TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED LITERATURE: 'STORYBIRD' AS A TOOL FOR DIGITAL PROJECTS ON GRAPHIC FICTION

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ABSTRACT

With the advancement of technology nowadays methodology of teaching Literature has undergone a revolution. Most teachers assign projects to their students as a mandatory assessment criterion in colleges and universities. The teachers of Graphic Fiction are often faced with the problem of assigning students with creative projects. A simple write up is not only boring but it does no justice to the subject under study. This article discusses 'Storybird', a web application that can be deployed to make projects on Graphic Fiction through digital storytelling tools. It is an online software tool that allows its users to curate artwork from artists, illustrators and animators around the world and encourage young writers to transform those images into amazing stories. The paper will look at how Storybird can be integrated into literature pedagogy.

Keywords: stories, Stoybird, Graphic Fiction, writing skills, English, teaching, technology

Introduction

According to Peter Bendor-Samuel [3], "Success with a digital platform doesn't depend on the technologies comprising the platform or the implementation. Success depends on users adopting the platform". Given such a situation we find the internet bombarded with ICT tools to help us in every area of our lives. We inhabit a digitally connected world where recent advances in technology have facilitated the digital transformation of the way knowledge is imparted in the area of education. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are increasingly being incorporated into the fields of study of all institutions at all levels [13]. Gone are the days of 'pen and paper' learning and teaching.

Digital technologies also provide ample opportunities for educators to rethink their pedagogical approaches to create a better learning experience for their students [6]. According to a popular website dexway.com [7] "Digital learning platforms have significantly changed the face of education. This is true of all spheres: online learning, offline learning and blended learning. It's also true of all educational organization types, including schools, colleges, universities and language training institutions."

Digital story tools like Storybird uses multimedia to develop fictional content. Since stories allow people to easily connect to content, Digital storytelling is found to be an effective way to enhance students' writing, reading and speaking skills [11], [16]. Storytelling is part and parcel of being a human. It is human to connect through stories. Storytellers and listeners both benefit from stories for the sheer joy it brings [15], [14]. According to Robin [14, p. 222],

> Digital storytelling is a technology application that is well-positioned to take advantage of user-contributed content and to help teachers overcome some of the obstacles to productively using technology in their classrooms. At its core, digital storytelling allows computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional processes of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story. This material is then combined with various types of multimedia, including computer-based graphics, recorded audio, computer-generated text, video clips, and music so that it can be played on a computer, uploaded on a web site, or burned on a DVD.

Children learn everything through stories. As a teacher, it becomes imperative not only to tell stories but also to guide students to tell their own stories. But, whereas the stories remain the same, storytelling has undergone a gargantuan change in the way they are told and the medium deployed in their dissemination. Nowadays stories are told/shown through videos, cartoons, slideshows, websites, online posters and animation. With the advancement of technology nowadays, ELT (English Language Teaching) has undergone a revolution in the teaching methodology of the four language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. It becomes timely and urgent that ELT practitioners harness storytelling as a tool for creative writing skills in the era of technologically mediated education by web tools like Storybird. Writing is a key indicator of student performance. However, as teachers, developing and honing writing skills in students can be extremely

challenging and arduous [8], [5]. Most students are reluctant to write. Storybird can be the solution to such issues as it makes writing simple and enjoyable. The paper will look at how Storybird can be integrated into ELT because it can enhance writing skills through digital storytelling.

Most teachers assign projects to their students as a mandatory assessment criterion in colleges and universities. The teachers of Graphic Fiction are often faced with the problem of assigning students with creative projects. A simple write up is not only boring but it does no justice to the subject under study. All Graphic Fictions replicate the images of a motion picture and are an astounding amalgamation of the visual and the verbal [17, p. 1]. According to Tabachnick [17] "The graphic novel demands a hybrid kind of reading which involves viewing as well as reading per se. The internet, PowerPoint, film, HDTV, the presence of pictures everywhere in newspapers and magazines, texting, and emails, have profoundly altered reading patterns" (p. 2). Similarly, [2, p. 17] opines that,

> The graphic novel's rise in popularity and sophistication has also grabbed the education community's attention. Educators recognize that today's students are constantly visually stimulated by the media and have a strong impatience for sitting down and wading through dense texts. Graphic novels cater to young people's growing affinity for the visual rather than written media.

Even since Graphic Fiction made it into the syllabi of universities across the world it has become reflective of the culture in which it is placed. According to Alissa Burger [4], "Our contemporary culture is one of dynamic multimodal and interactive texts, a trend which extends well beyond the classroom, and for which graphic novel reading will serve our students well" (p. 2). This article discusses 'Storybird', a web application that can be deployed to make projects on Graphic fiction through digital storytelling tools.

Story Writing Apps

Graphic novels can be a springboard to many creative writing projects. Any graphic fiction project expects students to be their creative best. As demonstrated in [1, p. 6],

> Students can write their own alternative endings, or accounts of what happened before or after the story. They can fill in an interval in the story that is not depicted, or only depicted visually. Another great exercise is to take a prose passage from a traditional novel and rewrite it as dialogue in a graphic novel, then create the pictures to go with it. Of course students can also create their own original graphic novels, and even have them published on the "Comic Book Project".

According to [10] "Digital storytelling is a great way for teachers to encourage the creative use of technology in learning. The process can be used with almost any subject, and with the abundance of apps and tools available, there's one that's right for every classroom." He enumerated thirty popular Apps and sites for digital storytelling.

- 30hands Learning
- Animaker Class
- Book Creator
- BoomWriter
- Buncee
- Cloud Stop Motion
- Comic Life
- Elementari
- HeadUP
- Imagine Forest
- Litehouse
- Little Bird Tales
- Make Beliefs Comix
- My Story
- Nawmal
- Noisy Book
- Pixton for Schools
- Plotagon
- Speech Journal
- Story Creator
- Storybird
- ·StoryJumper
- Storyboard That
- Strip Designer
- Tellagami
- UtellStory
- VoiceThread
- Wakelet
- WriteComics
- ·
- Zimmer Twins

Apart from the above, there are others like Powtoon, Toondoo, Tackk, Story Dice, Kid in Story Book Maker, Tell About This, Pictello, ChatterPix Kids, StoryKit, Little Story Maker, Shadow Puppet Edu, etc.[1]

Storybird

With more than 5 million users worldwide Storybirds lets anyone create stunning stories in matters of minutes. It is an online software tool that allows its users to curate artwork from artists, illustrators and animators around the world and encourage young writers to transform those images into amazing stories. It is a book-like tool that allows users to integrate visually appealing pictures with the desired text. It is a great tool for creative writing with innumerable features that are engaging and accessible. It also functions as a story sharing site in which students can create stories for embedding into various sites or blogs and social media platforms. It enables lucid integration of the content and visuals that teachers need and students desire. According to [11, p. 299],

> Storybird is an extremely engaging collaborative story writing website that embodies three ideas – creating, reading, and sharing. It is also a collaborative storytelling tool that allows students to focus more on the content of their writing rather than drawing pictures.

The website can be used to create and publish virtual stories. Innumerable stunning illustrations from artists around the world are provided to inspire creative writing through story writing. Students have an option to create poetry, picture books and chapter books. All that the users need to do is to choose an illustration, after which an entire collection of similar or related images by the same artist is provided. Users can then move the pictures around making narratives.

Getting Started With Storybird

One needs to simply sign up to Storybird at https://storybird.com by clicking on 'Sign up for free' or 'Sign Up with Google' The user is asked to choose between 'Regular user, educator/teacher, or student' to help identify what he/she will use Storybird for before choosing a username and password. Regular users need to provide their age, username, email, and password and children under the age of thirteen are required to include their parent's email addresses. It is their parents who activate their child's account via email. If the user is a teacher he/she needs to create a class account by filling in the class details before inviting the students to sign up.[2] Teachers can then create assignments, and review and comment on the stories submitted by the students. The website offers both the free version and Pro membership version which requires an annual fee. The free version enables teachers to work with seventy-five students only and a limited set of tools; however, the Pro membership gives more tools for teachers and students. Aside from the simple and user-friendly layout, Storybird has easy to locate tabs: Read, Create, Shop, and Studio. The Studio section of the site is designed for teachers/educators to create digital classrooms. After signing up for a free teacher's account, the studio page is set up automatically with appropriate tabs for students, assignments, a blog containing writing resources, and a classroom library having student work.

Story bird as a Collaborative Tool

Storybird is above all a collaborative storytelling tool. The website works with illustrators, animators and artists from around the world, who contribute their artistic works. The website allows teachers and students to freely communicate and creatively collaborate. Teachers can arrange projects and assignments which are worked on by students as a team. Storybird also facilitates social interaction. The comments feature allows the teacher, young learners and even their parents to add comments on a piece of narrative. This is very encouraging for sharing one's responses to the piece of writing. Also, learners can comment on their classmates' work. The teacher can moderate the comments. Such self-directed learning is a prerequisite to any creative writing. According to [9] by using Storybird, "Students were not only highly motivated to write. . .but they were also in control of their learning experience." Storybird is easy to use and can significantly change learners' experiences of reading and creative writing. Another important feature of Storybird is that it allows peer-editing. Not only the teachers, but fellow learners can assist in editing other's stories by providing constructive critique. Beautiful artwork can help students get inspired to express and develop ideas and feelings. When students write stories on different themes, events, characters, it is but natural they will look for specific vocabulary and grammar.

Drawbacks of Storybird

Despite being a wonderful tool for creative writing, Storybird is not a teaching site. It is totally up to the teacher to use the site to its fullest potential by harnessing and capitalizing on its various features in ways that best suit the needs of the students in their contexts, unique classrooms, and needs. Some drawbacks of Storybird are enumerated by [16, p.3] as,

> Firstly, storybird has 30 days free trial mode which gave difficulties for the students to keep on writing when the free trial mode was over. Second, storybird offers artful and beautiful pictures, yet the pictures are random and

'limited'. Thirdly the pages in pictures storybook are limited to 20 pages at the maximum. Fourthly, storybird requires online network to be able to use it. Fifth, the storybird lacked of the 'undo' button and 'autosave' software. This cause problem because when the application was used too long in one day, it would refuse to save as the screen would say 'save failed'. And finally, the storybird application can be used only with laptop or personal computer (PC).

Another limiting feature of Storybird is that it relates mainly to the English curriculum and cannot be deployed across a range of subjects. Also, while making and sharing stories on Storybird is free, printing them or downloading them incurs some amount of charges. Lastly, the students have to compulsorily choose from the artwork provided since there is no option to upload images to Storybird.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that web tools like Storybird have the potential to enhance the skill of writing. Such tools can have a profound impact on how students learn and teachers teach in the upcoming years. Storybird promotes self-directed learning where students become the sole creators and owners of their stories. They are introduced to the idea of 'creation' simultaneously learning individual responsibility. It also encourages self-assessment through online interaction with peers. It can be easily said that Storybird promotes imagination, linguistic skill and self-confidence. It can very well scaffold ELT and literature pedagogy with special emphasis on graphic fiction.

Endnotes

[1]Also see [12].

[2]See https://www.gcsnc.com/cms/lib/NC01910393/Centricity/Domain/2402/Story_Bird_Step-by-Step_Instructions.pdf for detailed instruction on how to use Storybird, also see: https://internal.masd.k12.wi.us/cms/0.Classroom.Connections/Documents/Storybird-Guide.pdf

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