

Stories in Our Classrooms: A Faculty Community of Practice as an Agent of Change

Beverly Bickel, William Shewbridge, and Jack Suess

IN 2006, THE UMBC's (University of Maryland, Baltimore County) Division of Information Technology's (DoIT) New Media Studio (NMS) began facilitating digital storytelling workshops as a gateway opportunity for faculty to explore how student-centered assignments, creative work with course concepts, and the use of digital tools can lead students to develop digital literacies.¹ Prior to this event, UMBC had made very little progress in leveraging technology and multimedia to support scholarship and teaching in the humanities and social sciences. As faculty began to come together in support of the importance of digital storytelling in teaching and research, we realized that we were in the midst of a game-changing moment in our efforts to promote digital literacy among students.

In the first three years, the faculty workshops were funded by the NMS and led by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), which was co-founded by Joe Lambert. CDS's pioneering work was a major inspiration to UMBC's early faculty adopters and inspired them to draw their colleagues into the effort. According to Kristen Drotner, this now-classic form of digital storytelling stems from Lambert's understanding that storytelling validates ordinary people's memories and experiences, serving to supplement and perhaps correct official histories.² While working as producers with audio and visual representations, storytellers discover how multimedia meanings are made and, in the process, are challenged to become more critical consumers of mass- and new-media messages.

Since 2006, this effort has brought together an interdisciplinary group of approximately one hundred faculty and staff representing a variety of departments that has developed into a community of practice focused on

encouraging digital literacy. We call it a “community of practice”³ because it is composed of early faculty adopters and IT staff who have worked together in the shared enterprise of digital storytelling workshops, whereby participants move fluidly between being novice learners or experts in various roles—as narrative authors and storytellers; photo, video, or sound editors; and artistic designers. In this collaborative professional context, everyone is challenged to reconsider learning and teaching as a shared social process that “differs from a mere collection of people by the strength and depth of the culture it is able to establish and which in turn supports group activity and cohesion.”⁴

In the first few years, the NMS nurtured this faculty group through e-mail lists, by awarding equipment and software grants, by sponsoring research seminars and training workshops, and by helping to shine a spotlight on the innovative work of faculty and students. This “community” group has developed cohesion over the semesters and has come together in various ways to advocate for the advancement of digital literacies across the UMBC curriculum. As the importance of digital-media literacies in all disciplines and professions becomes more apparent on a national scale,⁵ this group has helped jump-start campus discussions on addressing curricular changes, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Thus, this faculty community of practice has emerged at the center of an environment that encourages collaborations across disciplinary boundaries, discussions about research, and innovation in classroom practices where new models of learning are explored.

Eventually, the annual workshops became self-sustaining as UMBC faculty and staff, who had been specially trained by CDS, assumed the role of facilitators. As this transition occurred, we knew we were on the right path to building a vibrant community of practice to support and promote digital literacies, as the peer-to-peer flavor to the workshops has enhanced faculty members' exploration of new media technologies in a collegial, interdisciplinary, and nonthreatening setting. Beyond the workshop, this spirit of collaboration and mutual support continued as participants sought opportunities to share ideas across departments. According to Jason Loviglio, director of UMBC's Media and Communication Studies (MCS) program,

We have developed a real community of practice at UMBC based around the New Media Studio. . . . Every year we have widened the circle to the point where we had a core of people who were not only veterans of the workshop taught by Joe Lambert, but we were now the teachers of the workshop. It has been ambitious, it has felt quixotic to some of us, but it has been a really galvanizing experience where we feel like we can actually now share these ideas with our colleagues and we can watch them implement them in their classes.⁶

The community of practice has evolved from informal discussions to gatherings each semester to discuss technology-support needs, assignment ideas, grading rubrics, and stories about digital storytelling or visual assignments in over twenty courses annually. The community is supported by a website (<http://www.umbc.edu/oit/newmedia/studio/digitalstories/index.html>) and an active e-mail LISTSERV that boasts a membership of more than 175 faculty and staff members. The group has also served as springboard for broader discussions and has led in part to the creation of three working groups currently developing white papers on digital humanities in teaching, research, and publishing at UMBC.

With this increased interest in digital literacies came an increased demand for resources. In the absence of additional funding, faculty and staff have used the same grassroots approach that characterized the early development of the community of practice. Graduate assistants, financially supported by the NMS, began supporting faculty by providing basic technical training to students in the classroom. In addition, these assistants staffed a "genius bar" in the International Media Center's (IMC) Mac Lab, which had become the unofficial home for digital story activities. A closet in the IMC was outfitted for audio recording, and a few surplus cameras from the NMS were made available to students working on visual assignments.

In spring 2010, MCS and the NMS created a one-credit course, MCS 101L Multimedia Literacy Lab. The lab course was initially designed to accompany MCS 333 History and Theory of Mass Communication and Media Studies, a gateway course required of all MCS majors. The Multimedia Literacy Lab ensures that students develop basic multimedia skills while improving their writing abilities by creating two digital stories. Though it introduces students to a variety of production techniques, the lab stresses effective communication through the integration of written and audiovisual forms, and instructors expect all students to be able to communicate ideas effectively and creatively in multimodal work. As a result of connecting the lab to a required gateway course, the lab helps ensure that every MCS major creates at least one digital story or visual assignment early in the major. As Loviglio commented,

The level of student engagement in digital assignments in MCS 333 has been truly astounding. Students spend more time working with course texts, researching course concepts, and collaborating with peers since we've begun to require them to answer questions about theory using digital storytelling formats. Students report greater enthusiasm both for the assignments and for the material they're covering now that some of their coursework includes digital assignments alongside traditional written assignments.⁷

Faculty members and the NMS have also explored means of using digital literacies to help connect students to communities beyond the campus. A number of unique collaborative projects have been developed in which students use digital media to give voice to first-generation female German immigrants, returning Peace Corp volunteers, youth activists, and local residents reflecting on the histories of regional communities.

One such collaboration, the Charlestown Project,⁸ resulted from a partnership between the NMS and Retirement Living Television, a national network based at UMBC. Now in its fifth year, the project teams UMBC students with residents of the nearby Charlestown retirement community to create digital stories based on the residents' life experiences.⁹ Based on the success of this project, a new freshman-year seminar was offered in the fall of 2011, "Creating Stories about Times of Change," in which students worked in intergenerational teams to create stories that focused on common threads and shared insights and lessons about growth. The narrative collaboration offered opportunities for empathy and a broadening of perspective about the creation of identity in times of change.

Active involvement by both UMBC and CDS in the New Media Consortium (NMC), a leader in advancing digital-media literacy and open courseware among U.S. universities, has fostered participation in a broader community of practice, resulting in collaborations with other institutions and organizations on curricula projects, joint training workshops, national and international conferences, and grant proposals. In one example, UMBC students—working directly with CDS and local community organizations—worked with members of the Somali Bantu and Bhutanese communities in telling stories of their refugee experiences.

In creating a collaborative, faculty-led environment where grassroots innovation in teaching digital literacies can thrive, UMBC has made significant progress. By taking this work into the community, members of UMBC's community of practice are also creating new opportunities for student learning and civic engagement. While sustaining momentum in the absence of new resources remains a challenge, the growing community of practice illustrates the power of committed faculty and staff in transforming a campus into a digitally literate academy.

Notes

1. To date, faculty from the following departments have attended the workshops and begun using digital assignments: Media and Communications Studies; Visual Arts;

Modern Languages and Linguistics; Intercultural Communications; Language, Literacy and Culture; History; American Studies; Psychology; Education; Gender and Women's Studies; Math; and Engineering.

2. K. Drotner, "Boundaries and Bridges: Digital Storytelling in Education Studies and Media Studies," in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, ed. K. Lundby (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008): 63
3. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
4. Riel, M. & Polin, L, "Learning Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Environments," in *Designing Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, ed. S. A. Barab, R. Kling and J. Gray (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 18.
5. L. Johnson, R. Smith, H. Willis, A. Levine, and K. Haywood, *The 2011 Horizon Report* (Austin, TX: The New Media Consortium, 2011).
6. Jason Loviglio, "Digital Stories in the Classroom" (profiles from UMBC's Community of Practice), accessed May 18, 2010, <http://www.umbc.edu/oit/newmedia/studio/digitalstories/profiles.php>.
7. Jason Loviglio, e-mail correspondence with author, November 16, 2010.
8. "Digital Stories from Charlestown," <http://www.umbc.edu/oit/newmedia/studio/digitalstories/ctds.php>.
9. W. Shewbridge, "Partners in Storytelling: UMBC, Retirement Living TV and the Charlestown Digital Story Project," in *Higher Education, Emerging Technologies, and Community Partnerships: Concepts, Models and Practices*, ed. M. Bowdon and R. Carpenter (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2011).

Beverly Bickel is the Interim Director and Research Assistant Professor in the Language, Literacy and Culture Doctoral program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her teaching and research focus on digital storytelling and digital literacies, globalized communication in cross-cultural contexts, critical pedagogies and online pedagogies, and how the public space of the Internet supports transformational knowledge projects. **William Shewbridge** is founding Director of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, New Media Studio. His work focuses on advancing media literacy and exploring new technologies for learning. He is an affiliate Assistant Professor of Modern Languages and Linguistics, teaching courses in intercultural media, television production, and digital storytelling. **Jack Suess** is Vice President for Information Technology and CIO at University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). He is a frequent speaker on security, identity, and cloud services and has volunteered in numerous ways with EDUCAUSE, InCommon, REN-ISAC, and Internet2. For more information, visit <http://bit.ly/fSB5ID>.
