# Learning through storytelling:
# from *Once upon a time* to Digital Storytelling
## L'apprendimento attraverso la narrazione:
## dal *Once upon a time* al Digital Storytelling

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**ABSTRACT**
The storytelling is an interesting process as it is both a tool in the cognitive re-elaboration of content and values and an instrument for socially transmitting, sharing and re-writing knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the effectiveness of *Digital Storytelling* as a learning activity.

Lo storytelling rappresenta un processo interessante sia dal punto di vista di strumento di rielaborazione cognitiva dei contenuti e valori sia come meccanismo per trasmettere socialmente la conoscenza, condividerla e riscriverla insieme. Questo saggio intende presentare l'efficacia del dispositivo del *Digital Storytelling* inserito anche come attività di apprendimento.

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## 1. The Art of Storytelling

Since ancient times, the transition from one generation to the next has been characterized by storytelling as a way of transmitting one's personal life stories. We are all so deeply involved in narrating that, even today, we tell and listen to stories every moment of the day. Therefore, we can affirm that *storytelling* permeates the lives of us all. There are different narrative forms that belong to both the past and present: myths, legends, sagas, and traditions teach us that narration is the art of "making known". Bruner (1990, 1996) is the scholar who more than anyone else has raised the issue of defining the fundamental features of narrative text. First, he places emphasis on *referential opacity*: it is not necessary for the listener to frantically search for the truth in the story; what matters is that the story is realistic. His analysis seeks the *principle of intentionality:* the characters of the story are always introduced to the public in their psychological dimension so that their moods, ideas and intentions are made clear and the narrative is more easily understood through the decoding of the mental states of others. Another element that exists in narrative, according to Bruner, is the breaking of the canonical determined by the presence of unexpected events and the effort to regain original balance. The other issues on which the scholar focuses refer to two distinct dimensions: *the dimension of action and that of consciousness.* The former is related to what is happening and whom it happens to, while the latter refers to what the characters and the narrator think, feel and sense on an emotional level. «Through narrative as a privileged context for data and information re-elaboration it is possible to activate processes of construction of new knowledge and acquisition. This would activate the ability to link inner states with external reality, re-connect past and present with a projection into the future, and lastly, make possible the perception of individuals as subjects equipped with goals, values, and ties» (Petrucco, De Rossi, 2009, p. 25).

Thus we can affirm that storytelling is an interesting process as it is both a tool in the cognitive re-elaboration of content and values and an instrument for socially transmitting, sharing and re-writing knowledge. The more intimate nature of narrative has been the subject of interest of different disciplines over time; just to name a few: philosophy, semiotics (Barthes, 1973; Greimas, 1983; Eco, 1979), and psychology—which has investigated its potential as a cognitive and mnemonic tool; on the other hand, sociology has focused on the role of stories in placing the individual experience in society (Bateson, 1979). Pedagogy has, instead, interpreted storytelling as a fundamental tool in the process of reflection to the point that various narrative methodologies have been experimented over the years in both children's educational processes and in lifelong learning processes. The aspect that has most captured the attention of scholars in the field of education is the emotion-narrative binomial. To narrate with emotion means to achieve intensity and immediacy, reaching the balance necessary to enable us to narrate effective and passionate life stories because we know our own emotions and the emotions of others. Over the past decades, the rapid development of media has led to a profound transformation in the way narrative content is exposed, whether it is political, social, religious, or educational in nature. In education in general and in teaching in particular, storytelling has always played an important part, even though at times this strategy is implemented in an unconscious way precisely because it is implied in communication to the point of being imperceptible. We need only think of those well prepared and effective teachers who have always been skilled storytellers. The difference today is that,

through the use of media, stories become multi-medial and *cross-medial*, and narrative content is built and transmitted in a completely new way; just think of the phenomena of sharing stories on blogs and videos on YouTube. This new form of communication is called digital storytelling, and it represents an artifact that modifies stories by inserting them in a setting made of sounds and images as well as words. These kinds of stories can generate involvement and attention, which are important elements that help users to acquire a significant and highly context-bound understanding of the text.

## 2. The Role of Narratives in Learning Processes

Storytelling is a way to develop creativity and improve the learning process. In fact, it is known that social interactions play a decisive role in the structure of narrative thinking because social life plays a strategic role in developing thoughts, intelligence and emotions, and social exchange can be considered a form of narrative. A story is a collage of events, which are prearranged and organized over time, that bring to mind specific cause-effect relationships: an initial negative situation leads the hero of the story to abandon his home and do things that will somehow overturn the initial situation (Propp, 1966). Very often what prevails, especially in fairy tales, is the unreal element of narrated events so that the concept of fiction is based on the assumption that superficial events in the story are not relevant, while cause-effect relationships maintain their priority. «We can thus state that narrating does not consist simply in juxtaposing events but also in building whole meanings from distinct events. The ability to narrate, as well as the corresponding ability to follow a story, requires the ability to define a layout from a succession of events» (Ricoeur, 1981). Therefore, in a learning environment, narratives are considered teaching tools precisely because they allow us to *delineate configurations from a simple succession of elements*; furthermore they activate the process of construction of meaning in the individual who is creating or simply benefitting from the narrative. For these reasons, the intrinsic features of narrative can help aid teaching:

– It is a process which allows individuals to be connected with each other through the use of digital technology;
– It is fully in line with the constructivist model because it is a communication channel for experiences and a useful tool for reflection and building interpretive meanings of reality;
– It effectively combines contextualized and heuristic teaching of *I-learning* (Petrucco, De Rossi, 2009).

Studies conducted over the years have shown that the process of teaching/learning is more effective if the narratives used are based on concrete contexts taken from outside the educational environment and relating to the learners' social life. In this regard, an interesting proposal hypothesizes a *story-centered curriculum* (Schank, 2007) to be carried out in everyday teaching across all disciplines. Therefore, good "stories" can be told in school by using accounts with characters one can relate to and by encouraging learning that involves emotions and references to real life.

## 3. Towards Digital Storytelling

*Digital storytelling* spread with the experiments carried out in the 90s by the "Center for Digital Storytelling" founded in San Francisco by Joe lambert and Dana Atchley. Initially, its mission was to recreate social and emotional bonds of communities that were dispersed, fragmented and isolated in their perception of their own culture and lacked a common sense of belonging: «the center has helped many people use digital tools to tell their life stories demonstrating that the same technology that had created distance and fragmentation could be used in a new way to reconnect, create new ties, and participate in the community» (Petrucco, De Rossi, 2009, p. 50). Within a few years, it became an important meeting place where artists, educators and media professionals were utilizing digital storytelling on different levels: to create communities and socialize, as a dialogue between different generations, for reflective practices, art and teaching and, finally, for all learning contexts. It is a multi-medial process described « as a collective intelligence that attempts to codify itself in dynamic and collaborative shapes through tools that allow to share and store discourse, practices, and signs» (Petrucco, De Rossi, 2009). In designing a DST it is necessary to pull two elements close together, the emotional dimension and the cognitive one, in the effort to build effective communication. In this regard, the theory of *Dual Coding* (Paivio, 1986) is significant. According to the theory, our brain stores information in a separate but communicating manner; if we stimulate both coding channels, we understand more effectively and we recall content with greater ease. According to the author, images are easier to remember because they activate analogue coding; verbal coding can develop alongside analogue coding if the individual has already stored the corresponding verbal label, and, in this case, the narrative element undergoes dual coding. Similarly, verbal stimuli with a high imagery value determine dual coding, both verbal and visual; the latter is related to the image associated with the verbal stimulus; on the other hand, words with a low imagery value can make use of verbal coding only, not visual. According to Paivio, this dual coding makes memorizing concrete words easier and increases mnemic performance thanks to the use of mental images. Similarly, Kress affirms that the graphic representation of stories through images serves to clarify reality differently from traditional texts, fostering the process of constructing and understanding of reality that surrounds us. Didi-Huberman writes: «images do not stimulate only sight. They stimulate knowledge, memory, desire, and their ability to intensify as well. It's like they involve the totality of the individual, sensorial, mental, and social» (Didi-Huberman, 2006, p. 140). Digital storytelling has metacognitive and meaning generating potential as it enables reflection and a subjective interpretation of reality that is influenced by the individual's personal value system. Man's ability to narrate stems from the need to remember events and experiences. Lambert argues that digital storytelling fits into this context and functions as a support to our minds by expanding our capacity to reconstruct memory through the interpretation of images, video, audio and other technological support.

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