How and Why to Read and Create Children's Digital Books

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Published by University College London

Kucirkova, Natalia.
University College London, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81333.

For additional information about this book
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Children as authors of digital books

A principal focus of attention in this book so far has been on commercially produced digital books written by adults for children. This chapter turns this model on its head and discusses digital books produced by children for children. Harnessing the capacity of digital books to customise and personalise content, children can not only tailor existing content to their own preferences but can also become authors themselves. In this chapter, I take a deeper dive into story-making and story-sharing apps that allow children to create their own digital books. I outline a theoretical rationale of why children’s self-made digital books can be important to their learning and wellbeing, and give practical examples of how adults can support children’s digital story-making.

Why children as book authors?

The rationale for children’s authorship of their own digital books rests on two contentions. One relates to the creative and empowering experience of being positioned as makers who, through reciprocity, build their own belonging in the community of writers and negotiate their understanding of stories and texts by actively participating in their creation. The other relates to the 5As of personalisation which underpin children’s agency in learning. I will outline the scholarly perspective on both aspects, but first I approach the subject from a wider perspective and consider the role of children in making, personalising and using technologies.

The myth of children as digital natives

The twenty-first century is characterised by the ubiquity of digital technologies and often described as the ‘digital age’. Some people attach the
‘digital’ label to the generation born in the 1980s (and some to the generation born circa 2000 or 2010). Some refer to children born into the world of ubiquitous technology as ‘digikids’, ‘digital natives’, ‘iKids’, etc. The term ‘digital native’, and its association with the young generation, was coined by Prensky in 2001. Prensky refers to the young generation as ‘digital natives’ and the older generation as ‘digital immigrants’ and argues that students today think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors, as a result of being surrounded by new technology. Although it is true that the younger generation have grown up in times characterised by screens’ ubiquity and almost global internet coverage, it is not the case that all children are miraculously proficient with technologies from birth. What is true is that children are less fearful than adults and readier to experiment with new objects. The intuitive design of touchscreens makes it easy for children to explore their features and, through this exploration, to learn how the devices respond to their touch. If, however, we gave children any other intuitively designed object, say, a wooden car, they would explore it with similar curiosity, and we would not say they were native car drivers. Many researchers have therefore suggested abandoning the term ‘digital natives’ because it exacerbates intergenerational gaps in perceptions of technology. As Josie Fraser, a social and educational technologist, puts it: ‘Phrase “digital natives” has pretty much become a shibboleth among edtech & digital inclusion communities. Using it signals the speaker doesn’t really know much about technology. Or people.’

Similarly to ‘digital natives’, designations such as ‘digital childhoods’ or ‘digikids’ assume that children are a homogeneous group with identical capabilities and interests. In reality, families are idiosyncratic, with their own ways of being and responding to the outer world. Inspired by Steve Jobs, many people working in the technology industry raise their children with strict limitations on technology exposure at home. There are some schools that do not allow technology use at all. What binds us all is the fact that technologies are increasingly prevalent in our relationships with each other and ourselves. It is also true that, more than ever before, twenty-first-century classrooms are diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender identity. The transnational movement of families from war-torn countries, the gender equality movement and major national identity conflicts have had a great impact on today’s children. I therefore suggest we celebrate children’s idiosyncrasy and invite them into spaces where their individuality can come to the fore. One such space is the ‘story space’ and one way of encouraging children’s individuality is to let children personalise it.
Children’s story spaces

A story is a powerful medium by which to give coherence and meaning to an experience. The question of whether humans are wired to tell stories, or whether they tell stories because of societal traditions of portraying life as a series of stories, is a bit of a chicken-and-egg question. Stories are essential for identity development. Psychologists of early childhood, such as the wonderful Jerome Bruner, for example, assert that narrative is fundamental to constructing reality and making sense of life. In *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, he writes,

> Stories reassert a kind of conventional wisdom about what can be expected, even (or especially) what can be expected to go wrong and what might be done to restore or cope with the situation. Narrative achieves these prodigies not only because of its structure per se but because of its flexibility and malleability. Not only are stories products of language, so remarkable for its sheer generativeness, permitting so many different versions to be told, but telling stories soon becomes crucial to our social interactions. How early the young child learns just the right tale for the occasion! Storytelling becomes entwined with, even at times constitutive of, cultural life. (Bruner 2003, p. 31).

Children tell stories orally but they also express them in other, non-verbal, modes. For instance, children can dance or draw their stories, or perform them as drama. Such multiple modes of sharing feelings and thoughts are important for young children, who may not know how to, or may not want to, recount their stories orally. To accommodate the range of possible story expressions available to children, I like to think of children as *story-makers* rather than storytellers. Children’s story-making and making more generally, with technologies, is a very popular activity among young children.

Children as story-makers

So-called ‘maker-centred learning’ arose from the philosophy and efforts to position children as makers, designers and creators. Shari Tishman and Edward Clapp from Harvard University define maker-centred learning as ‘a new kind of hands-on pedagogy—a responsive and flexible pedagogy that encourages community and collaboration (a do-it-together...
mentality), distributed teaching and learning, and crossing boundaries’. The international project MakEY (Makerspaces in the Early Years), which focuses on children’s making in early years, offers several inspirational examples of children making creative and digital artefacts (see http://makeyproject.eu/). In this textbook I focus on a specific practice of maker-centred learning: children making their own multimedia stories.

Positioning children as story-makers is a powerful mechanism to honour children’s diverse experiences and those of their families and friends. A digital story can present a narrative in various ways: a story can be typed up as text, it can be performed and videoed, it can be narrated and audio-recorded, it can be based on children’s drawings and photographs or it can combine various modes. Children can be story-makers with non-digital resources and indeed there is a very long tradition of children making their own games, dens and toys without electronic technology.

The idea of children making their own digital books not only builds on digital making trends but also enriches them with links to literacy and multimedia. Not all story authorship requires a new story; children can also be story editors and make changes to the text or illustrations of existing stories.

Digital story-making is very popular among four- to twelve-year-olds, who enjoy making and sharing digital games or stories with friends. A survey in 2012 by Childnet International found that a third of seven- to eleven-year-olds have created their own digital game and 12 per cent their own app (Broadbent et al. 2013). Making digital games is an aspect of the digital ‘remixing’ and curatorship that characterise modern arts practices. John Potter explains the novelty of digital making in Digital Media and Learner Identity: The New Curatorship (2012):

Of course, appropriations, quotations, and borrowings are, and always have been, a commonplace in music, visual arts, literature, and filmmaking and in every form of cultural expression from the first stories onward. What has changed is the way in which those who have access to the digital artifacts at their fingertips have the means to take and remix content, to publish things that they have made alongside things they have created and establish new relationships between the elements to make new meanings. (p. xvi).

The pedagogy that supports children’s story-making can be framed in several ways. In the context of digital stories made by children in the UK, US, Spain and Slovakia, I have been using the framework of the 5As of personalisation.
Children’s story-making and the 5As of personalisation

The 5As of personalisation (Kucirkova 2017b) are a set of practical concepts for teachers who are interested in supporting children’s agency and reciprocity in story-making. Agency and reciprocity are the broader scaffolding around personalisation; they provide the reasons why teachers nurture story-making with community members and give children choices and diverse materials. The 5As of personalisation are the five individual ladders inside the scaffolding which can help teachers assist children’s story-making.

The 5As are not a theory but a framework that can be used to understand the importance of children’s personal stories and their own involvement in producing them. The emphasis is on the content rather than the form or format of the stories. This means that the 5As apply to both digital and print books and to stories created in any genre (poetry books, comic books, novellas, simple picturebooks or multimedia narrations).

The 5As include five parameters for children’s personalisation: authorship of their own stories, autonomy in producing them, authenticity of their contribution, attachment to the final product and aesthetics in its creation. In an article (Kucirkova 2017c), I have summarised the key ways in which the teachers I worked with used digital personal(ised) books in their classrooms. Based on my collaboration with these teachers, I developed a set of questions that can guide the activity of children’s agentic story-making. The five questions are:

To what extent are the stories based on children’s own content? (Authorship)
To what extent was the creation of the final product the child’s independent work? (Autonomy)
Who owns the final product? (Attachment)
To what extent do children’s stories capture content that is genuine and responsive to the child’s own situation? (Authenticity)
To what extent does the final product reflect the child’s own taste and preference? (Aesthetics)
(Kucirkova 2017c, p. 282)

In this chapter, I elaborate on each of these questions to illustrate the strategies teachers can adopt to support children’s digital story-making in their classrooms.
Authorship. To what extent are the stories based on children’s own content?

This question aims to ensure that children’s story-making is not constrained by prescribed scripts for content or formats for its expression. The question directly relates to the prompts that adults may use to encourage story-making. Children’s authorship of a story and adults’ mediation of it need to be a tender, carefully co-constructed process. There is no official curriculum guidance on how to encourage children to share their own stories; most curricula focus on established story scripts and encourage children to recount or retell and rewrite an existing story. This approach is useful in assessing children’s ability to comprehend a story, remember it and emulate a specific storytelling style. It is also used in assessing children’s writing skills. The approach I wish to encourage here is different.

I would like to position children as authors who make their own stories, with their own plots and characters, of any length, shape or form. To encourage such creative authorship, adults need to make children feel that their story is in safe hands and that the seeds of their ideas are valued. Children’s story-making needs to be encouraged with open-ended story prompts, calm and supportive environments and empathetic teachers who are genuinely interested in children’s own stories.

Such an approach to children’s authorship of stories is not unique to the making of digital stories; it applies to children’s authoring of any stories, oral, written or multimedia. It aims to foster literacy and communication skills and emphasises children’s curiosity, creativity and imagination. My recommended approach has many parallels with the storytelling/story-acting technique developed by Vivian Gussin Paley, which has been popularised in the UK as the Helicopter Technique by the MakeBelieve Arts Foundation and is well known in play-oriented kindergarten curricula in the US.

This technique focuses on children’s personal stories that are entirely open ended, without any pre-established plot. The Helicopter Technique has only one rule for eliciting children’s story-sharing: children need to tell their story to the teacher and the teacher needs to write it down as they do so. The written version of a child’s story is limited to one page (a time limitation that you may wish to adopt or adapt). The child can recount any story they like and the teacher writes it down verbatim. In the case of story-making with story apps, the adult doesn’t need to transcribe the story; the story-making app captures it according to the child’s instructions.
The storytelling/story-acting technique has some specific instructions for the adult’s role in facilitating children’s authorship. According to the technique, the adult should avoid asking leading questions; they need to act as a patient listener who lets the child narrate the story for as long as it takes. Adults who support children’s personal story-making should convey to the child that they are listening to them by means of their body posture, encouraging facial expression, direct eye contact and reassuring tone of voice. If they wish to support children’s storytelling they can ask them to elaborate on specific details by asking specific, non-leading questions, without introducing their own ideas. The adult should not correct children’s language. Children may anchor their stories in familiar tales and the adult should leave such choices up to the child. The tales that children carry in themselves may be inspired by popular stories but they do not need to follow a specific script or a sequence of beginning, middle and end. A story is whatever a child defines as a story. These specifications are best adopted in their entirety.

**Authenticity. To what extent do children’s stories capture content that is genuine and responsive to the child’s own situation?**

The way in which children’s stories are solicited influences the authenticity of content. For example, if teachers prompt children to ‘Tell a story about superheroes’, then they prompt children’s knowledge of superhero stories, including their memories of superhero stories they have read, heard or watched as well as what they know about superheroes more broadly. However, if the question is left open and the child is asked, ‘Tell me a story’, then the child is free to decide whether they include any heroes in their story at all.

The same principle applies to the authenticity of content generated with prompts supplied by digital technologies. If children’s story-making is supported with apps and PC programs that contain templates about superheroes, then the story content is very likely to reflect these templates. Similarly, if the story-making app contains ready-made images of Cinderella, including story background and props relating to this fairy tale, then the children’s creativity is constrained within a particular genre of stories.

Teachers often use worksheets in the classroom to guide children’s story-making in a specific direction that is tied to a specific curriculum objective. Templates can be great to ignite imagination or prompt
memory of past stories and guide children’s story-making according to established standards. However, stories based on templates are not fully authentic stories. To support children’s agency in story-making, children need open-ended spaces that fully invite their authorship.

**Autonomy. To what extent is the creation of the final product the child’s independent work?**

This question is to remind teachers to nurture children’s participation in active content production from a young age. The internet has increased access to existing content (through projects such as Wikipedia) as well as increasing opportunities to author content (through writing platforms such as Wordpress blogs, for example). Being a digital citizen means not only knowing where to find relevant and accurate information but also contributing information to the world wide web.

Children’s autonomy in producing their own digital content will depend on their skills and abilities, which are often related to their age. Older children are more likely to produce their own written stories and self-publish them on blogs, whereas younger children may prefer picture-based digital stories. The principle of autonomy reminds teachers that children’s story-making needs to be autonomous, action oriented, rather than passive consumption of stories, and independent of commercial, ideological or political pressures. Children can and should be helped to self-govern their position as producers and active receivers of stories. This is part of the democratisation potential of blogs and other open text spaces.

Autonomy in children’s story-making also refers to children’s discernment of appropriate tools for making and publishing their stories. Adults can support children’s self-directed authorship by providing access to suitable story-making and story-sharing platforms and help them navigate the rich array of digital possibilities. I recommend several programs and apps to that end in this chapter but emphasise that, in terms of content, children’s stories should be their own, personal stories which connect their own ‘selves’ to others.

**Aesthetics. To what extent does the final product reflect the child’s own taste and preference?**

In many countries, children grow up surrounded by picturebooks and this experience shapes their expectations and understandings of what a
story looks like and contains. You will have seen how young children try to replicate existing drawings in their own artwork, for example producing archetypical drawings of people, sun or houses with the same colours and shapes. In one of my studies with Mona Sakr (Kucirkova & Sakr 2015), we observed a father using the digital drawing tool Tuxpaint with his four-year-old daughter and noticed how the ready-made imagery influenced the child’s creative expression. With paper and pencils there was more collaboration between her and her father, whereas with Tuxpaint the child enjoyed more autonomy in constructing her image. The paper-based drawing was not in alignment with the child’s aesthetic expectations and she wanted to ‘scribble over it’, whereas she considered the digital image to correspond to adults’ aesthetic expectations.

This episode is a neat illustration of the fact that children’s aesthetic expression of their stories is linked to the way the story is elicited (the kind of story prompts I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), the resources that children are provided with (the templates and features of digital books) and how adults interpret what children create. Adults often underestimate the different values children hold about their productions and the different meanings they associate with them. I remember a child drawing a purple sun in her story and many dots around it. When I asked her what the dots were, she said they were ‘many mummies’. I would have never come up with this interpretation myself! To encourage children’s authentic story-making it is important that adults listen to children. In her doctoral dissertation, Marissa McClure (2007) describes how adults who ask children to explain their drawings can learn a lot from the children’s artistic interpretations. In McClure’s study in a Reggio-inspired school, the teachers approached children’s drawings in their own right and as an expression of the children’s own worlds: ‘Teachers do not “read” drawings as stand-alone. Their interpretation is neither projective nor evaluative. Rather, drawings, as a tool, help to make visible what children understand and articulate through many modes of symbolic language’ (p. 117).

Children have a high sense of aesthetic understanding when it comes to their own stories, whether these are image based, audio-recorded or written by hand. In my studies with primary-school children audio-recording their stories with the Our Story app, I witnessed how they went through numerous drafts of the audio version of their story – a cycle of recording their voice, listening back, deleting the file and recording again, repeated five or six times per session. Teachers who support children’s creation of digital stories should therefore offer adequate conditions for children to exercise their aesthetic rights.
Attachment. Who owns the final product?

Children’s ownership of their final stories is linked to the ways the stories are displayed and made available for distribution. The story-making application *Our Story*, for example, allows both immediate and distant story-sharing. Users can read and play their digital book within the app in the ‘use mode’, in which they can swipe the digital pages and play the audio-recordings. In the ‘share mode’, they can share their story with other users remotely by sending it via email. There is also the option to print the story out, although of course this is only possible for the text and pictures. Each of these three sharing mechanisms carries a different potential for the child’s development of attachment to their final book. Some children respond very positively to print stories and enjoy carrying them around in their pocket. They also like to share print stories with their parents, which can happen immediately when the parents pick them up from school. Other children, especially older ones, enjoy sharing their digital stories with friends and peers. For older primary-school children, the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded peers forms their long-term identity and stories are an essential vehicle on that journey.

I have explained how the 5As of personalisation can help teachers scaffold the story-making process. Frameworks are abstract conceptual tools. The rest of this chapter discusses the practical tools that teachers, parents, librarians and community workers can use to encourage children’s story-making with apps.

Story sparks

The idea of children making their own digital stories is of course not my idea. You may have considered doing this with your children in the past or even created your own storybook. If you did you may have come across so-called ‘story sparks’. These are little prompts, tips and starters to ‘ignite’ a story. There are several guides with tips for parents and teachers on how to support story-making with non-digital resources. My favourite book is *Show Me a Story* by Emily K. Neuberger (2012). This book also contains ideas for supporting children’s creativity with story sparks. The story sparks are suggested story characters and places where these characters could be, as well as adjectives that could describe these characters, reasons for what happens to them, etc. Teachers may already have their own lists of story sparks if they have encouraged children’s
story-making in the classroom before, and many parents use everyday situations as story sparks for their children’s stories (e.g. a castle becomes an obvious story spark if the family has recently visited Warwick Castle).

There are also digital story sparks that adults or children can use to explore their story ideas. For example, the author and creative writing teacher Bruce Van Patter has made his own ‘Story Kitchen’ wheel of story prompts. Children click on their selected hero, place and villain and then the tool generates a simple story the children can finish off.

http://www.brucevanpatter.com/storykitchen.html

The Oxford Owl website lists ten top tips for children writing their own stories, as well as free downloadable posters encouraging children to start a story and create their own characters. These can be accessed from the website regardless of whether your school subscribes to Oxford University Press resources:

https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/kids-activities/how-to-write-your-best-story-ever

Bear in mind that story sparks are a way into children’s own stories, not prescriptive templates or story scripts. If you truly want to encourage children’s authentic and original stories, then you should not give them ready-made lists of characters. Children carry their own story scripts, based on the many fictional stories they have come across and their own experiences which they can fictionalise and recount. Adults are there to facilitate the journey of children’s stories out to the world. In paving the way for this journey, we need to think not only of the destination but also of the purpose of children’s story-making.

The purpose of children’s story-making

There are many purposes and aims for facilitating children’s story-making. We may think of agency and reciprocity as our overarching aims but teachers need to think also of specific purposes relating to the curriculum and to learning objectives. For teachers who wish to support children’s story-making, the following questions may be helpful. Is the purpose of children’s story-making

• to encourage home–school connectivity?
• to encourage children’s production of books in their native language?
• to encourage children’s creativity, writing and art-making?
• to enable children to express their own stories in their own way?
• to improve children’s digital literacies and multimedia story-making skills?
• to provide a non-threatening space for children to practise writing and literacy skills.

Tools for children’s story-making

Another practical consideration concerns the tools available to teachers and the children in their classrooms. The type of device dictates what choices of story-making apps you can use. The number of devices that children have access to dictates whether children will engage in collaborative or individual story-making. Depending what digital and human resources are available, children’s digital story-making can be:

• guided by the teacher or a teaching assistant;
• guided one to one by an older child;
• collaborative story-making with peers;
• individual story-making with an app or digital story-making program.

These different scenarios are contingent upon resources, but there may also be pedagogical reasons for the support individual children need. Some children may need adult encouragement, whereas some might enjoy collaboration with their peers. As you plan your story-making session with the children in the classroom, you need to simultaneously evaluate the specifics of three key factors – the children, the resources and the purpose of the activity.

Sharing final stories

Before children start making their own stories, it is useful to have a discussion with them about the intended audience. In the school context, this discussion can be facilitated by teachers but also by authors or illustrators. There are various schemes that support the visits of published authors to classrooms (for example, Patrons of Reading in the UK) and some authors can also take part virtually by means of video-conferencing or indeed writing. When children share their self-made stories, the presence of adults important in their lives enhances their sense of pride and belonging. Teachers can reflect on this as they contemplate the various audiences and possibilities for children’s self-made stories:
• the whole class (e.g. using the interactive whiteboard);
• children’s parents (e.g. as printed booklets or e-books emailed to parents);
• on the screen in a one-to-one with the child’s friend or teacher;
• on the screen in a small group with the child’s peers;
• electronically with a remote group of children or distant family members;
• electronically or, in the case of a classroom visit, in person with a children’s author or illustrator;
• orally at a classroom assembly with other children, teachers, parents and local community members;
• the story is not shared and remains the child’s private personal story.

In the community context, there may be wider and more permanent ways of sharing, such as archiving children’s stories on the community’s website or including it in the local museum archive. Remember that if children’s stories are produced digitally, it does not follow that they need to keep the digital format forever. Many story-making apps support printing out final stories or even publishing them as professional-looking paperbacks and hardbacks. Printed stories are especially popular in families (e.g. making a digital story for Grandpa) or friends (e.g. making a digital story for a friend’s birthday).

Audience awareness is important not only for final stories but also for the process of story-making. If adults are interested in documenting children’s story-making process, they need to discuss this with the children and ascertain whether they are happy to be filmed or photographed. In a photo-saturated culture, adults often assume that children don’t mind being photographed but it is always worth discussing this with them, especially in the sensitive context of personal story-making. As a rule of thumb, always ask the child’s permission before sharing their stories and inform the child about the audience for their story before the story-making begins.

**Which story-making apps to use?**

The choice of story-making app will depend on the digital device that children have access to. The type of technology and the specific apps/programs that come with the technology will influence the multimedia options and aesthetic appeal of the final story. There are differences in the
ways different programs integrate the sound with pictures, for example, or the ways the programs generate final story files. Some story-making apps, particularly those for touchscreens, allow immediate picture-taking and picture insertion with the embedded camera, whereas others require pictures to be taken beforehand. Some programs allow children to print their stories out; some support online file-sharing. Some programs directly support children's digital drawing, whereas others don’t have this option. I list in this chapter several story-making programs that I have used with children myself or observed teachers using in their classroom. Bear in mind that some apps work better than others, depending on the context of use, and my list of recommended apps is by no means exhaustive.

Examples of story-making apps and programs

NB. As with other recommended resources in this book, the order in which the individual programs appear is arbitrary.

*Story Jumper* and *Storybird*

These are a number of story-making programs developed for US teachers and international communities.

*Story Jumper* is free to use, but users need to pay if they want their finished stories as printed hardbacks or paperbacks or to download them as e-books or audio-books (the prices are in US dollars). This software may be more useful for US-based teachers, since the community resources offer advice specifically linked to the Common Core curriculum. *Story Jumper* works on desktop computers and has an easy-to-use interface. What I value about this program is that its design is aligned with classroom use, with resources and support dedicated to teacher-mediated activities. The *Story Jumper* website contains lessons plans that are linked to subject areas and events happening each month (e.g. Women’s History Month in March). The story-making engine has a teacher management section, which allows teachers to view the books created by individual children in their class. The software was designed to support collaboration among children and it allows multiple people to edit the same book at the same time and video-chat with their co-authors.

https://www.storyjumper.com/

*Storybird* brands itself as a platform for writers, readers, and artists of all ages and is a fantastic resource for illustrated stories. The website curates illustrations and artwork that can be used in user-generated
stories. *Storybird* can be used on any device, including touchscreens and desktop PCs. It has a dedicated section for educators and offers a classroom management option as well as tips aligned with the Core Curriculum. The illustrations can be used to inspire children’s own picturebooks or even novels with older writers. The key premise of *Storybird* is that a story starts with pictures, which are used as prompts for children’s own stories.

https://storybird.com/educators/

The *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) website offers a wealth of advice written by teachers for teachers. It contains detailed instructions for creating a digital book on *Storybird*.

https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/easy-instructions-for-creating-a-free-ebook-on-storybird-11076810

*Story Maker*

This fantastic work by the British Council will be familiar to teachers across the world. *Story Maker*, available on the British Council’s website, is a simple way of introducing children to story structures and story characters, with guided questions and prompts provided by *Story Maker*’s developers. Children can choose the type of story, props and characters’ names and print the final story out. The focus is on children’s learning of basic English vocabulary, so teachers interested in fostering agentic reciprocity will need to think creatively about the ways in which the tool can be embedded in their classrooms.


*Little Bird Tales*

*Little Bird Tales* is a subscription site with a choice of a school or home account. Paid membership includes the option for children to use their own photos, voiceovers, text and drawings to make their own digital stories.

https://www.littlebirdtales.com/info/premium/section/teacher/

*My Story Book*

*My Story Book* is suitable for the youngest age range: pre-schoolers and lower-primary-school children will enjoy it best. The user interface is very child-friendly, with large icons and pictorial navigation. Children can add ‘items’ and backgrounds to their own drawings and accompany
these with their own texts or audio-recordings. Final stories can be printed out as a PDF (there is a nominal charge for each PDF) and stored in a library of stories. The software works for touchscreens and computers and requires log-in using an email address.

https://www.mystorybook.com/

The edition specifically created for schools is available for iPads and is called *My Story Book Creator School Edition*, available to download from here:


**Scrijab**

The program *Scrijab* is very popular in Canadian schools. It was created to support bilingual (English and French) story creation for both teacher and parent users. It runs as a website as well as iPad application, so it can be used on desktop PCs and iPads. Children can add their multilingual stories to the site, using their own drawings and texts. The user interface is less polished than those of the US sites, but the site has some very authentic stories created with the children’s own drawings, which teachers and children may like to read. These stories are available from the ‘read’ section: [http://scrijab.com/en/read/browse.html](http://scrijab.com/en/read/browse.html)

I was drawn to this resource not so much by its technological affordances as by the philosophy behind its development. There is a direct synergy between the aims of the developers to support children’s story-making and the aims pursued by Vivian Gussin Paley and our team in encouraging children’s story authorship. If you read the approach followed by the Scrijab developers, you will notice the emphasis on open-ended story-making. For instance, they share our view ‘that for children to feel that they OWN the books will be more important than strict grammatical accuracy or spelling’.


**StoryKit**

*StoryKit* is an iPhone app developed by the International Children’s Digital Library (ICDL) Foundation. This app is for children beyond pre-school age who want to create their own e-books with photographs, text and some drawings.

https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/storykit/id329374595?mt=8
There is currently no PC-based software dedicated to story-making for UK schools. (There used to be a fantastic program called RealeWriter but it has unfortunately been phased out.) For classrooms with iPads, the free application Our Story may be suitable.

**Our Story**

*Our Story* can be used for multimedia stories, since users can add their own pictures, texts and sounds. Finished stories can be sent to other users, played from the iPad or printed out as PDFs in three different formats. The app is free to use and its links to the App Stores are on the Open University website. I have been centrally involved in the app’s development and conducted several studies with the app in its early stages. A summary of ideas for how to use the app can be found on the Open University website:


The apps and programs listed so far comply with the idea of open-ended story content and are aligned with the 5As philosophy. If you wish to support story-making with a more directive approach, then the following template-based story-making apps may be more suitable.

**Toontastic**

The *Toontastic* app is based on story templates and pre-designed props and advertised as a creative storytelling app. It allows children to create 3D cartoons using the app’s set of characters, props and backgrounds. Children can add their drawings and narration to the stories and they can also animate them with 3D effects. The app is owned and administered by Google and available for free from a dedicated website: https://toontastic.withgoogle.com/

**TikaTok**

*TikaTok* is a tool for digital story-making developed by the international publishing house Pearson Ltd. *TikaTok* offers a range of templates in which children can insert their own texts and pictures. Children may like the ready-made frames and templates provided by the publisher. The website also offers resources for teachers: there are lesson plans developed in alignment with the US Common Core curriculum.

https://www.tikatok.com/learn/lessonPlan


**Tuxpaint**

If you wish to support children’s story-making with drawings and arts, you may want to explore with them the digital drawing software *Tuxpaint*, which offers many templates and ready-made images for children's art-making. Children can access a variety of painting and drawing tools with a single tap. The free software supports the use of hundreds of photographic and cartoon images, including stamps, various types of paintbrushes etc., as well as ‘magic’ (special effects) tools. The magic tools produce aesthetic effects that couldn’t be replicated on paper to the same effect, such as blurring parts of the image or making parts of an image look like a cartoon. The software is advertised as a computer literacy drawing activity for three- to twelve-year-olds and available for free from this website:

www.tuxpaint.org

Moving even further from the 5As of personalisation but recognising the multiple purposes we may have in supporting children’s story-making, the next three resources are suited to specific school-related objectives.

**Pobble**

If a teacher wishes to correct children’s grammar and assess their writing, then *Pobble* might be their choice ([https://www.pobble.com/](https://www.pobble.com/)). *Pobble* is a very popular writing platform among UK teachers. It supports planning, sharing and assessing children's writing. Teachers can upload children's handwritten stories, and others can comment on them, as shown in this example:

https://www.pobble.com/works/d4dbb045

**Comic Life**

*Comic Life* can be used to create comic books using one’s own photos. Children’s comics can be enhanced with the *Comic Life* template that can add light effects or specific comic themes. There are individual frames where users can add their pictures and text. Finished stories can be printed out or saved in the digital library; the free version is only available for 30 days of use.

http://comiclife.com/
**Wacky Web Tales**

*Wacky Web Tales* are template- and text-based digital stories that users can customise with specific parts of speech, selected for each tale. The site is popular with teachers who wish to practise parts of speech with children and is curated by Houghton Mifflin’s Education Place. Such template-supported story authoring is suitable for children who need some inspiration with their stories or simply want to have some fun. Teachers or children can choose a tale by selecting the story title and then add words as per the description of what the parts of speech might be. For example, in the story ‘Pet Show’, users are asked to insert pet name, body part, adjectives, plural noun, food, clothing, foreign-language singular noun and colours. The final story created through this process is then customised with the author’s words.

http://www.eduplace.com/tales/

**Apps for Good and App Inventor**

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that the boundaries between digital books and apps are often blurred, especially when the digital books are full of interactive and multimedia features (and hence may be called ‘story apps’). I conclude this chapter with two initiatives that position children as app-makers.

Apps for Good, according to their website, are currently in 400 schools, colleges and informal learning centres and they focus on ‘creating mobile, social and web apps’. The initiative is aimed at slightly older children (beginning at ten) and is supported by volunteers who help teachers to support children in making their own apps. The community-oriented vision of the initiative resonates with the agency/reciprocity framework of personalisation.

https://www.appsforgood.org/public/get-involved

The App Inventor initiative at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MiT) is an example of how children can act as app evaluators as well as developers. The direct link to the pool of academics at MiT is an important quality assurance and sets an example of how universities can work with industry and public communities. The motto of the group – ‘anyone can build apps that impact the world’ – and the provision of app-development tools and guidance constitute exemplary practice in this area.

http://appinventor.mit.edu/explore/
Chapter summary

The concept of children as story authors is consistent with maker-centred learning pedagogy. The 5As of authorship, autonomy, authenticity, aesthetics and attachment encourage children’s agency and position them as makers of their own contents. Adults can mediate children’s creation of personal stories by listening actively and providing access to story-making programs that fit the story-making context and the children’s needs. To support children’s agency it is important that facilitation is guiding but not prescriptive. Adults need to reflect on the story prompts they use to encourage children’s story-making as well as on the intended audience with whom the children’s final stories will be shared. Several story-making apps are available for children’s open-ended story-making. This chapter has listed a few that can be adopted for home, school and informal learning contexts.

Reflection point

Nobody is a villain in their own story. We’re all the heroes of our own stories. (George R. R. Martin)

I like this quote from the American novelist George R. R. Martin because it prompts me to think about the motivations behind the stories we create and propagate. I have seen many stories created by young children and can’t remember a single one in which a child was presented as a bad character. Why is that so? If you were to produce a story as an adult, would you portray yourself as a villain? Reflect on these questions as you read the next two chapters dedicated to adults’ story-making.

Further reading

‘Digital’ natives were first discussed in this widely cited – and contested – paper by Marc Prensky. You may find it interesting to read his argument and form your own view about it.


Jerome Bruner’s must-read book about the importance of stories in our lives:

To find out more about the storytelling/story-acting approaches to the sharing of children’s personal stories, I recommend exploring the MakeBelieve Arts Charity website: http://www.makebelievearts.co.uk/helicopterstorieslettingimaginationfly/

These two seminal books discuss the storytelling/story-acting technique in more detail:


If you are interested in reading more about the creativity angle on children’s story-making with digital technologies, this book by Dr Sakr and early years educators might interest you:


If you are interested in maker-centred learning, you may find the following book useful. Be sure to check the accompanying website, which contains pedagogic tips and scenarios for teachers.


If the children you work with are skilled readers and writers and you are interested in supporting their blogging skills, you may find this short volume of interest: