

PHOTO STORY: A LOW-TECH STORYTELLING TOOL

Are you looking for a low-tech project to draw out the natural creativity of your students? Consider creating an assignment using Photo Story, a free program available for download from [www.Microsoft.com].

Photo Story is a simple tool that allows you to build a slide show of images which you can overlay with text, music, and voice recordings. Similar to PowerPoint, you can add transitions between slides as well as various effects to the images. After building your Photo Story, you can compress and save the slide show so that it can be played through Windows Media Player. Though the final slide show is comprised of still shots, the transitions and other motion effects create a presentation that has the feel of a video. While intended for snapshot enthusiasts to display photographs of family and friends, Photo Story is one of those everyday tools that can be easily adapted for use in the language classroom.

I decided to design a Photo Story assignment for students enrolled in my second semester French course at Valparaiso University after witnessing a colleague's success in assigning an iMovie video project to her upper-level French students. I wanted a low-tech alternative to her video assignment since this project would not be the culminating focus of my course.

I assigned the Photo Story project twice in the semester. For the first assignment, students were to work with a partner and simply write a story in the past tense, having just studied the *passé composé*. I instructed the students to choose 6 to 8 images that they would link together in a story told in the past tense. In case you are wondering about accuracy: I fully anticipated misuse of the *passé composé* since I assigned the project before introducing the *imparfait*. However, once we began working with the *imparfait* a few weeks later, I exploited their errors by requiring the class to rewrite a few of the stories, changing the *passé composé* to the *imparfait* whenever necessary.

Though I established requirements regarding the number of slides and length of text for each slide, I gave students choices so that they could incorporate their personalities and unique perspectives, hoping this would cause them to engage more fully with the language. Students could write their story in the first or third person or primarily through dialogue exchanges. The story could be biographical, fictional, silly, or serious. The images could be pulled from the Web or could be snapshots they took themselves. The open nature of the assignment resulted in a wide variety of story lines: *L'Aventure du snowboard*, the story of a *bébé tigre*, a retelling of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, among others.

For the final exam, students were to choose one review item (a specific verb tense, direct object pronouns, etc.) and create a Photo Story that would illustrate this review item. The parameters I provided for this assignment were somewhat narrower since I would later require the class to view and respond to each of the Photo Stories during our final review. Students again submitted a variety of story illustrations: a predictable retelling of *Blanche Neige*, a true account of one student's automobile accident, even a continuation of one group's first Photo Story plot.

A colleague in German adapted this assignment for her class of beginners. When we compared the final results, she was more pleased with the Photo Stories her students had produced than I was with what my students had created. The difference in results was due in part to the way she framed the assignment in simpler terms. Whereas I instructed students to subtly demonstrate their understanding of a grammatical concept by creatively illustrating it within the content of a story, my colleague required her students to follow a stricter outline. This resulted in stories that were more finely focused on the review of the specific grammar item, and thus more effective as a source of a final review for the other class members. The first Photo Story project I assigned early in the semester was a success partly because of the freedom allotted the students in terms of both form and content; the second assignment probably would have been more successful with considerably less freedom permitted. The next time I assign the final review assignment I plan to incorporate the best parts of my colleague's improvisation of the assignment.

As with any technology-based assignment, it was important that I supply detailed instructional materials so that the students could focus their energies on the content rather than figuring out how to use the technology. However, I never dismiss the potential hidden value of a technology-based assignment. Beyond improving their language skills, such assignments also naturally increase their comfort-level in navigating a tech tool that is likely new to them. And knowing how to approach an unfamiliar technology is a skill all students will inevitably have to master in the working world. One anecdote to consider: I discovered early in the year that a first-generation college student of mine had never before sent an e-mail message with an attachment. The fact that she happened to learn how to perform this simple task in my class can certainly be counted as success, not to mention how far she progressed in her French!

I have posted the support documents for these assignments on a Web site that I invite

you to visit. Posted here are the assignment descriptions, technical directions, links to download Photo Story and Windows Media Player, and tips for viewing a Photo Story on a Mac. I hope you will build upon and improve these assignments as you explore this easy-to-use technology. Be sure to share with your colleagues how you can imagine students using Photo Story in even more creative ways.

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