Storyline at a Distance
By Todd Stewart-Rinier

One of the most valuable components of Storyline is collaboration. The social skills that develop through working and problem solving with others in a Storyline are exactly the kinds of collaborative skills that are necessary in larger arenas. Increasingly the problems we face are such that they require collaborative solutions: within communities, between states and between countries. So collaboration between students working on a Storyline project can truly prepare students for the future. That said, the question arises, how might one group of students work with another group of students in another town on the same Storyline? Or on a larger scale, how might an international collaboration be achieved between groups of students who live thousands of miles apart, or are in different time zones or who speak different mother tongues?

In the summer of 2007 I started to address these questions when creating a new Storyline based on the book Seedfolks by Paul Fleishman. Myself, Mary Lane and Linda Miller--with the help of Sallie Harkness--were trying to hone key questions related to the novel when we realized that we would be working in different schools in different towns around Oregon and would not be able to debrief or share student work. We would not be able to just pop into each other's classrooms and see how an episode went or talk through a particular problem that arose. It donned on us that we would be three islands without a means of collaboration.

We had put a lot of work into transforming the novel into a Storyline and were excited to try it in the coming school year, but the fact that we would not have each other's shoulders to cry on if something went wrong or be able to share each other's joy and pride in our student's work tempered our enthusiasm. Fortunately, I had been playing with some of the new Web 2.0 tools such as VoiceThread, Skype, Wikispaces and Survey Monkey, but cool as they were I was struggling to find a way to use them with my students. Then, a dangerous thing occurred: I had an idea. What if we used these tools to share our student's work over the Web? What if students from other classes could comment on the work and share their ideas as well? So I took my first step on the two year journey of using technology to do Storyline's at a distance.

Year One: Seedfolks

My first task was to get my students started on the Seedfolks Storyline. I had them create the characters, do the research and write reports about the characters. This done, I next needed to teach my students how to use VoiceThread. I chose this tool because it allowed me to upload images of student work and record the speeches that went along with the images. Ultimately, I could invite other classes to join in on the conversation and see the work my students had done. My hope was that it would spark interest in all classes involved to share their work and know that there were other students who were working on the same Storyline.

But, in the words of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, *"The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley. An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promised joy."* The first thing that

went wrong was my own technology. Although I had a fairly new computer with a built in microphone, it was not the best for recording my student's voices. Especially when there was a lot of background noise, as there usually is in a class full of active students. Another problem with recording their voices was that some students become very shy and would speak very softly. To overcome this, I trained one of my more tech savvy students to do the recording in another room with a parent volunteer. I worked with the quieter students on speaking close to the microphone and projecting their voices. That hurdle overcome, I was now able to invite the other classes to see our work (which is still online and viewable at http://voicethread.com/share/131728/).

It was in the sharing with the other classes that the second glitch came into play. I was comfortable with using VoiceThread--in fact I was comfortable playing with technology and making mistakes and hopefully learning from them--but not everyone operates at that same level of comfort. In fact, both Mary and Linda had little or no experience using technology in this way. This was compounded by the distance between us. I couldn't hold their hands as they were trying to learn something new and foreign. A solution came from exactly the source we would have wanted: a student in Mary's class. After discovering what my class had done, this student took it upon himself to play with VoiceThread then share his knowledge with the rest of his class (including his teacher).

In the end I was satisfied with my first attempt at doing a Storyline over a distance. But I was aware it had been achieved in the same time zone and with the same language, making it easier to accomplish. My second experience with Storyline at a distance began at the Golden Circle in Gotesburg, Sweden 2008 and involved a much greater distance.

Year Two: Norway

At this point, we knew that the next International Storyline Conference was going to be in Portland, Oregon. It would be the first time in the US. We had been busy making preparations and had planned to get ideas from the Golden Circle members regarding various issues related to hosting an international conference: collaboration, partnering with educators from different countries and using technology. In my small group discussion I had mentioned using tools like VoiceThread to share student work. Hanne Lund-Kristensen was intrigued by this and asked me more about it. A scheme was hatched.

We decided to try to coordinate a Storyline between her son's class in Norway and mine in Portland. We had not focused much on what the Storyline would be but more on what tools we might use. I was more tech-savvy than Hanne, but she was willing to learn what she could. During breaks we would talk and I shared the Seedfolks VoiceThread with her. She liked the idea and was hoping I could talk her through how to use the technology. Unfortunately, we each needed to head back to our own countries.

Once we had settled back into the routines of education, it was hard to reclaim the enthusiasm we had had in Sweden. Nonetheless, we did start up an email correspondence in the hopes of creating a more concrete plan. The use of VoiceThread was not mentioned, but I went ahead and created an account for Hanne. However, I was not able to help her set it up. I hoped that she would play with it on her own. Of course, I knew how hard that could be when day to day demands erode free time.

Still, armed with a bare bones idea, we started to work with our students. My first task was to have my students introduce themselves to the students in Norway. I had them create a name card with symbols to represent themselves and their interests. I instructed them in speaking slowly and clearly because the students in Norway would be hearing the words in a language that was not their mother tongue. My students practiced and practiced until I felt like they were ready to record. I scanned and uploaded their drawings. I had learned something from the previous year and had purchased an external microphone that could be adjusted to filter out background noise. I was now able to record their introductions and share them with the class in Norway.

Again, all was not simple. Because Hanne was not the regular classroom teacher but a visiting teacher she was not able to dedicate more than a few hours a week to working on the Storyline. To compound this, the regular teacher became ill and Hanne had to negotiate working with a standin teacher. Fortunately, he was knowledgeable in technology and was able to help Hanne and the students create a VoiceThread to introduce themselves to my students. The beauty of using Voicethread was there was little time delay in responses between the classes. Once the "thread" is created, it can be added to and edited regularly. No lag time, no waiting for a letter in the post (but also no interesting stamps from a different country).

Both classes wanted to know what the other students looked like and what their school was like. Hanne and I discussed how we might share photos. Even though our VoiceThread was private, we had to be aware of the dangers of posting photos of our students using an online tool. (Each district has its own policy regarding posting students photos.) To minimize the risk, we decided to email them instead of posting them on the VoiceThread. It was fun to share the class pictures from Norway because the photo showed the kids playing in the snowbanks around the school, something my students had not experienced. The photographs illustrated more of the differences between the students than did the introductions. Most of the students in both schools enjoyed similar hobbies and played similar sports. The global community was becoming more real for my students.

Trying to expand on these commonalities, Hanne and I decided to show both our classes the movie Wall-E. Our thought was that it could open up possibilities for discussions on sustainability and the role that advertising plays in consumption of goods. My students liked the idea of having a common experience with a class in a different country and started to work on questions and thoughts about issues of sustainability. I created an online survey using Survey Monkey to compare our class's views on consumerism and advertising. Things seemed to be moving along nicely, when both Hanne and I experienced frustrations. Besides the ill teacher, we

were dealing with district curriculum, testing schedules, deadlines for other projects, school holidays and I had a practice teacher who was doing her solo teaching.

In the end, Hanne led her students through a wonderful journey of the "Treasure of Life". It entailed creating fictional characters who traveled on a magic dragon ship that took them to different regions of Norway and ultimately to the Tree of Life. I even had the opportunity to use Skype (a program that allows you to call using a computer and the internet) to talk with the students in Norway about their work. I worked with my students on gaining a better understanding of how advertising affects their lives, how advertising can be blatant or subtle, and where advertising can be found. I had hope that my students would share their knowledge with the students in Norway, but I fell short of my goal.

Meanwhile, Hanne worked with her students to turn their work into a VoiceThread to share with my class as a way for my students to learn about Norway. The plan was to have my students create fictive characters who would travel to Norway and visit the various regions with her students as tour guides. But time was not on our side. Before Hanne could master the skills of creating a new VoiceThread, my school began their summer holiday. She did complete the presentation and it is beautiful. (To get a link for "Treasure of Life" please contact Hanne Lund-Kristensen <halkri@online.no> and request a link to the VoiceThread).

Hanne and I had hoped that we would present together this Storyline at a Distance project at the International Storyline Conference in Portland, but unfortunately, with a change in jobs and increase in travel costs, she was unable to attend. Since we had worked with Skype already, we devised a way for Hanne to present at the conference from her computer at home. I believe this gave a much better idea of how the technology can be used to share Storylines across great distances. At the end of the presentation, Hanne stated how proud she was of herself for learning and being successful at using new technology.

Somehow it seemed apt that these two *Storylines at a Distance* grew out of the novel, Seedfolks. In this story, a young girl plants a seed that changes an empty lot full of trash into a community garden through collaboration of the people who live in the neighborhood. I feel as if a seed has been planted for the possibility of using the internet and Web 2.0 tools to do more Storyline at a Distance in the future. In fact, since presenting at the Fourth International Storyline Conference, educators from Sweden and the US have connected via storyline_participants@lists.pdx.edu. And in England, primary head teacher Jill Wells and secondary teacher Paul Wells are using Skype to bring a sense of reality to Jill's storyline based on a space adventure by having Paul's school act as mission control. As we move forward with technology (remembering our students are always moving even faster) we need to find ways to further incorporate it into our Storylines, using it to expand the collaborative possibilities to ways of using it to connect with the global Storyline community.

The following are a few of the Web 2.0 Tools used for *Storyline at a Distance*
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Voice Thread
http://voicethread.com/ Web tool that allows students to share and narrate their work with people around the world. Free to educators.

Skpe
http://www.skype.com/ This is the site to download program ,which allows the user to make calls for free between computers.

Google Documents
http://www.google.com Site with web tools similar to Microsoft Office, but that allow user to share and create with others online.

Survey Monkey
http://www.surveymonkey.com/ Site for creating surveys and collecting data online.

Prezi
http://prezi.com/ Online tool for creating presentations.

Wikispaces for Educators
http://www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers Site for creating collaborative web pages. Educators need to apply for free account. There is a 30 day free trial.

Scratch
http://scratch.mit.edu/ A programming language for everyone. Create interactive stories, games, music and art - and share them online. This site is where the user can download program to use on their computer.