.g. in games, to acquire power during playtimes, during social functions etc.

This paper posits the centrality of developing storytelling skills among our young through formal K-12 education, in particular through the Language Arts classroom. It also discusses how information and communication technology (ICT), in particular mobile technologies can be tapped to tap the inherent potential within each child for storytelling. With specific references to iPad and iPhone applications such as Read-Me-Stories and Toontastic etc. and their use in home and school settings, the author hopes to demonstrate how mobile technologies empower individuals in storytelling by imbuing in them a deeper understanding of the story arc, appreciation for naturalistic dialogue and by providing them with a protected space for exploration and confidence building. The discussion will include a brief exposition on the game-ification of learning and how 'game mechanics' in these mobile apps are not only educationally sound but are also examples of learning theories well articulated.

1. Background

This paper encapsulates some thoughts that were inspired by experiences I had when I was at Stanford University and seeks to start a discussion around these ideas. Reading Goodwin (1982) – whose study looked into “instigating” through storytelling (i.e. gossip) among girls – for one of my classes brought to the fore the immediacy of stories in day-to-day living e.g. table conversation revolving how was everyone’s day was, insurance agents painting scenarios where insurance would be helpful and teachers talking in the staff room about recalcitrant students [1]. Much of human conversation, both professional and social (or personal), are embedded with stories, which prompted me to re-examine my understanding as to what constitutes a story and re-think the power of stories.

Most of us would consider stories to be objects or entities that are complete in their own right. When we think of stories, what comes to mind almost immediately would be the fairy tales, short stories or novels that we read. We tend to associate stories with fictional discourse. However, a brief survey on the scholarship in storytelling suggested otherwise. Brunner and Gorfain (1984: 57) in their analysis of Masada narratives explained, “no story is “a” story or “the” story but rather a dialogic process of many historically situated particular tellings” [2]. This follows Malinowski’s argument (1959: 312:313) that narrative is “a mode of social action rather than mere reflection of thought” [3]. For the purposes of this discussion, the author accepts the definition articulated in Polletta, F. et. al. (2011: 811) that stories are “social performances that are interactively constructed, institutionally regulated, and assessed by their audiences in relation to hierarchies of discursive credibility” [4].

The power of stories lies not only in its ability to resonate and bring people together, but also in its ability to give life to ideas and support the continuation of cultural norms and practices, as illustrated by the Masada narratives.

“Occasionally, a story becomes so prominent in the consciousness of an entire society that its recurrent tellings not only define and empower storytellers but also help to constitute and reshape the society.” (Brunner & Gorfain, 1984: 56)

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Common sense, also supported by research however, tells us that some stories are more powerful than others. In the words of Polletta et. al. (2011: 115), “power comes less from knowing the right stories than from knowing how and when to tell them”. This thus brings us to the first question that this paper seeks to explore – the place of stories and storytelling in K12 classrooms.

2. Storytelling and K12 Education

One clarification that needs to be made right from the beginning is the pervasiveness of storytelling in non-fictional text-types, that “the line between narrative and non-narrative discourse is more symbolic than real” (Polletta et. al., 2011: 117). Considering interviews, newspaper articles, academic journal articles and many other non-narrative text-types that we encounter and engage with on a regular basis, many of these texts turn to personal storytelling to “provide human connection and meeting” (for a more extensive discussion on this, please refer to Polletta et. al, 2011). This implies that we tell stories more often and in more contexts than we are aware, which leads to the next questions – how can we teach our young to tell good stories and use their stories to good effect in both their personal and professional lives.

This paper posits the centrality of developing storytelling skills among our young through formal K12 education, in particular through the Language Arts classroom. Nicolopoulou (2011:28) demonstrated that children as young as ages 3 to 5 are producing narratives that are “richer, more ambitious, and more illuminating” when given the freedom to create and the platform to tell the stories they created [5]. This presupposes that good storytelling skills can be nurtured and are influenced by the contexts and purposes in which children are exposed to and use stories.

Once we broaden our consideration of stories beyond fables and fairy tales, and recognize elements of storytelling in professional and academic writing, it is not difficult to see the impact good storytelling can make in areas of academic and professional achievement. This thus justifies the call to rethink how language arts is currently being taught, whether it is theme-based or skills-based, and calls for a greater emphasis on storytelling skills, in alignment with theories and pedagogies aimed at 21st century competencies.

A quick survey of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as well as community opinion sites such as Yelp and Flixster brings home the importance of authenticity and relevance. The amount of conversations and stories that one can read off these websites is humongous and the depth of these conversations as well as the complexity of the stories that are being (co-) constructed in these settings sometimes take an un-initiated reader by surprise. All these point to the importance of authenticity and interest (relevance). When individuals have a point they would like to make or a story they would like to tell, they would find a way to communicate that to their target audience. Thus, to teach good storytelling skills, i.e. good communication skills, we must first stoke the desire in our young to learn these skills.

One possible approach is to use information and communication technology (ICT), in particular mobile technologies as a leverage to tap the inherent potential within each child for storytelling. Through a brief exposition of two applications easily available from the iTunes store, Read-Me-Stories and Toontastic, I hope to demonstrate how mobile technologies empower individuals in storytelling by imbuing in them a deeper understanding of the story arc, appreciation for naturalistic dialogue and by providing them with a protected space for exploration and confidence building.

3. Using ICT to Develop Storytelling Skills: Two Mini Case Studies

Read-Me-Stories is an application that can be accessed from the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad. It is one of the over 200 applications that can be downloaded from the iTunes store, featuring stories that can be read to children. The application capitalizes on the affordances of digital technology, featuring a pre-recorded reading of the stories and highlight of the word being read. This means that as the children read each story, they are also acquiring new vocabulary. Built-in interactivity e.g. prompts to click on a character for audio playback, having the character ‘talk to’ the child / user, further draws the child into the story and thus deepening engagement.

The reason why I want to highlight this application is its potential to empower children to learn how to read independently. Given the early exposure many children have to gadgets and mobile devices, it is not difficult for them to use, for example, an iPad independently from ages 3 onwards. This thus opens up many opportunities for children to read, especially in the absence of a playmate or when the adults are busy and need the child to be kept busy. Logically, reading stories is the precursor to understanding the story arc and aids later learning of storytelling skills.

Toontastic is an application that can be used to help students learn and practice the story arc, building foundational storytelling skills. Positioned as a cartoon creation application, the application applies the story arc – setup, conflict, challenge, climax and resolution – to each of the cartoons that

children create. Built into the application is a step-by-step audio guide that takes each child through the creation process, explaining to them what each step entails. To progress from one scene to the other, children need to identify setting and characters, animate the cartoon by moving the characters and recording their telling, and choosing the music. Once they have completed their story, children can upload it to ToonTube, a website featuring animated stories created using the application.

This application has been used in some schools to support the teaching of Language Arts. Its classroom community wiki features lesson ideas that teachers have tried out in their respective classrooms. For example, an unnamed school in Tiburon, California has used Toontastic to complement the Lucy Caulkins "Reading and Writing Project".

"Last week we asked students to set up scenes and talk through the story before adding voice and animation tracks. Students found that thinking through and planning the story beforehand gave them a better sense of their end point. They likened it to using a map versus going on a random hike. Next week our 3rd grade teacher plans on using their Toontastic stories in her mini-lesson about how to create dialogue." [6]

This illustrated the affordances of Toontastic in terms of deepening one's understanding of a story arc through scaffolding in the form of steps to take and scenes to be created.

Both examples, Read-Me-Stories and Tootastic, point to the ease of using existing applications to develop in children the love for and interest in stories, as well as to teach foundational storytelling skills. The next consideration is thus to reexamine how teachers can help students bridge the distance between stories and non-fictional discourse using the notion of story arc. If Language Arts curriculum can be reshaped to focus on stories and storytelling, featuring both fictional and non-fictional discourse, would that be a possible approach to improving communicative competencies among our young. The ideal outcome of the proposed approach is to develop interesting speakers and writers regardless of their profession.

4. Closing Remarks on Gamification of Learning

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the phenomena of gamification of learning. The success of games, in particular multi-media online role-playing games (MMORPG) and mini-games on social networks such as Facebook, has led to the coinage of the phrase "gamification of learning". However, before we jump onto that bandwagon, it is pertinent to understand what gamification entails. Personally I am of the view that gamification of learning should focus on applying game mechanics that articulate learning theories effectively into the design of learning experiences, not merely using games in classrooms or turning learning into a game.

One key lesson to be learnt from games is that children are adept at handling in-game complexities. Popular games such as World of Warcraft and Maple Story have rich and complex game environments (embedded with an overarching narrative and comprises many sub-plots) that its players have no problem understanding and navigating. This thus challenges educators, particularly language teachers to rethink how we introduce stories to our young. Previously, we tend to read stories from easy to difficult to our young. However, with the proliferation of digital stories via mobile devices and on the Internet, there is thus a need to redefine the baseline – what stories should we start our young on. Given their frequent engagement with digital devices and the World Wide Web, there is also a need to reconsider how to engage our young with stories.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my earlier position that this paper seeks to start a discussion around developing storytelling skills in our young. It is not my intent to provide answers to the questions raised but hope that these questions can help to focus our thoughts and plans to re-design learning, particularly language learning.

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