Productive Dissonance: Using Digital Narratives in the Australian Literature Classroom[1]

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Discussions of the nature and fate of Australian literary studies—at least in the Australian university context—more often than not focus on *what* is taught and the *institutional challenges* that confront academics in the field.[2] These are certainly valid concerns, and ones that are voiced in relation to other humanities disciplines in the contemporary university. Yet, as important as these matters are, the attention paid to them tends to occlude a number of perhaps equally significant considerations, namely *how* we teach the subject, to *whom*, and *how our students learn*. This essay considers the utility of novel approaches to the teaching of Australian literature using digital media technology: namely, digital narratives. It reflects on the experience of using digital essays in an advanced undergraduate course on Australian literature; considers the benefits and challenges of doing so; and offers some advice to teachers considering similar strategies.

At the risk of alienating some, one could contend that from the outside, the university teaching of Australian literature looks fairly conservative. This is certainly the case in Australia, and we suspect it applies elsewhere. First of all, the field relies on pedagogical methods inherited from early twentieth-century English literary studies: in the manner of teaching and learning employed, there is not much that superficially distinguishes Australian literature from other topics in literary studies. Moreover, the residuum of cultural nationalism as an organizing principle and *raison d'être* of the field—despite the best efforts of scholars to critique and oppose it—incites the ambivalence of many contemporary students toward Australian literary studies (on this point see Penn-Edwards). Perhaps the most pressing challenge for teachers of Australian literature—and for literary studies academics generally—is to develop ways of teaching our subject that are responsive to contemporary trends in pedagogical practices. And this also entails being cognizant of the environments—specifically the virtual and online environments—within which many of our students will work when they graduate.

In this respect, it is becoming more urgent to consider how we take advantage of progress in digital technologies. Advocates of Web 2.0 technologies in education,

and those who espouse the realities of transliteracy and "digital nativism,"[3] challenge all instructors within the humanities—and not least those in literary studies—to consider how to teach in ways that are responsive to developments in computing technologies and visual cultures; that are consistent with trends in contemporary high school English Studies curricula that promote the teaching of multi-modal critical skills and the development of transliteracy;[4] and that are responsive to the increasing emphasis on active, hybrid, problem-based, and collaborative pedagogies in tertiary environments. A growing number of university teachers advocate the benefits of multimedia and digital practices in their classrooms in achieving these aims, extol them as a means to ensure the relevance of subject disciplines, and promote them as tools of engagement to facilitate student learning. Digital storytelling/narrative making is one such practice.

In their broadest sense "digital narratives"—or, as they are more commonly termed, "digital stories"—are multi-media narratives produced using audio-visual recording software programs that are frequently packaged on PC and Apple computers, tablets, and personal mobile devices. Relatively simple to make, digital stories/narratives come in a range of forms, but generally include photomontage and/or moving images, a voiceover and soundtrack. This essay examines the findings of a three-year project to integrate a digital narrative teaching and learning activity into an advanced undergraduate course on contemporary Australian literature. It outlines the steps taken to introduce the activity; the nature of the task and the kind of work students produced; and the reception of the task by students. With reference to the latter, it draws upon focus group and survey data to examine students' and teacher's (the first named author) experiences of using digital narratives and reflects on the perceived learning benefits of using digital narratives. This essay also discusses the practicalities and value of using digital narratives within the contemporary Australian literature classroom. And it concludes with a consideration of the specific advantages that such activities offer students in English studies, namely the manner in which this activity generates the kind of "productive dissonance" necessary to the development of students' evolving critical practice.

<div align="center">The Process</div>

From 2009 to 2012, the first-named author was convener of "Representing Contemporary Australia" (HEA319), a third-year undergraduate course offered through the English Studies program in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Tasmania.[5] In 2010, a digital narrative activity was introduced to the course. The design, development, and implementation of this teaching and learning activity was supported by a teaching development grant, which allowed the lecturer to travel to the Australian

Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, Victoria, for training in how to make digital stories. The grant also provided for the design and implementation of a formal evaluation methodology. The evaluation procedure was vital to ensuring the successful integration of the digital narrative project into the unit. Amongst other things, it gave students—many of whom had no prior experience with such activities—an opportunity to meaningfully comment upon and help shape the project.

The digital narrative project ran for six weeks during the thirteen-week semester of the course. Students were introduced to the task in the first lecture and were asked to reflect on the following questions: "What does 'Australian literature' mean to you? How does the experience of reading novels and poems, and viewing film, reflect and/or influence your sense of who you are and where you come from?" In response to these questions, each student created a three- to five-minute digital narrative.

In the last ten years or so, teachers in different institutional and disciplinary settings have been using digital stories and narratives in their classrooms and evaluating their utility. There is a now a reasonably large body of literature on how to make and use digital stories and the benefits of doing so.[6] It would appear that digital stories are also being used more frequently in primary and secondary school settings.[7] The Australian high school national curriculum for English requires primary and secondary students to develop skills in the use of digital and/or multimedia technologies. English students in year 10, for example, need to demonstrate that they can "[c]reate sustained texts, including texts that combine specific digital or media content, for imaginative, informative, or persuasive purposes that reflect upon challenging and complex issues" (ACARA). Given the relative simplicity of making digital stories and essays, it is likely that high school English students will become better acquainted with them and more adept at making them, and this will in turn shape their expectations of English studies as they move into tertiary education.

A number of claims have been made about the benefits of teaching with digital stories. Michael Coventry suggests that digital narratives can facilitate nontraditional ways for students to explore "texts and contexts" (166). Rina Benmayor argues that digital stories can facilitate the teaching of theory by showing "students how theory emerges from personal experience and how theorizing is both intellectual and creative [. . . It] helps demystify theory and empower students to become theorizers of their own historical and cultural experiences" (200). As well, it has been claimed that digital stories can be particularly powerful tools to foster engagement for students who are new to academic writing, or who have had previous experience in "nontraditional" educational settings (Oppermann).

The latter was a particularly pertinent issue for the present study. Many of the students who enroll in HEA319 are "first in their family" to attend university. And a number of them enter university through nontraditional pathways. It was hoped

that the digital narrative, introduced early in the semester, would allow these students to intellectually engage with the course texts and themes in ways that mitigated their anxiety in relation to essay research and drafting. As well as these potential benefits, in the case of "Representing Contemporary Australia," it was felt that digital narratives would provide a context for students to explore a core assumption of the field: namely, the manner in which Australian literature expresses and unsettles a sense of Australian identity. Thus it was hoped that the digital narrative project would enable student engagement with the film and literary texts in the course in ways that related to their own experiences; facilitate their understandings of the texts through creative personal responses and problem-based approaches to textual analysis; and complement their engagements in critical essay research and writing.

We should note here our use of the term "digital narrative" rather than "digital story." While much of the conceptual design and justification for this project came from the primary and scholarly literature on digital storytelling, we decided that it was appropriate to change the terminology and to label the exercise a "digital narrative" task. The term "digital storytelling" has a very particular lineage.[8] Digital storytelling relates to a set of cultural practices developed in a number of ways outside the university environment. In particular, we would contend that developers of digital storytelling more often than not promote them as a *goal* and *outcome* rather than as part of a process. In the Australian literature course, we used them as part of a pedagogical *process*: the narrative these products tells can be personal, but it is emphasized that they must be critical and reflective. The term "narrative" is less value-laden than "storytelling," at least in the context of much literature on digital storytelling that frequently draws upon notions of personal and therapeutic transformation.

The exercise was explained to students on the first day of the semester. Students were asked to begin reflecting on the exercise straightaway. In the second week, training workshops were conducted by faculty educational development staff. This involved introducing students to a set process. First, students were given details on drafting a script; developing a storyboard; gathering images, music and sounds, video, and other materials; and then converting these materials into digital formats. Students were then led through the process of creating the digital narrative in iMovie by adding images; recording a narration; creating a soundtrack; adding transitions, titles, sound effects, and credit sequences; and then exporting the file. Students were provided with a schedule of activities to guide them through the six weeks of the project. And they were given advice about copyright and the appropriate use of the finished videos. As well, students were provided with a range of resources both online and physical; computers in the computer lab were set aside for their use; and a resources area was established on the course's website. The latter included exemplars of digital stories, links to relevant websites, and "how-to"

guides. Students were also given access to a digital narrative made by the lecturer that was based on his own research interests.

In addition to scripting and creating a digital narrative, students were also required to write an 800-word critical reflection that addressed their experience of making the digital narrative and that engaged with relevant primary and critical material examined in class. This was a crucial part of the exercise, and students completed the reflection essay one week after submitting their narrative and having received some initial feedback from the lecturer. For both exercises, students were provided with detailed criteria-referenced assessment marking sheets. These rubrics were adapted from tools available on the Internet. We will discuss the issue of assessment more fully below.

The Digital Narratives

When students were introduced to the task, they were more often than not intrigued by the exercise: very few had experience with such activities or with making their own digital videos or presentations. As well, most were coy about reflecting on their experiences with Australian literature: as with many contemporary Australian students, as a group they reported having relatively minor experience with Australian literature but thought that, being university graduates, they should have a better knowledge of their national literature.[9] Ironically, for some, once they commenced the exercise, they interrogated the meaning of "Australian literature" and discovered that it was open to a variety of interpretations, some of which were applicable to their own reading experiences and habits.

An example of this is reflected in one particular student's work. When asked in the first class, "What does Australian literature mean to you?" the student replied that she didn't read Australian literature at all, and so Australian literature meant very little to her. When asked to reflect on the nature of Australian literature, her first impressions were of the poetry of Henry Lawson and A. B. Paterson (and such conservative choices were often voiced by students). Yet, as she commenced her project she realized, as she put it, "most of my bookshelves are lined with Australian authors" who had helped to "[shape] her childhood." That most of the texts were considered "fantasy fiction" led her to consider why they were not included in the Australian literary canon. Working on the digital narrative gave this student space and time to reflect on the idea of "Australian literature" as well as the nature of "genre" and "literary" fiction. Why do certain works by Australian authors earn the privilege of being classed as "Australian literature" while others do not? The digital narrative project gave the student a context for examining this question in a way that was immediately relevant to her own identification as a reader of genre fiction.

For some students, the exercise took on a deeply personal tone while others adopted a more distanced and critical perspective. In the case of the former, Australian literature was valued as a medium through which personal memory and family history and identity were evoked. Students frequently reflected on their experiences of canonical Australian children's literature or fiction, with soundtracks that included songs like John Williamson's "Hey True Blue" or Paul Kelly's "I Remember," which often reinforced a highly sentimental tone in the script. While such presentations often foregrounded the "white Australian" identity of the student, and at times (problematically) conflated the personal and familial with national identity, the work of a Malaysian student provided a contrast. For this student, reading Australian literature was as much an exercise in gaining insight into a "national" character as it was in appreciating the "universal" questions and dilemmas expressed in all "good" literature. Using Nam Le's story "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" from *The Boat*, the student reflected on the significance of a national literature to excite and question identity formation, and Australian literature as a site for challenging regressive cultural stereotypes and expectations. Taking as his cue, the line "That's all I've ever done, traffic in words" (Le 6), the student considered how reading Nam Le's story provided him with a point of identification with which to consider how Australian literature can offer the non-Anglo students a way of appreciating a multicultural society that seeks to respect sameness and difference.

While the work of the students described above at times verged on the idealistic and utopian—and displayed a number of ironies and discontinuities in the choice of sound and imagery to accompany their narrations—it is important to recognize that in all cases the digital narrative was not an end in itself. Rather, it provided the context for further discussion, investigation, and critique in the context of the authors and works included in the course. The digital narrative, in a sense, gave the lecturer a firm understanding of the kinds of experiences, pre-conceptions, and prejudices that the students were bringing to the classroom. It provided an effective way of engaging the students in a conversation that addressed the main themes of the first half of the course. In the first six weeks, students were introduced to a number of key concepts with regard to the nature and preoccupations of the criticism of Australian literature (identity, nationalism, landscape, gender, class, Indigeneity, and ethnicity) and how these relate to contemporary circumstances (including debates about the supposed "crisis" in Australian literary studies). Students read stories from Nam Le's *The Boat*, Angela Betzien's play *Hoods*, the poems of Sam Wagan Watson, and viewed Matthew Saville's film *Noise*. As they did, they also read selections of critical works that reflect on the preoccupations of Australian literature—in terms of class, gender, and race—and they considered the meanings and implica-

tions of cultural nationalism. A core theme of this section of the course—apart from the question of just what *is* Australian literature—is the representation of "ordinary life" and "ordinariness" in Australian writing. From the perspective of the lecturer, the digital narrative facilitated students' understanding of these ideas and their aptitude in applying them to their study of contemporary Australian texts. Furthermore, the digital narrative project provided students with a basis to have their ideas tested before developing their understanding further through the second major assessment task, namely an analytical research essay.

<div align="center">STUDENT FEEDBACK</div>

How did students react to the experience of working with digital narratives? A formal evaluation program was built into the project and student feedback was obtained through mandated student evaluation of teaching and learning (SETL) questionnaires, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data; individual student reflections in critically reflective essays that complemented the digital narrative; and focus-group interviews with the 2010 and 2011 cohorts. Here we consider the feedback provided by students within the focus group interviews.[10]

Students' comments on their digital narrative project reflected four aspects of their learning: motivation, skill development, understanding of course content, and emotion. In terms of the latter, while most students initially felt, in their own words, "daunted," "excited," "happy," "freaked out," "worried," "concerned," and "terrified" by the task, they recognized the potential for learning that could result. Also, they understood the value of peer support that was implicit in the exercise, an observation that is consistent with the pedagogical literature that highlights the utility of peer learning (e.g., Havnes).

Students reported enhanced motivation for learning in the unit as a direct result of undertaking "something different." Being able to complete an exercise in which they "didn't have to write another essay for once" was "appreciated" and "rewarding," even if time consuming. Also, for 2011 and 2012 students at least, the access to previous students' work apparently enhanced their motivation for engaging with the content and the assessment task.[11] Perhaps most significantly, students reported enhanced understanding of course content as a result of completing the digital narrative exercise. This aspect emerged in students' reflective essays and in their focus-group feedback. For many, the digital narrative allowed them to investigate issues of specific relevance to contemporary Australian literature studies. It gave them an opportunity to relate their personal experiences to their understandings of the field in a manner that is not possible in an analytical essay with its expectation of third-person objectivity. On the whole, students reported appreciating the opportunity to

use their examinations of the unit material to reflect on the specifics of their own identity formation. In this regard, the students' reflections are consistent with the claims made for digital stories by researchers (see, for example, Benmayor).

For some students, the digital narrative project provided a context to consider how Australian literature related to their personal lives; it gave them a chance to consider how they identified "with Australian literature and culture" and "was also a personal growth thing." The personalized nature of the task apparently facilitated a greater level of engagement for some students. One student claimed that it "provided [for] a deeper understanding and respect for the unit." Another claimed that she "could barely remember what Australian literature I had seen or read until I did the digital narrative." Another stated, "Developing a concise script, sharing my ideas, selecting images, and recording the script contributed to my understanding of Australian literature and what it means to me [. . .] it assisted in the development of my idea in relation to connections between the work of [Australian writers]."

Student reflections on the exercise relate to a variety of themes. Important amongst these is that the exercise gave students insight into how the design of the course aligned with the teaching and learning objectives. Overall, the feedback collected suggests that students responded positively to the digital narrative project and felt that their learning outcomes—as they perceived them—were enhanced.

Issues: Assessment, Benefits, and Challenges

If introducing the digital narrative exercise was successful in facilitating a perceived deeper engagement with Australian literature for students, then this is in part due to significant institutional support embedded in the implementation project. The initial investment of time and energy to establish the project allowed for more straightforward implementation in subsequent years. That said, there were a number of clear challenges in implementing this project. First of all, it was time consuming and resource intensive. A great deal of effort was expended before and during the semester to ensure that students were provided with a clear and effective learning scaffold that aligned with the aims of the course.

Related to this was the development of an appropriate assessment protocol. This was adapted from materials originally developed by Gail Matthews-DeNatale. The digital narrative is assessed on seven criteria: the establishment of a point of view; the posing of a significant question; an appropriate script (judged in terms of the prose employed, as well as the quality of the vocal delivery and the audio recording); an engaging emotional tone that is appropriate to the subject matter; use of images; economy of presentation; and appropriate crediting (Matthews-DeNatale). In the literature on digital storytelling, there is much consideration on the topic of

aesthetic expectations, and there is an ongoing debate as to whether it is reasonable to expect students' work to be "broadcast quality." How to assess students' work is an ongoing issue. Students were advised that their work was not expected to be broadcast quality, and as the audience for digital narratives is composed of their peers in the course, the narratives were not intended for public viewing.

Dealing with student anxiety was another important issue. The students who have undertaken the project have not been the "digital natives" (Prensky) that many educational theorists claim are increasingly populating our classrooms. While most of the students to date have been computer literate, the digital narrative exercise has been perceived as novel. Nevertheless, most indicated, for example, that they had never used video editing software. It was clear that the time and resources that went into developing the learning scaffolding around the project had been very beneficial, as the previous student responses suggest.

Nevertheless, students needed time to understand and adjust to the demands of the project. Perhaps not surprisingly, some found it a challenge to keep up with the recommended schedule. The pace of the project and the time commitment for students meant that great care was needed to ensure that energy was not taken away from other components of the course, that is, from weekly reading and class discussions. This is an ongoing issue that is being addressed each time the course is offered.

Productive Dissonance

Does the digital narrative project facilitate enhanced learning in Australian literature? As the feedback from students and the teaching staff reported above would suggest, the digital narrative exercise seemed to provide a rich complement to the teaching and learning regime for an advanced undergraduate course in Australian literary studies. The benefits observed by those who have researched digital storytelling were evident during the introduction of digital narratives to HEA319. However, it is clear that implementing digital narratives brings with it a number of distinct challenges as well as benefits. And the experience of the lecturer in preparing the exercise reinforces the need for effective and well-resourced support to ensure the success of such pedagogical innovations.

Perhaps the most pressing challenge facing the field of Australian literary studies—indeed any area of literary and cultural studies—concerns not *what* we teach but *how* we teach. Using digital narratives will not lead to a revolution in OzLit classrooms; indeed, using digital narratives is likely not appropriate in every literary studies classroom. Yet, in a globalized and highly competitive higher education industry—and in a world in which more of our engagements with texts are through e-books and other digital forms—employing techniques like digital stories may be one pedagogically effective

response from within the field to contemporary changes within the humanities more broadly, as they increasingly take on a "digital" character. While certainly not a replacement for other forms of teaching and learning (the standard prose critical research essay, the class presentation, and so on), digital narratives offer a means of complementing traditional pedagogies with skill sets that will better equip our students for the diversity of professional and intellectual contexts within which they work when they graduate.

More importantly, it seems to us that digital narratives are an effective way of facilitating meaningful learning encounters between teachers and students. By inviting students to reflect on the course materials and themes in relation to their own experiences, and in a manner that is challenging as well as entertaining, the digital narrative exercise opens up a space that allows students—particularly those who hitherto have had an attenuated experience with reading Australian writing—to engage more deeply with Australian literature.

Yet, if this is the case, then what is it about digital narratives that achieves such effects? And what if anything is the specific utility of making digital narratives for Australian literature students? We would answer these questions by first suggesting that the utility of digital narratives for any English studies student lies in part in what we call their "productive dissonance." When viewing the student-produced digital narratives from the last few years, one can't help but notice the frequent disjuncture between the different layers of the texts. It is observable, for example, between what students "say" in their voiceovers and the images they use to accompany their verbal claims and/or the soundtracks that they employ to create particular tones. At other times, inconsistency is evident to a lesser or greater degree in the way the students answer the two particular questions: "What does 'Australian literature' mean to you?" and "How does the experience of reading novels and poems, and viewing film, reflect and/or influence your sense of who are and where you come from?" However the incongruities may arise, they provide valuable moments of reflection; they are not simply demonstrations of students' lack of technical skills or critical sophistication (although, of course, they can be those, too). Such moments of incongruity or dissonance, it seems to us, provide very powerful demonstrations of the students' emerging critical consciousness. In simple terms, they reflect the struggle between the knowledge, experiences, and assumptions students bring to the classroom and the set of values they encounter when they enter it. This is akin to the "disorienting dilemmas" that Jack Mezirow describes as symbolic of transformative adult learning.

One of the tasks that students of Australian literature need to achieve as they work their way through the course is to become aware of themselves as part of a valuing community of critics. In doing so they need to become acquainted with

and understand the different regimes of value that intersect within and inform that community. As John Frow defines them, regimes of value are "semiotic institution[s] generating evaluative regularities under certain conditions of use, and in which empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated" (144). In the present case, that means understanding the dispositions, discourses, and interpretive practices of the field of Australian literary studies. No community is unified; within any valuing community there are a range of positions that an individual can occupy. In learning the critical language and predispositions of OzLit, students learn the skills to locate their own positions within that community. This is an ongoing process of engagement, inquiry, and reflection. It doesn't simply commence when students enter our university classrooms, and it (hopefully) won't end when they complete their course. But taking a position should not be an easy accommodation to a set of critical and interpretive codes. In fact, our ambition as educators in literary studies is to assist our students to develop "the ability to switch codes, to move readily between different practices of reading and valuation" (Frow 154). Acquiring that ability means, in part, being able to address the inconsistencies, the contradictions, and the dissonances that inevitably arise when one engages in criticism.

Activities like digital narrative-making are particularly powerful in this regard. By requiring students to produce a response to a set of texts and themes using multiple modalities—words, images, sounds—one has a powerful tool for considering how students' critical reasoning is developing: where they are "coming from," so to speak; how entrenched certain preconceptions may be; and how effectively the students are able to engage with the critical challenges of the course materials and themes. The dissonance produced by digital narratives provides an insight into the evolution of students' critical awareness and produces space for the kinds of conversations and reflections that lead to deeper learning. So, quite apart from the attractions of such exercises as being consistent with the new opportunities offered by the digital classroom, digital narratives can be seen as facilitating the traditional goals of Australian literary education, including, namely, facilitating students coming to a realization of their place within a community of critics of Australian literature.[12]

Notes

[1] Parts of this paper include material published elsewhere: see Robert Clarke and Sharon Thomas. Funding to support this project was provided through a Teaching Development Grant provided by University of Tasmania. The implementation and ongoing development of the project is supported by the staff of Flexible Education Office of the Faculty of Arts, University of Tasmania.

[2] For a range of views on these issues, see for example: Hassall; and, Doe, McLean Davies, and Mead. For an alternative perspective, see Gelder.

[3] See, for example, Brown and Adler; Prensky; Thomas et al.

[4] See, for example, the ACARA webpage.

[5] The course is now titled "Australian Literature" (HEN314).

[6] See, for example, Oppermann; Benmayor; Barrett; Ganley and Vila; Leon; and, Mellon.

[7] See Weiss et al.; Dogan and Robin; and, Tucker.

[8] See Lambert; Meadows; and, Hartley and McWilliam.

[9] This is consistent with other reported findings. See, for example, Penn-Edwards.

[10] Further detail of the students' feedback is reported elsewhere: see Clarke and Thomas.

[11] One student made specific note of the lecturer providing his own digital narrative as an exemplar: "[I]t was really good because teachers don't always put up what they have done and it just made it a lot clearer."

[12] It is worth mentioning here the potential synergies between our notion of "productive dissonance" and that of "productive ignorance" proposed by Michael Singh, professor of education, University of Western Sydney. Singh encourages us to consider the pedagogical potential of teacher ignorance for engaging international students in knowledge production and exchange. Ignorance can open pathways to the development of new knowledge; inquiry requires acceptance of ignorance. The outcome is a cyclical process where ignorance and knowledge are intertwined: in seeking to overcome ignorance we produce new knowledge, and through new knowledge we concede new areas of ignorance (Singh 34). To what degree, we might ask, is the goal of "productive ignorance" (and hence knowledge production) enhanced through the kind of facilitation of "productive dissonance" that we believe can be fostered through digital narrative making?

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