

## Chapter 12

### Telling Stories and Teachable Moments: The Possibility of Adobe Connect

*Barbara J. Dray*

With the rise in online learning, instructors continue to grapple with ways to make personal connections with their online students in heavily text-based learning environments. In face-to-face courses, personal interactions with students happen naturally. Students get to know the instructor's personality when instructors share personal stories or experiences as teachable moments that occur incidentally or in the moment in a face-to-face course. In online courses, though, instructors often struggle with replicating this impromptu style of telling personal stories or interacting with students in general (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).

Digital storytelling is one increasingly used approach to telling personal stories online. According to the University of Houston's [Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling](#) website, digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories that focus on a specific topic and contain a particular point of view. Digital stories contain some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and/or music. They vary in length, typically lasting between two and ten minutes and "range from personal tales to the recounting of historical events, from exploring life in one's own community to the search for life in other corners of the universe, and literally, everything in between" (Robin, 2009, p. 431). In the following pages, I share my experience using digital storytelling in the online courses I teach in an effort to connect with my students and to recreate those often lost teachable moments in online learning environments.

#### **Adobe Connect**

Relatively new to online learning, last year, I found myself searching for a way to infuse stories into my courses and to make personal connections with my students, so that my students could get to know me as a person as well as their instructor. About this time, I was introduced to a tool called Adobe Connect. [Adobe Connect](#) is a web conferencing tool that was created for hosting live web conferences and seminars. Adobe Connect enables you to share your computer screen with others, upload and share specific documents (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, photos, pdfs, images, etc.), surf the Web, while at the same time use a basic web cam to broadcast a video feed of your face. It also enables users to record and easily distribute recordings of their web conferences.



Initially online instructors turned to Adobe Connect to conduct synchronous activities (e.g., virtual office hours, live chat sessions). More recently, though, instructors have begun using Adobe Connect for asynchronous activities as well (e.g., recorded lectures, recorded guest presentations, digital stories, student presentations). While there are other tools that can accomplish many of the synchronous and asynchronous activities previously mentioned (e.g., Jing is a great tool to record lectures and digital stories—as long as you keep it under 5 minutes), I found that Adobe Connect serves as a nice one-stop-shop to accomplish many of these instructional activities and specifically an easy to use tool to record digital stories.

### **Telling Stories to Build Community**

Typically in the beginning of my face-to-face courses, my students and I spend the first few classes engaged in community building activities, sharing personal information about ourselves, and sharing aspirations for the course. I have tried to accomplish these same types of things in my online courses using asynchronous discussions. And while I have found that asynchronous discussions can easily accomplish *some* of these community building activities, I continued to feel disconnected from my students and often sensed that my students were not really “getting to know me” which I suspected had something to do with the heavily text based format of asynchronous discussions. I wasn’t sure though what to do about this.

After learning more about Adobe Connect, I began to think that this tool might help in addressing these problems of disconnectedness, social presence, and over use of text-based communication (see Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010 for more on this). After getting some basic training on Adobe Connect, I developed a digital story to introduce myself to students [<https://connect.cuonline.edu/p93407692/>].

While there are a number of ways you can do this, I basically selected photos of hobbies, family members, and favorite places I like to go. I then uploaded the photos to Adobe Connect through the document share pod. Once I had my photos uploaded, I thought about what I wanted to say. When I felt like I generally knew what I was going to say (i.e., the story I wanted to tell), I practiced telling my story while transitioning from picture to picture with the camera pod on. After a few practice runs, I clicked the record button and simply told my story. I addressed things like my expectations of students in the course, why I became a special educator, a little bit about my philosophy of education, and then shared about who I am when I am not teaching online, toggling between photos of my dogs and favorite places. Once I was done, I clicked the record button to stop recording and copied the URL to the recording into eCollege—the learning management system used in the School of Education and Human Development. But I didn’t stop there. I also asked students as a follow-up to introduce themselves and to share photos of themselves in an asynchronous threaded discussion. The feedback from students was positive. They commented that they appreciated being able to see me and that they felt more connected to me as their instructor. For example one student said, “I am really enjoying this way of getting to know one another. It definitely helps to see and read about classmates even though we are online.” Another student stated, “Thank you for posting your video intro. Most of my classes at UCD have been online and the intros really help me to have a connection with those in the class.” All in all I think it really added to the development of a community of learners within the online environment.

### **Telling Stories to Connect to Course Content**

As a teacher educator in special education, a central component of my classes are the stories I tell. Being a former teacher myself, I often interject stories of my teaching days as well as personal experiences with my brother who is Deaf as a way of connecting with the course content, demonstrating practical application, and providing an opportunity for students to get to know me better not only professionally as a fellow teacher but personally. I find the stories provide a rich context for us to “bring the course content to life.” Students also report feeling more connected to the material and have an easier time applying the content to their own teaching practices. In addition to telling stories to build community, I also use stories to connect students to the course content. So it was not long before I began finding ways to use Adobe Connect to tell these types of stories in my online courses. I basically use Adobe Connect to create two types of digital stories to connect students to the course content: demonstration of key concepts and as an anchor for students to apply key concepts.

### ***Demonstration of Key Concepts***

I have found that it is sometimes difficult to demonstrate key course concepts in text alone. Therefore, I began using Adobe Connect to create digital stories to demonstrate key concepts. For instance, in one of the courses I teach I have students develop an Eco-map (i.e., a graphical representation of the different systems that affect one’s life). I wanted to show students how to develop an Ecomap with a family to problem solve and identify resources accessible to a family. An Ecomap can be used as an alternative to an interview in getting to know a family and building a relationship to better support their student’s educational needs.

For this type of digital story, I told a story about my experiences of developing an Ecomap with the family of one of my past students. I uploaded photos of the student as well as sample Ecomaps from the text. I also shared my screen and showed them where in the learning management system they could find additional resources related to working with families and the chapter on alternatives to interviewing parents.

The benefit of this approach was to move beyond simply reading about how to complete an Ecomap to actually seeing and hearing how an Ecomap can be used with a real family. Students noted that prior to seeing the digital story—even after reading about the concept—they were confused, but that once they viewed the digital story where I demonstrated how I implemented the Ecomap with a family, they had a more clear understanding and were more likely to try the approach.

### ***Anchoring Application of Key Concepts***

I also use digital stories to anchor the application of key concepts for students. For instance, in a course I teach, students read about the core principles of positive behavior supports model—a school wide reform movement to promote positive behavior and increased learning opportunities in schools. Initially this concept was developed to address the behavior of individual students with significant behavior concerns but has since been scaled up as a school wide approach to promoting positive behavior. An otherwise abstract concept until seen in action, I developed a digital story of one of my students, Ricardo, as an anchor for them to identify and apply the core principles of the model. Again, I uploaded photos of the student in a variety of contexts and a PowerPoint presentation on alternative communication devices to provide a visual when talking about the student’s educational needs. I narrated the story using the camera and voice pod in Adobe Connect while toggling through photos of Ricardo and

the PowerPoint presentation. After students viewed the digital story, they participated in an online discussion forum to post the connections they made between the digital story of Ricardo and core principles of the positive behavior supports model from the reading (see below). Students really liked being able to apply the core principles to a case study and found that they understood the ideas more deeply as a result. Students also reported that they liked getting to know me better as a teacher and that the video helped to contextualize otherwise abstract concepts.

The screenshot shows a course page on CU ONLINE. The header includes the CU ONLINE logo and the course title 'Positive Behavior Support' with the instructor 'Donna Sobel, Barbara'. A navigation menu on the left lists course components like Syllabus, Required Readings, and Units 1 through 5. The main content area is titled 'INSTRUCTIONS FOR DISCUSSION #2 - APPLYING THE KEY IDEAS OF PBS MODEL'. It features a quote about self-determination, a link to a video on Ricardo's Story, and a discussion prompt asking students to map Ricardo's story to the PBS Model components. The page concludes with a request to build on peer responses and a 'Enjoy!' message.

## Conclusion

Creating digital stories in Adobe Connect has assisted me in making more authentic connections not only with the content of the course, but with my students on a personal level. The stories I create incorporate documents (e.g., .pdf, .ppt, and .doc), photos, and screen sharing to view web-based material. I hope my experience can help you think differently about the way you “present” information in your courses and engage students in the material. I have found that Adobe Connect can be a very effective and easy to use tool to create digital stories that engage students in (a) applying key concepts, (b) demonstrating skills, and (c) as a vehicle for getting to know the professor better. Whether you have used storytelling as an instructional tool in your face-to-face courses or not, I encourage you to begin experimenting with telling more

stories about yourself and the content of your course and I can't think of a better way to do this than firing up Adobe Connect and recording a story for your next course.

### **Additional Resources**

*University of Houston - Educational uses of digital storytelling*

<http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu>

A resource for educators interested in integrating digital storytelling into educational activities.

*Center for Digital Story Telling*

<http://www.storycenter.org>

An international non-profit organization focused on training, project development, and research committed to helping people tell stories from their lives.

### **References**

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- Lowenthal, P. R., & Dunlap, J. C. (2010). From a pixel on a screen to real person in your students' lives: Establishing social presence using digital storytelling. *The Internet and Higher Education, 13*(1-2), 70-72.
- Robin, B. (2008). The effective uses of digital storytelling as a teaching and learning tool. *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts*, (Vol. 2, pp. 429-440). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### **Bio**

Dr. Barbara J. Dray is an assistant professor in special education and teacher education in the school of education and human development at the University of Colorado Denver. Dr. Dray has been teaching online courses for the past several years and recently incorporated digital stories as an instructional tool. She also has been conducting ongoing research in the development of a survey to assess students' readiness for online learning with implications for institutions and faculty in the design and implementation of online learning. This research came out of the development of an online program to fulfill teacher shortages in bilingual special education.