

iPod therefore iWrite

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Research has provided evidence of the positive impact of utilising technologies to develop a learner's writing skill (Goldberg, Russell & Cook, 2004). As summarised by Goldberg at al, "...the results of the meta-analyses suggest that on average students who use computers when learning to write are not only more engaged and motivated in their writing, but they produce written work that is of greater length and higher quality" (*ibid*).

Many teachers are (or should be) familiar with online diaries, BLOGS and WIKIS. These Internet resources provide the writer with an extended readership beyond the classroom. Readers can also add comments to BLOGS for consideration by the author. In addition, WIKIS allow for text to be amended so resulting in a collaborative writing artefact. Some teachers and probably many learners may perceive such writing as typically 21st century. But online writing by English learners, and differentiated by computer technology, originate over two decades ago as exemplified by the works of Higgins & Johns (1984) and Berer & Rinvolutri (1981), and demonstrated by a computer-based text simulation entitled London Adventure (Hamilton, 1986). These were called Mazes, which were essentially hypertext stories. At the beginning of a maze (or, in digital jargon, *interactive story*) a problem is posed and a number of solutions are offered. The learner selects one of the given options which will then link to the next corresponding link. Subsequent actions are offered and the maze progresses until some outcome is reached. The paths taken by learners differ based upon their responses. Durani (1989) comments positively,

“In maintaining the learner’s interest, the branching structure of the maze is without doubt more stimulating than the linear or circular structures of routine exercises” (p.43).

Mazes though are inflexible and can become rather repetitive and boring. For potential language learning success, the simulation that a maze represents needs to be connected to planned, real world activities. Higgins & Johns (1984) called this the ‘briefing-execution-debriefing’ paradigm (p.67).

The iPod now offers the provision of portability of such interactive stories. Although essentially an audio and video player, the iPod can also display images and text. By using iWriter software (see <http://www.talkingpanda.com/iwriter/>), teachers and students can develop interactive stories that can be displayed and manipulated on iPods. If students do not have access to iPods then the iWriter project can also be displayed in a Web browser.

The following section is a personal account of writing interactive stories using iWriter.

I started using iWriter in May 2005 when it was originally named iStory Creator. I used my 1995 Masters project, which was essentially a HTML reading maze, to try iStory. I showed it to students and they liked it but wished for audio, images and video. See my Website at <http://homepage.mac.com/mvallance/professional/Personal69.html> to download my Business Meetings iStory.

I later introduced iStory to some Primary school teachers at an Apple Summer Camp for Educators in Singapore in June 2005, and together we developed a digital story of multiple paths based upon a National Education/ citizenship theme. We added audio files and linked to the reading text. A few students were given iPods (iPod minis) and they tried the story and associated MCQ quiz on the iPods. I wrote an account of this for Modern English Teacher (Vallance, 2006).

Teachers developing content using iStory was good, but the process was more interesting. So why not get the students to create the digital stories? In October 2005 I changed

universities, and countries, to Future University-Hakodate in Japan. I used iWriter 1.0 with my new science students in a Communication course. As I focussed upon the process of the story, it was important for the students to brainstorm and develop a coherent outline, and logical, understandable and believable multiple paths. We used Inspiration software (see <http://www.inspiration.com>) for this purpose. Looking at Figure 1 – Inspiration story development, at even 4 levels there are 16 components for students to write, so planning and organising text is essential. This is an affordance offered by the Inspiration software often neglected when developing written work.

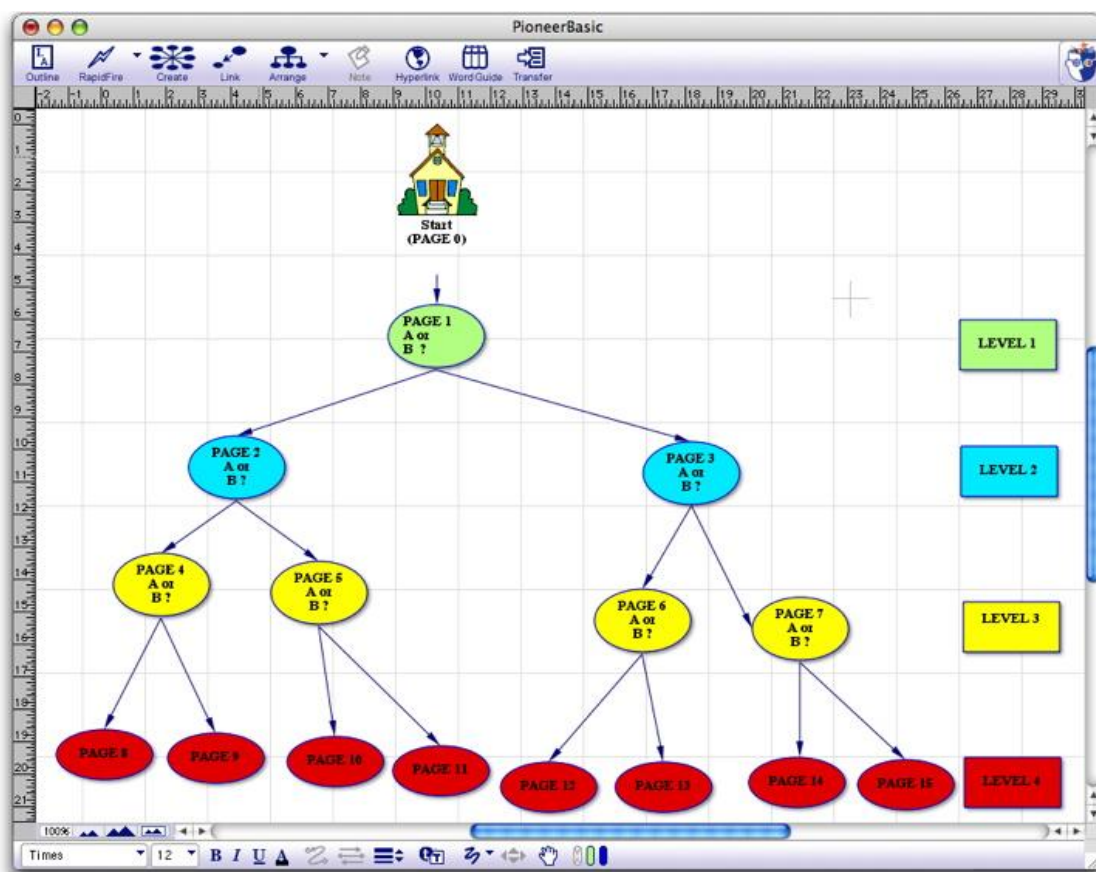


Figure 1 – Inspiration story development.

Once the story had been completed in Inspiration, the students typed their stories and paths much more quickly into iWriter 1.0. See Figure 2 – iWriter 1.0 interface, for an early example.

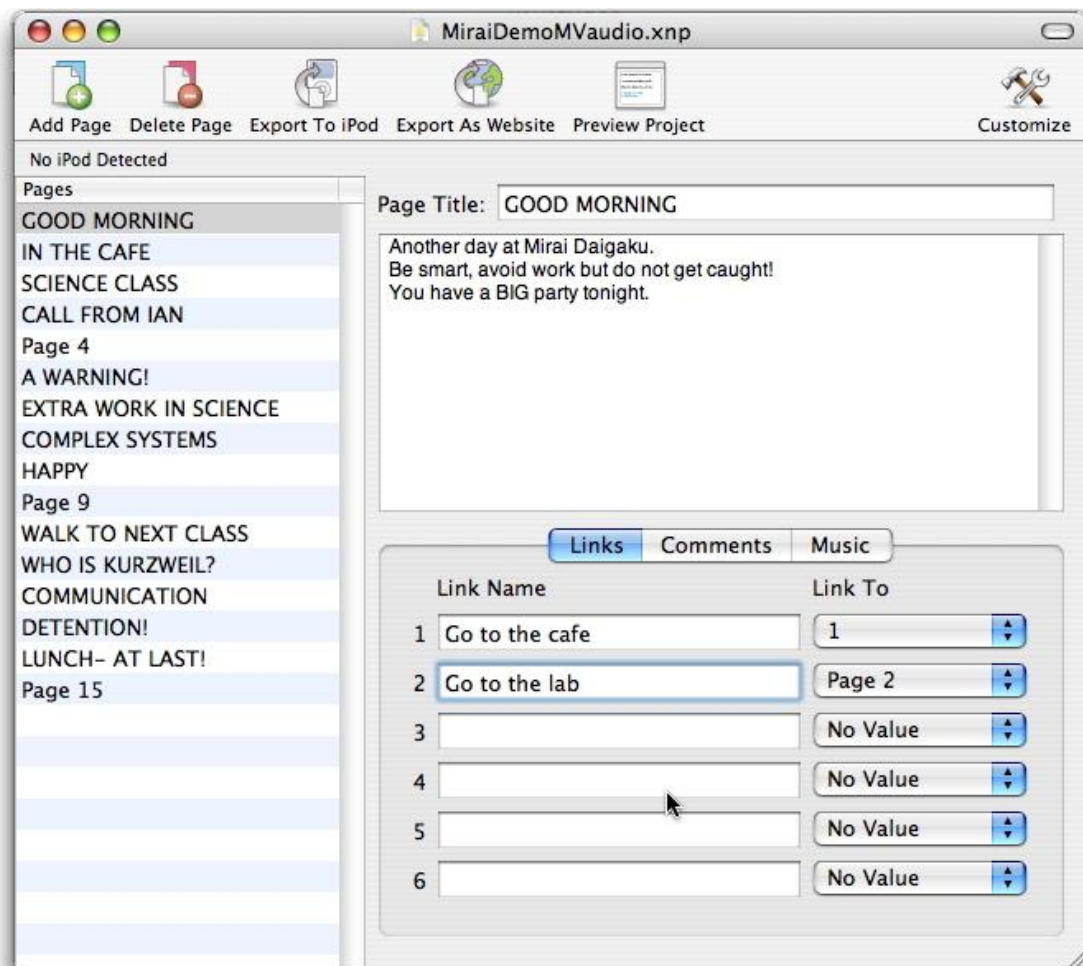


Figure 2 – iWriter 1.0 interface.

The stories were then uploaded to iPods for other students to read. See Figure 3 - Interactive story on an iPod.

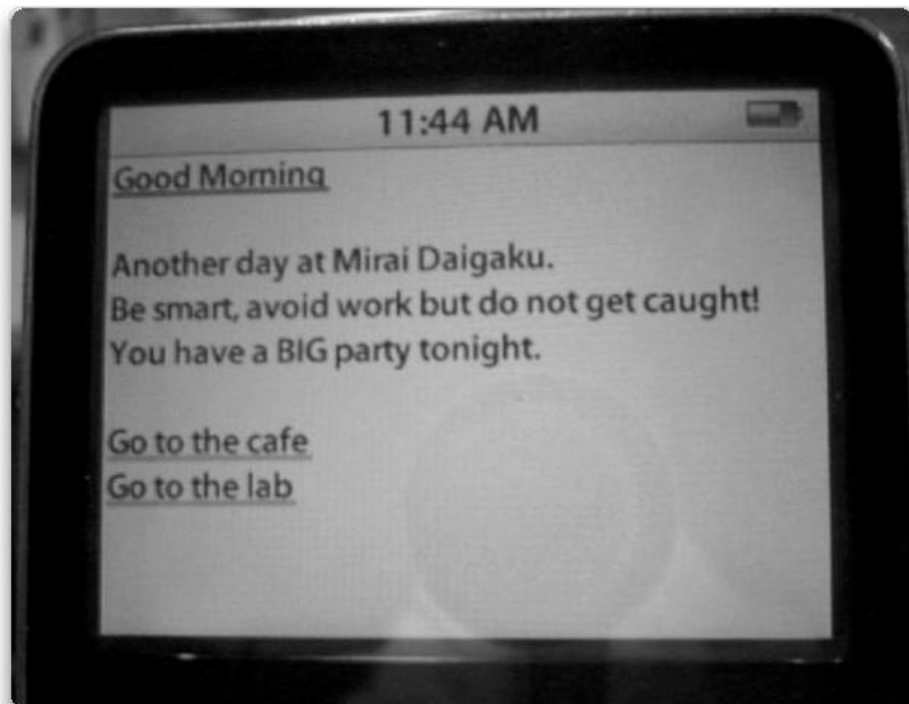


Figure 3 - Interactive story on an iPod.

Now that I have iWriter 1.2, with additional features such as templates, my next project will link courseware to iPods. The HTML export feature will be useful for pilot testing (see Figure 4- iWriter 1.2 interface) but really I want the information on the iPods as a learning journey; in English and Japanese.

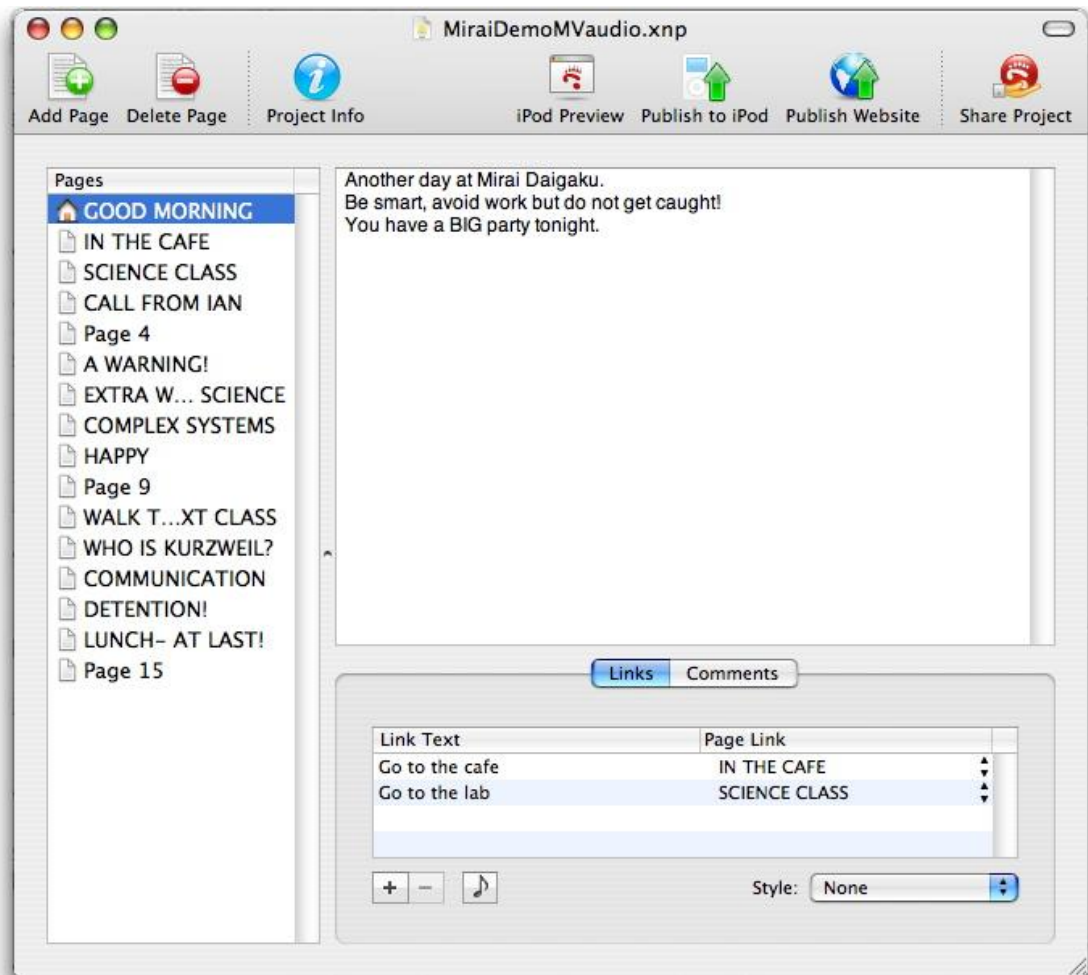


Figure 4- iWriter 1.2 interface

As stated earlier, we will link audio to add value to the displayed text. To link an audio file, students will simply record the audio as an MP3 file and add to the iTunes library on the computer. The file will be given a distinct name. In iWriter 1.2, the song will be linked as shown in Figure 5 – Adding audio to iWriter 1.2. Video linking is not yet possible although Apple are aware of this feature request. Text can also be copied directly from a Word processor such as AppleWorks or Microsoft Word. It is advisable to open the iPod Preview pane if relatively large chunks of text are copied. Limit the text though due to the small screen size of the iPods. Once an iWriter project is completed, the Share Project option will upload the project (text files and audio) to a .Mac account or a local folder for other students to access.

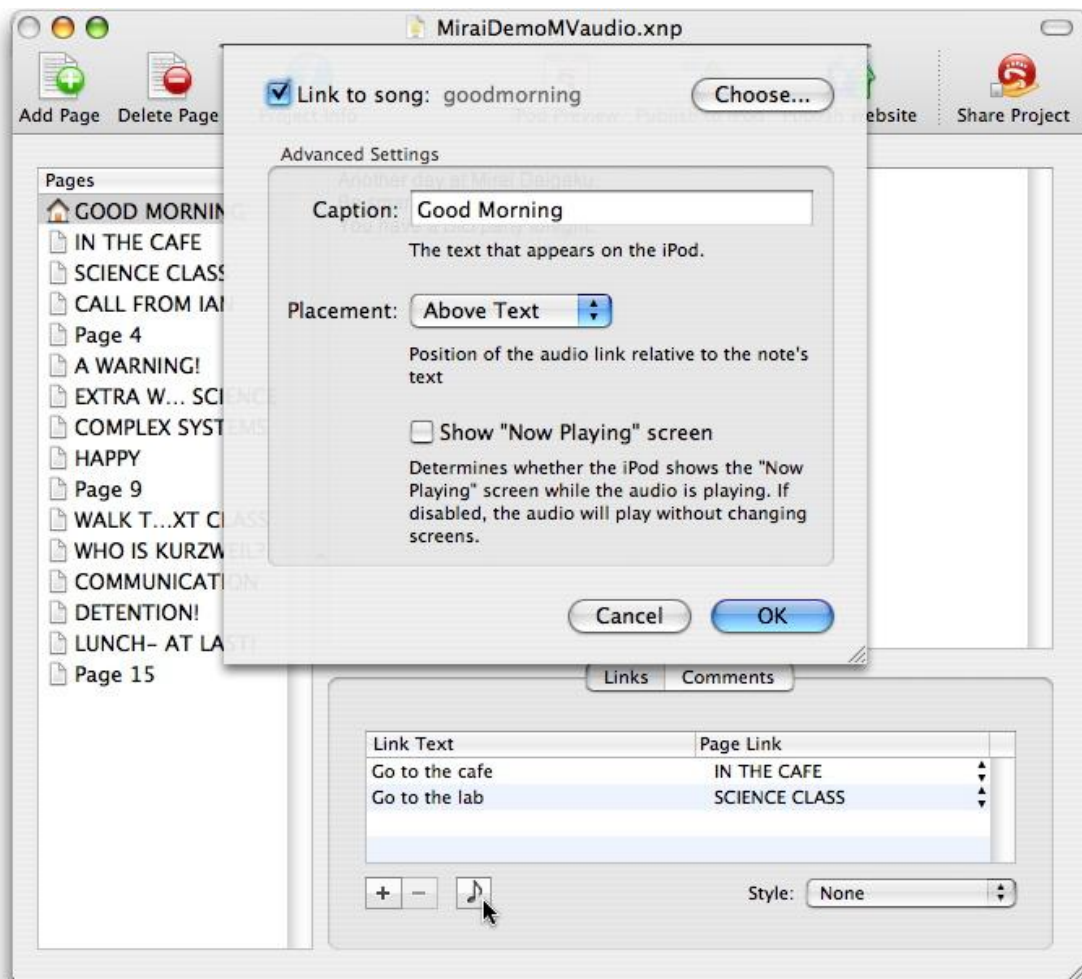


Figure 5 – Adding audio to iWriter 1.2

A number of iWriter interactive stories are available online for students to download (see <http://www.ipodsoft.com/index.php?/istories>):

- Survive Pioneer Middle School. This is a day in my school. Author: Ian.
- Trouble at sea. First your cruise ship is attacked, then you have to escape hungry sharks, and survive on a small island. Author: Cody.
- Corporate ladder. A zany adventure through the corporate ladder. Author: iJman.
- Original iTAG Game. You have lost your iPod. Do you have what it takes to get it back? Author: Kloberman.

Georgia College and State University run a programme entitled 'a pocketful of learning' (see <http://ipod.gcsu.edu/index.html>) where professors, for instance, provide audio files of lectures for students to download to their iPods.

Some further examples are students writing poems, teachers providing phrases supported by audio models, a localised story supported by common surrounding sounds, teachers providing a journey through new course information, and administrators providing introductions to the institute.

Cool Gorilla (see <http://www.coolgorilla.com/>) provides text-based content for the iPod such as a phrasebook. This company provided information about all the teams at the World Cup 2006 football competition as an iPod download.

In addition to iWriter, useful software that links text and audio is Life2Go (see <http://www.kainjow.com/life2go/>). This software can, for example, synchronise an audio file and lyrics on the iPod.

I presented an account of the experience at the JALT-CALL 2006 conference in Sapporo. The presentation was well received as I emphasised the focus upon the process and not solely the product of writing digital stories. A number of benefits were offered by using iWriter in an informed way:

- supports group work;
- is flexible in process and outcome;
- provides opportunities for peer review and support;
- offers a wide and authentic readership so the writing becomes more purposeful;
- provides opportunities for authentic and meaningful communication in project development;
- develops digital literacy through creating, organising, managing, evaluating and presenting information as a digital artefact.

In summary, I particularly like iWriter 1.2 as it can be a useful learning object if used appropriately (i.e. not to mimic writing without technology). It is important though that teachers allow students to develop digital stories by providing an authentic readership and focussing upon the process. For me, iWriter 1.2 helps to facilitate this constructivist approach to teaching and learning. In addition there are a number of templates to start using iWriter 1.2 (see Figure 6 – iWriter 1.2 templates).

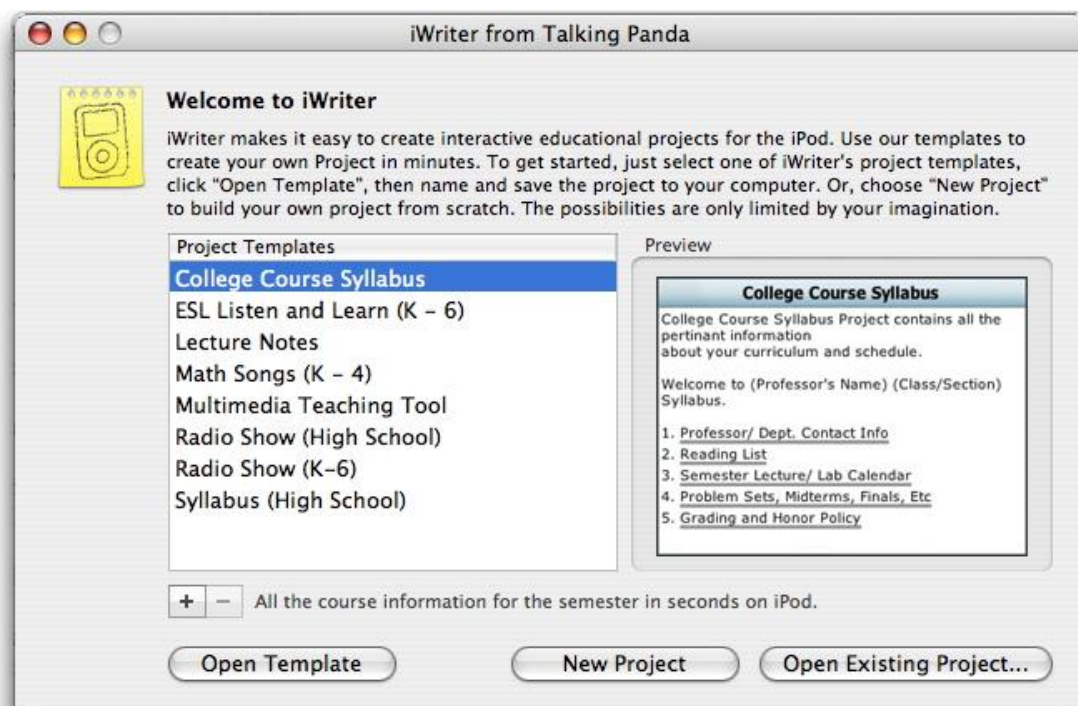


Figure 6 – iWriter 1.2 templates.

In conclusion, Mazes (Rinvoluceri & Berer, 1981) may be 25 years old, but the use of interactive, digital stories lends support to the positive observations of Goldberg *et al.*'s meta-analyses on writing and technology. For some English teachers though, such interactive stories or mazes simply represent old teaching ideas in new technologies: 'old wine in new bottles' (Higgins, 1995). However, text-based, interactive digital stories linked to audio files, and supported by authentic and meaningful pre and post iWriter activities can be an effective learning resource if facilitated by a constructivist pedagogy.

References

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Software: iWriter 1.2

Website: <http://www.talkingpanda.com/iwriter/>

Platform: Mac OS X 10.2.8 and Windows 2000/XP

Price: US\$12 per user

Comments: The support from the developers is excellent. See iWriter in action at <http://www.talkingpanda.com/iwriter/screencast1.mov>

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