

Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology Exploring the Use of Transmedia Storytelling in the Classroom

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If you have been in a classroom recently, you will have realized that today's students seem to have shorter attention spans than those of past generations. This is not your imagination. Attention spans are being affected by a constant bombardment of stimuli from a variety of sources. This explains why it is harder to hold our students' attention. We need to be constantly shifting activities to avoid having them "turn off". Additionally, browsing the internet has taught young people to jump from topic to topic, and to click wherever their interest takes them. Reading is no longer a linear process.

These changes do not only affect the classroom. Newspapers, as well, are losing readers and are exploring means of using digital platforms to distribute their content. One way that some newspapers are addressing this issue is through the use of transmedia narratives to tell their stories.

Transmedia refers to the use of multiple platforms to deliver content. A story, for example, can be told using text, video, infographics, animations, etc. For some examples, I recommend you check out this blog <http://www.miquelpellicer.com/2014/06/6-ejemplos-de-nuevas-narrativas-en-los-medios-de-comunicacion/>. The actual blog is in Spanish, but the first six examples are in English.

Using transmedia to tell stories has several advantages. From the point of view of the storyteller, it gives you the opportunity to explore the story from multiple angles and perspectives. You can really delve into it. From the point of view of the receiver of the content, transmedia allows you to access the information through your preferred channel. Do you prefer to listen? That is possible. Do you like to read? No problem, the text is included. Do you just want an overview? A summary in the form of an infographic is present and an option.

Transmedia is also starting to be used in education: primary, secondary, and tertiary education. One example is *Inanimate Alice* (Hovious, 2014):

Inanimate Alice marries text with sound, movie, and gaming elements to create an experiential story that invites readers to take part in the world of Alice Field, a globe-trotting girl who wants to be a game designer when she grows up. The project...has captured the imagination of teachers and students worldwide. It offers an innovative approach to twenty-first-century learning and literacies. (p.42)

Alice was originally created as a film project, but teachers have found in its characteristics of multimodality a way to engage learners and help them reach a deeper understanding of what they are reading. More importantly, Alice has also captivated students. Hovious (2014) explains:

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Inanimate Alice is an example of how transmedia storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for literacy development. The key characteristic that makes the story engaging is multimodality. In order for students to comprehend the story, they must go beyond reading words on screen—they must also make meaning out of images, sounds, and actions. Such tasks call for more than traditional text-based literacy. (p. 43)

Roswell and Walsh (2011) explain multimodality in the language classroom as “*comprehension and competence with language through a variety of modes such as image, sound, touch, multi-dimensions*” (p. 54, italics in the original). This is not a new concept; as language teachers, we have long been concerned with having our students understand and use both the spoken and written forms of the language. Multimodality becomes increasingly important nowadays; our students have access to language through many different channels, inside and outside the classroom.

The characteristics of the language classroom make it suited to teaching through transmedia. Some commercial publishers are beginning to realize that they need to include transmedia elements if they want to make their language materials relevant and attractive to today’s learners. The use of accompanying sites, videos, digital workbooks and others are all a step in the right direction.

If your course book does not offer these options, you can apply transmedia elements to your courses by looking for materials to complement it. For example, let’s say that your course book includes a unit on left-handedness and there is a reading text which accompanies the lesson. You can look for a short video which discusses the same subject, an infographic which explains how many people around the world are left-handed, a webquest to find famous lefties, a poll to find out how many of the people around you are left-handed, to name a few possibilities.

Another idea, and one that can help students develop their critical thinking skills, as well, is to look for materials that have opposing points of view. Imagine a scenario that your course book offers a unit on clean energy sources, and that it mentions wind energy. You could look for a video which deals with the negative side of wind energy—the danger to birds, for example. Having students see two opposing points of view helps them form their own opinions of the subject.

Incorporating transmedia elements into our classrooms can help us engage our students more effectively. For language learners, it offers the option of using multiple channels for learning. Learning materials can be made more attractive and more relevant for our students. Pence (2012) mentions the following:

There are various ways to define transmedia, but for an educator, the most useful definition should emphasize not just the use of a variety of media but also the need for the audience (students) to interact with the narrative. (p. 134)

This idea summarizes what should be the goal of all our classes: having our students interact with other students, the teacher, the materials, and the world at large.

Technology is changing the way our students learn. It also provides us with different ways to teach and engage with them. It is up to us to take advantage of the many options we have to enrich the learning experience for everyone involved.

References

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