



How To:

# Use Digital Storytelling in Your Classroom

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**Storytelling is a vital skill** with seemingly unlimited applications. Done well, it can have a magical effect—moving, enlightening, or entertaining audiences of any size. We tell stories to woo lovers, calm children, or reassure ourselves. Lawyers rely on the power of storytelling to vividly recreate crimes to juries, archaeologists conjure former civilizations, and teachers make abstract concepts real to their students.

In today's digitized world, visual storytelling is a favorite classroom tool, and the affordability and accessibility of technology such as iMovie provides opportunities not imagined a decade ago. Joe Fatheree and Craig Lindvahl, two teachers who have made seven films between them and who teach filmmaking workshops to educators, say that even when teachers are comfortable with the technology, they don't often feel confident about teaching the art of storytelling. But they probably know more than they think, say Fatheree and Lindvahl, who offer the following advice to help teachers:

## 1. Learn from what you watch.

Think of movies you adore, movies you could watch again and again. What makes them so effective? Is it the dialogue, the character development, the way shots are framed? Likewise, consider movies so bad they make you squirm. Just why are they so excruciating? Work with your students to dissect several well-known films; you'll soon find yourselves with several categories that fall under the rubric of storytelling techniques. You will be amazed at how much you already know.

## 2. See technology as a storytelling tool, not as a teaching goal.

Though students need some knowledge of how to use equipment, teaching about technology should never be the focus of the curriculum. Simple editing programs such as iMovie are intuitive and easy to learn. If you have a camera and a computer with FireWire, you're ready to go; your creative aspirations will drive your technology learning curve. Once you think of an element you want to include that requires more advanced software or gear, you'll be compelled to learn how to use it.

## 3. Allow your students to push you (and lead you).

Don't be intimidated if your students learn faster than you do. Many of them are accustomed to quickly absorbing technology. Use

their aptitude to your advantage by letting students teach each other; you'll find that they show their strengths fairly quickly. Within a class, you'll have great writers, editors, camera operators, and technicians. They can improve their weaker points while using their strengths to help others (including you).

## 5. Learn by trial and error.

Accept the fact that you will spend a portion of your time scratching your head, wondering, "Why won't that work?" Seek out resources where you can post questions and get answers quickly. (Creative Cow is an excellent online destination; it has sections for virtually every kind of production and postproduction software and hardware.) Every glitch will build your technology savvy until you get to the point where you can anticipate the kinds of problems students will have. Take heart in remembering that most great filmmakers come from a creative background, not a technical one; they depend on others to make technology work on their behalf.

## 6. Give your students freedom, but hold them accountable.

Kids are not used to the kind of freedom they'll need to do great creative work. Some will thrive in that environment, others will require close supervision to make sure they complete their projects. One good way to do this is to have students pitch a one-

paragraph description of their project and provide a production schedule. In essence, it's a work contract.

## 7. Consider yourself the executive producer.

Work with your students as a partner learning about technology and storytelling, but don't forget that you call the shots. You have to be the arbiter of good taste and the studio boss who decides whether an idea is production worthy. Serving in this role as a teacher is actually much easier than it is for a real-live executive producer, because students naturally look to you for leadership.

## 8. Don't forget to celebrate your students' work.

Whether you show completed projects to the class alone or to the entire school or even the whole community, present the stories your students tell. There's a good chance their work will be much more professional than you expect, and light-years beyond what your community might anticipate. A great side benefit of public showings is that your students will take their work very seriously. The knowledge that others are going to see it (and you can't hide C-quality work on a big screen) has been the source of tremendous inspiration for filmmakers for a hundred years.

### HOT LINKS

Creative Cow  
[www.creativecow.net](http://www.creativecow.net)