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Article

Digital Stories as a Creative Assignment for Studying World Religions

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Abstract: The incorporation of creative assignments in the form of digital stories and artistic assignments in undergraduate and graduate World Religions courses has resulted in positive feedback from the students, and these courses were considered the favorite of the semester. They have given students, many of which identify as "spiritual but not religious", or "non-practicing", an opportunity to connect themes from various world religions to their own life stories, implicitly or explicitly. The purpose of this article is to encourage educators in both a secondary and a college/university/seminary setting to consider digital stories as a creative assignment that deepens their understanding of world religions within the context of a World Religions course, or other religion and religious education courses. This article will present the institutional support provided by Mercy College (Dobbs Ferry, New York) and the context for the World Religions class in which the digital stories are assigned. It will be followed by the process of making a digital story, the directions given to the students, the different platforms that students can choose to make the digital stories, and examples of digital stories created by the students. The paper will conclude with a summary of comments made by the students about the assignment and connections with additional articles on the benefits of digital stories to increase empathy and replace the dominant stories that cause oppression and injustice, like racism and white supremacy, with stories that offer resistance and counter the status quo of oppression and injustice.

Keywords: digital stories; world religions; Bloom's Revised Taxonomy; religious education; worldview education

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1. Introduction

Digital technology is an important pedagogical tool and considered one of the strong points among many students who frequently use cellphones, laptops, and desktop computers for everything from photos to videos, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media sites (Lim et al. 2009; Armstrong 2014). Having these various kinds of devices and technological skills does not necessarily translate into a student's facility in making digital stories (Buturian 2016). A learning curve and guidance, which will be explained in this article, is still needed. A digital story incorporates pictures, videos, a musical background, and a script that can be based on a spontaneous voiceover, a text, or both, using a digital platform to make the digital story on a particular topic or theme. Daniel Meadows, a photojournalist and one of the leading promoters of digital stories in England, described digital stories as "multimedia narratives, short movies told in the first person with feeling". "Our approach insisted on a strictness of construction: 250 words, a dozen pictures, and a duration of about two minutes". " . . . . when made as a shared experience in workshops run by skilled facilitators, the stories produced were often tight as sonnets. Multimedia sonnets from the people" (Meadows 2021).

In the Digital Storytelling Cookbook, a primary resource for Digital Stories, from the former Center for Digital Storytelling, now called the Story Center, Joe Lambert captures the inherent spiritual nature of digital stories:

> Story is learning, celebrating, healing, and remembering. Each part of the life process necessitates it. Failure to make story honor these passages threatens the consciousness of communal identity. Honoring a life event with the sacrament of story is a profound spiritual value for these cultures. It enriches the individual, emotional and cultural development, and perhaps ultimately, the more mysterious development of their soul. (Lambert 2010, p. v)

The purpose of this article is to encourage educators in both a secondary and college/university/seminary setting to consider digital stories as an assignment that involves the highest levels of learning with "more emphasis on creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, information fluency, and innovation than on the ability to operate the technology" (Clemens and Kreider 2011, p. 74; ISTE 2021). Linda Buturian characterizes the creation of digital stories as an assignment that requires the highest level of thinking skills through the a creative process using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Preville 2021). "Bloom's Revised Taxonomy reveals that higher level thinking skills are required for educators to develop stories which effectively communicate content, as well as for students to create stories that successfully demonstrate their academic learning" (Buturian 2016). "Digital storytelling can be a potent learning experience that encompasses much of what society hope that students will know and be able to perform in the 21st century" (Robin 2021 in Buturian 2016).

Armstrong offers a contrast between the lower levels of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy that involve the ability to remember through recalling facts and basic concepts, defining, and memorizing with the highest levels of learning that a digital story can produce.

Researchers regard technology as a primary method to empower students to take control of their own learning. Rather than merely listening to teachers disseminate information and dutifully taking notes, students actively search for information and make decisions about the product they are creating. In essence, technology is transforming students into explorers and teachers into guides (Armstrong 2014, p. 41).

The digital story assignment in a world religion course offers students the opportunity for a deeper and more personal engagement with oftentimes abstract religious themes, sacred truths, and practices that can impact their own faith formation and development in relation to those belonging to various religious traditions or none. They can also offer the students an opportunity to create stories of resistance or counter-stories challenging traditional religious teaching that contributes to, or ignores, the oppression or persecution of people due to race, gender, or sexual orientation. These digital stories allow for a creative incorporation of personal pictures and video, or images and video from the internet that help students to express their own personal story and ontological narrative in relation to a theme from a world religion implicitly or explicitly expressed. This article will begin with the institutional support that made these digital stories possible at Mercy College and provide the context and purpose of the World Religions course that informs the digital stories. Mercy College was originally founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1950, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, before becoming an independent, nonsectarian, coeducational four-year college with campuses in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Dobbs Ferry, New York. This paper will include the directions given to the students, the different platforms that students can choose to make the digital stories, the seven elements of making a digital story, and examples of digital stories created by the students. We will conclude with a summary of student feedback related to the digital story assignments and additional articles that support the benefits of digital stories, including different categories of digital stories and how digital stories can increase empathy, and offer stories of resistance and counter-stories to the dominant stories of oppression and injustice.

2. Institutional Support and Context for Digital Stories in a World Religions Course

Mercy College and the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) have invested in the promotion and value of digital stories as a classroom activity and assignment. There are intensive workshops in June which teach faculty members how to make digital stories and ongoing Digital Story Working Groups that meet periodically throughout the semester

for support and the exchange of ideas. Mercy College also invites students to submit their digital stories for special recognition at what is called the Digi Awards. The Mercy College library also has a Research and Tutorial Section that includes digital stories (Digital Story Home 2020). This tutorial section involves resources for every stage of the digital story process. It includes tutorials on the software platforms that can be used to make digital stories with Adobe Spark, iMovie, and others; the Digital Storytelling Cookbook by Joe Lambert and the Story Center, that includes all of the resources needed to make a digital story (Lambert 2010; Story Center: Listen Deeply. Tell Stories 2021); the seven basic elements of the digital story; ideas and themes; guidance on script writing and the story arc; the use of a storyboard; and additional resources. A similar resource can be found at the University of Houston (Robin 2021), and by Helen Barrett (Barrett 2011). Storying Faith offers digital story resources specifically related to faith formation (Storying Faith 2021).

The World Religions course is an introductory survey course on world religions that includes a primary textbook (Fisher and Rinehart 2017), and additional books, guest speakers from different religious traditions, TED Talk assignments, YouTube videos and documentaries, a number of précis assignments on different articles, Discussion Forum topics, an artistic assignment based on a drawing, painting, haiku, or some other creative assignment with a brief description and citation, and the digital story assignment. Some very rich Discussion Forum topics include distractions, procrastination, and experiences of death. See a student comment on the artistic assignment.

> The artistic assignment was a good refreash (sic) on religion. Many people went all out in their drawings while others kept it simple. Every religion is amazing in their own way and that's the beauty of it. Including when it comes to shows either it's a movie, TV show or Anime, it shows the world the spiritual meaning and may even debunk false information out there. The artistic assignment showed me how passionate everyone was during presentation and also showed me a lesson that I never really paid much attention to up until now. My lesson is to keep an open mind on different religions out there. Most people get upset when someone they know is part of a different religion

The following comment by an LGBTQIA+ student after viewing a TED Talk on gender fluidity within the Hindu tradition shows critical thinking that is resistant and counter to the traditional teaching on gender and same-sex orientation within Catholicism.

> I chose to listen to this TED talk because being part of the LGBTQ+ community it interested me the most. I come from a Catholic family where I was taught only a man and woman was acceptable in marriage. From personal experience, I have been compared to my religion and beliefs for my sexuality. Hearing about the Hindu religion and that there are same gender relationships reassures me that the LGBTQ+ community is supported and not discriminated by other cultures. Being a female athlete and playing sports my entire life, I was always given looks for playing with the boys. Some parents or even some of the kids always made comments when I was going up to hit on the baseball field or on the ice with them during hockey. I was there for the love of the sport at the time and put my heart and soul into the game. Why did it matter that I was a girl then if I was playing the same way as the boys? It was a very informative TED Talk and I already shared with many of my friends who are also in the LGBTQ+ community. This opened my eyes to do research in other religions and see the different aspects on same sex gender, love, and attraction.

The first couple of classes are dedicated to building a community within the classroom, with introductions that include three things about the student and something that is considered unique. A name game is also incorporated in which the students are asked to choose a positive adjective that alliterates with their first name like "Kind Karen", or "Judicious Jay". The name I choose is "Catholic Chuck", which identifies my primary religion of Roman Catholicism along with the original Greek meaning of the word, which

is "universal". I describe myself as a white, cisgender, straight male born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, of Eastern European, Polish, Slovak, and Lithuanian ancestry and currently living in Yonkers, New York, which was once the land of the Munsee and Lenape Nations before a colonization and conquest that continues into the present day. I am married to an Afro-Latin X cisgender female of Honduran/Garifuna ethnicity. My dissertation research was an exploration of interreligious prayer as a graduate of Fordham University and the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education. A unique thing about me is my last name, which is unique to my family, since it was Americanized when my Lithuanian grandfather arrived in the United States. My preferred pronouns are he/him/his.

This name game has proven to be a positive activity for in-person classes and for online classes when the students could add their new name to the Zoom window. Students were also invited to submit video introductions, especially if it was an asynchronous course, to allow other students to see them and hear the same introduction. A recorded introduction of myself was also made available to the students in Blackboard LMS. The introductions also offer opportunities for students to state their preferred pronouns, which can also be entered into a Zoom window for an online class. The pronoun preference is not to be taken lightly, as 34% of transgender youths are less likely to have suicidal thoughts when preferred pronouns and names are used (The Trevor Project 2020). See the following comments from students posted in the Discussion Forum on the "Name Game and Introduction" activity.

> The name and game introductions was very important because we are being introduced to new peers and a new professor. I have always enjoyed meeting new faces because we come in contact with different cultures and backgrounds and we tend to become more social and interactive with them. The name and game introductions was very enjoyable because we learned adjectives that describe a person and gives us an idea of the type of person they are.
>
> The Name Game and Introductions shared this same idea. In the Name Game we chose Positive Adjectives to attach to our names, and I believe, although little, it made a big difference in the class. When I logged onto Zoom for my World Religions 622 class, I was happy and exicted (sic) for the class because of the positive energy that was in the class each time, and I believe the names supported this energy I felt in the class.
>
> The last topic I think was very important was the Name Game and Introductions. For me, It was as if Professor Chesnavage was helping me to find out who I was for myself. I would never think to label myself with a creative adjactive (sic) that best describes me and my abilities (sic). It allows yourself to express who you are in one simple word. I am also glad we did introductions because if it weren't (sic) for that, I wouldnt (sic) know who my classmates are behind the closed zoom windows. It also created some sort of social aspect when no physical ones could be made (From an LGBTQIA+ student).

The beginning of the semester is dedicated to walking through the syllabus, the details of the LMS, and tools of analysis for understanding world religions. Some of these tools of analysis include Krister Stendahl's Three Rules of Religious Understanding (Hobbins 2010). These three rules are the following: If you want to learn about a particular religion, ask the adherents of that religion and not an enemy; Don't compare your best to their worse; Leave room for "Holy Envy" or appreciation for the other religion. Different lenses for analyzing a religion are also reviewed, including the history, beliefs, practices, symbols, holidays, and more specific details concerning the roles of women and gender identity and religious teaching regarding the LGBTQIA+ community (Fisher and Rinehart 2017, p. 27). Different principles of religious education are reviewed, including an understanding of the words religious and education, with religious understood as learning about your own religion in relationship with other religions, so that religion is always understood in a

plural sense. Education is expanded so that it is understood beyond that which is learned in the classroom. It is lifelong, with and without end, and there are daily encounters with world religions in our everyday life, in the daily activities of going to school, work, or shopping, and meeting friends and family, and in the food that we eat and the places we go to, be it a house of worship or living near a house of worship (Harris 1989, pp. 116–22; Harris and Moran 1998, pp. 30–41). A rich discussion occurred around the meaning of the concept of "place determines practice" from an indigenous perspective and a more universal perspective, and another rich discussion focused on the image of Our Lady of Ferguson, which is a contemporary iconic image that addresses the problem of gun violence and introduces the history of icons and Christianity, with links to Judaism and Islam (Web Editors 2016; Mark Doox 2021). A final element of the course in the Fall and Spring semesters is to follow the Calendar of Observances and study holidays and events as they occur in different religious traditions (Calendar of Observances 2021).

Early in the semester the different symbols for the world religions are identified with a brief introduction that is considered an "appetizer", to whet the appetite of the students for further information, or the main "entrees" of world religions. These different symbols become some of the possible images that students will draw or create for their artistic assignment. Two very important feedback assignments are requested of the students after the Mid-Term exam and before the Final Exam, asking them to identify the three most important lessons of the course at each moment. The artistic assignments and digital stories are two of the most important classes and lessons of the course, based on student feedback. The course is guided by the principle of "Each one, teach one", and both of these assignments incorporate this principle along with the presentations "that are informed by a multicultural pedagogy which fosters critical and creative thinking" (Buturian 2016).

3. The Process of Digital Storytelling: Getting Started

A great way to understand a digital story is to make one. The Mercy College library tutorial recommends picking 5–10 images/pictures and a script of less than 300 words. The first digital story I made was overly ambitious but very useful. It consisted of 25 images and was nearly seven minutes, which is far too long for a typical digital story. It became the digital story that describes the history and mission of the Westchester Coalition Against Islamophobia (WCAI), which is a community-based organization that opposes bigotry and discrimination against Muslims and Islam. It continues to be edited, updated, and used for purposes of introducing public officials and the public to the mission of WCAI. This would be an example of what Linda Buturian calls a digital story as a social education tool and a teaching tool (Buturian 2016). The most recent digital story I created was in keeping with the original directions and based on the object of a mirror, six pictures, and a 274-word script. The script used the image of a mirror as a metaphor for seeing the world through the lens of COVID 19, contrasting the hopes and dreams of the ball drop marking the 2020 New Year and the impact of the pandemic, that personally impacted my wife's family, with the death of her mother and her two siblings. All three deaths occurred during Holy Week and Passover, when the angel of death was very busy, and my wife was hospitalized due to COVID. In the digital story a question was asked: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is my sibling, relative, and family member?" (In light of the pandemic), the answer was "the least among us". This would be an example of two other kinds of digital stories that Buturian would call digital stories as reflective assignment and/or a digital story that communicates a concept (Ibid.). The length was 2:25 minutes, well in keeping with a digital story, which is best kept to 2:30–3:30 minutes in length. Another digital story is on the history of a local not-for-profit home improvement association to generate support for the membership and ongoing survival of the community house, built by a historical African American community that will be sixty years old in 2023.

4. The Seven Elements of a Digital Story

The Digital Storytelling Cookbook recommends a seven-step process. The first three steps are script-related and focused on owning your insights (idea), emotions (engaging the audience), and finding the moment (the climax of the story or the moment of change). The next steps are more technical: seeing (visual images) and hearing (voice, and the inclusion of music). The final steps are the assembly of these elements and the sharing via a software platform (Lambert 2010, pp. 9–24; Iwancio 2010). These seven steps can be condensed into a story with a beginning, middle, and end. A beginning that introduces an issue, obstacle, or desire; a middle that offers a context, with more information needed; and an end that brings about change, transformation, and resolution. Ohler describes the steps as a call to adventure with an interruption, crisis, or tension; a problem-solution and transformation; and a closure that ends with a meaningful conclusion, and not necessarily a happy ending (Ohler 2005–2006, p. 45). "Twelve tips" were offered for digital stories within a medical school for motivating medical students for deeper learning (Sandars et al. 2008, pp. 774–77). A storyboard could also be part of the planning of the digital story, mapping out the images with the script (Lambert 2010, pp. 31–35).

5. The Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling Adapted to Rubrics

Clemens and Kreider turn these seven steps or elements into rubrics for assessing the digital stories. They describe the elements as (1) Point of view (A first person narrative). (2) Dramatical Question (A moment of change). (3) Emotional content (How do people connect). (4) Pacing (Time spent in the story, including pausing, and number of pictures). (5) Economy (The right number of media to support the story). (6) Voice (Optional vs. script/subtitles or music and images only). (7) Soundtrack (Musical background) (Clemens and Kreider 2011, p. 77; Rubistar 2000–2008).

The following example of a rubric for images and soundtrack uses four levels of assessment.

Little or no attempt to use images to create an appropriate atmosphere/tone.

An attempt was made to use images to create an atmosphere/tone but it needed more work.

Images create an atmosphere or tone that matches some parts of the story. Image choice is logical.

Images create a distinct atmosphere or tone that matches different parts of the story. The images may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors.

Music is distracting or inappropriate.

Music is ok, and not distracting, but it does not add much to the story.

Music stirs a rich emotional response that somewhat matches the story line.

Music stirs a rich emotional response that matches the story line well (Clemens and Kreider 2011, pp. 78–79).

These rubrics, along with the seven elements, help answer the questions many students have. The big question many students ask is "how long should it be?" A good time frame is 2:30–3:30 minutes, but this can vary at the discretion of the teacher depending on the purpose of the assignment and the topic. Some students go below or over the time frame and the digital stories can still be acceptable. The digital stories also include pictures, with script or voiceover or both, and some incorporate video as well as musical background. The biggest critique refers to pacing and whether the pictures or script are left up long enough for the students to read the script and look at the picture. Some students use a split screen slide with an image on one side and script on the other. Many students include quotes or sayings obtained on the internet. Many pictures and videos are of a personal nature or from the internet and Google images. Other questions could include: Was there a balance between the number of pictures used, the script, and the video? Did the story have a beginning, middle, and end? Did the story have a personal element or was it more of an academic presentation? All digital stories should be saved as an MP4 file. A small number of students use PowerPoint to complete the digital stories. Digital

Citizenship can be an opportunity to teach the students to give proper citations to any pictures or video that are copyrighted (Clemens and Kreider 2011, p. 75). Having gone over the institutional support, the context of the class, and the seven basic elements and rubrics, it is strongly suggested to include a story circle exercise and process. In my classes, a world religions theme sheet is given to the students for ideas for their digital stories.

6. The Story Circle

A strong recommendation for digital stories is to create a story circle to provide feedback to the person writing a script. Great suggestions and exercises for this process can be found in the Mary Hess article that describes a "Basic Four-Role Story Circle" and a "Story Titling Exercise" (Hess 2020, pp. 33–34). The first exercise involves a story that is told based on a chosen topic, like a moment that questions the meaning of religion, or a moment of transcendence, or a moment of curiosity about a particular religion. Each person has a role to play that involves listening for facts, emotions, and values. After each story is told and feedback is given, the roles rotate. The Story Title Exercise involves the student telling a story and then turning their back while story titles are suggested. The turning of the back during the exercise makes a difference between seeing the facial expression, which can impact what is heard, and "hearing" the suggestion and "seeing" who is making the suggestion (Ibid.).

In my classes, the story circle is replaced by showing examples of digital stories that were created by students in previous semesters, and there is a collective evaluation and analysis of each story, which include the theme(s) of the digital stories and how they were technically created with photos, personal and stock, video, musical background, pacing, script or voiceover, and other observations. Students are given very basic directions, which include the links to the library resources and the primary platforms for making the digital stories, that include Adobe Spark (2021) and iMovie (2021). As time has passed, students have discovered additional platforms for making the digital stories, which include Animoto (2021), Movavi (2021), and special effects with Canva (2021). The various digital platforms include free and paid subscriptions. Samples of Digital Stories are also found in the Mercy College Library Digital Story Tutorial. Very little technical assistance is given to the students and very little help is requested. Most of the students are able to complete the digital story, with a few relying on PowerPoint to create the story with pictures, script, and background music, narration, or live voiceover. Very few students choose not to do the assignments, and the presentation of the Digital Stories involves a very brief introduction and Q and A after the presentation, that is part of a participation grade for the course. While the technical aspects and the various platforms are briefly explained and can be chosen by the students, a world religions theme sheet is given to students to help them with ideas for their digital stories. Students also have opportunities to improve the digital stories based on feedback after the first draft.

7. The World Religions Theme Sheet

Christopher Booker's book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* offers the seven basic plots that are repeatedly told in storytelling (Booker 2005). While some of these plots like "rebirth" and "tragedy" may be found in digital stories, additional ideas or "plots" for digital stories are given in the Digital Storytelling Cookbook. These include character stories that express how we love and find meaning in our relationships; memorial stories that recall the memory of someone who died; and adventure and accomplishment stories. The Mercy Library DS resource offers prompts for digital stories related to "First, Lasts, Bests, and Worsts" experiences; for example: your first trip abroad; your last mystical or spiritual high; your best family moment; and your worst financial crisis. In my classes, students are given a world religions theme sheet that begins with the following quotes: "That which is most personal is also that which is most universal". "That which is most particular to a religious tradition is also that which is most universal". Examples and a discussion of both quotes are given as preparation for what the digital stories will achieve. Universal themes are

read from the sheet, with examples given of how previous digital stories expressed these themes. These universal themes include love, compassion, pain, suffering, birth, death, redemption, forgiveness, friendship, role models, inspiration, transformation, resurrection, conversion, the spiritual but not religious or NONE classification, and MORE.

In addition to these universal themes, more specific themes are given from some of the world religions. For Christianity, the following themes are presented, with questions and ideas for digital stories: The Birth of Jesus: Is there a significant birth story of your own or someone else? The Life of Jesus and the call of his disciples: Is there someone who inspired you? Jesus taught forgiveness: Have you had an experience of forgiveness? Jesus healed the sick and performed miracles: Have you had an experience of sickness or suffering and healing? Jesus suffered and died on the cross: Have you had any experience of suffering or death in your life? Jesus resurrected from the dead after three days: Have you had a resurrection experience or new life experience?

In a similar way, the dominant theme of suffering in Buddhism, or the teachings of Buddhism, can be incorporated into a digital story. Various holidays or celebrations are also offered in different religious traditions, and students share how they celebrate these holidays, like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Holi, Passover, or Ramadan. Prayer, symbols, and pilgrimage and travel are additional themes for students to choose for a digital story, among others. After a brief introduction to digital story platforms, viewing digital story examples, and an explanation of the theme sheet, the students are given the chance to create their own digital stories. The following examples will add brief details to the digital stories created by the students. Of particular note is the multicultural pedagogy and the critical and creative thinking within the digital stories.

8. Examples of Student Digital Stories

8.1. Holidays

Advent: A Roman Catholic student showed how her family celebrated the customs of Advent over the course of her lifetime from a young girl to a young adult.

Christmas: Some students do a digital story that shows how their families celebrate Christmas in both sacred and secular ways, and some explicitly mention the scripture stories or the Christian meaning of Christmas, while others emphasize Christmas as a time of gift giving and spending time with one's family. One student focused on Los Posadas, or the Christmas rituals from her Mexican culture, that involve the faithful travelling from house to house singing songs and praying as they reenact the story of the Holy Family finding no room in the inn in the Gospel story of Luke. Family celebrations tend to include and reveal the culture of the student.

New Year's: A student from Ecuador showed the unique custom of burning effigies that resemble superheroes or cartoon characters in bonfires around the city. Another student from the Dominican Republic showed the custom of taking a suitcase and running around the house to suggest travel and exploration for the new year along with the eating of twelve grapes.

Holi: A Hindu student shared the celebration of Holi, cut short by COVID, which is a celebratory holiday that involves the throwing of colorful powders on each other as a celebration of Spring and a Hindu myth celebrating good over evil.

Ramadan/Eid: Muslim students have shared how their family celebrates Ramadan and the Eid holidays, and one student compared the celebration of Ramadan and Lent within a Christian context, given her multi-religious family.

8.2. Birth Stories

Students have shared the significance of their own birth, if there were any problems, or the birth of a sibling, or the tragedy of a miscarriage, and the happiness and new life of an upcoming birth. One of these digital stories on a stillbirth won a Digi Award. Some students make an explicit connection to the birth of Jesus, while others are more implicit,

by not mentioning the birth of Jesus. Many digital stories have multiple themes, which include love, family, suffering, hope, healing, and new life.

8.3. Suffering and Sickness

Students have shared very powerful stories of near-death experiences or serious illnesses they or their family members have experienced. One student shared his story of being a hit and run victim and how his church and family prayed for his recovery. Another student shared the touching story of her father, who had a stroke right before her Quinceañera, and after he went through the long process of rehab was able to celebrate it with her. She won a Digi Award for this digital story.

8.4. Death

Some of the most powerful digital stories are about death. Oftentimes, it reveals the close relationship a student had with a parent or grandparent. This past semester, Spring 2021, two students shared stories of close friends who died from opioid overdoses. Other students have shared the death of family members to gun violence. After a guest speaker for the class spoke about Spiritualism and communication with spirits and individuals on the other side, a student put together a digital story called "Pennies from Heaven" that included signs from the other side that included pennies, numbers, and the hummingbird that were associated with the loved one who passed away. This digital story won a Digi Award. One student began her digital story on the death of a beloved uncle with a voiceover and had to switch over to script given her emotional feelings while doing the narration, which expressed profound sadness and pain.

8.5. Islamophobia and Islam

A powerful example of a digital story without script or voiceover addressed Islamophobia, which is one of the topics discussed in class. The digital story was created by a student from a white, Christian background. It had four parts with a musical background. Part I were images of Islam, showing symbols like the Quran and mosques and pictures of Muslims eating and celebrating their culture and religion. Part II was the 9/11 event. Part III was the aftermath of 9/11 and acts of Islamophobia with protests against Muslims and attacks on mosques. Part IV was the response of Muslims protesting against Islamophobia.

Another Muslim student showed a digital story about the stabbing of his father, that occurred on a playground when another family asked his family to leave. It began with video footage of 9/11 and the planes hitting the Twin Towers. It addressed the impact of 9/11 on the Muslim community leading up to the incident. His father survived the stabbing but left behind a traumatized student and family. These were the final words of his digital story. The entire length was 1:31.

> It wasn't the world I was afraid of. It was the ignorant people who judge Islam based on the horrible actions of a few individuals. It triggered a huge shift in my community. Families became protective of their children. My sisters no longer acted the same. They became aware of how people viewed the hijab and saw them as a walking target. They became terrified of the world. This will forever affect my life, because it affected my religion, my culture, my identity, but most importantly it affected me.

One of the Digi Award winners involved a Digital Story, without script or narration, entitled Hope, that was created by a student with expertise in filmmaking. He used visual montages of his family church and included his Latin X family members in the digital story. It had an obvious reference to the Christian symbol of the cross and included the church his family attended.

8.6. Digital Stories by Veterans

The digital stories created by students who have shared their experiences as veterans have been particularly powerful. One student shared the memory of his mother crying on

the day of 9/11 and how that inspired him to join the military. His video story included photos from deployment and images of his deceased brothers who died in combat. The inspiration of this digital story was Islamophobia and not believing everything that is said about Muslims based on his experience in the military. Another veteran shared his pictures of deployment, his attempted suicide, and eventually finding recovery and support with a marriage and baby.

8.7. Immigration

One student began her digital story, called A Dangerous Journey, with a tweet from President Trump. It used anti-immigrant rhetoric and was dated 2 April 2018.

> [Donald J Trump @RealDonaldTrump
>
> Honduras, Mexico and many other countries that the U.S. is very generous to, sends many of their people to our country through our WEAK IMMIGRATION POLICIES. Caravans are heading here. Must pass tough laws and build the WALL. Democrats allow open borders, drugs, and crime. 8:12 PM–2 April 2018.]

The student was from Honduras. Her digital story did not have a musical background and consisted of images of people protesting the Trump policies. The posters held by protestors of different ages in the story stated these messages: "All we want is a better life". "We are not criminals. We are hard workers". "We the people are greater than fear". "Open borders. Open Minds". "No somos criminales. Somos trabajadores". (We are not criminals. We are workers.) "Good enough to work. Good enough to stay". "Keep families together". "Not 1 + Deportation". A map of the United States in the form of an American flag with "Made by Immigrants" under it. The only sound in the digital story was a video showing the sound of a crying baby in an inner tube with his/her parents while crossing a river. Under the video image were the words "Going on a dangerous journey for a better life".

8.8. Domestic Violence

One student created a digital story on her own experience with domestic violence. She was willing to show the digital story to her classmates but was not able to remain in the room during the showing of the digital story. The students were very supportive of her upon her return to the classroom.

8.9. Death of Pets

The first digital stories about the death of pets occurred in the Fall 2020 semester. They revealed the close relationship with pets and questioning how God can allow animals to suffer. The stories included the image and poem known as the Rainbow Bridge Poem (2021) and the relationship of the pet with family members living and deceased. Additional digital stories on the death of pets continued into the Spring 2021 semester as a result of seeing examples from the previous semester. These stories would impact my own personal experience during this Spring semester, 2021, with the death of my dog Happy, who was put to sleep in March, a week before the passing of my father. Happy would have been seventeen in May 2021, and my father passed away at 100. Both losses were deeply felt, and the digital stories helped me cope with my own loss.

8.10. Colorism and COVID 19

A unique digital story created by an African American student concerned the issue of colorism both within and outside the black community. Her initial idea came from our class discussion on the caste system of Hinduism in India. Later, she spoke about her inspiration being the "white-washing" of Jesus in Christianity. It was an example of how the interpretation given to a digital story by the creator can change over time from its original inspiration.

Another student addressed the source of COVID 19 as it related to bats in China. He connected it to the concept of "karma" in Hinduism.

8.11. Digital Stories by Graduate Students at the Unification Theological Seminary

The digital stories have also been assigned to graduate students taking a World Religions course at Unification Theological Seminary (New York). One example from these students was called "God's Real Home". The student incorporated her children in the digital story when they raised the following question: If God lives in a Christian church, what about their friends who are Muslim? Does God live in their house too? The student proceeded to show images of different houses of worship to her children, starting with their own Christian church and moving on to a mosque in the Islamic tradition, a Temple from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a Gurdwara in the Sikh tradition, a Baha'i Temple, a Buddhist Temple, a Hindu Temple, a Jain Temple, the Jewish Temple Mount in Jerusalem, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and the Obando Central Methodist Church in the Philippines, where the family is from. She also included indigenous traditions. Her daughter asked, "Momma, where God stays (sic) when some other people are having other problems and they can't go to church?" The student answered her daughter and showed pictures of the poor being helped by others and said, "God is everywhere. He is with the rescuers, compassionate neighbors, and all individuals who have a heart to help. He is also with you when you choose to help. And when you share what you have to others he lives in you, especially when you show love to each other. I believe he also lives in our family". "Wow, God lives in me", both of them shouted. "God lives in us", my husband shouted too. "Truly, God's real home is in the heart of each individual shared with one another".

All of the digital stories are very powerful and personal and engage the entire class in both mind, body, and heart, stimulating the cognitive and emotional parts of our brain. While these digital stories are best seen than explained, they express what Sonja Vivienne describes about digital stories among queer activists as "self-representation by everyday people" (Vivienne 2016, p. 11); "self-revelatory . . . in explicit . . . and alternative ways" (Ibid., p. 14). She describes the term voice "to encompass discussions around how marginalized individuals find the confidence (or agency) and the means (or access) to articulate personal stories" (Ibid., p. 16). The digital stories created by the students express their marginalized voices and various cultures, ethnicities, gender, and socio-economic realities. Most of the students are African-American, Latin X, African, Caribbean, LGBTQIA+, with a minority that are European, and many are first-generation college students.

It is clear from the digital stories that many students have expressed some experiences of trauma, not to mention the impact of the pandemic. These experiences and the awareness of trauma-informed pedagogies affirm ideas that are already part of the class and others that can be added to the class (Hess et al. 2021). The introduction process and name game and pronoun preferences mentioned earlier offer an opportunity to build a classroom community of support and safety. Taking the time for breathing exercises is another helpful exercise that could be included in the class. The digital stories themselves give the students an opportunity to address issues that can bring about relief and healing or trigger past traumas. It will be important to give students permission to process these feelings or be prepared in advance for trigger experiences and to offer them campus support services through the counseling department.

The feedback and comments from the students regarding the digital stories show signs of spiritual growth and insight. Students expressed emotional connections to digital stories that expressed the loss of a pet. Students who identified as Spiritual But Not Religions (SBNR) appreciated the digital story of a student who revealed various images of how she sees God throughout different places she has traveled to with wonderful quotes. A student found joy and happiness through the companionship of her birds, describing them as family, and even went so far as to identify with her birds by putting on colorful eye shadow that mirrored their look. Another student expressed how the digital stories helped her to get to know the students in a closer and more personal way and how happy she felt being able to express herself and the way her culture celebrated New Year's in a unique way. Students acknowledged not being alone when hearing about the struggles of fellow

classmates, and their appreciation for every student accepting the challenge of learning a new skill in order to make the digital stories. A student encouraged her classmates to be less judgmental and to be open to exploring other cultures and religions—like her own background, coming from the Arab community and facing misunderstanding and judgment about her own cultural and religious identity as an Arab Christian. Another student expressed the transformational impact of the digital stories, that allowed her to see things in a different light and inspired her to be more kind.

In addition to these comments expressing spiritual growth and insight, there are other benefits of digital stories, that include different categories of digital stories that can challenge the stock stories maintaining oppressive systems through alternative stories under the categories of concealed, resistance, and counter-stories. Studies in neuroscience have also revealed how effective storytelling, whether it be fiction that is read or digital stories that are seen, can lead to an increase in empathy which reduces biases and promotes a more inclusive world.

9. Different Categories of Digital Stories

In a collaborative session at the Religious Education Association Conference, entitled "Embodied Digital Pedagogies for Trauma-informed Teaching and Learning in Religious Contexts", Mary Hess introduced four different kinds of digital stories: stock, concealed, resistance, and counter (Hess et al. 2021). These categories are found in The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning About Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts (Bell et al. 2008, pp. 7–9). The purpose of the collaborative session was to "address issues of trauma, race, gender and sexuality as they intersect within a religious or theological learning context" (Hess et al. 2021). The identification and application of the four different kinds of digital stories to race and racism in the United States can be very helpful for students before making their digital stories and also for gaining more tools for the critical analysis of race, racism, and religion in the United States and the important work of antiracism.

Stock stories, referring to those stories told by the dominant group, are the most public and found in mainstream institutions of government, media, and schools. They are found in historical documents and can be part of rituals and monuments. They can reveal much about the status quo view of race and racism (Hess et al. 2021; Bell et al. 2008, p. 8).

Concealed stories coexist with stock stories, but remain hidden in the shadows. These are stories told by those in the margins of society, out of view of the mainstream. They provide a critique of the mainstream stock stories and a forum for expression among those oppressed and victimized by the dominant group (Ibid., 2021 and 2008).

Resistance stories are those told by "heroes" and "sheroes", that resist and challenge the stock stories that uphold or normalize the systems of racism and injustice. These are the stories of Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the #metoo and #Black Lives Matter Movements. They can provide examples and inspiration for antiracism work (Ibid.). Can figures or scriptures from various religious traditions offer material for digital stories of resistance? Yes. The life stories of many of the religious founders offer stories of resistance, with some paying the ultimate price by being put to death, or those facing persecution and martyrdom up to the present day.

Counter-stories are new stories that capture the essence of the concealed stories, and resistance stories challenge the stock stories. They "enable new possibilities for inclusive human community". "They interrupt the status quo and work for change" (Bell et al. 2008, p. 9). Having examined these four kinds of digital stories, I can find some of these characteristics in the digital stories created by my students. In particular, the digital stories mentioned about Islamophobia as a concealed story, and the stories about colorism and immigration are stories of resistance. The introduction of these concepts will add an additional tool of critical analysis for the study of world religions to examine if, how, and when world religions promote or prevent genocide, racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, heteronormativity, hypermasculinity, and other acts of hate within the

human community that are inflamed by the unholy alliance of religion, law, and the media and maintained through stock stories. Many of the basic teachings within the world religions offer teachings that counter the status quo and the stock stories of their day. The concept of Tikkun Olam, in Judaism, or the repair of the world, offers rich images for digital stories and also relate to the perils of a planet threatened by climate change and global warming, which threaten the survival of humanity (Dorff and Willson 2008). The document written by Pope Francis, Laudato sí, On the Care of our Common Home, is an excellent source document for digital stories within the Roman Catholic tradition on the impact of climate change and global warming (Pope Francis 2015).

Some of these different categories of digital stories and the theme sheet available in a World Religions course can be applied to other courses and give students additional ideas and ways of critically thinking about and analyzing a given topic in a course.

10. Digital Storytelling and the Promotion of Empathy

Perry Frith wrote a three-part series on storytelling, empathy, and advocacy (Frith 2015a, 2015b). She revealed studies that showed an increase in empathy towards people as a result of reading fiction. We become what we read and can be influenced by what and who we are reading about. Studies show that reading what a character is doing or smelling interacts with the motor and olfactory parts of the readers' brain, so sensory words that are read light up the same parts of the readers' brain (Frith 2015b). Frith mentions three elements for effective storytelling. She found that stories that generate empathy are stories that "transport" people, capturing their full mental and emotional attention. A story that promotes empathy leads to postsocial action and can inspire someone to help others. Effective stories that promote empathy can break down biases and foster inclusiveness (Frith 2015a). A story that increases empathy is a story that builds and increases tension or includes the dramatic arc. It is a key part of a successful digital story and the seven elements or parts: the beginning, middle, and end. In addition to the attention-grabbing nature of these moments of tension, the release of oxytocin, which is the hormone associated with empathy, is also important. It is the hormone associated with people being more compassionate, charitable, generous, and trustworthy (Ibid.).

The studies that support the promoting of empathy by works of fiction and effective storytelling, are complemented by the neuroscience research that concerns mirror neurons (Hess 2012). Just as the previous studies showed how reading fiction could promote empathy through the brain's identification with sensory words and the dramatic arc "transporting" the reader, resulting in the release of oxytocin and the increase in empathy, mirror neurons mimic and imitate what is viewed within the visual realm of media—and, for the purposes of this article, digital stories. Daniel Stern explains how watching someone reach for a glass is mirrored in the same way in the mind of the observer of the visual action. This translates into how the visual representations and storylines in digital stories can also be imprinted on the mind of the viewer and, depending on the effectiveness of the story, promote empathy. Stern explains, "In brief, the visual information received when watching another act gets mapped on to the equivalent motor representation in our own brain by the activity of these mirror neurons. It permits us to directly participate in another's actions, without having to imitate them. This 'participation' in another's mental life creates a sense of feeling/sharing with/understanding them, and in particular their intentions and feelings . . . " (Stern 2007 in Hess 2012). Why is empathy such an important feeling to develop through fiction and digital storytelling? Because psychologists believe it is the biological foundation for morality, with the help of good stories and good examples to watch and witness, along with the release of oxytocin (Gray 2014). It seems that both studies on the impact of fiction, effective storytelling, and mirror neurons that promote empathy offer further reasons to include digital stories in one's course assignments. One of the comments from a student about the digital stories mentioned how the digital stories "made me see things in a different light, we all go through storms and nobody knows unless

you tell them. Which is why it's important to be kind to one another". This statement suggests an increase in empathy for her as a result of watching the digital stories.

11. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to encourage teachers and professors in secondary and higher education to consider incorporating a digital story assignment not only in a World Religions course but also in other religious education or religious studies courses. In a faculty for young adults and adults, the students need to move away from "content only" and seek methods that encourage them to reflect more deeply, think more profoundly, and connect their whole being to their essential identity.

Many resources, like those offered by Mercy College, can be very helpful regarding the process of making a digital story that includes the seven elements of digital stories, examples of rubrics that can be used, and how a world religion theme sheet or different categories of digital stories can help give students ideas for their own digital stories. Student feedback to the digital story assignments shows a depth of appreciation, a deeper learning about the world religions, and a deeper relationship with other students based on the personal stories that were shared in their own voices. Both undergraduate and graduate students have benefited from the digital stories, and there is no reason to believe that students taking other religion and religious education courses cannot benefit in the same way.

The benefits of using methodologies such as digital storytelling and similar formats in religious education are that they engage the highest levels of learning, according to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, including creativity and critical thinking. In addition, methods such as digital storytelling provide an opportunity to challenge cultural norms or oppression and injustice and can increase empathy, which helps reduce biases and thereby support the creation of a more inclusive worldview.

As noted by one student's reflection on her digital story: "I felt like I had so much freedom to focus on what is important to me in my life". The more faculty and teachers are able to consider diverse pedagogies and technologies, the more students will be challenged to learn more profoundly and deeply. With each new generation of undergraduate and graduate students, this becomes increasingly true. The Millennials and Generation Z students are steeped in technology and social media. The use of digital storytelling and student reflections and comments shows us that such methodologies are going to become ever more critical for theological and religious educational content.

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