



The Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities

2nd edition
April 2018



Erasmus+

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Published by: European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, The Netherlands

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Suggested citation

Author(s) (2018) Title of paper. In G. Ubachs; L. Konings (Eds.) The Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities. (pp. Pages). Maastricht, NL: EADTU. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/envisioning-report>

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This research is conducted as part of the EMPOWER programme. EMPOWER is supported by the European Commission, DG EAC, under the Erasmus+ Programme. The European Commission supports for the production of this publication and does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

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Transmedia Storytelling as a Framework for Effective Blended Learning Design

Innovative impact

This article discusses the use of *Transmedia Storytelling* in blended learning, based on recent research and the need for an effective learning design. The interest in digital storytelling for educational purposes has increased over the last few years, with researchers also identifying key pedagogical features of new media that make these inherently powerful learning tools.

Stories may have high impact in the development of resources for blended learning, and could well replace some forms of traditional teaching (such as expository lectures) but more likely they will remain just an alternative to other more conventional education methods.

The trend towards learner centred strategies and collaborative learning shows the way to learning designs that should incorporate factors of knowledge construction (predominantly in group activities), authentic learning, and personalized learning experience, which merges agreeably with the integration of other factors such as games, digital storytelling, science inquiry, and technologies that are able to engage "Millennial" students.

Introduction

Transmedia Storytelling is a process of "crafting stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, in which each piece interacts with others to deepen the whole - but is capable of standing on its own - giving the audience the choice as to how deep into the experience they go" (Weaver, 2013, p. 8). In a nutshell, Weaver compares the transmedia approach to storytelling to the creation of a handshake. The audience has the chance to return the handshake by consuming one piece and then deciding if they want to continue the conversation by seeing what else is in a given storyworld.

Transmedia Storytelling is also "a strategic process where the scale and scope are a whole lot more than the sum of all its parts" (Kalogeris, 2014, p. 177). At its core, a transmedia project relies on processes of leveraging media platforms to deliver a story and create an interactive experience. For Raybourn (2014, p. 475), transmedia storytelling design entails the development of character (interaction and personas), story (narrative and scenarios), worldbuilding (place), and audience (participation and emergent culture). In addition to these elements, in the case of a transmedia learning experience, it is also necessary to ground a learning framework. Taking into account the goals of a blended learning project, the framework of a specific storyworld must support the construction of knowledge via manipulation of the digital resources scattered through the platforms and integrate interaction triggers that can ultimately lead to an authentic learning experience.

Stories and learning

Stories are mystifying and forge emotional connections. Fiction, in particular, stimulates empathy with characters that seem real. As communication tools, they provide understanding and entertainment. Independent of the medium - books, web series, comic books, films or games, stories engage audience members in a narrative experience that becomes a unique enterprise that differs from individual to individual.

The internet has given rise to a new form of narrative "one that's told through many media at once in a way that's non-linear, that's participatory and often game-like, and that's designed above all to be immersive" (Rose, 2011, p. 3). Stories are universal nevertheless, the way they are told changes with the medium through which they emerge. As participatory media proliferate, storytelling does too. In this context, transmedia storytelling emerges as a mean of creation and expression of the "Millennial generation", a definition introduced

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Rose, F. (2011). *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and*

by Howe and Strauss (2000, p. 4).

As passive viewers become active users and participants, transmedia provides a set of tools and techniques that can reach and engage young audiences, often through multiple interfaces, platforms and devices. Gomez (2014) refers to the "Millennials" as the most published and social generation in the history of humanity. He argues they are also the "Transmedia Generation" since they can take different parts of a story, delivered across different platforms and assemble a whole that suits the level with which they want to engage with the material.

The exploration of the educational uses of transmedia practices has become a prevalent topic of discussion in recent years. From an educational point of view, transmedia learning environments allow to shift the balance of agency as students "become hunters and gatherers pulling together information from multiple sources to form a new synthesis" to become "active publishers of knowledge" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 46). They also allow to "broaden the mix of representational modes in which students express their knowledge and to build collaborative knowledge cultures" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 84).

Learning resources

The learning framework we propose takes into account the following set of questions to assess the appropriateness of a narrative work for an educational setting, in this case, in reference to an e-module (Kalogeras, 2014, p. 178):

1. Can the story be integrated into an existing curriculum?
2. Is the story engaging, and can it help make learning more effective?
3. Does the story contain subject matter that is relevant to the module?
4. Do the hyperlinks found in the story provide valuable information in keeping with learning objectives and outcomes?
5. Can additional learning extensions be created by subject-matter experts/producers?
6. Can the students create stories extensions via digital stories to provide educational value?

Drawing from the multi-literacy training approach proposed by Kurek and Hauck (2014, p. 119), the students' interactions may be scaffolded around the following parameters: reception, participation, and contribution. This method "attempts to address learner literacy needs on various levels. Similarly to what is happening in a language classroom, the learner is guided from observation of the desired acts, through their interpretation to the final performance, with the teacher gradually withdrawing support" (Kurek & Hauck, 2014, p. 126).

In a specific project the learning sequence: reception, participation,

the Way We Tell Stories. New York: W.W. Norton.

Weaver, T. (2013). *Comics for Film, Games, and Animation: Using Comics to Construct Your Transmedia Storyworld*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press.

and contribution, implies selecting platforms that would allow for the progression from reception to contribution. Platforms that would on one hand provide learning inputs (e.g. YouTube, iTunes U) and, on the other, trigger the creation of learning outputs and engage students into taking an active role (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). The different gateways to a storyworld are set forth via a common interface - a website, the hub of the storyworld. The navigation across different platforms allows for a cumulative or complementary exploration of the story elements, linear or non-linear. Participants can determine their level and form of immersion in the storyworld.

Conclusion

Looking forward, we argue that traditional pedagogy has to be reformulated, not just accommodating transmedia storytelling and the latest technology for blended learning but also enabling rich social interaction, enhancing group work and communication within educational settings. We would define learning today as a multidimensional construct of learning skills and cognitive learning results, for instance, including procedural, normative and strategic knowledge, and attitude. Learning is, from this perspective, about building up knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes that together, form an identity as someone who is a capable consumer, and perhaps even producer of scientific knowledge. Some may also speculate that this "identity-level" is a good way for educators to think about transfer. Perhaps if students experience the development of identities as competent performers in science, acquiring knowledge, skills, and beliefs congruent with those valued by various scientific communities, they will take on these practices outside of formal school contexts. Finally, we concede that a lot has still to be done, but we contend that social networking, digital storytelling, gamification, and other similar strategies, are all crucial to the future of open and distance learning.