

Drama, English and Digital Storytelling: Using drama to create digital stories across languages and cultures

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Introduction

This article examines how and why drama became a key feature of the Critical Connections Project (2012-ongoing) and enabled young participants (6-18 years old) to create digital stories in a range of over 44 languages. Critical Connections is a funded research project involving young people learning languages through the process of digital storytelling in over 60 primary, secondary, and community-based complementary schools across 15 countries (Australia, Algeria, Brazil, Cyprus, Egypt, Germany, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Palestine, Taiwan, Turkey, UK, US). The focus here is on how drama is used to support young participants explore texts, ideas, and narrative to move from talk to performance and filmmaking. Role play, developing characters' back stories, and experimenting with how the story is told are crucial stages in the digital storytelling process. Digital storytelling comes from a background of experimental theatre, folk culture, and cultural activism. The digital storytelling movement emerged alongside the opening up of access to digital media production tools and distribution and became linked with media justice. Lambert, founder of the digital storytelling movement, convincingly argues that a healthy community is grounded in plurality, understanding, and belonging: 'Being the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world, is a fundamental idea in democracy' (Lambert, 2013: 2). The Critical Connections project fosters multilingual literacy and activist citizenship and supports and develops all a young person's languages. As this special issue is about drama and the teaching of English, I will look at how learning English has been scaffolded and enhanced through this bi- and multilingual approach and the use of drama in both mainstream classrooms and an after-school club in the UK.

Transformative pedagogy underpins the way the Critical Connections project is implemented in schools recognising the importance of teacher and learner agency in sustainable and imaginative language learning. In our work, we argue that for children 'to become agentive in their expanded language learning, these experiences need to be framed within a pedagogical approach that seeks to value the languages, cultures and experiences of the children' (Stavro et al., 2021: 99). The aspect of the Critical Connections work presented here considers how drama is transformative pedagogy in practice and digital storytelling can provide the context to play and improvise with different ways of doing things. The process of trying things out and constant experimentation, revision and reflection is viewed 'as the essence of successful Digital Storytelling' (Lambert 2017: 26)

In the next part of the article, I will look at how and why drama has been utilised to support students learning English during different stages of the filmmaking process (Figure 1).

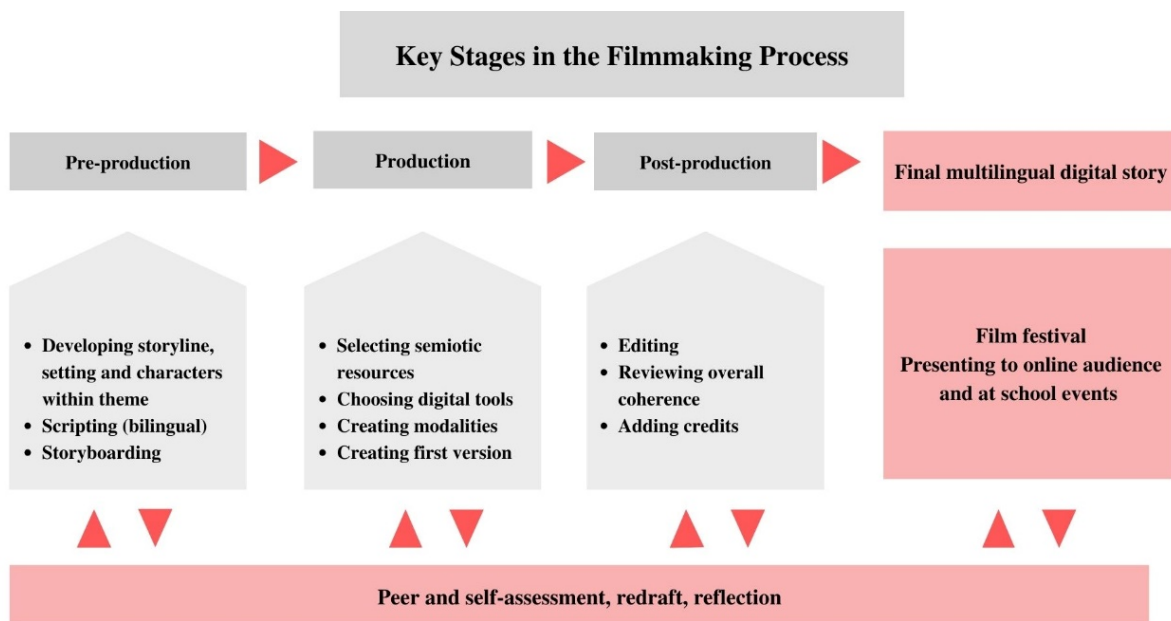


Figure 1: Key Stages in the Filmmaking Process in the Critical Connections Project

Drama education within digital storytelling

A key development in the Critical Connections Project was the implementation of drama workshops for teachers and students as part of the digital storytelling process. Chryso Charalambous, drama practitioner and researcher, was a lead drama educator on the project who opened up spaces to explore complex issues of migration and belonging. She expanded the digital storytelling circle through the use of cultural objects and props and enabled participants to experiment with characters, building tension, and changing emotions. The film educator on the project, Jo van de Meer, created workshops that extended these ideas into film and participants focused on camera angles and shots, sound effects and dialogue, and improvising scenarios. She gave participants the courage to have a go, get things wrong, and find imaginative and creative solutions to telling their stories.

The Critical Connections Project has gained momentum and visibility since 2012 and some lead educators have been part of the project since the start. In this article, I have selected a range of schools from across the duration of the project (2012-ongoing) and looked at what happens when drama and digital storytelling meet in English, English as an additional language, and English-French bilingual lessons in UK schools. I focus on the creation of the following digital stories (3-5 minutes) in the Critical Connections project:

Inside the Asylum, 2013, Wanstead High School, UK – <https://vimeo.com/149756543>

Migration, 2016, Broomfield Secondary School, UK - <https://vimeo.com/168321455>

The B.A.D. Robot, 2017, International School London, UK – <https://vimeo.com/220581681>

From my Window- De ma Fenêtre, 2022, Europa School, UK - <https://vimeo.com/719861849>

The role of drama in the pre-production stage of digital storytelling



Figure 2: Wearing masks to create characters

The digital story, *Inside the Asylum*, was created by a small group of 13–14-year-olds within their mainstream English class. These students were working towards the first Critical Connections Film Festival (2013) under the theme of ‘Inside Out’. The digital storytelling project enabled these young students to tackle the subject of mental illness and the students explored the idea of a character trapped in his own mind. Drama was integral in the process of moving from storyboarding to enactment of the scenario as the students decided to create white masks for all the characters (Figure 2) and tell their story through movement, action, and the repeated word ‘bored’ written across a blank page and final word ‘escape’. The young filmmakers wanted to touch on themes of mental illness, imprisonment and the unknown and wearing masks made them think deeply about how they could act out their story. The film educator supported the students with their use of cameras, tripods and sound enabling them to experiment with high and low angle shots and capture critical moments in the story. The English teacher encouraged students to think about how they could tell stories for a multilingual audience (Macleroy, 2016).

The second digital story, *Migration*, was created by two 13–14-year-olds who were part of an English as an Additional Language class for recent arrivals (1.5-2 years in the UK). The use of drama within their EAL classes enabled these young participants to explore contentious and hard subjects and decide on how they wanted to tell their stories about migration. The drama educator ran two workshops in the school on the theme of migration and used video clips, a series of group activities, short improvisations, questioning and discussion to draw their attention to news reporting and presenting in the media. These students were supported further by the film educator to combine drama with using green screen to tell their story and think carefully about how to present a short documentary. The two EAL students were able to use both their languages, Greek and English, in the scripting process and this pushed their language

use into vivid and meaningful communication. Student 1 scripted strong prose statements about migration in English (then translated into Greek) whilst Student 2 wrote his script as poetry in Greek (then translated into English).

Student 1 - Many leaders speak and promise for a better tomorrow, but who turns talks into actions?

Student 2 - Just as the winter wears a grey cloak and then the distant hopeful spring with an optimism awaits.

These young participants used drama to create intercultural narratives that were interwoven with their own voices, histories, and memories (Anderson & Macleroy, 2017).

The third digital story, *The B.A.D. Robot*, was created in an after-school film club for young participants learning EAL. There were three Brazilian students (14–15-year-olds) and two Hungarian students (new arrivals) who were brothers (14 years old; 10 years old). The younger sibling had only a few words of English and this project allowed him to work alongside his older brother in a school setting. The siblings could use Hungarian together to develop ideas and interpret and translate the dialogue. The Languages teacher and Art teacher ran the film club together and used drama in creative and imaginative ways. The Art teacher opened up the art classroom to new possibilities through improvisation and experimentation and the young participants were supported to learn how to animate objects. They came up with the hard question – what would happen if robots could feel emotions? Objects and props enabled the young participants to slowly bring their story to life and the Art teacher recognised a dramatic breakthrough when the youngest participant created a wooden robot out of stuff lying around and became the chief robot designer. The drama strategy of creating a back story for their robot characters (name, voice, experience, age, story) was key in enabling the students to create a collaborative storyline (Figure 3). The youngest participant moved from speaking a few words in English to writing a detailed back story in English for his robot. There was also a critical moment of energy when the students started experimenting with the voices of the robots in Hungarian, Portuguese and English. To meet the challenge of storyboarding across three languages, the students were supported to create a digital storyboard improvising digital sketches of each scene and the trilingual narrative script came out of this improvisation (Macleroy, 2022).



Figure 3: Back Story for *The B.A.D. Robot*

The fourth digital story, *From my Window- De ma Fenêtre*, was created in a mainstream primary classroom with 9-10-year old bilingual (French-English) participants. The young participants engaged with texts dynamically and creatively and drama was used in fun, experimental and musical ways. The film educator on the Critical Connections project ran workshops on the vital importance of the soundtrack in creating mood and changing emotions and these young participants thought carefully about how to use drama, song, and music in telling their story. In creating a digital story, these children had ‘recourse to a battery of intertextual phenomena ... fictions, visual texts, film, illustration ... songs’ (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005: 169), but started with their lived experiences. As a way into the project, children wrote in French and described from memory what they could see from their bedroom windows, and then added what they could hear and feel. Moving from writing to artwork, the children looked at various artists painting views from windows and drew their view from their own window. The young participants were finding it challenging to move from their writing and artwork to creating the script for their digital story and watched the video clip of the song, Antsa & Mendrika, *Je suis comme toi* (I am like you). The children wrote their lyrics whilst listening to this song and tried out many versions that did not work or fit. Drama strategies (imagining ‘what if’ realities; focusing on emotions to evoke in an audience; conveying a clear message; working collaboratively on segments of the song; peer feedback on each other’s work) became integral in supporting these young participants write lyrics that worked and a song that could be performed. The children thought about shifting emotions and were challenged to speculate about what they would not want to see from their windows and to describe their fears or possible changes. These young participants also made use of props, using a window frame they could take outside, experiment with different views, and put themselves in the window frame. The children created the following refrain for their digital story.

For as long as we can see each other,
My spirit will find peace.
I am just like you,
I see what you see.

(Excerpt - *From my Window - De ma Fenêtre*, 2022)

In these four digital stories, the role of drama was crucial in the pre-production stage as the young participants learn to transfer meaning across modes (linguistic, visual, spatial, auditory, gestural) and this process of transmediation involves flexible thinking and continual adaptation ‘for representing knowledge’ (Mills, 2016: 67).

Drama in the production stage

How did the young participants use drama in the production stage to bring their stories to the screen and convey a meaningful message to young multilingual audiences across the world? In the first digital story, *Inside the Asylum*, the young participants decided to produce a silent film and so their story had to be presented through their movements and actions. These students took their filming outside and looked for gates, doors, walls, and barriers that could be used to show the character imprisoned. The protagonist was filmed holding the bars of a large green padlocked gate looking sideways for a way out. These students used dramatic pauses and moments in the film to build the tension and sought out different locations around the school grounds to act out the chase scene. All the students had to learn how to act with masks, face the camera, and represent shifting emotions with movements and gestures rather than facial expressions. The young filmmakers needed to repeat their actions, practise the chase, and think very carefully about different camera angles and shots to represent the inner feelings of the character.



Figure 4: Acting with masks in *Inside the Asylum*

In the production stage of the second digital story, *Migration*, drama was integral in helping these young EAL students develop the confidence and skills to present their story to a wider audience. As this was a multilingual project, these students were able to present the digital story in Greek with English subtitles. Student 1 commented that migration would not mean losing their Greek roots and ‘yes we moved but we never gonna forget where we came from or what language we spoke or what country we were born so that’s something deep in our heart and that’s never gonna change’. The dramatic effect of these two young participants presenting their story in Greek is powerful and their voices are full of expression. These students position themselves as news reporters, appearing on the left of the screen, and looking directly at the

camera. These students were learning how to act in front of the camera and make meaning through the use of their voices and the rhythm and pace of the digital story.

In the third digital story, *The B.A.D. Robot*, improvising and using dramatic techniques were integral to producing the animation. These young participants created a mood board to explore settings for the digital story and then created a film set in the art classroom. They had to experiment with lighting, making the robots stand up, and animating the robots to interact in meaningful ways. These students learnt how to create a film set using found materials such as concrete blocks, film paper, canvas frames, old boxes, and an old blue painting. The robots were created out of art materials, electronic junk, and computer parts. These young filmmakers were finding it challenging to balance and move the robots to act out the story and moved outside to look for a solution. The breakthrough in the production process came when they decided to use the sand pit and placed concrete blocks in the sand to create the set with a blue backdrop (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Producing the digital story, *The B.A.D. Robot*

In the fourth digital story, *From my Window - De ma Fenêtre*, the young participants were playful and adventurous in finding their film locations. These young participants used drama skills effectively to bring their song lyrics to life and looked happy and relaxed in front of the camera. In the production stage, the young participants filmed scenes outside in the school grounds using a wooden window frame to position their shots. They took shots of their artwork with speculative scenes from their windows. They took shots at home looking out from their own windows and a dramatic moment in the digital story is when they move to filming themselves playing music in different locations (bedrooms, living rooms) playing the drums, the piano, and guitar. Through this experimental and dramatic production process, these young participants are given the opportunity to learn how to present changing emotions and harsh realities. There is a deep connection in the way they come together to make meaning through their digital story and sing the lyrics of the song they have created as a class. The digital story is full of drama and movement (looking, dancing, jumping, skipping, singing, playing musical instruments, drawing, writing outside, tree climbing, hiding and appearing) with recurring motifs of hope, connection and resilience.

In order for these young filmmakers to bring their digital stories to the screen, drama became an integral part of the production process and allowed these students to improvise, experiment and find out how to make their digital stories meaningful for a youth audience.

Reflecting on drama in the post-production stage

The post-production stage of the digital storytelling process is challenging for students and takes time and perseverance as well as creativity and vision. Young people learn many skills in the post-production process including how to make their digital story dramatic, aesthetically engaging, and meaningful. Digital stories are like collages as they bring together photographs, moving image, animation and artwork and students become adept at translating, adding subtitles, soundtrack, and special effects within a 3-5-minute digital story. Digital stories are especially valuable because of their personal perspective, shortness, and versatility.

In the editing process of *Inside the Asylum*, the students use the soundtrack and music to create dramatic effects and meaning from the first frame. The digital story opens with a photograph of a hospital and sinister music playing as the film then cuts to large writing 'Mental Health' on a cracked and stained wall. High fences and rows of empty hospital beds continue to build tension before the live footage starts and we see the hand of the protagonist writing the same word repeatedly. These young filmmakers are setting up the drama and learning how to create shifts in mood and tension. The escape and chase are captured by the young filmmakers through moving image and in the final part of the digital story they use special effects to blur the background and represent the hallucinations, growing panic, and fear in the protagonist. The movements slow down as the protagonist collapses to the ground, broken and trapped, as the hospital manager walks slowly towards him. The young filmmakers have been bold and experimental and created a short sad drama on mental health.

In the second digital story, *Migration*, the two young filmmakers were supported with how to use green screen and created dramatic effects through the photographs projected behind them as they presented their story. These filmmakers cleverly use the same image at the start and end of their digital story of a group of young people walking determinedly in single file up a road in the countryside (Figure 6). This recurring image of migration sends a powerful message to the audience of the need for change. Their digital story is full of dramatic images from the suffering and plight of refugees forced to leave their homes, risk dangerous crossings, and search for new lives. In editing the digital story these two filmmakers use an evocative and stirring soundtrack to develop the drama and call for action. The young filmmakers use versatility and creativity in their subtitling and create drama through their voices, images and music ending the digital story with the hope for 'a future that will bring a society that offers solidarity and equality amongst all its people'.



Figure 6: Post-production and using Green Screen

In the post-production stage of the third digital story, *The B.A.D. Robot*, the young filmmakers experiment with the dramatic effect of using different languages and accents for the voice-over of the robotic characters. The editing process is complex, and the young filmmakers are working with three languages and developing their use of English in the process. These students decide the old robot character would speak in Hungarian, the newer androids in Portuguese, and the narration and subtitles would be in English. In this editing stage, the young filmmakers use images from their mood board to set the scene in 2124; a back story to develop the dramatic narrative as the robot has been deactivated for 100 years; and electronic music and sounds as the robot is reactivated by solar energy. The students use their languages and voices in versatile and playful ways to create dramatic tension in their story and show how the main character is excluded and made to feel threatened, unwanted, and odd due to his age, shape, language, and voice. The young filmmakers present a critical and creative perspective on belonging and edit the story to have a sad ending with the old robot humiliated and rejected and deciding to deactivate himself to wait for a better world.

In the fourth digital story, *From my Window - De ma Fenêtre*, the young filmmakers had the challenge of bringing together artwork, photographs and moving images into a coherent visual story which matched the rhythm and pace of their song lyrics in French with English subtitles. The children opened the digital story with images of themselves looking out of windows, and then with a wooden frame round them, and then decided to juxtapose a photograph of themselves looking out the window with their artwork of a view from their window (Figure 7). These were powerful and effective ways of presenting their digital story and the first part was full of laughter, sunshine, and possibilities. In order to create dramatic tension in the digital story, the children shifted the emotion in the next part to the harsher, darker more fearful side of life and what they do not want to see from their windows. The images are carefully edited and juxtaposed, and flames, plastic bottles and rubbish placed over views from their windows. The critical dramatic moment is created when the emotion shifts again to a more hopeful tone and mood and a call to action. The children use this line, 'From my window I await', to frame this shift in the narrative and search for an alternative way of life that is more equal and just. The final frame ends with the refrain and message of hope and resilience.



Figure 7: Post-production in *From my Window - De ma Fenêtre*

In the post-production stage across these four schools, the young filmmakers learn how to develop dramatic tension through shifting emotions and mood; changing colours, images and special effects; and experimenting with languages, voice and music in their digital stories.

Conclusion

The research and work from the Critical Connections Project (2012-ongoing) clearly demonstrates how drama can be used in the pre-production, production, and post-production stages of digital storytelling to open up possibilities for creative and imaginative uses of language. Drama can be used to scaffold and enhance students' engagement with texts, creating scripts, dialogues, and lyrics, and producing their own digital stories with a strong message and purpose.

Teacher and learner agency are key to the sustainability of the Critical Connections Project and the young participants learn through experimenting, improvising, problem-solving and working things out through repetition, resilience, and imagination. The project is challenging, and we are always impressed by the level of commitment and motivation the young people show in developing their multimodal skills of communication. The digital stories are a powerful testament to the young people's dramatic skills and creativity.

Finally, the annual Critical Connections Film Festival is a vital element of the project, and the young filmmakers gain the opportunity to present their digital stories to a global audience. The young participants develop the courage and confidence to stand on a stage to present their films and show their stories matter and make a difference. Film festivals have been held in the Media lecture theatres and Curzon Cinema at Goldsmiths and in 2016/2017 at the British Film Institute, London Southbank. This is a moving and powerful dramatic experience for the young filmmakers to see their digital stories projected on a large screen and to be part of a multilingual audience of peers both in-person and online. Reflecting on the film festival, a student from the Europa School UK, commented: 'I learnt that languages are what make you, you'.

Critical Connections online workshops: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/online-workshops-for-critical-connections/>

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