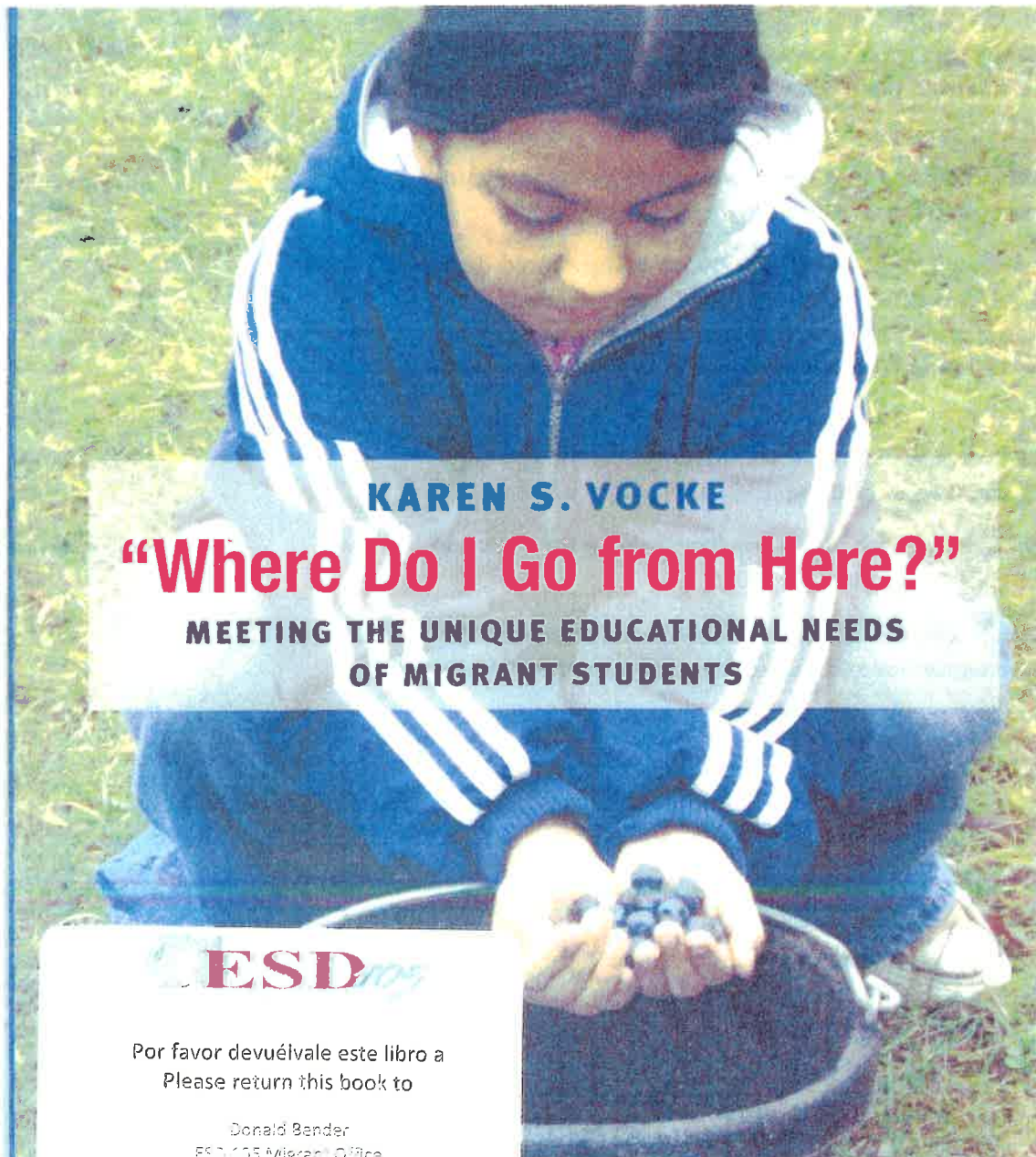


Digital Storytelling

... That summer I participated in a digital storytelling workshop sponsored by the Third Coast Writing Project, at Western Michigan University. In digital storytelling, students first write a narrative about a personally meaningful subject or event. (Freedom in choosing a topic creates additional excitement about writing.) The stories range from imaginative fiction to personal narratives based on real experiences. The final product, however, is a digital movie, produced using any of a number of software products, including Windows Movie Maker, iMovie, and Adobe Premiere. This project is especially appropriate for



ELL students, because it uses pictures and images, along with the students' own words and voices.

One way to look at digital storytelling is to think of it as a revival of the oral tradition of storytelling using modern technology. It is a way to marry technology and personal experience. The technology used in digital storytelling is new to almost all students. They are used to playing video games, in which they manipulate someone else's images according to someone else's rules, and sending instant messages, in which the writing is quick and spontaneous, not planned and coherent.

The Core Elements

The seven elements deemed to lie at the heart of the digital story—which make digital storytelling different from just putting together a home movie, for instance—were initially identified by the Center for Digital Storytelling, in Berkeley, California, in the process of showing a great many people, old and young, how to use technology to tell the stories of their lives. The elements are as follows:

1. *Point of view.* Who is the narrator and why is he telling us this important personal story? What central premise is the context for the story's action?
2. *Dramatic question.* What question is answered as the story unfolds? What impact did the story have on the narrator's life?
3. *Emotional content.* The personal experience being shared deals directly with fundamental emotional paradigms—death and our sense of loss, love and loneliness, confidence and vulnerability, acceptance and rejection. The stories we are drawn to inspire us to go on living.
4. *The gift of your voice.* Spoken first-person narration adds a unique dimension to the story's meaning.
5. *The power of the soundtrack.* Music sets the mood for the story and enhances the audience's investment in it.
6. *Economy.* A short script (about one double-spaced page) incorporating a small collection of still images (no more than thirty) forces

the writer to make choices about which and how many artifacts to use to convey meaning.

7. *Pacing*. Good stories breathe. They move along generally at an even pace, but once in a while they stop. They take a deep breath and proceed. The writer decides what the audience sees when, slowing down the action or speeding it up to create layers of meaning. (Adapted from Lambert 2002)

For most students, these are unfamiliar terms, at least as they relate to digital media, so you'll need to spend a lot of time discussing what they mean and how they impact the story. It's essential to make sure that students have a solid understanding of these seven elements before they begin their own stories.

In my first digital story, I described a classroom project about grounding biographical writing in a sense of place. Using the seven elements, I was able to take a series of pictures showing how to do the project and showcase the emotional energy that my students and I put into the project—a more powerful message than I had originally envisioned.

When I introduce digital storytelling I first show my students examples (some created by former students and others found on various websites) that best convey each of the elements. For example, I show a story that has a good point of view, and we discuss the ways this point of view contributed to the story. Then we follow this same procedure for each of the remaining six elements. (This has the added benefit of showing students the wide range of topics digital storytellers can address.)

At this point, I give students a rubric I've developed that breaks down each of the seven elements into its essential components. Working in groups, the students use the rubric to rate some additional digital stories I show them. Each group comes up with a final rating, and we share and discuss the results. This preparatory work, which takes two to three days, is well worth the time we spend on it.

Creating the Script

Working in pairs, students first choose topics ranging from important or influential characters in their lives to watershed events, places, and adventures. The trick is to get students thinking about

layers of meaning—what the words can convey and what is best said by the images and the soundtrack. To help them think through these layers, I have them fill out a graphic organizer that shows how each of the seven elements will be used in their stories. This also works as a prewriting tool.

The next step is to write the script. Since the students will use this script when they record their narration, it's important that anything that is to be spoken is clearly indicated. It's also a good idea to model what a script should look like. To that end, I work on my own story along with them. I show them my draft, my revisions, and my final clean version so they can see that I change and tinker with the words I've used, just as I do when I write prose or poetry. Students tend to write too much. They need to be reminded that the essence of digital storytelling is how all the parts contribute to the most effective presentation and that sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. If possible, students type their scripts and highlight their speeches.

Making a Storyboard

When the scripts are complete, students fill out a storyboard on which they coordinate the soundtrack, the images that will best convey the meaning to the audience, and the narration. I need to approve the storyboard before a student begins to work on the computer. (See Appendix D for a storyboard graphic organizer that can help students map out the components of their digital stories.)

Gathering Images

By now students should have a good idea of the images they want to use. The first thing they should do is make a folder on the computer desktop in which they can store their images. Some may bring pictures of themselves or family members from home and scan them in. Others may take digital photographs of original images or tableaux. The Internet is also a rich source for images.

A caution here: A minilesson on how to search for images needs to include a discussion of appropriateness. Most school computers are equipped with filters, but undesirable pictures will occasionally pop up. Also, students will inevitably search for images of celebrities (performers, athletes, the rich and famous), images that they think are cool but that do not belong in a school project. Therefore, you need to set strict guidelines. You cannot monitor every computer screen at

every given moment, so students need to understand your expectations and also the consequences if they violate your rules. Since much of your time will be spent troubleshooting, holding conferences, or assessing progress, however, it is likely that any inappropriate images will be caught before the final project is recorded. With younger students, you may want to create a bank of pictures that students can draw from. Another way to limit Internet image access is to create links to image sites that you have previously screened and require students to search only those sites.

Making the Movie

Students are now ready to put all the pieces together using movie-making software. Movie Maker comes with Windows XP, but other software programs are available. Through a series of minilessons, you'll need to show students how to sequence (and perhaps manipulate) their images, add transitions, and create a soundtrack (narration and music). (I save the movies on a memory stick because it's portable.) As a final step, I ask students to have peer conferences with another pair of students in which they comment specifically on the seven elements, using the rubric as a guide.

Adaptations

Digital storytelling is a very adaptable technique. If only a few computers are available, students can work in groups. Each member writes and chooses images for a section of the piece, and the group as a whole decides how to put them together with music, transitions, and pacing. If moviemaking software is not available, a PowerPoint presentation is a good substitute. No microphones? Have students provide live narration while music (on a CD player) accompanies the presentation.

Young students can also produce digital stories. A lower-elementary class can write a story together about a shared experience, such as a field trip, and use photos that were taken on the trip. (Each student should narrate part of the story, even if it's just a line.) Or have each student write a sentence or two about a personal experience and draw a picture to illustrate it. Then, with your help and guidance (or that of parent volunteers), have the students record their sentences, scan their drawings into the computer, and combine them into a digital story.

I paired Aline with Nancy, another former migrant student, who had been a student in our school for several years and was performing near grade level. I wanted to make sure Aline would feel comfortable with the writing and have help using Windows Movie Maker. The importance of collaboration in providing support and language development for second language learners is eloquently captured by Peregoy and Boyle:

Collaborative projects generate particularly rich language learning contexts, especially when groups include advanced or native English speakers. . . . Everyone gets a chance to contribute in a low-risk, low-anxiety atmosphere. (2001, 73)

Aline needed more experience using English in real contexts, such as talking about ideas and developing a shared story. The digital story project would allow Aline and Nancy (and all my other students) to talk about their stories in an informal, nonthreatening way.

Many English language learners have a much richer storytelling background than their native English-speaking counterparts do. Joe Lambert points out:

In traditional cultures, the intermingling of personal stories, communal stories, myths, legends, and folktales not only entertained us, but created a powerful empathetic bond between ourselves and our communities. . . . As we dropped our books and flocked to movie theaters, more quickly scanned our newspapers and magazines . . . as we stopped reading entirely and watched TV an average of seven hours a day . . . there were losses, one after the other. . . . Many cultures . . . never lost their sense of story, and the role of story in their culture. They have much to teach us in our restorifying process. (2002, xviii-xix)

In the Mexican culture, the sense of story is strong. I have had students write about the time their grandparents saw a ghost or about walking over the mountains to get water every day. While some of my other students struggled with finding a meaningful story to tell, Nancy and Aline had a wealth of material waiting to be shaped.

They decided to share their common heritage by describing their favorite Mexican celebrations. They were excited about this writing assignment. Even though they had become comfortable in the classroom, they were eager to share a piece of their culture with their fellow students, most of whom celebrated in very different ways. Aline and Nancy had to find images that would help tell the story in a way that would be meaningful to an audience encountering these celebrations for the first time. Planning their story, they exchanged ideas with

other pairs of students. Later they shared their storyboard in a peer conference during which Aline demonstrated her Mother's Day dance to the delight of her conference partners.

The hardest part of this project for the girls was recording their voices. They both had Spanish accents and were self-conscious about speaking out loud. While they had become comfortable with sharing in small groups during writing conferences or literature circles, the thought that all the students would hear them was frightening. We rehearsed many times until they felt comfortable with the script. Their comfort level rose when they realized that they could redo the voiceover as many times as it took to get it right.

The entire class eagerly awaited the day the students would present their digital stories. As the moviemakers played their stories for their classmates, their reactions varied. Some were quietly proud, some hid their faces, some giggled all the way through. Aline and Nancy were among the shy ones. They hid their faces while the story was playing, but afterward, when they saw that the other students were genuinely impressed by this glimpse into their cultural heritage, proud smiles lit their faces.

We also held a movie night and invited parents to view the students' movies. Aline and Nancy came with their families. At the end of the evening, the audience voted for awards in three categories: best story, best technology, and people's choice. Nancy and Aline won the people's choice award. I don't think anything could have meant more to them. Putting themselves out there was scary, but their digital story had truly given them a voice they wouldn't have otherwise had. Hearing their voices telling a story that was important to them went beyond developing English skills and language competence. The acceptance of their classmates and the acknowledgment of the larger school community made them feel they belonged.

I would like to think that all the lessons I plan have that effect on all my students. Critical literacy for English language learners has to start with giving them a voice and allowing them to find the words for the story they want to tell. Digital storytelling gave these students that voice and power, a voice and power that I hope will lead them to become lifelong learners.

