Lest We Forget: Using Archival Data in Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

Archival research serves as a crucial bridge between the past and the present. This abstract explores the role of university library archives staff in supporting media students engaged in digital storytelling projects. While integrating historical data into undergraduate-level media production courses may not be the norm, it helps students contextualize contemporary events often covered in communication courses. University library archives, traditionally accessed primarily by researchers in specific disciplines, can be daunting for students and professors alike. However, collaborative efforts with the archival department can alleviate uncertainties, offering students historical resources and research skills development. Such interdisciplinary collaborations empower students to connect the past to the present and shape future narratives effectively.

Archival research functions as a mechanism vital in connecting the past to the present, offering insights for understanding historical contexts and shaping future decisions. University library archives staff can aid media students in conducting digital storytelling (DST) projects, by enhancing their knowledge of historical information and providing them with a litany of resources (Scheub, 2007). While researching and incorporating historical data may be uncommon in an undergraduate-level media production course, the material assists in contextualizing current events typically explored in communication courses. Christie (2005) mentioned that working with archival data provides a space where storytellers can engage with information to weave a coherent and representative narrative.

University library archives house a rich collection of historical documents pertaining to topics such as past presidents, campus architecture, the local community, and other individuals who impacted the history of the institution. Oftentimes, this data remains in boxes on shelves and is primarily utilized by researchers working on projects in specific disciplines (i.e., humanities and social sciences). Visiting the library archives for research purposes may evoke a level of uncertainty for some students and even professors. To minimize this, a collaborative approach may provide some relief. Partnering with the archival department to develop student-related DST projects increases exposure to historical resources and enhances students’ research skills. Also, by collaborating with the university archives department, students gain access to materials without incurring the release fees that may be associated with use. These types of collaborations between departments provide students with the opportunity to learn and reproduce historical narratives utilizing archival elements (Christie, 2005; Scheub, 2007).

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Archival Research, Student Production, Collaborative Learning
Digital Storytelling

The DST framework provides a mechanism that enables storytellers, from novice to professional, to curate, produce, and share impactful stories (Lambert, 2010). DST enhances a creator's capacity to blend traditional storytelling methods with modern technology and techniques (Horea & Vrecer, 2016). The application of DST has been used as a pivotal mechanism to assist in training underserved populations. Schuch (2020) found that the ubiquity of inexpensive software and hardware aids in the production of DST and becomes a vital tool that can create and increase “learner autonomy, diverse and inclusive learning spaces, intercultural learning, and multilingualism” (p. 178). McDonough and Colucci (2019) noted while working with migrants, DST was essential in engaging participants in creating and sharing traumatic and personal experiences. Moreover, Liu et al. (2018) found that DST produces a positive impact when working with elementary students to improve their English language skills. Incorporating DST principles in media production courses enables instructors to provide students with a fundamental tool that assists in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Using archival data to create DST projects enhances students’ research and media production skills and exposes them to the history of their community and university.

The Project

Baxter and Jack (2008) noted that the case study method, which involves utilizing a variety of data sources, is a research technique that facilitates the exploration of a real issue within a defined context. The case in this article is a course project in which students create a two-column script and five to six-minute video incorporating archival content (i.e., interviews, videos, pictures) related to a topic of their choice. Common topics include the history of university sports, the significance of individuals to whom campus buildings are dedicated, and the development of academic programs. The objectives of this project are for students to demonstrate their understanding of innovative storytelling in media writing, archival research, the integration of various multimedia elements, and visual design and aesthetics.

The context pertains to two sections of a 200-level, introductory media preparation and writing course open to communication students in all disciplines, including Advertising, Digital Media Production, Integrated Marketing Communication, Public Relations, and Journalism. On average, there are 22 students per section, represented by all class levels, with many of the students being sophomores and juniors. Students have the option of working individually or in groups of two. They are introduced to the project in week two of the 15-week course when they make their preliminary visit to the library archives. The project involves collaborative efforts with the library archives department staff to conduct research, utilize archival data resources, and complete a DST project. Throughout the development of the project, students are expected to educate, inform, entertain, and engage their viewers. Their final scripts and videos are assessed using a rubric that evaluates the level of media writing and video production skills. The rubric specifies outcomes related to accuracy, clarity, and conciseness in media writing, proper audio/visual production and composition, and a unique and engaging narrative arc that enhances viewers’ understanding of the topic. Upon completion, access to student’s digital contributions is available on the University’s library archive repository.

Enhancing Research Skills

Through this project, students can enhance their research skills by collaborating with the archival department staff to learn how to effectively utilize library resources while engaging with archival data. Before the semester begins, the course professor and archival staff meet to determine the topics that are available to students, drawing from an array of content in their possession, related to various subjects. The archival data is organized using a three-tiered system: substantial, requiring outside support, and little or sparse information on the topic. This system assists students in making an informed topic selection.

By the third week of the semester, students are required to select a topic and begin reviewing the existing archival data to determine what additional resources may be needed. Students are responsible for conducting preliminary research on their selected topic, to ensure they understand it clearly. During this phase, they work with the library archives staff to compile all relevant information related to their topic. They may also collaborate with the alumni engagement office to contact graduates and organize interviews, which will serve as the primary research materials for the final project. Throughout the project, students have the option to schedule appointments with archives staff if additional support is needed.
Enhancing Media Production Skills

During the semester, students engage in various facets of DST. These class sessions are dedicated to an array of lab exercises aimed at enhancing students’ skills in media writing and production. The course also consists of modules to ensure the students understand the purpose of accuracy, brevity, and clarity in media writing. Students spend several weeks engaging in and understanding the importance of clear and impactful writing. They utilize the resources provided during data collection to create a detailed two-column script. To demonstrate they have a solid grasp of the subject, they must exhibit their media writing ability through their final script. This script adheres to the media industry standard, with visuals in one column and dialogue and music in the other, offering students a clear roadmap to follow. This format ensures they are engaged with several elements of media writing. Throughout their script development, students are required to cite all sources utilized during the creation of the final document.

Alongside the media writing component, students acquire important skills in media production. They learn valuable production skills including operating digital cameras, audio recording, and editing software through the completion of various lab exercises. Moreover, students are introduced to Adobe Premiere Rush to complete the video editing phase of the project. This valuable and user-friendly editing software is ideal for individuals who are novices in media production.

Learning History

Another major component of this project is to familiarize students with historical topics unfamiliar to them. By undertaking this project, students acquire a deeper understanding of the history of the university and the local community. Participants in the course are exposed to diverse subjects spanning several decades, the evolution of university majors, historical shifts in academic departments, and notable alumni curated by the archives staff. Examining the history of the university through the decades, students can identify significant changes that have occurred, and how it shaped the present-day institution. Students also record and preserve new information captured during interviews they conduct. By the completion of the project, students can disseminate new knowledge, develop primary information, and contribute to the preservation of history.

Conclusion

Throughout the introductory phase of this project, students may struggle to grasp the connection between the research component, the significance of writing for the media, and crafting a digital project. However, by the course’s conclusion, students develop a wealth of skills connected with many facets of writing and digital media production. The incorporation of archival data into a digital media project is a way to increase students’ exposure to the library archives, its resources, and dedicated faculty and staff. Throughout the years of this collaboration, this project has enabled students to refine their research aptitude, cultivate media writing skills, and engage with the rich history of the university and local community. Overall, this project serves as a mechanism for Communication students to learn and engage in various elements of DST through the lens of archival research. The utilization of historical data to create digital stories effectively prepares students for future positions in communication and digital media careers.

References


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