# Reflective learning for the Net Generation of students: the digital storytelling approach

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Reflective learning is an essential attribute for lifelong learners. This learning process allows an individual to make sense of their experience and provides them with an opportunity to challenge thoughts and feelings about events and change future behaviour. Teachers lament on the lack of engagement of their students in reflective learning yet students do realise the importance of the reflective process. In the School of Medicine we responded to this challenge by identifying how our present cohort of students learn and developed an approach that was based on these findings.

### The Net Generation of students

Our students have grown up in a world surrounded by technology and multimedia. Recent research has highlighted that this 'Net Generation' of students learn differently. They prefer to be actively involved in tasks that use multimedia and like working in groups. Our surveys of first year medical students supported this view, with bodily-kinaesthetic and interpersonal learning preferences highly rated. The same students also have high ownership of mobile phones, use of media sharing sites (such as Flickr or YouTube) and a profile on a social networking site (such as MySpace or Facebook).

### A picture is worth a thousand words

The usual teaching approach for reflective learning is text based. However, it is often difficult to put thoughts and feelings into words. Visual images and sounds are able to more easily portray these essential aspects of the reflective learning process. Often the choice of media representation is symbolic and very personal. For example, the experience of meeting a patient for the first time may be portrayed by a picture of a sunrise or an earthquake. This choice can lead to deep reflection.

The use of multimedia can motivate reluctant learners. Work with schoolchildren has highlighted the "digital disconnect" highlighting the lack of engagement with school-based literacy work but an extensive use of the same skills through informal social networking and instant messaging.

### The digital storytelling approach

The empowering effect of writing a digital story by illustrating a personal narrative with multimedia has been widely used in community development and adopted in primary education. We adopted

this approach and asked first year medical students to produce a digital story of their first visit to a patient. Students used a blog to store their collection of images which they had either taken themselves (often by mobile phone cameras) or downloaded from one of the online archives that offer free visual images. The digital story was finally presented as an image-only PowerPoint show to a small tutorial group.

**The student evaluation**

**Students commented on how much they enjoyed the process of building the story** and how they enjoyed being creative and artistic.

Engagement in the reflective process heavily dominated their responses with all of the students within the group comparing the use of pictures to their levels of engagement with text-based accounts and presentations both as a creator and as a viewer.

*"It was entertaining and really gave you an insight into other people."*

*"It was a good difference to writing essays all the time or standing in front of a word presentation*."

The use of pictures triggered recollection within some students, a disorientating dilemma in others and in all cases both a deeper understanding of their own emotions and the presentation of a 'safe' channel in which to express them.

> *" I find it very useful because while I was trying to choose my pictures I could actually visualise what was going on at that moment and you can think of the emotions you were feeling. You think that it will only take 5 minutes but you end up putting a lot of effort into it."*

> *" You go greater into depth as well to be more honest and show your feelings."*

**Our evaluation**

We were impressed by the enthusiasm of the students and the overall depth of reflection in their presentations.

The use of digital storytelling appears to be a valuable pedagogic tool to stimulate reflective learning amongst the Net Generation of undergraduate medical students. We will continue to use this approach to develop reflective learning and this will be supported by the award of a full University Teaching Fellowship to John Sandars.

Further research and development will also be stimulated through the JISC funded Reflect 2.0 project. This project will study the use of next generation technologies for reflective learning and the collaborators are Jonathan Pitches in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, Maggie McPherson in the School of Education and Jill Taylor at Leeds Metropolitan University.

**Further information on digital storytelling in education**

Ohler  J  (2008)  Digital Storytelling in the Classroom   Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press

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