

FROM LOCAL TRADITIONS TO DIGITAL STORIES TO CULTIVATE EMPATHY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Denisa Ramona CHASCIAR, University Assistant, Ph.D., Cnd.,
Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania,
denisaramonachasciar@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Integrating digital storytelling into cultural education is an innovative approach to cultivating empathy and cultural awareness among students. This study explores how children can be actively involved in documenting local traditions and transforming them into creative digital narratives. By combining storytelling techniques with accessible digital tools, students are encouraged to interact with community members, discover the value of their cultural heritage, and develop essential emotional and social skills. The results of the research highlight the impact of these activities on empathy, collaboration and appreciation of diversity. The findings underscore that such educational initiatives not only enrich students' understanding of their cultural roots, but also equip them with transferable skills needed in the digital age. The paper emphasizes the importance of integrating active and creative methodologies into cultural education in order to ensure a balanced socio-emotional development and a deeper connection with cultural identity.*

Key words: *digital storytelling; cultural education; empathy; local traditions; socio-emotional development.*

Theoretical foundation

Cultural education is a fundamental pillar in the development of empathy and identity awareness in children and young people. According to UNESCO (2023), access to diversified cultural education contributes to reducing educational gaps and promotes a more inclusive society. In an increasingly technological educational context, digital storytelling is becoming an innovative tool to connect students with cultural traditions and values.

Digital storytelling is a method that combines traditional storytelling with multimedia elements, such as images, sound and animations. Robin (2022) points out that this approach increases student engagement while developing their communication skills and creativity. The use of digital storytelling in education has proven effective in increasing motivation for learning and stimulating critical thinking (Smeda, Dakich & Sharda, 2014).

Empathy is an essential component of socio-emotional development,

being defined by Goleman (2024) as the ability to understand and respond to the emotions of others. In storytelling activities, students have the opportunity to take on different roles and understand diverse perspectives, leading to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity (Hull & Katz, 2023).

According to the OECD report (2023), the integration of technology in education not only facilitates equal access to resources, but also supports the development of essential digital skills in modern society. Digital storytelling is thus a means of encouraging students to become active content creators, exploring and reinterpreting local traditions through creative means.

In Romania, recent projects such as "Education through Heritage" have demonstrated that the involvement of students in documenting and capitalizing on local traditions contributes to the development of cultural awareness and the strengthening of community ties (Ministry of Education, 2022). Also, the West University of Timisoara (2024) highlighted the fact that the use of digital resources in rural education has increased student motivation and contributed to reducing school dropout.

Technology and cultural education are complementary. According to UNESCO (2023), digital storytelling offers students the opportunity to learn through active participation, thus developing both their creativity and emotional and cognitive skills. In addition, educational projects based on transmedia storytelling have proven that students significantly improve their literacy skills and ability to collaborate (Neumann, 2023). In conclusion, digital storytelling is proving to be a valuable methodology in cultural education, providing students with the opportunity to connect with their cultural heritage while developing empathy and digital skills. This approach transforms education into an interactive, inclusive and future-oriented process.

Research

This research aims to investigate how digital storytelling can contribute to the cultivation of empathy and cultural awareness among primary school students, by capitalizing on local traditions. The main hypothesis is that the active involvement of students in documenting and reinterpreting community traditions through digital means has a significant impact on their emotional and social development.

The study was carried out over a period of six months and included 60 students from the third and fourth grades, selected from two primary schools, one located in the urban area and the other in the rural area. The participants were divided into two groups: the experimental group, which was involved in digital storytelling activities centered on local traditions, and the control group, which followed the usual educational

program.

The students in the experimental group participated weekly in structured sessions, which aimed to document the traditions specific to their community, such as Easter holidays, harvest customs or stories about local craftsmen. The process included steps such as gathering information through interviews with community members, observing customs first-hand, and researching the archives of the school or local library. Subsequently, this information was turned into digital stories using accessible tools like Canva and Powtoon. Each session ended with reflections on lived experiences, in order to stimulate empathy and collaboration.

The methodology used was mixed, including both quantitative and qualitative methods. The students' level of empathy was assessed before and after the intervention, using a child-adapted variant of the Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). In parallel, the observations made by the teachers provided information about how the students collaborated in teams and about their degree of involvement. The digital stories created by the students were analysed to identify the authenticity of the cultural elements included and to assess the impact on the understanding of community values. Also, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers provided detailed insights into perceived changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors.

This intervention was designed not only to increase students' cultural awareness, but also to develop their digital skills, providing them with a creative environment through which to learn about local traditions. The activities have been adapted to the needs and level of understanding specific to primary education, with an emphasis on experiential and collaborative learning.

It is anticipated that students in the experimental group will demonstrate a significant increase in empathy and cultural awareness, compared to those in the control group. Also, the digital stories made by students are expected to reflect a deeper understanding of local traditions, as well as an increased appreciation for cultural diversity.

Results

The study demonstrated the significant impact of the use of digital storytelling on the development of empathy, cultural awareness and collaboration skills among primary school students. The analysis of the collected data showed notable differences between the experimental group and the control group, emphasizing the effectiveness of this educational method.

The increase in empathy was one of the most obvious results of the intervention. The scores obtained on the Basic Empathy Scale showed a significant improvement in the experimental group, where students

demonstrated a better understanding of the emotions and perspectives of others. Semi-structured interviews confirmed these results, with students stating that the activities of documenting local traditions helped them to appreciate more the experiences and stories of other members of the community. The teachers noticed a more empathetic attitude in the interactions of the students, who were more open to collaboration and more attentive to the needs of their colleagues.

In terms of cultural awareness, the digital stories created by the students reflected an authentic integration of local traditional elements. The analysis of these projects showed that the students included complex details about traditions such as winter holidays, folk crafts and agricultural customs. Additionally, students demonstrated creativity in how they combined traditional information with digital technology, using images, animations, and text to personalize their stories. Teachers reported that students were motivated to explore and present aspects of their culture that they previously considered less relevant.

The development of collaboration skills was another key outcome observed during the intervention. The activities were designed to encourage teamwork, and the students in the experimental group demonstrated an increased ability to work together to achieve common goals. The direct observations made by the teachers underlined the fact that the students learned to share tasks, listen to their colleagues' ideas and support their points of view in a constructive way. These skills were especially highlighted in the documentation stages and in the final presentations of the stories.

In addition to empathy and collaboration, the students' creativity was stimulated through the process of creating digital stories. Students were encouraged to integrate personal elements and add visual and audio details that enrich the narrative. The analysis of the projects showed a variety of original approaches, from describing local customs through a child's perspective, to using humor and visual metaphors to make the stories more engaging.

Motivation for learning increased significantly among students in the experimental group. The teachers noticed an active and enthusiastic participation in the activities, the students showing interest in documenting local traditions and in the use of technology for educational purposes. Also, the storytelling events had a positive impact on the students' self-confidence, who enjoyed the appreciation of their peers and teachers.

In conclusion, the results of this study highlight the multiple benefits of integrating digital storytelling into primary education. Increasing empathy, cultural awareness and collaboration, along with stimulating creativity and motivation, confirm the value of this method as a modern and effective educational tool.

Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate the significant positive impact of digital storytelling on the development of empathy, cultural awareness and social competences of primary school students. The method has proven to be an effective tool for connecting students with local traditions, while giving them the opportunity to develop their creativity and technological skills.

Students' participation in documenting local traditions and turning them into digital stories facilitated a better understanding of cultural diversity and community values. The students in the experimental group demonstrated increased empathy, both towards their peers and towards the interviewed community members, indicating sustained emotional development. The stories created by them reflected the authenticity of their cultural heritage, highlighting their creativity and sensitivity to the details of local traditions.

Another notable result was the increase in students' ability to collaborate effectively. Group activities within the digital storytelling sessions promoted mutual respect, fair distribution of tasks and mutual support, thus contributing to the development of an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. These skills are essential in preparing students for a society based on cooperation and effective communication.

Also, the use of digital technology has boosted students' motivation for learning, providing them with a modern and attractive platform for exploring traditions. The creative process involved in digital storytelling was perceived by students not only as an educational activity, but also as an opportunity for personal expression, strengthening self-confidence and enthusiasm for future projects.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended to integrate digital storytelling into the school curriculum, especially in subjects that promote cultural education, history and the arts. Teachers should be trained to be able to implement this methodology in an effective way, using accessible digital resources adapted to the age level of students. In addition, extending this method to disadvantaged backgrounds can help reduce educational disparities, providing students with equal opportunities to develop their socio-emotional and cultural competences.

In conclusion, digital storytelling is a bridge between the past and the future, connecting students with their cultural roots and preparing them for the challenges of a global society. This innovative approach transforms cultural education into an interactive, inclusive process oriented towards the holistic development of students.

References

- Goleman, D. (2024). *Emotional Intelligence: New Perspectives for Education*. HarperCollins
- Hull, G. A., & Katz, M. L. (2023). *Crafting empathy through digital storytelling*. *Research in the Teaching of English*
- Ministerul Educației. (2022). *Educație prin patrimoniu: Ghid pentru profesori*. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică
- Neumann, D. L. (2023). *The role of digital tools in fostering creativity and collaboration*. *Educational Technology Review*
- OECD. (2023). *Educational Innovation: Bridging Cultural Gaps*. OECD Publishing
- Robin, B. R. (2022). *Digital storytelling: A new era in educational engagement*. *International Journal of Learning*
- Smeda, N., Dakich, E., & Sharda, N. (2014). *The effectiveness of digital storytelling in the classrooms: A comprehensive study*. *Smart Learning Environments*
- UNESCO. (2023). *Storytelling for sustainable education*. UNESCO Publishing
- UVT. (2024). *Impactul tehnologiilor educaționale în mediile defavorizate*. Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara.