Sophia Junior College Faculty Journal
Vol. 30, 2010, 1-10

Developing Narrative-based Multimedia Material in an Academic Setting

Kenneth E. Williams

Abstract:

This paper looks at Internet based social networking and its expansion of the personal-social narrative among college age students. In turn this expansion of the personal-social narrative milieu allows teachers to develop effective multimedia material based on tools traditionally used to create cinema.

Introduction

Along with the widespread use of personal computers and mobile phones, participation in online social networks, especially among high school and university students, has become more widespread as well (Cotterell, 2007; Ormrod, 2008). A distinctive feature of this online communication is the increasing use of personal narrative (Levinson, 1999), not only as text but also as multimedia storytelling (Horn, 1998; Hana, 2009). Participants in online social networks enhance their stories with photos, graphics, audio, and video. As a result, this new generation of students has come to expect the transfer of information to be audio-visually rich and engaging. The implication for educators in higher education should not be missed. If we want to effectively convey information to our students in an academic setting, we need to exploit the genre of personal narrative and employ the most powerful of multimedia forms: cinematic storytelling. In this paper, "multimedia" refers to a combination of images, words, and sounds presented in a narrative sequence to students in a classroom or viewed on a computer, and "script" refers to the lecture (either oral or written) instructors use in class.

The Growth of Online Social Networks and Personal Narrative

The Internet has intensified and broadened social networks and personal narratives (Lenhart, Hitlin & Madden, 2005; Haskett, 2008; Osttertag, 2008).

Consequently, it is important that we understand how it has been done before we start to make any multimedia material. The artifacts of Internet-based personal narratives are all around us and include but are not limited to computers, mobile phones, e-mail, online social networks and video websites. Mobile phones and e-mail are ubiquitous among college-age students and are used on a regular basis (Lenhart, et al, 2005; David, 2006; Brown, 2009; Lenhart, 2009). Online social networking sites are gaining popularity quickly and online video websites are also very popular. "According to a survey recently conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all Americans between the ages of twelve and seventeen use some online social networking site" (Rosen, 2007).

Computers were originally central to this new universe; however, mobile phones now are begging to supersede them (Brown, 2008). Initially, mobile phones were mere extensions of landlines and like landlines they were used to make verbal contact with other people. What is obvious though is that mobile phones can, more or less, accomplish this activity anytime and any place the user wishes. Presently, mobile phones allow the user not only to talk to people, but also enable them to use instant messaging and e-mail, send photos and short videos, and access social networks and video Websites. All of these have facilitated the use of personal narrative among teenagers and young adults and in turn helped continue to extend and bolster what may be considered a personal narrative society.

Online social networking and video Websites are the newest and the most dynamic form of personal narrative communication that continue to fuel the personal narrative explosion (Young, 2006; Stanic, 2009). Many social networking sites exist. In the United States, Twitter and Facebook are widely used, and in Japan Mixi is described as the "largest social networking site in Japan" (Cashmore, 2006). At Twitter, people may put up short, often personal, information and, if they wish, connect it with one picture (LeFever & LeFever, 2008; Williams, 2009). For longer personal information, related pictures and short videos people use Mixi in Japanese or, Facebook for Japanese or English. More information may be found about these networks at "How social media can make history" (Shirky, 2009).

Twitter is interesting because it has the ability to function much like a multimedia presentation. Members are limited to a maximum of 140 characters at any one time. For example, "I am having dinner in Shinjuku." Along with an "update" like this, a picture that extends or complements the statement may be uploaded from their mobile phone. For instance, they may upload a photo of the outside of

the restaurant, the food or the people they are having dinner with. Although this is possible on Facebook, in general it seems to serve a different purpose. Japanese often refer to Mixi as an online diary and people on Facebook may feel the same. Like many things on the Internet, there is often overlap on how they may be used. Additionally, along with the capabilities of the site, the shape a social network will take is up to the individual and the goals of groups that the individual belongs to.

Application to an Academic Setting

There will be some differences depending on the school or area in the world, but there is a commonality in the departments and in turn the courses that are taught at the university level (Universities Worldwide, 2008). The courses taught vary from Agriculture to Zoology with a plethora in-between. The wide variety of courses may also be roughly viewed as falling into the humanities, social sciences, and physical-natural sciences. Of course, these groupings will overlap and at times envelop all at the same time. The point is Philosophy will likely be taught in a different manner than one of History. Nevertheless, there are components and objectives of each that will allow teachers to develop good multimedia material.

Designing a multimedia presentation for an academic setting should be based on a form students will connect with (Nunes & Gaible, 2002). Furthermore, "the hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born" (McLuan, 1964: 55). Some believe this new form is a multimedia language or close to it (Horn, 1998; IML. 2009). This new mode or language may be viewed as a story-narrative in a cinematic form because of the relationship between photos and movies (Monaco, 1981; Kawin, 1992) along with words, which create images or a flow of ideas. Therefore, to create good multimedia materials, an instructor needs to use resources that suit the cinematic form. This approach leads to viewing the end product as something connected and flowing rather than a slideshow of static, independent frames.

No matter how well teachers believe their multimedia programs are constructed, there is a significant possibility that the point aimed at will be missed if the viewers are not considered first. Hence, before starting a multimedia project it is important to understand the people you wish to communicate with along with the circumstances that helped to create the situation. In this paper, college-age students will be the focus, and in this group personal-narrative is the base of story-narrative. A personal

narrative is one where people share their life (events, incidents or experiences) with others and vicariously experience the things that happen to each other. A story-narrative has characters, settings, and conflicts.

Creating the Script

Although oral presentation has been and is the basis of transmitting information in most classrooms, often little time has been giving to the process other than the dissemination of information. It is just as important to evaluate the script as a story-narrative. It is also equally vital that teachers understand their script and text as a visual presentation if they wish to develop it into an effective multimedia presentation. For that reason, the first thing to do when developing a multimedia project is to think of the script in a narrative structure form. This not only describes the topic but it starts to create the visual story that is essential for a multimedia presentation (Block, 2007).

As already pointed out, classes will be taught in diverse ways and in turn some will fit the narrative structure easier than others. To describe a script in a narrative structure form, we must understand the following (In Point, 2004):

(1) Where the script is located. This may be in a real place, an abstract one, or even real time. Everything must happen somewhere. At times this may be hard to comprehend, but there is no alternative. Some places are just more obvious then others. Even in psychology or philosophy topics are likely to go back and forth between ideas or emotions and the real world.

(2) What started this script? Another way to approach this is to ask what is so important about this story that it needs to be told. This may be something teachers need to consider because they are often so involved with a topic that they have not thought what would be compelling for students. If this is troublesome it may help to look at the ending and then proceed back to the beginning. This will likely resolve the issue, if there is one.

(3) Who or what is the main focus or topic of the script? In other words, what is being talked about? This would include characters, ideas or both. Also, it is important not to forget that there often are secondary focuses along with the primary one(s). This should be worked on until the main focus can be presented in one sentence or less and then under that secondary focuses should be presented.

(4) As the script moves along, what conflict must be met and surmounted? There are always things to overcome or subjugate. At first this may not be obvious or appear small or even just normal changes but they are there and important. Even moving from simple ideas to complex ones involve that something be lost, left behind or changed into more complicated ideas.

(5) How does the topic or character change as it overcomes or is defected by the obstacles that arise? It is not likely that the topic will stay the same throughout the course. Does it grow or diminish? Change is always something we can count on.

(6) How are things resolved? In other words, how does the script end? Think about how it is different from the beginning. Something is resolved. This resolution may be found by considering or recognizing the main point or changing of the script (Lipman, 2003).

After organizing the script into a narrative form, it needs to be put together in a structure. The three-act structure is a basic form that goes back as far as Aristotle (Deemer, 2000) and is still popular (Arnold & Eddy, 2007). There are various components in a classical three-act narrative structure format that all scripts will have. First would be the opening, beginning or setup.

All scripts must have a beginning. Often students know little or nothing about the topic teachers are introducing. Therefore, at first the teacher often needs to present the boundaries of this topic along with the main characters or ideas, the goals, likely obstacles and location. In other words, the topic is defined and given a body that the teacher wants the students to hold in their minds. Another way to look at this first act or beginning is to consider it an in-depth expansion of the introduction. History classes probably have a linear narrative based on characters, places and time. Other classes are set in ideas that will be built upon. These ideas will perhaps interact with time and characters. The beginning is where the overall shape of the topic takes place. This starts what may be seen as a thickening arc. As the script moves through the beginning it thickens and rises in the sense that more parts are added and it likely becomes more complicated.

The second part of the script is the main section of the story, journey, or quest. Conflicts arise in the information presented and the ideas become more complex. The basic topic or character interacts with the surroundings and is challenged in some way or confronted by people, issues, or ideas that must be overcome. The main focus of ideas or events is presented in the second part. In this phase the students are often

asked to move to a different level of thinking. Urgency often enters in that the "story arc" thickens and more demands are put on the students as the information or ideas presented becomes more complicated.

In the third or end part of the script, the loose ends are tied up. Resolution or conclusion involving the topic and subtopics happens in this part. This may show the topic in a new light with new importance or increased status.

It is essential to remember that the length of the three acts will vary depending on the amount of information that needs to be presented in each one. They are not necessarily divided into three equal parts.

Creating the Storyboard

At this point, the script has been observed from a narrative point of view and a three-act structure. The script now may be analogous to all of the wood required to build a house and the storyboard the assemblage of the house. Here the script is turned into a visual form via the storyboard in a series of pictures that tell the story using drawn images. Along with the images, supportive words or phrases are written in or next to frames the pictures are drawn in. The easiest way to think about a storyboard is writing in pictures. Storyboards are the way most film or animation scripts are transformed into visual stories (Palazzi, 2009).

The layout of a storyboard is very flexible. One style would be to write the narrative three-part script on the side and then add pictures along with pertinent words or phrases in boxes that expand or illustrate the ideas, action, or people relevant to the story. This is something like illustrating a book. A second way is to draw pictures related to the script as it is read. A few words are written in each box that can be used in the final design. This is similar to drawing a comic book. A storyboard generator may be found at Incompetch (MacLeod, 2007).

There is no single way to develop a storyboard. One approach is viewing the process similar to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. There are various strategies when working on a jigsaw puzzle. Starting with the outside edges is one of them. The three-act structure as a body could be considered the outside edges of the script. A second tactic is to find common colors. This could be seen as the topic or main focus of the script. Finding the lines or shapes in the jigsaw puzzle is a third way. The story arc may represent this.

Again there is no one-way to draw pictures for the storyboard. A main factor is

to ask what the picture does say, not what it looks like but what it says. A second and also very important feature to consider is what the relationship of the picture is being viewed to the one in front of it and following it. In other words, do not forget that a flowing story is being told. As already mentioned, using a storyboard is like writing in pictures. It will likely take a number of rewrites before it is completed.

Once the storyboard is finished, the development of a narrative-based multimedia material project has been completed. The next parts depend on a number of variables. First is the availability of pictures for the project. This involves the area of copyright laws (Copyright, 2009: Harper, 2004) or making pictures. The next step depends on how this material will be used. Is the project to be presented by the teacher in the classroom (Green, & Brown, 2002) or put on a computer (Lee, & Owens, 2000) and controlled by a student? If the multimedia project is in the classroom to support a lecture, than the information presented by written words will likely be less then perhaps that of a computer-based presentation. The rule of thumb is too many words ruin a project. My question is why was a multimedia project made if words dominate the presentation? Let the images do the talking.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to find people that view multimedia boring, at best (Tufte, 2003; Bolton, 2007; Johnson, 2009). To avoid dull multimedia projects, it is important to first understand the audience by being knowledgeable of the milieu they function in. In this paper, it is argued that students, for the most part, live in a personal narrative setting. This world has been expanded by the use of social networks on the Internet. Understanding the personal narrative world and that multimedia is a form of visual storytelling allows us to view a multimedia project something closer to a movie than a series of independent slides. There are three points that educators should bear in mind. First, transforming the classroom script in a narrative form will begin to move it into a style students can relate to. Second, viewing the narrative form in a three-act structure, beginning, middle and end, gives the script a body. Finally, the script needs to be turned into a visual form via a storyboard. The process of developing a first-rate multimedia project is not easy and it is time consuming. However, it is far better than boring students and not having the message hit the mark. As Mayer (2001) puts it, “multimedia learning offers a potentially powerful way for people to understand things” (194).

References

Arnold, B. & Eddy, B. (2007). *Visual Storytelling*. New York: Thomas Delmar Learning.

Block, B. (2007). *The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV and Digital Media*. Oxford: Focal Press.

Bolton, S. (2007) Powerpoint Presentations are Boring. *SEO*: http://seoblog.intrapromote.com/2007/01/powerpoint_pres.html

Brown, D. (2008). Why Cell Phones are Replacing the Laptop. *Inc.Technology*: http://technology.inc.com/hardware/articles/200609/cellreplace.html

Brown, G. (2009). Mobile Youth, *The Mobile Youth Network*: http://mobileyouthnet.com.

Cashmore, P. (2006). The Biggest Social Networking Site In Japan. *Mashable*: http://mashable.com/2006/07/08/mixi-japans-biggest-social-network/

Copyright Office. U.S. (2009) Copyright: http://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/faq-fairuse.html.

Cotterell, J. (2007). *Social Networks in Youth and Adolescence*. New York: Routledge.

David, C. (2006). *Left to Right/ the cultural shift from words to pictures*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing.

Deemer, C. (2000, Oct. 1) The Importance of Three-Act Storytelling, Ibiblio: The Public's Library and Digital Archive: http://www.ibiblio.org/cdeemer/cfs1000.htm, and Cyber Film School: http://www.cyberfilmschool.com/135/Article/NWFS/ The%20Importance%20of%20Three%20Act%20Storytelling.htm.

Green, T. D. & Brown, A. (2002). *Multimedia Projects in the Classroom: A guide to Development and Evaluation*. London: Crown Press.

Hana, W. (2009). Keeping Up with Faster: http://www.visualstorytelling.com/editorial.htm.

Harper, G. (2004) Copyright Issues: Multimedia and Internet Resources: http://www.utsystem.edu/ogc/intellectualproperty/mmfruse.htm

Hasket, G. (2008). The Year of Personal Narratives-Storytelling on Ourselves. Blogher: http://www.blogher.com/year-personal-narratives-storytelling-ourselves.

Horn, R. E. (1998). *Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century, 1st edition*. Bainbridge Island: MacroVU, Inc.

Johnson, C. (2009). PowerPoint Celebrates 25 years of Boring Slideshows. AOL Tec:

http://www.switched.com/2009/08/20/powerpoint-celebrates-25-years-of-boring-slideshows?icid=sphere_wpcom_inline.

Kawin, B. (1992). *How Movies Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lee, W. W., & Owens D. L. (2000). *Multimedia-Based Instructional Design: Computer-Based Training, Web-Based Training, and Distance Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

LeFever, S., & LeFever, L. (2007). Twitter Search in Plane English. Commoncraft: http://www.commoncraft.com.

Levinson, P. (1999). *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*. New York: Routledge.

Lenhart, A. (2009). Teens and Mobile Phones Over the Past Five Years. Pew Internet: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/14--Teens-and-Mobile-Phones-Data-Memo.aspx.

Lenhart, A., Hitlin P., & Madden M. (2005). Teens and Technology: Pew Internet: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2005/Teens-and-Technology.aspx.

Lipman, D. (2003). Finding an Ending for a Story: Story Dynamics: http://www.storydynamics.com/Articles/Working_with_Stories/find_ending.html

MacLeod, K. (2007). Incompetech. http://incompetech.com/graphpaper/storyboard.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Boston: The MIT Press.

Mayer, R. E. (2001). *Multimedia learning*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Monaco, J. (1981). *How to Read a Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nunes, C. A., & Gaibel, A. E. (2002). Development of Multimedia Materials. In W. D. Haddad, & A. Draxler. (Eds.) *Technologies for Education: Potentials, Parameters and Prospects. Washington* D.C., Paris: AED/UNESCO.

Ormrod, J. (2008). *Essentials of Educational Psychology* (2nd edition). New York: Prentice Hall.

Ostertag, B. (2008). The Facebook Candidate Meets the Real World. *The Huffington Post.* http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-ostertag/the-facebook-candidate-me_b_121568.html.

Palazzi, M. (2009). Digital Animation. ACCAD: http://accad.osu.edu/

In Point. (2004). Narrative Structure. Pacific Cinematheque: http://www.inpoint.org/LanguageofFilm.htm.

Rosen, C. (2007). Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism. *The New Atlantis*, *Summer*: http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/virtual-friendship-and-

the-new-narcissism.

Shirky, C. (2009). How Social Media Can Make History. TED: Ideas worth spreading: www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html.

Stanic, J. (2009). Social Networking Grows at 3 Times Rate of Internet. *Dynamic Business*. http://www.dynamicbusiness.com.

Tufte, E. (1973). PowerPoint is Evil. *Wired*. http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html.

University of Southern California. (2009). Institute for Multimedia Literacy. http://iml.usc.edu/index.php/about-iml/history-background.

Universities Worldwide. (2008) Links to 8343 Universities in 201 Countries: http://univ.cc/index.html.

Williams, E. (2009). Evan Williams on Listening to Twitter users. TED: Ideas worth spreading: http://www.ted.com.