IATL Funding Final Report: *Communicating the Classics via Digital Storytelling*

What did you achieve with this project?

This project was the first time that the genre of digital storytelling had been applied to Classics. As part of second year core module, *The Hellenistic World*, students were invited to consider the ways we approach and represent the Classical world, and what an interdisciplinary approach might bring to this complex period of history. Seminars and lectures introduced different disciplinary approaches to the classical world, and an excursion to the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford allowed the students to question the traditional way of representing antiquity to the general public.

As part of this module theme, students were asked to work in groups to produce a digital story about an aspect of the Hellenistic world. Initial training was provided by Netskills (now JISC), with topics covering: Why do we tell stories + what makes a good story (attended by staff, postgrads, and undergrads, and recorded via Lecture capture: https://lecturecapture.warwick.ac.uk/ess/echo/presentation/228cc3c1-7f32-4087-b862-c2a0a7ce88b2), and then image sourcing, recording the story, and Wevideo software training (attending by staff and postgrads, and then later taught by myself to the undergraduates over the course of Spring Term as part of their seminar work). This project introduced to students the changing nature of Classics as a discipline – we increasingly use technology in our research, and are increasingly asked to communicate our research to the broader public. Digital storytelling thus not only taught the students transferable skills, but also introduced them to what being an academic means today. The project became a forum through which staff and students could discuss the changing nature of what it means to be a classicist in the 21st century.

Each group completed their video (100% completion rate, excellent for a non-assessed piece of work), and these are now online at the Warwick Classics Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbOUT4_M3WXXKuEeIhYRYRA. The videos were then presented in a short film festival in the Summer Term, *The Hellies*, with a prize awarded to the best story. This served not only to reward and recognise the students' efforts, but also allowed us to test out possible assessment criteria (developed by David Beck).

Students were able to develop their academic skills (independent research), as well as the transferable skills needed for the 21st century (knowledge of image copyright, communication, creativity, co-operation/group work, visual literacy). They also completed a tangible output that can be placed on their CV's for their future careers.

What has been the single biggest impact of the project?

While the videos are the most obvious tangential output of the project (the first time that the genre of digital storytelling had been applied to Classics, a huge achievement for the students involved), I feel that the biggest impact has been the dialogue that has been sparked within the department and amongst the students about the role of digital humanities within Classics and within undergraduate education. This was an unexpected outcome, since as active researchers in the field, the benefits and necessity of these types of skills were self-evident to both staff and postgraduates. For the undergraduate students however, the idea that a 'traditional' discipline like Classics should involve digital technology was new and unexpected, and led to a dialogue between myself and the students about the changing nature of what it meant to be an academic within the discipline, and the types of activities we perform within the university. That the students now see how digital humanities is a methodology that can and should be used within Classics was a significant outcome.

What were the biggest problems you encountered during the project?

One of the largest challenges of the project was to teach something to the students as I was learning it myself. As mentioned above, an unexpected development was that I had to explain to the students *why* we were doing this project, and the need to contextualise it within Classics as a discipline. From speaking to colleagues, the need to explain in detail *why* a new or unusual activity is occurring or is important (even though it may appear self-evident) is common, and something I will keep in mind in future. Although it is often thought that students are 'digital natives', many within my module were not, and extra encouragement and reassurance had to be given to some groups (but this reinforced to me the importance of this type of project). I am not completely confident in my own computer skills, and so having the support of David Beck (Digital Humanities) was important in this regard; even though I did not need his technical skills in the end, the fact that he was on hand in case of any unexpected technical glitches gave me confidence and comfort.

There were also some resource challenges that I faced doing this type of work within the university; problems which will likely only increase if more people engage in this type of activity. There were very few microphones available to be booked for student use (two across the entire university), and for the initial training day we had to ask Netskills to bring extra headphones/microphones in order to run the session. We also had difficulties finding quiet places for students could record their stories (particularly since we were constrained by the very tight time frame that microphones were actually available).

Another unexpected problem was that programmes are not installed on all university computers (only on those in offices and in computer labs), meaning it was impossible for me to quickly answer a question or demonstrate something during a lecture, and which often meant I had to bring in my own laptop in order to effectively teach what was required. When computer labs were booked, students kept coming in and out of the room not realising it was used for

teaching. This caused disruption to many classes, although I understand that steps are being taken by room bookings to prevent this type of thing happening in future. Having brought in outside consultants for the training I wanted to use Lecture Capture, only to discover it was only available in some rooms, and that it wasn't working in the slot we wanted it to work for (it did in the end record the lecture, but no one, not even Audio-visual, were sure it was doing so at the time).

What student involvement was there on the project?

The 41 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in the *Hellenistic World* module were involved in the project. About 5 postgraduates also underwent the digital storytelling training. One postgraduate student acted as a judge at the *Hellies*.

How many students do you estimate were impacted by the project and in what way?

For the 41 undergraduate students who created the videos, they have a better understanding of the different types of outputs and activities that classicists engage in, they have improved group work skills, improved computer confidence, improved understanding of image use and image copyright, and improved academic self-confidence.

For postgraduate students, staff and other undergraduates, the project has begun a dialogue about the role of digital humanities in teaching and communicating research, and has led to renewed interest in this area; two postgraduates are working with me over the summer developing other digital technologies for teaching purposes (in particular TEI for teaching Classical Texts, a project entitled *(De)coding Classics).*

Could you see your project being replicated or built on elsewhere in the university?

I intentionally chose software for this project that is free and/or extremely cost effective, and that is easy to master. Audacity (the voice recording software) is free and is available as an IT delivered application to all those within Classics at Warwick; this could be extended to other departments easily. Similarly Wevideo (the movie software) is free online software that can be accessed from any computer; for a small subscription fee we received additional support and features that worked well within a classroom situation (e.g. I could see and edit the work of the students, they could collaborate together on different files). The video itself is created by manipulating jpeg images, which again is very accessible and easy to use, even for those who might be intimidated by technology. Hence the project would be easy to replicate elsewhere; the purpose of digital storytelling as a genre is that it is accessible to all, using simple techniques to communicate effective messages.

Wevideo has stated that they would be willing to offer a discount, or enter into discussions if the university wished to renew the licence. I found them extremely helpful and responsive; they altered the software and offerings available in response to my questions/requests.

Do you recognise in the outcomes of your project implications for the university and beyond?

David Beck and others are looking into this type of work as a form of assessment, and the case study has proven valuable in developing an approach to this, and in forming a basis from which to move forward. I think that if this type of project were adopted more widely across the university, then greater infrastructure would be needed (e.g. greater number of computer labs, microphones, etc).

The project was run as Australia introduced a new curriculum for schools. This new curriculum emphasises that students need to acquire is literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding. Digital storytelling within history has been identified as an effective way of achieving many of these goals, and I have been in conversation with several primary school teachers in this regard. There are plans that I will travel to Australia next year as a consultant to introduce the method to schools across NSW.

The consultant (Chris Thomson) from Netskills (now JISC) is also using the resulting videos to demonstrate how digital storytelling might be used within the university classroom.

What evaluation of your project did you carry out and what were your results?

Part of the project was to assess the viability of this type of work as a form of alternative assessment, going beyond the essay/exam format. A questionnaire was given out to the students in the summer term after the project ended; the results are summarised in the attachment. It was clear from the questionnaire that this type of project created a split amongst the student body – some felt it was important, while others remained opposed to the idea of having it as a form of assessment. Many of the comments from the students stated that they felt it was not the equivalent workload to an essay. It would be interesting to see whether students appreciated the project more at the end of their third year (i.e. if it affected/influenced them in their future studies). A surprise from the feedback was the general opposition to group work – many cited this as the most challenging part of the project, more so than the technology. While some thought the software was challenging, others who were more confident with technology thought that if the piece of work were to be assessed, then the software chosen was a bit clunky.

One student also emailed me with thoughts about the viability of this project as a form of assessment:

"As for the process, I found it interesting, and think it may come in useful in the future to say that I have had some experience of digital methods. I do not feel it enhanced my understanding of the period as much as an essay, and I think that there would be some serious issues arising from two marking systems running alongside each other (especially considering how much students complain about the single mark scheme as it is already...!). Here are some thoughts:

1. It is practically impossible to go into as much critical depth in a 3 minute digital story as in an essay, particularly when it comes to debating current scholarship, and exploring new directions for the field.
2. Similarly, a digital story that is truly interesting to a dispassionate audience must forfeit a certain amount of rigour for the sake of narrative (and when it comes to images, for the sake of copyright...)
3. Necessarily, there would be a much greater emphasis on presentation in the assessment of a digital story than an essay; it might be argued that a digital story would be more appropriately assessed as part of a media studies degree, not Classics.
4. On the flip side, a good digital story must demonstrate an ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively, which student authors (and academic writers more generally) sometimes lack."

Another email read:
'I found it useful and enjoyable - if an individual was doing it alone it would probably be slightly less work than an essay. I thought that We Video was a limited tool, particularly if the project was to be assessed.'

From staff discussions, it was felt that with the right structures in place this might form a piece of assessment, but that we don't want to rush the process to the disadvantage of students. We provide a series of lectures in first year focusing on how to write essays; if digital storytelling were introduced as a form of assessment then a similar amount of training would have to be provided in the interests of equity. Similarly, my discussions about the project with other staff (within and outside Classics) have raised some questions about having this as a form of assessment: the mechanisms of submitting something like this and then checking it for plagiarism (i.e. what would be the equivalent of Turn-it-in), as well as what the assessment criteria would be (albeit the latter is being addressed by David Beck). It was also felt if this was a piece of assessment we would make it individual work, not group work. As one colleague stated:

"I think the storytelling video exercise would be best used as part of a broader 'Digital Dossier' (??) including a mini-essay or the like providing the scholarly background, scholarly engagement, and some opportunity for self-reflection, with full referencing and bibliography, integrated as seamlessly as possible. This would then require some tight assessment criteria (which we would clearly need anyway if we are upgrading the module: it would prob. need to go to board of UG studies and the external examiner)."

Digital storytelling as a form of assessment was discussed at a staff meeting (attended by David Beck) on the 26th June. We felt that it could be introduced as an additional piece of work, or as an option for students (who then might play to their strengths and choose to write *either* an essay *or* do a digital story in their second term). All, even student representatives, felt that if it formed a major assessment component, then a reflective diary or something similar should be submitted alongside the video. Student representatives felt that this might also make it seem more like an 'academic' piece of work for the students involved.

Where will your project go from here?

Although we are still developing the structures to make it a possible form of assessment, the department of Classics and Ancient History recognises that this type of work has a place within undergraduate university education. I will be running digital storytelling within my module again next year (again the core second year undergraduate module *The Hellenistic World*), and the training will also be open to interested postgraduates from the department and faculty more broadly (CADRE have asked it to be open to doctoral students and I will ensure this occurs). It is hoped that by training undergraduates and postgraduates together, a learning community will be fostered, and the importance of these types of skills within academia might be communicated more to the undergraduate population.

I will teach digital storytelling slightly differently next year, and will embed it more into the themes of the module – e.g. the role of stories in making sense of the world and cultural/political changes (an important theme for this particular module). In this way I hope to improve student understanding and use of literary texts, and improve their ability to use fiction as a historical source. There will also be a clear criteria and previous set of examples to work against, which will improve student understanding about what types of things are expected from this genre.

I should also note that further links and resources are available on my module website:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/students/modules/hellenistic/digitalstorytelling/