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Stories that Matter: Using Digital Storytelling to Develop Critical Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how digital storytelling is reshaping the way educators encourage critical literacy in today's classrooms. Drawing on peer-reviewed research published between 2007 and 2024, it pulls together what works, what's promising, and what educators should watch out for when using digital storytelling to help students think more deeply and critically. The research shows that digital storytelling doesn't just boost traditional literacy, it brings students into the process through multimedia, inspires emotional investment, and invites active creation. As a result, students see real gains in how they read, analyze information, and navigate digital worlds. The review also reveals practical strategies that make digital storytelling work, like building in structure, encouraging peer feedback, and honoring students' cultural backgrounds. There's strong evidence that these approaches especially benefit multilingual learners and help create more universal classrooms. At the same time, the paper acknowledges the challenges and points to the need for thoughtful implementation, ongoing support, and further study as technology evolves. Ultimately, this synthesis offers some perspectives and actionable ideas for educators eager to integrate digital storytelling into their approach to teaching critical literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In an era where digital media increasingly shapes how we communicate, learn, and make meaning of the world that means "writing restructures consciousness itself" (Ong, 1986), the intersection of technology and literacy has become a critical area of educational focus. The traditional concept of literacy, the ability to read and write has expanded to encompass a broader range of competencies necessary for success in the digital age (Proctor & Blikstein, 2019). Among the innovative approaches that have emerged to address these evolving literacy needs, digital storytelling stands out as a particularly promising pedagogical tool, offering "a powerful technology tool for the 21st century classroom" (Robin, 2008). This perspective helps us understand how digital storytelling represents not just a new tool, but a restructuring of literacy consciousness for the digital age. Digital storytelling represents the convergence of narrative tradition with contemporary technology and offers unique opportunities for developing critical literacy skills. While storytelling has long been recognized as a fundamental human way of making sense of experience, the digital dimension adds new layers of complexity and possibility. Through the integration of multimedia elements- text, images, audio, and video, digital storytelling creates "multimodal meaning-making spaces" (Chung, 2007) where students can engage with multiple forms of expression while developing critical awareness of how these elements shape understanding and teach to ask questions.

The urgency of developing critical literacy skills has never been greater. In today's information-saturated environment, students must navigate "an increasingly

complex landscape of digital media, fake news, and competing narratives" (Alalem, 2023). Students need not only to comprehend content but also to analyze, evaluate, and create it with sophisticated awareness of context, audience, and purpose (Kaeophanuek *et al.*, 2019). This challenge is particularly acute in educational settings where traditional literacy instruction may not fully address the demands of digital citizenship and participation in contemporary discourse (Gonzales, 2018). The transformative potential of digital storytelling in educational contexts has been well-documented. It significantly enhanced students' critical thinking skills while simultaneously developing their technical literacy (Menezes, 2012).

This paper examines how digital storytelling can serve as a catalyst for developing critical literacy skills in educational contexts. It explores the theoretical frameworks that underpin digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach, analyzes empirical evidence of its effectiveness, and considers its practical implications for educators and learners. By bringing together insights from multiple disciplines including education, digital media studies, and literacy research, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling can be leveraged to foster critical literacy development. The significance of this investigation extends beyond immediate educational outcomes. As Syam argues, the ability to critically engage with and create digital narratives becomes increasingly central to meaningful civic engagement in our networked society (2022). Digital storytelling can enhance not only critical thinking skills but also academic achievement and motivation across diverse student populations (Tamimi, 2024). Understanding how

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digital storytelling can contribute to these broader social goals while developing individual critical literacy skills is crucial for educators, researchers, and policy makers. The questions, this paper would ask are the below:

- How does the integration of digital storytelling in academic settings transform students' critical literacy development, particularly in their ability to analyze, evaluate, and create multimodal narratives?
- To what extent does the emotional engagement facilitated by digital storytelling enhance students' development of critical literacy skills across different linguistic and cultural contexts?

Through careful analysis of recent research and practical applications, this study aims to provide insights that will help educators and researchers better understand and utilize digital storytelling as a tool for developing critical literacy. As Bloch suggests, the potential of digital storytelling to transform literacy education lies not just in its technological affordances but in its capacity to engage students in meaningful, critical exploration of their own voices and perspectives within the digital landscape (2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of digital storytelling and critical literacy has attracted considerable scholarly attention since the late 2000s, reflecting broader shifts in educational technology, pedagogy, and literacy theory. Early studies, such as Robin (2008), positioned digital storytelling as a gateway for student engagement, emphasizing how multimedia tools could invigorate traditional literacy instruction. Over time, this perspective has expanded to include more nuanced understandings of how digital storytelling functions within diverse classrooms, particularly as it relates to critical literacy - the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and produce texts with an awareness of power, culture, and context (Freire, 1970; Kress, 2003). Chung (2007) and Menezes (2012) both point to the multimodal nature of digital storytelling as a key driver of its pedagogical value, arguing that the integration of images, audio, and video allows students to construct meaning in ways that transcend print-based literacy. This multimodality, as Kress (2003) contends, is essential for literacy in the digital age, requiring new forms of reading and composition that are attuned to visual, auditory, and interactive dimensions.

A significant body of research has also investigated the impact of digital storytelling on student motivation and agency. Alalem (2023) and Tamimi (2024) demonstrate that digital storytelling projects can cultivate a participatory culture in classrooms, empowering students to share personal narratives and engage in collaborative meaning-making. This is particularly critical in multilingual and multicultural settings, where Bloch (2018) and Gonzales (2018) show that digital storytelling can provide spaces for students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires and cultural backgrounds.

Yet, not all scholars are unequivocal in their support. Some, such as Proctor and Blikstein (2019), urge caution,

suggesting that the rapid adoption of digital tools can sometimes outpace thoughtful pedagogical integration, leading to superficial engagement rather than deep critical inquiry. Questions also remain about the scalability of digital storytelling, the training required for teachers, and the assessment of multimodal texts (Syam, 2022; Kaeophanuek *et al.*, 2019).

Recent research has begun to explore the implications of emerging technologies - such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and interactive platforms - for digital storytelling and critical literacy (Jiang, 2024). These studies signal both opportunities and challenges, highlighting the need for ongoing research, teacher support, and adaptable frameworks that can accommodate technological change and diverse student needs.

Collectively, the literature suggests that digital storytelling is neither a panacea nor a passing fad. Rather, it is a dynamic pedagogical approach that, when implemented thoughtfully, can significantly enhance critical literacy by fostering multimodal competencies, cultural responsiveness, and student agency. It also raises important questions about equity, access, and the evolving definitions of literacy in a digital world.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize and analyze existing research on digital storytelling and its relationship to critical literacy development. The systematic approach ensures comprehensive coverage of relevant literature while maintaining methodological rigor in the selection and analysis of sources. The paper's analysis was guided by a theoretical framework that combines critical literacy theory (Freire, 1970) and multimodal literacy perspectives (Kress, 2003). This integrated theoretical approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how digital storytelling intersects with critical literacy development across multiple dimensions of learning and engagement. The methodology employed in this study aims to provide a comprehensive yet focused analysis of how digital storytelling contributes to critical literacy development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis highlights digital storytelling's unique capacity to foster critical literacy development across varied educational contexts. By synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, several key themes emerge that illuminate the transformative power - and the nuanced challenges - of integrating digital storytelling into contemporary classrooms.

Multilevel Engagement and Deep Critical Awareness

A defining strength of digital storytelling lies in its ability to engage students emotionally, intellectually, and technically. Research consistently demonstrates that when students are invited to craft narratives that matter to them, they invest more deeply in the critical processes of reading, analyzing, and constructing

meaning (Alalem, 2023; Jiang, 2024). For example, Maria, a first-year composition student, when first encountered digital storytelling, she was skeptical. “I’m not good with technology,” she insisted. Three weeks later, she had created a powerful narrative about her grandmother’s immigration experience, weaving together old photographs, voice recordings, and historical footage. Maria’s journey (Alalem, 2023) from technological skepticism to creating a compelling family immigration narrative mirrors a broader trend: as students become emotionally invested in their stories, they are more willing to navigate unfamiliar technologies and critically examine their rhetorical choices. This finding echoes Gonzales’s concept of “digital rhetorical literacy,” where students learn to negotiate multiple modes – text, audio, image, video – while making conscious decisions about audience, purpose, and representation.

The emotional investment fostered by digital storytelling is not merely motivational window dressing. Jiang’s (2024) work on affective engagement demonstrates that students’ personal connections to their projects often drive them to interrogate sources, challenge assumptions, and explore multiple perspectives more rigorously than in traditional literacy activities. Quantitatively, this is reflected in studies reporting significant increases in motivation and critical analysis skills, with Turan and Seker (2022) noting a 27% rise in engagement when digital storytelling replaced conventional instruction.

Equity, Inclusion, and Multilingual Contexts

Another crucial dimension is the way digital storytelling opens access for multilingual learners and students from marginalized backgrounds. Traditional literacy assessment often fails to capture the full range of students’ communicative abilities, especially for English language learners. Digital storytelling, however, creates space for linguistic hybridity and cultural self-expression (Bloch, 2018; Syam, 2022). Lin, a student from China, struggled with traditional academic essays. However, when given the opportunity to create a digital story, she crafted an intricate narrative about cultural identity, seamlessly blending Mandarin and English narration with visual metaphors (Bloch, 2018). It exemplifies how digital storytelling can empower students to draw on their entire linguistic and cultural repertoire. Tamimi’s (2024) data supports this, showing a 31% improvement in critical thinking for English learners engaged in digital storytelling – a substantial gain that suggests this approach can help close equity gaps.

Educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of “culturally responsive literacy spaces” (Syam, 2022), where students’ backgrounds are not only acknowledged but leveraged as strengths. Digital storytelling, by accommodating diverse voices and media, supports more universal design for learning and helps challenge deficit-based models of literacy education.

Multimodal and Computational Literacies

Digital storytelling is more than just a new way to present information; it requires students to synthesize and critique across modes, blending artistic expression, narrative structure, data, and even elements of programming. The CIDST (Critical Inquiry through Digital Storytelling) model (Kaeophanuek *et al.*, 2019) makes clear that effective digital storytelling unfolds through phases: inquiry, design, production, and reflection. At each stage, students are called on to evaluate source credibility, make design decisions, and provide peer feedback. The impact is measurable – studies report 42% improvement in students’ ability to assess sources and a 35% increase in critical analysis skills (Kaeophanuek *et al.*, 2019).

This process also nurtures what Proctor and Blikstein (2019) term “computational-narrative thinking,” an emerging form of literacy where students must critically engage both with storytelling conventions and with the logic behind digital tools themselves. For instance, when students juxtapose data visualizations with personal testimony or interrogate the affordances and limitations of editing software, they are learning to question not only what stories get told, but how and why those stories take shape in digital environments.

The Role of Structure, Scaffolding, and Peer Collaboration

Success in digital storytelling is rarely accidental. The literature is clear: well-structured, scaffolded instruction is vital. Tamimi (2024) demonstrates that students provided with clear guidelines and ongoing support show 45% greater improvement in critical thinking than those left to navigate digital storytelling on their own. Peer feedback is equally transformative – Kaeophanuek *et al.* (2019) found a 38% increase in students’ ability to give and receive constructive criticism through guided collaboration, fostering a classroom culture where critical literacy is shared and dialogic rather than individual and static.

Transferability and Lifelong Impact

Perhaps the most encouraging outcome is that these critical literacies extend beyond the classroom. Students who have engaged deeply with digital storytelling begin to question the media they consume in daily life, scrutinizing sources more carefully and recognizing the constructed nature of digital narratives. As new technologies like AI and virtual reality emerge (Jiang, 2024), the foundational critical habits developed through digital storytelling prepare students to become informed, ethical participants in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

Ongoing Challenges and Future Directions

Yet, challenges remain. Not all teachers feel equipped to scaffold digital storytelling or assess multimodal projects fairly (Proctor & Blikstein, 2019). There is a pressing need for professional development, adaptable assessment

tools, and research into the most effective ways to integrate emerging technologies without sacrificing depth for novelty.

Future research should focus on:

- Developing nuanced, flexible rubrics that capture the complexity of digital storytelling outcomes,
- Investigating how AI and immersive technologies can support – not supplant – the creative and critical processes central to storytelling,
- Exploring how digital storytelling can be adapted across content areas and educational levels.

In sum, digital storytelling represents a paradigm shift in literacy education: it empowers students as meaning-makers, bridges personal experience with academic rigor, and cultivates critical consciousness in a digital era. The stories students create – and the processes by which they create them – matter. By continuing to refine digital storytelling pedagogy, we are not just improving literacy outcomes; we are preparing the next generation to interpret, critique, and shape the stories that define our world.

CONCLUSION

As this synthesis makes clear, digital storytelling is not simply an add-on to traditional literacy practice or a fleeting technological trend. It represents a meaningful reimagining of what it means to be literate in an interconnected, multimedia world. The integration of digital storytelling redefines the boundaries of literacy, requiring students to not only decode and encode text, but also to navigate, critique, and produce meaning through an evolving array of digital, visual, and auditory forms. In this way, digital storytelling is both a response to and a driver of broader cultural shifts in how we communicate, learn, and engage with the wider world.

The implications of this shift are far-reaching. For students, digital storytelling offers a pathway to agency: it empowers them to take ownership of their voices, to weave together personal experience with academic inquiry, and to engage in dialogue with diverse audiences. For educators, it offers a powerful framework for building inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms where every student's story has value and where critical thought is nurtured through authentic, multimodal expression. For multilingual and marginalized learners in particular, digital storytelling can be a vehicle for affirmation and academic growth – helping to bridge persistent gaps in participation and achievement.

At the same time, the move toward digital storytelling surfaces new challenges that cannot be ignored. Teachers and students alike require access to resources, meaningful professional development, and supportive assessment frameworks that recognize the complexity of multimodal composition. Schools must also contend with issues of digital equity, ensuring that technology expands opportunity rather than reinforcing divides. As artificial intelligence, immersive media, and new storytelling platforms continue to shape the educational landscape, it is essential that critical literacy remains at the center of

innovation – so that students learn not just to use tools, but to question, critique, and shape them for ethical and creative purposes.

Looking forward, the future of digital storytelling in education rests on ongoing research, collaboration, and adaptability. Researchers must develop new methodologies for evaluating the nuanced skills and dispositions cultivated through digital storytelling, while policy makers and school leaders must prioritize access and equity in their implementation efforts. Most importantly, educators must remain attuned to the voices and experiences of their students, adapting approaches as technology and society evolve. Digital storytelling's greatest promise lies in its capacity to foster not only critical readers and writers, but also empathetic listeners, creative makers, and thoughtful participants in an ever-changing world.

Ultimately, the adoption of digital storytelling as a tool for critical literacy is about more than pedagogy or technology – it is about empowering the next generation to author their own stories, to interrogate the narratives that shape their world, and to participate fully in the civic and cultural life of the digital age. As we continue to experiment, reflect, and refine our approaches, the enduring lesson is clear: stories matter, and so does our capacity to tell them well.

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