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Amanda Hill

Abstract

This paper considers the practical and theoretical methodologies of the community literacy project, “The Recipe of Me,” conducted with homeless youth in Orlando, Florida. In this project, youth created personal, mediatized narratives in a storytelling residency aimed at examining the role of digital storytelling in fostering confidence, autonomy, and literacy awareness. The project allowed the youth to create narratives as artists, encouraging not only the creation of a work of art but also the formulation of an artistic voice.

Introduction

In the summer of 2011, as part of its “Arts and Character Training” program, the Orlando Repertory Theatre (The REP) located in Orlando, Florida enlisted my help to create and implement a digital storytelling residency for youth, aged twelve to fifteen, living at the Orlando Union Rescue Mission (O.U.R. Mission). Since 1948, O.U.R. Mission has served Orlando’s homeless community by providing immediate physical needs, such as food and shelter. The REP, in addition to providing a full season of professional productions for family audiences, offers residencies and workshops for underserved communities in the greater Orlando area throughout the year.

I had worked as a theatre teaching artist for a year when The REP developed an interest in expanding their program into the realm of video production and creative writing. Knowing that I had experience with these creative processes, the theatre asked me to help develop a program with O.U.R. Mission, where youth could engage in the practice of sharing their own narratives. Drawing on my previous experiences in classroom and camp settings using theatre and storytelling, I aimed to develop a program that would inspire creative thought and teach digital editing skills for this population. This partnership was the first project in recent history in which The REP and O.U.R. Mission worked together. In partnership, the agencies and I hoped to create a space where youth could discover their unique artistic voices by creating personal narratives in the form of short videos, known as digital stories, that would be presented during a celebration of the youth at O.U.R. Mission for their families, friends, mission staff, and mission residents. The resulting residency, “The Recipe of Me,” spanned twelve weeks, during which time fifteen middle-school-aged youth participated in the program, writing, recording, and constructing their own short,

expressive videos based on recipes that recreated themselves. The participants came from a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some participants were new to O.U.R. Mission and others had been there for several weeks or months. All youth came to us through the Mission's rehabilitation program, which hosts families for up to one year. To create their recipes of themselves, participants used both abstract and concrete concepts, symbols, and objects in their ingredients lists and cooking instructions, thus creating abstract personal collages of their identities. The residency sought to encourage avenues to engage with community, autonomy, agency, artistic voice, and literacy awareness.

This article focuses on using the methodology of digital storytelling to incorporate multimodality to create literacy awareness and build confidence in multimodal authorship practices for young community members. It details the types of literacies incorporated in the practice as well as the layers incorporated in such multimodal video compositions. It further discusses how multimodality can serve as a meaning-making practice for young people writing personal narratives detailing their conceptions of their identities. Finally, it uses quotes from the students' created works published in a cumulative DVD to focus on how the young participants engaged with the genre of writing and highlights one student's specific struggles completing the project. Together, these pieces work to show how digital storytelling can serve to build literacy awareness and confidence in young participants.

The Writing Process

Recognizing that young people are especially enmeshed in continued intrapersonal debates to define and redefine themselves, seen through changes in facets such as appearance, attitude, and beliefs, it seemed appropriate to give youth in our residency a chance to create a work in which they defined themselves for themselves. Doing so grants youth a creative outlet to visualize their sense of self, meditate on the person they want to project, and begin to discover and define their own voice and authority.

A 2008 study by the Pew Research Center, a study relevant at the time of this residency, showed that while 85% of teens engage in some form of electronic communications like texting or emails at least occasionally, 60% of teens do not view these practices as writing. Further, writing was seen as vital to success: "86% of teens believe good writing is important to success in life – some 56% describe it as essential and another 30% describe it as important" (PEW). These findings were further supported by parents of teens, especially Black parents and parents with education levels equivalent to a high school degree or less, who at 94% and 88%, respectively, said "good writing skills are more important now than in the past" (PEW). For these reasons, we wanted to help youth understand how writing practices could be utilized within digital spaces. Helping homeless youth gain digital literacy and technological skill sets was of additional importance, as transitory youth may have limited access or time with the devices and technology required for multimodal composition. This digital divide was evidenced as we began working on computers with the students, some of whom did not have a working knowledge of using computer mice, filing systems,

and downloading data. Further, we wanted to show the youth in the residency that “writing” in digital environments could mean more than solely text-based composition, and for this purpose we chose to utilize digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling has been shown to increase levels of engagement in active learning (Ohler) and heighten academic success in ways that engage students differently than in traditional, print-based literacy composition practices. Research shows that students who engage with digital storytelling reach greater levels of academic achievement, academic motivation, and retention of learning (Wang and Zhan; Aktaş and Yurt). Additionally, digital storytelling can increase academic achievement for at-risk students through improved writing skills, increased family involvement and support in the learning process, and an “increased awareness of future educational opportunities” (Figg and McCartney 52). Furthermore, as a composition practice, digital storytelling was chosen for a variety of benefits including as a platform for meaning making (Garcia and Rossiter; Long), because it “favours a flat hierarchy between participants, researchers and other stakeholders” (de Jager, et. al. 2551), and because it promotes multimodal composition (Hull and Nelson; Hull and Katz) and digital literacy development (Banaszewski; Hartley et al.; Chan et al.).

The students in *The Recipe of Me* residency shaped their digital stories with written text, images, and speech to reveal their unique understanding of themselves and their identity to a wide audience, using multiple modalities that were layered together in a composition that included an assemblage of text, images/video, and audio/music. The layering process became a period of construction, where students created visual and verbal representations of self from their perspective of who they were at the time and how they wanted to be remembered in the future. For this project, the participants needed to think through each of these layers. The individual elements combine to create a digital story, yet their combination is just as important as the individual assets. Glynda Hull and Mark Evan Nelson observe, “images, written text, music, and so forth each respectively impart certain kinds of meanings more easily and naturally than others” (6), but together, these assets create new, more complex meanings. One of the most important ideas to remember when merging assets, however, is also one of the most difficult to master. When unifying the assets, it is sometimes easy and often appealing to add too much spectacle to the digital story. Spectacle is not the goal of the project, and it often muddies the story’s clarity. In my work on “*The Recipe of Me*,” I found myself regularly reminding the students to simplify their work in order to allow the story and “text” to stay at the forefront of their projects. The focus needed to be on the story, not the technology. The principles of storytelling exist throughout the entire process of creating a digital story, whereas the digitization does not. I often reminded the students the technology must work to tell the story, and the story should not be structured to meet the technology.

The process of construction is one that required the students to imagine themselves as architects of identity as well as authors. Their assets become building blocks, which the youth use to stack, shape, and remold their digital stories. Many times, these building blocks would remain in place for a period of time before being replaced or repositioned. Sometimes these elements, most often imagery, would be re-

vised before they were imported into the editing software. Other times assets would remain in place until the final edit. With this ability to construct and deconstruct, the students became agents of their own work, assembling the components until they created the desired effect and told the desired story. As Ohler notes, “the media production requires students to synthesize imagination, creativity, research, and critical thinking in order to translate their ideas into some form of media-based expression” (11). It is in this process that I saw students truly begin to take ownership of the outcome of their digital stories. Hull and Katz suggest, “digital stories, through their combination of image, music, sound, and text, seem to engage young communicators and to provide an especially potent way to perform a self” (72). In taking ownership of works that urge student-created definitions of themselves, the students constructed pieces that spoke to each of them individually and expressed their understanding of themselves to their audience. Layering thus becomes a formulation of participants’ self-representations and can be seen as a reflection of their views of themselves during the twelve-week composition process.

For their digital stories, the students were to create recipes of themselves. Participants were instructed to explore different moments and events in their lives as well as their everyday emotions, events, hobbies, passions, the surface facets of their personalities, and their deepest understandings of themselves. The students’ recipes center on their own lives and identities, emphasizing key characteristics of their individual personalities they wished to acknowledge. Just as a cookie recipe involves certain ingredients, students’ recipes contained ingredients, which, from their point of view, would be needed to recreate themselves, allowing them to perform their identities as they prefer. The idea in this was that by considering a whole (themselves as people), they could begin to discern the parts that made up the whole. Students thus created portraits of their identity in the form of recipes. Their writings became short memoirs of who they envisioned they were at the time and the person they wanted to project to society. In writing the recipes, the students listed concrete and abstract ingredients that would be needed to recreate themselves.

The following examples are taken from the students’ works found within the project’s cumulative DVD titled *The Recipe of Me*, which features all of the completed student videos. Their ingredients ran the gamut from the tangible (basketballs, colored pencils, and New Smyrna Beach) to the abstract (patience, fear, and “sparkles of love”). Further examples of ingredients used by the students include creation, self-esteem, beauty, sass, attitude, swagg [sic], anger, love for family, care, and silliness [sic]. Optional ingredients, often notated at the end of recipes, give insight into the youth’s understanding of their ever-evolving identity. Examples of this phenomenon include: “add 4-5 books, as needed” and “add one cup of awkwardness (optional).” Small quantities of ingredients, such as “a dash of crazy,” “a pinch of hateful,” “a teaspoon of sarcasm,” and “a pinch of procrastination,” provide examples of traits that students want to acknowledge, but downplay; although, some students admitted to less desirable traits in bigger quantities, such as the student who acknowledged needing “eight quarts of clumsiness” in her recipe. For the most part, larger-quantity ingredients were of socially-acceptable or desirable traits or those the students wanted

to publicly project: “1 cup of hope,” “1 cup of creativity,” “three cups of math,” “six cups of joy,” “eight pots of sweetness,” and “two whole bags of humor” (*The Recipe of Me*). The diversity of ingredients shows the reflective nature of the task, as students recognized a complex range of facets within themselves. During the revising period, we discussed the ways different ingredients might interact with each other, which caused some students to re-evaluate their ingredients or the amount of their ingredients. We discussed how measurement quantities might affect or overwhelm the recipe and asked students to carefully consider the required measurements for each ingredient. A similar conversation took place again during the recording stage, as we asked youth to convey the words used to describe the amount of their ingredients through their own voices.

Youth detailed the cooking and serving instructions to complete their recipes. Examples of cooking instructions include: “Shape Like Dough, Do not rush: TAKE TIME!!;” “Do not 4get any ingredients;” “Caution! DO NOT HEAT;” “Just let it sit after mixing;” and “cook at 350 in oven, eight on stove, ten minutes in microwave, fifteen minutes in the toaster, and get a beautiful, talented girl” (*The Recipe of Me*). Others included the cooking instructions with each ingredient, as in the following recipe:

Sprinkle in one cup of attitude
Beat in five cups of basketball
Boil two cups of family
Steam one and half cups of courage
Freeze gold, silver, ruby colored pencils
Microwave four cups of hip-hop
Bake two cups of football
Add three cups of swimming pool water
Plate ingredients and serve with a side dish of video games. (*The Recipe of Me*)

Serving instructions varied from the simplest, “serve on a plate,” to the instructions for dining company, “serve with family,” “Made to Be shared,” and “serve to haters.”

As the first step in the process, the creation of the recipe meant the youth were starting with perhaps the most familiar and traditional literacy, written text. This served as both an advantage to some students—granting them a familiar path into the project—and an ominous task for others. Erstad and Silseth quote a grade school teacher, identified as Mary, who noted:

For [low-performing] students, there exists an empowering and agentic potential in digital storytelling; they are low-performing in regard to the traditional written assignments, but get the opportunity to express themselves in new ways by using technologies other than the written text. (220-221)

As an after-school program, our students’ academic performance remained unknown to us, and I can only use my outside observations to infer whether or not the students were fully engaged in the process. However, Mary’s insight did appear to be true in the work of our youth, some of whom seemed more engaged in the process because of the diversity of literacies. Behaviors of engagement I observed included students’

continual efforts to coalesce and perfect their work, unsolicited peer discussions about recipe-creation, and the frequent return of students to residency sessions.

While several students appeared to struggle with one or more modalities, it also appeared as if they mastered others with ease. One such student was Antonio (name changed). Antonio's interest in our programming was apparent by his continuing to show up, yet it took a significant amount of communication to gain his trust. Antonio enjoyed engaging in our community-building games and activities but was prone to coming and going from the classroom as he desired, indicating restlessness. Getting him to remain in the classroom was a challenge, and eventually, a pattern in his wandering emerged: Antonio would leave when tasked with traditional writing activities. On the day the students wrote their recipes, we persuaded Antonio to stay in the workshop and try to write a recipe. As the other students were finishing their recipes, I noticed Antonio only had two lines written. His paper was pushed aside, and he was playing with his pen. I approached him, and he confided in me that it takes a lot of effort for him to write and that he was concerned because he often spelled words wrong and didn't write "good." I asked him if he had other thoughts for his recipe. He shrugged. I felt that Antonio was interested in completing the project, especially as he continued to return to our workshops and made the effort to stay in the classroom on this particular day, even when the assignment became difficult. He didn't ask for help outright, but his physical presence in the room suggested that he wished to continue with the assignment.

I sat down across from Antonio at the table as other students continued to finalize and revise their recipes. I encouraged Antonio to re-establish his writing space, reassured him of his abilities, and told him I wouldn't leave until he was satisfied with his project. Together we worked to complete his recipe. He would brainstorm ingredients and then ask me how to spell the words. Eventually his recipe was complete. Over the next few sessions we worked together to finalize the wording of his recipe and to transfer the words onto his storyboard. It occasionally proved stressful – Antonio was not eager to engage in word-based writing activities – but his creativity and excitement grew as he completed this stage of the work. He willingly jumped into crafting images on his storyboard and imagining the overall outcome of his final product. Antonio became so invested in his project that he spent time working on the project outside of the facilitated sessions, and he soon moved ahead of his peers on the production timeline. On his own, he decided he wanted to further personalize his project. He re-envisioned his planned images, so they included photographs of him engaged in his favorite activities. For his ingredient, "two footballs," he staged a picture where he was in the act of throwing a football and directed a facilitator to help him stage and capture the moment. When he had compiled the photos he wanted, he anxiously went into the computer lab. Within just three sessions, Antonio's digital story was ready to be published, far ahead of our preconceived timeline.

For the next few sessions, as the other students worked to construct their digital stories, Antonio would walk in and out of the computer lab, lamenting that he didn't have any more work to do on his project. He frequently inquired how much time remained until the other students would be finished so we could progress to the next

project. Antonio's progress in the creation process of his recipe might not have been achieved had the project not engaged multiple literacies. In previous sessions, we had seen Antonio abandon his writing projects, sometimes leaving the session to do so. His excitement to move to the next phase of the design work seemed to indicate a desire and motivation to finish this project and move into working with computers. For Antonio, the opportunity to work in media and combine multiple literacies to tell a story, instead of being limited by the word-based text with which he struggled, allowed him to find his own voice and create a work in which he was able to define himself and communicate to a wider audience. The promise of the next steps helped this student return, as did individualized support moving through the writing section of the design. In offering this support and motivating students through different phases of the storytelling process, I believe the project afforded students the chance to effectively explore multiple modalities of meaning-making.

Conclusion

"The Recipe of Me" residency concluded with a celebratory showcase of the youths' finished video narratives that was viewed by staff and community members of both O.U.R. Mission and The REP. For many weeks after the showcase, youth at the O.U.R. Mission approached my colleagues and me about future residencies and the age requirements for involvement; both high-school and elementary students expressed their interest in creating digital narratives. The REP and O.U.R. Mission were happy to oblige, developing numerous collaborations between the organizations for youth of all ages that lasted for many years. The development of these programs is indebted to generous funding from Disney's Helping Kids Shine program, which more than doubled its funding to The REP's "Arts and Character Training" program after receiving copies of the digital stories the youth created in "The Recipe of Me" residency. This donation ensured that similar programming could occur for community youth to continue to engage with the creative arts and foster dialogue, awareness, social change, and community engagement.

As an educator, my work in "The Recipe of Me" residency taught me new ways to instruct youth in using and combining multimedia and multimodal literacies. I learned to work with community youth of differing literacy aptitudes in ways that inspired them to continue searching for their artistic voice, highlighted their personal fortes, and challenged them to strengthen other literacy modes. The story of Antonio illustrates the complexity of writing practices that digital-native youth engage, and it additionally showcases the challenges and opportunities multimodal writing affords these young people. The project shows us that the incorporation of multimodal authorship practices through the creation of digital stories can help young participants gain literacy awareness and confidence in their writing and multimodal authorship practices, all of which is especially important for young people facing homelessness, who may not have sustained or equal access to the technology and devices required to compose multimodally. Programs that support digital literacy growth and compo-

sition in multimedia can help alleviate symptoms of the education gap created by a digital divide.

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