

# Digital Storytelling Closes the Gap between Schools and Immigrant Parents

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## Keywords

*Digital storytelling, English language learners, parent outreach.*



*"A picture shows me at a glance what it takes dozens of pages of a book to expound"* Ivan Turgenev, the Russian writer

## Abstract

*When it comes to establishing regular communication with immigrant parents, the language barrier seems to be an insurmountable problem. In this paper the author discusses how images, sounds, and voice-overs can become effective mediators for launching two-way communication between teachers and immigrant parents. Digital Storytelling is a technology-based method that can be utilized not only to convey messages, but also to teach literacy skills to English Language learners.*

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## Rationale

After a brief conversation with a Hispanic father about his first grade son’s frequent absences, I concluded that he was unaware of how important regular attendance was for his child’s academic success. This father was not an isolated case. Over and over I have heard the teachers’ concerned voices lamenting over the fact that it was very hard, if not impossible, to reach out to their immigrant parents. I assumed that a lack of communication had been going on undetected since the first wave of registered immigrant students hit the area back in 1994. Certainly, it would be in the district’s best interest if the communication gap could be addressed in a way that aligns with curriculum goals and is cost-effective.

In my district, the number of immigrant families exceeds the number of identified English Language Learners (ELLs) in school. I asked a group of six teachers who have had ELLs in their classes over the past years to take a brief survey. Their answers confirmed that communication problems exist. These problems may keep immigrant parents from involving their children in ESL programs.

A review of the professional literature gave me more reason to address the issue. Hill & Flynn (2006) described immigrant parents’ disadvantageous position in relation to school personnel, stating that “Parents of recent immigrants may be unfamiliar with the U.S. education system. They may not know their rights, they may not understand what is expected of them, and they may not be familiar with academic concepts such as ‘standards-based education’” (p. 111). *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) identifies parents as one of the primary stakeholders in the educational enterprise. Under this act, school districts and schools must involve parents of ELLs in decision-making regarding their children’s education. Moreover, information needs to be communicated in a language that parents can understand. As was emphasized by Epstein (2004), schools must “help parents understand state standards and assessments and provide materials to help parents assist children’s achievement at home” (p.14).

My district's main communication tool is a web site. Quarterly newsletters, aiming to reach out to all, parents and the community at large, are posted on the site. The newsletters contain descriptions of exciting classroom activities and list district, school, teacher, and student achievements. Along with the Progress Book link, a web-based grade book for attendance, lesson plans, assignments, and grade cards are placed on the district's [home page](#). Various forms are accessible and can be downloaded from there. None of the newsletters or forms is provided in any language other than English.

It is clear that my district has not developed practical tools that will help to establish good communication with our immigrant parents. This problem prompted me to investigate our current practices and to search for better ones. Based on what I learned from the teachers I surveyed, any tool needed to be simple to use, written in plain English, and delivered in a personalized way.

Technological advances hold promise as a way to close the communication gap. Digital Storytelling (DST) has been reported to be not only an efficient communication tool, but also an exciting learning experience for participants. "For the first time in my teaching career, not one student wrinkled a brow and declared, 'I don't have anything to write about!'" (Banaszewski, 2002, p.1). However, considering the scarcity of research findings about DST implementation in educational settings, further investigation is needed.

In my research, four first grade ELLs developed digital stories about their school lives to share with their parents. Once I started developing the DST plan in more detail, I realized that I needed to ensure its educational purpose as well. As the production was intended to be a part of my regular English language instructional time, generating a reasonable teaching plan became essential. Thus, to ensure my students' learning engagement before they got their hands-on "wonderfully powerful and distracting technology" (Ohler, 2008, p.6), I created a set of activities ranging from the pre-production stage to the final product. As the project developed I was becoming more and more aware that DST is actually a powerful teaching tool, too. Although the role of DST as an instructional means was not an intention of this research, my teaching instincts could not miss such a great opportunity to note what I was discovering. I recorded my observations in my personal journal, looking closely into different stages of DST development and noting how DST impacted student learning.

## Context

The history of my professional growth includes sixteen years of teaching Russian language and literature K-12, as well as four years of teaching at the undergraduate level back in former Yugoslavia. Besides teaching, I spent some time working as a journalist and translator. I joined the ESL crowd of educators soon upon coming to the US eleven years ago. I share the responsibility of instructing between sixty and seventy, K-12 students scattered across the district, with one ESL teacher. The pull-out program arrangement lets us serve our ELLs in one-on-one or a small group instructional setting. Depending on the number of students, our ESL teaching workload changes from year to year. During the 2008-2009 school year, I divided my time between the elementary (K-2) and the middle school. There were four first grade students participating in my Digital Storytelling project: three Somali girls and a Chinese boy. All four students were born in the U.S. and could handle most conversation in and out of their classrooms. However, their language competency was far behind native speakers and was insufficient to help them meet grade level academic requirements.

Most of the time, our digital story production was conducted in a one-on-one type of instructional setting. The pull out type of service has been a district wide adopted practice since 1997, requiring ESL teachers to use our short instructional time efficiently. For this project, students would be pulled out of their regular classes three times a week for approximately 30-40 minutes. We started taking our first video shoots in February and were done with the project in the middle of April. Three students used *Windows Movie Maker* while the fourth, who replaced a boy who withdrew in the middle of the project, created her movie in *Photo Story 3*.

All four students had some experience with computers as they occasionally visited the computer lab with their regular teachers to do some on-line reading or to play games. All of them reported that they have computers at home; however, from their descriptions, their home computers were either outdated or not working properly.

## Grounding my Work in the Professional Literature

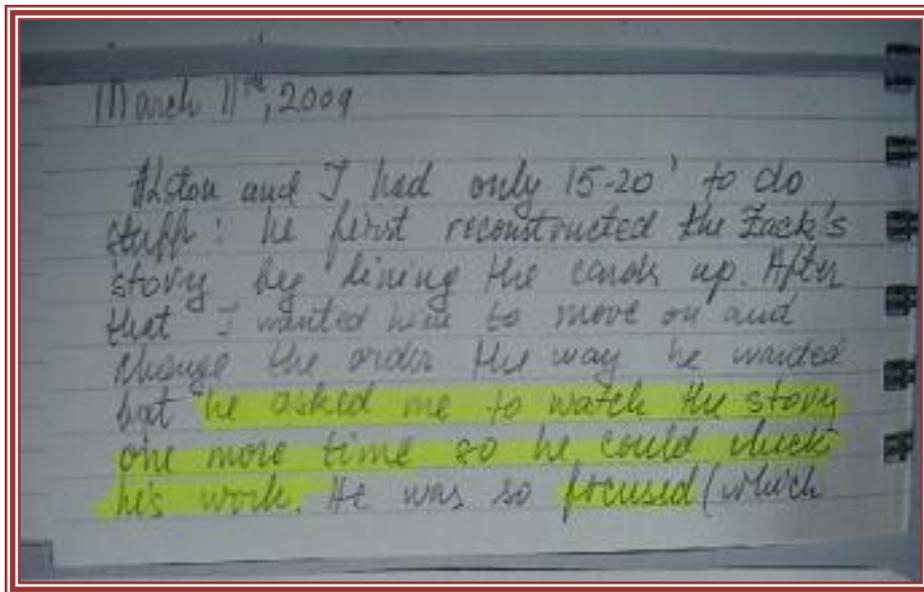
### *The Power of Stories*

Stories are the oldest form of communication among humans, and, as Lenox (2000) noted, they are "...a powerful tool to promote an understanding of self and others" (p. 97). Ohler (2008) sees the story as a necessity in our modern world. "As each of us struggles to make sense out of the

cacophony of information that bombards us, the need to construct personal, clarifying narrative that is connected to the world we live in becomes critical” (p.8).

Erstad & Silseth (2008), who studied the cultural complexities in digital storytelling among Norwegian youth, found that schools are lagging behind in creative use of technology compared to the home setting. They reported that “Digital storytelling might represent a new way of integrating these contexts and might bypass a categorical division between formal and informal paths of learning” (p.229).

Meadows (2003), who with a group of journalists from Wales conducted research on the impact of DST on the community, concluded that Digital Storytelling “raises community self-esteem” (p.193) and observed that TV as a passive media is being replaced with the two-way mode of active communication feasible in DST.



*An excerpt from my journal*

## Method

I began my investigation by validating the assumption that a communication gap existed between schools and immigrant parents. Six teachers (four middle and two elementary) took a twelve-question survey that I created in order to get first-hand information about the nature, frequency, and quality of their communication with immigrant parents. All six teachers were experienced with ELLs, having had four or five of them in their classes over the past several years.

Five teachers reported that they seldom if ever met a parent with an interpreter present, emphasizing the notion that the language barrier might be the main reason for scarcity of the immigrant parents' visits to school. Teachers also reported that the invitation letters and school procedures for parent-teacher conferences are too complicated for those who are new to the country. The six teachers felt strongly that immigrant parents needed to be better informed about their children's school life. They believed that parents deserve to have the curriculum explained in plain language so that they can understand it.

In a follow-up interview with one teacher, I identified one other important reason for establishing better two-way communication with immigrant parents. There are cultural differences that might affect how these parents feel about exposing their children to readings that include subjects such as violence or sexual abuse. When talking about it, she said, “I am sure

*that immigrant parents would be appalled by some material their kids read because it is culturally not acceptable, for those things to happen in their culture” (Interview, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008).*

The teachers provided me with useful information. I received clear directions to look for a communication tool that would meet the criteria teachers emphasized in their survey responses: simplicity, personal connection, and plain language. A majority of our immigrant parents are Somali. Somalis come from an area where the written language is a relatively new innovation. Therefore, there is a strong oral tradition. It was possible that a simple communication tool based more on visual than written language might be efficient for schools to use when communicating with our Somali parents. Any other immigrant who is not fluent in English would certainly benefit from such a tool as well.

Legg, Bacon, Fraser, Brown, & Kiruswa (2007) introduced digital photography as a communication tool to Maasai people in Africa who also share a rich oral tradition of storytelling. They confirmed that the members of Maasai tribe showed “remarkable adaptability at learning a new technology” (p.23). Summing up the results of their observation, the researchers stated that digital photography can “give the participants an authoritative voice...and a more solid bridge to gap the language barriers that exist between the participants and the researchers” (p.25). This report convinced me that Digital Storytelling would meet the needs of both my students and their parents.

I kept a personal journal throughout the project. Revisiting the journal later helped me detect themes. The most salient themes that emerged were *teaching and learning strategies, students’ own creative ideas, positive experiences and frustrations*, as well as *my own learning*. These themes will be discussed in greater detail in the Findings section.

**Student 1: “I understand now!...you first think and then write!”**

**Student 2: “I didn’t know there was a TV in computer!”**

**Student 1: “It was good that we found a solution to the problem.”**

**Student 3: “I learned what ‘chanting’ means.”**

**Student 4: “If I think about a problem, I find a solution to that problem...or I can ask my teacher to help me...”**

**Student 2: “If there is a problem, there is a solution, too.”**

**Student 2: “It is good to have a script because when I get nervous I look at it.”**

Along with CD and DVD versions of the DST, a follow-up survey was sent home to parents to fill out. Participating students also took a twelve-question survey. Both parent and student surveys rendered valuable insights regarding their DST experience.

**Figure 1 Selected Interview Comments**

## ***Preparing My Students for DST***

My four students and I were new to the Digital Storytelling experience. Every session during this two months' long journey needed to be planned carefully to ensure that students were not just creating fun digital stories but were also improving their literacy skills. Students also needed to be gradually introduced to the sophisticated technology they were about to start using. To facilitate the learning process and to avoid any confusion, we took small steps. I figured it would be best to get started by watching somebody else's story and thus understand what the final DS product should be like. [A \*Day in the life of Zack\*](http://t4.jordan.k12.ut.us/teacher_resources/filmfestival/2006_Films/Best_Picture.mp4) was a digital story we found on a website ([http://t4.jordan.k12.ut.us/teacher\\_resources/filmfestival/2006\\_Films/Best\\_Picture.mp4](http://t4.jordan.k12.ut.us/teacher_resources/filmfestival/2006_Films/Best_Picture.mp4)).

For some of them, this was pretty amazing experience, "I didn't know there was a TV in the computer," one student commented during an interview (Personal Journal, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

After watching Zack's digital story, students did plenty of other preparatory activities: breaking the story into eight segments, writing a one-sentence-long description of each scene on index cards, and sequencing the cards. After that, they were told to paste the cards on story-board templates, which were later put on a big piece of paper and up on the wall. Each student had a turn to re-tell the story orally to the rest of us. Students were now ready to get started with their own story production.



## ***Student Interviews***

*It was important to know the art of asking questions*

**At the Interview Desk**

At the end of each session, students would get to the interview desk where they would tell about that day's DST experience. Some highlights from our dialogue can be found in Figure 1. Overall, students were much better at giving thorough answers if the questions that I asked were specific. For example, a question such as "Why did you like doing voice-over more than typing on the library clip?" yielded a better answer than a more general inquiry such as, "How did you feel about this activity today?" I also learned to ask more specific questions during the voice-overs. It is frustrating when you ask a question and a student simply nods. Every time that happened we had to delete the narrative and start it all over again. I quickly learned to avoid, 'yes' or 'no' types of questions.

# Findings

## *Journal Themes: Teaching vs. Learning Strategies*

An article about performance literacy by Dillingham (2005) provided the backbone for my curriculum developments and served as a guide for the DST pre-production planning. Performance Literacy is reported to be great with ESL students. “By performing their own stories, students provide an opportunity for parents and community members to see them

For example, “My favorite class is \_\_\_\_\_.  
I like it because it makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.  
Sometimes I have a little \_\_\_\_\_. I don’t  
know how to \_\_\_\_\_.”, etc.

creating and performing authentic literature while conducting themselves in a professional manner” (p.72).

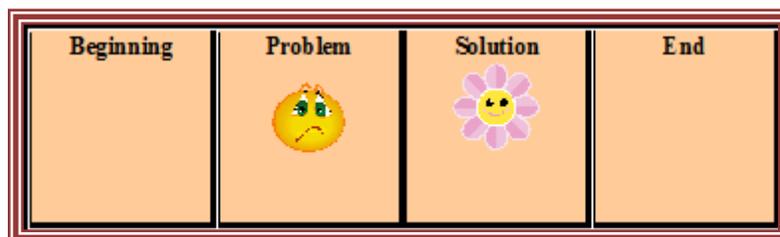
For both oral storytelling as well as for written narratives, scaffolding was critical. Pre-teaching vocabulary contributed

to more fluent production. For students who really struggled with speaking or writing in whole sentences, we used open-ended-sentence patterns as a framework (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Sentence Starters**

At certain stages of production, graphic organizers were very helpful. A spider map that I put on the board was a great tool for group brainstorming and for generating new ideas at the early stages of story production. To sort ideas out we used the [Problem/Solution Chart](#).

To identify the main elements of the story on a story map we used key words, some of which had images added, just to clarify the meaning of the new terms (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3 Basic Story Elements**

The initial purpose of the DST project was to make stories about students’ school lives in order to help parents get a better understanding and ultimately become more involved. It was challenging to organize an abundance of information and create a smooth flow without making choppy transitions. Choosing the right music alleviated rough spots in stories. Question/answer dialogues additionally made the stories flow. Without dialog, it would have been too hard for first graders to tell their stories fluently. They told me that they felt very nervous and “left alone” when they were asked to do voice-overs by themselves. Still, it was sometimes unavoidable to have them do oral narration on certain clips independently. If that was the case, we had to practice it in advance and repeat narrations many times. This practice made them very confident in telling their stories orally, even though the activity was time consuming and at some points exhausting. I kept the number of voice-overs to a minimum, due to the complexities of thinking and speaking skills required.

## ***Student Creativity***

Students readily embraced the challenge to rearrange *A Day in the life of Zack* story segments as they tackled the task of breaking it down to its components. By doing that, they got hands-on experience with the secrets of DST trade. Each of them chose to re-tell Zack's story, usually starting with the scene they felt strongly about. Overall, surprisingly for me, the pre-production turned out to be a very creative time for students. They were not under pressure to produce, but were given a chance to play with the material and intervene in it. Such a spontaneous learning approach was crucial in getting their creativity to flow once they began telling their own stories. I also realized that DST requires flexibility and openness to surprises and new ideas that need to be recognized on the spot and, if valuable, given a chance to develop. One student told me he was not sure of his colors. He created three or four slides with "The Colors of a Rainbow" song in the background.

Students were fully engaged in the learning process. They each found at least one solution to a self-identified problem, asked to re-read a piece of writing they just had produced to make sure that it was complete, and requested meanings for new words. They came up with the idea of singing songs and greeting their parents in their native languages completely on their own. Moreover, adding exclamation marks or playing with colors, transitions, and other effects turned their work into a great delight. By having to select the right sound loops for the stories, they became creators of a harmonious medley made of music, pictures, narration, and voice-overs. They did that surprisingly well. Once key vocabulary was provided on the board, students composed narratives, first orally and then in writing, with ease and joy. They later reported they felt a great satisfaction from such activities as it gave them freedom to play with the narration without feeling constricted for lack of vocabulary support.

## ***Positives and Negatives***

Naturally there were activities that kids loved more than others and one such activity was watching [\*A Day in the life of Zack\*](#), breaking it down into pieces and figuring out how it was constructed. They also enjoyed talking about their favorite things and their problems. Finding solutions made them especially proud. On the day when they were in charge of taking some pictures in their classrooms with the "Official Photographer" tags snapped on their shirts they felt very important. As was stated by Erstad & Silseth (2008), DST "might give the students an opportunity to make self-representations in the school setting" (p.229). Singing or saying a few sentences in their native language was the moment they felt that they were totally themselves and happy. Overall, students enjoyed reflecting on their school life. They gave me



some new insights about hidden issues that I was able to address later in my conversations with their classroom teachers.

There were also obstacles to overcome. My greatest frustration came from my own lack of experience with DST and with what it takes to make it a success in an educational setting. I always felt only one step ahead of the students. Capturing video footage in classrooms was also challenging. One teacher wanted to make sure she was well prepared so that she could be at her best even though I told her that the camera would close in only on the child featured in the digital story. Other teachers were more relaxed and were willing to allow me to walk in at any time during the day.

<b>Camera Safety Rules</b>
• Use <i>The Official Photographer Pass</i> to get permission to use the camera
• Don't run or move too fast with the camera in hand
• Hold onto it tightly
• Don't leave the camera on your desk
• When finished, turn it into your teacher.

Students also experienced frustration. They showed some nervousness with voice-overs probably because they thought that they were to sound like newscasters on TV. In any session, we could get through only one to three clips. Typical of computer novices, they would click impatiently and make their computers freeze up. *Windows Movie Maker* proved to be too complex for seven years olds. Given the limited amount of time we had at our disposal (30-40 minutes per session daily, three days a week), we were running against the clock all the time.

## ***My Learning***

A DST project, like any other classroom activity, can only be successful with good planning; with good pacing added to it, it becomes a joyful experience. It took a lot of my energy to figure out the right pacing. When I was in doubt, I would simply forget my ambitious plans for a session and let students lead me through activities at their own speed. That means that I had to give up on what I thought would be feasible to finish in one session. Instead, I would attentively observe my students' creative impulses and learn from them. By doing so I learned how to gauge the right amount of freedom they needed to get their ideas spurred and recognized. I was new to DST after all, and I needed the time to process new information, too, and thus learn my own lessons. Whenever I felt stuck or overwhelmed with too many things going on at the same time, I would reflect on my own actions. As has been emphasized by Forman (2002), "Experience is not the best teacher. One must reflect on experience in order to learn" (p.13). Generally, the reason for my dead-end situation was that I was trying to do too much in too short a time period. The children reacted accordingly. When under pressure, they would give flat answers at the interview desk; when relaxed, their thoughts flowed.

Dealing with such a complex task as DST production requires the vigilance in balancing out its multifaceted nature. This project gave me face-to-face experience with the technology I did not know much about before. I often felt frustrated with the loads of material I had to deal with. The

great relief came from our technology department who instructed me how to keep students' pictures, voice-overs, and narrations organized in separate folders. They also provided me with first hand solutions with any technology issue. By the time we finished the entire DST project, I was fully confident in handling a variety of technology tasks and was pretty sure I wanted to stay involved in future DST projects. Additionally, I learned to be even more cautious and aware of each and every detail involved in the process. For example, after gathering survey results from parents, I realized they did not provide answers to all the questions. I had assumed their sufficient English language proficiency based on my interviews with students, the number of years families spent in the country, and some other school forms they filled out. I can only guess that the lack of understanding made them skip few questions. I want to emphasize that those few questions were not taken into account for my final DST report.

### A Taping Script

Action	What has been done	What needs to be done	Done
<i>Entrance – building</i>			
<i>Hallways – student work</i>			
<i>Classroom structure and activities</i>			
<i>Food in Cafeteria</i>			
<i>Kids interacting</i>			
<i>Kids developing their stories</i>			

### *On Technology*

My initial plan was to have both still pictures and some video clips included in students' digital stories. Sketching out a Taping Script (as shown above) helped me stay on track and prevented me from uncontrolled shootings which could happen so easily when you have a camera in your

hands. It was so important to make the right selection of shots depending on what kind of information I wanted to include. The [Five-Phase Media Development Process](#) chart that I adapted from the *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom* by Jason Ohler (2008) helped me to organize my ideas.

### **Making my own movie: SCRIPT**

**School building:** This is my school – Indian Trail Elementary. It takes me for about \_\_\_\_\_ minutes to get from home to school every morning. Riding a bus is / isn't fun. I am sleepy and hungry in the morning. I wish I had breakfast before going to school.

### **Hallways:**

1. Our hallways are very clean. I know how to get to the library, cafeteria, \_\_\_\_\_ or to the office by myself. The teacher takes us to the art and music. We need to by quite while walking. My teacher shows us.....
2. Walking down the hallway is not boring because you can watch kid's work the teachers hung up for you to look at. Our school hallways remind me of ..... It always makes me feel happy to spot my own work and show it to others.

### **A Child's Sample Script**

I took a workshop on *Windows Movie Maker* (WMM) and got some basic understanding of how it works. The WMM manual does an excellent job of providing thorough explanations of the process. The most useful part of the manual for me was [How to Capture Parts of Video From a Tape in a DVD Camera](#).

One of the participating students withdrew from school in the middle of the DST project. Luckily, another student had been working with me on her story independent of the project. She became a member of our DST team. I decided to have her use *Photo Story 3*, a program that existed on all student computers across the district. This experience helped me to compare these two programs, *Photo Story 3* and *WMM*. It was clear that the former was a better fit to the first graders' literacy skills. Even though only still pictures can be imported into *Photo Story 3*, its simplicity eliminates unnecessary frustration which consequently lets student creativity emerge.

Dealing with technology requires multi-tasking. "For young children this means that in addition to learning to read the text, they must now learn to read *multiple sign systems*...(they) need to learn not only to read and write, but to navigate, integrate, and evaluate...as part of their early literacy learning" (Barone, Mallett, & Xu, 2004, p. 107). It was obvious throughout the DST project that manipulating written language, imagery, and audio required students to use higher level thinking skills. Doing one thing at the time and adjusting the pacing were the crucial strategies to keep things moving forward. Deciding on the audience (parents in our case) at the

very beginning of the DST process gave students control, proving Bakhtin's theory about the necessity for a teller to define his audience (cited in Nelson & Hull, 2008).

The technology specialist in my district was willing to sit by my side and help whenever I felt I was going nowhere. She was very interested in what I was doing since, as she said, it was going to help her in the long run. She had a difficult time offering teachers creative and meaningful activities that would make sense in their daily curriculum planning. She recognized that digital storytelling could be a viable activity for many teachers.

### ***Student Surveys***

Students' first reaction to DST was an excitement which confirms Sadik's (2008) finding that "...teachers perceived students to be motivated and excited"(p.502) . They loved talking about their lives in school. Talking about problems that they probably don't even share with their parents, such as "How do my friend and I stop arguing?" or "There is a kid who is picking on me and telling me bad words," assured them that their voices were being heard. Finding solutions to their problems gave them great satisfaction. As a matter of fact, understanding the problem/solution pattern in their lives became a powerful tool for all of us when facing some daily problems. Every time some sort of misunderstanding arose, I simply reminded them to look at the situation as the same kind of problem-solution activity that we learned about while developing digital stories...and it worked!

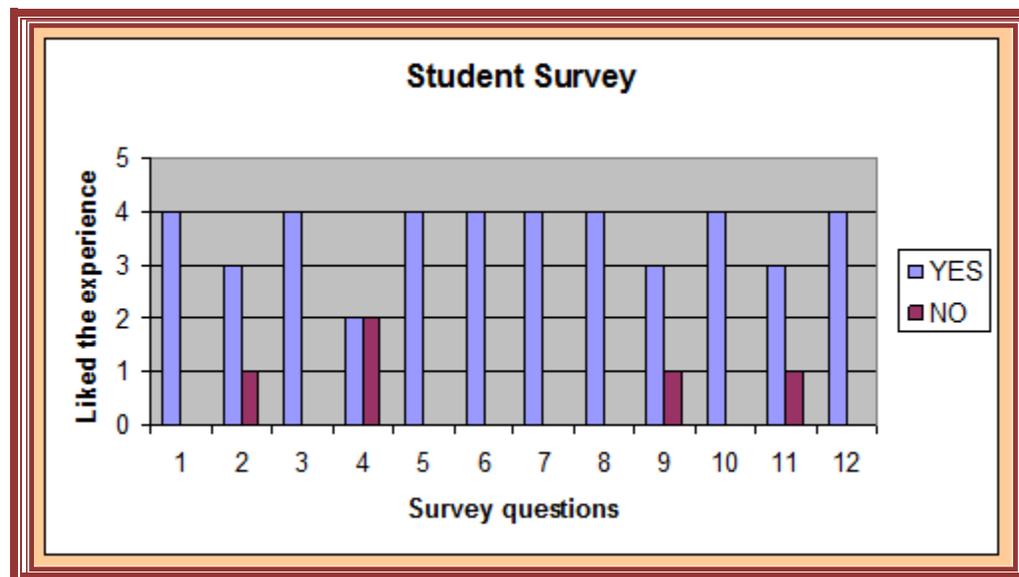
It was interesting to watch students negotiating the content for their DS and struggling to find the balance between what they liked and what their parents would like. Mostly, the dilemmas about the content were based on cultural and religious specifics – kids didn't want to say something they knew parents wouldn't be happy with. For example, one girl said that, while she liked a song we listened to, her mom wouldn't like the following verse: "I am a Christian and you are Jew ...". So, we simply had to find a different song. This confirms the existence of two parallel processes going on inside immigrant families - the assimilation that kids go through, and the adaptation that is acceptable to parents. It was obvious that the children played both roles pretty successfully but at the price of their own frustration.

The four students were asked to complete a survey at the end of the project. Responses showed that all four had remarkably positive feelings about the whole DST experience (see Table 1). All four gave affirmative answers to eight out of twelve questions. They were proud of their own accomplishments and expected that their parents would be as well. One student doubted that he would be able to make another movie without assistance, while the other three felt confident about taking on such a challenge. Two of them said they didn't enjoy recording their voices because, as they stated, they were afraid of making a mistake. Three of them were comfortable

sharing their movies with their classmates; one girl said she was too shy and would feel embarrassed.

**Table 1**

**Student Survey Results**



### ***Parent Surveys***

Before sending the survey home to parents, I gathered the information about their English language proficiency and found out that they were proficient enough to be able to complete the survey. However, some fields in the survey were left blank which made me assume there were issues with understanding them. Such questions were left out in this survey analysis as invalid. Generally, [Parent survey](#) results were positive. They found the digital stories interesting and felt that they clearly depicted their children’s school life in a comprehensible manner. Parents also confirmed that watching their children’s digital stories brought families together and sparked discussion. Liechti & Ichikawa (2000) investigated the role of digital photography in home communication and reported that digital photography can create “affective awareness” (p. 6) among family members and thus contribute to maintaining two-way communication. All parents gave maximum points to the statement “I trust my child’s teacher much more and want to maintain our communication in the future.” As a group, they gave 19 out of 20 possible points to the following statements: “A lot of positive is going on in my child’s school”; “My child is stimulated to become an active thinker”; and “I know how to help my child with his/her school work.”

Some parents added their own comments. One parent said he felt “great” about his daughter’s school after watching the movie. The most important information that he learned from watching the video was that his daughter had made great strides in English. This student was captured

practicing contractions on the board and she took the role of a storyteller in her movie explaining how contractions were constructed.

I decided to include this clip (about forming contractions) after I met with the father at a parent-teacher conference in February. A classroom teacher had given him a progress report print-out, and he seemed to be pretty confused. He asked the teacher specific questions such as “What does she really struggle with?” and “What do you do in Language Arts?” We often assume that all parents are familiar with our practices and forget that immigrant parents actually need to learn about them from us. Since my DST project was still in the development stage, I decided to include this segment about contractions in order to show the family what the child was learning in language arts.

## Conclusions

### ***Can Digital Storytelling Close the Gap in Communication Between Schools and Immigrant Parents?***

Parent survey results confirmed that DST can help to close the communication gap. Believing that the digital story described school life in detail made it interesting to watch. Another positive aspect was that watching DS led to family time spent in a good discussion. Seeing their children perform in a real-life learning environment helped them get a feeling for what is expected from their children but also it helped alleviate some unnecessary concerns regarding their children’s progress. Overall, by learning about school life, parents were becoming empowered and consequently said they felt more apt to get involved in their children’s school life.

### ***Does Digital Storytelling Enhance Literacy Skills in English Language Learners?***

While I started with a question focused on parents, I found myself answering another question about student learning as well. The experience of creating digital stories with my first grade students gave me a totally new perspective on my teaching and tutoring practices. In my district we have adopted the “pull-out” method of serving our English language learners due to relatively small number of ELLs (n=63) scattered all over the district. As an ESL teacher, I seldom have a chance to actually visit classrooms and observe my students’ real school life challenges. Having that kind of experience yielded some valuable insights. Even though I communicate with classroom teachers daily, there is no substitute for direct observation. My DST project opened the classroom to me. After the DST experience I better understood issues that teachers are facing, and I now see how I can help them with differentiation.

### ***Did the Project Enhance my Teaching Skills?***

The Digital Storytelling venture helped me understand how to use technology in a meaningful way. DST proved to be a fine tool for reinforcing certain skills that students struggle with. For example, the young lady who had a problem with contractions prepared Power Point slides to include in her digital story. The whole experience turned into great formative assessment for me and a useful review session for her. Another student told me he didn't know The Pledge of Allegiance and decided to include it in his movie. He was specific about a clip with the American flag that he wanted to import. We practiced reading the Pledge and did the voice over

chorally since the vocabulary was quite challenging for him to pronounce. By reading the Pledge together, he was reassured that it was okay not to say it flawlessly on the first attempt because learning new words takes time. He learned the pronunciation and meanings of new words. In addition, his voice will be heard in homeroom when the pledge is recited.

***“Digital Storytelling gives an almost boundless spectrum of possible uses,” Kibbat, an old-fashioned oral folk storyteller.***

Generally, ESL pull-out time is the time when children feel more relaxed and the time they can ask some questions they are afraid/don't get a chance to ask during the day. Having some pictures/video clips of them taken/ taped in their classrooms triggered conversation about some hidden problems that had been interfering with their learning. Most of the trouble spots emerged from cultural differences. These ELLs feel afraid to address them in their regular classes because they don't want to sound “stupid” or “different.”

### ***Reflection on my Personal Experience as an Immigrant Parent***

From a personal perspective as an immigrant parent I wish DST existed ten years ago! Why? Even though I had 15 years of experience at that time from teaching Russian language and literature in my country, walking into American schools was a shocking experience for me because nothing looked familiar. In my home country we didn't have teacher aides or volunteers. Instead of spending long days at school, kids would go home and study there. Hands-on activities were somewhat present in science classes but that was it. No loose papers were used for anything except for quick quizzes. Therefore, there was no need for “get your papers organized.”

I wanted to know what my children were learning in school in each of their subjects in order to make sure that they were getting good education. There was no way for me to learn what I wanted to know about American schools based on just 15 minutes conferencing time with teachers. Interestingly, my own children didn't want to talk about their school experience with

me. Later I learned that they were going through painful stages of acculturation. I understood that there was a gap of silence developing between my own children and me. I am probably one of those parents who stubbornly did not want to be left behind. I insisted on staying involved in my own children's lives no matter what. I didn't want my values to get pushed aside and replaced by others that I would find unacceptable.

Encounters with many immigrant families that I have been around as a translator helped me to figure out that most immigrant parents don't have an idea of what is going on in their children's school lives. I witnessed many times how school administration "suggested" special sections of high school classes for immigrant children, directing them to take less demanding classes because of their limited English skills. How many capable ELLs have been assigned to a "non-academic" curriculum because their parents did not understand how the "system" works?

### ***Final thoughts***

The Digital Storytelling project expanded my knowledge of teaching English as a Second Language. Students and their parents pointed out many positive aspects of utilizing DST as a tool in the parent-student-teacher communication process. The most significant effect of this research was bringing a realistic sense of the school context into immigrant families' homes and thus closing the gap in communication between schools and immigrant parents. "Theory and research findings remain separate from classroom and child-rearing practice. Expertise will remain the province of the few until we help teachers and parents read the full texture and complexity of real, flowing encounters with children" (Forman, 2002, p.16). In addition, teaching students how to create narratives, which was the instructional approach I chose for this project, turned out to be an effective instructional practice.

DST seems to be a suitable communication tool for teachers to reach out to their immigrant parents. I assume that DST could be an equally efficient communication bridge connecting schools and parents in general. Moreover, the research findings have led me to the conclusion that DST should be used with ELLs at different age levels. While having students develop a narrative might be an appropriate approach for lower grade levels, some other genre might work better with older students. My observations showed DST to be an effective tool in enhancing students' speaking and writing skills in particular. In addition, higher level thinking skills had to be utilized in order to create stories.

***"It would be great for you to do one near the beginning of the year, with maybe important people, teachers, where to go...I can see this working in many ways. Way to go!"***

*S.W., first grade teacher,  
Canal Winchester Local  
Schools.*

My experience with DST underscored the importance of choosing the right technology tool for a particular grade level. *Photo Story 3* might be better for elementary youngsters, *Windows Movie Maker* might work with older students. To conclude, it would be unrealistic to draw conclusions on the basis of one project involving four students, but DST seems to hold promise as a way to enhance communication and to improve literacy skills for ELLs. I hope that other teachers will try out DST and help to discover new possibilities for this powerful teaching tool.

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## Appendix 1: Problem-Solution Chart

<b>Your name here</b>	
<b>Problem</b>	<b>Solution</b>

## Appendix 2: Five-Phase Media Development Process

1. Planning
2. Identifying and gathering materials, expertise
3. Development and implementation
4. Honing, editing, and finalizing
5. Sharing with others

<b>Media Production Process</b>				
<b>Story Planning</b>	<b>Pre-Production</b>	<b>Production</b>	<b>Post-Production</b>	<b>Performance, distribution</b>
<b>Ideas</b>	Make media list	Finish creating, editing media components(voice-over, music, pics, video, scans. Etc)	Mix, add transitions, titles	<b>DVD</b>
Story storming	Gather raw material components	Assemble media into final product	Add credits & citations	
Story map	Begin editing raw material components & creating new ones	Formative review	Final review	
<b>Peer pitching</b>			Final editing	
Scripting, writing			Export final product into readable format	
Story-boarding				
Telling/re-telling				

“If your students are having difficulty understanding the five-phase media development process, I recommend having them translate something they already know how to do into this process, such as mastering a skateboard maneuver, building an address book on a cell phone, or conducting an experiment for science class. Translation is a great way to test for comprehension. Students can translate something only if they understand it.” (Ohler, 2008)

## Appendix 3: How to Capture Parts of Video From Tape

1. Make sure your DV device is connected properly to an IEEE 1394 port, and then set the camera mode to play recorded video (often labeled VTR or VCR on a DV camera).
2. On the **File** menu, click **Capture Video**.

–or–

In the Movie Tasks pane, under **Capture Video**, click **Capture from video device**.

3. On the **Video Capture Device** page, in **Available devices**, click the DV camera.
4. In the **Enter a file name for your captured video** box, enter a file name for your captured video file. Then, in the **Choose a place to save your captured video** box, select the location where you want your video to be saved or click **Browse** to select a location.
5. On the **Video Setting** page, select the video setting you want to use for capturing video and audio.
6. On the **Capture Method** page, click **Capture parts of the tape manually**.
7. To separate the video into smaller clips, select the **Create clips when wizard finishes** check box.
8. To prevent audio from playing over your speakers while capturing video, select the **Mute speakers'** check box.
9. To automatically stop capturing after a time period has elapsed, select the **Capture time limit** check box and then type or select the length of time you want to capture. Time is displayed in the form of *hours:minutes*(h:mm).
10. Locate the video and audio you want to capture from your tape by using either the controls on your DV camera or VCR or the **DV camera controls** in the wizard.
11. To begin capturing video, click **Start Capture**.

The tape plays automatically and capturing begins.

12. Do one of the following:
  - When the tape reaches the point at which you want to stop capturing, click **Stop Capture**.
  - If you have selected the **Capture time limit** check box, wait for the specified amount of time for video to be captured.
13. Repeat steps 10 through 12 for each part of the video tape you want to capture.
14. When you have finished capturing, click **Finish** to close the Video Capture Wizard.

The captured content is imported into a new collection with the same name as the specified video file.

## Appendix 4: Parent Survey

1. Was the information presented to you in the video-story interesting? YES NO
2. Did your spouse and your child/children watch the video together?
3. Did the watching video sparkle discussion with your child and other family members?
4. What other school related information would you like to see in the story next time?
5. What was the most important information that you learned from watching the video?
6. After watching the video, what question would you like to ask your child's teacher?
7. Did the story clearly depict a part of your child's school life? What you didn't know before and the video story made it clear to you?
8. Tell us how do you feel about your child's school now after watching the video?

I feel I spent a day in my child's school	0 disagree	1	2	3	4	5 agree
There is a lot of positive going on in my child's school	0	1	2	3	4	5
My child is stimulated to be an active thinker.	0	1	2	3	4	5
The movie helped me understand how I can help my child with the school work.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I trust my child's teacher much more and want to maintain our communication	0	1	2	3	4	5

Your  
comments \_\_\_\_\_