

Pressing in the digital age



**Digital Storytelling
with Kathleen Burnett**
By Natalie Clarkson

Modern entertainment takes shape in many forms, with seemingly limitless options available to content creators. Stories of all genres, shared through multiple media, engage the public and immerse their audiences in the lives of others momentarily, especially in the digital realm.

In fact, to many observers, we are in the age of digital storytelling.

Florida State University F. Williams Summers Professor Kathleen Burnett, who teaches in the College of Communication and Information, explored that theme during the Summer 2022 semester in Valencia, Spain. Her course, aptly named Digital Storytelling, demonstrated to students the inner workings of media production in contemporary times.

Students in the class created their own digital stories using their phones, just as they would for a TikTok post or a vlog entry. While the influences of modern technology seem to be largely outcompeting print media, the impact of print is not lost on these students, Burnett says.

“I think that people read a lot more than people think they read,” says Burnett, who has been an FSU faculty member since 1996 and was the director of the School of Information until December 2022. “We get a lot of our information through text. I’ve noticed that even in working with the students on digital stories, they could just do an oral narrative and visuals. There’s no need for them to put text on there, but they often do.”

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In many ways, though, society finds itself in a pivotal time when the content consumed no longer comes from the pages of newspaper, a book, or a magazine but more often from online sources, often received through the small screens of smartphones.

The modern smartphone is becoming less of a luxury and more of a necessity, mainly because how people use their devices has changed. Burnett recalls the time she spent in 2016 and 2017, on sabbatical, traveling across Asia, visiting 32 universities and speaking with the people she met.

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“What is this thing?” she says. “I learned that almost every culture, regardless of how they use it, calls it a phone.”

However, she found that designation carries little relevance to the device’s primary purpose.

“For a lot of people, the phone is more important for everything else it does,” she says. “It’s more important for taking pictures, for listening to music, for texting or searching the web.”

Based on her firsthand experiences, Burnett understood how powerful the smartphone had become, which led her to create the assignments in Valencia. Students produced travel vlog projects, with students working in production teams of two to produce their projects, with each vlog running between 20-30 minutes.

Burnett had the students present their assignments in a “Digital Storytelling Festival” at the end of the summer semester. The teams provided short introductions, played their vlogs, and then answered questions from the audience.

Burnett’s own method of teaching storytelling has evolved to suit the current style of content creation, an approach that has changed since the early days of her academic career. Burnett says she was always fond of books and the process behind printing from the beginning of her professional work in higher education.

After graduating summa cum laude from the University of California-San Diego with her bachelor’s degree in German literature, Burnett went on to earn her master’s in library studies from the University of California-Berkeley. She found herself becoming interested in a career as a rare books librarian.

At that time, however, California had few positions in the rare books field for anyone, let alone a recent graduate. Jobs that were available often required prior experience and, more often, a doctorate.

“I decided I’ll work on my Ph.D.,” she says, referring to her studies in library and information studies at UC-Berkeley. “I became very interested in the process and in the history of printing and publishing, which led me, in a

strange kind of way, to technology.”

While writing her dissertation, *Word Becomes Image: Herbert Bayer, Pioneer of a New Vision in Book Design*, Burnett was working with a specific printing technology. The printer required coding in order to print plaintext, the intelligible form of encrypted text.

“I kept going to the university’s computer science department, looked at their documentation and talked to them, wrote new documentation that people could actually use and then went back and trained the faculty to use this printer,” Burnett says. “You had to code everything in order to print it. It was like having HTML codes embedded all the way through your documents.”

Recent programs allow for more simplistic means of use and accessibility, of course. Nonetheless, these advancements come with their own downsides, Burnett says.

“The only problem that comes up—and this has been true with the whole history of technology—is once you’re able to use something without understanding how it works behind the scenes, you lose a lot of capability,” she adds.

Burnett addressed this issue and others with her students in Valencia. Initially, though, she started with a simple exercise, asking students to share a personal narrative on the first day of her Digital Storytelling class. Students had to answer two questions, “Who are you and why are you here?”

“And I told them that they didn’t have to tell us a true story—they could also tell us a fictional story,” Burnett says.

The underlying message of the exercise, she explains, matters more than the actual words being spoken to the listeners.

“As long as it would answer those two questions for everyone in the room, then that would help us get to know each other,” Burnett adds.

And each student would tell a story. The digital component would be taught during



Photo by Natalie Clarkson

classes throughout the rest of the semester.

Included in her lessons was teaching students how the increase of globalization provides a growing collection of more widely available tools. Thanks to the internet, seeking out inspiration for stories or replicating certain design elements has never been easier. As the world becomes more integrated, similarities increasingly show up across contemporary content.

The meshing of styles through globalization is affecting diversity in artistic choice, Burnett states, largely because the market economy creates the tools. In addition, literacy is no longer just the ability to read and write but rather a more nuanced understanding of layered content, especially in the digital realm.

Associating words with visual agents and background sound allows creative types to manufacture content with an array of meanings.

“But really the big constraining factor is that you need money,” she points out. “And so, everybody goes for the same kind of thing, because that’s what’s going to create an income.”

Burnett brought her extensive academic background to FSU Valencia in an era that could serve as a distinct turning point in communication and perceptions of how to engage in human connection. Print media is not entirely lost in contemporary times, but new technologies stand to bring different, and possibly unforeseen, ideas to the table.

Students in Burnett’s Digital Storytelling course had the hands-on opportunity to learn how to create in that environment.

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