Once upon a time...

**DIGITAL STORYTELLING**
brings new dimensions to reading, writing and more

*BY KAREN FELDMAN*
Combine the age-old tradition of storytelling with the latest technology and the result is a compelling tool that motivates students to read more and write better.

The technique is called digital storytelling, and Danilo M. Baylen, FGCU College of Education assistant professor of curriculum and instruction, has been teaching a wide array of people to use it.

It’s no secret that many students resist reading textbooks and struggle with writing.

Baylen, however, believes all of them can and should know how to express themselves through words and that each has a story to tell.

“What they are thinking they can write,” he maintains. Employing cutting-edge technology helps motivate them.

“If you use a digital story to deliver material or ask your students to engage in creating a digital story, really you’re looking at it in terms of how one impacts their learning … not only in terms of the content or context of particular material, but also in terms of improving reading comprehension, writing skills and media literacy.”

It’s far more involved than merely writing a story.

“They have to know how to use the technology, how to clean up pictures, how to record their sounds,” he says. “They have to choose appropriate effects to communicate certain feelings, a certain mood and pull them all together. They use digital cameras, scanners, microphones and different kinds of software.”

This year’s students produced all manner of works. Topics included: autobiographies, dating, America’s role in Iraq, how water evaporates and the pain of being abandoned by a parent.

Baylen’s burgeoning program began through his involvement as technology liaison for the National Writing Project at the Invitational Summer Institute at FGCU, a four-week program in which teachers of writing get together to hone their own writing skills and share techniques they can use to help students improve.

(See accompanying story.)

“Kids are using the Internet to play games,” Baylen says. “I wanted them to utilize technology to do something creative yet supportive of their learning. We are doing digital storytelling because I believe it’s the best example of what you can do with technology integration. You can pull together digital images, digital text, digital sound effects and make it support all sorts of disciplines.”

FGCU sophomore Dawn Peck was a technology neophyte when she took Baylen’s “Introduction to Computers in Education” class last fall.

“I probably hadn’t e-mailed 10 people before that class,” says the Montana native.

Nonetheless, she and classmates Michelle Williams and John Finch collaborated to create a digital story that addresses the causes of, and ways to prevent, AIDS.

First, students wrote a basic story and created a storyboard, using pictures – often taking their own photographs – to illustrate their words. Next, they put the recorded words and images together on the screen, adding music, titles and credits.

Initially, “he taught us how to do our own e-books and to use (the Windows program) Movie Maker,” she says of Baylen. “One of the most important things we learned was how to navigate around these programs. If I got a new program now, I could probably...
figure it out.”

That sort of knowledge and confidence is vital in today’s technologically sophisticated workplace, according to the International Society for Technology in Education. The organization currently is revamping the standards it recommends for what K-12 students need to know about technology to succeed in the classroom and on the job.

To that end, tomorrow’s teachers must be equally savvy about technology.

Williams, a sophomore, thinks being able to use digital storytelling will give her an edge as an elementary school teacher.

“It’s more interesting for people,” she says. “Some don’t like to read.”

Peck hopes to teach social sciences at the secondary level.

“It’s wonderful to have all kinds of media at our fingertips because students learn in all kinds of ways,” she says.

Finch found value in the process, too.

“Because of my experience in the school environment already, I am not afraid of the technological tools that will be available to me … It was rewarding to see the final project, which motivated me to get started on the next project.”

Unlimited variations

The range of potential projects makes it a technique that can be used with children as young as 6 on up to adults, as Baylen demonstrated this year.

Students in Sara Kohlhauff’s first-grade class at Pinewoods Elementary School in Estero began with a drawing of a squiggly line on newsprint that they had to amplify by creating a picture from it and writing a basic story.

Baylen scanned their drawings into computers and the children then got their first lessons in typing by copying their stories onto the screen. They had to break their stories into components, placing one thought on each of four pages. The result was a short, simple illustrated story created using PowerPoint.

Story subjects included autumn leaves, missing diamonds, an orange snake, a big shark, and a farm in Mexico.

“There are little kids who haven’t ever worked with technology at this level,” Baylen says. “The outcome is not always about the product.”

Anna Bowe tried it out on her French honors class at Lely High School in Naples. The students were 15 to 18 years old and of varying ethnicities.

“Initially the students were perplexed. They had never written a poem in any language the least so in French and with limited vocabulary,” she says.

“Students chose their favorite colors, thought of any natural phenomena, animals, objects, whatever they could connect with their specific colors.”

She then supplied them with a list of adjectives that they combined with nouns and eventually crafted rudimentary poems. Then they went to the lab, where she showed them how to use Movie Maker.

“Their reaction went from tentative to very positive,” she says. “They seemed proud of what they were able to pull together into their products.”

The process also brought a diverse class together. Bowe says she subsequently saw one of the more reserved students start regularly offering to help others.

“As a teaching tool, digital storytelling has revealed its potential,” she says. “It enables me to create a genuine community of learners, where the language of the written word is embedded and enriched by visual images and aural elements.
(music or voice), so catchy for today’s students. They never mumbled at the idea of editing and re-editing, because their product is real and they see the reason why it should look good, sound good and feel good."

Although there were a few technological stumbles along the way that caused some frustration, Bowe says she absolutely will use digital storytelling again.

In an ambitious digital storytelling project of her own, retired Lee County teacher Hazel Geier has been chronicling the use of the technique in local high schools. After taking part in the 2004 National Writing Project at FGCU, she hired on to work with others at the 2005 and 2006 sessions.

From there, she took up Baylen’s request to document the project with a movie that was to be shown at a spring conference about digital storytelling.

She thinks the technique helps develop abilities that go well beyond writing. Although students in the three high schools – Lely, Estero and Bishop Verot – vary in culture and academic skills, “students at all schools have embraced this new approach to writing, learned new technology skills, demonstrated creativity and critical thinking and have developed social skills that involve supporting one another, listening, evaluating and appreciating one another’s efforts,” she says.

She sees applications of this process for all areas of curriculum.

“The push in education is to teach reading and
writing across the curriculum, and I believe this gives teachers another tool for doing just that,” she says.

**Literacy and life lessons**

Bambi Fischer teaches Even Start, a family literacy and parenting education program at Three Oaks Elementary School. She works with immigrants to increase literacy and teaches adults skills such as parenting, budgeting and buying a home.

Although the group’s language abilities ranged widely, she used digital storytelling by providing questions to which participants wrote answers, crafted them into paragraph or story form, then recorded and matched them to photos.

Fischer used the technique because “I felt that digital storytelling was a unique and progressive way for the adults to learn. Because of the process of writing and speaking, it was a winner in promoting the acquisition of language skills.”

Jo Stahl found similar enthusiasm at Estero High School in her 10th-grade English class that included gifted, regular and English as a Second Language students.

She believes digital storytelling proved quite effective. “I think it has made them enjoy writing because they are writing about what they know and like,” she says.

In her sophomore and senior classes at Bishop Verot High School, English teacher Stacey Elmeer saw tangible results that digital storytelling improves writing.

“We started off the year with the project and I feel like it allowed me to address many of the basics up front,” says Elmeer, who learned the technique at a summer session of the National Writing Project at FGCU. “I often shortchange the basics like voice and organization because I am too busy getting the literature students to digest the large thematic concepts of whatever novel we are studying. Once you take the novel out of the equation, you will be surprised at how much students will grow as writers.”

Students had to show their finished works to the rest of their class and their peers evaluated them, picking out such aspects as elements of exposition and how well the creator communicated the main points. They were also asked to provide constructive criticism, adding yet another dimension to the learning experience.

There’s no question that the process involves a lot of work on the part of the teachers as well.

Elmeer recalls staying up until 4 a.m. making CD copies of the videos for herself, some teacher friends and Baylen.

“A few of my students had made videos on almost cliché topics like ‘love’ and ‘happiness,’” she says. “I was so touched by what I saw, even in these simple pieces, that I got all weepy. I felt like the students, in their movies, very willingly showed you the inside of their hearts, and you do not always see that when someone is writing an essay on ‘Ethan Frome.’”