

2007

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Publication details

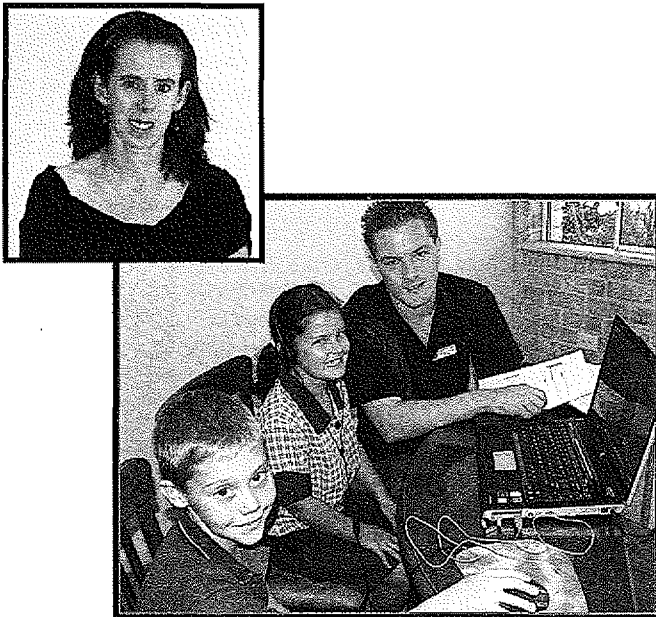
Jeffrey, C, O'Bryan, D & Phelps, R 2007, 'Discovering virtual stories together', *Practically Primary*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 21-24.
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DISCOVERING VIRTUAL STORIES TOGETHER

Christine Jeffrey and Damian O'Bryan
with Renata Phelps

Louis and Tom, Year 4 students, are busy at their workstation. With 7 versions of their 'choose your own adventure' story completed, they contemplate how they are going use hyperlinks to enable their readers to navigate through their story. Joel, a reluctant writer in year 3, already has his headset on and is recording his voice so the audience can hear about a Motorbike rally (his special interest).



At St. James School in Yamba, NSW, virtual stories (sometimes known as digital stories or ebooks) have become a hit amongst students, teachers and parents alike. Using PowerPoint, students ages 7 to 10 have been using images, voice and their own created music to construct lively, animated narratives that extend the imagination of both readers and writers. This is the story not only of the learning outcomes for students, but of the professional development journey for us as teachers as we learn more about ICT and the literacy practices of our students. It is also the story of what can be achieved when, despite hardware deficiencies and limited experiences, teachers set themselves ambitious ICT goals and are prepared to take risks and learn with and from their students.

Our context

St James is a small regional Catholic School with a student population of approximately 180 students. Established in 1997, St James is located in a coastal town in far north New South Wales. Like many

other schools, we have limited funding available for computer equipment and we face restrictions on what we can achieve with the hardware and software available. Our computer lab, which is part of the library, consists of 20 computers of varying ages and capacities and, as is often the case, not all will be working at any one time. Our lab runs the standard Microsoft Office suite on Windows 2000 (although an upgrade to the server had been planned, this had not been in place at the time of our virtual story project). Our classrooms do have one to three computers in them (or in adjoining withdrawal rooms) but, again, these are older, experience technical problems and have limited capacity, including many having no sound cards. Despite, and perhaps in spite of, these hardware limitations, as a group of teachers we were determined to start integrating ICT more effectively in our teaching.

As a staff we believe that ICTs are powerful tools to support and enhance learning and teaching, and we recognise the capacity of ICT to engage and motivate our students. In 2006 the opportunity arose for our school to participate in *Technology Together*, a whole-school ICT professional development process. *Technology Together* (Phelps, Graham, Brennan and Carrigan 2006, Phelps, Graham and Thornton 2006, Phelps, Graham, Watts and O'Brien 2006) attempts to meet all teachers where they are at on the ICT learning ladder and scaffolds teachers to set new learning goals relevant to their level of readiness. The process also builds support and professional dialogue in schools and suggests a range of mentoring and teacher learning strategies to encourage teachers and school communities to go on learning beyond their involvement in the process.

At St James we decided to buddy teachers on each stage as learning partners. Christine and Damian were teaching Stage 2. Damian was a first year out (new scheme) teacher, who was quite confident with technology, and Christine was a

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highly experienced teacher who was somewhat less confident with ICT. That said, creating virtual stories extended both of us (as well as our students) well beyond our initial level of skill.

The two classes involved in the project were from Stage 2 (Year 3 and Year 4). Year 3 consisted of 26 students with diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. All students spoke English at home, although the class included students with Aboriginal, Japanese, Pilipino and Indonesian backgrounds. One student had been diagnosed with ADHD and was collaboratively managed through the Wrap around Kids Program (<http://www.wraparoundkids.com>), and another student with learning difficulties was supported by a teacher aide. Year 4 had 22 students. This predominately male group (there were only 7 females) came from a diverse background with various literacy needs. Four students had significant learning difficulties – two were on an Individual Learning Program, whilst the other two children were on the Wrap Around Kids Program.

We were immediately taken with the idea and could see the potential for integrating the technique into our teaching.

Our introduction to virtual stories

In setting our own learning goals as part of *Technology Together* we were challenged to take risks and be ambitious. While we had both used the basic features of PowerPoint, Renata, (our school critical friend from Southern Cross University) introduced us to the idea of narration and self-running presentations and showed us some examples of virtual stories created by students at the university. We were immediately taken with the idea and could see the potential for integrating the technique into our teaching. This led to a discussion surrounding the relative benefits of involving students drafting their work on paper before creating the PowerPoint presentation on screen. Renata suggested that we make this a focus of our project, and compare the strategies between classes. We gave ourselves a firm timeline for the project and aimed to have the students complete their stories for display in Book Week.

We firstly spent half a day with Renata, playing with the technology and developing our own skills. Christine created a fun practice story about a dinosaur that had fallen down a crevice and had to be rescued by miners (inspired by the Beaconsfield mine disaster that was in the news that week) and Damian created a story (titled Gracie the Snail) about a number of students in his class, using photos and speech bubbles, which added humour to the narrative. We then showcased these stories at

the staff meeting that afternoon (which subsequently inspired other staff to 'have a go'), using them as a motivational and stimulating introduction to introduce the concept for the students.

We also did some research about virtual stories and read a range of articles. One very practical resource was Richard Walter's 'How to create Talking Books in PowerPoint 97 & 2000' (http://atto.buffalo.edu/registered/Tutorials/talkingBooks/ppt_ace.pdf)

Trying it out with the students

Both classes were studying narrative text types, but we decided to approach the task in two different ways. Initially, Damian and Christine led a discussion with both classes on possible content, structure and organisation of the text. Damian then guided his class to write and edit their first draft in the classroom, whilst Christine's class typed their stories directly to

PowerPoint in the lab. We devised a rubric that gave the students definite learning goals that were to be assessed. The skills targeted were based around multimedia components, i.e. colour, image,

animation, text sound and/or creative material. We also integrated other learning outcomes by incorporating all three (NSW) strands of English and outcomes from Science and Technology.

Access to the computer lab in our school is not always easy, as it is located in the library and thus serves both ICT and library lessons. Although there are 20 computers, frequently some are not working. For these lessons, students only had one hour a week in the lab and were encouraged to work in pairs.

The Year 4 children were already familiar with PowerPoint, whilst Year 3 children required initial instruction. Neither class had learnt to record sound or create self-running presentations. Some of the more confident year 4 students also learnt to create hyperlinks so they could create a 'choose your own adventure' story. Given that lab time was allocated in consecutive sessions (Year 4 followed by Year 3), Year 4 were rostered on as peer mentors for Year 3, which also consolidated their learning. The students were very creative at finding images from different sources. Some were humorous and creative, and students found they were able to create appropriate atmospheres to go with their story, through their choice of background images. It was rewarding to see, after initial instructions, colleagues and students

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figuring problems out for themselves and realising that they could learn and remember skills more effectively by experimenting, rather than through direct instruction.

Between lab sessions students showcased their work and evaluated and assessed each other's presentation. Students were asked to list three points that were really good and also discuss what their peers could do to improve the presentation. It was important to encourage students to be thoughtful about transitions, animations, speed of delivery and sounds together with the verbal narration. The students appreciated the progressive showcasing of work. Feedback from their peers was particularly powerful as children tended to listen to suggestions from their peers more so than feedback from only their teachers.

Editing versus writing on screen

Year 3's narrative word processing was enhanced by students typing directly into PowerPoint and editing as they formulated their stories. Learning was purposeful and interesting, and students who normally struggled with writing were motivated and engaged at a level they would not normally display. One 'at risk' student who normally struggled with literacy tasks was highly motivated and on task throughout each session. It was clear that he was stimulated in a different learning environment and that the virtual stories provided intrinsic motivation as each story was unique. He was able to copy and paste pictures from cached educational .jpg websites and add text, voice, sounds, transitions and animations to produce an entertaining virtual story. The majority of Year 3 and 4 students preferred to type their story straight into PowerPoint and edit as they went rather than put 'pen to paper', edit, and then publish on the computer.

Year 4 students wrote with more sophistication and structure (as would be expected) and showed evidence of higher order thinking, particularly when creating the 'choose your own adventure' stories, which appealed particularly to the boys' sense of adventure. However, by the end, most students were keen to continue to write and edit as they typed.

What did the students think?

After inviting students to complete a survey, results indicated that they felt positive about their virtual story journey and were proud of their achievements. Both classes were eager to showcase and explore each other's stories during Book Week and gained the attention of other students in the school. Many of the other students consequently took an interest

in the project, asking for assistance from the Year 3 and 4 students on how to write their own. The Year 3 and 4 students commented that they enjoyed:

'The fact that you can put sound and movement for each screen'

'The fun of thinking up a story and making it into a PowerPoint'

'I liked being able to show the Year 6 students how to record your voice in PowerPoint'

'It was fun and you could make the picture and words move'

'It was good that the stories were on the Internet so we could show our family'.



We were delighted that, at half yearly interviews, parents reported that their children were creating virtual stories at home. This demonstrated to us that students were not only enjoying the activity but reinforcing their skills. One parent reported that their daughter 'had actually come home and taught me how to use PowerPoint; I didn't know that you could actually record your voice with it too.'

Taking it even further!

The *Technology Together* professional development process encourages teachers to continue to set new learning goals, and see ICT as a life-long learning journey. Buoyed by our success around the digital stories, we began to seek our next goal. We had been introduced to software called eJay, (which we purchased after a little hunting from a bargain bin for \$9.95 a copy – we bought five copies). This enabled students to create their own contemporary music (Dance, Trance or House). We used this as an extensional activity for those students who completed their digital stories early. These tracks were also able to be used in the school instead of the school bell.

It wasn't all plain sailing

Although the success of the project outweighed the difficulties we encountered, there were a number of

lessons learnt and we can share with other teachers considering a similar project. These included:

The need to initially purchase headsets with microphones. While these weren't expensive (around \$9 a set), we purchased five sets so students could take turns.

Finding the computers that would actually record the sound. While most computers had a sound card and microphone input, it was necessary test computers prior to the lesson as on some computers PowerPoint would not recognise the sound card.

Network restrictions. As the sound narration (in .wav format) can become quite large, our network administrator needed to allow students more storage space on the network.

Students' skill. Students who did not have access to a computer at home often found it difficult to keep up with the demands of the task. Although one-on-one peer assistance was useful, peer assistants tended to 'take over'.

Student deleting their work. Some inexperienced students would inadvertently delete their work, which proved frustrating, time consuming and resulted in work not being completed in the allotted time. We needed to ensure that students were aware of saving procedures, which we modelled with the aid of the data projector.

What did we learn from the experience?

Creating virtual stories engaged students on many levels, developing the critical language skills of writing and oral communication. Students were self-directed and motivated by this competitive but supportive learning environment and even our most

reluctant writers evidenced enthusiasm and impressive literacy outcomes. Showcasing between lessons allowed for students' self-evaluation and built high expectations. The assessment rubric allowed for explicit quality criteria to be achieved by the students on completion of the journey.

Perhaps more importantly for us, however, was the fact that our school learnt that, with collegial support, teachers with modest ICT skills can experience success in integrating ICT. To do this, they need to be prepared to take risks, be ambitious, and learn with and from our students.

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Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education

By Elizabeth Thoman & Tessa Jolls (CML: Center for Media Literacy)

Critical media literacy is about being able to analyse, understand, create and critique messages through asking questions such as:

1. Who created this message?
2. What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why was this message sent?

The downloadable 50 page book, *Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education*, is full of ideas and explanations for teaching this subject area, which focuses on questioning the media. The ideas can be adapted for children of any age group.

http://www.medialit.org/pdf/mlk/01_MLKOrientation.pdf