

PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF STORYTELLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract. This article presents a systematic review of national and international research examining the pedagogical use of storytelling in university education. Storytelling and its digital forms are increasingly used in higher education to support active student learning. Publications from 2016 to 2026 in Kazakh, Russian, and English were considered, with the search and selection process guided by the main principles of PRISMA 2020. The selected studies were examined through descriptive and thematic synthesis. The literature associates storytelling with student engagement and motivation, understanding and organisation of learning material, and the development of language and writing skills. Digital storytelling is also discussed in relation to creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaborative learning, and digital and multimedia skills. At the same time, its integration into teaching may require considerable time, appropriate technological resources, and adequate digital preparation of both students and instructors. Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that the educational value of storytelling does not arise from the use of digital tools alone. Its potential largely depends on the way storytelling activities are aligned with learning objectives, incorporated into instructional design, and supported by the instructor.

Key words: storytelling, digital storytelling, higher education, pedagogical potential, students, 21st-century skills, systematic literature review.

Introduction

The digital transformation of the modern higher education system requires a re-evaluation of teaching content and technologies. The shift from students passively absorbing information to learning models focused on their independent construction, interpretation and presentation of information in various formats has become one of the most significant trends in the educational process. Against this backdrop, there is growing interest in pedagogical technologies that enable the comprehensive development of students' learning engagement, creativity, critical thinking, communication and digital skills.

One such method is storytelling. In an educational context, storytelling is regarded as a pedagogical approach that organises information into a specific narrative structure, creating the conditions for learners to engage with the learning material in a meaningful and emotionally resonant way. With the development of digital technologies, traditional storytelling has evolved into the format of digital storytelling, which combines text, video, graphics, sound, music and other multimedia elements into a single narrative. The distinctive feature of digital storytelling lies in its ability to transform the learner from a recipient of ready-made information into an author who actively participates in shaping educational content.

Research in recent years shows that the scope of storytelling in education has expanded. J. Wu and D.-T. A systematic review conducted by V. Chen analysed 57 studies on digital storytelling in education and found that it is used in primary and secondary education as well as in higher education. The authors categorised the outcomes of digital storytelling into several areas, including affective, cognitive, conceptual, academic, technological, linguistic and social outcomes [1].

The educational potential of digital storytelling is particularly important in terms of developing 21st-century skills. In a systematic review, M.-A. Isaacs and his colleagues synthesised

qualitative data from 18 studies and identified a consistent link between the process of creating digital stories and skills in critical thinking, creativity and collaboration [2]. Furthermore, recent research demonstrates the ability of digital storytelling to positively influence cognitive and affective learning outcomes, technological skills and the ability to develop media literacy, collaborative work, creativity and reflection.

The significance of storytelling in higher education lies in its ability to link students' professional and subject-specific knowledge with digital, communicative and creative activities. The process of a student developing a digital story involves researching a topic, selecting and organising information, creating scripts, choosing multimedia resources, editing the final product and presenting it to an audience. In this regard, storytelling can be viewed not only as a means of conveying information, but also as a comprehensive pedagogical tool that facilitates active learning on the part of the student.

There is also growing interest in digital storytelling within the Kazakhstani educational sector. Domestic research has examined the potential for applying this technology in higher education institutions, including in language teaching. For example, studies have explored the prospects for using digital storytelling technology in the teaching of students at non-language-specialist higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Subsequent studies have begun to explore the potential of digital storytelling, supported by artificial intelligence tools, in developing the writing and pronunciation skills of future English teachers in Kazakhstan. These studies demonstrate that storytelling is also becoming a subject of research within the country's higher education system.

At the same time, despite the growing number of studies on digital storytelling in the international academic literature, its pedagogical potential in higher education is characterised by a variety of performance indicators, subject areas and methodological approaches. Furthermore, there remains a need to examine the findings of international research in relation to the experience of higher education in Kazakhstan and to systematise the factors and barriers that influence the implementation of storytelling. Therefore, the systematic collection of available research data enables a comprehensive assessment of the pedagogical potential of storytelling in higher education and the identification of areas requiring further study.

The aim of this study is to conduct a systematic analysis of domestic and international academic research on the use of storytelling in higher education and, on this basis, to identify the key pedagogical potential of storytelling, the ways in which it influences learning outcomes, the barriers to its implementation, and promising areas for future research.

In line with this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: For what pedagogical purposes are storytelling and digital storytelling used in higher education?

RQ2: What learning outcomes have been reported in studies relating to the use of storytelling?

RQ3: What are the main obstacles and limitations affecting the implementation of storytelling in higher education?

RQ4: What research gaps and promising areas emerge when comparing international and Kazakhstani studies?

Materials and methods of research

The study was conducted as part of a systematic literature review. The process of searching for, selecting and presenting the results of the review of scientific publications was organised in accordance with the key principles of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines [3].

The literature review included academic papers published between 2016 and 2026. To identify publications relevant to the research topic, a search was conducted in international academic databases and academic search engines. During the search, various combinations of the English keywords «storytelling», «digital storytelling», «educational storytelling», «higher education» «university students», «undergraduate students», «university teaching» and «pedagogy» were used. In order to identify Kazakhstani research, the search was supplemented by the use of the alternatives «storytelling», «digital storytelling», «higher education», «students», «university» and

«storytelling Kazakhstan» in Kazakh and Russian.

The main criteria for including studies in the review are: 1) studies involving storytelling or digital storytelling in the context of higher education; 2) studies in which the participants are students at higher education institutions, or studies focused on the pedagogy of higher education; 3) the presence of data on the pedagogical application of storytelling, educational outcomes, benefits, barriers or limitations; 4) the presence of data on systematic reviews relevant to the topic; 5) academic works published in Kazakh, Russian or English; 6) articles published between 2016 and 2026.

Exclusion criteria included studies focusing solely on pre-school and secondary general education; works in which storytelling was not considered an educational approach or technique; conference abstracts, editorial pieces and non-academic publications; works for which the full text or sufficient information on the research findings was unavailable; and duplicate publications.

Publication selection was carried out in several stages: compiling the initial search results and removing duplicate records; screening titles and abstracts; assessing the full texts of potentially relevant articles; and forming the final body of studies according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study selection process is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1) [4].

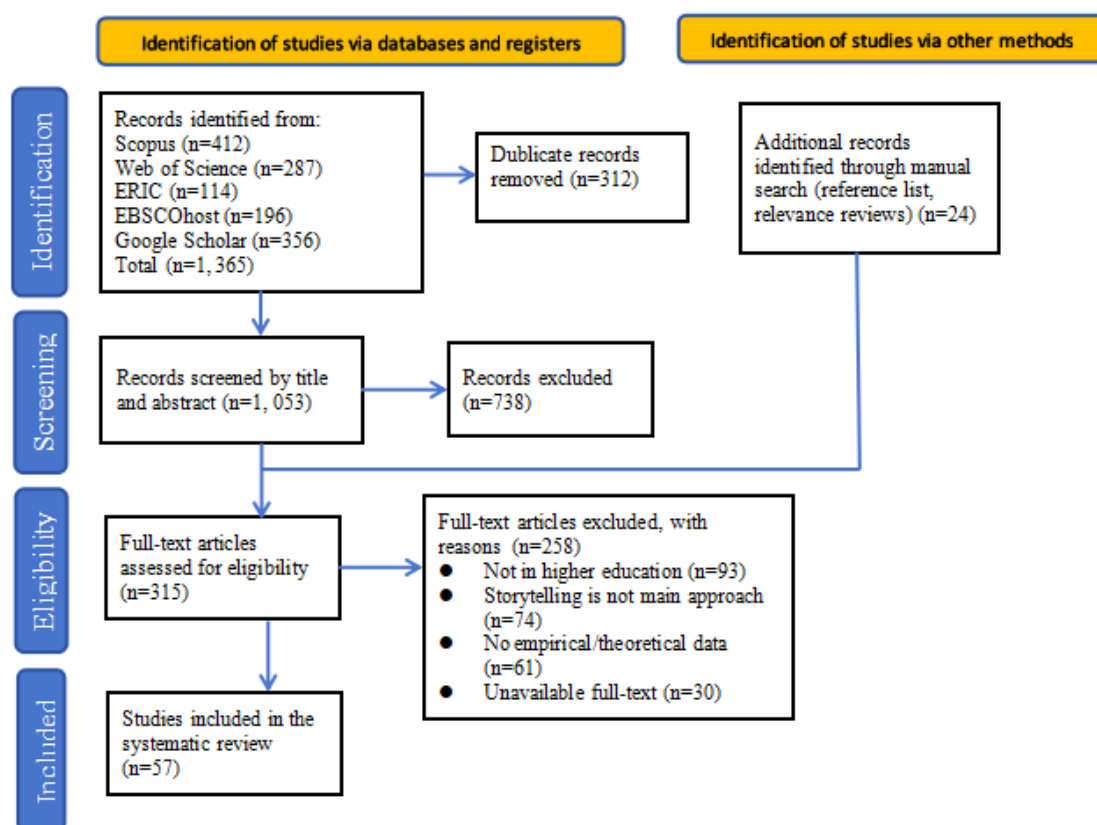


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

The studies included in the review provided data on the authors, year of publication, country in which the study was conducted, study design, participant characteristics, the form of storytelling used, the educational outcomes examined, and key findings. The data obtained were analysed using descriptive and thematic synthesis methods. During the thematic analysis, the studies were categorised according to the pedagogical aims of using storytelling, educational outcomes, barriers and limitations associated with its implementation, as well as areas for future research.

Results and its discussion

A systematic review of the academic literature has shown that the pedagogical potential of storytelling and digital storytelling in higher education is examined across several interrelated areas.

Based on a synthesis of the research in terms of content and themes, the main areas of application for storytelling are: 1) enhancing students' engagement and motivation; 2) improving cognitive and academic outcomes; 3) developing creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills; 4) enhancing language and writing skills; 5) fostering digital literacy and multimedia competences; 6) expanding learners' opportunities for reflection and personal understanding of their learning experiences [1–3].

In research within the context of higher education, one of the most significant pedagogical benefits of storytelling relates to ensuring students' active participation in the learning process. When creating a digital story, students explore a topic without merely accepting information in its finished form; they select the necessary information, integrate it into a specific logical structure and present it in a way that is understandable to their audience. Such activities allow students to be viewed as active participants in shaping educational content. Research conducted in university settings shows that digital storytelling is also used as a tool for understanding students' experiences, learning and interactions, as well as for collaboratively improving the curriculum and assessment approaches [5].

The second area identified in the review concerns the link between storytelling and cognitive and academic learning outcomes. The findings of systematic reviews indicate that digital storytelling can support cognitive outcomes such as knowledge retention, understanding of learning material and its semantic organisation [1, 3]. Although a statistically significant positive effect of digital storytelling on cognitive and affective learning outcomes was found in the final results of the meta-analysis and meta-synthesis, it was shown that the extent of the effect and the nature of the outcomes vary depending on the research context, the way the digital story is organised, and the pedagogical design employed [6].

The third key area is the development of creativity and 21st-century skills. Research into the use of digital storytelling shows that pupils engage in analysing information, selecting ideas, constructing storylines, making creative decisions and presenting their thoughts in various multimedia formats. A systematic review by Isaacs and his colleagues demonstrates the ability of digital storytelling to develop, in particular, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration skills [2]. Collaborative creation of a digital story in a higher education setting requires students to communicate, share responsibilities and make joint decisions to achieve a common outcome [2, 6].

The fourth area relates to language and writing skills. Digital storytelling combines several language-related activities within a single task, such as planning a script, drafting text, editing, and subsequently presenting it in an oral or multimedia format. In this regard, research in the context of foreign language learning examines the relationship between digital storytelling and vocabulary, spelling, oral communication, motivation to learn the language and learner autonomy. Recent systematic reviews also demonstrate the potential of this technology in the teaching and learning of English [7].

The fifth area concerns the development of digital and multimedia skills. Producing a digital history project requires the integration of textual, visual and audio information, the searching for and evaluation of digital resources, the processing of multimedia materials, and the presentation of the final product in a digital environment. As a result of these activities, students are given the opportunity not only to acquire subject-specific knowledge, but also to put elements of information and media literacy into practice [1, 3].

Furthermore, the studies analysed have shown that there are a number of limitations associated with the pedagogical potential of storytelling. These frequently cited limitations include the significant amount of time required to prepare a digital story, technical difficulties, disparities in the digital skills of learners and teachers, and problems with access to technological resources [3]. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of storytelling is linked not only to the mere use of digital tools, but also to the appropriate organisation of pedagogical tasks, support from the teacher, and the technical capabilities of learners.

A comparative analysis of the results of the systematic review showed that the pedagogical effect of using storytelling in higher education is shaped by a combination of several interrelated

components. Firstly, storytelling organises learning material through a narrative structure, enabling students to make meaningful connections between pieces of information. Secondly, in the context of digital storytelling, learners engage in active tasks such as searching for information, selecting content, developing scripts, choosing multimedia materials and presenting the final product, rather than merely consuming ready-made content. Thirdly, this process can involve communication, collaboration and mutual feedback, as well as individual learning activities [1–3].

The findings of the analysed studies enable us to examine the pedagogical potential of storytelling at three main levels. The first level relates to students' motivation to learn, their interest and their active participation in the learning process. The second level encompasses cognitive, linguistic and academic outcomes, including the comprehension and structuring of information, as well as writing and communication skills. The third level focuses on the development of complex competences, such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and digital literacy [1–3, 7].

Furthermore, the differences between studies mean that the effectiveness of storytelling cannot be regarded as a universal pedagogical effect. Learning outcomes may vary depending on the context of the study, the characteristics of the learners, the subject being studied, the storytelling format, the organisation of the task and the extent to which digital tools are used [1, 3]. Therefore, when assessing the pedagogical potential of storytelling, it is necessary to take into account not only the positive results, but also the conditions under which it is implemented, as well as technical and organisational barriers.

Overall, the analysis carried out shows that the significance of storytelling in higher education should be viewed not only as a standalone digital tool or a means of presenting information in an engaging way, but also as a pedagogical approach that enables the organisation of active, creative and reflective learning activities for students. Realising its educational potential depends more on pedagogical design, methodological support for the lecturer and the alignment of storytelling tasks with learning objectives than on the technology itself.

The literature review conducted has shown that the pedagogical potential of using storytelling and digital storytelling in higher education is not limited to individual learning outcomes. The findings indicate that this approach is regarded as a comprehensive pedagogical tool capable of interlinking aspects of students' cognitive, affective, linguistic, social and digital development [1–3]. This characteristic stems from the fact that digital storytelling views the learner not as a recipient of ready-made information, but as an active agent who independently constructs, interprets and presents educational content to an audience.

The frequent demonstration of creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills in the review's findings is consistent with the competence-based objectives of modern higher education. In the process of creating a digital story, students search for and evaluate information, identify the main idea, organise the material into a logical structure, develop a script, select multimedia tools and present the finished product to an audience. Each stage of this process requires students not only to perform technical tasks, but also to analyse, make creative decisions and reflect. The findings of a systematic review conducted by Isaacs and his colleagues also highlight the link between digital storytelling and 21st-century skills, particularly in terms of critical thinking, creativity and collaboration [2].

Furthermore, the positive findings identified cannot be explained unequivocally. Wu and Chen draw attention to a prevalent characteristic of positive findings in studies of digital storytelling and regard this as the 'Rosy picture' problem [1]. This suggests that, when assessing the effectiveness of digital storytelling, one must take into account publication bias, the heterogeneity of research projects, sample size and approaches to evaluating results. Therefore, generalising the link between the use of storytelling and positive educational outcomes to all educational contexts requires scientific caution.

This finding is further supported by recent research. Whilst a systematic review and meta-analysis covering digital storytelling in education between 2014 and 2024 demonstrated a statistically significant positive impact on cognitive and affective outcomes, the authors demonstrate that the effectiveness of digital storytelling depends on the nature of the media used,

the method of story construction, the subject context and the pedagogical design [3]. Furthermore, technical difficulties and the time required to produce a digital product are identified as key barriers [3].

In this sense, it is not enough to link the pedagogical value of digital storytelling solely to the technology itself. Its effective use depends on the teacher's pedagogical support, the specific aim of the task, the students' digital literacy, the technical resources available, and the integration of storytelling elements with the learning content. A systematic review examining the development of tools for creating digital stories also shows that, alongside expanding technological capabilities, there remain design and practical challenges associated with their implementation in an educational setting [8].

The educational outcomes of storytelling may also depend on the form in which it is used. Learners viewing ready-made digital stories is not the same educational activity as them creating their own stories. For example, a systematic review of medical professional training showed that students' active participation in creating digital stories was associated with learning outcomes, whilst the impact of using ready-made patient stories was limited [9]. This finding reflects the pedagogical significance of active models that view the student as an author rather than a consumer of the storytelling product.

An important area of focus is the comparison of research relating to the Kazakhstani context of higher education with the international academic literature. Whilst existing studies indicate that interest in storytelling and digital storytelling is growing within the domestic higher education system, evidence of the systematic nature of research areas, the diversity of methodologies employed and long-term outcomes, when compared with the international literature, requires further investigation. Therefore, future research should focus on an empirical assessment of the specific pedagogical mechanisms of storytelling, its effectiveness across different subject areas, and the particularities of its adaptation to the higher education context in Kazakhstan.

It is also necessary to bear in mind a number of limitations of this review. The inclusion in the study of works published between 2016 and 2026 in Kazakh, Russian and English may result in the exclusion of relevant studies in other languages. Furthermore, differing definitions of storytelling and digital storytelling, as well as the heterogeneity of research projects and the educational outcomes being assessed, limit the possibility of direct comparison between studies. The qualitative nature of this thematic synthesis also does not rule out the presence of a certain degree of research subjectivity in the interpretation of the results.

Conclusion

The systematic literature review carried out has shown that the use of storytelling and digital storytelling in higher education has multifaceted pedagogical potential. In the studies analysed, storytelling is considered in relation to increasing students' learning engagement and motivation, supporting cognitive and language skills, and providing opportunities for the development of creative abilities, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and digital competences. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the pedagogical impact of storytelling depends not only on its actual use, but also on the learning objectives, instructional design, methodological support provided by the lecturer, students' digital literacy and technical capabilities.

In this regard, when introducing storytelling into higher education practice, it is important to prioritise its pedagogically sound organisation rather than technological tools. Promising areas for future research include assessing the long-term impact of storytelling across different subject areas and student groups, clarifying the pedagogical mechanisms that determine its effectiveness, and developing models adapted to the context of higher education in Kazakhstan.

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ЖОҒАРЫ БІЛІМ БЕРУДЕ СТОРИТЕЛЛИНГТІ ҚОЛДАНУДЫҢ ПЕДАГОГИКАЛЫҚ ӘЛЕУЕТІ: ЖҮЙЕЛІ ӘДЕБИ ШОЛУ

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Андатпа. Мақалада аталған тәсілдердің педагогикалық мүмкіндіктері отандық және шетелдік ғылыми жарияланымдарға жүйелі шолу жасау арқылы талданды. Жоғары білім беру жүйесінде сторителлинг пен цифрлық сторителлингті қолдану студенттің оқу әрекетін ұйымдастырудың перспективалық тәсілдерінің бірі ретінде қарастырылып келеді. 2016–2026 жылдар аралығында қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдерінде жарияланған еңбектерді іздеу мен іріктеу барысында PRISMA 2020 ұсынымдарының негізгі қағидаттары басшылыққа алынды. Іріктелген зерттеулердің мазмұны сипаттамалық және тақырыптық синтез негізінде қарастырылды. Әдебиеттерді талдау сторителлингтің студенттердің оқу үдерісіне қатысуы мен мотивациясын қолдауға, оқу материалын түсіну мен меңгеруге, тілдік және жазылым дағдыларын жетілдіруге ықпал ету мүмкіндігін көрсетті. Зерттеулерде шығармашылық және сыни ойлау, коммуникация, бірлескен әрекет, цифрлық және мультимедиялық дағдыларды дамыту мәселелері де кеңінен қарастырылады. Сонымен қатар, цифрлық сторителлингті оқу үдерісіне енгізу қосымша уақытты, тиісті техникалық ресурстарды және білім алушылар мен оқытушылардың жеткілікті цифрлық даярлығын талап етеді. Шолу нәтижелері сторителлингтің тиімділігі цифрлық құралдарды пайдаланумен ғана анықталмайтынын көрсетті. Оның педагогикалық мүмкіндіктерін іске асыруда оқу мақсатына сәйкес құрылған тапсырма, оқытушының әдістемелік қолдауы және педагогикалық дизайн маңызды орын алады.

Түйін сөздер: сторителлинг, цифрлық сторителлинг, жоғары білім, педагогикалық әлеует, студенттер, XXI ғасыр дағдылары, жүйелі әдеби шолу.

ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ СТОРИТЕЛЛИНГА В ВЫСШЕМ ОБРАЗОВАНИИ: СИСТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

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Аннотация. Сторителлинг и его цифровые формы все чаще рассматриваются в высшем образовании как способы организации активной учебной деятельности студентов. В статье представлен систематический обзор отечественных и зарубежных исследований, посвященных педагогическим возможностям применения

сторителлинга в университетском обучении. Поиск и отбор публикаций за 2016–2026 гг. проводились с учетом основных положений PRISMA 2020; в обзор включались работы на казахском, русском и английском языках. Содержание отобранных исследований было проанализировано с использованием описательного и тематического синтеза. Анализ литературы показал, что применение сторителлинга связывают с вовлеченностью и учебной мотивацией студентов, пониманием и усвоением материала, а также развитием языковых и письменных навыков. Отдельное место в исследованиях занимают возможности цифрового сторителлинга для развития творческого и критического мышления, коммуникации, совместной деятельности, цифровых и мультимедийных навыков. Вместе с тем его использование требует дополнительных временных затрат, соответствующих технических ресурсов и достаточной цифровой подготовки преподавателей и студентов. Полученные результаты позволяют заключить, что образовательная ценность сторителлинга определяется не самим фактом использования цифровых инструментов, а тем, насколько они согласованы с учебными целями, педагогическим дизайном и методической поддержкой преподавателя.

Ключевые слова: сторителлинг, цифровой сторителлинг, высшее образование, педагогический потенциал, студенты, навыки XXI века, систематический обзор литературы.