



Austin Film Festival's Digital Storytelling Curriculum:

A Deep Dive Into Story as a Critical Means of Communication and Creative Expression

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Abstract: Austin Film Festival's Digital Storytelling Curriculum examines the art of storytelling as a critical tool for communication. Developed collaboratively with Austin Film Festival and Austin Independent School District secondary English teachers, Digital Storytelling is nine-week, English language arts screenwriting curriculum in which all students draft an original short screenplay. Digital Storytelling bolsters students' creative and communicative skills while acknowledging storytelling as an ever-present aspect of our lives. Within the screenwriting unit, students are encouraged to harvest personal stories and then translate them into original screenplays. This article presents the curriculum's purpose, structure, application, and benefits for students in both a classroom and post-academic setting. The program's success can largely be attributed to two important pillars: a hands-on, experiential curriculum as well as an emphasis on connecting students to professional writers, filmmakers, and media artists.

Keywords: storytelling, communication, creativity, screenwriting, revision

“OMG, I have to tell you what happened at lunch!” I'm sure we've all heard similar exclamations as students file in through our classroom doors eager to recount recent events to their peers. Young people have an inspiring knack for finding the excitement in something as ordinary as lunch, or third period, or even a math test as they overlay their unique perspective to create a gripping new tale with ease. Yet, even beyond our adolescent years, storytelling is an ever-present part of being human. From discourse with friends, to pitching a new idea at work, to recalling what happened over the last year, storytelling is essential form of communication. Just like reading and writing, storytelling, which is often a dynamic utilization of the two, is a skill of self-expression imperative to student development as it is the universal means in which humans present their distinct point of view. Encouraging students to tell their story not only affirms that their perspectives are valid but also teaches them to access the elements of their personal experiences in tandem with their imagination that they wish to share with their community. Students learning to tell their story are students learning how to be heard.

Austin Film Festival in the Classroom

Austin Film Festival (AFF) is a nonprofit arts organization founded on the idea that more storytellers deserve a platform in which to be heard. Established in 1993, AFF was the first organization of its kind to celebrate the often-unsung writer and their creative contributions to film and media. AFF's official mission is to further the art and craft of storytelling by inspiring and championing the work of writers, filmmakers, and all artists who use written and visual language to tell a story. As one initiative that supports the organization's mission, AFF supports Texas's next generation of storytellers through its year-round, youth art education initiatives, known comprehensively as the Young Filmmakers Program (YFP). Designed to introduce young creatives to the arts of screenwriting and filmmaking by working hand-in-hand with industry professionals, the program seeks to develop students' storytelling abilities while illuminating both the possibilities and realities of

working within the film and entertainment industry. The program's success can largely be attributed to two important pillars: a hands-on, experiential curriculum as well as an emphasis on connecting students to professional writers, filmmakers, and media artists.

Digital Storytelling Curriculum

YFP has grown to be nationally recognized by its signature, in-school Digital Storytelling (DS) curriculum. Developed collaboratively with Austin Film Festival and Austin Independent School District secondary English teachers, DS is nine-week, English language arts screenwriting curriculum in which all students draft an original short screenplay. Formally launched in 2002, DS has served thousands of Central Texas high schoolers by encouraging students to harvest stories from their own lives, transform those stories into scripts, and experience the challenging, yet rewarding process of turning personal narrative into art. Offered at no cost to participating schools (which included Bowie High School, Akins Early College High School, and Crockett Early College High School for 2021-2022), AFF provides the necessary tools, training, and support system to implement DS into any classroom. Additionally, AFF often provides a trained arts educator to co-teach the curriculum with the students' English teacher. DS allows students to experience all stages of the creative process from within the classroom.

Digital Storytelling Lesson Approach and Purposes

Lesson Overview	
Lesson	Script Progress
Lesson One: The Big Picture	
Lesson Two: What Makes a Good Story	
Lesson Three: Beginning, Middle, & End	
Lesson Four: Brainstorming	
Lesson Five: The Pitch	Due: Story Pitch
Lesson Six: Making a Script	
Lesson Seven: Writing Action	
Lesson Eight: Writing Dialogue	
Lesson Nine: Write Away Day	Due: Story Structure Worksheet
Lesson Ten: Write Away Day (Cont'd)	
Lesson Eleven: Script Development	
Lesson Twelve: Script Development (Cont'd)	Due: 1st Draft of Screenplay
Lesson Thirteen: Script Reading	

Figure 1. Lessons in Screenwriting

Writing an original short screenplay can seem like a daunting task, even for professional writers. Approaching the art of a short script (roughly 15 to 30 pages) like a condensed and simplified full-length film, DS presents the writing process as 13 lessons (see Figure 1) that take students from brainstorming through revision, with attention to learning industry-standard script formatting. This practical approach focuses on marrying creativity with discipline as students clarify key story concepts, plot points, and theme before drafting. DS lessons are designed to build upon one another, each utilizing the activities from the previous lesson to work closer to the end goal: a complete, original short script students can present with pride.

From our time teaching DS, we have observed student growth and motivation in a variety of areas including students taking more interest in reading and writing, showing more confidence with technological tools (e.g., cameras and video-editing programs), and being more willing to collaborate with and help peers. Yet, perhaps most importantly, DS pushes students to take ownership over their creative voice. Students are encouraged to write a story that is wholly their own. Students think deeply about a number of questions: What is it that I want my story to stay?, How do I want my audience/reader to feel?, What part of my perspective do I feel compelled to share?, and so forth. Such questions, though large, are essential to telling a story with clarity. The following lessons not only are instrumental for discovering students' answers to these questions but also for providing clear examples of how the unit contributes to student development.

Key Lessons and Examples of Growth

Lesson 3 provides an in-depth analysis of the Three Act Structure—the film industry's standard story outline for screenplays. Most collegiate-level film programs spend beginning semesters teaching and analyzing the Three Act structure, as it is universally accepted as the most effective way to craft stories for the screen. In this lesson, the Three Act Structure is parsed into its essential components including “the inciting incident” and “the choice,” the moments that set the protagonist's journey into motion. Students watch and analyze past AFF selected short films as they identify the key elements of the Three Act Structure presented. By clearly identifying these structural elements, students are able to confidently begin translating their own story components into this professional outline. The story structure worksheet (see Figure 2) helps students determine the essential story elements needed before they start diving into their screenplays.

WORKSHEET: MY STRUCTURE

Act I – Setup: In the setup, your job is to tell us something about your character and the world they live in – specifically, establish their flaw and want

- **Exposition:** Intro your character and establish the world
- **Inciting Incident:** Sets the story in motion; establishes the problem the protagonist needs to solve
- **Plot Point I:** The event that catapults us into the second act; the protagonist's choice to engage the conflict

Act II – Conflict: Conflict is when both internal and external forces prevent the protagonist from solving their problem; in this act, conflicts will become increasingly difficult until your protagonist is brought to their lowest point – their moment of despair right before the climactic choice

- **Rising Action:** Your character encounters first minor conflicts
- **Mid-Point:** Major point of conflict; an event in direct contrast with the protagonist's want/need; what threatens their goal?
- **Plot Point II:** Launches the story into the third act; the protagonist's low point that sets up the choice they must make in Act III

Act III – Resolution: This is where your story peaks; tie up loose ends & force characters to come to terms with their flaws; your protagonist will face their biggest conflict – the epitome of the problem established in the setup, and ultimately resolve it

- **Choice (Climax):** Pinnacle of the overarching theme/conflict
- **Denouement:** Wrap it up – dot your I's & cross your T's; resolve unanswered questions

Figure 2. Story Structure Worksheet



The story structure worksheet also serves the purpose of countering students' feelings of being overwhelmed and the apprehension of not knowing exactly where to start. The story structure worksheet guides students from their initial brainstorming process through the completion of the script. "Identify your protagonist" is a manageable first step and much more attainable than simply starting with "draft a screenplay." Once students know the character who is driving their story and identify the incident that sparks their journey, creativity flows with ease.

The Bravery of Pitch Day

Lesson 5 focuses on the art of the pitch, an essential skill for any creative career. Students watch professional pitches from previous Austin Film Festival writers' conferences before crafting pitches of their own. Through a provided pitch structure, students prepare 90-second pitches that must clearly demonstrate an understanding of their script's main story elements, as defined in Lesson 3. During class, each student stands in front of their teacher and peers to pitch their script's story. While practicing the important skill of public speaking, students learn how to craft language with the goal of intriguing an audience. In this lesson, students are able to receive feedback in a supportive, encouraging environment and improve their stories' concepts before they even commit to writing drafts.

Though writing is generally a solitary process, a principal component of screenwriting, filmmaking, and all story-centered endeavors is having the confidence to share your idea with other people, along with the ability to provide constructive feedback. During the pitch day, students grow as they overcome the nerve-racking experience of speaking before the class. These fears are often alleviated when peers ask one another questions, eager to know where each story is going. As the class time progresses, the classroom transforms from a group of timid students into a group of passionate creatives excited to start writing with more direction.

Lindsay (all names are pseudonyms), a Crockett High School Student and a 2022 DS participant, comments on her experience pitching: "I'm

usually a very quiet person, so this was the first time I've ever gotten to share my ideas with others, and I've actually felt proud of my own work. I loved this unit and loved writing out my script."

Of course, most students will not find themselves on a career path of pitching to movie producers, but public speaking and the art of crafting a persuasive, compelling argument are applicable to almost all workplace environments. This lesson allows students to practice a vital communication skill in a low-stakes and constructive environment.

The Realities of Revising

Once students have completed a first draft, it's time to delve into the tough but true lesson that writing is rewriting. Lesson 12 focuses on the development of the students' first drafts by giving students time to share their newly completed scripts with peers. After reading through their partner's script, students use a guided feedback worksheet (see Figure 3) to both celebrate the strengths of the scripts as well as identify aspects of the story that need clarification or thoughtful rethinking. In partners, students talk through the notes they have provided and received as they articulate a plan for rewriting. Students start to change their view of the practice of revising writing not as a tedious task, but rather as a means for making their stories stronger.

Worksheet: Thinking Critically

Now that some time has passed since you finished your first draft, it is time to think critically about rewrites. Take some time to answer the following questions:

1. Does your story follow the short story structure? If not, what changes can you make to fix it?

2. Are your characters relatable? If so, in what ways? If not, how can you make them more relatable?

3. Does everything have an onscreen equivalent? If not, how can you tweak the writing so that it is more visual?

4. Is the story dramatic enough? If not, how can I add more conflict to the story?

Figure 3. Guided Feedback Worksheet

Eli, a Bowie High School Senior and a DS Fall 2021 participant explains, "[I learned that] writing is a process and quite a lengthy one at that. Revisions are super important. Though I understood that before, it's clearer now more than ever when in a class that requires truly good writing."

The objective of this lesson expands beyond the improvement of student scripts to explore the importance of both giving and receiving constructive notes with grace. As students transition out of high school, producing work for a review process will be a reality of their professional lives. Lesson 12 prepares students to embrace feedback as something to digest, process, then apply discerningly



to their work. This lessons also provides students with examples of substantive feedback.

Stories Are Meant to be Shared

The final lesson of the screenwriting unit is the script reading! During this class, students sit in a circle, assign reading parts, and hear their stories informally performed aloud. This lesson is definitively the most fun and rewarding of the unit, as nothing is quite as exciting for the students as hearing their scripts brought to life. Typically, this class starts with the teacher asking for a volunteer to hear their script read first. This question is always met with the silence of several intimidated and nervous students, until one brave soul volunteers. After the first script reading, without fail, students' hands go up volunteering to share their work next. Hannah, a Bowie High School Senior and a DS Fall 2021 participant explains, "Around one month ago, I sat in the back of the class, alone, and didn't feel confident enough to speak up. But through this program, through this amazing and once in a lifetime opportunity, I felt heard and confident." Teachers often report increased engagement from students who are typically reserved in the classroom setting, delighted to see shy students eager to share their work.

Script sharing is also an opportunity to relish in the students' hard work and to recognize the development of their voices as writers. Previous lessons provided space for constructive feedback, so this concluding lesson focuses on the importance of celebrating our creative accomplishments. For most of these students, this is the first time they have ever been exposed to storytelling in this format, so time should be dedicated to reflect on how far they have come within this completely new medium. Due to the collaborative nature of previous lessons, students feel comfortable sharing their stories, most of which come from a very vulnerable place.

The curriculum has particular success in engaging emergent bilingual students in the language arts. When including dialogue in a script, students are encouraged to write authentically, which means that they get to express their thoughts in their own words and portray themselves and their experiences accurately as they reveal stories that are important to them. While emergent bilingual students may feel challenged by the expectation to use formal English in academic writing, screenwriting provides an artful avenue for using language and expression that is more of a mirror to students' day-to-day lives.

Preparing for the Next Chapter

Teaching students how to effectively communicate and, more specifically, how to authentically express their personal experience is pertinent to their future success. From ever-emerging social media platforms to anecdotes in future job interviews, consuming, creating, and articulating story will not only be a fact of life for this generation, but a critical tool in both personal and professional settings. By teaching the fundamentals of storytelling and providing students the space to practice in a supportive environment, DS gives students the foundation needed to envision their future stories within both professional creative industries and beyond.

It is no secret that arts education opportunities are often underfunded within schools. This lack of funding directly impacts the resources available for students interested in developing their creativity and pursuing artistic careers. For many students, a career in the arts is a path many do not know exists because these paths are not highlighted in traditional curriculums. Beyond its exploration in story, DS aims to expose students to potential careers within film, television, and the media arts and ignite new interests for students to explore beyond the class. Sarah, a James Bowie High School Junior and a Fall 2021 DS student, explains, "I've always been interested in the movie making process, and now that I understand it better. I'm much more inspired and excited to explore it as a creative avenue." Many DS students go on to pursue screenwriting or other forms of creative writing at the collegiate level.

We believe this generation's greatest strength is their adaptability. From an unanticipated transition to online learning, to masks and social distancing, to broader cultural shifts, this generation has demonstrated its resilience in the face of great change. But have they been given the time and space to reflect upon society's massive reshaping? Storytelling is an essential tool for processing change. Story links our emotional response to an event, allowing us to reflect upon our personal experience. Then, by articulating our reflection of this event, we foster connections with those who have experienced and grown from change in similar ways. To say that our students have persevered through immense change over the last three years would be an understatement. By sharing their stories, students acknowledge the ways in which these obstacles have forced them to grow.