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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

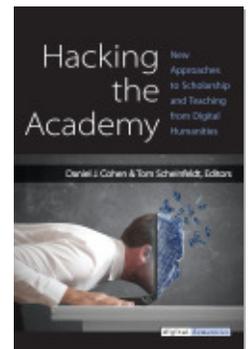
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What's Wrong with Writing Essays

A CONVERSATION

Mark Sample and Kelly Schrum

What's Wrong with Writing

—*Mark Sample*

I have become increasingly disillusioned with the traditional student paper. Just as the only thing a standardized test measures is how well you can take a standardized test, the only thing a student essay measures is how well a student can conform to the rigid thesis/defense model that—surprise!—eliminates complexity, ambiguity, and most traces of critical thinking.

I don't believe that my mission as a professor is to turn my students into miniature versions of myself or of any other professor, yet that is the only function that the traditional student essay serves. And even if I did want to churn out little professors, the essay fails exceedingly well at this. Somehow the student essay has come to stand in for all the research, dialogue, revision, and work that professional scholars engage in. It doesn't.

The student essay is a twitch in a void. A compressed outpouring of energy—if we're lucky—that means nothing to no one. My friend and occasional collaborator Randy Bass has said that nowhere but school would we ask somebody to write something that nobody will ever read.

This is the primary reason I've integrated more and more public writing into my classes. I strive to instill in my students the sense that what they think and what they say and what they write matters—to me, to them, to their classmates, and through open-access blogs and wikis—to the world.

In addition to making student writing public, I've also begun taking the words out of writing. Why must writing, especially writing that captures critical thinking, be composed of words? Why not images? Why not sound? Why not objects? The word *text*, after all, derives from the Latin



"Captain's log." Photograph courtesy of Mark Sample.

textus, meaning that which is woven, strands of different material intertwined together. Let the warp be words and the weft be something else entirely.

With this in mind, I am moving away from asking students to write toward asking them to *weave*. To build, to fabricate, to design. I don't want my students to become miniature scholars. I want them to be aspiring Rauschenbergs, assembling mixed-media combines, all the while through their engagement with seemingly incongruous materials developing a critical thinking practice about the process and the product.

For instance, I asked students to design an abstract visualization of an NES video game, a kind of model that would capture some of the game's complexity and reveal underlying patterns to the way actions, space, and time unfold in the game. One student "mapped" *Sid Meier's Pirates!* onto a piece of driftwood. This "captain's log," covered with screenshots and overlaid with axes measuring time and action, evokes the static nature of the game more than words ever can. Like Meier's *Civilization*, much of *Pirates!* is given over to configurations, selecting from menus, and other nondiegetic actions. Pitched battles on the high seas—what would seem to be the highlight of any game about pirates—are rare, and though a flat photograph of the log doesn't do justice to the actual object in all its physicality, you can see some of that absence of action here, where the top of the log is full of blank wood.

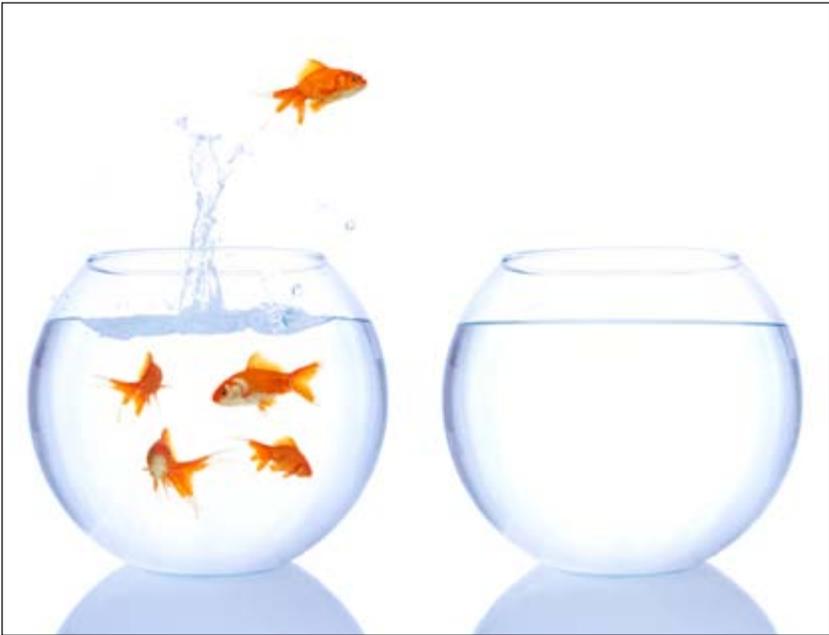
What's Right with Digital Storytelling

—Kelly Schrum

As Mark Sample eloquently points out, student essays generally measure how well students conform to a standard model of essay writing far more than they measure students' ability to think critically, explore complexity and ambiguity, and engage as learners.

One of my goals in teaching a graduate-level digital storytelling (DST) class at George Mason University was to experiment with digital storytelling as a substantive, content-rich assignment.

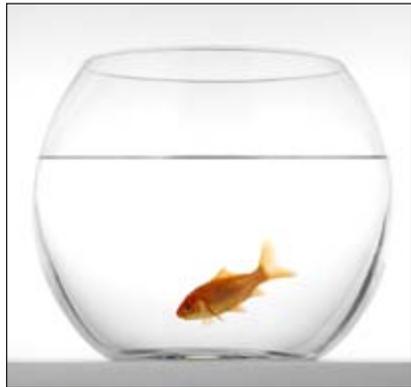
A short project early in the semester asked students to tell a story in five photos—along the lines of the Flickr group "Tell a Story with 5 Photos for Educators."¹ One student told a tale of two goldfish bowls entitled *An Escape*.



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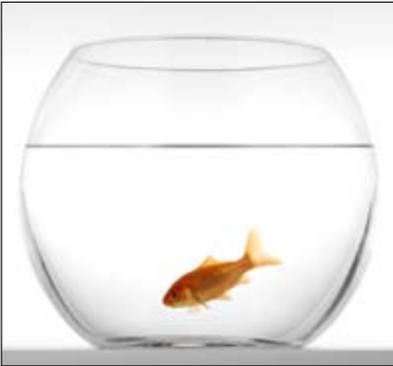
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The fish leaves a crowded fishbowl to explore a solitary life. After swimming alone, though, the fish returns to group, choosing companionship over solitude.

But this is what happens when the pictures are rearranged.



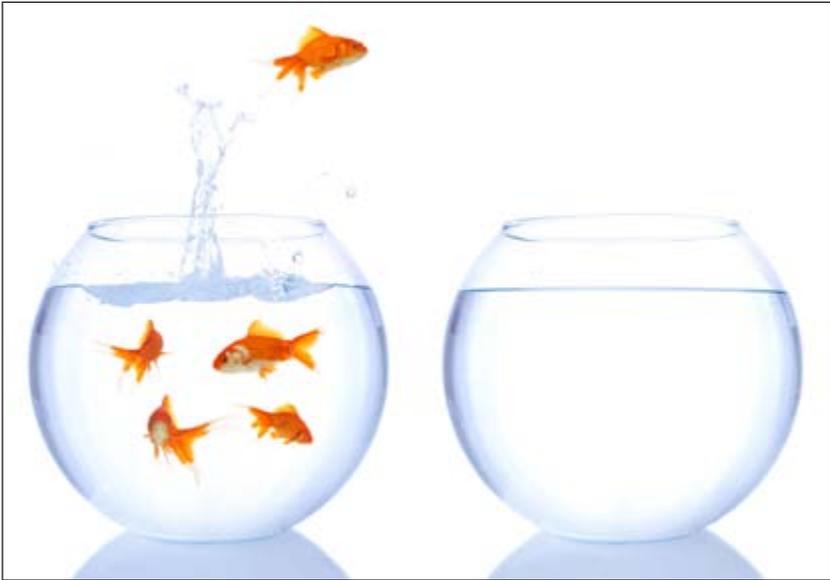
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Leader goldfish. ©shutterstock/khz



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The images tell a very different story.

We experimented with this in class, arranging and rearranging several sets of photos. For some of the nineteen master's and doctoral students from the Department of History and Art History and the Higher Education Program, this was their first experience telling a story visually. As simple as it was, it started the process of shifting their thinking from a text-

based world to one in which images tell stories and communicate meaning. This was one step of many on the path to creating the final project, a ten-minute digital story.

For me, one of the successes in the class was seeing the projects grow and develop, watching students grapple with and learn to utilize the digital medium. As students developed project pitches, scripts, and storyboards and then moved into production to create rough cuts and final projects, they experimented with a process that changed their thinking about their topics, as well as about the nature of producing knowledge. The process was intentionally scaffolded to emphasize experimentation, reflection, peer feedback, and iterative learning. At each stage, students examined their purpose, intended audience, main point, and narrative arc, and received instructor and peer feedback, pushing them to create stronger projects; more compelling pieces that engaged the digital in the storytelling.

One student, for example, chose to explore competing scholarly interpretations of *Primavera*, painted by Italian Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli in the late fifteenth century.

The initial script read like an academic article: introducing, comparing, and contrasting academic analyses of the painting with long scholarly quotes. Through conversations, feedback, and the experience of watching a host of digital stories—the good, the bad, and the ugly—the student reexamined her approach and began to investigate strategies for maximizing the potential of DST to tell this story.

This process also surfaced the student's larger goals: to make art history accessible, and to empower viewers without a background in art history to ask questions about the broader context of paintings and their meaning.

The process of creating a digital story forced the student to confront these questions, and in the end, she created a lively digital tale that put the painting into a simulated courtroom trial as Exhibit A. Art historians served as “witnesses,” explaining how and why they interpreted the painting in specific ways, presenting their credentials and the evidence for their arguments. Visually and through “testimony,” the story explored debates over the painting, such as whether the third figure from the right represented the personification of spring or the goddess Flora, and whether the figure on the far left represented Hermes or Mercury. The “jury” (viewer) was asked to evaluate the testimony and competing narratives, but also to consider the constructed nature of meaning and the process of scholarly discourse.



Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1477. Used with permission by Art Resource, New York.

DST challenged students to think in new ways, to ask new questions, and to interrogate the sources and ideas they were reading, researching, and developing. It challenged students to use their academic interests and research to tell a compelling story digitally—one that both made a clear argument, and fully utilized the tools and power of digital storytelling.

One story by Rwany Sibaja explored the protest movement started by mothers and grandmothers of the 30,000 *desaparecidos*—those who disappeared during the military dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla. Integrating video of the protests, interviews with former military officials defending their actions, and footage of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the story presents a powerful historical narrative, contrasting a nation's celebration with ongoing persecution, and exploring the complicated nature of history when examined through multiple lenses.²

Another, “Re-inventing the Lecture (Or, Why Online Lectures Don’t Work, and What We Can Do About It),” by Tad Suiter, tackled the nature of the digital medium and one of the most common academic uses, posting video of lectures online. Tad’s video not only discussed weaknesses of online lectures, it demonstrated their shortcomings, investigated alternative modes of communicating and conveying information—especially

emerging best practices in the video blogging (vlogging) community—and encouraged viewers to think about the potential for online pedagogy. As Tad wrote on his blog, *The Leisurely Historian*, “The only thing more boring than a bad lecture is a decent lecture on YouTube.”³

In one last example from the class, “Multisensory Music Making: Unleash the Power of Music Within You!” examined a new theory of teaching and learning music: connecting visual and auditory stimuli to help musicians “connect with music on a deeper level,” and “expand their range of emotional and expressive playing.” A paper on this topic could not begin to capture this approach, but seeing a student play a musical phrase, tell a story about it through an image, and play it again shows how this works, transforming “expression into music.”⁴

All of this argues for multimedia and visual literacy, but why *digital* storytelling?

Primarily, because it is accessible, relatively easy to teach basic technical skills, and a useful practical skill. It allows students to engage with visual and multimedia sources while researching a topic and crafting thoughtful arguments; it also creates an end product that can be shared and revised.

Several students adapted this approach to weekly assignments, submitting vlogs in place of blog postings. The blog discussion on copyright was thoughtful and lively, but Mark Bergman’s vlog on the topic accomplished what a text-based blog could not. He explored the music involved in a recent copyright dispute over Coldplay’s song “Viva La Vida.” Guitarist Joe Satriani accused Coldplay of copyright infringement based on his 2004 song “If I Could Fly,” which led to further claims of copyright infringement by the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens based on his 1973 song “Foreigner Suite.” A written blog assignment could link to audio excerpts, but playing the excerpts one after the other engaged the reader/watcher in deciding whether the case had merit, creating a powerful example of the nature of copyright dispute.⁵

As Jeff McClurken likes to say, making students uncomfortable, but not paralyzed, often leads them to ask new questions, explore content more deeply, and take ownership of their learning. While this DST class experienced its fair share of technical difficulties and near disasters—more laptops died during this semester than I care to count, from natural and unnatural causes—and teaching nineteen students with various technical skills introduced its own challenges, creating ten-minute digital stories focused on historical research or on teaching and learning at the college

level challenged students to think in new ways, to question not only the sources they used, but how they crafted and presented their arguments.

DST is not a silver bullet. It made students uncomfortable at different times, and for different reasons. But they all survived, emerged on the other side of the semester not only with a ten-minute digital story, but with a new appreciation for the power of iterative learning, of rethinking and questioning research, central questions, and presentation—something that doesn't always happen with essays, even at the graduate level.

Notes

1. "Tell a Story with 5 Photos for Educators," Flickr image sharing, <http://www.flickr.com/groups/fivephotos/>.
2. Rwany Sibaja, *Silent Voices*, <http://vimeo.com/11165331>.
3. *The Leisurely Historian Blog*, "Why Digital Lectures Don't Work," blog entry by Tad Suiter, May 4, 2010, <http://www.leisurelyhistorian.net/why-digital-lectures-dont-work>.
4. "Multisensory Music Making: Unleash the Power of Music Within You!" <http://vimeo.com/11424032>.
5. Mark Bergman, "Copyright Vlog," <http://vimeo.com/12140910>.