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The Efficacy of Digital Storytelling Projects on Student Learning and Engagement [1]

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Overview and Rationale: Students in my Narratives of the New China and Rhetoric of Medicine and Health classes often grapple with the embodied, emotionally intense nature of these courses. Walking around Tiananmen Square after reading about its complicated history or analyzing deathbed discourses when loved ones are ill can leave students searching for words. My hunch is that many of our students would benefit from learning digital skills in order to make sense of their learning. Accordingly, the purpose of this proposed research is to implement and study the efficacy of digital storytelling projects on student learning and engagement in two of my 4000/5000-level bridge classes at CU Denver: Narratives of the New China andRhetoric of Medicine and Health. Digital storytelling interweaves images, video, music, text, and audio into a compelling twenty-first century format. Digital storytelling draws on the deep narrative structure of human life in order to convey ideas, information, and analysis in impactful ways. Anecdotal evidence suggests that fostering students' creation of digital products enhances "deep learning" in content areas, promotes digital literacy, supplies material for portfolios, maximizes employment opportunities, and can build campus-community engagement by connecting academic work with broader audiences (Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007, p. 442; see also Cron, 2012; Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). Yet as Robin (2008) notes, a need exists "to consider how educators might conduct future research studies that can demonstrate the benefits of multimedia in general and digital storytelling in particular" (p. 227). If my pilot digital storytelling project is successful, I would like to share this pedagogical program with my colleagues at CU Denver and the wider university community.

Preparation and Training for the Proposed Pilot Program: With our graduate students, I have sought funding for a series of workshops for spring 2014 that will introduce our graduate students and faculty to key components of digital storytelling, from narrative structure and storyboarding through videography and editing. Participants will produce one digital product showcasing their research, teaching, or service; these will be on display at a public event in the Tivoli Center on our downtown campus in mid-April 2014.

Pilot Program: Based on that training, I will implement digital storytelling components in my summer 2014 Narratives of the New China class (in Beijing and Shanghai) as an optional final class project (the other option will be the composition of a conventional academic term paper) and again in Fall 2014 as a required project in my Rhetoric of Medicine and Health class. I

envision working closely with students on the travel study class to select a key narrative theme associated with contemporary China to be presented into a digital format. For instance, one student might create a digital story that analyzes Tiananmen Square from multiple perspectives; another might present the story of China's rise to power in the early twenty-first century. If selected for the PTS program, I will continue to refine my scholarship of teaching and learning research design while learning how to better teach digital storytelling via these classes. The inclusion of digital storytelling term projects will require multiple in-class workshops and extra-class editing sessions (for examples, see Matthews-DeNatale, 2008), and I am actively gathering sample assignment structures and best classroom practices. To facilitate these pedagogical practices, I have arranged for our class to use the cameras and video-editing laboratory at CU Denver's International College Beijing (ICB).

Theoretical Model: Narratives, or stories, form a powerful part of human communication that incorporate topic selection, writing, analysis, and design components. More than a mere iMovie, digital storytelling, as Robin (2008, p. 224) observes, enhances learning when used to "inform viewers about a particular concept or practice." Moreover, narrative forms of communication are particularly suited to my Narratives of the New China and Rhetoric of Medicine and Health classes, which ask students to merge traditional course content with embodied, experiential narratives (see Kreuter et al., 2007 on the import of narrative in health and medical contexts). In blending course content with digital storytelling, I am guided by what Robin (2008, p. 220) and others call the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) model, which requires instructors to teach students to use and think about new technologies within existing content structures.

Method of Assessment of Student Learning and Engagement: To assess the efficacy of digital storytelling assignments on student learning and engagement, I plan to conduct pre- and post-testing of student's knowledge of both technological processes and course content along with evaluation of final products using the Department's outcomes assessment rubrics and structured group interviews with students. For longer-term outcomes assessment, portfolios can be assessed when students graduate to see if these skills translate into other contexts.

Mentorship and Support: If selected, President's Teaching Scholar Mitch Handlesman has agreed to mentor me on the CU Denver campus. I also have permission to share 'enthusiastic support' from Acting Office of International Affairs (OIA) Director John Sunnygard to use this program in my travel study classes.

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