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DIGI-JOURNIES

Digi-Journies: Preservice Teachers' Growth and Self-Reflectivity

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Abstract

This study examined how preservice language arts teachers critically perceived their growth as educators. Preservice teachers tracked and reflected on their professional growth through a series of digital images accompanied by music and text in motion. The researchers dubbed this reflective process as “Digi-Journies.” Preservice teachers were not given a pre-determined structure for how to think through the process, rather they were given the freedom to “think outside the box” in depicting their growth because the researchers wanted to see how critical reflection was approached. The researchers found that Digi-Journies were an effective method of illustrating the preservice teachers’ growth, and a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction was evident.

Digi-Journies: Preservice Teachers' Growth and Self-Reflectivity

Introduction

The promotion of reflective practice in teacher education programs emerges in an effort to teach preservice teachers this conception of best practice whereby teachers continually evaluate the effects of their instructional methods and actions on students, parents, and the school community (Krol, 1997). In teacher education programs, this promotion of reflective practice often takes the form of written journals because they prove accessible to all students while on campus and in their school placement sites and because they prove an easy means of sharing the preservice teachers' reflections with instructors and supervisors for critical dialogue. However, as discovered through feedback in our own methods courses, while preservice teachers see the value inherent in reflective journals, they find them tedious by the conclusion of a ninety-hour placement. As a result we sought to integrate an equally accessible yet more creative means for promoting this best practice with our preservice English language arts teachers.

Self-reflection is an integral part of teaching; when paired with visual imagery it allows diverse student populations to see their progress (Salpeter, 2005) and to better link theory with practice. As discovered by Wursta, Brown, and Segatti (2004), best practices can be monitored with digital photography. Reflection is a key element in teacher expertise, but this comes by having the ability to notice one's role, which is often done through the means of video technology (Sherin & van ES, 2005). By using a learner-centered approach (Vygotsky, 1979), the researchers in this study allowed students to construct their own meaning without imposing standard, rigid guidelines that inhibit

thought and do not allow them the opportunity to “think outside the box.” Not only were students encouraged to think “outside the box,” but they were encouraged to do so in a manner that fostered a democratic style by incorporating transactions within reflection and text (Pradl, 1996; Rosenblatt 1996). With easy access to multimedia tools, an emphasis on learning how to use and integrate technology in teaching and learning, and an increased interest in digital storytelling in many disciplines, it seemed that a natural method of reflectivity to use with preservice teachers could be use of digital stories.

Review of Literature

Visual Literacy

In a world filled with multi-media gadgets and multiple outlets for communication, it is necessary for a person to be literate beyond a more traditional sense of comprehending the written word. In order to function in society today, one must be able to comprehend the messages relayed through other forms of media. The terminology used to explain this type of literacy is known as critical literacy, whereby one can read the world as seen through his or her culture (Friere, 1970). Yet, within critical literacy there is visual literacy. Visual literacy is both the ability to understand and to produce visual messages (Smolin, 2003). In today’s digital world, images come in many forms and formats, such as those acquired, scanned from print, or those downloaded from the Web (Hammond & Sebastin, 2003).

Reflective Practice

Why look at reflective practice using digital imagery? The broad question, “Is reflection important and if so, why is it important?” emerges when considering this issue. Embedded within this question is the issue of defining *reflection*, especially as it applies

to classroom practices. Dewey (1916) eloquently stated in his seminal work, *Democracy and Education*,

Thought or reflection, as we have already seen virtually if not explicitly, is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence. No experience having a meaning is possible without some element of thought (158).

According to Dewey, this seeking of knowledge is integral to development. He purported that all learning begins only when one realizes that he or she is comfortable that ideas are inadequate for a task at hand. It is then that one must use the process of reflection to find a way to change for the better. Reflection, therefore, becomes an essential part to teaching, and in order to be successful teacher, reflection must be a fundamental part of the teaching experience. As teachers gain experience by trial and error, reflection allows for growth (Gibbons and Jones, 2004). According to Cambron-McCabe (2000), experienced teachers gain knowledge of their craft through systematic and informed reflection on their work. These teachers are critical in their reflection: they use reflection that ties theory and practice together.

However, there are many ways to learn and reflect. One of the most authentic and real world ways is that of an aesthetic aspect (Eisner, 1998). Eisner claims that aesthetics are integral to the process of perception and of imagination. Both of these are seen to hold real-world implications in learning and learning processes, which in turn stem from experiences (Schelecty, 2000). Eisner (1998) states, "All experience is the product of both features of the world and the biography of the individual" (p. 34). This type of reflective thinking can be seen to hold the learners accountable, yet able to portray their experiences in a light that they feel will best represent them. Eisner (1998) claims that in

order for understanding to take place, one must first experience it. It is this experience that leads to aesthetic development, which, in turn, leads to deeper learning.

Forms of Reflection

There are various methods to reflection, such as journaling, conferencing, and videotaping. Many organizations, such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), rely on the method of videotaped reflection to have practitioners review their own teaching methods' strengths and weaknesses so that they might make changes to improve their classroom practice. These videotaped documents become a central artifact in their teaching portfolio. Video-taped reflection has been a part of teacher reflective practice since the 1960's (Sherin & van ES, 2005). Jensen, Shepston, Connor, and Killmer (1994) assert that videotaped reflection serves as a catalyst for effective assessment of teaching, particularly student teaching. Using video as a means of self-study allows teachers to reflect on one situation numerous times. As Sherin and van Es (2005) point out, "...video can help teachers learn to *notice*, that is, to develop new ways of "seeing" what is happening in their classrooms" (p. 476). This process helps teachers at all levels from novice to veteran. Sherin and van Es also note the importance of video reflection because it acts a "permanent" (emphasis added) record of teaching and allows the teacher to develop new ways of seeing what happens in his/her classroom.

However, before the advent of digital video recording, the storage of these VHS videotapes proved cumbersome. The bulky size and unreliability of the equipment (caused by the loss of data due to faulty players destroying the tapes) was detrimental to using them multiple times to get a variety of readings from one situation. In order to see a

certain situation several times to get a good reading of it, one had to rewind or fast-forward this could not only be time consuming but could also destroy the document.

The advent of digital photo and video recording allows one to record and immediately see the images captured. However, while digital files may not take up as much physical storage space as their analog brother (VHS), they do take up a considerable amount of digital space. Additionally, downloading can pose problems for viewing and reviewing (Burns & Koziol, 2005).

Noting that there are problems inherent in using traditional VHS and the newer digital video medium, how can we use the form of visual literacy to continue to encourage reflective practice? Is digital photography valid in reflection? As mentioned above, it allows for immediate reflection because of the ease with which one can take photos and then review them. Digital photos take up less memory than digital videos, and are not as cumbersome as VHS tapes or a print photo album might prove to be, but do they have a place in the future of teacher education programs?

Elements of Digital Storytelling

The Center for Digital Storytelling in California urges people to listen and to tell stories through all means of storytelling. Photo albums and the telling of stories through pictures and/or photographs have been around for ages (Lambert, 2003). For centuries people have taken part in the tradition of oral storytelling and sharing their stories with others through oral and visual means. Thousands of years ago, stories were told by cave drawings, which were used to communicate ideas and to relay history and stories. Folk tales have been passed down through the ages to communicate ideas and stories for many to hear. Storytelling is nothing new and has indeed become a tradition in many families

and cultures. However, in an evolving technological age, the trend of storytelling is becoming digital. As the Institute for New Media Studies (2004) notes, “The digital frontier is a dynamic new space for storytelling but its potential has yet to be realized” (¶ 1).

Because learning (and viewing) is never a passive process, when teachers use active means of teaching (through interactive programs such as Photo Story, a digital storytelling template), students bring their experiences to the media-text; they use a wide-range of interpretive strategies to read the signs of the text (Bousted, 2004). This allows them to construct the story with the narrative being the key link between the text and the visual media (Bousted, 2004).

Taking a series of still images and combining them with a narrated soundtrack in order to tell a story is a crucial component of a well-told digital photo story (Institute for New Media Studies, 2004; Kajder & Bull 2005). The storytelling itself must be kept at the forefront of the process; the story that the photos are telling must be the reason for the creation of the project (Kajder & Bull 2005). It must stir emotions and connect with life (Lambert, 2003). This does not mean one must excessively utilize flashy transitions and loud music. According to Lambert (2003), using spectacle diminishes the storytelling process. Spectacle is that which detracts from the true meaning of the story. This includes, but is not limited to, the loud pulsating music and flashy transitions. Anything that covers up a weak presentation, which is devoid of meaning, turns it into a digital spectacle rather than a digital story.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how a group of preservice language arts teachers critically perceive their growth as educators while tracking and reflecting on their growth through a series of digital images and utilizing music and text in motion to illustrate that growth. The researchers have dubbed this reflective process as “Digi-Journies.”

Methodology

Participants for this study were eleven preservice English teachers enrolled in teaching methods coursework at a southeastern university. For the purpose of this study, pseudonyms are used in data presentation. The methods block consists of four courses (secondary English/Language Arts methods, content area reading and literacy, clinical experiences, and testing and measurement). The clinical experience component of the methods coursework requires that the preservice teachers complete ninety hours of contact/teaching time in an assigned area school as well as a culminating electronic portfolio demonstrating technology skills and classroom technology integration. One of the assignments in the electronic portfolio for all university methods students is to demonstrate knowledge and skill in using digital video technologies, with each content area having some latitude on how this assignment may be defined. Because the language arts professor’s research on teaching her methods class had shown that the students began to find reflective journaling tiresome, she chose to use the digital video assignment as a method to foster reflective practice among her students.

Using an accessible (and free Microsoft download) program called Photo Story 3.0, the class was assigned the task of taking photographs throughout their clinical

placement. At the end of their clinical placement the students chose three to four photos from the first month of teaching, three to four photos from their second month of teaching, and three to four photos from the last month of teaching for a minimum total of ten photographs. Students then imported these photos into the Photo Story program and implemented the elements of text, music, and motion to help aid them in the reflection process. In giving this assignment to the students as part of their methods course, the instructor told them to take many photos over the three-month course of their placement but not to take them with the intention of telling any particular story. The idea was for the students to use the digital cameras to chronicle various aspects of their placement and then at the conclusion of it, as they sat down to synthesize what they had learned about becoming teachers, to see what story they could tell with their photos. From the inception of the assignment, the students knew they were ultimately looking for a story to emerge. The tactic of dividing the placement into three segments with a minimum photo requirement to represent each segment served as a means to provide structure for the students and a framework for thinking about their growth. It helped to prevent students from realizing that they had another assignment due and from simply taking photos on one or two days to fulfill that requirement; instead, they had to critically think about this assignment throughout their clinical placement. After students reflected on their experience through the digital photos, they were to upload the selected photos and add text, music, and motion using the Photo Story program to create their story of professional growth.

In giving this assignment to students, additional considerations included informing the preservice teachers about the policies of taking recognizable photographs

in school settings and encouraging their compliance with all policies concerning taking photographs in a school setting. The preservice teachers were also informed of copyright laws and fair use policies to adhere to when creating their Photo Stories. While the use of this software program logically dubs the finished product a “photo story,” the researchers dubbed the process of reflecting on teaching experiences and creating the ensuing digital photo story *Digi-Journies* instead.

The researchers realized that the potential for discrepancy between what the preservice teachers intended to convey through their *Digi-Journies* and what was actually conveyed existed, the participants also wrote a statement describing their intention in creating their *Digi-Journey*. This provided a means for the researchers to cross-reference their perceptions of individuals’ *Digi-Journies* with the intention behind the creation of each one.

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the *Digi-Journies* in an effort to track the preservice teachers’ change over the course of the ninety-hour clinical placement. A rubric focusing on the categories of text selection, music and other audio selection, picture/image selection, and design was created. These four categories align with The Institute for Media Studies’ (2004) elements of digital storytelling and were used to assess the preservice teachers’ growth based on the choices they made.

In analyzing the category of text selection, the researchers viewed the *Digi-Journies* to see if they said something about each preservice teacher’s growth rather than simply providing a description of occurrences or a description of the pictures themselves. In analyzing the category of text, the researchers also looked at the word choices the

preservice teachers made. For example, were they using transition words to create a coherent story, or were they using descriptive phrases to describe individual pictures? In examining word choice, the researchers also considered whether or not the preservice teachers utilized titles and subtitles in order to create a sense of story versus a sense of labeled photos.

The analysis of the category of music and other audio choices proved the most subjective. In analyzing this category, the researchers considered the way in which the music or audio selection enhanced or complemented the story. In viewing the *Digi-Journies*, the researchers considered whether or not the use of music conveyed a sense of belonging with a professional product versus whether or not it conveyed the popular culture of the preservice teachers.

In analyzing the category of picture/image selection, the researchers considered a variety of elements including the depiction of variety and of action in the classroom versus passive participation. The researchers also considered how the pictures were sequenced to show a shift in the preservice teachers' experiences in the classroom (i.e., from passive scenarios to active participation). In viewing the *Digi-Journies*, they also considered whether or not the pictures were arranged in a sequence to convey a storyline. In analyzing all of these elements, the researchers were considering whether or not the pictures represented digital storytelling versus digital spectacle (Lambert, 2003).

In analyzing the category of design, the researchers considered if the *Digi-Journies* conveyed a recognizable beginning, middle, and end as text-based stories do. Additional considerations focused on how various design elements, such as choices in font, music, color, and motion, either enhanced or detracted from the story. The broad

consideration in this category was one of whether or not techno culture had taken over the product so that the story and the purpose were lost within the “bells and whistles.”

The researchers all viewed the *Digi-Journies* multiple times, recording notes in each of the aforementioned categories and noting additional trends that emerged among the collective group. After recording notions for each category for individual *Digi-Journies*, the researchers compared what they had viewed and analyzed with each preservice teachers’ intention statement. The researchers also recorded notes from these statements as they paralleled or contradicted the analysis. After the researchers analyzed the individual *Digi-Journies*, a table comparing the individuals’ choices for each of the categories of analysis was created, allowing the researchers to note common trends and exceptionalities.

Results

Elements of Story to Create Sequence

Because the preservice teachers participating in the study are in the area of English language arts, they have a strong awareness of the conventions of stories from their English coursework during their program preparation. As a result, many of the *Digi-Journies* exhibited clear conventions of stories, a trend that emerged when the individual stories were analyzed as a collective group. For example, five participants used title frames and five participants used conclusion frames to indicate a beginning and/or end of the story. Of the five participants in each of those groups, only two used both a title and a conclusion frame. Two participants, Amy and Emily, used the word “story” in their title frames. Most of the participants who included a conclusion frame wrapped up their *Digi-Journey* with the statement, “The End.” Two had creative conclusion frames that

explicitly spoke to their growth as teachers. Sarah actually used two conclusion frames with the first utilizing the traditional “The End” statement. Then she transitioned to another conclusion frame that said, “Or, the beginning!” Throughout their methods courses, the students are exposed to the metaphor of teaching as a journey, as set up by Christenbury (2000) in her book *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts*. Sarah’s statement clearly embodies this metaphor.

Another element of story that participants implemented in their *Digi-Journies* that worked to create a sense of sequence was the use of transitional words and phrases. Four participants clearly used these, and each of these four participants proved successful in establishing a clear sequence of events. Six of the participants utilized complete sentences in creating their story. One participant, Megan, even implemented a variety of end-mark punctuation to convey her growing sense of excitement as she began to “catch on” and grow in her confidence as a teacher. For example, Megan begins by stating early in her story, “Students are slow to ask for help.” She then moves to declaring, “Students are actually reading!” and “Student motivation is increasing!” This shows that she is trying and experiencing success with strategies that actively involve students in the classroom learning environment.

Subjects of the Stories

Perhaps the most revealing element of the *Digi-Journies* created by the preservice teachers was the focal subjects of the stories themselves. The preservice teachers had two choices on which they could focus the subject of their stories: themselves as the teacher or their students as learners. The manner in which the participants created a story with

subjects of both the descriptive sentences and the photos provided the greatest sense of how they were reflecting on their growing role as teachers.

Of the eleven participants, eight focused on both themselves and their students as subjects, while two focused solely on themselves and one focused solely on students. Of the eight who focused on both themselves and the students, four had a clear shift in the focal subject as their placement progressed and they grew as teachers. For example, Megan used her pictures to depict the subjects and began by focusing on herself and then shifted to focusing on the students. The use of the images with the shift in focus clearly showed her starting her placement as the director of learning and shifting into a role where she was a facilitator of learning. In early pictures she showed herself in front of the class disseminating information, whereas in later pictures she showed herself circulating the room and interacting with students as she facilitated their independent and collaborative learning.

Sarah's *Digi-Journey* provides a contrasting example of how a participant used a shift in subject to illustrate growth through the selected photos. Sarah began by showing herself as the sole subject of the photos where she was focusing on tasks she was learning to perform as a teacher such as filing, grading, and planning lessons. She then shifted to show the students engaging in the activities she had created. Another participant, Julie, clearly saw herself as the facilitator of learning in the classroom environment from the beginning, as her photos show her and students, with the primary subject focusing on students working and her, as the teacher, facilitating their learning.

The following table details in-depth how all of the participants utilized various elements or conventions of story in creating their *Digi-Journey*. When analyzing whether

or not the participants depicted the teacher or the students as the subject, the numbers one and two were used to indicate which subject they focused on first if there was a shift, as previously discussed.

Table 1: Analysis Matrix of Elements of Story

Participant	Title Slide	Conclusion Slide	Transition Words	Complete Sentences	Teacher as Subject	Students as Subject	Varied End-Mark Punctuation
Rebecca		X		X		X	
Amber		X	X	X	X1	X2	
Melissa			X		X	X	
Carrie	X	X		X	X	X	
Meredith				X	X		
Sarah		X			X1	X2	
Amy	X	X			X		X
Emily	X		X	X	X	X	
Megan	X			X	X1	X2	
Michael				X	X		
Julie	X		X		X	X	

Integration of Music

Interestingly, none of the participants implemented any music selections outside of those embedded within the Photo Story program. The program does allow for this, however. Because we emphasize issues of copyright and fair use, especially as it pertains to technology integration, we questioned whether or not this could be attributed to the participants' concerns about violations of copyright. Part of the reason we questioned this revolved around the fact that, despite using the embedded music choices, many of the

participants did change selections at various points in their *Digi-Journey* to emphasize a shift in their view of themselves as teachers. For example, in her *Digi-Journey*, Amber tells the story of how when she began teaching she would talk to the students and receive minimal participation. As she learns that if she shifts her role to that of facilitator rather than director, she changes the music selection to one with a faster tempo to reflect the new-found energy of her classroom.

Intention in Creation of the Digi-Journies

The participants were asked to write a statement of their intention in what they were trying convey in their *Digi-Journey* so that the researchers could compare the statements to what they perceived to be the message in each story. After reviewing the *Digi-Journies* and then comparing them to the statements of intention, eight of the eleven participants' intentions matched their *Digi-Journey*. Of the remaining three, the researchers questioned whether or not the intentions and the *Digi-Journies* matched, and one statement of intention did not match. In his outlying statement, Michael said, "I was just really showing some different pictures. I am not really sure what I was trying to convey." His lack of focus in telling his story clearly parallels his minimal use of elements of story in Table 1 as compared to the other participants.

Meredith was a participant whose intention the researchers questioned. Upon viewing her *Digi-Journey* the researchers felt that she had created a digital product to showcase her abilities as a teacher versus telling the story of her growth through her clinical placement. Meredith reported in her intention statement, "I was trying to show a variety of activities that students were engaged in during class time." The reason the researchers questioned the alignment of the statement with the *Digi-Journey* is that

clearly it was not viewed as portraying her growth, but it was unknown if she perceived the “variety of activities” to show her growth from implementing one type of activity to another. This was the same type of question that arose with Amy, the second participant of whom the researchers were uncertain.

Discussion

With the exception of two participants, Michael and Amy, the preservice teachers showed growth in reflecting on their clinical experiences; although, some showed it more explicitly than others. The group as a whole showed a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction. This was evidenced when the participants segued from highlighting themselves as the subject to focusing on students as the subject. Many of the participants, such as Sarah, also began by focusing on themselves struggling to learn the day-to-day tasks required of teachers (i.e., taking attendance and planning for instruction) before focusing on the students as the subject. This is consistent with research showing that as novice teachers evolve in their teaching confidence, they move from a focus more on themselves and their role to one or more of their students and the instructional environment (Sherin & van Es, 2005).

As indicated in the analysis of the data, the preservice teachers implemented many elements of story in their *Digi-Journies*. In a methods course, this assignment could also be utilized in reviewing the conventions of stories with the preservice teachers, who often need a gloss review of subject matter content.

Wursta, Brown, and Segatti (2004) pointed out that best practices can be monitored with digital photography. Through the combined use of digital photography

and reflective storytelling, the preservice teachers were able to pictorially review their experiences in their clinical placements. They could examine where they were struggling in classroom day-to-day management, where they were not involving students in instruction, and where they were serving in the role of the director. Preservice teachers often have not yet developed the skills to simultaneously facilitate class instruction and monitor students' nonverbal feedback. By seeing these aspects of their instructional practices in their digital photos, the preservice teachers were able to realize where their instruction was leaving students unmotivated, to ask questions about how they might better involve the students, and to change their instructional practices and move into the roles of facilitator versus director.

A real question that arises is one of how the preservice teachers will go about reflective practices when in the classroom and out of the university environment. When compared with video taping technologies, the use of digital photography will certainly prove more efficient and accessible to classroom teachers wishing to implement them for reflective practice (Burns & Koziol, 2005). Will they continue to use digital technologies to tell their stories? Will they use digital photography to document their students' growth in the classroom? Will they use digital technologies to document and reflect on their own teaching practices?

Conclusion

Digi-Journies do prove an effective means of encouraging preservice teachers to reflect their growth during their clinical placements. They allow the preservice teachers to do more than tell what is going on in their classrooms to the supervisors who cannot be there on a daily basis; they enable the preservice teachers to also show and interpret their

progress. As demonstrated in the data collection, there can emerge a disconnect between what the preservice teachers intend to convey in their stories and what the university supervisors perceive; therefore, additional methods of reflection such as journals also need to be incorporated into methods courses.

Based on student feedback, the preservice teachers did not find the practice of reflecting via digital storytelling to be as tedious as continuous journaling of experiences, and when implemented together, the preservice teachers complained less about traditional reflection methods. Their feedback indicated that they enjoyed the process of chronicling their teaching through photography and reflecting on the photos to create stories – to create their *Digi-Journies*.

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