Spinning Yarns Around the Digital Fire: Storytelling and Dialogue Among Youth on the Internet

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This article explores the importance of dialogue, storytelling and collaboration in children’s learning, followed by examples from message boards, webblogs, and instant messaging software (IM) that support learning through storytelling. Children’s verbal and iconic literacy, as well as digital fluency is investigated along with peer collaboration and empowering children’s voices through Internet technologies.

Storytelling and dialogue are a part of every child’s life. From bedtime chronicles exploring the misadventures of fantastical creatures to the beginning mumblings of a toddler trying to explain his/her day, storytelling introduces children to the initial stages of communication and literacy, as well as a bridge between the physical world and an imaginative one (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999, pp. 105-108).

Stories help children and adults to share experiences and feelings in an engaging and entertaining way (Denning, 2001, p. xv). As Denning explained: “Stories are immediate and unique. Storytelling brings people together in a common perspective, and stretches everyone’s capacity to empathize with others and share experience” (p. xviii). The advantages of this type of narrative permeate our culture, creating social practices and human relations that help constitute reality (Carey, 1989, p. 86), yet its role in the education and learning process of our children is especially important.

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Freire’s (1993) notions of “dialogue” in education insist on breaking the “contradiction” of the teacher-student relationship (p. 72). In his “banking” concept of education, merely allowing students to “receive, file, and store deposits” (p. 72) rather than engaging them in ways where they can define their own problems and solutions, encourages “passivity of the oppressed” (p. 95). For Freire, dialogue remains the catalyst in promoting educators and students to cooperate in ways that transform the world (p. 167).

One of the needs addressed by constructivist perspectives in learning regards teaching students how to “work together to solve problems through group-based, cooperative learning activities” (Roblyer & Edwards, 1997, p. 51). Collaborative and group-based activities can promote prosocial behavior, or “positive social interaction skills such as cooperation, sharing, kindness, helping, showing affection, and verbalizing feelings (Calvert, 1999, p. 209).

This increasing awareness of the importance of communities in learning environments includes ways to use computers and technology in order to encourage collaboration (Kafai & Resnick, 1996, p. 6). In what ways can digital technologies (in particular the Internet) add dimension to dialogue, storytelling, or collaboration?

This article hypothesizes that online forums and virtual communities, including message boards, webblogs and instant messaging software (IM) allow children important spaces to share ideas and feelings, discuss issues and projects, ask and answer each other’s questions, and promote a prosocial spirit.

To validate this hypothesis, this article will explore the importance of dialogue, storytelling, and collaboration in children’s learning, followed by examples of digital technologies that support them. First, it will look at early literacy and digital fluency. Next, it will investigate peer collaboration and prosocial behavior. Third, it will deal with the importance of empowering children’s voices. Finally it will demonstrate examples of message boards, webblogs and IM’s that sustain the previous concepts.

FROM EARLY LITERACY TO DIGITAL FLUENCY

Storytelling provides a way for children to exercise imagination, language style, and the production of social roles (Cassell & Ryokai, 2001, p. 204). Children’s language and independent reading skills grow as a result of the practice of telling stories (Bransford et al., 1999, p. 105). By the time a
child is three or four, she/he becomes quite a teller of tales. She/he can convey many different types of stories such as autobiographical accounts, retelling fiction and recalling previously heard tales (Bransford et al., p. 108). “Children like to listen to and retell personal experiences. These reminiscences are stepping stones to more mature narratives. As they get older, children increase their levels of participation by adding elements to the story and taking on greater pieces of the authorial responsibility” (Bransford et al., p. 108).

Children develop a verbal literacy, in the form of reading and writing text, even before entering school (Zero to Three, 2003). They also develop iconic or visual literacy by viewing and interpreting images and symbols, or by using human-computer interfaces (Subrahmanyam, Kraut, & Gross, 2000). Yet, technology has produced a third type of literacy, sometimes referred to as digital fluency.

Digital fluency develops as children (and end-users in general) become comfortable and natural with using computers and other digital technologies. As Resnick (2002) suggested, “When you learn to read and write, you are in a better position to learn many other things. So, too, with digital fluency. In the years ahead, digital fluency will become a prerequisite for obtaining jobs, participating meaningfully in society, and learning throughout a lifetime” (Resnick, p. 33). Cavallo (2000) of M.I.T.’s Future of Learning group added:

The idea of building technological fluency draws on the image of being fluent in a language. When one is fluent in a natural language, one can think, express, communicate, imagine and create with that language. In the same way, we like to develop fluency through the construction of, and with technology as a means of, personal and group expression. We try to develop fluency with technology in order to help people become more eloquent and effective in their expression. Just as fluency changes the focus to a more holistic use of natural language, this also changes the focus of learning with technology (Cavallo, p. 771).

COLLABORATIONS AND CLUBHOUSES

Peer relations matter to children (Bullock, 1998). But this does not mean that relationships or collaborations occur naturally. The logistics of a school day, for instance, or even the physical spaces of classrooms can serve
to constrain students from identifying with each other (Evard, 1996, p. 225). As Freire (1993) suggested, “the more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided” (Freire, p. 142). In other words, when the teacher does all the talking, and the students all the listening, it creates a lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge (Freire, pp. 72-73). Effective group learning, however, promotes prosocial behavior and positive group functioning (Calvert, 1999, p. 230). A collaborative style of learning can also generate “shared responsibility,” a “sense of ownership” and “negotiated interactions,” all of which are facets of prosocial behavior (p. 230).

One example of this is the Computer Clubhouse, an initiative organized by The Computer Museum and the M.I.T. Media Lab. The Computer Clubhouses are “learning centers” placed in economically-disadvantaged areas in Boston, providing a physical venue for children to express themselves with digital technologies. Rather than teach a few technical classes, children become designers and creators of their own software, web pages, graphic arts, multimedia or digital music (Resnick & Rusk, 1996). Individuals were not only becoming naturally adept with computers and software, they were also collaborating with each other. They would ask and answer questions, help each other to understand technology or complete projects. Older members would become consultants and help new members, and new social roles and respect were established (Resnick, 2002, pp. 34-35).

Evard (1996) remarked, “Sharing a creation can result not only in its refinement, but also in the learner obtaining a deeper understanding of other people’s perspectives on the object and on the ideas to which it is related” (p. 224).

**EMPOWERING CHILDREN’S VOICES**

Children develop a sense of accomplishment and empowerment when they can create and control the objects around them (Cassell & Ryokai, 2001, p. 203). Feelings of self-efficacy, or the ability to control one’s environment, may have a direct impact on a child’s attention or motivation, and in effect control and regulate behaviors (Calvert, 1999, p. 81).

Some scholars see digital technologies as a way to enable children to have more control and navigation in their learning, mostly through direct exploration of the world around them, ways to design and express their own ideas, and ways to communicate and collaborate on a global level (Negroponte, Resnick, & Cassell, 1997).

The Junior Summit program, for instance, is an Internet-based global learning community, bringing together 3,000 children, aged 10 to 16, from
139 different countries (Cassell, 2002, p. 124). In it, children communicate across languages on international topics. They translate for each other, discuss topics, and demonstrate individual projects. A unique aspect with this project is the almost complete lack of adult participation or intervention. Children build the topics and discussions on their own, and even solve problems and conflicts by themselves (p. 139). The primary concern of the project is to enable the voices of children “whose stories have not been heard” (p. 124), recognizing adult participation might overpower children and limit their ability to find their own voice and speak out (p. 133). Even three years after the summit’s conclusion, the children continue to use the forum and keep it alive (p. 141).

The next part of this article explores message boards, instant messaging and weblogs as examples of the preceding concepts, namely: storytelling and dialogue; collaboration; expression; and empowerment.

MESSAGE BOARDS AS LEARNING TOOLS

While the message board has been around since the dawn of the Internet (in the form of Newsgroups for instance), its usefulness should not be overlooked. It’s a source of online community-building, and 84% of Internet users say they have contacted or joined online groups (Online Communities: Networks that nurture long-distance relationships and local ties, 2001).

Message boards offer a way to archive the knowledge that is shared throughout the community. This remains important for educators to be able to monitor the use and success of the storytelling arena, and for users to be able to search and find pertinent information. Message boards are used for different types of conversation, as depicted in the following screens. They can be used to ask and answer questions (Figure 1), express opinions or feelings (Figure 2), or showcase a talent or project (Figure 3).
Figure 1. Ask and answer questions

Figure 2. Express opinions or feelings
Message boards may also incorporate entertaining features. **Avatars**, for instance, are graphical icons that represent a real person in a virtual world (Webopedia, 2003). Children use avatars to reflect realistic attributes of themselves, including gender roles or pop culture representations (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, in press).

**Emoticons**, the hybrid of the words *emotion* and *icon*, are composed of punctuation characters that indicate how a message should be interpreted (Webopedia, 2003). A ; ) for instance may indicate a joke. Emoticons are often used in e-mail and message boards to convey gratitude, humor, sarcasm, or anger (Deshaye, 2003, p. 12).

Since message boards provide a threaded discussion and archive all information, and they are available anytime-anywhere a computer and Internet connection is accessible, it may be an easy tool to put into practice. Free message board applications include phpBB.com (http://www.phpbb.org), ezboard (http://www.ezboard.com), and VoyForums (http://www.voy.com).
Instant Messaging Isn’t a Fad

Instant Messaging (IM) has become one of the most popular Internet applications, fostering an online community that is unparalleled (Alves-trand, 2002). Perhaps this stems from its dyadic nature—IM users communicate in an almost synchronous, one-to-one style, and stay aware of the presence of their online community through their “buddy list” (Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000). Rather than a multi-user chat room, IM’s are direct modes to communicate in informal ways.

America Online’s AOL Instant Messenging Service (AIM) “estimates 1.6 billion AOL and AIM IM’s are sent every day” (Edwards, 2003). Similarly, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 74% of online teens use instant messaging (Key Facts: Teens Online, 2002). Many students employ e-mail and instant messaging to create virtual study groups or to collaborate with peers in school settings (Levin & Arafah, 2002, p. 11). Others use it just to keep up with friends, spending hours instant messaging with them (Edwards, 2003).
Even considering the popularity of instant messaging, in what ways can it be utilized in learning environments? Kids often refer to using IM in order to “hang out,” to chat about “anything,” or “nothing,” to send out multiple inquiries, and even to overcome shyness (Schiano et al., 2000).

Like message boards, instant messaging might promote the same types of dialogue: (a) Asking and answering questions; (b) Expressing opinions or feelings; and (c) showcasing talents, links, or projects. However, unlike message boards that archive knowledge, instant messages last as long as the chat window stays open.

The most popular instant messaging programs available on the Internet include **AOL Instant Messenger** (http://www.aim.com), **ICQ** (http://www.icq.com), **Yahoo Messenger** (http://messenger.yahoo.com), and **MSN Messenger** (http://messenger.msn.com).

### Blogs and Bloggers

Weblogs, or *blogs* for short, are defined as “publicly-accessible personal journals” (Webo-pedia, 2003). These online journals or diaries offer unique features for users: 1) They are stored in public spaces that can be updated from anywhere; and 2) They often offer ways to publish online without knowing HTML or other programming code (Carl, 2003, p. 21). Because blogs allow such a convenient public space, some consider it to be one of the most important applications on the Internet (Carl, 2003, p. 94).

**Blogcount** (http://dijest.com/bc), a web site dedicated to finding how many blogs and bloggers are out there, suggest there are 2.4 - 2.9 million active weblogs (“active” means they have been updated in the last eight weeks) as of June 2003 (Greenspan, 2003). While more explicit statistics on blogging is difficult to acquire due to its newness, the fact major Internet players are getting involved, such as Google.com’s acquisition of Blogger (one of the most popular blogging tools) (Munarriz, 2003), as well as AOL’s
addition of AOL Journals to its vast community (Shirpy, 2003), symbolize a market place that’s aware of a popular phenomenon.

What kinds of stories or dialogue are happening in the blogosphere? Due to its open nature, probably just about everything. For purposes of this article, blog culture demonstrate several key areas: (a) Diary or anecdotal personal reflections; (b) Commentary or critique of everything from popular culture to Hollywood movies; (c) Research and academic information; (d) News and online journalism; and (e) General storytelling. Figure 4 and 5 are examples of the type of voices found in blogs.

![Figure 4. Voice found in blogs](image)

Blogs may be an excellent opportunity for children to exercise their voices in personal, informal ways, and indirectly promote digital fluency. For educators and parents interested in utilizing blogs in learning environments, there are several popular blogs, including LiveJournal (http://www.livejournal.com), Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) and Diaryland (http://www.diaryland.com).
This chapter has explored the power of storytelling and dialogue in children’s learning, as well as some popular Internet applications in which collaboration, expression and empowerment manifest. Message boards, Instant Messaging, and Weblogs all demonstrate unique artifacts that allow children to share and discuss ideas and feelings, ask and answer each other’s questions, or showcase projects, all of which promote a prosocial attitude.

As this article demonstrates, storytelling and dialogue have always been a part of educating and entertaining our children. The use of digital technologies may actually encourage different types of literacy, including verbal and visual skills, as well as what is often referred to as digital fluency.

The examples of Internet applications serve as a recommendation for educators and parents interested in adding e-Learning in their children’s education process. Each application is already a popular part of the online

**CONCLUSION**

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**THE ROSE**

My four brothers and I went to the same neighborhood grade school, the youngest by several years. It was private, and we were fortunate with "tuition exemptions" thanks to my dad being a vet who served in the army.

After a rampage of fistfights and arrests in seventh grade I was sent to a reform school. First in the family, big controversy. I knew they were emboldened by the war, and later I did the same thing at three public schools, finally dropped out of high school, and never gave the incident much thought.

Years later us kids were sorting through Mom’s things after she died. The big discovery was this pile of cheap spiral notepads. Some of them had newspaper articles, and these little writings that I thought I’d written, which didn’t turn out to be much, but which somehow interest me now.

**Figure 5.** Another voice found in blogs
community—utilizing them in learning environments seem like a natural thing to do in order to bridge what some students believe is a significant disconnect between how they use the Internet for school and how they use it at school (Levin & Arafeh, 2002, p. iv).

Storytelling and dialogue are not new ideas, but implicit in all children’s growth. Its uses in education, however, may be another way to harness the power of technology with learning. By focusing on ways to enhance the classroom through digital technologies, we begin to spin yarns around a fire that will always burn bright.

Works Cited


*References are in the style of the original printing in First Monday, 9(1).