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Joana K. Y. Tse\*, Stephanie W. Y. Chan, Samuel K. W. Chu

# Quality Assessment for Digital Stories by Young Authors

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**Abstract:** Digital storytelling, an innovative way of writing, has been introduced to young learners who are taught to construct stories with digital tools to convey their knowledge and ideas. In 2018 and 2019, 31 digital stories created by Hong Kong primary school students were published on a digital story writing platform and linked from an online gamified reading platform. Each book on average gained 4,000+ views from across the globe and received 3,000+ favorable comments in total. While the digital stories are popular in these platforms, their quality and education value are uncertain. A review of the literature shows there is a lack of robust tools for assessing digital stories by young authors. The research team for this paper thus constructed their own framework in evaluating digital stories. An assessment of the stories has been done by two capable assessors, who found that the stories overall were of good quality and suggested room for improvement. This paper made three contributions: (1) “invention” of a digital story assessment framework; (2) it shows that stories created by students (with support from educators) can be an enjoyable and useful educational resource for their peers; and (3) digital storytelling can help foster the development of young authors.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, e-books, digital literacy, quality assessment

## 1 Introduction

Writing can be a daunting task. In fact, it can also be an enjoyable task. Digital storytelling, integrating the use of multimedia into traditional story writing, has become a powerful technological tool in educational settings and has proved to be an effective way to engage both educators and learners (Wang & Zhan, 2010). This innovative way of storytelling has been introduced to young students, enabling them to write and publish digital stories online, sharing their ideas and work across the globe.

In recent years, around 40 Hong Kong primary schools have been using a gamified online reading platform “Reading Battle” to try to enhance students’ reading interest and abilities. In 2018 and 2019, top users who read more than 200 books and achieved at least 80/100 in answering the questions in these books were invited to create their own digital stories with support from a team of educators on an online platform “Storyjumper.” In all, 31 digital books were published by these students with a total of 127,094 reads as of April 20, 2020.

In this paper, we constructed an assessment framework to evaluate the quality of these 31 stories and investigated the educational value and practicality of digital storytelling for young students.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Digital Storytelling for Educational Use

Digital storytelling combines traditional storytelling with digital multimedia, including images, animations, recorded audio, and music (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Like traditional storytellers, digital storytellers select a topic and create stories with their purposes and points of view. Digital stories are typically short which readers can finish reading within minutes, and is enhanced by

\*Corresponding author: Joana K. Y. Tse, Department of Psychology, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China, Email: kytse@eduhk.hk

Stephanie W. Y. Chan, Faculty of Education (Academic Unit of Human Communication, Development, and Information Sciences), The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Samuel K. W. Chu, Faculty of Education (Academic Unit of Teacher Education and Learning Leadership), The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

technology while the story content remains as the primary focus (Boase, 2013).

In the previous decade, digital storytelling has been more commonly practiced in classrooms and has the potential to become a powerful tool for teachers and students' collaboration and communication (Robin, 2008). Digital stories help teachers introduce ideas and knowledge more effectively by arousing students' interest and curiosity toward topics (O'Byrne, Houser, Stone & White, 2018), while multimedia elements capture students' attention, encouraging them to explore further. Robin (2006) also suggested that teachers can create stories that tailor their students' needs and demonstrate how ideas can be conveyed using technology.

Under the teacher's guidance, students create digital stories to share their ideas with peers. In addition to brainstorming ideas, conducting research, developing storyline and script, they also learn how to collect, analyze, and incorporate multimedia elements with text when creating digital stories (Robin, 2008). This equips students with twenty-first century literacy skills – digital, global, technological, visual, and information literacy, enhancing students' effective communication skills in this innovative technology-driven world (Brown, Bryan, & Brown, 2005). Developing digital stories can also trigger students' creativity, in transferring ideas into artifacts by combining elements to make them interesting for the audience, and enhance critical thinking through analysis and reflection during the process (Boase, 2013).

## 2.2 Current Models for Constructing Digital Stories

Recognizing the benefits of digital storytelling, experts introduced guidelines and core elements for constructing digital stories, allowing teachers and students to tell quality stories in digital form (Tenh, Shiratuddin, & Harun, 2012). Lambert from the Center for Digital Storytelling developed seven elements in digital storytelling in 2006 on creating digital stories systematically, which include Point of View, A Dramatic Question, Emotional Content, The Gift of Your Voice, The Power of the Soundtrack, Economy, and Pacing (Lambert & Hessler, 2018).

Robin (2008) from the University of Houston modified Lambert's 7 elements into 10 for educational use. He intended to encourage students to consider the story's purpose, quality of multimedia elements, and language use, on top of the seven elements, to make it more practical for teaching and learning purposes in the classrooms. These elements provide important references for teachers

and students on producing quality digital stories, with the reminder that story literacy should be the top priority in digital stories (Ohler, 2013).

## 2.3 Assessment for Digital Storytelling

After constructing digital stories, it is essential to conduct evaluations to build stronger reflective and grading systems at schools. This can be done during the design, development, and completion stages, by both authors, peers, and teachers (Ohler, 2013).

Teachers are found lacking professional knowledge on digital story evaluation (Aagaard, 2014). Assessment frameworks are therefore important to help them assess students' work more effectively and objectively, and for students to comment on peers' work and improve their own stories. Ohler (2013) proposed digital story evaluation traits for teachers' development of rubrics in the classrooms, including story, writing, research, digital craftsmanship, media grammar, and creativity. Samples of digital storytelling rubrics are found and used to assess high-school projects (Barrett, 2006).

However, there are no robust models and most rubrics were designed for secondary to higher education. Guidelines or assessments for younger authors are lacking and therefore we developed a rubric to assess and evaluate their work.

# 3 Methods

## 3.1 Participants

A total of 30 Chinese students ranging from Grades 3–7 (age 8–11) from different primary schools in Hong Kong participated in the study. These students were the top users and high performers in a gamified online reading platform "Reading Battle," who read more than 200 books and attained 80/100 score in the reading game.

## 3.2 Instrument

A digital storytelling assessment framework was developed in this study to examine the quality of digital stories produced by young learners. The three-step development was based on elements of digital storytelling (Lambert & Hessler, 2006; Robin, 2008) with adaptations made to accommodate the needs of young learners: first, a

Table 1  
Score in I. Story Content and Language Use

Item	Mean score
1a. Point of view – purpose	3.16
1b. Story organization	3.42
1c. Story structure	3.33
1d. Language use – vocab and sentence structure	3.39
1e. Language use – grammar	3.68
1f. Dramatic questions	2.65
Average score under this domain	3.26

Scale: 4 Excellent, 3 Good, 2 Satisfactory, 1 Needs improvement

draft was built from theoretical models. Assessment items were modified to be more age-appropriate after analyzing digital stories produced by authors at a similar age in the online story writing platform “Storyjumper.” For example, “emotional content” in the seven elements of digital stories was excluded in our framework, while language use was taken into consideration for our scoring. Second, this was reviewed by experts in language education, early years education, and digital learning. Third, five randomly selected stories were rated by two independent raters who discussed the scorings and revised the rubrics.

The final scale was structured in three domains: story content and language (includes purpose, organization and structure, language usage), the use of multimedia elements (includes digital effects, selection and quality of illustrations, audio narration, sound effects), and final product & presentation (includes overall length, creativity elements). Each item was rated on a 4-point scale: 1 = *Needs improvement*, 2 = *Satisfactory*, 3 = *Good*, and 4 = *Excellent*. Expected performance under each item was presented in detailed rubrics for scoring (Appendix A).

We applied different equations for the overall scores for different genres. For picture books, the weighting for the three domains (Story content and language: The Use of Multimedia Elements: Final Product & Presentation) was 6:2:2. Chapter books which were more textual based were weighted 8:1:1. Some items were only applicable to particular genres, for example, we did not score dramatic questions for non-fiction books.

### 3.3 Procedures

All students participated in 1–2 one and a half-hour training workshops on producing the digital stories and

using the digital platform. Students were invited to write a digital story for students of similar or younger age, and they knew that these stories would be displayed on “Reading Battle,” which would be read by other students. They were free to choose whether they wanted to write the story in Chinese, English, or bilingual in both languages. They were provided with the same electronic platform “Storyjumper” to construct and present their digital stories with.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Story Content and Language Use

Students’ digital stories were first evaluated on story content and language use, which are the heart of effective digital stories according to Ohler (2013). Six areas were rated using the rubrics (Table 1):

Every story is created with a purpose, with reasons why authors decided to write and share (Greene, 1996). According to Fuhrken (2009), the major purpose of authors for elementary students included to persuade, inform, entertain, and describe. Among the 31 digital books, the most popular purpose is entertainment and enjoyment, telling an imagery story or real experience, focusing on characters and events, for example, “Friendship with a Dragon” and “The Tortoise’s Adventure” show adventurous journeys of the characters facing dangerous situations. Some stories have moral messages, for example, “A Fairy Tale Shuffle” sends the message of “All things in their being are good for something” and “The Ocean was Angry!” calls for environmental protection. Few students expressed the purpose explicitly, for example, the author of “My Invention Journey” wrote “I wish you could find your favorite hobby and keep doing, and there could be some surprising results”.

For the story structure and organization (Items 1b and 1c), all students included core story elements, which are the setting, characters, and plot. Some wrote about conflicts, struggles, climax, and resolution, making it more attractive and arousing readers’ interest. Students also demonstrated good language skills (Items 1c and 1d), most had appropriate vocabulary choices with accurate sentence structures and grammar, while there are two chapter books written with complex structures and advanced vocabularies. We noted that English books contained more grammatical mistakes than Chinese books.

Lastly, these books had a relatively low score on Dramatic question (Item 1f), which is the key question

Table 2  
Score in II. The Use of Multimedia Elements

Item	Mean score
2a. Written text	2.77
2b. Images – selection	3.48
2c. Images – quality	3.10
2d. Audio – voiceover's quality	1.48
2e. Audio – voiceover's style	1.48
2f. Audio – voiceover's pace	1.52
2g. Audio – music/sound effect	1.29
Average score under this domain	2.78

\*Scale: 4 Excellent, 3 Good, 2 Satisfactory, 1 Needs improvement

kept in the readers' mind on how things will turn out, either by asking or prompting the audience to think about it at the beginning (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Some stories are quite straightforward and do not raise questions to arouse readers' curiosity, while most of the realization is barely different from the expectation.

Overall, the average total score for story content and language use was 3.26, which shows that students have strong capabilities in story construction.

## 4.2 The Use of Multimedia Elements

Thirty-one digital books were assessed on multimedia elements, considering *Principles of Multimedia Learning* developed by Mayer and Fiorella (2014). The results are shown in Table 2.

We examined the quality of the written texts. For the 31 digital books, some books showed texts in a conventional way, while some authors added text effects connected to the plot to facilitate understanding. For example, important vocabularies were highlighted in color with a bigger font size, and some dialogues are displayed with speech bubbles (see Table 3). This is consistent with the signaling principle that suggests that people read and learn better if we highlight significant information to direct readers' attention (Mayer & Fiorella, 2014).

Multimedia and image principles suggested that students learn better with relevant images. Most books attained high scores in image selection and quality (Items 2b and 2c), with abundant images that enhanced engagement. They connect to the text and are relevant to the story and one author even drew her own pictures (see Table 4).

Audio including human voiceover in an informal and conversational tone positively helps the audience to get into the presentation, as stated in the voice and personalized principle (Mayer & Fiorella, 2014). Score for the audio components was low (items 2d-2g) because most books do not have a voiceover, as this is not compulsory. However, even though it was not introduced during training, six students added voiceover narratives. For example, authors of *Friendship with a Dragon* and *The Adventure of a Monkey* added their own voiceovers, the pace matched with the storyline and punctuation, facilitating the audience to engage in the story. They even added sound effects to the background to make stories become more engaging and unique.

## 4.3 Final Product and Presentation

Lastly, we reviewed the digital books in terms of duration (how long is the story), economy (the amount of information), and creativity (see Table 5).

To facilitate an effective presentation, authors combine content with multimedia to communicate ideas with readers and keep it as a short digital story which can be completed within 5 min (Harun & Shiratuddin, 2009). While 10 books are either too short or too long, the remaining ones can be finished within 5 min, with 10–25 pages in total. Within these pages, students were able to select and include the optimal amount of materials in the story without overloading the readers, which is always regarded as a challenging task for the authors (Lambert & Hessler, 2018).

Creativity is another bonus element of the digital stories. While all stories are original, some students managed to present their ideas in an unordinary way with the application of multimedia elements. Students' creativity was shown from the surprise plot in the storyline, creative combination of pictures, and different sound effects made by authors (see Table 6).

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Realizing students' capability to produce high-quality digital stories, it is worthwhile to encourage them to engage in digital story writing from an early age, using this innovative form of storytelling to communicate and share ideas with others.

First, it turns writing into an enjoyable task for students, giving them a more motivating and engaging way to communicate thoughts by adding different digital



Table 3  
Examples of the Use of Multimedia Elements I

		
<i>Why Do I Have to Clean My Room</i>	<i>Friendship with a Dragon</i>	<i>Lily the Little Girl</i>

Table 4  
Examples of the Use of Multimedia Elements II



	
<i>The Ocean is Angry</i>	<i>A Fairy Tale Shuffle</i>

Table 5  
Score in III. Final Product and Presentation

Item	Mean
3a. Duration	2.94
3b. Economy	3.26
3c. Creativity	3.00
Average score under this domain	3.06

\*Scale: 4 Excellent, 3 Good, 2 Satisfactory, 1 Needs improvement

media and skills into stories instead of just words alone. While writing has always been regarded as a traditional assignment in language classes, digital storytelling demonstrates a gamified way for everyone to tell stories and express themselves using various channels like pictures, songs, graphics, and so on. This fun way of learning helps motivate students, even for those who are

struggling with language, to create stories and to practice their language skills and communicate with others in a less stressful environment.

Second, it helps foster students' development and broaden their horizon by providing opportunities and channels to exchange their ideas and work with people all around the world, forming a globalized peer-centered learning environment. Students can create stories, publish them on online gamified platforms, and interact with their peers internationally. They read, answer questions, play games designed by the peers, comment, and rate the stories. This process turns students' work into valuable educational resources which allow them to learn from peers online. It is believed this could enhance students' engagement and produce higher quality digital stories in the long run.

Furthermore, the assessment framework developed can benefit teachers and students in several ways. The framework provides a well-defined and systematic outline

Table 6  
Examples of Creativity Elements in the Stories



Remember the Source of the Drinking Tea



Monster



The Adventure of a Monkey

for good digital stories and assists the trainers to educate students on writing digital stories. Trainers can instruct students on how to write good digital stories through the three domains and allow them to target the areas in which the students might need to improve. Students can refer to the guideline to improve their writing and also help assess other online stories, which can in turn facilitate peers' learning. Lastly, this can also be used as an instrument for teachers to assess and grade their students' work and offer suggestions for improvements.

## 6 Limitation and Improvement

The assessment framework was produced and used to analyze the 31 digital stories as explained in the paper. More digital stories should be chosen and assessed in order to further examine and modify the rubric. Besides, in order to validate the reliability of this new instrument,

comparison of the scores rated by experts such as school teachers and librarians is needed to ensure that the framework is able to help differentiate the quality of digital stories in an effective and objective way.

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## Appendix A

### Assessment Framework for Digital Stories Written by Young Authors

CATEGORY	Item	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Satisfactory (2)	Need improvement (1)
<b>I. Story Content and Language</b>	1a. Point of view – purpose	Purpose of the story is expressed clearly and explicitly, and remains the main focus throughout.	Purpose of the story is expressed clearly and remains the main focus for most of the time.	Purpose of the story is fairly clear but with a few lapses in focus.	The story does not have a purpose/message.
	1b. Story Organization	The ideas are connected/organized coherently and cohesively. Paragraphing is reasonable and logical.	Most of the ideas are connected/organized coherently and cohesively. Paragraphing is mostly reasonable and logical.	The story is fairly organized, some ideas are not connected. Paragraphing needs improvement.	The story is poorly organized, most ideas are not connected. Paragraphing is not reasonable.
	1c. Story Structure	The story includes the core elements: setting (When and where does it happen?), characters (Who are in the story?), plot (What happens in the story?). And it also has conflicts/struggle, climax and resolution.	The story includes the core elements: setting (When and where does it happen?), characters (Who are in the story?), plot (What happens in the story?). And it has at least one of the following: conflicts/struggle, climax and resolution.	The story includes the core elements: setting (When and where does it happen?), characters (Who are in the story?), plot (What happens in the story?). But there are no conflicts/struggle, climax and resolution.	It lacks one or more elements in the story structure: setting (When and where does it happen?), characters (Who are in the story?), plot (What happens in the story?).
	1d. Language use – vocabulary and sentence structure	The author uses a wide range of advanced vocabulary in the story with a variety of sentence structures.	The author uses appropriate vocabulary in the story with accurate sentence structures.	The author uses appropriate but limited vocabulary in the story.	There are a lot of errors in the use of vocabulary and sentence structures.
	1e. Language use – grammar (only applicable for English books)	There are few or no errors in grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.	There are some errors in grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.	There are lots of errors in grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.	There are too many errors in grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, which affect the writers' understanding of the story.
	1f. Dramatic questions	The story raises a question or prompts the audience to raise a question on how things will turn out. Realization is totally different from expectation.	The story raises a question or prompts the audience to raise a question on how things will turn out. Realization is barely different from the expectation.	The story raises a question or prompts the audience to raise a question on how things will turn out. Realization is the same as the expectation.	The story does not attempt to raise any questions on how things will turn out.
<b>II. The Use of Multimedia elements</b>	2a. Written text	More than one effect on the text is added, including size, font, color, or conversation box. They are connected to the plot and facilitate the understanding of the story.	One effect is added on the text, including size, font, color, or conversation box. They are connected to the plot and facilitate the understanding of the story.	No effect on the text is added to facilitate the understanding of the story.	No effect on the text is added to the story. The text is edited badly, e.g., the size of the words is too big or too small, the color is too light, or the font is difficult to read.



*Continued* **Assessment Framework for Digital Stories Written by Young Authors**

CATEGORY	Item	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Satisfactory (2)	Need improvement (1)
<b>II. The Use of Multimedia elements</b>	2b. Images – selection	All images selected add impact to the story and enhance engagement. They are connected to the text and relevant to the story.	Most of the images add impact to the story and enhance engagement. They are connected to the text and are relevant to the story.	Some of the images add impact to the story and enhance engagement. Some of them are not connected to the text and are relevant to the story.	There is no image in the story. Or most of the images are not relevant to the text and the story.
	2c. Images – quality	All images are clear with high resolution, consistent in style, and placed in the appropriate position.	Most of the images are clear with high resolution, consistent in style, and placed in the appropriate position.	Most of the images are clear with high resolution, but some of them are not consistent in style or placed in the appropriate position.	Most of the images are fuzzy with low resolution, inconsistent in style and placed in an inappropriate position.
	2d. Audio – voiceover's quality	The voiceover is clear and consistent.	The voiceover is clear and consistent in most parts of the story.	The voiceover is clear and consistent in some parts of the story.	There is no voiceover. Or the voiceover is in low quality.
	2e. Audio – voiceover's style	The author speaks in a conversational style (either colloquial or written language for Chinese version) for most part of the story.	The author speaks in a conversational style (either colloquial or written language for Chinese version) for some parts.	The author mainly uses a monologue or automated style.	There is no voiceover.
	2f. Audio – voiceover's pace	The pace including rhythm and punctuation fits and supports the storyline and facilitates the audience to engage in the story.	The pace including rhythm and punctuation relatively fits and supports the storyline and facilitates the audience to engage in the story.	The pace including rhythm and punctuation partly fits and supports the storyline.	There is no voiceover. Or the pace including rhythm and punctuation does not fit or support the storyline.
	2g. Audio – music/sound effect	Appropriate music or sound effects are added to the story. All of them match with the storyline and help set up an emotional mood related to the story.	Music or sound effects are added to the story. Most of them match with the storyline and help set up an emotional mood related to the story.	Music or sound effects are added to the story. But only some of them match with the story.	No music or sound effects are added into the story. Or they are all inappropriate and distracting.
	2g. Audio – music/sound effect	Appropriate music or sound effects are added to the story. All of them match with the storyline and help set up an emotional mood related to the story.	Music or sound effects are added to the story. Most of them match with the storyline and help set up an emotional mood related to the story.	Music or sound effects are added to the story. But only some of them match with the story.	No music or sound effects are added into the story. Or they are all inappropriate and distracting.
<b>III. Presentation/ Final product</b>	3a. Duration/ number of pages	It can be finished within 5 min. It contains 15–20 pages.	It can be finished within 5 min. It has 10–14 or 21–25 pages.	It cannot be finished within 5 min. It has more than 25 pages.	It can be finished in less than 5 min. It has fewer than 10 pages.
	3b. Economy	The story is told with optimal amounts of materials. It does not overload the audience.	The story composition is good, but there are a few extraneous, distracting materials, or more materials can be added to support the story.	The story composition is fair, but there are lots of extraneous and distracting materials, or more materials should be added to support the story. Further editing is needed to make it better.	The story composition is poor. The materials are either extraneous and distracting to overload the readers or not enough to convey the message of the story. Extensive editing is needed.

*Continued* Assessment Framework for Digital Stories Written by Young Authors

CATEGORY	Item	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Satisfactory (2)	Need improvement (1)
III. Presentation/ Final product	3c. Creativity	<p>The story is original and fulfills two or more of the following creativity requirements:</p> <p>(a) New ideas/surprising plot in the storyline  Creative ways in the application of multimedia elements:  (b) Creative combination/edit of pictures  (c) Author's voice is used to make different sound effects  (d) Music/Sound effect is added  (e) Others: (please specify)</p>	<p>The story is original and fulfills one of the following creativity requirements:</p>	<p>The story is original and the ideas are presented in an ordinary way with the application of multimedia elements.</p>	<p>Ideas of the story are copied from others, and it is presented in an ordinary way with the application of multimedia.</p>