**Classrooms as 'safe houses'?**
**The ethical and emotional implications of digital storytelling in a university writing classroom**

Kristian D. Stewart
*University of Michigan, USA*

*Most educational institutions focus on the shaping of the mind by sometimes forcing a mental conforming...leaving the emotions and stories in our hearts unattended and raw* (Daniel, 2015).

**Abstract**
This paper reports the findings of a digital storytelling praxis within a higher education classroom located outside of Metro Detroit in the United States. Drawing on Zembylas's (2006, 2008) scholarship on emotion in the production of knowledge and the teacher's role, adjacent to literature surrounding personal writing and safe houses for learning, an investigation of student perceptions of digital storytelling within a writing classroom took place during the 2016 and 2017 academic years. Data highlights the students' interest for the emotionally-driven course content digital storytelling encourages, as it taught students how to insert genre conventions into their own writing. Digital storytelling, according to the students, also supplied a means for students to develop relationships with their peers as many students felt isolated on this largely commuter campus. Students additionally viewed the curriculum as promoting 'real world' skills they could transfer outside of the classroom and into their lives. However, to craft digital stories, data revealed how students turned toward sharing personal (and or traumatic) narratives. This can be problematic in terms of emotional safety if students are made to feel they must leverage emotions for grades and are then forced to broadcast their digital stories in a public forum. To lessen these concerns, strategies for implementing digital storytelling into the curriculum are provided. Lastly, the author concludes that educating students within a Trump presidency requires a different pedagogical approach. Assignments such as digital storytelling that merge the scholarly and the personal, alongside nurturing empathy, open dialogue, and building relationships might offer a direction forward.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, classrooms as safe houses, personal writing, higher education

**Introduction**
Digital storytelling has emerged as a social pedagogy and genre of media writing since the Center for Digital Storytelling/StoryCenter established the digital storytelling movement in

the early 90s (StoryCenter, nd). The digital story, a composition that invites participants to merge images, voice, and music into a 3 - 5 minute video production, has proven to be a beneficial educational platform for both engaging differently positioned learners and as an assignment that places emphasis on student-driven experiences (Benmayor, 2008; Hull and Katz, 2006; Stewart and Gachago, 2016; Vasudevan, 2006). Increasingly, university instructors are implementing the digital story format as a venue to encourage student voice and as an activity that prioritises student agency as a primary curricular focus.

However, to compose a digital story students tend to excavate narratives from their personal lives. In fact, the StoryCenter model, although it can be applied to varied storytelling scenarios, has mainly been used for sharing personal life events with a public audience (see Capture Wales, 2014; Silence Speaks, 2000). In the literature, classroom instructors, both in higher education and in K - 12 systems, have followed suit by appropriating StoryCenter's model of digital storytelling for classroom use and thereby requesting that students use this format to explore critical issues that may be personal to them (Benmayor, 2008; Gachago, et al., 2013; Kadjer, 2004; Rolón-Dow, 2011). This kind of request can lead students to author highly personal stories inclusive of pain and victimisation, bringing first-hand and often traumatic experiences into public classrooms. What the literature lacks, and what this paper contributes, is a thread of scholarship that attends to the ethical and emotional practice of digital storytelling in classrooms, particularly when those stories are both assigned a grade and often made available for public consumption. Lastly, this paper will provide insight on how instructors who work in the genre of digital storytelling can work to create a 'safe house' (Pratt, 1991) for personal authorship in public domains.

**Creating safe zones for learning -- before challenging them**
Creating a space among diverse learners aligns with Pratt's (1991) joint metaphorical classroom sites of 'contact zones' and 'safe houses'. Pratt defines a contact zone as a 'social space where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths, as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (Pratt, 1991: 34). Classrooms, according to Pratt, are sites of struggle over power and varied forms of domination. Pratt asserts by learning from each other and by examining multiple viewpoints, transculturation occurs and new understandings are produced. Her answer to teaching in the contact zone is the construction of a 'safe house'. Pratt describes a 'safe house' as an intellectual and social space, although temporary, where from within legacies of subordination diverse groups can co-exist, build trust, and work toward healing. Additionally, Pratt advocates for 'pedagogical arts' that seek crossroads through storytelling and other collaborative classroom activities as a means for instructing students in the contact zone.

The contact zone and safe house concepts have been adopted by those who work with student writers. Building on Pratt, Lu (1994) situates the contact zone as a portal for both instructing writing and for challenging her students to reconceptualise the discursive positionality of multilingual writers that often sits adjacent to the idiosyncrasies of 'academic' English. Underlining a need to explore the pedagogical possibilities of both contact zones and safe houses, Canagarajah (1997: 24) notes the 'hidden underground' of 'contact zone literacy'. Jerskey (2013) considers her university's writing center a 'safe house'

for both multilingual student writers and faculty members inside the larger 'contact zone' of the university. In part, Jerskey outlines the value of a 'safe house' as a place to 'cultivate empowering, alternative narratives' (Jerskey, 2013: 200). Maxson (2005) describes contact zone pedagogy as inspiring students to use their home languages and cultures to critique academic language and culture, a practice that assists students in renegotiating their own (and others) subjectivity. Lunsford (2016) encourages teachers to return to Pratt's analysis, as Lunsford advocates for both contact zones and safe houses in the age of writing alongside trigger warnings and civic movements. She argues for teachers to revisit these terms and to set their own definitions to serve as 'guiding principles for building a strong and effective, a daring and respectful classroom community' (Lunsford, 2016: para. 8).

However, Boler and Zembylas (2003) argue that no classrooms are safe, particularly when power dynamics shape all classroom environments. They advocate for both students and teachers to vacate comfort zones in order to examine how assumptions and personal belief systems work to create worldly views. This is a position Zembylas (2006) elaborates on in his article 'Witnessing in the Classroom: The Ethics and Politics of Affect' as he moves into a discussion on the responsibilities of bearing witness to testimony in classroom spaces, demonstrating how classrooms and affect can interact to produce a politics of ethics. Zembylas (2006: 306) states his teaching ideology is centered around creating a classroom community 'whose members see themselves as responsible for one another' and who 'engage in alternative versions of how past events make them feel and why'. In Zembylas's view, students who serve as critical witnesses take on a responsibility for each other – and the teacher is responsible for them.

Ultimately, no place can ever become truly secure for its inhabitants. However, this should not stop educators from developing classroom terrains that view students' emotional intelligence central to their academic growth. Integrating content into the curriculum that draws on student emotion can serve as a transformative force, an approach Zembylas (2008: 61) labels 'critical emotional reflexivity'. Zembylas (2008) outlines his approach in 'Engaging with Issues of Cultural Diversity and Discrimination Through Critical Emotional Reflexivity in Online Learning'. Through the implementation of sustained and reflective writing activities, students in Zembylas's class worked to understand emotion's role in the production of knowledge, while they 'developed an empathetic understanding and an enriched sense of the Other' (2008: 71).

Critical emotional reflexivity is located within a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999; Boler and Zembylas, 2003) and urges students to challenge comfort zones, consider the role of emotion in relationships of power, and to work against predetermined conventions and stereotypes. An underlying belief of a pedagogy of discomfort is centered on the notion that uncomfortable feelings are essential for challenging the dominant belief systems that maintain social inequalities (Zembylas, 2015). Starting from a place of critical emotional reflexivity, per Zembylas, emboldens students to disrupt the self /other binary. Emotional engagement can then be utilised as a tool for students to question privileged positions alongside systems of injustice so classrooms might become sites for transformative learning (Zembylas, 2015).

**The risks and rewards of personal writing**

Scholars in composition and rhetoric have long argued both the value and contentious nature of personal and or expressivist writing assignments. In the late 80's and throughout the 90s, Bartholomae and Elbow took part in a back and forth conversation highlighting both the pros and cons of the genre (Bartholomae, 1995; Elbow, 1995). Bartholomae (1995: 63) argues in favor of assignments that focus on critical and analytical skills, which coincides with his belief that developing an academic discourse is the 'real work of the academy'. Whereas Elbow (1995) believes for students to view themselves as writers, emphasis should be placed on their own writing, placing student ideas as central versus summarising what others have said. According to Schwartz (2007), the Bartholomew and Elbow debate was more than just a difference in how to teach writing, but a theoretical divide on the purpose of higher education.

Scholars who bridge the expressionist divide suggest personal writing assignments allow students to use their experiences as a framework to negotiate the academic world. Brodkey (1994) purports how students gain power when they can utilise their personal lives in the classroom to guide their writing, thereby becoming their own informant. Spigelman (2001: 64) comments on the value of composing the personal essay stating, 'the telling of stories can actually serve the *same* purpose as academic writing and that narratives of personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly work'. Expressionist and personal writing assignments have been linked to underscoring voice and critical authorship; and as Banks (2003: 33) articulates, writing that is 'personal' does not mean that it is not 'critical' or 'rigorous'. Lastly, Selfe (2010) links the personal narrative as an effective means to explore the formations (cultural, political, social, and historical) that exists in groups.

Within this context, a thread of scholarship discusses the challenging nature of assessing student work that is based on the private lives of students. Hindman (2001) comments on the murky standards for evaluating successful personal writing, and Ruggles Gere (2001: 207) adds that if teachers privilege certain narratives over others, students will not feel like they have had the 'right' lives to produce writing valued by teachers. Berman (2001) notes the difficulty in grading texts that require self-disclosure, while at the same time encouraging teachers to instruct students in how to write safely in classroom spaces. DeBacher and Harris-Moore (2016: para.10) write about both the importance and absurdity of separating 'the writing from the writer, the text from the life', as DeBacher attempted to grade narratives from students who experienced Hurricane Katrina. Overall, the literature addresses the possibility that students could feel they must 'out themselves' emotionally to receive a good grade in the class. Instructors, on the other hand, are faced with the pressure of grading a personal life event (that may or may not be well-written).

The literature also attends to the risky nature of personal writing assignments that link writing in this genre to emotional danger. Scholars like Rak (2006) note the ethical challenges involved in bearing witness to student trauma, while Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler (1993, para. 1) equate personal writing assignments to requiring 'inappropriate revelation' through 'shockingly unprofessional' writing assignments. Perillo (1997) adds that society's obsession with confession as a literary form has created confusing classroom climates. And, Alton (1993) questions if it is the teacher's responsibility to play the role of a

psychiatrist when students write about grief, trauma, and pain, which is a line she states educators are not qualified to cross.

However, a growing body of literature reflects the realisation that students' personal lives make their way into the writing classroom. Morgan (1998) reminds us that student lives are complicated and therefore their writing mirrors these complications. DeGenaro (2007) explains how writing instructors '*constantly* (emphasis his) confront the stories and personal, lived experiences of students' (381). Valentino (1996: 275) shares how 'private revelations' still found their way into student writing even when her assignments did not require a personal response. Chandler (2007: 53) documents the 'shift in perception of emotion' and describes how emotion in the writing classroom is now understood as a social and 'discursive form' signifying 'patterns that can be characterised and understood contextually'. Leake (2016) adds his voice by encouraging a pedagogy that teaches empathy as a rhetoric and a disposition, an approach that instructs students to recognise both empathy's values and limitations. Leake (2016, para. 15) notes:

Teaching empathy as rhetoric has broad application as a suitable means of more closely examining the personal, social, and rhetorical functions of reason, emotions, and judgments. Empathy can be a means of invention, a heuristic, a way of considering audience and situation, an instrument of revision, and a tool for critical analysis. Teaching empathy as rhetoric attunes us to its all of its possible uses and liabilities as a means of persuasion.

**The digital story as engaged media authorship**

This rise of internet and media tools has emboldened a sense of authorship to unskilled (in media production) authors and created a space where 'ordinary people' using computer-publishing tools could 'talk back' against the grain of publicly controlled and expensive media outlets (Lambert, StoryCenter, nd). It is in this frame where Joe Lambert (with partners Dana Atchley and Nina Mullen) co-founded the Center for Digital Storytelling, now StoryCenter, in the 90s. The Center was eventually housed at the University of California's School of Education (at Berkeley) where scholars investigated the varied uses of digital storytelling and education.

The Lambert/StoryCenter model of digital storytelling is a short video production that merges images, music, and the author's voice as the over-arching narration. A digital story usually consists of 300 to 400 spoken words and can be produced using computer-mediated software like iMovie or Photo Story 3. A digital story, additionally, has all the elements of a narrative structure, including a beginning hook, salient point, and an 'ah ha' moment on the part of the author. The StoryCenter website (nd) states the digital story genre features all the elements of good storytelling, including a seven-step approach to composing a digital story that covers writing concerns like economy, point of view, and pacing. As an act of participatory media authorship, digital storytelling participants must also contend with issues stemming from media literacy concerns akin to exercising knowledge of creative commons licenses for using web-based images.

Applications of the Lambert digital storytelling model have found its way into classrooms across the globe. As examples, educators have integrated digital storytelling projects into curricula to examine their own stories or the stories of others (Benick, 2012;

Brushwood-Rose, 2009; Gachago et. al., 2013; Hull and Katz, 2006), as an exercise in writing (Kadjer, 2004; Oppermann, 2008; Yang, 2012), or to participate in civic engagement outside of the classroom (Couldry, 2008; Raimist and Jacobs, 2010). Further, scholars like Stewart and Ivala (2017) and Burgess (2006) note digital storytelling's effectiveness for promoting student voice. Digital storytelling has also been the subject of primary research and theoretical articles, research studies, grants of all types, and the focal point of a few doctoral dissertations (my own included, see Stewart, 2016).

**Premise of research, methodology, and collected data**
This study investigated the practice of digital storytelling in a university classroom located in Metro Detroit, United States of America. The teacher - researcher wished to understand that emotional impact of a digital storytelling curriculum on the students enrolled in her varied writing classes, as in previous classes it was observed that students authored highly personal stories to complete this project. This case study, grounded in phenomenology (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2009), took place between the 2016 and 2017 academic years. Student names have been changed to protect their identities, and this study received ethical clearance.

*Questions*
Students often share personal (and often painful) accounts when authoring a digital story. Students are also placed in the position to hear stories from other students that may be traumatic as part of the course curriculum. What are student perceptions surrounding the emotional component of a digital storytelling curriculum? How might student feedback alter a digital storytelling praxis?

*Collected data*
To answer these questions, students from several writing courses (N=67) were surveyed. Collected data included essays students authored at the end of the class, classroom/campus observations, and digital stories. The essays were graded and required students to comment broadly on how they experienced the digital storytelling process. All data were subjected to first and second-round coding implementing Saldaña's (2012) methodology for coding qualitative data. First-round coding was holistic in nature and sought to understand emergent data threads. During the secondary - cycle, concept and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2012) was applied to the data. Lastly, axial and in - vivo coding (student quotes) were examined to triangulate the data. Emergent themes revealed how students wished for a deeper connection to their classmates, showed growth (personal and academic), and desired emotional learning activities.

**The digital storytelling project**
Curriculum for each writing class featured a digital storytelling unit inspired by StoryCenter's (nd) model. Digital storytelling prompts varied for each writing section. Freshman usually respond to the question, 'What do you think it means to be human today?' Advanced students on the teaching track might use the digital story medium to explore a critical issue in

education. Students read articles relevant to the class theme found online, a course text, and watched TED Talks. Examples included Foster - Wallace's (2005) 'This is Water' and excerpts from Appiah's (2006) *Cosmopolitanism,* adjacent to watching Brown's (2010) *The Power of Vulnerability* and Adichie's (2009) *The Danger of a Single Story* TED Talks. Students also participated in an event called a story circle. The story circle, a teacher-selected mixed grouping of four-five students, provided a space for students to orally present a pre-writing exercise called 'The Tree of Life'. The Tree of Life encouraged students to share moments that have shaped them, both personally and academically, with their classroom colleagues. From there, students moved to drafting their 'Tree of Life' stories into a digital story text before transferring an edited script to Photo Story 3 or iMovie software. At the end of the unit, digital stories were shared publicly within the class. Digital storytelling, in this context, was a critical praxis that emphasised both an intellectual enterprise and a socialising pedagogy.

Although the course themes were very broad, and students could select to respond in a manner of ways, they usually shared a personal or traumatic life event as the story's nucleus. Of the 67, stories ranged from being bullied to the importance of role models, stereotypical representations (race, body image, disability), connection (lack of, longing for, what makes us human, seeing past difference), human rights (racism, LGTBQ equality), the importance of friends/ family or overcoming hardship (hunger, divorce, depression, abuse).

**Data findings**

***Engaging emotion through digital storytelling***

As the data revealed, although students had choice in how they could answer the assignment brief, many shared personal narratives in the story circle and then made that experience the foundation of their digital story. Of the 67, only 2 students did not rely on personal experience to shape their digital stories. Rather, they crafted a response that was more 'academic essay' than 'personal narrative'.

An advantage of a digital storytelling praxis is that it places emphasis on classroom climate. Meaning, students participate in class activities that push them out of their comfort zones and encourages open dialogue. In fact, as a socialising pedagogy, this aspect of the project is prized as much as the academic work students produce. Both in their written texts and from classroom discussions, students remarked how they appreciated the communal aspects of the project, particularly since most students do not live on campus. Students felt that dedicated time spent in getting to know one another made them feel as if they were members of a college community. Students like Bekka and Corey wrote that digital storytelling provided a great first year experience and they wished for similar projects in other campus courses. Fatima discussed how the role of the university is not only to teach academic subjects, but to socialise students. She stated, 'Digital storytelling prioritises the equally important social aspect (while teaching us to communicate, write, and effectively put a video together) of school that's so often ignored'.

Data analysis also revealed that students welcomed the digital storytelling project as it made them think about themselves and their peers differently. As examples, students used phrases to describe the experience like 'life - changing,' 'eye - opening,' and 'rewarding'.

Dan provided further insight, writing, 'I didn't believe that a project such as this one would help me not only connect with my fellow classmates, but also change my perspective of them as well'. Syed added, 'Digital storytelling connected strangers in a way I had never seen before entering this class'. And, from Ayeh: 'I realised after he hugged me that he was no longer my colleague, but now a friend. It was an extremely heart-warming gesture that I don't think would have happened with any classmate in another class under any circumstance'. Students also viewed the digital storytelling assignment as a bridge to understanding each other. Sarah commented, 'We connect to their struggle through their conveyed emotion'.

As for the affective aspect of the curriculum, students found the digital storytelling project to be a useful activity that could teach them real-world skills. Mike mentioned how it would be 'unethical' to deny students learning that engages the mind alongside the heart, as the world we live in demands a 'different skill set'. Jessica shared how in the right context she did not mind 'getting personal' because she saw the project as having an 'outside of classroom' benefit that would provide her 'a more - rounded perspective of the world'. Kobe had this to say about the project, 'As a learning experience and as a map of emotional landscape, I thought that digital storytelling was invaluable'. Megan, commenting on the emotional content revealed in the digital stories and how they altered her opinion of her colleagues, stated, 'These videos were more powerful than any paper you could have assigned us'. Justin shared, "Being able to connect, relate, and understand others is a beautiful and respected skill that can be carried throughout life'. One last comment that summarises this data thread:

We live in a time where we have the access to contact someone across the world, but even in a classroom we don't dare speak to the person next to us. Therefore, I think emotional stories should become the norm in a classroom. School has only ever taught students to use their heads when their hearts are just as important.

Lastly, a line of data spoke to how students associated the emotional learning component of digital storytelling as central to their growth as student writers. As an example, students reflected on how important it was for writers to develop the rhetorical strategy of pathos (an appeal to emotion). They mentioned texts like *The Declaration of Independence* (US 1776) and Poe's (Poetry Foundation, 2017) 'The Raven' as examples of texts driven by pathos. Sam wrote, 'Emotion in the classroom is necessary especially in the writing environment. It is the backbone of creativity'. From Kenya, 'In a learning setting, using emotion as a writing tool is important for reader impact' and 'without emotion the words on the page have no meaning'. Other noteworthy phrases included the use emotion as a persuasive device and how students felt they had 'authority over writing' and were 'reassured that our opinion counts'.

### Comfortable and 'safe' classroom spaces

This paper and initial inquiry was a result of questioning student perceptions of digital storytelling from inside of a writing classroom. In the reflective texts, students wrote about initial feelings of nervousness and fear at the course's onset, to finding the project beneficial at its conclusion. As an example, Rachel described her initial weeks as 'terrifying,' and she expressed 'overwhelming discomfort' at the start of the term. However, at the end of her essay, Rachel reported how the digital storytelling project, in her words, was a 'blessing in

disguise'. Her belief centered around her growth as both a person and a writer, made possible once she was 'pushed out of her comfort zone' and could take risks both in writing and in communicating with her peers. Rachel was not the only student who felt this way. Austin said, 'I felt more comfortable with the people in this class than in any other class I had'. Stella reflected on how she felt connected on a deeper level to her classmates because, in her words, 'They made me comfortable when I had felt so vulnerable in the beginning. I had the feeling they knew exactly how I felt'. Although the students wrote extensively about their feelings of unease at the beginning of the class and/or the project, whatever discomfort students had at the onset they certainly did not have at its conclusion. Codes in the data revolved around themes of 'safety' and 'comfort'. As an example, Sarah wrote, 'We created a sufficient amount of safety. It allowed us to come out of our shells'. Data revealed that of the 67, 60 students commented on how the project assisted their growth either as a student, a person, or as both.

Another example of fluctuating student 'comfort levels' relates to how students altered their classroom seating arrangements, meaning the seats students established and defended during week one of the course did not seem so important toward the end of the semester. Additionally, some students were observed forming tight relationships within their story circles outside of class time. One group of four was documented hanging out around campus on several occasions. Another time, a story circle was observed sitting outside of the classroom talking an hour after class ended. Another group shared how after class one day their story circle went to a campus courtyard and talked, sitting in the grass, for four hours. In the reflective texts, students described the story circles as 'judgement - free zones' and the 'best part of the class'.

The story circle phenomenon described above was not uncommon, but it was not the classroom standard either. Not every student felt the same level of comfort, and this was very clearly documented with one group. Isra, one of the female members in this group, reported how she felt vulnerable because she shared the Tree of Life so openly, yet the other students, according to her, did not and 'took the easy way out'. Her comment to me outside of class was, 'How am I safe if others do not share… but I do?'

### *Classroom climate*

Data was then examined to understand what elements within the classroom environment contributed to the students' feelings of comfort and security during this project. Responses encapsulated the teacher's flexibility regarding grades[1] and assignment due dates, students being allowed to opt out of showing the digital story to the class, and student participation in the story circle. Students also noted how many of them did not like writing before this class, and they attributed their new attitude to the level of comfort established in the room. Ryan commented that digital storytelling was an 'experience' and not an 'assignment'. Sameh relayed how the story circle preceding the digital story production was one of the 'finer points' of the class and she wrote how it 'felt good' to get her story out and to 'express

---

[1] Students could rewrite parts of the project for higher grades. They stated this policy relieved the pressure of high stakes grading.

myself and my emotions'. Viv echoed this sentiment and shared how having her classmates listen to her (in the story circle) was a new experience and that she had been given a voice. More than a few students repeated a desire for this type of learning to be included in other classrooms, as aforementioned. As an example, Carly expressed, 'I would honestly like for other teachers to start creating safe classrooms for students to really open up in. It doesn't take much to change a class around because we should want to not just better ourselves, but the whole human race'.

**Discussion of data**

The data indicates that most students were in favour of this project. It cannot go unnoticed, however, that collected data was completed for a course grade. Even though the data was not examined until after the completion of the class, whenever a grade is at stake there is a possibility that students may produce what they think the teacher wants to hear. There is one caveat to this claim, however. In the reflective texts, students did not hold back when writing about parts they disliked or 'hated' during the digital storytelling process. Examples from students include recording their voices or the challenges of economising their drafts into less-wordy scripts. Based on class conversations, students voiced these concerns in the same way they wrote about them in the reflections. Therefore, I am inclined to believe their texts regarding the positive reaction the project encouraged as authentic, versus performative for a grade.

In addition, Isra's comment about the level of sharing she experienced provides a direction for future research. In her opinion, Isra felt she was over-exposed emotionally to a group who seemed uninterested and shared very little. No doubt, a project such as this requires a level of 'buy in' from the class. So, what happens when students do not want to be take part in this type of curriculum? Hill (2014), in part, takes up this argument in 'Digital Storytelling and the Politics of Doing Good: Exploring the Ethics of Bringing Personal Narratives into Public Spheres'. Hill addresses the implications of bearing witness to someone else's traumatic story, and she questions in what ways might sharing and listening represent a political act. Although Hill's work is with adults and not students, the concerns she raises are applicable in a classroom context. Student disclosure as key course curriculum can lead to a troubling academic endeavour. It is worth remembering that a student may sign up for a class, but not *want* to be privy to another student's personal story. Further, forcing students to bear witness when they chose not to could provide no benefit, educationally or otherwise, as Jansen (2009) claims.

In Isra's scenario, academically, the teacher has a responsibility to encourage students into a critical examination of *how* their stories might work to engender a rhetorical awareness of the genre and to satisfy the assignment brief. Following Leake's (2016) approach, it would also be useful to instruct students into probing how empathy functions as a rhetoric within the digital storytelling genre, which may then lead students into a deeper engagement with each other and inspire critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas, 2008). No student response has to be 'personal' and thereby equal the traumatic, but all students should be personally invested in the work they produce. Good instruction can navigate students to this entry point. A future study might question students who do not prefer 'trauma' in their writing class, alongside

navigating how teachers might instruct students who do not buy into the digital storytelling process. For the groups who did mesh, sustainability data is not available. It would be interesting to re-establish contact with specific story circle participants to see if they are as close now as they were during the course, and if they still feel the same way about the project in hindsight.

The data also illuminated how students felt both 'safe' and 'comfortable' in this classroom. This brings on another concern about classroom 'safety,' which I will address more broadly in the concluding remarks. As scholars in composition and linguistic studies note, there is value in creating safe havens for both writing and contact zone literacy (Berman, 2001; Canagarajah, 1997; Jerskey, 2013; Lu, 1994). However, Pratt (1991) describes contact zones as temporary, and Boler and Zembylas (2003) argue that classrooms are shaped by social and power hierarchies. Therefore, normalising phrases like 'safe' and 'happy' and 'comfortable' in a classroom context might prove impossible when students ultimately have to be graded for their academic output in that space. The challenge, then, as Chandler (2007) posits, is not to allow student emotion to overshadow the academic purpose. Therefore, a digital storytelling praxis, even when used as socialising pedagogy, should function to intersect the personal and the scholarly.

As for classroom climate, attention should center on building students' critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas, 2008) to aid students in examining the classroom's spatial orientation without reinforcing idealised perceptions. Although the students claimed the space was 'safe' and 'comfortable,' what does that mean? For whom is it safe and for whom is it not? Activities that encourage students' awareness of themselves and each other - through extended opportunities for dialogue, participatory learning activities, and reflection (discussion board commentary or journaling) should play a substantial role in the curriculum. By integrating a critical and reflective lens through directed assignments, students can explore how space is (re)produced by power hierarchies and how self/other binaries are constructed before defining what factors communicate to our collective understandings of spatial comfort. This is imperative since most digital storytelling instruction encourages reconfiguring classroom environments, building relationships between diverse learners, and ultimately altering the learning space. It is unethical to leave students with token notions of safety and comfort, particularly when these concepts vary for so many in our world. Critical and careful digital storytelling praxis can turn classrooms into settings that utilize discomfort for transformative learning (Zembylas, 2015), locations that become more than temporary sites of education. Moving forward, an additional study could investigate more fully the role of critical emotional reflexivity in a digital storytelling classroom, specifically exploring how it might be facilitated to complement transformative learning.

**Implications for digital storytelling instruction**

As a digital storytelling practitioner, developing classroom settings for open and respectful 'conversation hubs' is as important as the content area I teach. Making curricular space for what Pratt (1991: 40) deems 'pedagogical arts of the contact zone,' through exercises like storytelling transports people across difference, highlights our humanity, and nurtures mutual understanding. However, digital storytelling practitioners do ask a lot of students and

ourselves in this process. We position students in an environment that can parallel emotional material with academic content. This juxtaposition could leave students perplexed about the class, could transfer harmful feelings associated with the project to the academic subject, or cause the student unnecessary anxiety. Worse, sharing stories where unequal relationships exist and are built around power could reify notions of otherness, thereby cementing unfair stereotypes in the minds of students rather than serving to disrupt them. Digital storytelling could backfire and operate as a form of (re)colonialism, what Leake (2016) documents as a liability when emotional content enters the writing classroom.

Further, is it fair to place students, as student Rachel described above, in situations that are 'terrifying?' Is student discomfort the price of entry for learning that will further both students' personal and academic growth? As Zembylas (2015) points out, 'discomfort' does not necessarily mean 'unsafe'. Digital storytelling practitioners (myself included) must continue to tread carefully, as ethical classroom practice demands that we do not place students in emotionally harmful situations. This means we must continually examine our own practice, question our motives, and ensure that a digital storytelling curriculum is in the best academic interest of our students.

Next, just the title of the digital storytelling activity – with the world 'story' imbedded - sends a message to students regarding the kind of response a teacher expects. If digital stories at their very core are narratives, and personal narratives at that, then the 'risk' argument scholars in composition articulated must be applied to texts that take digital and public forms. The reality is that many students have a default setting that connects the word 'story' to both 'personal' and 'painful'. It is up to the instructor to make it very clear that students are not required to barter emotional content for a grade. Nor, should students be forced (again for a grade) to publicly broadcast their stories - even if the broadcast is only in the context of the classroom. Students should be allowed to show their stories privately without penalty.

Being forced to share a digital story could lead to another complication for students. A teacher might read a story and deem it appropriate for classroom viewing, as to the teacher, the student's response may not seem intimate. Regardless of the subject matter or topic, it cannot be lost that many digital stories are first-hand experiences turned into short movies. Mix in images and music alongside a student's voice detailing the event and a student could be left feeling vulnerable in a very public way. A public broadcast could traumatise the student from their point of view, especially if the subject matter is centered around a student's tragic life event. For those minutes the story is on display, the student's world takes center stage and becomes *the* curriculum. As critical race theorists point out (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002), this is a great opportunity for students who have been traditionally underrepresented in the curriculum, as sharing this kind of counter-story may disrupt stereotypes and offer a unique learning opportunity not found in books. However, this broadcast could also be disastrous for students who do not want to be put on the spot. Keep in mind shy students, or students who are not technically savvy, or even learners who may not be as linguistically competent as their peers. Digital storytelling practitioners have an ethical responsibility to not force students into a public outing, as we cannot theorise the lasting impact of this type of project on a student's emotional well-being.

To mitigate these concerns, instructors who implement digital storytelling into their curriculum must be closely involved in every aspect of the digital storytelling process. This starts by reading every script and draft, to pulling students aside that may be going down too hard a path and providing campus resources (DeGenaro, 2007), to reminding students that they are not required to leverage emotion for grades. Instructors can also provide classroom examples of digital stories that are not driven by pathos. A conversation can then ensue on how the story could be graded, turning the dialogue toward outlining both student and teacher expectations. Overall, the digital story is a text and texts can be graded. In fact, if the digital story is on the syllabus then students will expect it to be graded. Treating the digital story like a text and not a personal story changes the conversation. In addition, exchanging the word 'story' for 'essay' alters the tone of the assignment and provides a bit more wiggle room for multiple responses. Additionally, speaking honestly about course content (emotionally and otherwise) with students at the onset, in addition to integrating some of the ideas above, could lessen some of the concerns composition scholars voiced about the expressionist genre. Lastly, rubrics should be provided (or co-constructed with students) that focus on writing concerns with respect to course learning outcomes, rather than the inclusion of emotional or personal content.

**US classrooms as conflict zones**

The emotional reaction that digital storytelling encourages requires an extra level of attentiveness on the instructor's part. First, digital storytelling is dependent upon the instructor's ability to create an atmosphere where students are urged to get to comfortable with one another. The data reveals how the classroom became what Pratt (1991) articulates as a safe house, a temporary space where diverse student populations co-exist and build trust. Although the data highlights how students felt secure inside this classroom space (some even transitioned this comfort with their peers outside of class), I continue to question the validity of such a response. I bring forward an argument Read published in 1998 and echoed by Zembylas in 2015. Read questions if classrooms can ever be safe when the nation is not safe for many of its citizens. Read's argument remains relevant considering US political transactions, which rang especially true on our campus the days following Trump's election victory. In my own class, a student wrote BUILD THE WALL #TRUMP2016 in huge letters across the chalkboard. Another of my students, who happens to be a hijab-wearing Muslim female, detailed being told to 'go home' as it was 'his America now' by a stranger in a grocery store parking lot. Not to mention, Trump's Executive Order banning both travel and refugee asylum into the United States from citizens residing in predominantly Muslim countries continues to make its way through the judicial system. The world our students inhabit, indeed American history, has been drastically altered. When students enter campus this week they will also carry with them a new kind of knowledge, one that may encompass both trauma and angst.

If the nation is not safe, how can a classroom provide safety? I argue this election cycle has made US classrooms conflict-orientated zones not unlike communities and nations that have experienced conflict trauma elsewhere in the world. I draw on Jansen's (2009) notion of 'troubled knowledge' from his book *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race in*

*an Apartheid Past* to substantiate this next claim. Jansen outlines the term 'troubled knowledges' to define predisposed ideas about race, ethnicity, and identity students - some victims of apartheid and some not - brought into the university classroom once it had been racially integrated in a post -apartheid South Africa. American educators, now more than ever, are faced with how to grapple with all the 'knowledges' (and fear, and confusion, and tension) students now carry.

Learning activities, like digital storytelling, that promote critical cultural engagement are of vital importance as we find ourselves not only in a divisive and racially charged Trump era, but as we have yet, as a nation, to confront the ongoing brutalisation people of colour continue to face, which has emerged on a national stage in places like Chicago, Baltimore, and Ferguson. Safe houses, as Pratt (1991) and others (Jerskey, 2001; Lu, 1994) suggest, are meant to provide an environment where 'new narratives' and 'new understandings' can take form. Updating the safe house and contact zone concepts to include what Kwame Appiah (cited in Barrios, 2016: 48) writes about the responsibilities attached with living in a global society might offer a direction forward. Appiah calls for an approach in cosmopolitanism, and he recommends initiating 'conversations' to 'develop habits of coexistence'. Appiah believes conversations, both with ourselves and one another, can serve as sites of engagement where people can become used to one another without attempting to change another's beliefs. Future research could examine how to alter classrooms for work that encourages students to better communicate and to nurture empathy over apathy, skills students might transfer as they leave classrooms and enter the world.

Digital storytelling promotes understanding across difference, communication, and critical reflection. These are skills valued not only in the writing classroom, but in all areas of academia. No matter what subject is being taught, the world we live in today, as student Mike mentioned above, requires a different skill set. The data communicates the value students placed on a digital storytelling based curriculum, and educators must continue to be mindful of the expectations placed on students who participate in digital storytelling. However, educators have an equal charge to place students in directed environments that challenge their notion of otherness, nurture tolerance, and promote diversity in order to prepare them for the lives they will lead outside of the classroom. Classrooms are not in a vacuum; pedagogy and instruction must transfer into the world. This study, although with a limited student population, supports how university students desired the emotional content digital storytelling evoked. Moving curriculum in a direction that simultaneously engages students emotionally and intellectually may alter many long-standing beliefs about what it means to receive a university education. Perhaps it is time to open the door a bit wider for alternative conversations, ones that centre around the demands of living in a global and transcultural world.

**Kristian D. Stewart** is a Lecturer II in the department of Language, Culture, and Communication at the University of Michigan – Dearborn, USA. Currently, Kristian is finishing grant related work that examines environmental justice alongside student experiences associated with the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. She is also part of an interdisciplinary research team that will investigate the writing experiences of international

students on the Dearborn campus later this year. Kristian's scholarship interests include post-conflict zone pedagogies, digital storytelling, social justice education, and the turn to educating students 'glocally'.

**References**

Adichie, C. N. 2009. *The danger of a single story.* Online at
        https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
        (accessed 10 September 2015).

Alton, C. 1993. Two comments on 'crossing lines'. *College English,* 55(1993): 666-671,
        DOI: 10.2307/378707.

Appiah, K.A. 2016. Making conversation and the primacy of practice. In Barrios, B. (ed)
        *Emerging: contemporary readings for writers.* New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 44-
        58.

Banks, W.P. 2003. Written through the body: disruptions and 'personal' writing. *College
        English*, 66(1): 21-40, DOI: 10.2307/3594232.

Bartholomae, D. 1995. Writing with teachers: a conversation with Peter Elbow. *College
        Composition and Communication,* 46(1): 62-71, DOI: 10.2307/358870.

BBC Wales. (n.d). *Capture Wales.* Online at
        http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales.shtml
        (accessed 4 June 2014).

Benick, G. 2012. Digital storytelling and diasporic identities in higher education. *Collected
        Essays    on    Learning    and    Teaching* Vol.    V.    Online    at
        http://celt.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/CELT/article/view/3360    (accessed    21
        July 2014).

Berman, J. 2001. *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom.*
        Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Benmayor, R. 2008. Digital storytelling as signature pedagogy for the new humanities. *Arts
        and Humanities in Higher Education,* 7(2008): 188–204, DOI:10.1177/1474022208.

Boler, M. 1999. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education.* New York: Routledge.

Boler, M. & Zembylas, M. 2003. Discomforting truths: the emotional terrain of
        understanding differences. In Trifonas, P. (ed) *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking
        Education for Social Justice.* New York: Routledge, 116-139.

Brodkey, L. 1994. Writing on the bias. *College English,* 56(5): 527-547.

Brown, B. 2010. *The power of vulnerability.* Online at
        https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability (accessed 2015 September
        10).

Burgess, J. 2006. Hearing ordinary voices: cultural studies, vernacular creativity and digital
        storytelling. *Continuum*: *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies,* 20(2): 201–214.

Canagarajah, A.S. 1997. Safe houses in the contact zone: coping strategies of African
        American students in the academy. *College Composition and Communication,* 48(2):
        173-196, DOI: 10.2307/358665.

Chandler, S. 2007. Fear, teaching composition, and students' discursive choices: re-thinking connections between emotions and college student writing. *Composition Studies,* 35(2): 53-70.

Couldry, N. 2008. Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling. *New Media and Society,* 10(3): 373-391, DOI: 10.1177/1461444808089414.

Creswell, J.W. 2009. *Research Design*: *Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

DeBacher, S. & Harris-Moore, D. 2016. First, do no harm: teaching writing in the wake of traumatic events. *Composition Forum,* 34. Summer. Online at http://compositionforum.com/issue/34/first-do-no-harm.php (accessed 22 February 2017).

DeGenaro, W. 2007. Us and them: Joyce Carol Oates and the stories students tell. *Teaching English in a Two-Year College,* 34(4)*:* 380-393.

Delgado, R. 1989. Storytelling for oppositionists and others: a plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review,* 87(8): 2411-2441.

Elbow, P. 1995. Being a writer vs. being an academic: a conflict in goals. *College Composition and Communication,* 46(1): 72-83.

Gachago, D., Ivala, E., Condy, J. & Chigona, A. 2013. Journeys across difference: preservice teacher education students' perceptions of a pedagogy of discomfort in a digital storytelling project in South Africa. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning,* 1(1): 22– 52, DOI:10.14426/cristal.v1i1.4.

Gere, A.R. 2001. Revealing silence: rethinking personal writing. *College Composition and Communication,* 53(2): 203-223, DOI: 10.2307/359076.

Hill, A. 2014. Digital storytelling and the politics of doing good: exploring the ethics of bringing personal narratives into public spheres. In Pleasants, H, & Salter, D. (eds.) *Community Based Multiliteracies & Digital Media Projects.* New York: Peter Lang, 22-41.

Hindman, J. E. 2001. Special focus: personal writing. *College English,* 64(1): 34-40.

Hull, G. A. & Katz, M. 2006. Crafting an agentive self: case studies of digital crafting storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English,* 41(1): 43–81.

Jansen, J. 2009. *Knowledge in the Blood.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Jerskey, M. 2013. Literacy brokers in the contact zone, year 1: the crowded safe house, in Canagarajah, S. (ed) *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms.* London: Routledge, 197-206.

Kajder, S. 2004. Enter here: personal narrative and digital storytelling. *English Journal*, 93(3): 64-68, DOI: 10.2307/4128811.

Lambert, J. 2012. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* (4th ed.)*.* London: Routledge.

Leake, E. 2016. Writing pedagogies of empathy: as rhetoricperillo and disposition. *Composition Forum*, 34. Summer. Online at
http://compositionforum.com/issue/34/empathy.php (accessed 22 February 2017).

Lu, M. Z. 1994. Professing multiculturalism: the politics of style in the contact zone. *College Composition and Communication,* 45(4): 442-458, DOI: 10.2307/358759.

Lunsford, A. 2016. Trigger warnings, safe houses-and writing. *Macmillan Community,* 22 Sept. Online at https://community.macmillan.com/community/the-english-community/bedford-bits/blog/2016/09/22/trigger-warnings-safe-houses-and-writing (accessed 25 February 2017).

Maxson, J. 2005. Government of da peeps, for da peeps, and by da peeps: revisiting the contact zone. *Journal of Basic Writing (CUNY)*, 24(1): 24-47.

Morgan, D. (1998). Ethical issues raised by students' personal writing. *College English,* 60(3): 318-325.

Oppermann, M. 2008. Digital storytelling and American studies: critical trajectories from the emotional to the epistemological. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education,* 7(2): 171-187, DOI: 10.1177/1474022208088647.

Perillo, L. 1997. When the classroom becomes the confessional. *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 44(14): A56.

Poetry Foundation. 2017. The raven. Online at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/48860 (accessed 30 January 2017).

Pratt, M.L. 1991. Arts of the contact zone. *Profession,* 33-40.

Raimist, R. & Jacobs, W. 2010. The pedagogy of digital storytelling in the college classroom. *International Journal of Media, Technology, and Lifelong Learning,* 6(2): 280-285.

Rak, J. 2006. Do witness: don't: a woman's word and trauma as pedagogy. Online at http://topia.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/topia/article/view/382/271 (accessed 2 February 2014).

Read, D. 1998. Writing trauma, history, story: the class (room) as borderland. *JAC,* 18(1): 105-121.

Rolón-Dow, R. 2011. Race(ing) stories: digital storytelling as a tool for critical race scholarship. *Race Ethnicity and Education,* 14(2): 159–173, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2010.519975.

Rose-Brushwood, C. 2009. The (im)possibilities of self-representation: exploring the limits of storytelling in the digital stories of women and girls. *Changing English,* 16(2): 211–220, DOI: 10.1080/13586840902863194.

Saldaña, J. 2012. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Schwartz, B.J. 2007. Fear of narrative: revisiting the Bartholomae-Elbow debate through the figure of the writing teacher in contemporary American fiction. *Rhetoric Review,* 26(4): 425-439.

Selfe, C. L. 2010. Stories that speak to us: multimodal literacy narratives. In Perl, S., Hawisher, G. E. & Selfe, C.L. (Co-authors). *Computers and Composition Online.* Online at http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/digitalcomposing/selfe.html (accessed 4 April 2014).

Silence Speaks. (n.d). International health and human rights. Online at http://www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks/ (accessed 18 August 2014).

Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. 2002. Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(23), 23-44, DOI: 10.1177/107780040200800103.

Spigelman, C. 2001. Argument and evidence in the case of the personal. *College English,* 64(1), 63-87, DOI: 10.2307/1350110.

Stake, R. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Stewart, K. D. 2016. What's Left Unsaid: Rewriting and Re*story*ing in a South African Teacher Education Classroom. Unpublished PhD diss., University of Michigan. Online at http://hdl. 446handle.net/2027.42/118196.

Stewart, K. D. & Gachago, D. 2016. Being human today: a digital storytelling pedagogy for transcontinental border crossing. *British Journal of Educational Technology,* 47(1): 528-542, DOI: 10.1111/bjet.12450.

Stewart, K. D. & Ivala, E. 2017. Silence, voice, and 'other languages': digital storytelling as a site for resistance and restoration in a South African higher education classroom. *British Journal of Educational Technology,* DOI: 10.1111/bjet.12540.

StoryCenter. (n.d). Core principles. Online at: http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55368c08e4b0d419e1c011f7/t/55f25885e4b0afb 1e83b98fd/1441945733158/Principles.pdf (accessed 14 November 2016).

Swartzlander, S., Pace, D. & Stamler, V.L. 1993. Requiring students to write about their personal lives. *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 17: B1-B2.

Valentino, M.J. 1996. Responding when a life depends on it: what to write in the margins when students self-disclose. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College,* 23(4): 274–83.

Vasudevan, L. 2006. Making known differently: engaging visual modalities as spaces to author new selves. *E-Learning*, 3(2): 207-215, DOI: 10.2304/elea.2006.3.2.207.

Wallace, D.F. 2005. This is Water. Transcription of the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address. Online at http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf (accessed 21 August 2014).

Yang, Y. F. 2012. Multimodal composing in digital storytelling. *Computers and Composition,* 29(3): 221-238, DOI: 10.1016/j.compcom.2012.07.001.

Zembylas, M. 2006. Witnessing in the classroom: the ethics and politics of affect. *Educational Theory,* 56(3): 305-324, DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00228.x.

Zembylas, M. 2008. Engaging with issues of cultural diversity and discrimination through critical emotional reflexivity in online learning. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 59(1): 61-82, DOI: 10/1177/0741713608325171.

Zembylas, M. 2015. Pedagogy of discomfort and its ethical implications: the tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education,* 10(2): 163-174, DOI: 10.1080/17449642.2015.1039274.