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Pierce's "Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom"

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Pierce’s “Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom”

by Troy Hicks

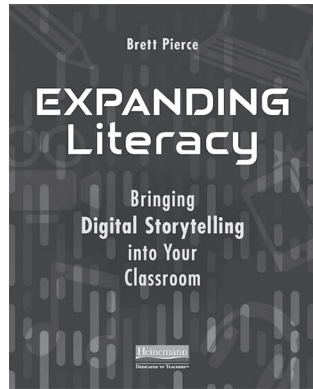
Book review of Pierce, B. (2022). *Expanding literacy: Bringing digital storytelling into your classroom*.

Heinemann.

“Digital storytelling is the capacity to communicate using text, sound, music, and imagery—still and moving,” argues Brett Pierce, in his 2022 Heinemann book, *Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom* (p. 6).

From the start, it is clear that Pierce has a vision for inviting students in the creation of videos. He broadens the definition of digital storytelling to include over two dozen different “genres and formats” including styles as diverse as a movie trailer, a nightly newscast, sketch comedy, music videos, Minecraft stories, and mockumentaries (p. 87). While these broader examples of digital video production may stretch beyond the more customary definition of “digital storytelling” as a brief, 3-5-minute personal narrative, Pierce’s goal to expand students’—and teachers’—literacy practices through the production of video is admirable, and worthy of attention from all educators, especially those of us in the English language arts (ELA).

As a former producer for Sesame Workshop and the founder of the non-profit Meridian Stories (meridian-stories.org), Pierce makes the case that an intentional approach is always best, and considers the many possible audiences, purposes, and contexts that students may encounter across the many genres for and tools of digital storytelling. Here, in his introduction and throughout the book, he provides pedagogical principles and specific examples that support the second, perhaps



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more important part of his argument: “You don’t have to use all of these tools, but they are the main components of digital storytelling” (p. 6). Moreover, in an age where we might worry about too much screentime in school, Pierce often encourages teachers to consider moving their students away from the computers for tasks such as brainstorming and storyboarding.

It is from this initial description that Pierce then weaves overlapping elements of process and product in the subsequent five chapters and detailed descriptions of over two-dozen digital storytelling activities. Pierce traces his interest in the pedagogical aspects of digital storytelling to 2011 when he watched his son, then a seventh grader, create a video that was both “making fun of Justin Bieber” and, at the same time, was “reinforcing derogatory stereotypes” (p. 1). At that moment, Pierce asked himself how he could work to “find a way to make meaningful, thoughtful digital storytelling a standard, best practice in schools” (p. 2). Drawing from a number of curricular standards and policy documents, Pierce homes in on the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” (2019), focusing specifically on the idea that our modern world “demands” that students utilize a number of interconnected skills to consume and, more importantly, create texts. He also makes connections to the idea of educational equity and preparing students

for being part of a participatory culture (referencing the work of Henry Jenkins, 2009).

With the book's stated goal of making "digital storytelling normative in the upper-elementary, middle, and high school classroom" (p. 17), Pierce makes a strong case for doing so. Having described a number of shorter digital storytelling projects in the earlier chapters—including ones that could be implemented in just one class session such as his strategy for having students write multiple captions for a single image (p. 32) or creating a brief storyboard based on three images at various points in time across a story (p. 33), Pierce uses Chapter Five (which comprises nearly one-third of the entire book's content) to share two projects, one a multi-week exploration and analysis of a piece of literature and the other an interdisciplinary STEAM project inviting students to examine intersecting issues of environmental justice. With these projects, he connects the nuts and bolts of digital video production in line with the broader pedagogical goals that align with specific skills that students need to exceed as readers and writers, speakers and listeners.

Throughout the book, Pierce combines his own experiences as the founder and director of the non-profit Meridian Stories with insights from many teachers as brief quotes about their own experiences integrating digital storytelling into their classrooms. Again, with a variety of quick, one-period class activities and many thoroughly described projects, Pierce does make a compelling case for helping students develop skills that "builds their digital vocabulary to communicate effectively with the world—to think of ideas and solutions and artistic concepts through the lens of . . . photography, character, voice, music, games, podcasting, setting . . . and words" (p. 148). While it would have been helpful to see the work of students—both process work and final products—represented in the book, there are numerous examples on the Meridian Stories website that teachers and their students can explore.

My one concern—as an educator who hears students describe a product as being "a YouTube video" or "a Tik Tok video" without talking in more detail about

the genre, style, length, and overall production quality of that video—let alone the individual or group that created it—is that Pierce has lumped so many genres of video production into the category of "digital storytelling." Instead, I would encourage educators to begin by looking at his list of possible genres and formats (p. 87) and to have students think critically about the similarities and differences between those many examples, perhaps using the Five Key Questions of Media Literacy (n.d.) while looking at samples of each genre.

Still, in the end, Pierce has provided a clear argument for, yes, "expanding literacy" in our classrooms as well as demonstrating how the collaborative aspects of the work and specific skills being taught make digital storytelling a justifiable portion of any ELA curriculum. And, without spoiling the story, his son comes to some new understanding about the power of storytelling as well.

Both for its numerous, practical lesson ideas and because of his clear passions for helping students tell stories with passion and purpose, I recommend Pierce's *Expanding Literacy* for any teacher looking to step into digital storytelling practices, as well as for those who are looking for new approaches to the work that they already do.

References

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Author Biography

Dr. Troy Hicks is a professor of English and education at Central Michigan University. He directs the Chipewewa River Writing Project and collaborates with K–12 colleagues to explore how they implement newer literacies in their classrooms. Dr. Hicks has authored dozens of resources including books, articles, chapters, blog posts, and other media broadly related to the teaching of literacy in our digital age. He can be reached at <hickstro@gmail.com>.