Chapter 9

Digital Storytelling within a Service–Learning Partnership: Technology as Product and Process for University Students and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse High School Youth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a university/high school partnership focused on digital storytelling. It also explains the multi-stage process used to establish this successful partnership and project. The authors discuss the central role that technology played in developing this university/high school partnership, a collaboration that extended the impact of a digital storytelling project to reach high school students, university students, educators, high school administrators, and the local community. Valuing a reflective process that can lead to the creation of a powerful final product, the authors describe the impact of digital storytelling on multiple stakeholders, including the 13 university students and 33 culturally and linguistically diverse high school youth who participated during the fall of 2009. In addition, the chapter includes reflections from university and high school student participants expressed during focus groups conducted throughout the project. While most participants had a positive experience with the project, complications with the technology component often caused frustrations and additional challenges. Goals for sharing this project are to critically evaluate digital storytelling, describe lessons learned, and recommend good practices for others working within a similar context or with parallel goals.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY

“No amount of books is really going to teach you or give you the feeling in your heart that you feel when you’re with those kids and start connecting with them, feeling their problems, their frustration. Like, no book is going to give you that feeling, you know? You have to go and you have to be with them and talk to them. You have to talk or it’s just not going to happen.” – University student reflecting on the value of working directly with youth during this project

With recent advances in multimedia technology, creating short videos is no longer limited to professionally trained journalists and documentary filmmakers (Burgess, 2006; Lambert, 2007; Meadows, 2003; Davis, 2004), but is instead designed to “amplify the ordinary voice” (Burgess, 2006, p. 207). Creating videos through digital storytelling (a process that combines still photos, a recorded narrative, and music) enables students to inform the public about critical issues from a personal perspective. How-to manuals, project descriptions, and anecdotal comments are available on digital storytelling, yet very little research has been conducted to determine its impact on the stakeholders involved in the process. Moreover, even with the growing number of digital storytelling projects around the world, with the exception of a handful of studies (Ware, 2008; Vinogradova, 2008; Hull and Katz, 2006), little research examines culturally and linguistically diverse youth (CLD) experiences with technology and how digital storytelling can contribute to building alliances between institutions of higher education and high schools. The development of such alliances enhances the educational experiences of participants through the exchange of stories, experiences, resources and expertise and presents the opportunity for undergraduate students to engage in scholarship that is relevant and useful beyond the university walls (Strand et al. 2003, p. 5).

In this chapter we describe one digital storytelling project facilitated within the context of an undergraduate service-learning course focused on community planning, education, and immigrant integration. Although this project was three years in the making, we focus specifically on the culminating semester, during which 13 undergraduate students mentored 33 CLD high school students in the creation of personal digital stories to share their voices with the community.

We write this case study as four educators who worked together on this project, two of us from universities and two of us from partnering high schools. The four of us bring complementary expertise in areas that include multicultural education, community planning, and English as a Second Language instruction. Within this chapter we each share our individual perspectives on the benefits and challenges of using multimedia technology to help CLD youth develop language and communication skills and enable them to express their views of the community. We discuss the central role that technology played in developing this university/high school partnership, a collaboration that extended the impact of the digital storytelling project to reach high school students, university students, educators, high school administrators, and the community. In addition, we include the reflections of both the university and high school students expressed during focus groups conducted throughout the project.

One of our goals for sharing this project is to begin a dialogue within academia to critically evaluate digital storytelling as an empowering teaching tool and to consider its impact on multiple stakeholders through its process and final product. In addition, we describe our lessons learned and recommend good practices for others working within a similar context or with parallel goals.