Across the great divide: Building connections in a large first year marketing course through digital storytelling

Introduction

The lecturer who wants to engage students in learning and promote co-inquiry needs to find ways of transforming the large class learning space so as to bridge the divide between lecturer and students. The power distance that is problematic in the large-class learning space is compounded by other critical gaps between lecturers and students, particularly first year students. Some of these differences are due simply to maturity and life experience; the worldviews and lifestyles of lecturers and first year students are naturally different. In relation to higher education, many students just out of school are apprehensive about university learning and carry with them certain attitudes about teachers that may sometimes include an adversarial mentality (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007).

Furthermore, many academics are unfamiliar with current approaches to teaching and learning in schools and have little idea about how the students are used to going about the teaching and learning process (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Finally, large first year classes generally include a very diverse group of students (Biggs, 1999; McClaren, 2001; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) and this can be difficult to cater for in an environment in which the voice of the lecturer is generally the dominant, if not the only, voice. In addition to these practical and logistical difficulties, both academics and students usually come into the lecture theatre armed with unconscious, but powerful, myths about what is expected in a university lecture.

Therefore, first year students are likely to be on a very different page from the lecturer - and even from each other - in terms of expectations and understanding of learning. In addition, first year students might not have much common ground in relation to the subject content to which they are being introduced, especially if it involves both a new academic discipline and unfamiliar theoretical concepts. The large-class lecturer not only needs to try to establish a new shared learning space, but also find ways of connecting what Palmer calls “the big stories” of the discipline with the “little stories” of the individuals in the class (1998, p. 74).

Literature review

The challenges of teaching students in large classes have been well-documented. They include the potential passivity and anonymity of the students, the distance between lecturer and students that promotes lecturer authority and transmission of information, and difficulties with conducting dialogue that plague both lecturer and students (Bath, 2008; Habeshaw, Gibbs, & Habeshaw, 1992; Herbert, Chalmers, & Hannam, 2003; Krause, 2005; Race, 2001). While research has established that deep learning requires students take personal ownership of their learning (Magolda, 2004), the lecture format tends to send the message that the lecturer is in control. A comment from Rich (as cited in Kajder, 2004, p. 64), captures the alienation that can result when she says “when someone with the authority of a teacher…describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing”. Moreover, it appears that the widespread use of PowerPoint slides reinforces the underlying pattern of lecturer control and student reception rather than the idea of a shared learning space (Yiannis, 2008).

The literature on digital storytelling indicates that it can be a pedagogically effective way of meeting some of these challenges. Digital storytelling, which can take many forms,
involves telling stories using various digital multimedia such as images, audio, and video. It can be used for the telling of personal stories, narrating historical events, and to inform or instruct the viewer on a particular concept or practice (Robin, 2008a), or for a combination of these purposes. Digital storytelling is also situated in teaching and learning in multiple ways, depending on whether the digital stories are generated by the students or by their teachers.

Student-created digital storytelling is recognised as a particularly beneficial learning tool for today’s students, a generation that has grown up with digital and cyber technologies (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007). Educationalists claim that digital storytelling can help improve student empowerment and transform students from passive receivers of information into active agents in their learning by enabling them to be more involved in the learning process (van Gils, 2005) and to take greater ownership of knowledge (Weis, Benmayor, O’Leary, & Eynon, 2002). Digital storytelling offers students valuable cognitive, affective, and social benefits (Weis et al., 2002) and fosters ‘21st Century literacy skills’ such as digital, global, technology, visual, and/or information skills (Robin, 2008a).

Although it has received less attention in the literature, teacher-created digital storytelling is now emerging as a powerful teaching tool. It is regarded as a valuable means to capture initial interest in a topic and increase student interest in exploring new ideas, link current knowledge to new knowledge, make unfamiliar or abstract content more understandable, and facilitate discussion about the concepts presented in the digital story (Ormrod, 2004; Robin, 2008a). Finally, as well as personalising the teacher/learner experience, teacher-created digital stories that are based on everyday life can make student learning more relevant and authentic (Ohler, 2005/2006). While teacher-created digital storytelling can be used to present content across a range of subjects and disciplines, scholars concerned with developing a coherent theoretical framework for the constructive use of digital storytelling advise that teachers must take into account “the interactions between content (the subject being taught), pedagogy (the teaching process being used), and [the] technology” (Robin, 2008b, p. 226).

In the following sections, we describe and evaluate our application of teacher-created digital storytelling as an instructional tool in a large first-year marketing class. We have refined it in response to our appreciation of the dynamics that influence student learning in this context.

The teaching initiative

The teaching initiative that we are developing uses elements of digital storytelling and tutor participation to build connections and enhance student engagement in the introductory marketing course, a core course for all students enrolled in the premier four-year business management degree at the [XXX name of institution removed XXX]. Approximately 700 students take the course each year, the majority of whom are first year students.

In addition to the general challenges posed by teaching in large first year classes, many first-year marketing students seem to regard marketing as a ‘sexy’ business subject, an easy-pass in comparison with accounting and finance. As revealed by the ‘definitions’ of marketing they write in the second lecture, most of these students expect marketing to be about advertising and selling. It seems that they are not expecting marketing to have a sound scientific basis. Nor are they expecting the wide range of marketing topics they are exposed to in this introductory course. However, in common with most introductory courses, an important aim of this course is to teach/learn the basic concepts, principles, and theories of marketing to provide a sound base for developing interest and knowledge in later marketing courses. In this context, teaching foundational, step-by-step marketing processes such as the consumer decision-making process can be challenging!
The topic of Consumer Behaviour comes early on in our introductory course, beginning in the second week of semester, a time when many students are grappling with the adjustment to university life and learning expectations. While the topic is definitely more appealing than some of the others (e.g., market research and pricing), consumer behaviour also has a well-established set of conceptual and theoretical principles that we are charged with introducing to marketing students at this level. The consumer decision-making process is a key aspect of consumer behaviour. At its simplest, the process can be presented as a series of five steps. But, as in the textbook for our course, these five steps can be heavy with models and theorising from the experts that have the potential to dehumanise the process and thus take it further away from students. The textbook approach can thus accentuate student alienation from the learning which often occurs in the large lecture and ignores the students’ often considerable prior experience with the subject.

Iteration 1

This teaching initiative began when we decided to apply a real-life example of consumer decision-making to teach the process in a more integrated and relevant way – in the hope that it would be more engaging for the students. Aware that this early on in the course students were not likely to be yelling one another down in the lecture theatre with stories of their personal decision-making, the lecturer decided that she would provide the example of buying a new television. Not only would her example help close the gap between theory and practice, textbook and real-life, but it would demonstrate transparency to help build trust and close the gap between lecturer and students. So she illustrated each of the steps with digital photos, starting with their “early NZ ghetto” style 20 year-old TV, through a candid shot of her sister and brother-in-law in front of their state-of-the-art plasma set-up, to a final photo of the newly purchased, splendid top-end television and DVD recorder standing proudly in the family living room.

Evaluation: At this stage the lecturer had designed the approach somewhat intuitively; it reflected her evolving teaching philosophy which she was coming to understand increasingly in terms of relationship and connection. While she did not design a formal evaluation system, her reflection on its ‘success’ led her to see that she was still missing the mark in some way. To start with, the initiative seemed to tick all the boxes. The simple digital photos ensured the story remained in the foreground and the technology in the background (Bull & Kajder, 2004; Kearney & Schuck, 2003). The digital photos recorded a real experience of the consumer decision-making process, it illustrated each of the steps, and it brought the students into her home and family life. But while the lecturer’s digital story certainly provided an integrated example of the whole consumer decision-making process, she reflected that the big flaw in her design was that this example was primarily meaningful to her - a middle-aged mother-of-five academic. Buying a top-end TV was not likely to be meaningful to her students, who at their stage in the FLC would be more likely to be watching borrowed, cast-off, or bargain-priced second-hand sets.

Iteration 2

At this stage the tutors step into the frame. Realising that we were in danger of exacerbating the lecturer-student divide with the TV example, we enlisted the help of the tutors who were signed up to work with the students in the up-coming semester. Signe, a 20-something Caucasian woman was in the process of buying her first wake-board, an expensive piece of sports equipment that would allow her to ride the wake created by her boyfriend driving a jet-boat at high speed. Perfect, a purchase that had no rightful place in a lecturer’s life. Signe’s
photo-narrative took the consumer decision-making process to a new level of meaningfulness. Here was one of the students’ tutors, someone from the teaching team but significantly closer to them than the lecturer, illustrating the theoretical process and sharing her personal life with them. The students loved it – especially the ones in her tutorial groups. Her digital story was ticking the boxes better than the lecturer’s had.

Evaluation: Reflection and informal conversation showed us that there were still flaws in this design. First, a wake-board is a specialised piece sporting gear and those of our students (domestic and international) who were not familiar with the sport would have struggled to ‘engage’ with the example. Second, in order to narrate her story to the class, it took considerable effort for the lecturer to learn the language required to communicate the intricacies of her social life (i.e., personal, non marketing-influenced word-of-mouth sources) and the technical specifications of women’s wake-boards (i.e., evaluative criteria of alternatives in her consideration set). Third, Signe graduated. With her no longer working on our teaching team, the innovation would lose its immediate appeal.

**Iteration 3**

The latest version of this teaching innovation stars another tutor, Kayleigh. Her photo-narrative differs from Signe’s purchase of a wake-board on several key points. Kayleigh’s story records her purchase of a new second-hand car, starting with several shots of her old car taken at the panel beaters after it was written off in a collision. This car was gifted to her by her grandfather to help her get to and from lectures. The collision occurred as she pulled out of a service station into a major intersection, close to the university and well known by our students. Because students are likely to be familiar with many of these elements, Kayleigh’s story is based on life events that are arguably more meaningful than the purchase of a specialised sporting good. Her information gathering again involves a (now ex-) boyfriend, as well as her best girl-friend, flatmates, and mechanic-uncle. Much of her search for alternatives was conducted via TradeMe, an online auction site extremely popular in NZ and therefore more familiar to students than a boutique board shop. Another important refinement in this version was having Kayleigh come in and narrate her own story; the first time she ‘delivered’ it straight, the second time it was a much more relaxed presentation with the lecturer and students asking questions as the story unfolded, which effectively deepens student involvement with the teaching activity.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Personal reflection and informal conversation have led to the evaluation and refinement of the initiative at each stage. Initially, our refinements were aimed primarily at heightening the connection between teacher and students and shifting the learning away from the control of the teacher. As we developed the initiative, we became increasingly aware that our process was moving into the realm of digital storytelling and that this pedagogy could provide a basis for modifying the initiative and systematically evaluating its usefulness. The move from teacher story narrated by the teacher to the most recent step when the tutor narrates her story while the teacher and the class are active questioners moves the initiative much closer to the goal of student agency and ownership of the learning, which the literature suggests is one of the most significant potential benefits of digital storytelling. The change from a story of buying a wake-board to that of buying a car would also bring the narrative into the realm of most students rather than a somewhat exclusive group.

However in order to test whether this learning process significantly impacted on the classroom environment, the active participation and the conceptual understanding of the
students, a formal evaluation process needs to be conducted. In its next iteration, we will evaluate these aspects through a questionnaire and the conduct of a focus group. Each stage thus far has involved an increase in the handing over of the content and process to the students. Based on this evolution and of the strong evidence for the benefits of students creating their own stories in the literature, it would seem appropriate to invite students to develop and present their own stories. Not only could this increase ownership and participation, but could help to foster many of the other potential skills such as collaboration, media literacy and communication. Multiple stories may also heighten student criticality in relation to the theoretical model.

Our reflections and the level of energy and engagement in the classroom suggest that we are moving in the right direction. We will use a formal evaluation process to assess the effects of the initiative more precisely and to determine whether we can push the experience to its logical conclusion of inviting students to create and present their own stories.
References