This Is Me! Empowering children to talk about their learning through digital story

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Abstract:
The transition from pre-school to Kindergarten is an important part of a child's learning journey. In the early childhood setting children develop interests, knowledge and learning preferences that often remain unknown in the early days of Kindergarten. We argue that from this young age children can identify and articulate learning preferences as they use their literate practices to communicate their preferences, aspirations and reflections.

Digital Stories are short, personal, multimedia presentations created through image (from still and/or video cameras), which are then edited on a computer with video editing software to include a spoken narrative. In this paper we share a project where a cohort of children in transition from pre-school to Kindergarten developed personal digital stories introducing themselves and their learning preferences and interests to their future Kindergarten teacher. Learning events and practices as identified by the children will be shared as we investigate their language choices throughout these experiences. Our analysis reveals implications and makes recommendations for those working with children in the early years of schooling. In presenting the paper we will share examples, the process of construction and our reflections on the children's use of language.

Introduction

McNaughton (2001) argues that the successful transition for children moving from early years settings to primary school is critical to their ongoing success at school. During this transition, the sharing of information between early years teachers, primary teachers and parents is common as Kindergarten teachers prepare to accommodate these new learners in their classrooms. At this time a strong focus is usually taken on the child's social development and adaptability to the demands of their new school environment (ICS, 2008c; Wilde & Sage, 2007).

This paper argues that children's voices are an important element often overlooked in this dialogue and that digital stories can provide the opportunity to empower very young children to share their stories. Digital stories are useful tools for teachers planning pedagogically appropriate learning experiences for the early days of Kindergarten because they capture a child's perspective on their learning. Further, digital stories capture extended oral performances that provide valuable information about a child's strengths and challenges in the construction and articulation of oral texts.

This paper describes the process of creating digital stories with children in their final year of preschool. It reports on the implications emerging from analysis of both the process and final products and makes recommendations for those working with children in the early years of schooling.

Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context in which it is used. It is sometimes described as an art form, a genre, a practice, and even a social movement. It most commonly refers to the creation of a multimodal, digital text that combines photos and voice (and sometimes additionally moving images, sound effects, music, or text), which is created through the use of computer video-editing software (Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), 2005; Bull & Kajder, 2004-2005; Lowenthal, 2009; Meadows, 2003b). Digital Stories are different from other broadcast mediums, in that they utilise multiple modes of meaning to create works that are usually only between two and four minutes long (ACMI, 2005; Banaszewski, 2002; Jakes, cited in Salpeter, 2005; Meadows, 2003a). The short narratives created are most often highly personal; they act as avenues for self-expression, allowing people to represent their thoughts, memories, opinions or ideas (Atchley, 1990-2000; Bull & Kajder, 2004-2005; Hartley, 2008; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; King, 2008; Meadows, 2003b). However, the genre can also be used to inform and instruct, or to examine historical events (Robin, 2008). Although new technologies are an integral part of making Digital Stories (affording new possibilities to traditional storytelling), many authors stress that the *storytelling* should remain the main emphasis (Atchley, 1990-2000; Banaszewski, 2002; Bull & Kajder, 2004-2005; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Kajder, Bull & Albaugh, 2005; Lowenthal, 2009; Salpeter, 2005).

As a 'movement', Digital Storytelling emerged from the work of Joe Lambert and the late Dana Atchley (among others), who sought to expand the use of this genre beyond experts such as digital artists. The early stages of development took place in the 1990s. In 1994, Atchley and Lambert founded the

San Francisco Digital Media Center with Nina Mullen (Hartley, 2008) and, in 1998 the Center was relocated to Berkley University, California, where it became the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) (CDS, date unknown). It was here, in 2000, that Daniel Meadows attended an intensive workshop on the genre (Meadows, 2003b). Meadows subsequently undertook a project with BBC Wales, in which Digital Storytelling was utilised as a way to include the audience in the creation of broadcast television (Meadows, 2003a). The project, *Capture Wales*, was initially scheduled to last two months, but continued to develop over a period of seven years. At the inaugural Digital Storytelling conference in Wales hosted by the BBC in 2003, the Director of the Canadian Film Centre's media lab, Ana Serrano, acclaimed: 'You are the best practice. You are the case study that we should be touting all over north America, all over Europe' (Meadows, 2003a). The work of the CDS and Meadows has thus been highly influential in regards to subsequent work in this field.

Australia entered the international Digital Storytelling network in 2002, when the founders of the CDS were invited to train staff at the newly-renamed Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), in Federation Square, Melbourne (King, 2008; Simondson, 2009). Digital Storytelling has since been developed in Israel, South Africa and Brazil (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009), as well as Europe, Canada, Japan and New Zealand (ACMI, 2009a). Despite Digital Storytelling being formally introduced in Australia in 2002, it is still an emerging practice in this country. This is evidenced by the fact that Australian books on Digital Storytelling are very recently published, and limited in number.

Digital Storytelling is most frequently used as a tool for working towards equity and social justice, providing a voice to *ordinary* people (who otherwise might not be heard) and enabling them to express their often *extraordinary* stories (CDS, date unknown; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Salpeter, 2005). For example, the ACMI (2005) works in partnership with many marginalised groups, such as Alzheimer's Australia and women living with HIV. Several authors describe how Digital Stories allow the knowledge of marginalised youth or reluctant writers to be validated and appropriately represented (e.g., Bull & Kajder, 2004-2005; Lowenthal, 2009; Vincent, 2006). Such examples show how Digital Storytelling can be a medium or tool for creating communities of interest and critiquing social contexts through shared narratives (ACMI, 2005; Atchley, 1990-2000). Meadows (2003b) contends that Digital Storytelling empowers the general public, rather than merely positioning them as passive consumers of media. Meadows (2003b) explains that, although 'Anyone can make a Digital Story because everyone has a story to tell' (p.190), it requires a conscious effort to be made by people who possess the technological skills:

> If, in the digital age, we want *everyone* to be able to join in the "conversation" that Big Media promises to be, then we must intervene to help *everyone* - and not just those who are computer savvy - to speak the language of media (Meadows, 2003a).

This is especially pertinent to educators who wish to engage their students in Digital Storytelling.

Banaszewski (2002) argues that digital stories provide students with voice and confidence, a finding supported by Sylvester and Greenidge (2010, p. 291) who identify the opportunity to narrate rather than construct print based text as powerful in reducing pressures created by print 'conventions such as spelling, capitalisation and handwriting'. Outcomes such as these do much to position young children as literate individuals able to 'express themselves verbally and visually in artistic, ingenious and productive ways' (Valkanova & Watts, 2007, p.804).

Using Digital Stories to Assist Young Children's Transition to School

Beginning primary school is an exciting, but somewhat stressful and difficult time for many young children and their families (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2001). In NSW, children usually begin primary school at the beginning of the year within which they turn five. McNaughton (2001) observes that for those children who will become increasingly less successful throughout their school careers, it is at this point that the differences between developmental processes begin to be accentuated. In addressing this concern, McNaughton (2001) argues that transitions may be enhanced when educators can create meaningful connections between the pre and primary school settings for children in transition. That is, teachers are challenged to hone in on children's abilities, to engage their interest and to scaffold their learning through activities with common structures, beliefs and values that will allow them to transfer their developing expertise from one setting to another (Honig, 2007; McNaughton, 2001).

The literature is consistent in observing the crucial role that language plays in supporting children's transition to primary school and to their future success with literacy (for example, Hill, 2006; Honig, 2007; McNaughton, 2001; Wilde & Sage, 2007). Hill (2006, p.20) writes, 'being able to hear language, perceive differences in meaning and articulate language is crucially important for learning to read and write… spoken language is the foundation for written language'. In supporting this important transition, Cairney (2009) recommends the following approaches for parents and teachers: regular language interactions, encouraging creativity, and sharing new media. Each of these is an important component of the planning and creation of Digital Stories.

Language development and the ability to communicate effectively are often considered important factors for teachers and parents in determining *school readiness* (Cairney, 2009). For example, in NSW, a survey of Kindergarten teachers conducted by Illawarra Children's Services (ICS, 2008c), found that three of the fifteen skills identified by Kindergarten teachers as 'necessary' for children starting primary school were: the ability to communicate their needs, to speak clearly and to follow verbal instructions. But it would appear these could be unrealistic demands. Whilst children certainly do start school having experienced using oral language for a range of purposes (Jones, 1996), communicative language remains in the early stages of development (Wilde & Sage, 2007). Supporting this finding, the ICS Transition to School website reports that it is reasonably common for children's speech to be unclear up to the age of five (ICS, 2008a; ICS, 2008b), that is after the beginning of their first primary school year.

The current project aims to provide Kindergarten teachers with information about communicative abilities and language development. Jones (1996, p. 11) observes 'one of the difficulties of considering oral language in the classroom is that spoken forms of language are much more difficult to capture than written forms'. Through the digital stories created by children in transition to primary school, Kindergarten teachers have opportunity to observe an extended oral language performance as they consider the needs of this learner in the early days of Kindergarten. This information will complement knowledge about other skills included in the abovementioned survey, such as children being able to identify their name in print, share with peers, take turns, and hold a pencil (ICS, 2008c). This broader perspective on communicative language will hopefully enhance the transition between preschool and school through deeper understanding of young children's development.

Effective school transitions are achieved through the development of strong relationships that encourage collaboration and communication between prior-to-school and Kindergarten staff (CCCH, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2001). These authors also argue that primary/elementary school teachers need (and often want) to find out about children's abilities and needs before the beginning of the school year, so they can develop appropriate curricula, but some communication practices are inadequate in providing the information sought (Cassidy, 2005). Dockett and Perry's (2001) observations that children 'know a lot about themselves, how they learn, and how they respond in certain situations…Often, children are eager to be involved in meaningful communication about school.' (p.14) provides an avenue for further exploration.

The current study aims to work in partnership with participating children, and their educators, in an attempt to provide personal information about the children to their future teachers. This will assist in providing the foundation for relationships and for appropriate programs and pedagogy to be designed.

Research Methodology

A team of three researchers visited a community based early childhood centre in the Illawarra region of NSW to work with children making the transition to Kindergarten. Informed consent was obtained from the centre director, the centre staff and each parent/guardian for children starting Kindergarten the following year. The research team was located within the centre during its operating hours for one week. During this time 27 children and a teacher from the early childhood centre children created digital stories.

Each child created an individual digital story with a researcher as they:

- Photographed up to 10 events and/or activities they like to do in the early childhood centre
- Talked with the researchers about each photograph – why they took it, what happens in that location, any special memories. This conversation was recorded.
- Worked with the researchers to edit the images and audio into a multimedia presentation

Each digital story was shared with the centre staff and copies were burned onto CD. Each child was provided with a personal copy and a copy was sent to the child's future Kindergarten teacher.

In this paper, two children's digital stories are shared as we discuss our observations of the process of construction, description of the final digital story and analysis of language use.

Case One: Lili

Lili was described as 'confident' and 'talkative' as she led the researcher around her preschool on Monday identifying preferred activities for photographing. Whilst she happily interacted with the researcher, it was noted that the focus of her conversation was often on topics other than those being photographed and that stories or topics of conversation ran from one to the next.

Lili continued to appear comfortable and interested as the photographs were loaded onto the laptop. She watched the opening narration of three of her peers' digital stories before attempting her own introduction. This was repeated for the second and third slides until the researchers felt Lili could construct her story free of this support. Although Lili had chosen the activities to be photographed and also talked about them as they were captured, she appeared unsure about the purpose of narrating a story to match an image. Reminders to 'think about what was in the picture' were used throughout as Lili worked to bring the image and narration together.

Lili's digital story is 2 minutes and eleven seconds long. She used ten images and spoke to each for an average of 13 seconds. During her narration (244 words), the word *'sometimes'* is used 11 times and *'um'* 15 times. Six of the photographs captured Lili engaged in outdoor activity (crash mat, sandpit, bikes, playground climbing equipment, worm farm and the frog pond). The remaining four show her indoors at the hairdressing table, the computer ("the puter"), reading a book and drawing on a whiteboard.

Despite several rehearsals and conversations about the topic of each photo, Lili found the oral construction of text somewhat challenging. Analysis of the Lili's language revealed regular use of *'um'* to fill the space as she considered what she wanted to share. Further, the repetition of phrases suggests it was a challenge for Lili to focus on the topic of the image and the construction of the narrative (for example, *'Well, I'm going to big school, and I/ and I'm going to big school!', 'I love getting in the sandpit and, and I like going in the sandpit*') However, she appeared both resilient and committed to achieving the goal of narrating her digital story and her body language at the final viewing indicated that she was proud of her achievement.

Case Two: Campbell

Campbell was described as a 'quiet' child who was 'sometimes shy'. He made his digital story on Friday, the last day of data collection in this project. He met the task with some caution and it took some time initially to build rapport before Campbell began to identify photographic opportunities.

Interestingly, Campbell was keen to be photographed with his selected place or object in each instance. He displayed strong preference to capturing outdoor activities (his outdoor choices included: bikes, soccer ball, sandpit, compost bins, outdoor deck, and the creek). The three indoor photos he staged also had connections to the outdoors (e.g. the yabbie tank). As the photographs were loaded onto the computer, Campbell appeared excited about creating his digital story. During the collection of photographs there had been lots of discussion about what he could say in the making of the movie, he recounted some key points as different pictures appeared on the screen. He declined the offer to look at another story, choosing instead to begin recording his own annotations.

Campbell's digital story is 3 minutes and 37 seconds long and includes a total of 301 spoken words. He included ten images and spoke to each for an average of 22 seconds. In 9 of the images Campbell began with *"Hi, my name is Campbell".* The repetition of his name suggests that he sees each image as a separate entity, not as a collection of images that contribute to the one story.

Analysis of the images and verbal transcript reveals two separate texts that come together to create some complex information. One without the other would not make sense. One image showed Campbell crouching next to the outdoor deck. His annotation explains that a blue-tongue lizard lives underneath the deck, he then described an separate encounter with a blue tongue lizard at his home. In 5 images, Campbell's annotations make connections between home and school contexts. While each image was taken in the Early Childhood centre, Campbell extends upon these with description of home activities (eg. When talking about the compost bins shares that he is growing pumpkins at home, the map of the world as an opportunity to share his own home address).

Findings

Our analysis of the children's responses during the task and their final product reveals areas for discussion. Each will be examined in connection with the cases and the literature.

- *Approach to the task*

Evident in the approach of each of the children was their different activity preferences, learning styles and the ways they engaged physically and interpersonally within their environments. For example, Lili was immediately enthusiastic about working with the researchers. She spontaneously shared information about her school, herself, friends and family as she moved confidently and quickly about the school environment identifying suitable images to capture.

Campbell was initially reticent about working with the researchers, but became more interested and comfortable as the rapport between researcher and child grew (Cairney, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2001) and as he engaged with the familiar environment of his preschool. Campbell took time describing and explaining each activity he liked at school and then made strong links to his home based activities. It appeared important to Campbell that the gathering of images was thorough and captured the most meaningful aspects for him. Campbell took the opportunity both during the collection of photos and

recording of annotation to share information about his home contexts. This finding supports Dockett and Perry's (2001, p. 14) assertion that 'children know a lot about themselves…and are eager to be involved in meaningful communication about school'.

- *Understanding the purpose of the task*

The digital story was a new genre for the children participating in this project. Across the week, 27 children created their stories. Lili created hers on Monday and Campbell on Friday. Time was spent to introduce the purpose and structure of a digital story through demonstration and deconstruction of digital story texts. The digital story made by the teacher from the early childhood centre was also used as a demonstration. It is important to note that deconstruction of text was different for each child. As previously described, Lili was shown the introductory annotation and image of three of her peers' stories and then she constructed her own introductory annotation. The second annotations of the same three stories were then shown and Lili recorded hers. This was repeated once more before Lili then completed the remainder of her digital story. This decision related to Lili's somewhat unfocused manner during the earlier stages of the process, suggesting that a closer focus on the 'parts' within the story would support construction better than a viewing of the story as a whole.

Deconstruction of the text was different for Campbell. The text, its purpose and structure were explained to him and then he viewed a peer's digital story in its entirety. Following this he indicated that he did not want to see any others, preferring to begin his own construction. It needs to be noted that the differences displayed by Campbell and Lili with regard to the deconstruction of the genre can be attributed to both learning styles and timing of the experience. Lili's was one of the first stories created, while Campbell completed his later in the week. Campbell's increased exposure to observing his peers may have contributed to his confidence with this new genre.

The rationale behind taking different approaches to deconstruction is supported by Honig's (2007) observation that teachers 'need well-honed skills for tuning into the level of linguistic complexity in each child's oral language' so they can provide appropriate support and direction to ensure each child's chances 'not only for school learning success, but for ability to flourish in negotiations in peer play, friendship patterns, multicultural understandings and team activities' (p. 611). Further, it demonstrates the variation of support and explicit teaching required as the children immersed themselves in this new genre.

What is interesting about these differing approaches is the ways the children interpreted the nature of digital stories. In selecting images, Campbell demonstrated an understanding of the purpose of the task as he described the significance of each activity he had chosen. However, his repeated use of the introductory statement, '*Hi, my name's Campbell'* suggests he views his text as a series of images and annotations rather than a single cohesive story.

For Lili, the nature of the text as a story connected well with her propensity for telling stories about herself. The deconstruction of similar individual parts of a number of stories rather than a single story appeared to support her construction of a narrative. She was easily able to identify the types of images she would need and, although she struggled with the oral construction of the annotations, evident in her final product is an effort to build the topic throughout the story. Both Lili and Campbell appeared empowered as creators of texts beyond the immediate audience of their preschool setting as their digital stories afforded creative expression visually and verbally (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2010; Valkanova & Watts, 2007).

- *Sense of audience*

All children in the project had visited their primary schools and met their Kindergarten teachers as part of their transition to school. It was explained to each child that the viewers or audience for these texts were their Kindergarten teachers. The question, '*What would my teacher like to know about me?'* was used with the children as they considered the ways the images they would capture and the stories they would share could help them to achieve their goals (Meadows, 2003b). Initial stories shared by Lili and Campbell in the playground occurred spontaneously and somewhat casually as they moved from one place to the next describing their reasons for choosing that activity. However, these changed somewhat when they came to record the narrations. The technology brought a change of dynamic to the task. Two distinct movements emerged within the task: a relaxed and informal photo gathering session and a more formal voice recording session.

The purpose of the task moved from talk as a process to talk as a performance (Jones, 1996). The children were encouraged to mentally rehearse their annotations, to consider what their teacher needed to know and to tell their story to the teacher in a strong and clear voice. The task allowed the children to make connections between their deep understanding of their preschool setting and the lesser known context of the primary school (McNaughton, 2001). Choosing the content and topic of the narrations was observed to provide Campbell with occasion to make strong connections between his home and school experiences. For Lili, it allowed her the space and time to construct oral text that the busy classroom environment may not have been equipped to accommodate.

- *Sense of self*

All 27 children were offered the camera so they could choose and capture the photographs themselves. However, all elected to place themselves in the image and have the researcher (or in some cases, a friend) take the photograph. Lili and Campbell provide evidence of this with their appearance in each photograph. It appeared important to the child that they were physically part of the image and actively part of the activity they were capturing. The sense of ownership of *their* images and *their* story was evident (Banaszewski, 2002).

This sense of self was further evident in Campbell's story as he repeatedly introduced himself and made connections beyond the school environment to his home life. For Lili, her sense of self was

revealed as she shared that it had been her birthday and through her acknowledgement of important relationships with friends at preschool.

- *Ability to connect image with oral annotation*

It is a common task following the construction of written text for children to be asked to illustrate with hand drawn images. Whilst the children in this project had talked about the possibilities for annotating an image as it was captured, the annotations required them to start with an image and to explicate its meaning through oral text. This new perspective on matching image and story challenged Campbell and Lili in different ways. Throughout Campbell's oral text, annotations initially related to the image soon shifted in focus to experiences at home. For example, in one image, he talks initially about the sandpit (in the playground), then his sandpit at home and then the pumpkins growing in his garden. The result is something of a mismatch between the oral and visual texts as the 'story' unfolds.

Lili's efforts to connect her images with oral annotations produced different results. As Lili constructed the oral text to accompany the visual, she appeared to struggle to remain talking about the focus of the image, instead shifting to stories about herself or her friends. For example, when annotating an image of herself on the climbing equipment, Lili shared, *'I'm Lili. And I can climb on things. And I'm four. And I had my birthday'*.

These findings are interesting in light of observations about successful transitions to school (Honig, 2007; McNaughton, 2001) and the connection between oral language development and literacy success (Hill, 2006; Wilde & Sage, 2007). They provide further weight to Cairney's (2009) recommendations that children engage in regular language interactions, have opportunities to be creative and share new media.

- *Language differences and inconsistencies*

Both Lili and Campbell begin their story by introducing themselves. They identify their name and their age with a short annotation about themselves (Campbell – *"…I'm tall";* Lili – *"I'm going to big school"*).

Campbell and Lili's introductions for each image varied. Lili used positive language to introduce her interactions within the learning environment, using phrases such as "I can", "I love", "I like". Campbell provided one instance of emotive language in his introduction of image "*I love soccer".* Instead, he chose descriptive language. For example, *"there's a blue-tongue lizard in, um, there"* and *"… this is Australia".*

Lili and Campbell's vocabulary choices demonstrate their strong sense of self and their ability to 'tell' their story (Meadows, 2003b; Dockett & Perry, 2001). Both repeatedly used "I" as they discussed their connection to the image. For example, Lili recorded *"I can play on the bikes … I can share with my friends"*. Campbell also used "I" to describe, however also demonstrated a sense of community with his inclusion of "we" as he talked about interactions between himself and his peers, for example, when

talking about the yabbie tank he says *"we always … feed the yabbie … we always look at it"*. Both children repeated personal information throughout their stories. For Campbell, it was the consistent introduction, *"Hi, my name is Campbell"*, while Lili repeated her age *"and I'm four",* then later *"and I'm four, and I had my birthday"*.

Both Lili and Campbell repeatedly used "and" to build their description. For example both children selected to photograph and talk about the compost bins located within the centre. Lili described, *"um, um, well … it's smelly bread and sometimes … umm … well, it's smelly bread and, and there's worms!".* Campbell described, *"and … sometimes we feed the bugs something and they make juice and we have a look at them and we have a look at all of them and there's some bug worms underneath".* Through these examples evidence is provided of the children's early stages and ongoing development of communicative language (Wilde & Sage, 2007) as they worked to include additional information for their audience.

Recommendations

Jones (1996) observes the challenges in finding opportunities to observe children's talk in comparison with the convenience of written texts. Teachers can capitalise on the more permanent nature of digital stories by taking opportunities to observe the construction of oral language, to revisit sections of the text throughout an analysis and to plan learning experiences based on their findings.

Planned opportunities for very young children to 'become involved in meaningful communication' (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p. 14) are empowering as the burdens and constraints of constructing print based texts are removed in favour of oral construction (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2007). Teachers can support children to consider the ways talk can be used in meeting their needs and in being 'heard' beyond their immediate setting.

Finally, digital stories provide opportunity for children to be creators of text, to be authors, to share what they have to say. This ability for self expression at an early age provides a strong basis upon which to develop the problem solvers, creative thinkers and successful communicators required for successful communities into the future.

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