Firefly Sparks and Image-weaving in a Pre-Teacher Education Program Technology Class

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on one associate professor's teaching of digital storytelling and her pre-Teacher Education Program (TEP) Freshman Learning Community (FLC) students' learning and creating process of using Adobe Acrobat's Firefly AI tool to generate images that were embedded into their individual digital stories. Students' goals were to input descriptive language of a crucial (highly significant) event or moment from their created digital story into Firefly. Firefly would then output an image that closely represented the crucial moment or event in the digital story. The culmination of the assignment was to then embed their AI-created images into their digital stories. Artifactual Literacies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) and Sacred Literacies (Cooper, 2023; Romero-Ivanova, 2014) as two strong theories, lent themselves to the conceptual framework for the writing of this article. Fittingly, they also help to ground digital storytelling as a differentiated writing process because of how writing took place: students digitally scripted their stories, provided various digital images and photographs paired with their scripting, and/or a voiceover and/or a musical soundtrack of their choice. Current research perspectives on digital storytelling within higher education, especially within teacher training programs, and ones directly related to AI-generated image-making for digital stories have been reviewed to ground the purpose for is article, which is to understand the uses of AI-image making for digital stories as purposeful and connective. The hopes for this article are to share and extend knowledge on how the process of AI-generating images can help to enhance digital storytelling when done purposefully and ethically.

The questions that frame the discussion for this article are as follows:

1. What entails the creative process of digital storytelling? How can AI image generation be integrated into this process?
2. How can inputting language into a generative AI tool such as Firefly, and outputting constructed images in the connection to digital storytelling be considered a Sacred Literacy practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research studies reviewed for this article focus on the added richness that AI-generated images can provide as well as ethical considerations of using AI tools to create.

The Perspectives Divide

Distinct perspectives on AI image-generating tools were discovered throughout the process of reviewing literature: AI-generating (when used within limits) can enhance human-created sketches and the creative process; complete reliance on generative AI tools is problematic; human-created sketches should always be considered first for image creation.

Generative AI Tools Add Richness

Brainstorming

Generative AI tools can add richness to the creative process (Fernandes, Nisi, Nunes, and James, 2024), as well as the inclusion of AI to "enhance learning at each cognitive level" (Kharbach, 2025, p. 107) when integrated

into Bloom's Taxonomy. Because of the endless possibilities of images generative AI tools can create, they can also enhance original sketches (human-made), diversify image outputs, and explore multiple perspectives on a topic (Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad, 2025).

When used as a brainstorming tool or a reference (Huang, 2024; Wolfersberger and Hagler, 2025), generative AI is useful for inspiring creativity and sparking the human creative/thought process. Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad (2025) note that using AI can aid in brainstorming ideas.

Promoting Collaboration

Perhaps, to think of generative AI tools, such as Gemini, ChatgPt, Microsoft Co-pilot (among many other digital tools) as helpmates, one can leverage the space between resistance and overuse. Alongside findings from their study, which relate to AI hindering human creativity, Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad (2025) suggest that AI be used as a collaborative or assistive tool to accomplish research, writing, image-making, and other tasks. It can also usefully serve as a helpful tool for refining human-created work that is already in existence (Wolfersberger and Hagler, 2025). AI usage has also been helpful when used to help English First Learners (EFLs), aiding in language building and more concretely, as Compagnoni (2025) concludes that it (AI), "...promotes multifaceted language development. Students engage with all four language skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, through various phases of the storytelling process." (p. 16). Kirkland (2026) notes that AI as a resource can help struggling learners to become successful who would possibly succumb to failure otherwise.

Technologies are imperfect, and experientially – through trial and error – we come to understand this. Just as human beings revise work to refine it, inputting revised language with each attempt, AI can output inconsistencies when multiple revisions are made (Fernandes, Nisi, Nunes, and James, 2024; Wolfersberger and Hagler, 2025) and it may take multiple attempts at back-and-forth negotiating between the human and the collaborative AI tool (Wolfersberger and Hagler, 2025).

Speed, Accessibility, & Authenticity

Generative AI's accessibility has been noted because of its ease of use, speed, and efficiency – all while providing outputted quality images (Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad, 2025; Fernandes, Nisi, Nunes, and James, 2024; Shishido, 2026; Wolfersberger and Hagler, 2025). Along with these notable attributes, comes the reminder that AI overuse can diminish creativity and increase overreliance in the human creator (Shishido, 2026).

In Huang's (2024) study, most participants – architectural students, valued human creativity primarily and AI creativity secondarily. Students conceptualized AI as a supportive tool to organize and clarify their writing. The AI-generated images that were outputted helped to promote critical thinking, as it prompted students as writers to rethink and reorganize their thoughts when designing building structures. In the study by Fernandes, Nisi, Nunes, and James (2024), participants also valued traditional human creativity and preferred traditionally created sketches over AI-created images, noting that too much AI usage hinders humans' originality in design and reduces the authenticity of an image.

Ethical Uses

The common themes among the literature are the awareness regarding human critical thinking and ethical uses of AI (Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad, 2025; Kharbach, 2025). These considerations regarding AI usage are being iterated in K-12 schools and higher education. They are also pieces of the larger questions being asked by culture: How has AI embedded itself into modern culture? How do we navigate this new AI-embedded culture? As storied in the documentary, *The AI Doc: Or How I became an Apocaloptimist* (Roher and Tyrell, 2026), the filmmakers weave these questions, among many others, into the storyline of a new father who is cautiously approaching the new AI phenomenon. His positioning as a new parent sparks his interests in AI and causes him to question, "How far is it too far with AI?" Kharbach (2025) shifts the focus to how generative AI can provide opportunities to breakdown the ethics of using AI tools to lesson plan: "Every lesson where AI is

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integrated becomes an opportunity to pause, unpack how AI works, and raise ethical or interpretive questions that get students thinking more carefully about the tools in front of them." (p. 51). This question is answered by educators and users ethically learning and using AI tools as aids within the parameters of human creation (Abro, Ahmed, Oad, and Ahmad, 2025; Frontier, 2025; Kharbach, 2025)

Theoretical Framework

Digital storytelling is a Sacred Literacy because of its involvement of remembering and artifacts embedded in remembering, and as a Sacred Literacy, it involves crucial event remembering (Cooper, 2023). Images discussed in this article, which students created through their choices of AI tools and were imbedded in students' digital stories were very much conceptualized as digital artifacts and helped to mediate remembering in digital storytelling.

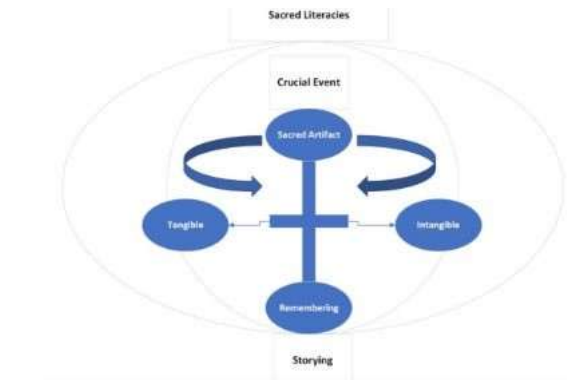
Artifactual Literacies Theory

Every day, commonplace objects are embedded into individuals' daily lives, either naturally (items gifted from others) or purposefully (created for a specific purpose). These objects, which can be touched, felt, or remembered, connect individuals to identities (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010), and past experiences. Artifacts (objects) also help to unearth emotive responses in digital storytelling (Romero-Ivanova, Cook, and Faurote, 2021).

Sacred Literacies Theory

There are pivotal moments and events in our lives that cause our shift in thinking and shape who we have become. These pivotal moments are crucial events in our lives (Cooper, 2023; Ivanova, 2014; Romero, 2025). Sacred Literacies first begins with a crucial event from one's life (See below).

Fig. 1, Sacred Literacies, Cooper (2023)



Storytelling develops from the crucial event and remembering through the connections to Sacred Artifacts (tangible and intangible) and as a sacred literacy practice can take different forms, such as verbal storytelling, pictorial storytelling (photographs, paintings, etc), and digital storytelling.

Digital Storytelling as a Sacred Literacy

Digital storytelling as a Sacred Literacy involves remembering. Artifacts are embedded in remembering, and significantly, crucial event remembering, which remembered or tangible artifacts help to mediate. Exceptional (crucial) events within individuals' lives cause thinking shifts and alter perspectives, behaviours, and life pathways (Cooper, 2023; Ivanova, 2014; Romero, 2025).

BACKGROUND

In this section of the article, I describe my FLC students' AI-generative image-making context. The FLC course I teach, "Teaching with Technology" at Indiana University Kokomo (IUK) in the Spring 2026, is the focus for

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the discussion. The project setting, the digital storytelling project itself (introduction to what digital storytelling is, the process of students' creating their individual digital stories, outputting generative-AI created images paired with a crucial moment in each of their stories), and how I addressed ethical considerations of AI use are described in the following sections.

Digital Storytelling in a Freshman Learning Community (FLC)

In spring 2026, I, Christina Romero, Associate Professor of Education at IUK's Division of Education trained my pre-TEP students on AI-generate image-making using Adobe Acrobat's imbedded Firefly tool. The overall purpose of the training and task in which students would be engaged was to create images that represented crucial events/moments in students' storytelling to enrich their digital story presentations. The hopes were that students would be able to learn skills of purposeful, ethical AI-image construction to then be able to input specific and detailed language into a generative AI tool of their choice. The outputted image could then be imbedded into their digital story.

Cohorts of Students

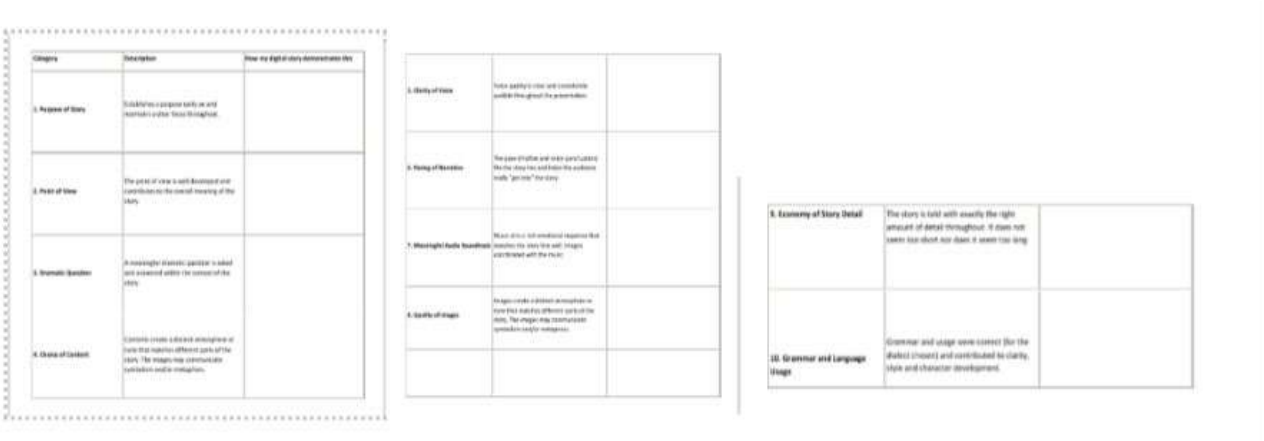
The Spring 2026 FLC cohort included 18 pre-TEP freshmen who were pre-elementary or pre-secondary, or Early Childhood education students.

Learning Digital Storytelling

This part of the article relates to the *how:* how I taught students digital storytelling.

Our digital writing and storytelling journey in the spring 2026 first began with an overview of what digital storytelling is and does. I started with the historical background of digital storytelling and its development in which different disciplines (Schrum, Majury, and Simonelli, 2021), including education, have embraced and used the digital format to convey stories of struggle, joy, trauma, and many other experiences. After presenting a few digital stories, I directed students' uses of a digital storytelling planning guide (see below).

Fig. 2, Digital Storytelling Planning Guide (Cooper, 2023)



The guide shown above helped students to unpack their crucial event: the starting point for storytelling (Cooper, 2023). The digital storytelling guide helped to prepare students to story tell through chunking different pieces of the crucial event into seven elements: design, economy of story, pacing, point of view, using a dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of voice, and the power of soundtrack (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2005). Each digital storytelling element helped students to purposefully think about their digital story they would be creating, using the descriptions they had added in their digital storytelling planning guide to create scripting. I guided students through this process of using the seven elements of digital storytelling (Robin, 2006), and they began scripting their story and adding scripted slides to their choice of presentation software (Canva, PowerPoint, Google Slides, and so forth).

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Adobe Acrobat: Firefly

"Firefly images helped me refine my essay ideas." (Shishido, 2026).

The quotation above, though brief, states a specific use of AI image creation. It posits "refine" to identify AI's role in image creation. Kirkland (2026) posits that AI can be embraced as a helpful, inclusive resource. Kirkland's ideology of AI acceptance and embrace, which pairs well with hooks' (2001) notion of love allowed me to deeply consider how I could embrace digital tools to help students. Students who had difficulty with self-creating images, and even more, difficulty with conceptualizing their crucial event (and oftentimes, one that centered on trauma or a challenging experience) in language and written or spoken storytelling (because I would allow students to digital story their crucial event through a voiceover or through text) could use Gemini, co-Pilot, or another favorite generative AI tool to help visualize their crucial experience (Romero, 2026) they were storytelling.

I introduced Firefly (an AI tool imbedded in Adobe Acrobat) and modeled specific, detailed language which I inputted, changing words and phrases a few times to get an image that closely matched my mentally visualized idea. See below.

Fig. 3. Firefly Image 1

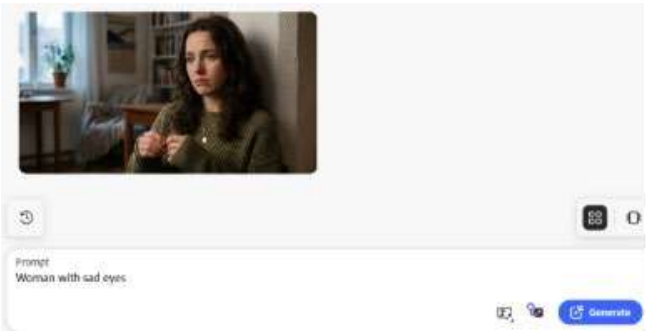


Fig. 4 Firefly Image 2



I asked students to AI-create at least one image for their digital story, a digital artifact that could help to enrich their scripting and could make the storytelling about their crucial event more visible. I then guided students through the process of downloading their selected AI-generated image.

I modeled descriptive language use to write a two-paragraph response that described the outputted AI image. This was the second task of the assignment.

Visualizing Your Digital Story with AI!

The AI image creating assignment was created using Gemini. Below is the table incorporating the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (T.I.L.T.) model of assignment instruction, which highlights the purpose of an assignment, provides a description of the task, includes a sample response, and explains grading criteria.

Fig. 5. Visualizing Your Digital Story with AI assignment

Purpose	Task	Example	Grading Criteria
The goal of this assignment is to help you bridge the gap between your written narrative and visual storytelling. By using AI to generate a key moment from your digital story, you will: • **Practice AI Literacy:** Learn to use generative tools to create specific, intentional imagery. • **Deepen Narrative Reflection:** Think critically about which moments in your story carry the most emotional or thematic weight. • **Explore Visual Mediation:** Analyze how a static image can enhance or change the meaning of your spoken/written words.	1. **Generate:** Follow the 2. provided tutorial to create an AI- 3. generated image that a. represents **at least one pivotal moment** b. from your digital story. c. **Document:** Take a high-quality screenshot of your final image. **Reflect:** Write a **two-paragraph description** (roughly 250–300 words total) that addresses the following: Why did you choose this specific moment to visualize? What specific elements in the image represent your story's themes? How did the process of creating this image feel (frustrating, empowering, surprising)?	 **Student Name:** Alex Chen (hypothetical name) **Digital Story Title:** The Silent Spotlight (hypotetical story) **Image Description:** I chose to visualize the moment I first stepped onto the auditorium stage for my final presentation. This image represents the overwhelming scale of my anxiety compared to my physical presence at that moment. In the image, the tiny figure standing in a vast, dark theater under a single, piercing spotlight captures the "all eyes on me" sensation that defined the climax of my story. The deep blues and heavy shadows of the empty seats symbolize the weight of my fear and the "unknown" reactions of the audience, while the warm glow of the spotlight represents the internal spark of courage I had to find to continue.	A successful submission will include these components/considerations below: • a clear, visible screenshot of the AI-generated image • two well-organized paragraphs that answer all four guiding questions • evidence of thoughtful connection between the image and the digital story • adherence to standard grammar and professional tone
	d. In what ways does this image help "mediate" or translate your story for an audience?	Creating this image was a surprisingly cathartic experience; it felt like I was finally externalizing a memory that had been trapped as a vague, heavy feeling in my chest for years. Seeing the AI interpret "isolation" and "pressure" so vividly helped me realize how much of that experience was about the contrast between the darkness I felt and the light I was standing in. I believe this image helps mediate my story by providing a visual anchor for the emotional intensity of stage fright. While my words describe the shaking of my hands, this image communicates the loneliness of that moment in a way that words alone cannot, making the eventual resolution of my story feel more significant to the viewer.	

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RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection

Students were given the assignment, "Visualizing Your Digital Story with AI!" and were tasked with using Adobe Firefly to create at least one AI image that represented at least one crucial/highly significant moment from their digital story. Data collection consisted of downloading students' responses to the assignment. A total of 15 out of 18 student responses which included AI-created images and paragraph descriptions of the images were used. Three students did not submit assignment responses.

Coding & Analysis of the Themes

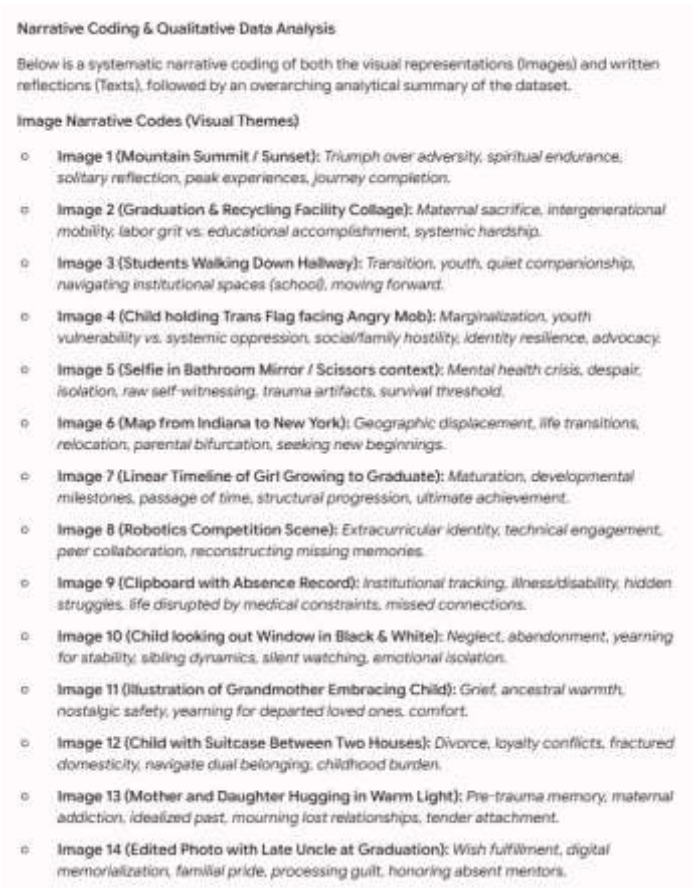
Google Gemini was used to code each image (visual coding) and each piece of writing that was connected to each image (writing narrative coding). Below shows the process of input and output using Gemini:

Fig. 6. Input for Coding AI-created Images & Descriptive Writing



Input

Fig. 7. Output for Coding AI-created Images & Descriptive Writing



Narrative Coding & Qualitative Data Analysis

Below is a systematic narrative coding of both the visual representations (Images) and written reflections (Texts), followed by an overarching analytical summary of the dataset.

Image Narrative Codes (Visual Themes)

- **Image 1 (Mountain Summit / Sunset):** *Triumph over adversity, spiritual endurance, solitary reflection, peak experiences, journey completion.*
- **Image 2 (Graduation & Recycling Facility Collage):** *Maternal sacrifice, intergenerational mobility, labor grit vs. educational accomplishment, systemic hardship.*
- **Image 3 (Students Walking Down Hallway):** *Transition, youth, quiet companionship, navigating institutional spaces (school), moving forward.*
- **Image 4 (Child holding Trans Flag facing Angry Mob):** *Marginalization, youth vulnerability vs. systemic oppression, social/family hostility, identity resilience, advocacy.*
- **Image 5 (Selfie in Bathroom Mirror / Scissors context):** *Mental health crisis, despair, isolation, raw self-witnessing, trauma artifacts, survival threshold.*
- **Image 6 (Map from Indiana to New York):** *Geographic displacement, life transitions, relocation, parental bifurcation, seeking new beginnings.*
- **Image 7 (Linear Timeline of Girl Growing to Graduate):** *Maturation, developmental milestones, passage of time, structural progression, ultimate achievement.*
- **Image 8 (Robotics Competition Scene):** *Extracurricular identity, technical engagement, peer collaboration, reconstructing missing memories.*
- **Image 9 (Clipboard with Absence Record):** *Institutional tracking, illness/disability, hidden struggles, life disrupted by medical constraints, missed connections.*
- **Image 10 (Child looking out Window in Black & White):** *Neglect, abandonment, yearning for stability, sibling dynamics, silent watching, emotional isolation.*
- **Image 11 (Illustration of Grandmother Embracing Child):** *Grief, ancestral warmth, nostalgic safety, yearning for departed loved ones, comfort.*
- **Image 12 (Child with Suitcase Between Two Houses):** *Divorce, loyalty conflicts, fractured domesticity, navigate dual belonging, childhood burden.*
- **Image 13 (Mother and Daughter Hugging in Warm Light):** *Pre-trauma memory, maternal addiction, idealized past, mourning lost relationships, tender attachment.*
- **Image 14 (Edited Photo with Late Uncle at Graduation):** *Wish fulfillment, digital memorialization, familial pride, processing guilt, honoring absent mentors.*

Output

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Fig. 8. Output of Codes

Writing Narrative Codes (Textual Themes)

Entry / Subject	Dominant Narrative Codes	Primary Functions of AI/Image Generation
Sisters / Loss Text DOCX	*Abandonment, emotional longing, sisterhood, loss processing.* DOCX	Visualizing felt absence; externalizing grief. DOCX
Mountain Text	*Faith-based resilience, overcoming struggle, reflective gratitude.*	Symbolic metaphor for overcoming personal hardship.
Mom & Recycling Text	*Gratitude, labor empathy, maternal sacrifice, class struggle.*	Honoring parental labor; capturing lived hardship.
Trans Youth Text	*Identity pride, systemic adversity, adult rejection, advocacy.*	Re-enacting systemic trauma; expressing resistance.
Mirror Selfie Text	*Suicidal ideation, extreme isolation, healing perspective, survival.*	Documenting trauma threshold; contrasting past vs. present.
Map Move Text	*Fresh start, parental divorce, bittersweet growth, distance.*	Spatial mapping of life transitions and separation.
Graduation Stages Text	*Identity evolution, milestone pride, bittersweet aging.*	Visualizing linear time and developmental accomplishment.
Robotics Text	*Constructing missing archives, unexpected accuracy, team pride.*	Synthetic memory reconstruction to fill archive gaps.
Absence Record Text	*Chronic illness/medical issues, isolation, loss of friendship.*	Materializing invisible/systemic struggle.
Window/Brother Text	*Parental neglect, sibling crisis, emotional hyper-independence.*	Re-creating lived emotional neglect and hypervigilance.
Grandmother Text	*Grief processing, ancestral longing, safety in memory.*	Softening loss through nostalgic artistic representation.
Two Houses Text	*Parental divorce, guilt of choosing sides, divided identity.*	Capturing psychological dilemma of fractured family.
Mom's Addiction Text	*Pre-addiction memory, mourning a living parent, enduring love.*	Capturing "the version before"—generative healing image.
Graduation Uncle Text	*Posthumous presence, grief/guilt resolution, milestone honor.*	Synthetic photo manipulation as grief technology/closure.

Fig. 9. Output Analysis

Cross-Data Analysis & Key Findings

- **Generative Art as Digital Memorials & Wish Fulfillment:** Multiple participants utilized AI/image editing not merely to show what happened, but to construct *what could have been* or *what was lost*. Editing a deceased uncle into a graduation photo or generating an image of a mother prior to addiction demonstrates image creation acting as a therapeutic tool for grief resolution and memory repair.
- **Themes of Familial Rupture & Domestic Strain:** A prominent theme across texts involves domestic instability, including parental divorce, sibling-centered crises causing neglect, parental addiction, and family displacement. The visual modalities frequently position the narrator as a isolated figure navigating adult-created chaos.
- **Institutional & Systemic Adversity:** Participants frequently framed personal struggles within larger systems—ranging from health/attendance tracking systems and school environments to transphobia in society and socio-economic labor pressures facing immigrant/working mothers.
- **Temporal Contrast (Past Despair vs. Present Healing):** Narrative reflections regularly establish a temporal gap between the child/past self experiencing trauma (suicidal ideation, feeling neglected, medical strain) and the present self reflecting with gratitude, growth, and distance. Generative imagery acts as the bridge to process these past emotional states safely.

Below is the table of students' AI-created images which symbolize crucial events from their lives and which they embedded into their digital stories they created in our Spring 2026 FLC class, Teaching with Technology. After each image was uploaded to Gemini, I asked AI to visually code each one. The results were themes that were outputted.

Fig. 10. Table of AI-created Images Symbolizing Crucial Events and Visual Themes

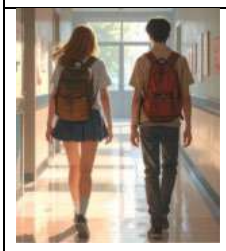
	Name of Image	Visual Themes
	**Image 1 (Mountain Summit / Sunset)**	Triumph over adversity, spiritual endurance, solitary reflection, peak experiences, and journey completion.
	**Image 2 (Graduation & Recycling Facility Collage)**	Maternal sacrifice, intergenerational mobility, labor grit vs. educational accomplishment, systemic hardship.
	**Image 3 (Students Walking Down Hallway)**	Transition, youth, quiet companionship, navigating institutional spaces (school), moving forward.
	**Image 4 (Child holding Trans Flag facing Angry Mob)**	Marginalization, youth vulnerability vs. systemic oppression, social/family hostility, identity resilience, and advocacy.
	**Image 5 (Selfie in Bathroom Mirror / Scissors context)**	Mental health crisis, despair, isolation, raw self-witness, trauma artifacts, survival threshold.

	**Image 6 (Map from Indiana to New York)**	Geographic displacement, life transitions, relocation, parental bifurcation, and seeking new beginnings.
	**Image 7 (Linear Timeline of Girl Growing to Graduate)**	Maturation, developmental milestones, passage of time, structural progression, and ultimate achievement.
	**Image 8 (Robotics Competition Scene)**	Extracurricular identity, technical engagement, peer collaboration, and reconstructing missing memories.
	**Image 9 (Clipboard with Absence Record)**	Institutional tracking, illness/disability, hidden struggles, life disrupted by medical constraints, and missed connections.
	**Image 10 (Child looking out Window in Black & White)**	Neglect, abandonment, yearning for stability, sibling dynamics, silent watching, emotional isolation.
	**Image 11 (Illustration of Grandmother Embracing Child)**	Grief, ancestral warmth, nostalgic safety, yearning for departed loved ones, comfort.

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	**Image 12 (Child with Suitcase Between Two Houses)**	Divorce, loyalty conflicts, fractured domesticity, navigate dual belonging, childhood burden.
	Image 13 (Mother and Daughter Hugging in Warm Light)	Pre-trauma memory, maternal addiction, idealized past, mourning lost relationships, and tender attachment.

The first layer of coding and analysis involved the process previously described and allowed me to categorize themes with similar meanings, like triumph and accomplishment. The table below shows the second layer of coding which took place by first grouping similar themes and then inputting these into Gemini to receive sub-themes.

Fig. 11. Table of Themes

First-layer Themes	Grand Themes	Revised & Regrouped Firstlayer Themes	Sub-themes
°triumph over adversity °peak experiences °journey completion °educational accomplishment °moving forward	success	°educational accomplishment °ultimate achievement °journey completion °triumph over adversity	milestone accomplishment resilience & trajectory
°structural progression °ultimate achievement		°moving forward °structural progression °peak experiences	affective peaks
°new beginnings °life transitions °maturation °developmental milestones	new beginnings	°developmental milestones °formal age markers °life events °the process of adjusting to a new environment, role, or relationship °maturation, emotional evolution, shifting mindsets, taking responsibility	external transitions & milestones navigating change

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			internal growth
°ancestral warmth °comfort °tender attachment	family	°sense of grounding connected to roots, lineage, memory, cultural heritage, or generational continuity °deep, affection-rich emotional bonds with specific living or remembered family members °the feeling of safety, acceptance, unburdening, or "being home" provided by the family unit or environment	ancestral warmth tender attachment familial comfort
°institutional tracking °adversity °systematic hardship °marginalization °system oppression	systemic oppression	°system oppression °systematic hardship °institutional tracking, gatekeeping	macro-level structures institutional mechanisms & sorting
		°marginalization, structural adversity	experienced consequences
°life disrupted by medical constraints °hidden struggles °illness/disability °mental health crisis °despair °isolation °trauma artifacts	mental health crisis	°illness/disability, life disrupted by medical constraints °hidden struggles, mental health crisis, trauma artifacts °despair, isolation	embodied & operational disruption hidden psychological strain & trauma affective alienation

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°emotional isolation °silent watching °divorce °fractured domesticity °childhood burden °neglect °abandonment °social/family hostility °parental bifurcation °yearning for departed loved ones	family issues	°divorce, parental bifurcation, fractured domesticity °neglect, abandonment, social/family hostility °childhood burden, silent watching °emotional isolation, yearning for departed loved ones	structural & household breakdown relational harm & relinquishment childhood adaptation & vigilance affective remnants & longing

Fig. 12. Table of Artifacts, Themes, and Crucial Events

Artifacts	**Crucial Event**	**Outputted Images/Digital Artifacts' Themes**	**Overarching Themes**
•linear timeline of girl growing to graduate •mountain summit at sunset **•students walking down hallway**	•high school graduation **•moving from one U.S. state to another**	•milestone •accomplishment •resilience trajectory •affective peaks •external transitions •internal growth	Accomplishments and growth
•students walking down school hallway	**•childhood experience of**	•macro level structures	society/culture
•child holding Trans flag facing angry mob •clipboard with absence record	**coming out to society** •school absenteeism's impact		
•child holding Trans flag facing angry mob •map from IN to	**•childhood experience of coming out to family and society •moving from one**	•childhood adaptation •childhood vigilance •ancestral warmth •affective	•familial issues •familial support

NY •child with suitcase between two houses •child looking out window in black and white •grandmother embracing child •mother and daughter hugging in warm light	**U.S. state to another** •losing a close family member •bonding with a close family member	remnants and longing •tender attachment •household breakdown •familial comfort •affective alienation •relational harm and relinquishment	

FINDINGS

Students constructed images/digital artifacts in a human-AI partnership (Kharbach, 2025) that entailed input-

ting thick descriptive language of their selected crucial event (Cooper, 2023; Romero-Ivanova, Cook, and Faurote, 2021; Romero, Burke, and Graham, 2026). Throughout this process of image construction, students exhibited different domains of AI Literacy. As Kharbach (2025) notes, there are three domains of AI literacy: knowledge, skills, and attitudes (p. 9). In this section, I use each domain as a way of discussing the process of inputting/outputting as it took place in our class. W200 students' data. I will also use facets of Artifactual Literacies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) and Sacred Literacies (Cooper, 2023; Ivanova, 2014) to discuss findings from the coding and analysis I conducted on students' outputted images.

Knowledge

AI literacy involves, "Understanding what AI and generative AI are, how they function, how to tell the difference between AI and non-AI systems, and where the limits and strengths of AI lie" (Kharbach, 2025, p. 9). My students had gleaned knowledge about AI and generative AI in our spring 2026 course, Teaching with Technology and before beginning the image creation of their crucial event had practiced using several different AI tools such as Gemini, co-Pilot, ChatGPT, Google Illuminate, and Acrobat Firefly. This practice work allowed students to see differences in input and output related to image creation. Ultimately, students used Firefly for our assignment.

Skills

"Skills are broader competencies that let you analyze, synthesize, learn (or unlearn), and then apply that knowledge to new situations. Sometimes that means creating fresh learning experiences, other times it means approaching familiar classroom routines in new ways. (Kurbach, 2025, p. 9). Relating to our image creation that stemmed from digital story creation, students had previously analyzed three crucial events from their lives and had selected one event they wished to story. This analysis transferred to the new learning experience of inputting language into Firefly and recrafting words and intonation to go through several rounds of input to output the most favorable and comparable image for the digital story. With each revised language input, students' knowledge of AI output grew from realizing input impacted output.

Attitudes

As noted by Bornet (2024) in Kharbach (2025), "Think of AI as your partner, not your rival. It's not the Joker trying to outsmart you; it's Robin, ready to assist. Focus on what you can achieve together. Efficiency is your new mantra." (p. 26). Students' mindsets ranged from eagerness and willingness to AI image create to hesitance and resistance. Once image creation began taking place, students became aware of the duality: the human creativity expressed in language for input to retrieve an image formulated by the technology that symbolized the crucial event.

Emerging Themes

Coding, categorizing, and re-categorizing students' outputted AI images led me to cross-analyze themes and meanings that emerged in the data. Below is a table reflecting this process. Discussion will follow directly after.

Fig. 12. Table of Artifacts, Themes, and Crucial Events

Students' digital artifacts (the outputted AI images) were entry points (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) into their crucial event storytelling. As shown in the above table, the images functioned as symbolic representations of crucial events in students' digital storytelling. Some images brought about emotive themes of accomplishments and growth (milestones, upward trajectory, transitions, and resilience). Other images brought about critical themes connected to society and culture (macro level structures) and family issues and support (familial connections, alienation from family, adaptation, and family breakdown). As shown above, some crucial events and their outputted digital artifacts (images) are related to more than one overarching theme, which presented those crucial events as critical themes. For example, the crucial event of *coming out* was related to family and societal scourge. Another example, the crucial event of *moving from one U.S. state to another* was related to family issues and support as well as accomplishments and growth.

Artifactual & Sacred Literacies

As digital artifacts, the outputted AI-generated images helped to mediate storytelling (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) of students' crucial events because of their symbolic representations, as shown in the above table. Powerfully, they helped to oftentimes translate what was difficult to voice in words. For example, the AI-generated image of a child holding a trans flag is a symbolic representation of childhood contrasted with societal harshness. The community members' angry expressions and shoutings at the child are both diabolical and an oxymoron, as children are often thought of with tenderness and care. The image mediates mistreatment during the time of the digital storytelling author's childhood experience, which may have been verbally or textually difficult to overtly tell.

Storytelling as a Sacred Literacy practice involves tangible and/or remembered artifacts (refer to fig. 1) that are imbedded in crucial event storytelling (Cooper, 2023). The Sacred artifacts mediate highly significant events (as perceived by the individual who is storytelling); they dynamically (because of symbolic mediation with the stories individuals tell) exist as entry points into the storytelling and help to crucially reveal stories that speak to societal issues and larger challenges such as divorce, drug addiction, mental health, among other important issues.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

What Generative AI Image-Making Does when used to Mediate Digital Storytelling

Through the intentional reading and coding of each Firefly AI-created image, as well as the two-paragraph description of each student's image, themes of empathy, familial reflection, connection to family members, and greater societal issues of survivor hood (as well as other crucial themes) were unearthed. Digital storytelling with AI-generated images is also a classroom practiced using active learning in which learners can use critical thinking skills to hone a story they wish to tell related to their own identities, experiences, and corpus self.

I conclude my writing by leaving a thought that relates to the importance of digital storytelling related to student-centered learning in the classroom:

"It can enable students to carve stories the way they want, use their knowledge and imagination in novel ways, reflect on their decisions, deliver stories autonomously, self-assess their progress and performance, and improve their interpersonal communicative skills." (Shahid and Khan, 2022, p. 606)

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