

TECHNOLOGY

Grades
1–5

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HEALTHY HABITS THROUGH NONFICTION DIGITAL STORYTELLING: BLENDING TECHNOLOGY SKILLS AND HEALTH CURRICULUM

When I became a school librarian, I eagerly looked forward to providing innovative information literacy instruction. I was excited to partner with classroom teachers to infuse technology into every part of the curriculum. Visions of our cooperative projects filled my head, and I just knew that teachers would love every project I suggested! Of course they would be willing to change their current instructional methods in order to accommodate my technology project . . . wouldn't they?

I was right in believing that the teachers at my school were open to new ideas in technology and information literacy. What they weren't so open to was the suggestion that we overhaul teaching methods in order to fit new projects in. And who can blame them? Teachers are very busy people with incalculable responsibilities, and the curriculum they teach currently barely fits within the confines of the school day. I found out early that teachers were most open to ideas that didn't require anything extra from them and, if possible, made their jobs a little easier by reinforcing existing curricular content in new ways. One such idea, with which I had great repeated success, was a process I call Nonfiction Digital Storytelling.

WHAT IS NONFICTION DIGITAL STORYTELLING?

In essence, it is children creating digital photographs to reflect curricular content. Such a project provides a winning situation for classroom teachers, students, and school librarians, as learning is extended, children become more excited and engaged in content, and technology skills become a key element of the unit. Perhaps most importantly, this project can be done during regularly scheduled library or computer times, without imposing on teachers' instructional time. In my experience, this has worked particularly well with health units, because so often, ideas in the field of elementary health are illustratable.

I first developed nonfiction digital storytelling with a second grade team, during a unit on good health habits. About halfway through the unit (so that students already had an understanding of some of the material), I began working with small groups of students. Working together, each group identified a good health habit that they had learned about. Then we brainstormed ways to show this habit in pictures. For example, a group working on the habit of healthy eating might come up with ideas for photos featuring images such as someone eating a piece of fruit or drinking a glass of milk. After brainstorming, we chose several ideas to actually photograph. The children became models, photographers, and directors as they designed each shot and took the pictures using a digital camera. We then imported the photographs into Word documents and added sentences explaining the pictures (for example, "Eating fruit helps us stay healthy!"). The children learned to resize the photos and adjust the font and text size. After printing the Word documents from every group of students, I bound the pages into books. Each classroom received a copy of the book, and several copies were added to the library collection for circulation. Students loved seeing themselves in photos. This was a great tool for enhancing the curriculum with technology and for helping students look at curricular content from a new perspective.

Nonfiction digital storytelling can take many forms, depending students' ages and the resources available to the school librarian. If time is short, be selective about the number of technology skills students will actually practice. For example, perhaps offering a choice of fonts isn't necessary. Maybe focusing on inserting a picture into a Word document is enough; in this case, type the sentences yourself, or leave the text out altogether. Time can also be saved in the initial stages of the project by simply assigning each group a topic, or writing each topic on a slip of paper and having each group choose one slip, rather than inviting groups of students to select their own topics. The photography portion can be abbreviated by directing and shooting the pictures, yourself, and having students simply serve as models. Additional

time could be saved by not binding the pictures into books. The printed pictures can simply be shared or hung on a bulletin board. If time is very short and your technology goal is to expose students to digital photography, you might choose to print the photos yourself. I was fortunate to have time with small groups of students. If this isn't an option for you, this idea can be adapted for whole group instruction; with proper modeling, guidance, and role identification, students can facilitate their own groups as the school librarian oversees the process. This works best if enough digital cameras are available for each group to use one. Even if shortcuts are made on the process of nonfiction digital storytelling, students will still benefit from meaningful technology experiences connected with classroom instruction.

Expanding nonfiction digital storytelling allows for a deeper student experience of the subject matter as well as additional technology skills. If time and resources permit, you might consider combining grade levels. For example, we had success pairing fifth graders with first graders. Older students inserted the younger students' photographs into Word documents and typed as the first graders dictated sentences.

Another great extension is to create a special page on your school's website just for nonfiction digital stories. Students who are learning to build and edit websites can add the pictures and text. If PowerPoint is a focus of technology goals in your district, digital nonfiction storytelling lends itself naturally to slideshows, which can be shared at Open House nights or other gatherings.

Information literacy skills in this project are easily expanded, particularly with older students. Consider having each group research a selected topic, and then include their findings in the text portion of the finished product.

For example, a fifth grade class learning about vitamins and minerals might focus on where to find certain nutrients. One group could be responsible for finding out about calcium-rich foods, while another could be in charge of identifying foods containing iron. Further, students might be asked to find out why the nutrient in question is important for human bodies, or how it benefits us. Each group would carry out research in order to identify foods and benefits. Skills such as note taking, source identification, online search strategies, writing citations, and using the library catalog all fit nicely with this part of the procedure. Students' findings will help them determine appropriate photographs to illustrate their topics.

Don't be afraid to step out of the box (in this case, the library or computer lab) for this project. The nurse's office provides the perfect backdrop for photographs illustrating injury care. The school nurse or other office personnel will most likely be thrilled to pose with students for pictures; he or she may even provide additional information on the topic at hand. Most likely, a field trip to a local hospital, doctor's office, or EMS station is scheduled during the year. Take advantage of photo ops on the trip by sending a camera along with a chaperone.

Nonfiction digital storytelling can take many shapes; there are really no hard-and-fast rules. Consider your own resources and goals, and use these factors to guide your process. No matter how big or how small you make this project, your result will be happiness all around. Students will be happy about having the chance to try something new with technology. Teachers will be happy because their curriculum will be reinforced without added responsibility for them. And you will be happy because you'll know that you are delivering high-quality, meaningful technology and information literacy instruction.



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