

Using “Storybird” in Young Learners’ Creative Writing Class

by LAURA GIACOMINI



Major changes in technology have had an influence on education. Teachers cannot neglect the impact of new technologies and fail to incorporate them in their teaching practice because that would not cater to many students’ needs. Ignoring technological advances would also entail not benefiting from an array of online teaching resources and academic material. The question that arises then is: why not make use of the tools at our fingertips?

I reflected upon my own teaching practice and decided it was time I tried something innovative in my classes. I have been exploring different online tools and have chosen Storybird as part of the new media to exploit in creative writing lessons. In this article, I will share the experience of using this website (www.storybird.com) in the classes I teach and describe the effect it had on learners’ writing process.

The first step is to explore the online tool yourself. I accessed the website and made sure I had a good command of it before presenting it to students. What I found interesting about Storybird is that it combines art and writing. You are provided with works of art presented in sequence as if they were part of the plot of a story. However, you decide which images to choose, how to order them, and what story you want to tell. That is, after choosing some artwork, you can start writing your story. The site gives you the options of writing a long-form book, a poem, or a picture book.

Before taking the idea into the classroom, I created two Storybird class accounts, one for each of the groups of students I teach. The rationale for doing this is that each of the class accounts is private; only the teacher and the students in that class can read what their classmates have written once they have published it. No outsider has access to the account or can contact the students. To protect students' privacy, it is best to have one account per group and not to mix the virtual classrooms.

GETTING STARTED

After writing a Storybird text myself, I showed it to students to give them an idea of what they were going to work on. I then guided them in logging in to their own accounts with the usernames and passwords provided by the site. Students had to change this original password; information about that was on a card I put in their communication notebooks so that parents had access to it.

The students were genuinely enthusiastic about using the website, and they were ready to take an active role in this new writing endeavor. Thanks to the online tutorials and myriad tools the Internet presents, it was not difficult to utilize Storybird.

To sustain students' enthusiasm, I decided not to grade their first Storybird assignment and requested that they write a ten-page picture book based on the artwork that inspired them the most. I even included a tutorial to foster their autonomy. It was highly rewarding to see

how seriously students took this new project. This motivation to write a narrative story was translated into motivation to use English because the students were putting into words their creative ideas. Not only did they learn new vocabulary items and grammar structures, but they also recycled ones they knew.

The students wrote their first Storybird story at school. It took them three sessions to complete the assignment. When some of them finished early, they asked me if they could write another story using the website while their classmates concluded their tasks. On no account does this happen when they are writing on paper; once they finish a piece of writing, I encourage revision, and when they finish that, they hand in their papers and then do something else. They never ask to continue writing.

After using Storybird, some of them even inquired if they could write in Spanish, their L1. Because they had already complied with the tasks I had assigned in English, I thought they should be allowed to write in their L1 because they had an inner drive to do so. When I informed coworkers and the school authorities about the outcome of using Storybird, they were delighted. One of them even witnessed how, as I came into the classroom and greeted the students, they asked me when they were going to use Storybird again. This was motivating, both for my students and for me.

ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT

The second assignment was more guided and had a different objective. This time, the students wrote about personal experiences. They used Storybird while making meaningful connections and using certain language structures they had already learnt. In this case, they were asked to write a story using any artwork tagged "snow." Although teachers should use tags that are appropriate for their context and for students' experiences, I gave my students the option to invent part of the story, or all of it, in case some of them did not wish to share details about something that really happened to them. For instance, they could write about their winter holidays or their recent visit to Chile on a

cultural and educational exchange program. Their work had to have a minimum of ten pages and a maximum of 20 pages. In addition, they had to use appropriate tenses and at least five vocabulary items they had learnt, and they also had to include reported speech (which they had recently studied) at least once. (Of course, other teachers might change these requirements, as appropriate.) The impact of this activity was remarkable. The students were so enthusiastic about this task that some of them willingly stayed during break time to finish their stories, even when I was not around.

My role in this project was that of facilitator—going around to see if students needed help with the website or with how to express certain ideas in English. However, students were helping each other and did not rely solely on my assistance to advance their writing. Having a more powerful, active, and autonomous role has rendered students more confident when using English. And besides writing their own narratives in English, students read the ones published on the website, getting additional exposure to the language.

REFLECTIONS

In my teaching practice, I do not follow a specific method; rather, I use a combination of strategies I find enriching and successful. By employing Storybird as one more tool for

teaching creative writing in English language class, I made an effort to maximize learning opportunities through meaningful learner involvement. Students were not only highly motivated to write in English by means of a technological device, but they were also in control of their learning experience.

In order to benefit from the use of Storybird, I had to feel comfortable with the website and ensure we had the necessary elements to accomplish the tasks—that is, the right connectivity and one netbook per student. Bringing technology into the classroom may not be a viable idea for all teachers due to the fact that technical glitches may arise and that some teachers may not be as computer-literate as their students. Nevertheless, it is a sound decision to overcome certain fears and undertake the challenge of innovation in your classes not only for your students' benefit but also for your own. The students' engagement with the task motivated me even further to maintain these sorts of practices because it also compelled me to learn something new and continue growing as a professional.

Laura Giacomini is from Argentina. She has been teaching English as a foreign language for ten years in a variety of contexts. She holds a BA in English Language Teaching and is working toward an MA in English Literature.