Digital Story Pragmatics: Tips & Tricks

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Abstract
Our digital story exercise for induction week continues to be a success that we are keen to share. This exercise brings unfamiliar students together quickly in an engaging collaborative exercise: to describe what HCI is to a young audience using the 'digital story' technique. Students are immediately confronted with sharing and negotiating their perspectives of HCI, working on a coherent and engaging message for their audience and getting to grips with the digital story technique. In this paper we focus on the pragmatics of the exercise that can be adapted for other purposes.

Introduction
Our work on developing this digital story exercise for induction week for the MSc in Human-Computer Interaction with Ergonomics at University College London (UCL) has been reported elsewhere [1, 2]. [1] focuses on describing the exercise as a case study for enhancing course induction for HCI students. [2] focuses on the synergy between the digital story technique, public engagement and teaching students. This paper aims to rapidly cover the details of the exercise with tips and tricks that we think contribute to making it a success. In this way teachers can grasp the idea and details quickly to reflect on and develop their own practices.

Using Digital Stories Flexibly

Digital stories are an accessible, engaging and relatively cheap method of producing video. They are essentially a story that is conveyed by a series of still photos with narration over the top of the changing images. These have been used in a wide variety of contexts and people have different views of what constitutes a 'true' digital story. For example, one of the rules in question is that digital stories should be a first person narrative about a personal story. However, rules are made to be broken and we would encourage people to use the 'digital story' technique creatively. We have used it creatively with success. Our approach combines a group exercise for students in induction week, with a real public engagement challenge: to describe what HCI is to school students. We first outline the exercise structure before describing tips and tricks that contribute to the exercise's success.

The Exercise Structure

The exercise is run over induction week with about 4.5hrs of staff contact time, and some further hours of student groups working by themselves. The three stages of the exercise are described below.

Day 1: Introduction and Forming Groups (30min)
The first 15 minutes of this session is dedicated to introducing the concept of digital stories and the exercise. The second 15 minutes is used to form groups for working on the exercise. Groups are left to plan their own time to meet the screening deadline on the last day. They are also strongly advised to attend the drop-in surgery session on the second day.

Day 2: Brainstorming and Drop-in Surgery (2hrs)
The groups should hopefully be well underway with developing their story, delegating tasks and bringing their digital story together. It should be expected that different groups will be at different stages. It is the job of the tutor to encourage, support and challenge groups at this time to make sure they are on track and meeting their exercise objectives

Day 3: The Screening (2hrs)
The completed digital stories are required on the lunchtime of the third day so they are ready for the screening in the afternoon. Feedback sheets are handed out to the students at the screening so they are able to provide feedback to each group. Each group votes on what they think is the best film.

Tips and Tricks

A focused topic and audience
We think that a focused topic helps students express their creativity within bounds [2]. For example, rather than getting them to make a film about HCI we ask them to explain what HCI is to school students.

A real world problem
The fact that students are able to work on a real world issue helps motivate them. We are clear that the best videos will help our department's public engagement work. Indeed, a student digital story, *Why Buttons Go Bad*, was shown at the CHI video showcase in 2011 and has received many thousands of views on YouTube.

A storyline
We advise the students to think carefully about the story's beginning, middle and end. Also, do they want to preach to their audience or raise questions?

Photos
We advise students to think about the composition, angle, colour and perspective to make their visual story more engaging.

Narration
We advise students to treat their audio narration like a performance; rather than to just speak their words, they should think about their tone and what emotions they are expressing.

A digital story example
We have found that an example digital story can work well to give the students an idea of what they need to aim for. To encourage participation and creativity we recommend a mediocre quality digital story so students do not feel overwhelmed by the task.

Time limit
We believe that setting a time limit is important for the length of a digital story, so students are creative within clear boundaries. We have found two minutes suitable for conveying an idea quickly without it dragging on.

No video
We have found video distracts groups from the storyline and photos and so have banned its use. Still photos force students to think about each image and their pacing, whereas shooting good video and editing requires a deeper set of skills that can be overlooked with the ease of modern point and shoot cameras.

Technology – Software
MovieMaker (Windows) and *iMovie* (Mac) are both free and suitable for creating digital stories. *PowerPoint* is also a possibility but students have experienced more trouble using this software for digital story purposes. *Audacity* is another free piece of software that can help with editing audio clips.

Technology – Hardware
Students will need access to a digital camera for photos, and some sort of audio recording device. Most students have this equipment and capability on their laptops and phones. A computer is needed to produce the digital story, and a data-projector for the screening.

Technology – Collating videos
All the videos can be collated on one computer. *VLC media player* is able to handle the playback of most video formats. Alternatively *YouTube* offer an 'unlisted' category so videos can be uploaded and shared between people who have access to the non-public link.

Group working
We would encourage students to work in groups for this exercise. This not only fulfils learning objectives related to teamwork but makes the exercise more fun and collaborative. Group working facilitates unfamiliar students getting to know each other quickly.

Healthy competition
Students have been highly engaged with this task to the extent it seems to dominate their attention during induction week. We think at least part of this level of engagement is encouraged by the fact that a healthy competition develops between groups.

Feedback sheets
The feedback sheets that we developed highlight three criteria for students to judge each other's work on: impact, coherence and entertainment. Each group

provides short qualitative feedback to each other group on the sheets. The groups then select their favourite digital story for each criteria. The votes are counted and the winners are declared at the end of the screening. All of the feedback sheets are collated and the comments are summarised and shared anonymously to all students the week after the screening.

The screening
The groups would have worked very hard to get the digital stories together in this timescale, and so the screening should be a celebration of their efforts. We leave a three minute gap between each group's screening so some discussion can take place and the feedback sheets can be completed. We had some budget at our last screening to have drinks and popcorn for the students.

Copyright
Students are taught not to use third party material without the appropriate permissions and licencing. Pragmatically this amounts to the avoidance of all third party material unless they access a repository for licence-free digital material e.g. *Creative Commons*.

Benefits for Teaching of HCI

This approach provides a number of benefits:

- Students are encouraged to think about their perspective of HCI and those of others in the first week of their course. What does it mean to them, and to their new classmates and what should be communicated succinctly to other people?

- Team-working skills are essential for working in HCI roles, this exercise provides students with a collaborative task under a short time frame. We have found that this collaborative task for induction week positively impacts on the group's cohesion for the remaining MSc activities.

- Communication skills are essential for working in HCI. Students have to think carefully about what their message is and their audience.

- Students learn the digital story technique, which is an engaging and effective visual media technique that can be adapted for purposes outside of the course.

Conclusion

This idea has won an award for teaching innovation at UCL. We have outlined it here so others can grasp it quickly to reflect on and develop their own practices. The exercise has direct benefits for considering what HCI is; it develops important transferable skills; and encourages cohesion between class members.

References

1. Benedyk, R. & Furniss, D. (2011): Using Digital Stories to enhance course induction for HCI students. Presented at British HCI Educators Workshop Stream.

2. Furniss, D. & Benedyk, R. (2011): Boundaries and Three Points on a Virtuous Circle: Digital stories, public engagement, and teaching students. Presented at the Workshop on Video Interaction at CHI 2011.