Digital Storytelling as a Culturally Responsive Instructional Strategy for Pacific Islanders in Guam and Micronesia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of digital storytelling as a culturally responsive instructional strategy for Pacific Island students on the islands of Guam and Micronesia in the Western Pacific. A major feature of Pacific Island cultures is their orality; therefore, building on the oral tradition through digital storytelling might be one way to optimize language and literacy learning for Pacific Island students in Guam classrooms. The article also describes an accessible and easy-to-use model for digital storytelling using PowerPoint that teachers can use to implement digital storytelling in the classroom.

KEYWORDS

Digital, Guam, literacy, Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

The island of Guam is a United States territory in the western Pacific Ocean. It is the largest and southernmost island of the Marianas archipelago. Located between Hawaii and the Philippines, Guam is “where America’s day begins” because it is 12 hours ahead of the U.S. West Coast (Stoicovy, 2014). The Chamorro people are the indigenous inhabitants of Guam and the other Mariana Islands, who have inhabited these islands for over 4,000 years. Chamorros, along with other Pacific Islanders from the Micronesia region (Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, Yap, Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshalls), comprise a majority of the total student enrollment in the Guam public school system (Guam Department of Education Annual State of Public Education Report AY2015-16). The researchers’ purpose is to find out how Guam educators facilitate language and literacy skills. One approach is to utilize digital storytelling. What is it about digital storytelling that can help Pacific Islanders improve their language and literacy skills? Also, what is an easy to implement model for digital storytelling using PowerPoint that teachers can use in their classroom? To answer these questions, it is important to first define digital storytelling and its use in the classroom. We will then discuss culturally responsive instruction and how digital storytelling is a culturally responsive instructional strategy for Pacific Islanders. Next, we will discuss some of the barriers to implementing digital storytelling in the classroom, followed by a description of an accessible and easy to use model for digital storytelling that teachers can use to implement digital storytelling with their students. Finally, we will examine responses from a group of classroom teachers who implemented digital storytelling with Pacific Island students.

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

According to Leslie Rule’s (2010) widely quoted definition, “Digital storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, experiences, and insights” (p. 56). As the name suggests, digital stories usually include a combination of digital images, text, voice narration, and music. Robin (2008) tells us that most of the stories used in education usually last between two and ten minutes and are created for the telling of personal stories, the recounting of historical events, or as a means to inform or instruct on a particular topic. Educators often use digital stories as a way to present course content or to capture students’ attention and increase their interest in learning. However, Robin maintains that perhaps the greatest benefit in the classroom occurs when students are given the opportunity to create their own digital stories. When students create their digital stories, they become entranced by the power of their own voices and their own images (Rance-Roney, 2008).

Kajder and Swenson (2004) posit that digital story images allow students to “see what they think they know, connect the new to the known, and express their understanding in ways that are visual, auditory, scholarly, and powerful” (p. 46). Researchers such as Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) and Boster, Meyer, Toberto, & Inge (2002) have shown that the use of multimedia in teaching helps students retain new information as well as aids in the comprehension of difficult material. According to Burmark (2002), researchers have found that humans process visual information 60,000 times faster than textual information. In addition, they’ve concluded that visual aids can improve learning by up to 400 percent.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION

The concept behind culturally responsive instruction is that teaching approaches should build upon the strengths that students bring from their home cultures (Au, 2011). According to Au, culturally responsive instruction has the goal of helping students grasp academic concepts through means and content responsive to their cultural values and practices. Most educators would agree with Au that for educational experiences to be relevant, they must reflect and connect with the students’ particular life experiences and perspectives. The more a teacher understands the cultures and other aspects of diversity in a classroom, the more likely the teacher can provide a classroom context that is culturally responsive and that will result in successful, high-quality education for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Au, 2011; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY FOR PACIFIC ISLANDERS

A major feature of Pacific Island cultures is their orality (Topping, 1987; Reynaud, 2006). Their cultural roots remain grounded in the traditions of orally held knowledge. Therefore, building on the oral tradition through digital storytelling might be one way to optimize language and literacy learning for Pacific Island students in Guam and Micronesia. Digital stories add a new and rich aspect to storytelling skills as they enable students to capture images, and weave in narrative and music to tell their stories. An added bonus is that for those students who are second language learners, digital storytelling increases second language acquisition (Green, 2013). Moreover, Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman (2010) emphasize that a multimodal digital storytelling experience authentically engages students in the learning process.
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