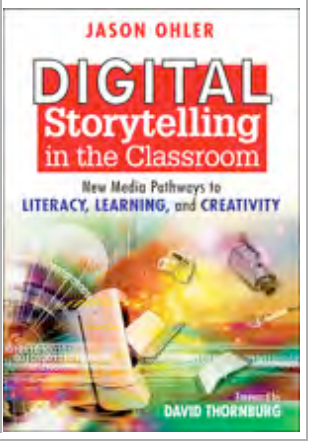
TESL-EJ Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language

September 2009
Volume 13, Number 2

The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language

Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning and Creativity			
Author:	Jason Ohler (2007)		
Publisher:	Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press		
Pages	**ISBN**	**Price**	
Pp. xvii + 228	ISBN: 978-1-4129-3850-1	$33.95 U.S.	

Today we find ourselves living in a world with increasing "multiplicity" and "cultural and linguistic diversity" (New London Group, 1996). A "paradigm shift" (Gilster, 1997) resulting from integrating new media into our lives requires us to expand the traditional concept of "literacy" and "literacy education" and impels us to point out to students the "multimodality" (Bearne & Wolstencroft, 2007; Kress, 2003) of a text, thus empowering them to explore diverse modes of meaning-making. It is within this broad context that digital storytelling (DST) has emerged. Evidence has shown that such multimodal practices can exert positive impacts on students' competence in both technology and literacy (Ware, 2008). However, as Hull and Nelson (2005) indicate, incorporating digital multimodality into classrooms has posed great challenges. This is particularly true for teachers quite unfamiliar with multimodal texts, hence not technologically prepared for them. Some teachers show a willingness to try out DST as a pedagogical innovation, yet they are still puzzled by questions such as, What value can digital media production have for educational pedagogy? How can it be made effective and how can it be assessed?

Jason Ohler's guide is a timely response to these perplexing questions. This 15-chapter book was written for multiple purposes: to enable readers to see the significant place of DST in the

classroom, to understand today's students' attraction to a good digital story, and to introduce digital storytelling procedures.

It is not hard to see Ohler's central argument that an effective and memorable digital story should be, above all else, a good story, a point vividly captured in this analogy: "What happens when you give a bad guitar player a bigger amplifier" (p. 6). As the author argued earlier:

> [T]he problem for many students is their focus on the power of the technology rather than the power of their stories. Some students are engaging the medium at the expense of the message, producing a technical event rather than a story. (Ohler, 2006, p. 45)

This book goes a step further by emphasizing that media are simply used to *amplify* the impact of a story, making it even more powerful. Technology serves a story, not the other way around, a principle underlying the whole book and guiding its organization.

Digital Storytelling is organized into three parts. Part one orients the reader by situating DST and its principles in a larger educational setting, a new pedagogical landscape. It enables readers to see the great potential for DST's use in the classroom; as the author argues, "digital storytelling allows today's students to speak in their own language" (p. 10). Ohler further claims that DST facilitates development of digital, artistic, oral and writing skills, and enlists "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 1983, cited by Ohler, p. 61). Lastly, Ohler briefly describes his tentative approach to DST assessment, but only after clearly explaining that for DST feedback to work teachers need to sometimes take a back seat to students who come to school with already mastered network technology.

Part two introduces fundamental principles of storytelling, again stressing the primary importance of a good story over flashy digital technology. The author argues that a good story needs to incorporate "character transformation" to make it effective and memorable, and that "story mapping" can be used as an effective teaching and learning tool to help visualize the story's progression.

Part three demystifies the media production process by providing a step-by-step approach to constructing a digital story. It argues that different from the grammar of traditional writing, media grammar needs to deal with various modes combined into a multimodal totality. Ohler also calls attention to legal and ethical issues over intellectual property protection.

Readers may find the conceptual knowledge the book transmits insightful. Storytelling enjoys a very long tradition in human history and modern technology injects new life into it by combining various modes of meaning-making, such as signs, images, sound, etc. It is quite necessary to direct readers' attention to DST's traditional nature when embarking on a modern digital storytelling tour. On the other hand, the procedural knowledge introduced is

equally useful—and practical. Teachers can follow the guidelines for designing a digital story and consult the list of evaluation traits.

One merit of the book is its systematic organization. Following the principle of "story first, technology second", it discusses storytelling before exploring *digital* storytelling. This sequential ordering enables readers to see not only the tip of the DST iceberg, but what lies below it as well. With a grasp of the big picture, teachers can share it with their students as they develop into confident, active and wise digital storytellers.

The book has other merits that make it a valuable complement to the existing literature. It cogently emphasizes the value of combining storytelling with *critical thinking*, a key skill of digital literacy equally well acknowledged in Towndrow (2007). Ohler's manner in writing his book is equally praiseworthy. As an efficient storyteller himself, he tells his "story" in an informal style and with a sense of humor by creating a dialog with his readers and drawing on personal anecdotes.

A word of caution: Readers hoping to find a full discussion or assessment of DST's current theoretical research context may be disappointed. However, this downside can be well understood when we realize that the author's intention was to achieve a good balance between theory and practice, and that his target audience is classroom practitioners. The book's genesis is the author's 25 years of experience in educational technology.

A more substantial shortcoming: the need to analyze digital stories in a more integrated way. While it is certainly helpful that exemplary digital stories are used to concretize the analysis of "story mapping" (chapter 6), it might be even more helpful if the same model stories were used to later analyze "media grammar" (chapter 14). This might be an effective way to enable readers, especially novice storytellers, to make sense of "affordance" (see Nelson, 2006) of different modes, that is, what they can offer in the overall multimodal meaning-making process.

The guidance and advice in this book could easily be carried over to the classroom. It might also serve as a beneficial reference for a teacher education course. It has been successfully used with Chinese EFL tertiary-level teachers participating in a teacher education program at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University at Singapore. On that basis, I recommend it to teachers and teacher educators passionate in answering the call for a new pedagogy and committing themselves to expand their teaching repertoire and amplify their teaching practice in this "age of digitally afforded multimodality" (Hull & Nelson, 2005, p. 224).

References

Bearne, E., & Wolstencroft, H. (2007). *Visual approaches to teaching writing*. London: Paul Chapman.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Gilster, P. (1997). *Digital literacy*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Hull, G. A., & Nelson, M. E. (2005). Locating the semiotic power of multimodality. *Written Communication*, *22*(2), 224-261.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge.

Nelson, M. E. (2006). Mode, meaning, and synaesthesia in multimedia L2 writing. *Language Learning and Technology*, *10*(2), 56-76.

New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, *66*(1), 60-92.

Ohler, J. (2006). The world of digital storytelling. *Educational Leadership*, *63*(4), 44-47.

Towndrow, P. A. (2007). *Task design, implementation and assessment: Integrating information and communication technology in English language teaching and learning*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education.

Ware, P. (2008). Language learners and multimedia literacy in and after school. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, *3*, 37-51.

Yan Wang
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
<happyyanzi99@hotmail.com>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.