Traditional Stories Go Green

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"I know only one thing about the technologies that await us in the future, we will find ways to tell stories with them," from *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Learning, Literacy and Creativity* (Corwin Press, 2007).

What happens when traditional storytelling meets The Matrix? The answer is DEOST, Digitally Enhanced Oral Storytelling. Anyone on the set of "The Matrix," "I Robot," or a number of other recent movies would see actors holding forth "telling stories" in a large green room. After a scene has been recorded, editors replace the green color with images using chroma-key editing. Incidentally, chroma-key editing is also used in nearly every weather broadcast we watch on television. The weather map the announcer points to is actually a green screen that has been filled with satellite images and other weather information.

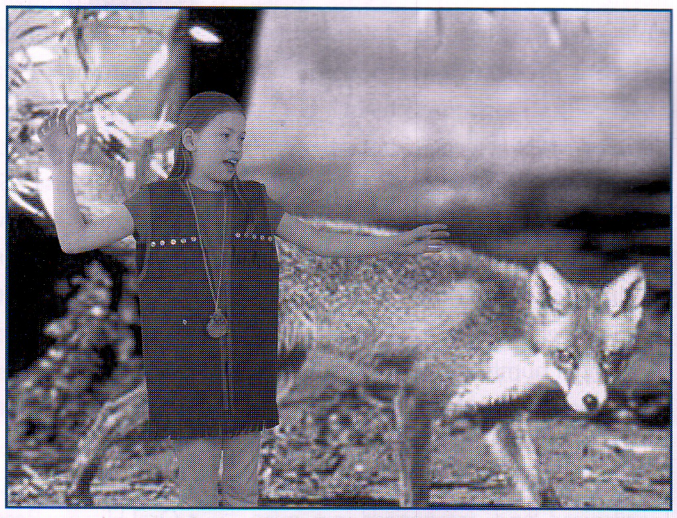
Storytellers are blending telling stories with digital technology

Like much of the technical magic that characterizes the digital age, chroma-key editing began as an expensive tool for specialists and has become an inexpensive tool accessible to any hobbyist with a garden variety laptop computer. As a result, storytellers are experimenting with blending the timeless art of telling stories with the evolving opportunities offered by digital technology.

In one of my typical DEOST projects, students tell stories in traditional oral fashion in a makeshift green room, created by hanging up a green backdrop or by actually painting a wall green. Either method is cheap and easy to do. While the results might not be broadcast quality, they are acceptable within a school setting. Besides, the goal is to produce authentic storytelling, not slick media.

As part of the story development process, students create artwork or select images that illustrate key points

In front of the green screen, in this case a wall that was painted green.



In front of a picture of European red fox downloaded from the Internet and used with permission from CSIRO (c).

in their stories. Students' storytelling performances are recorded within their green room, and their pictures are then added behind their performance using free or cheap chroma-key editing software. The final product is then burned to a DVD, which provides a wonderful piece of school work for students to take home to parents and show to the community.

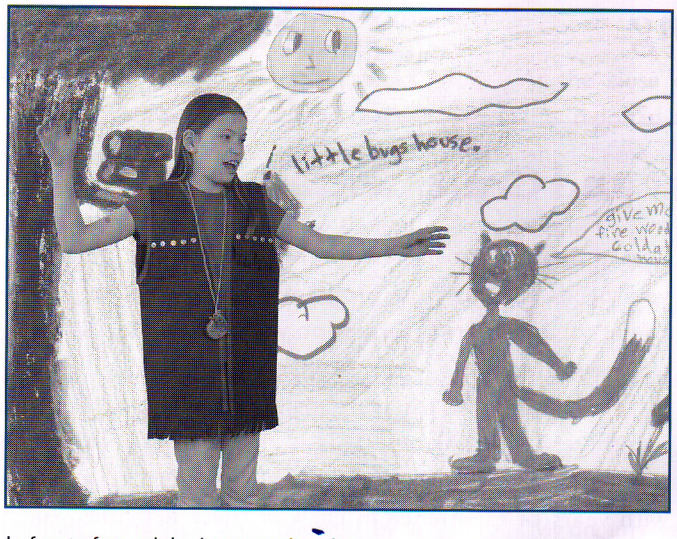
Original artwork usually consists of crayon or pencil drawings created on regular paper, making it easy to produce within the financial and scheduling constraints of a typical classroom. Artwork is then scanned using an inexpensive scanner (mine cost $80) so it can be included in the digital story. Other options for background images include digital photos, video footage, and pictures of anything scanable, including personal papers, old photos, and objects that are reasonably two-dimensional. Students also like to use images downloaded from the Internet. However, this introduces "fair use" issues that teachers need to address.

DEOST puts the story first, and the technology second.

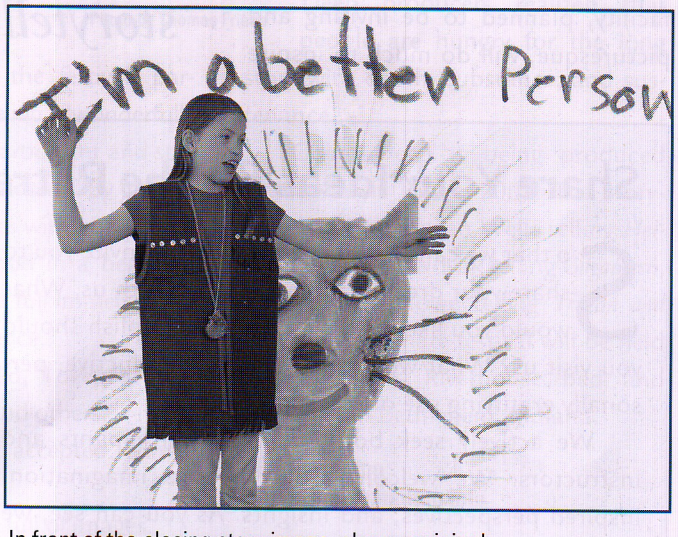
DEOST projects offer students a rich learning experience by facilitating the "DAOW" (pronounced "Tao") of literacy. This integrates four of the most important aspects of literacy needed by today's students: Digital, Art, Oral, and Writing. Part of digital literacy is "media literacy," the ability to detect, evaluate, and apply media persuasion. When students are involved with a DEOST project, they see firsthand how a media tool like chroma-key editing is used to create illusion, which in turn enables them to think more critically about the media they consume.

Of the many new media projects I do with students, I am particularly partial to DEOST because of this simple fact: if all of the technology failed, the project would still be successful. Students would have told their own stories in front of an audience and produced the same artwork and written artifacts for assessment. There just would not have been a DVD of the final, chroma-edited performance. DEOST puts the story first and the technology second. The result is that technology is used to support the story, rather than the other way around.

Jason Ohler (www.jasonohler.com/storytelling) is first and foremost a storyteller, telling tales of the future that are grounded in the past. He is also a writer, teacher, international keynote speaker, and lifelong digital humanist.



In front of an original crayon drawing.



In front of the closing story image, also an original crayon drawing.