Chapter 8

Cross-Cultural Affordances of Digital Storytelling: Results from Cases in the U.S.A. and Canada

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors consider the use of digital storytelling as a tool for boundary crossing. Media, as an extension of self, has potential to help cross-cultural learning that benefits all stakeholders, but specifically, immigrants and English Language Learners, who often experience school literacy challenges. The authors used Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a lens to view two teacher case self-studies, one in Canada and one in the U.S.A., and to examine how their use of digital storytelling helped elementary ELL students to learn the language of school as well as transfer their knowledge to other students and educators. The findings indicated the importance of creating avenues through which immigrant English learners can develop interpersonal communication skills critical to being successful across cultures. Through an analysis of the cases, the authors present language learning implications for educators.

INTRODUCTION

“In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7)

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In 1964, Marshall McLuhan uttered his famous words “the medium is the message” (p. 7). While some have mistaken this much cited quote to mean that the mode or means of communication is more important than the actual information content, McLuhan viewed the medium as the “massage” in that “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1976, p. 26), “as a wheel…is an extension of the foot” (pp. 30-31) or as “the book…is an extension of the eye” (pp. 33-36). Similarly, with digital storytelling, technologies allow individuals to massage their messages through sophisticated multimedia, and to participate in cross-cultural communication.

McLuhan’s message originated in the 1960’s. This was a time when people lived in a media-consuming world where “all media works us over completely” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1976, p. 26). However, today’s students are not just passive consumers of media; they use digital technologies and communicate their messages through social media (Jenkins, 2006). Because of developments in the Internet, video-editing software, and mobile Apps, elementary school-aged children can create and publish professional-looking digital stories in the form of slide shows, videos, and other multimedia presentation formats. Since these more sophisticated production tools have become widely available on personal computers and mobile devices, it is reasonable to expect that we all converge on deploying and exploiting their use.

But what happens in educational contexts? Kearney and Schuck (2006) posit that the “recent convergence of video and computer technologies presents new opportunities and challenges in education” (p. 1). While the use of technology in educational contexts can present challenges, in this study we focused on the opportunities. More specifically, we were interested in examining what the teachers learned about their practices with the use of technology: 1) How did the teachers use the medium—of digital storytelling—to massage the messages of the students and help with cross-cultural communications? 2) What did the educators learn about BICS and CALP from their experiences working with the students?

This purpose of this chapter is therefore to examine two vignettes, one in Canada and one in the United States of America, where educators noted ways in which digital storytelling helped English Language Learners to cross barriers to communication. Throughout the chapter, we provide vignettes of the teachers (Christine and Karen) and their single focus students: Christine and Juan in the U.S.; and, Karen and Reba in Canada.

BACKGROUND

Immigrant Students and Disciplinary Literacy

Immigrant students face many cross-cultural challenges in language and literacy, especially when learning in the content areas. Formerly considered as content-area literacy, Draper (2010) called for a (re)imagining of content-area literacy instruction that is grounded in discipline-specific language and literacy. In content areas, students require specialized discipline-specific literacy: the language and academic vocabulary of the disciplines (Bauman & Graves, 2010; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Furthermore, in the United States, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) have created major shifts that prioritize understanding disciplinary literacy and academic language as essential for college and career success.

What is academic vocabulary? Bauman and Graves (2010) noted that “academic vocabulary” consists of the following: 1) domain-specific vocabulary: “the content specific words used in disciplines like biology, geometry, civics, and geography”; or 2) general academic vocabulary: “words that appear in texts across several disci-