Experiential Learning with Dvolver

by CHARLES McKINNEY IV

Dvolver is a free moviemaking platform that allows users to employ animated characters to develop fun, concise scripts in a digital format. A Korean co-teacher, who told me about Dvolver, and I created a 45-minute lesson plan for teaching students at the upper-beginner and lower-intermediate skill levels. Our aim was to teach our students how the website works and how they can experiment with language in imaginative ways, and we hoped the experience would improve their attitudes toward learning English by having them practice using the language in an enjoyable way.

The purpose of this article is to describe the utility of Dvolver for instructors and students alike as a way to maximize its language-learning potential in the classroom. The article is a step-by-step guide that provides educators with a road map to incorporate such technology into their language teaching, for both curricular and extracurricular purposes.

PREPARING FOR DVOLVER

1. Acquaint yourself with the Dvolver website by watching a YouTube tutorial or two. I recommend the ones on the Dvolver Tutorial YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/dvolvertutorial).

2. Prepare a simple presentation, PowerPoint or otherwise, that will enable students to conceptualize the lesson. To do this, you first need to familiarize yourself with the site's functionality. Students will be creating simple movies; if possible, you might consider creating a movie that can serve as an exemplar for your class.

3. Confirm that Adobe Flash is properly installed on the computers or devices that students will use to complete the project.

GETTING STUDENTS STARTED

4. Write the Dvolver website address on the board: www.dvolver.com

5. Introduce the lesson objective to students and the concept of using Dvolver to achieve the learning goal. For example (for the sake of this article), "We will focus on the use of money-related idioms in English." Make sure students understand the goal; in this case, for example, they would have to know what idioms are.

6. Tell students they will create their own digital visuals and text focusing on these idioms.

7. Brainstorm money-related idioms with students and make a list on the board (e.g., *show me the money*, *time is money*, *put your money where your mouth is*, *talk is cheap*).

8. Assign students in pairs to work on the project.

9. Direct students to the website and have them click on "Make a Movie."

Note that students can use the program with topics and themes besides money-related idioms. For a lesson on cultural domestic travel, for example, you might advise or ask your students about story lines dealing with customs, food, holidays, or geography. The whole class can focus on one of these subtopics, or each pair/group of students can be assigned a different subtopic under the umbrella of domestic travel. A mind-map illustration on the blackboard would clarify these prewriting tasks. Students can then feel confident to begin working on their films.

CHOOSING BACKGROUND AND SETTING

10. Choose a background. Scroll through the range of options available.

11. Choose a sky. Scroll through the range of options available. Once you choose these elements, an image of their appearance in the movie will manifest on the screen with a description below the image that includes the following meteorological data: weather conditions, visibility, temperature, humidity level, and the time of sunset.

In these steps, the topic can influence the selections. If the aim is to review vocabulary on seasons and weather conditions, then students might choose the New York City studio apartment background and the snowflake sky, which they could include later in the conversation between the characters when they reach the dialogue stage. Descriptions are provided for each option, so students can select the most fitting elements for their movies in each step of the process.

SELECTING PLOT AND CHARACTERS

12. Tell students to select the story line that best matches the idea for their movie. Four plot options exist (rendez-vous, pick-up, chase, and soliloquy), with suggestions for corresponding genres and casting. For instance, if you choose the rendez-vous plot, the following information will appear in the animation: plot— rendez-vous; characters—2; ideal for— romance/ drama/comedy. You might explain a decision like this: "For our lesson goal about money idioms, let's choose the chase plot because it is ideal for action movies."

13. Tell students to click "next" so that they can scroll through the variety of characters available, ranging from Snowgirl to The Mack (Snoop Dogg imitation). You might suggest a character choice as follows: "As for characters, let's choose Bart Cheever, who is Dfilm Founder and CEO, and Mr Big, a developer who favors doublespeak. These characters should

make for a suitable interaction on our learning goal of finance idioms."

As an aside, a brief description of each character (including the character's occupation, skills, age, language, and catchphrase) makes the selection more intriguing, and a diversity of characters gives the students options. These choices enhance lessons that deal with embracing differences, idiosyncrasies of human behavior, and so on. Allow students to choose the character they most identify with or the one they believe will inspire thoughtful and entertaining writing. Let them have fun!

CREATING A SCREENPLAY

14. Instruct your students to write the dialogue for each character, one line at a time, incorporating the grammar point and/or vocabulary being emphasized in the lesson. Inform them that conciseness is important because each line cannot exceed 100 typed characters of text. Each character in the story has a maximum of three lines (more if another scene is added). The following example illustrates what a script might look like:

CHARACTER 1: Are you going to buy this building for your new business or not? Time is money.

CHARACTER 2: Yes, I thought we had an agreement. My word is worth its weight in gold. You can bank on that!

CHARACTER 1: OK, I need half the money up front, or I take my business elsewhere. Oh, and I need the money NOW!

CHARACTER 2: What? Do you think money grows on trees? You told me I had until next week.

CHARACTER 1: Well, I guess you heard wrong. Now show me the money!

CHARACTER 2: Your talk is so cheap! The deal is off.

15. If students selected a soliloquy plot, tell them to draft a monologue related to the grammar focus and/or theme of the lesson. For example, if students are practicing introductions and greetings, a monologue would work well. A character might talk about his or her family, hobbies, dreams, and talents as if he or she were presenting the information independently—for example, "I have a large family, with three brothers and five sisters. Tennis is my favorite sport, and I want to play professionally when I'm older. Juggling is an interesting pastime of mine."

Additionally, if your class is doing a lesson on personality and adjectives, some students may prefer a soliloquy to generate an enlightening self-description (e.g., "My name is Zach. I am 17 years old. I am clever, stylish, and friendly. I have brand-new eyeglasses, brown eyes, and long arms and legs. … "). Otherwise, most students will have two characters in their movies, and they will write a dialogue that involves both characters.

Keep in mind that if students are given a specific language goal, particularly when constructing their scripts, they will gain more from the project than if you simply allow them to write or say whatever they want at random. Clear and focused lesson goals will keep them on task, making classroom management easier, especially if this will be a graded or credit-based assignment.

It is important to know that you will not hear the characters reciting their lines. Their speaking parts appear as dialogue bubbles on the screen to be read quickly while the music (see next section), if used, plays. Thus, students get to practice reading and writing skills in a creative and user-friendly way.

FINISHING THE MOVIE: MUSIC, CREDITS, AND PREVIEW

16. Tell students they can add a scene to the movie, or they can finish the movie now; they can click on the appropriate

option. If they add a second scene, they will repeat the steps in the Creating a Screenplay section above to develop the scene. If they choose to finish the movie now, they should proceed to the following steps.

17. Ensure that your computers' sound and speakers are functioning properly. If speakers are not available, students do not need to select any music.

18. Advise students to choose the music that best matches their story line—or to decide not to have any music at all. A number of music genres will appear on the screen for students to listen to and select if they want to use music. All the music is instrumental, and only a snippet of each genre is played. Note that the music and animations are produced by the website creators and their affiliated partners, so there is no need to worry about open educational resource regulations.

19. Tell students to insert a movie title and director credit (which will be their name or names) and to choose a title design (*classic*, *horror*, *radio active*, or *seventies*). The title design shows how the title and filmmaker will be introduced on-screen in a way that is comparable to real movies. Students tend to love this part!

20. Direct students to preview the movie.

21. Watch and enjoy the movie together as a class.

22. Tell students to email the movie to themselves and to you, the teacher, for viewing and, if this is a graded project, for grading.

Note that if you have a teacher's blog or class blog or website, or if you want to include the movie on your LinkedIn profile or YouTube channel, after previewing the movie you can embed the unique link provided into your preferred website for permanent access.

CONSIDERATIONS

Dvolver can be used not only for classroom-based lessons, but also for activities in English clubs and community groups, and as a home-based activity as a rival to computer video games that consume many students' time and interest. Nontraditional students and adult learners can also benefit from using Dvolver by developing their computer-literacy skills in English while working creatively. In the absence of computers, Dvolver can be used on tablets and smartphones.

Teachers might even consider using Dvolver for informal assessments. For example, if students are working on comparatives, superlatives, topical vocabulary, or some other specific skill, teachers can determine the student learning curve via a Dvolver project. Imagine telling your students that their pop quiz on irregular verbs will be conducted in the form of a digital movie. Perhaps an unorthodox experience like this will alter their views toward assessments / evaluations, and even toward learning English in general.

VARIATION (NO COMPUTER ACCESS)

If your school and students lack computer technology and Internet access, students can still carry out this project in conventional handwritten form. Students can sketch their own characters and settings, then create a plot and script on poster board or construction paper. They can then act out their movies in real time in front of the class and even, if they wish, make their own music. Do not discount this project if technology appears to be an obstacle. The best edutainment is not limited to the virtual world.

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