Fighting the Myths and Misconceptions on Evil Stepmothers: Long Life Learning by Means of Digital Storytelling [1]

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Abstract | One of the foremost goals of the European Framework of Reference for Language Teaching is the development of professional competences, which requires substantial modifications in the teaching and learning process, even as early as primary and secondary school. The motivation for the conception of this article is to display a report of strategies derived from an innovative use of Digital Storytelling. Namely, it is suggested here a new use of children's classic tales in combination with Digital Storytelling as a tool for learning both about language and about life. I will show how Digital Storytelling can help children to be aware of the old values included in the tales and how to bring them up to date. Moreover, this activity could help them to deal with NICTs concerning the five basic competences: listening, writing, reading, speaking and communicating. These are directly involved with the professional world, among other competences related to integrative social traits, for instance, gender equalities and inequalities, and new family structures including the modern role of step-mothers.

After some tentative pilot experiences with Digital Storytelling with primary children, I may draw the following conclusions: firstly, that digital storytelling can help and motivate students to carry out their group tasks in primary and secondary education since children are allowed to use a computer and thus achieving positive appraisal in professional competences. Additionally, this activity, which has merged Digital Storytelling, critical thinking and literature, has proved to be a good reason to be given to parents as to why computers could be used for something more constructive than simply playing computer games. In other words, students have learnt by doing.

Key words | Digital Storytelling, critical thinking, Education for Development, literature for children, NICTs, project work, professional competences

1. Introduction

The present article is based on the concept of 'active learning' by means of Digital Storytelling, a methodology which could involve a change in the students' attitude and role in their learning process due to the fact that: they become active subjects instead of passive ones because the digital story locates the students in the epicenter of the learning process. In addition, Digital Storytelling makes the learning of cross curricular competences easier: group work, written and spoken communication, autonomous learning and project work from primary and secondary school.

We, educators and parents, try to instruct our offspring by advising them about what they should or should not do according to our childhood experiences which we transform into "stories that really are instruction disguised as reminiscence" (Luckens 138). But it stands to reason that if we keep giving them the same kind of teaching, even though we mean well, they might become indifferent to our attempt to educate them. In my opinion, we do not really realise that a growing awareness of what is right and what is wrong may sometimes be drawn from a textbook, a film, or even a tale.

This article suggests a new use of children's classic tales in combination with Digital Storytelling as a tool for learning both about language and about life. Digi-tales (another term used for Digital Storytelling) have been used for many different purposes. This paper explores a selection of attractive and alternative-to-traditional approaches to reading comprehension techniques, by implementing some of the characteristic elements of Digital Storytelling: e.g. interviews, drawing and variation of voice-quality and tone. The purpose is to illustrate how these activities, in particular the use of Digital Storytelling, may motivate them to learn and improve pronunciation, storytelling techniques and critical thinking while creating an alternative multimodal version of the tale they have read. Using tales such as those from the Grimm brothers' fairy tales collection; for instance, *Snow-White*, *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Rapunzel* (Grimm and Grimm [1857]) can help develop the educational, social and practical dimensions embedded in some of the key competences for lifelong learning suggested by the European

Union. I am talking particularly about the interpersonal, professional, intercultural and social competences as well as the civic competence, at the same time as learning a foreign language. Thus, what is depicted in the present article is the use of Digital Storytelling as a very positive and constructive tool since one of its advantages is that it is a first person narrative and thus it can make children aware of the old values included in the tales and how to contextualize them within their more updated social environment.

To sum up, this activity can help to deal with NICTs concerning the four basic competences: listening, writing, reading and speaking and, furthermore, some competences related to integrative social traits, for instance, gender equalities and new family structures, to mention but a few.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Digital Storytelling

Storytelling is traditionally referred to as the retelling of a story. According to Farmer, "[s]torytelling is a personal and direct way to share literature and folk wisdom, and it helps children develop listening and comprehension skills" (155-156).

Nevertheless, in this age of digital native offspring, which seems to push books made of paper, and therefore reading, into the background, technology can play a noteworthy role in fostering the love for literature amongst children adding, at the same time, a professional trait to their lifelong learning. They currently have the chance to use new technologies of information and communication (NTICs) not only to come across those traditional tales derived from oral tradition such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella* or *Rapunzel* which have been passed on from parents to children, but to create and share their own narratives by the use of Digital Storytelling. In my opinion, working with literature in combination with Digital Storytelling in class could offer learners the opportunity to acquire new contextualized vocabulary to promote their creativity and to use their imagination in addition to facing new challenges concerning the understanding of the text.

Moreover, a digital story is an example of a multimodal text that engage the learners' senses in a wide range of ways: "written text and images affect [their] visual sense; spoken language, music and sound affect the hearing sense; images and music affect [their] feelings, separately and in combination (Jamissen and Skou 4). When using Digital Storytelling in class, it is not only the peers taking part in the process that are motivated and willing to learn the language so as to be able to produce a digital story, but the audience too.

Some studies have demonstrated the benefits of using Digital Storytelling to encourage a critical socio-educational focus not only in primary education but also in secondary education (Gregori-Signes and Pennock 2012). The results indicated that the students developed a certain awareness of the issue chosen for their story (e.g. violence, racism, war) since the final product conveys a critical perspective on the topic itself.

2.1.1. *Digital Storytelling and the professional competence*

Digital Storytelling has opened an innovative window to the art of telling tales since it provides a particularly satisfying and motivational marriage of voice, sound, images, multimedia tools and the traditional storytelling art (Lambert 1997-2010). Furthermore, as Burgess argues, Digital Storytelling can be referred to as "the specific modes of production, technological apparatus and textual characteristics of the community media movement" (207).

A concise definition of Digital Storytelling drawn by summarizing many authors (Lambert 2010, Robin 2005-2008, Barrett 2004-2006) is that it is between a 2-and-5-minute short story or narrative which combines traditional ways of telling a story (spoken and written) with a wide range of multimedia tools such as audio, video or publishing on the internet, to mention but a few. As seen, economy is a core principle of this genre,

> using scripts of around 250 words which are then recorded as voiceovers, and a dozen images, usually brought from home. These elements are then combined in a video editing application to produce a digital video that is of sufficient technical quality for web streaming, broadcast, or DVD distribution. (Burgess 207)

Digital Storytelling is workshop-based process in which the assistants can create their own first-person digital story that can be uploaded onto the web. As Burgess explains, Digital Storytelling is not solely a media form, but a "worthwhile contribution to public culture" (207).

The pedagogical applications of technology such as Digital Storytelling to achieve professional skills is out of discussion since students become technologically enhanced, which narrows the boundaries between the amateur and the professional world. In other words, Digital Storytelling is a technological learning process rooted within the framework of authentic professional skills development.

2.1.2. *The first person point of view*

There is one characteristic which makes Digital Storytelling particularly interesting for literature teaching; the personal point of view. Point of view has, according to Lukens a particular meaning for literature since "as we read a story, we may be aware that we are seeing the events through the eyes – and mind – of one of the characters. Or we may have the sensation that we are unbiased eyewitnesses watching the events take place right in front of our eyes" (169). In others words, as Lukens elucidates, "in the first person point of view, the reader/teller lives, acts, feels and thinks the conflict as the protagonist experiences and tells it" (170).

In a digital story, children could either choose to be the first person protagonist or any of the minor characters and retell the story from their point of view, updated, according to what they are going through in their daily lives.

2.1.3. *Cross curricular tool*

Digital Storytelling could also work as a cross curricular tool because its script, either a new version of folk tales as shown in the present article or any just-created story, can contain aspects of other disciplines studied at primary and secondary schools, apart from literature. For instance, as Farmer conveys:

children can create a story about the American Revolution based on what they know about those times. They can tell the life story of an animal based on the knowledge they have or the research they have conducted on that animal's habitat, behavior, and life span. They can also construct a maths story to demonstrate their understanding of shapes or fractions, for instance. For students to succeed in this endeavour, they must know their facts, make decisions about the key elements, and shape those within the parameters of telling a story. Such work involves high-level information literacy, critical thinking and creativity; the result is an original and authentic product of the child's knowledge and imagination. (Farmer 156-157)

2.1.4. *The gift of a voice*

Lukens explains that "in any composite of verbal and pictorial storytelling, the pictures content appears all at once, but the verbal story is revealed a little at a time in linear progression" (40). For this reason, Digital Storytelling is a very complete tool since it is composed not just by images, but by the presence of a voice, the author's voice.

2.2. Literature from oral tradition aimed at children

When the 18th century arrived, books aimed at children became more child-oriented in their tone, language and subject matter than they had been in previous centuries (Alcantud-Díaz 43). While death and damnation were still important concerns, so too were more ordinary issues related to family life. Nonetheless, it was later, in the 19th century, that children's literature started gaining some significance, as a result of technological developments and commercial supply, amongst other changes, which made books more accessible for everyone (Zipes, *Sticks and Stones* 46). Accordingly, a reading public composed mostly by the rising middle class that fostered universal education sprung up and appropriated traditional folk tales, as Zipes explains (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 14-15), thus spreading the seeds of what we currently know as literature for children.

It was in the shelter of this setting where the Grimm brothers started to publish their collection of tales. The Grimm brothers gathered the tales that belonged to their *Kinder-und*

Hausmärchen (*Fairy Tales for Children and Home*, 1812 to 1857) with the intention of turning them into the expression of the perpetuation of the German culture.

However, occasionally, folk tales were rewritten to include didactic content for children so that they would not be hurt by the violence, crudeness and fantastic exaggeration of the originals. At other times, these tales became trivial, and new fairy tales were written to amuse and distract audiences and make money. Moreover, plays, ballets and operas such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* which drew upon folk tales came into fashion, particularly at the end of the 19th century (Ashliman 169).

The tales which come from oral tradition such as those collected by the Grimms have been referred to in many different ways: the "spiritual history" of humanity or "the cement of society" that brings many cultures together (Lukens 23). Their 'didactism', which can be found in textbooks too, has gone from generation to generation surviving many different ages, political affairs and the modernization of our society. As Lukens depicts, "some literature gives a great deal of information without letting it take over from suspenseful and exciting plot, or from well-developed characters" (139). Some tales will show us different periods of the history of humanity, different countries, different people, different behaviours, but they will also portray social inequalities (related to gender, physical disabilities or wealth). This is one of the traits which has caught my attention most about the Grimm brothers' fairy tales collection (given that they are considered to be one of the benchmarks of worldwide literature), the violent acts embedded in them, how Cinderella was ill-treated, the way in which Rapunzel was kidnapped by the witch and locked in a high tower, how Little Snow White had to escape from an awful and shocking death up to three times, or how poor Hansel and Gretel were abandoned by their parents and almost eaten by a cannibal witch. This aspect of folk tales, the way in which they are an interesting scaffold for critical thinking activities, is what has been successfully developed with children since, according to Lukens, literature "does not teach; helps us understand" (139).

2.3. Critical thinking

The rise in the presence of critical thinking in the classroom is the evidence which shows to what point educators are aware of the fact that the children that they are instructing today are our societies' future (Vallone 78) since critical foundations are, according to Rafi, "universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness" (64).

Moreover, critical thinking involves "reflecting on what is known and how that knowledge is justified" (Kuhn 23) and thus children will become aware of what they think and can explain why.

In my opinion, critical thinking and literature may be an interesting marriage due to the fact that literature can be a very flexible instrument for second language teachers since "it can engage the class in aspects of critical thinking that text books rarely do and open minds onto the world" (O'Connell). In fact, this is one of the main objectives of the present article, to foster the use of literary texts, namely tales from oral tradition collected by the Grimm brothers, as an interesting and motivating tool to carry out critical thinking activities. By doing this we would be promoting the right attitudes and values, regarding, for instance, gender equality or the role of some of the characters like step-mothers.

3. Changing the Story: Method

Despite the fact that this article is mostly a report of strategies regarding the use of Digital Storytelling in the way previously depicted, some tentative pilot experiences have been carried out with a group of 15 7-to-8-year-old primary children in order to provide a solider reasoning to the present article. Thus, I proposed some children studying at Public School Padre Tomás de Montañana in Valencia (Spain) to help me with this proposal by participating in the activity with ideas regarding, for example the scripts and by creating themselves a digital story.[2] I had just one experimental session with them but it was, in my opinion, enough to support and adjust the

steps of the proposal. Additionally, we were able to create a sample digital story in English, a new story about Cinderella's stepmother.

Using Digital Storytelling as an educational tool entails one adult acting as scaffolding in the learning process. This reasoning is based firstly on Vygotsky's theories (1962, 1978) supporting the children learning theory within a social context, that is, a learning process sustained by adults and, secondly, on Bruner (1990) and his scaffolding theory.

The figure of the step-mother is a good example to start with when using Digital Storytelling in order to foster critical thinking. One of the messages that the Grimm's fairy tales conveys to its readers with regard to the family structure does not suit the current concept of family. The step-mother is a good case in point; when children are asked to describe this role, they always describe her in terms of a mean, wicked and envious person that always ill-treats her step-children (Alcantud-Díaz 368). These are precisely the traits of the step-mothers found in the Grimm brothers' fairy tales collection.

Well known examples include: (i) the queen step-mother that tries to kill *Snow White* several times as well as abandoning her in the forest; (ii) the wicked step-mother in *Cinderella* who did her every inconceivable injury; (iii) Mother Holle who forces her step-daughter to do all the hard work in the house and seriously mistreats her; and (iv) the step-mother in the Juniper Tree who cuts her step-son's head off, tears him into pieces, cooks a pudding using his meat and gives it to his father for dinner (Alcantud-Díaz 345). Any of the previously mentioned tales could be used to make children think and change the concept they have about steps-mothers.

Children could change the story; the traditional one containing unpleasant details regarding social and gender inequalities could be turned into an updated version which takes into account, for instance, the new family structures (step-mothers and step-fathers, two men, two women; a single man or single woman).

To achieve this objective, I followed Vallone's "fourfold procedure of selecting, preparing, discussing and following up . . . as well as a brief traditional critical thinking discussion adapted to 10-to-12-year old learners (Vallone 78).

3.1. Selecting

Thus, the first thing to be done was to choose one of the tales. I decided to focus on Cinderella as it is an easy-to-dramatise tale. Additionally, the characters' behaviour might be changed without changing the whole plot of the tale.

3.2. Preparing

Once the tale had been selected I could make the most of the previous knowledge of the tale that children tend to have in the sense that they are so familiar with the plot that it does not really matter whether or not the tale is read in English, in terms of their listening comprehension. Hence, I read the tale once showing the images of an electronic book[3] or, alternatively, flash cards to the children; there are also some very useful web pages on the internet that can be used to create your own flashcards.[4] Picture books are an interesting starting point as well as a common pedagogical tool in many primary classrooms, namely those focused on critical thinking activities based on literature since, as Pantaleo conveys,

> often, children are asked to create visual texts after picture book read-aloud sessions. In the study conducted by Arizpe and Styles (2003), the participants drew pictures in response to the three selections of children's literature. The researchers examined the literal understanding, overall effect, and internal structure of the children's drawings, and concluded that the children's drawings demonstrated "that even the youngest children can interpret, comprehend and communicate the visual-far beyond what they might be assumed to know" (2003: 138). Arizpe and Styles believe that the children developed "deeper understanding[s] through their visual explorations" (2003: 138).

Thus, visual images make them think beyond what is simply written or heard; visual images make them 'switch their brains on' and start thinking by themselves.

3.3. Discussing

Having read the story aloud, some questions needed to be formulated so as to prepare the discussion. The aim at this stage was to encourage the children to draw upon their experiences,

that is to say, questions such as: who is Cinderella? Is the step-mother mean/wicked/bad? Who is this? (pointing to the prince).

Depending on how competent the students were in English the questions had to be easier or more difficult to understand and could lead them to more or less in-depth answers. The questions at the very beginning were kept very general (description of characters, their clothes, what kind of animals there are and so on). Afterwards, I led them to look for situations which were right and wrong, also by means of questions.

As Vallone depicts, "the important thing is not to impose any particular orientation or theory on the children" (79) but to make possible for them to see how what they have derived from their opinion could be applied to their own behaviour and life.

3.4. Following up

To start with, some decisions were to be made. The first thing to be determined is the kind of Digital Storytelling activity which was going to be carried out in class: a class task, a group task, a drama activity in order to make a new version of the tale at stake, an interviewing activity with the characters of the selected tale so they could tell the story from their personal point of view, and so on. In my opinion, this kind of activity is very useful in working on collaborative competencies and, thus, I always propose that it takes place in groups.

At this stage children had started to make up their minds about the different moral issues found in the tale. Hence, their next step was to transfer their opinion to a digital story script in which rights, the equality between men and women and values, would be present. This script did not necessarily have to be a new version of Cinderella. I offered them the possibility of writing either an interview, or to change, enlarge or include something in the original tale by means of a more rights and equality-based version.

This re-telling of the story was based upon what is known as *parallel storytelling* "used to describe a child's work if the text and the drawings told the same story simultaneously" (Agosto 267; Pantaleo), but in this case, with changes they thought might be necessary in order to

update Cinderella. To sum up, this was about telling us the same information but "in different forms of communication" (Nikolajeva and Scott 225), from visual and listening to visual and spoken.

4. Result: A Digital Story

Once the learners had been invited to step into the victim or the villain's shoes (Cinderella, her father, her step-mother, and/or her step-sister), hands on!

Given that this activity has a salient cross-curricular component, computer classes at school might be used to this end. To be precise, all the steps which are going to be depicted next: how to look for sound and images, how to store the raw materials, and so on, might be utilised in an IT class. Likewise, art lessons can be the source of images for their digital story, and music lessons the source of sound and tunes. Religion, or the alternative subject, citizenship might be the place to discuss the concepts of equality, what is right or wrong in relationships with parents, step-parents and other relatives, in their mother tongue. Moreover, some other subjects can contribute to their digital story projects in one way or another.

Furthermore, another trait which I like about dealing with Digital Storytelling with primary children is that we can decide to construct an activity which links family and school. In other words, parents can participate by revising their scripts together while considering what is right and wrong. In addition, parents can help them with their searches of images, audio and so on; material that they can bring into school on a pen drive.

In order to start working with Digital Storytelling, some instruction is needed to train children so as to familiarise them with this tool and, thus, scaffold their learning. I started by showing them the software to be used in the activity, Photo Story 3, a user-friendly and easily downloadable program that is free and, thus, available to everyone. Then, the children had to open different folders on their desktop or pen drives in order to organise their projects.

4.1. Looking for audio and images

Once their scripts were written, I recommended that they make up their own storyboards so as to know exactly what kind of images or tunes were needed. The objective of the storyboard was twofold: firstly, to put them in the shoes of a real film director since that is the position that I suggested they work from, because after several Digital Storytelling projects with primary learners, I have realised that this sort of role play motivates and encourages them a lot. The second objective was to teach them to be organized when having to deal with project work.

There are many copyright-free websites where images, music and sound can be found.[5] Having copyright-free material is important if you want to upload the final products of the digital stories to a blog or web page.

Once all the material had been gathered, the creation of the digital story was easy. The children had to follow the windows on the program (Photo Story 3) to, firstly, import the images in order, write something on them, add some transition and zoom effects, add the audio and, what I find the essential part, add their voices.

5. Conclusion

The use of Digital Storytelling has been proven to be a very positive and constructive tool since one of its advantages is that it is a first person narrative and, thus, it can make children aware of the old values included in the tales and how to bring them up to date.

Likewise, the script, that is the new story, is the core part of this digital story, critical thinking activity, not the technology that has been used to create it as Porter explains:

> A story should be remembered for its soul, not the bells and whistles. If you don't have a good or powerful story, script, and storyboard, then there will never be enough decorating that technology can do to cover it up. On the other hand, demonstrating exemplar craftsmanship with mixing the technical elements in artful ways to unfold your story creates compelling, insightful, original and memorable pieces of communication. The richness of a good story can be diluted when technical elements are over used, distracting, or just plain annoying.

As mentioned previously, I carried out, in an experimental way, this activity with a reduced group of 15 voluntary primary children (7 to 8 years old) studying at Padre Tomás de Montañana public school in Valencia, Spain, so as to gather more accurate data for the present article. One of the problems faced during this activity with them was that even though the children were encouraged to take a very active role in the construction of meaning during the read-aloud session, I found it difficult to engage them in finding the first step into the critical thinking world. It was initially difficult to get them to answer questions about the original tale in the first reading-session. Nevertheless, once some of the most able learners started to provide their opinion, the door to the rest of the class was opened wide.

In short, when children are allowed to use a computer in order to step into literature, they face "all of the storytelling media of the past rolled into one. . . . It is part oral tradition, part print tradition, part television tradition, all integrated to create a fascinating whole" (Madej 2). Furthermore, there is another positive trait to be taken into account, "parents see how [computers] may be educational but fear the quality of children's engagement with them . . . [and] are torn about their children's involvement" (Turkle 13-14). This activity, which has merged Digital Storytelling, critical thinking and literature, has proved to be a good reason to be given to parents as to why computers could be used for something more constructive than simply playing computer games, computers can help them to think.

Notes

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[2] An example of which can be found in

< http://mmedia.uv.es/buildhtml?user=maldiaz&path=/&name=Cinderella_retold_ED.wmv>

[3] See <http://www.tesiboardus.com/iwb/Cinderella-Story-Book-Read-Alone-318>

[4] See <http://cambridgeenglishonline.com/Flashcard_maker/>

<http://www.flashcardexchange.com/search?query=cinderella&sm=1>

[5] See <http://bancoimagenes.isftic.mepsyd.es/>, <http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/royalty.html>,

<http://www.stonewashed.net/sfx.html>

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