Learning and Teaching Digital Storytelling: A Student's Journey into "Bravery Spaces"

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Introduction

In the fall of 2008 Walt Jacobs was an Associate Professor and Chair of African American and African Studies at the University of Minnesota. Syressa Lewis was a second year undergraduate student. The previous fall (2007) Syressa excelled in Walt's freshman seminar "Your television will be colorized: Black TV comedians' riffs on race," but was a bit unsure about taking Walt's "Digital storytelling in and with communities of color" class the following year. She decided to enter what she would later term her "bravery space," a state where a student puts aside doubts and decides to trust in her ability to adapt to a new environment. She would further venture into a bravery space in the spring of 2011 when Walt re-taught the class and invited Syressa to be, officially, the teaching assistant, but she really served as the co-instructor. Syressa also mentored Walt, as he used her example to construct his own new bravery space in 2014.

The co-mentoring Walt and Syressa shared in the spring 2011 class contributed to later career advancement. Syressa graduated in 2013 with a major in History and a minor in African American Studies, and is currently a Student Activities Advisor at the University of Minnesota. Walt is a Professor of Sociology and the Dean of the College of Social Sciences at San José State University. We will discuss how our co-mentoring experience contributed to these later career moves.

Our article is constructed in three parts. In the first section Walt provides an overview of digital storytelling and then discusses how co-teaching a class enabled him to enter a new bravery space. In the second section Syressa provides a very detailed analysis of her experiences in learning and teaching digital storytelling, and concludes with a discussion of how these experiences have enhanced her post-graduation employment successes. The final section lists supplementary digital storytelling resources and provides a brief synopsis of a process other instructors might use in their own classes.

Walt's Experiences in Learning and Teaching Digital Storytelling
The Basics of Digital Storytelling

> Storytelling is a tool for preserving memory, writing history, learning, entertaining, organizing, and healing in communities of color. It is in the telling of stories that communities build identities, construct meaning, and make connections with others

and the world. In this course, we will investigate modes and power dimensions of digital storytelling, analyze the role of digitized media as a method of individual healing, and examine media as tools for community organizing and development. We will explore media making, creative writing, and memoir in both literary and digital writing, and examine the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of digital storytelling. We will create projects to tell our stories, examine our social ghosts, and work with community members as part of the 40th Anniversary of the African American and African Studies Department to develop digital stories about Twin Cities communities of color. Students will learn to produce creative work (writing, video, photography, sound and artwork) and gain technical proficiency in Mac-based editing. Students will produce photographic and video work that will be shared on the course blog. No technical expertise is necessary!

The epigraph above was the course description from a fall 2008 course at the University of Minnesota that was cross-listed in African American and African Studies (AAAS), and Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies (GWSS). Rachel Raimist was a graduate student in GWSS, and co-taught the class. Digital stories are short, first person video-narratives created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds. Digital storytellers are those who have a desire to document life experience, ideas, or feelings through the use of story and digital media. In the class students learned to make digital stories and become digital storytellers.

The class was very intense, as students were required to share their own personal experiences from day one. Given that the 2008 class was about communities of color, Rachel showed the students examples of stories from a wide variety of social justice websites. We also asked students to find additional examples on their own to be posted to the course blog, along with 250-word analyses of the digital stories. Students were then asked to comment on each other's postings. This was done to start the process of building community in the classroom.

An essential element of the digital composing process was the "story circle." Based on a component of the 3-day StoryCenter workshop I attended in May 2008, the story circle is an in-class workshop where students share their story ideas and get feedback from others in the class.[1] Story circles are very important in the digital story composition process, as they create safe spaces for students to share experiences and thoughts. The ground rules of the story circle were: (1) let each person present to the end without interruption; (2) give an affirming comment as the first response to a participant; (3) frame critical feedback with the construction, "If it were my story, I would…"; and (4) assertive folks should try to let the more shy participants speak first. We added a fifth ground rule when we used the story circle technique in our "Digital storytelling in and with communities of color" class: (5) while some stories may appear to be more "serious" than others, they all reflect the speakers' truths, so do not judge them against one another. In adding this fifth rule, we intended to create a space for students to begin resolving the various tensions involved in the conflicted cultural and identity-based work of digital storytelling.

Story circles were used to help students prepare two digital stories. In the next section, Syressa provides details about her story circle experience, and discusses the two powerful digital stories she made. I not only used the first one— *Phoenix* —in the 2011 class Syressa and I co-taught, I also showed it to the audience in conference presentations.[2]

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[1] StoryCenter was formerly known as the Center for Digital Storytelling, a founding organization in the global digital storytelling movement that uses innovative story development practices and participatory media methods to support people in sharing personal narratives rooted in their own life experiences.

[2] Walt and Syressa had one co-presentation: "The First Year Ghostbox," Focusing on the First Year. Minneapolis, MN: February 13, 2013. Walt also screened Syressa's 2008 digital stories in other conference presentations.

Bravery Spaces in 2008, 2011, and 2014

In the 2008 class I discussed "the sociological imagination," the ability for an individual to realize that her understandings are not only shaped by forces larger than herself, but her beliefs and actions also impact those bigger social forces (Mills, 1959). I had discussed this concept with students in the class Syressa took as a first year student in 2007 class, "Your television will be colorized: Black TV comedians' riffs on race," and asked Syressa to co-present the topic with me in the 2008 digital storytelling class. After I explained the general idea, Syressa provided examples. We then jointly answered questions: Syressa would respond, and I would then provide an affirming thought. Rachel and I thought that seeing a fellow student presenting information to her peers would help facilitate our goal of creating a community of learners where we all could teach as well as learn, and it did!

In a recent article on the controversial "safe spaces" in higher education, Callan (2016) argued that students must feel safe enough in classrooms in order to not worry about attacks on their right to be valuable members of the community (their dignity is not in question), but they should be insecure about received wisdom they have developed to that point: "Education worth having will encourage open-mindedness. To that extent, it must often take on an agnostic spirit as settled beliefs and values are subject to critique that some students will find distressing or exhilarating, or both at the same time. This is just to say that a good education requires teaching that makes students intellectually unsafe. This can and should happen in an environment where students are also dignity safe" (Callan, 2016, p. 65). Our co-presentation about the sociological imagination in the fall 2008 class was the first time Syressa modeled dignity safe/intellectual unsafe space—bravery space—for other students. It would not be the last!

In the spring of 2011 I taught another digital storytelling class, but this time without Rachel as my co-instructor. I hired Syressa to be the teaching assistant for the class, but an unofficial co-instructor label would be the more accurate description, as we collaborated extensively about all aspects of the course other than grading.[3] In the next section, Syressa thoroughly details her experiences in the 2011 class, but there is one memory that I should highlight before closing this section. Recall the ground rules of the digital storytelling story circle from the fall 2008 class described above. In the 2011 course Syressa added a 6th rule: do not preface comments with disclaimers such as "this is probably not a good idea, but...." Syressa told students to "silence the inner editor; speak up and trust the group to be open and honest." In other words, she pushed students further into their own bravery spaces.

In December of 2013 I thought of Syressa's "silence the inner editor" exhortations from our 2011 class when it came to decisions about my own career. I had become a college Dean in July 2013 following 14 years at the University of Minnesota, but it soon became apparent that I was not a good fit for my new institution. I initially worried about how it would look if I left a new institution so soon, but decided to quiet that voice. I recalled a conversation Syressa and I had just before I left for my new position. In that conversation I learned that Syressa had been admitted into a prestigious university that was not the University of Minnesota, but decided to enroll at "The U" because she thought she would have a better experience there. Most people would think that she was crazy for making that choice, given the extremely high status of the other institution. In the end, Syressa decided to ignore external optics, and do what was best for her. I followed her lead and began applying for other positions in the spring of 2014. In July 2016 I became the Dean of the College of Social Sciences at San José State, and plan to remain here for years to come.

Syressa's Experiences in Learning and Teaching Digital Storytelling

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[3] University of Minnesota rules prevented Syressa from officially serving as an instructor for other undergraduates, hence she was not able to do any grading. Undergraduate students can be wonderful teaching assistants, however. See Jacobs, Gutzman, & McConnell (2006) for examples.

Entering a Bravery Space, 2008

As creators of digital narratives, we become filmmakers, mentors, investigators, journalists, poets, teachers, photographers, musicians, storytellers, authors, biographers, scholars, and commentators. But most importantly, we become human. We become part of the new community—the digital world that we have created. Our society has constructed a virtual community, a world without limits that reaches to every corner of the earth. And as people, we must investigate the power that gives us—the changes we can create with a click of the mouse and a few keystrokes. From my first class in 2008 to the present day, digital storytelling has reshaped how I participate with and add commentary to my daily life. The opportunity that Walt created for me to co-lead a classroom of my peers with a respected professor built my confidence, my humility, and a belief in the power of the classroom to be a space for sharing and discourse, not just a lecture hall.

My own journey as a student of digital storytelling was one of growth. In a very tangible way, I was actively learning new skills as a student and a person, skills that would enhance my own learning capabilities. But on another level, I had become a student of the world. For the first time I felt truly engaged with the technology that has come to define my generation. With the accessibility of digital images and information, it sometimes feels like system overload, as though someone is weighing me down with unnecessary…stuff. Before I leave the house I have to make sure I have my laptop for meetings, my phone for emergencies and whimsical texting, and my iPod to block out unwanted noise. Never before has there been so much choice available—so why not redefine what it is to have the power of digital media.

My first experience with the class was as a student in 2008. A professor at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities who was an incredible mentor of mine recommended that I take a brand new digital storytelling course as an elective. There was a grad student, she said, who was breaking boundaries in every direction and would be attempting to tackle some of the issues in communities of color with a class about digital storytelling. Now, I was never one to try new things, and frankly, I still had trouble texting more than five words a minute, so learning how to make movies on a computer sounded like a giant life mistake. But my favorite professor from my freshman year was co-teaching the class and I still did not have a major. During a presentation Walt and I gave in 2013, I described this moment in my life as my "bravery space." I felt the need to expand my thinking and my college experiences. As a result I tried a plethora of new things, and this was one of them.

At the start of the class in fall of 2008, we focused mainly on decoding and deconstructing the tools, tactics and purpose of the American media. Dissecting the monetary desires of large corporations opened our eyes to the true motivations of storytelling in media culture and added a critical lens to any and every piece of news that I read, viewed, or heard. It changed the way I viewed the information that was relayed, but also the images and techniques used to make the information available. Every image, title, and sound or video clip was a choice that relayed someone's view or perspective of a story, and nothing was black or white—truth became subjective.

The first exercise pertaining to our project used personal images. We were asked to bring a small selection of photos to class in any format—as photographs, jpegs, or even on Facebook. After we had our pictures in front of us, we were asked to choose one and write words, phrases, feelings, and sentences that described the photo. To be honest, out of the five pictures I brought, I only remember the one I eventually chose for my first digital story. It was taken on a day when my grandmother and I had been clearing branches and weeds from our backyard in preparation for my aunt's wedding. It was late afternoon and as we burned the debris, smoke began to rise between the branches of the trees and the sunlight from behind cast rays of sunlight across the entire backyard. I ran to get my camera because I could not pass up the urge to become a photographer for the afternoon. It became one of my favorite days as I snapped photos from all different angles, of the smoke, the trees, and

the fire. Finally, as we were finishing, my grandmother turned to leave and I took one candid shot of her back. It is officially the favorite picture I have ever taken.

In class, we went around the room a few times without prefacing what our pictures looked like, each of us sharing the words, phrases, and sentences we had written about our photos. For me, it helped solidify my feelings about the photo and its subject. I have known for a long time that I am a very visual person, so using the pictures to generate stories worked really well for me. The exercise also made me feel more comfortable about sharing in a classroom space. I had always been a shy student, afraid to voice anything in a classroom, let alone something personal. With everyone sharing rapidly, there was no individual focus forced on any one person, and it relieved all the pressure or embarrassment I would normally have felt.

Our next assignment was to go home and generate the "voice over narration"; a key feature of digital stories is that the creator speaks directly to the audience in her own worlds. The parameters were loose – it could be prose, a poem, or a song, whatever would best communicate and tell your story. This was the part that caused some trouble for me. While I had a strong feeling about the aesthetic and emotion that I wanted my story to convey, I had no idea how to put it into words. So, in the week between classes, I managed to collect all my pictures and decide on a song, but I found myself struggling to come up with a voice over. Finally, an hour and a half before class, I felt desperate. I used a poem I had written about myself, changed all the pronouns, and printed it out. It was only a few stanzas long and extremely personal, but it fit the mood I wanted to portray. As we sat in our story circle and I waited to share my voice over, I became increasingly nervous. I did not even share my poetry with my grandma and now I was going to read it out loud to my classmates. I finally volunteered, though there were only two of us who had yet to share. I received a lot of positive feedback from the circle, especially Rachel, and that added to my confidence. The story circle eliminated a lot of the fear I had about sharing the story—fear that could have impeded my ability to make a vulnerable and honest digital story.

Our next class period was aimed almost entirely at the technology of creating a digital story. This was probably the most challenging class period because of the amount of new information hurled my way. I did not join the class because technology was my forte—in fact, the technology almost deterred me. Rachel and Walt were extremely patient while they remixed one of Walt's videos so Rachel could demonstrate not only how the software worked, but also how various choices we made could change the entire tone of the video. Fading, opacity, volume, and movement all had to blend well together so that the story being presented was fluid and consistent with the emotion and content. This task seemed daunting and overwhelming. I could describe myself as stubborn and a perfectionist, both of which can frustrate me when working on a project.

Over the next few weeks, I worked on the project intermittently, and let us just say, there was a lot of trial and error. The first twenty seconds of pictures were probably the most difficult part of piecing the story together. In retrospect, I had no idea which questions to ask myself before the process began. For instance, how would I time my pictures? Would they match the beat of the song or the timing of my voice over? How should I pace myself in the voice over? Which pictures should I use? What is the best order in which to place my pictures? How am I going to effectively use a song with meaning (and lyrics) so that it doesn't compete with my voice over? Without knowing to ask these questions first, it became a difficult endeavor to discover what the most important aspects of my story were.

In the end, the timing of my video became my focus, so I began by placing my music track and then placing the photos so they appeared at regular intervals in time with the musical cues. After listening to the music I found the places where the lyrics were important to me and made sure that the photos

were impactful at those points—mainly the introduction to the music and the ending. After placing the appropriate image at the end and the beginning, I filled the middle with photos that had roughly the same amount of screen time, and then added my voice over track as well. After I solidified the volume of my voice over and my music (making sure they did not compete with one another), I focused on the movement of the images on the screen. That was probably the most time-consuming portion of the video because I had to learn how to keep the video fluid through every frame and then go back and watch to see if there was an abrupt transition or if anything zoomed too fast or too slow.

The last thing I did was adding titles to my story, which was interesting. For all of my vision and forethought, I had not considered a title for my piece and I wanted it to be something that embodied all the things my video was about. It took two days to conceive of the title *Phoenix*. When the titles were finished, I finally sat back and looked at the final project. I was actually astounded by all the things I had managed to do successfully considering I thought of myself as digitally illiterate. I no longer doubted my skill in the computer lab, but sharing the video with everyone else proved to be a nerve-wracking experience. Not because I was nervous about the content—everyone had already heard my poem. Something about all eyes on a personal creation of mine made me want to jump out of my skin with nerves and shyness. I honestly have no recollection of day we shared our digital stories for the first time. My nerves overwhelmed me to the point of distraction and all I can remember is the lights going off and then the flood of relief when the lights came back on. It created a sense of accomplishment, knowing that I had created something from scratch and put it together in just a few weeks' time. I was more excited about the second project knowing that I had the technical skills to accomplish whatever I chose to talk about.

Our second project was meant to be a community-based story that focused on communities of color. As a biracial student who grew up in an almost completely White[4] town, I already knew what my project would be about. I have seven sisters and one brother—four are half-siblings and four are step-siblings—all of whom are half Black, some are half Korean American, and some are half White. We all grew up in different spaces with varying degrees of familial and cultural support. Two of my half-siblings on my mother's side grew up in and around the urban sprawl of Minneapolis and interacted with other students of color on a daily basis, something I never did as a child. Inspired by their experience, I interviewed my sister Dylisi who was nine at the time.

It was great to interview a person I was familiar with and I did not ask Dylisi until I had the recorder in my hand. We did it in my mother's bedroom, someplace she felt really comfortable. I set the recorder down between us and then proceeded to act like it was not there. The interview was hard mostly because she was a child and was shy, but also because in order to extract some of the information I wanted her to talk about, I found myself falling into the same cultural traps that I had been fighting against my whole life. For instance, when I asked her a question about race, she did not understand what race was, and I responded by explaining that race was the color of our skin. As an academic studying race, I know that that is not all it is—in fact that is a terrible way to explain what race is. However, Dylisi is a child and in the moment I was limiting my role to that of an interviewer instead of an educator. In that moment, I had failed to recognize that the differences in our youths had created different concepts of race. As one of few minorities in a rural/suburban school district, I was constantly fighting to redefine my identity through the racial assumptions of my peers. But Dylisi has gone to school in the inner city with students and some teachers who look like her and the identity that held so much gravitas in my own life was almost standard in hers. I missed a teaching moment, one that she and I discussed after I finished the video and realized my mistake.

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[4] Following Esposito and Williams (2016; footnote 1), we capitalize racial group names to honor the group's history, tradition, and culture.

After the interview was complete, I needed to decide how to orchestrate the video. I decided that instead of pulling focus from my sister, I would make the entire story about her and her singular experiences as a young, mixed race student. I used videos clips of her stepping and jump roping (two of her favorite activities) as well as pictures of her from the past year. She is an incredibly photogenic girl with a lot of different sides to her personality and it made the process of choosing photos that much easier. Choosing music for this project was immeasurably more difficult. I wanted music that matched the various moods of the story, but I also did not want there to be any lyrics to compete with what was being said. I quickly found that working with the video clips was the most challenging aspect of the project, but everything else felt fairly similar to my first project for the class.

The night before the project was due, I was finishing the transitions and volume when my computer froze and then crashed. I lost most of my project and some of my files, so I had to start from scratch. I had no time to render my video files again, so the project became a masterful game of what I could manage to do in the six hours before it was due. I still had most of my interview and a lot of my pictures, so I arranged those in the way that made the most sense and tried to incorporate a decent amount of movement in the images to keep the visuals interesting. While disappointed that my final project—*Caramel*—was not what I originally envisioned, the content in my interview made me extremely proud. I enjoyed hearing her perspective on her surroundings—because of our different experiences, my racial identity had left me feeling ostracized from my peers but hers had made her relationships stronger and I was glad to see that her identity was not a struggle.

That final class period involved discussing the project in detail and our final thoughts about the class in general. We also talked about our videos and what they had meant to us. Interviewing my sister was probably my favorite moment from the course because of the incredible honesty and merit she brought to my video. I have been so concerned with race my whole life that my viewpoint on it is changed and varied from day to day. But Dylisi's thoughts were new and fresh, because racial identity was not something that was brought to her attention on a daily basis. My final video gave me the tools to discuss and discover notions of race that I was still processing in my first few years of college. While readings and discussions with professors and other students can open you up to new ideas, sometimes the fluidity and speed of those conversations can bypass powerful realizations. I was able to meditate on the power of Dylisi's words with music and images and it created an understanding of her ideas of race, but it became a self-reflective process as well.

Entering More Bravery Spaces, 2009 and 2010

The revelations of the 2008 class propelled me forward toward the next part of my journey – teaching. As part of a team that involved both Rachel and Walt, we worked with a Summer Bridge Program in the summers of 2009 and 2010. It provided a guiding hand for incoming freshmen who were multicultural, first generation, and/or athletes. The program had classes so students could acquire credits before the fall, but also had sessions on how to engage and be successful as a college system – everything from learning how to schedule your time to balancing a budget. As a teaching assistant for Rachel, my entire perspective of the course was changed. Course content was not the only part of the class I needed to focus on—in a very real sense, I had to establish teaching skills in order to effectively function in a classroom. While I had worked in a coaching capacity before, this felt like a true test of my abilities. For a first teaching experience, this was perfect, I felt extremely comfortable with the material and I was working with my two favorite professors, which relieved stress.

After a long training week in the summer, our team assembled to discuss the syllabus that Rachel had created and before I knew it, the students had arrived. Working with the syllabus for the summer program was easy because the material was familiar and the basic elements of the course were the same—the students would learn the technology, make a first video to actively use what they have

learned, and finally make a final project video that tackled a more serious social issue. The biggest difference between the summer classes—in both 2009 and 2010—was that the summer students were incoming freshmen, so in essence, this was their introduction to a college class. As excited as they were to be introduced to college, the classes often functioned like high school classrooms—they did not assume they needed to take notes, there was talking, distraction, texting, and active voluntary participation was limited. It was not until the story circle that we truly began to see community formation amongst the students on an academic level. The fact that most of them were living in the dorms with each other created a different kind of relationship between the students than had been present in my original 2008 class. The students felt more comfortable with each other, and were less isolated from their peers.

For instance, one of the female students felt disrespected by some of her male peers because of the jokes and stories they would tell. So her final project became an interview—an open discussion—with those men that she had been at odds with. She established a rapport with them and they opened up about their feelings about women, their feelings about society's views about women, and what they thought was expected of them as men. It was one of my favorite moments in the class. To watch someone's personal struggle with identity in conflict with others and then to see her analyze the issue with the academic tools we had made available to her was rewarding and exciting.

> "It was one of my favorite moments in the class. To watch someone's personal struggle with identity in conflict with others and then to see her analyze the issue with the academic tools we had made available to her was rewarding and exciting."

Because the 2009 Summer Bridge course was the second time the course was caught, we were able to give the students more specific notes and encouragement about how much of themselves they should put into the project. The first round of videos were personal story videos—talk about a personal moment in time. And the students blew us away—not only with the level of vulnerability in their personal stories, but also the vast amounts of creativity they displayed in their videos. One student made a video about her personal struggle with an eating disorder while yet another used music she had written and performed as the background piece in her video. My own contributions to the class revolved around the things that had inspired me during my own course. We talked about the "truths" of narrative, the power given to those with the tools to participate in the media monopoly, and the gift of the story.

I will admit that my own insecurities about being so close in age to my students and being such a new teacher probably limited my effectiveness. I was barely three years older than some of the students. The teachers who had been most effective in my life had not been dictators, but considering the lack of age difference, my style should have leaned toward disciplinarian of some kind. I felt that my messages were good and they reinforced the topics that Rachel was teaching in the primary lecture, but I had yet to learn how to solidify my teaching style so that it was clear and straightforward. But my forte was during classes later in the program. My own style of video-making included work with some of the more difficult pieces of basic editing—opacity, movement, transitions, and volume. So when it came time for the students to use class time for work, I felt that I was useful in answering questions and pushing students to use different techniques to enhance their stories.

My second Summer Bridge experience in the summer of 2010 included much more confidence on my part about the material, how I functioned in the discussion sections, and what my goals were as part of the teaching team. This time, Rachel's course was the primary focus of the entire program and so I worked with two other teaching assistants instead of one. We each worked with a specific

group of students, but coordinated together about what our goals were as a group. Eventually, because of the scheduling required of the students who were athletes, we established a secondary discussion section where the athletes could participate in a discussion without missing out on the pieces they may have missed earlier in the day. While the other aspects of the class felt similar to years before, the discussion with the athletes created a new space of discussion that I had not had before. It was a primarily masculine space and I did not realize how different the discussions would be because of that group identity. One of the other teaching assistants came with me and those sessions had some of the most interesting discussions I had seen in the course. They questioned, argued, and debated more than the other sections and I learned a lot from being in that room about what it meant to be an athlete, a man, and how that balanced with being a student of color. It was in this space that my teaching skills were truly tested—there was not the same passive acceptance that was sometimes found in other classrooms, instead the constant barrage of questions and debate kept me striving for new ways to introduce material and redefine the parameters of the material.

This exploration of self and identity became a running theme for all the students. Their videos became reflections of themselves and often demonstrated the ways in which they had accepted or at least considered the things we had discussed in class. Using the digital stories became a way to gauge the impact of information through each student's eyes and also informed my own perspective about the best way for students to engage with the course material. Even when the topics were similar—i.e. "my identity as a Black, male, athlete" —no two stories were the same and that generated even more discussion amongst the students. One of the videos centered on discussing people's perceptions of "jocks." Through interviews they accumulated viewpoints on the stereotypical athlete and then added their own commentary about how that feel that affects them as athletes themselves. The ability to be critical and reflect on such a large part of their identity made me extremely proud.

The Bravery Space of 2011

After working with freshman two summers in a row, I was ready for the challenge of teaching a class that was geared toward all undergraduate students. The class Walt and I co-taught in the spring of 2011 was much more open to interpretation and included three digital story opportunities. For the first time, I helped to facilitate the story circle and I felt so incredibly passionate about making sure that each student felt that their story was valued and that they could be open and intimate with what they chose to share. Walt and I were not disappointed. There was a plethora of personal stories, everything from one student's identity as a White South African living in America to another's personal struggles with her identity as a mother. The creativity was again stunning and my own role was that of a catalyst, ensuring that they felt safe enough to share and bold enough to dare.

This class held a lot of new experiences though. As Walt's "co-instructor", I felt I had more responsibility, not just to the students, but to Walt and to me to make sure the students' experiences were special and impactful. There was more planning, and more speaking in front of groups. I also became critical of what and how I said things. The discovery of who I was as a teacher and a coach became clearer during this class and it helped me in other endeavors as well. In the end though, the content was something I could never take credit for, and the technique and narratives the students used still impresses me. One of the final project videos was called "Four Mornings." The student, John, recorded himself doing the same thing several times and then superimposed the videos on top of one another.[5] This was never something we had discussed in class and it was not something I had done or seen done by any other student.

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[5] "John" is a pseudonym, as are the names of all other undergraduate students referenced [other than Syressa]. Rachel Raimist is the real name of the graduate student who co-taught the 2008 class with Walt. IRB approval (University of Minnesota IRB Code #0808S42362) was obtained for ethnographic study of the 2008 and 2011 classes.

Some of the more traditional assignments gave Walt and me more opportunities to give feedback. We both gave feedback on reflection papers and the videos, but during the pre-production and production stages, the suggestions and critiques we gave had the most obvious immediate impact. Walt and I have such different backgrounds, both academically and how we choose to visualize a story and all its pieces. Getting feedback from multiple people created a bevy of ideas and viewpoints for students to use and understand. Students are more equipped to reflect when they have more voices to reflect about.

A critique in digital storytelling may be technical, such as grammar usage or volume. It may also serve to shed light on a new perspective that the student had not considered, especially in the reflection papers. But I believe that the most valuable feedback comes in the form of suggestions, phrased as "If this were my story, I would…" For instance, if a student's story is strikingly powerful in one moment or phrase, I felt compelled to say, "If this were my story, I would use only your voice over for this part of the story and keep the screen black." While not every suggestion given by Walt or me was used, that was never the point. In truth, if students used every suggestion given by their professors, they may as well give us their stories and we could make the videos for them. The students can learn from their own and each other's mistakes. They might take an idea that was originally for someone else and use it in their own video. Our feedback served only to enhance the wealth of knowledge the students used to create and develop their stories, not to dictate the way in which they should share. In the end, the ability of each class to surprise me with creativity was exciting and something that still makes me excited to be in the classroom, as an educator or a as a learner.

At the end of this journey a few things are for certain. As people, it is easy to feel that our stories are unique to our own lives and more often than not, that is true. But the value of a story is not always in what it says, but how it is said. I recall a story circle where one student chose to tell the story of a summer day he and his friends spent cliff diving. It was beautiful - with descriptive imagery and soft prose it made us feel as though we were outside on a bluff with the sun on our faces instead of cramped into a humid classroom. But his story took a sudden and dramatic turn when he revealed that one of his friends had taken a bad dive and died that day. We were stunned—but the power of the story was only enhanced when he put that narrative to video and used pictures of the day, and then switched to a black screen for that final dramatic turn. To tell the story in a linear, chronological fashion may have seemed so straightforward and obvious to some people, but his method proved to be the most stunning and uncomplicated—it was a compelling method and uniquely his. We are the products of moments in time, which then become our memories and the chronicles of our lives. But we dare to reinvent those stories with our own visuals, music, and creation—we have the ability to reinvent the narrative.

As students, we are expected to be scholars first and foremost. We must learn the methods, understand the whys and why nots, and use the tools given to use to effectively demonstrate our learned capabilities. But the tools we use have moved beyond the boundaries of pen and paper. Every time I was assigned a paper, the first thing I always looked for were "the rules." "The rules" always consisted of basic information on how to formulate your paper—margin and font size, minimum and maximum pages allowed, header and footer requirements, and sometimes a specific prompt that must be answered in [x]-number of parts. I craved specific guidelines from my professors—what did I need to write to earn an "A." But as a student of digital storytelling, an A is a byproduct of the effort, not the outcome. Our stories have those same basic elements of structure— use Final Cut, pictures, music, and a voice over, your video should be 3-5 minutes long, etc. But the content was my own, the research was mine to conduct, and the final product was a result of my own time, dedication, and effort. The possibility for creativity knew no bounds and while I was shy at first

and felt trepidation about sharing too much about myself, I grew to understand more about my own ability to share and have my voice heard and appreciated.

In 2012 and 2013 I volunteered to be a judge for History Day, a national initiative designed for young students between 7th and 12th grades to do sophisticated research on a topic related to an assigned theme. Students then compete all the way to a national competition in Washington D.C. with a variety of mediums including papers, websites, speeches, short skits, and boards. One of these mediums is a digital video project where—as individuals or in groups—they have ten minutes to use pictures, music, and video clips to describe their research. It was one of the most incredible experiences I have had – students managed to describe Kissinger and his impact on Vietnam in a more clear and concise fashion than I had ever seen. Other students tackled environmental activism in Africa, the impact of McDonald's, and the scientific experiments done on human subjects during World War II. Their editing was remarkable and it made the content that much more compelling. It struck me while reading over their bibliographies that these students had accomplished things that some college students with history majors never manage to achieve. They had reached beyond the articles, books, and paper primary source materials to interact with images and digital documentation. They had seen the past as a current and contemporary presence through the eyes of twentieth century technology rather than a dusty pile of fragile papers. The students had been forced to sift through an abundance of reliable and unreliable source material available online in order to determine what information was not only trustworthy, but of value to their thesis.

Students of the twenty-first century are confronted with a new kind of conundrum. The way we understand and interpret information has been redefined by the technology we use and the daily interactions we have with that technology. It is not unreasonable then to expect that how we teach and learn must change as well. Regurgitating names and dates is no longer an acceptable standard for a good historian and so pen and paper should not be the only acceptable medium for analysis. In my dream classes, students of any and every discipline would be given the opportunity to make a digital story of something related to their major, maybe as a precursor to their final project, whatever the subject. As a required course within each major, students would be given the tools and parameters for how they should present their research, and the professor would assign the topic and theme of the course. But I firmly believe that for students who respond better as visual and active learners, this would be a method of utilizing their unique skills and allowing the students creativity. It may even push students to understand their majors/classes in a new way and inspire different methods of research and discovery.

My own experiences in digital storytelling changed me in both subtle and overt ways. I became a more confident classroom participant. I learned to value the insights of my classmates and how to take and give constructive criticism without losing sight of my own goals. As a student of digital storytelling, I learned to interpret my information differently and to view my own studies through the eyes of an artist, not just a scholar. And true to form, I saw my own story as part of a larger narrative—the narrative of humanity. For Christmas in 2011, my aunt asked me to put together a photo album of her girls from the time they were children. Instead I used 500 family photos dating back to 1900 and edited 3 hours of family video footage to illustrate the history of our family chronologically, even using pictures that had been posted on Facebook days before. I used music from as many eras as possible including Stevie Wonder, Frank Sinatra, and Katie Herzig. I even incorporated family interviews as a voice over for some areas. On Christmas, we ate, we argued, we laughed, we opened presents and we watched my video. Everyone cried happy tears.

Exploring a New Bravery Space
In February 2014, I was hired as a Student Activities Advisor at the University of Minnesota. Our office provides advising to nearly 1,000 student groups about resources and benefits available to

them on campus. I coordinate the annual group registration process, manage the communications to groups, and assist my team in the execution of other programs in our office, including the Student Unions and Activities Grants program and the Tony Diggs Excellence Awards. I coordinate with departments and colleges across campus that also support student engagement. Outside of my full-time position, I work with the University of Minnesota Marching Band as an Assistant Instructor for the Color Guard (I was on the Color Guard as a student). In both of these roles, I feel engaged with the outstanding experiences that made my college experience not only memorable, but meaningful.

My digital storytelling experiences developed both my critical thinking skills and my technical skills, including collaborating on specific projects. One such project was a short video within my department, detailing the history of the second floor of Coffman Memorial Union after it was renovated in 2013. I felt that through the collaboration of my department and the video staff, I was able to mediate conversations and discuss the content and logistics from the viewpoint of all involved parties.

Professionally, working in a Student Affairs field has allowed me to transfer the skills I learned in a digital storytelling setting into a co-curricular atmosphere. Personally, digital storytelling taught me how to harness my strengths as an introvert as I build relationships with colleagues and students. When Walt allowed me to join him in the front of the classroom, I was given a gift of empowerment. Someone believed in my potential and valued my input. My trepidation in co-teaching was shadowed only by my fear of missing the moment—what if I chose not to participate and I regretted it for the rest of my life? The experiences I had leading a classroom of students while I was still a student myself reframed my thought processes to be more collaborative, considerate, and inquisitive.

> "But a digital storytelling experience asks you to engage in active listening—to hear more than the surface and to seek understanding of context, motivation, body language, and word choice in the moment.

For instance, I listen differently now. I used to hear people speak and easily accepted the information they had chosen to share. I rarely questioned or challenged their words. But a digital storytelling experience asks you to engage in active listening—to hear more than the surface and to seek understanding of context, motivation, body language, and word choice in the moment. This also pushed me to be more present.

As a result of this active listening, I also respond more thoughtfully—I do not answer immediately for the sake of filling space or feel the need to give a critique their thought process. In learning to become a digital storyteller, I was proud to have defined my style and my first instinct was to teach in a way that encouraged others to mimic my style. But after taking on the role of teacher in the classroom, my role in working with students and colleagues is to share *my own perspective*, not to change or pass judgment on their perspectives. That means I must enrich the conversation by asking questions that invoke thought, to consider my own bias in the setting, and to remember that "my way" is not the only or the right way.

During our initial co-teaching experience in 2008, one of my classmates asked a question related to our presentation. I remember nervously glancing at Walt thinking he would respond, but he gave me an encouraging nod and said, "Go ahead." He did not say, "Do you think you can answer?" or "Do you want to try answering?" He responded as a colleague. I felt valued and trusted, but more importantly I felt like I had a voice in the classroom. My previous classroom experiences had involved arriving twenty minutes early to class so I could find a seat as far back as possible. It was almost a

game to see how artfully I could evade a teacher's gaze when they were looking for someone to call on for an answer. Walt not only invited me to the sanctuary at the front of the class, but modeled respect and trust in me as he handed me co-authority over the space. This moment in time feels like the first time I was not only offered leadership, but authentically trusted with the influence that leadership brings.

Before digital storytelling, I was hesitant to speak up in any setting – not because I did not have something to say, but because I was fearful that no one would care to hear what I said. After the time in the digital storytelling classroom, contributing to the conversation felt important because *I decided it was important*. The fear of sharing is a fear of trusting, and I had to learn to trust my own judgment—my input may not be the make or break contribution, but it builds teamwork and demonstrates the care I have for any given topic. Besides, I find that the catharsis of speaking my mind when I have something to offer far outweighs the labor of holding my tongue because I am afraid.

Finally, being a student and leading my peers forced me to ask a more dreaded question: Would I follow me? It was a scary enough journey to lead, but to ask for feedback about my leadership was petrifying. But, part of digital storytelling is a belief in voice—that I do my utmost to produce a genuine and truthful product and to be willing to listen to the viewpoints of my audience. Confidence in my work and in myself will prepare me to allow for feedback and digest the constructive suggestions that could help me improve.

Walt modeled an incredible willingness to mentor me through his support of my pursuits in the classroom and out. We had regular check-ins throughout my academic career that included occasional lunches with a Pink Cadillac for each of us (a Pink Cadillac is a strawberry malt with Oreo cookies)! I remember my first lunch with Walt. As we approached the counter at Annie's Parlour and I pulled out some money, he stopped me and said he would cover the bill. Being a Minnesotan, I started to argue and Walt shared that I could pay him back by taking my mentees to lunch. I never thought I would have a mentee, but three years ago, I took my first student for a lunch check-in, and with a smile I paid for both of our Pink Cadillacs.[6]

Conclusion

We would like to conclude with two final thoughts. First, as you have read in Syressa's sections, digital storytelling can be a powerful tool for increasing students' confidence and agency. We encourage readers to learn more about digital storytelling. StoryCenter's website has valuable information, and Walt's article "The Pedagogy of Digital Storytelling in the College Classroom" is online, and includes a 12.5 minute digital story about digital storytelling (Raimist, Doerr-Stevens, & Jacobs, 2010). The book *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (4th ed.) outlines practical as well as conceptual aspects of digital storytelling (Lambert, 2012). The Immigrant Stories website helps recent immigrants and refugees create and share digital stories; their curriculum includes a tool kit for instructors to make digital stories and teach digital storytelling.

Second, many instructors have students who take multiple classes with them. We encourage those who do to consider inviting such students to co-present a short lecture with you, as Walt invited Syressa to do in 2008 in her second class with him. This practice not only benefits the student co-presenter, it demonstrates to other students that student input is highly valued in the instructor's

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[6] Walt learned this version of "paying it forward" from his Ph.D. dissertation advisor, who never let Walt pay for meals, saying that his mentor did the same thing for him. It seems that this arrangement never ends. Syressa was shocked when Walt told her that his mentor smacked his hand away when he tried to pay for breakfast the day after attending the mentor's retirement party in the summer of 2015!

classroom. It helps the student presenter and the other students further venture into bravery spaces where they quiet doubts about their abilities, and take chances to gain powerful new perspectives.

We have enjoyed the process of revisiting our experiences from 2007 through 2014. Syressa had a very powerful experience as an undergraduate student when she was given a unique opportunity to co-teach a subject she recently learned. We hope that our story encourages you to learn more about digital storytelling and how undergraduates can serve as teaching assistants in its deployment.

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