

I am from Delicious Lasagna: Exploring Cultural Identity with Digital Storytelling

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Where I'm From

I am from Florida
and partly from Mexico.
I am from Hillside.
I like to play soccer outside
and kick the ball in the air.
I am from cool friends.
I am from a house in the mountains.
I am from my mom and dad.
I am from cats, dogs, and bunnies.
I am from delicious lasagna
made at Port Christopher's.
I am from a loving family.

—by Reynaldo (third grade)

Poems written on the theme “Where I’m From” provide but a glimpse of third grade students’ realities, yet they are inviting and potentially rich resources for classroom teachers. Reynaldo—a bilingual, bicultural, Mexican-origin student, is typical of elementary students in our region. He is a member of the fastest growing demographic group in North Carolina, a state that in the past decade has experienced a large increase in English Language Learners (ELLs) in its public schools. For example, in the past five years, the population of students identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) has doubled from 60,149 to 112,534.¹ The majority of these students are Hispanic, with origins in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, or Nicaragua. While some teachers might feel apprehensive or uncertain of how to deal with these new groups of students, we believe that this growth in diversity presents novel opportunities to learn about cultural and linguistic difference in the United States and in the world.

In an effort to gain greater insights into bilingual and bicultural children’s understanding of their cultural and linguistic identities, we embarked on a Where I’m From (WIF) multi-media

poetry project.² The WIF project has great potential and value for developing students’ language and communication skills, and for exploring the meaning of culture, cultural diversity, and identity. Grounded in the curriculum standards theme **4 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**, this activity encourages students to reflect on personal experiences, past achievements, and family traditions and events that have been meaningful in shaping their identities.³ In this article, we present an overview of the WIF project, provide examples from student work, and highlight the components most applicable for classroom use.

Initiating Conversation

Classroom teachers recognize the importance of building trust and community with students, especially at the beginning of a school year. It is important to provide time and opportunities for all members to learn about each other. Sharing the WIF poems was a means of initiating these conversations.

To introduce students to the concept of a WIF poem, we read aloud examples by Linda Christensen in *Rethinking Our Schools*, along with one or two photos, objects, or other artifacts from our own family memorabilia.⁴ In discussions, students were able to make connections between their own family histories and those of the teachers, thus initiating conversations that were essential in establishing trusting relationships.

Thinking about Sources

Although research on language acquisition supports the statement that schools should include and develop students’ native languages, bilingual students who attend U.S. public schools often have very limited opportunities to do so.⁵ In most school districts across the United States, bilingual programs are not readily available. Well-meaning but poorly informed educators discourage the use or maintenance of the home language in the classroom. We promoted and encouraged students to use of all of their linguistic resources in the completion of this project.

After the introductory session, teachers asked the students to reciprocate and prepare for their next class by bringing in



A Mexican Dance Ensemble “Los Quetzales” performs at the Fort Belvoir, Virginia, Hispanic-American Heritage Month observance in 2009.

Photo by Ashley Henry, US Army

something from home (a photo, a toy, or some other artifact) that they would like to share with their teacher. Teachers also engaged their students in a brainstorming activity to reflect on important people, places, and things. Students thought about unique or special items that might be found in their homes, neighborhoods, or yards, or might be borrowed (with permission!) from family members and relatives. The teacher also encouraged students to recall expressions, nicknames and sayings used in their family, to describe food that makes them think of family, and tell about places in their homes where the family keeps their important memories. Linda Christensen describes this process in detail.⁶

Something Lost, Something Gained

The initial brainstorming process is critical because it allows participants to reflect on what is important to them as individuals and what they think of when reminded of home or family. These concepts and themes are universal, but at the same time are interpreted and practiced differently by different cultural groups and individuals and thus provide a simple yet deep way to explore cultural diversity. As such, this activity did not come without some risk.

One child, Linda, became very upset because the activity reminded her of her grandmother, who she had not seen in

many years and who she missed terribly. For that reason, Linda decided to write and create her multimedia project about a recent field trip to the top of a local mountain. Linda was very engaged throughout all of our sessions and was still able to share a story and her unique voice, but for some students, activities that ask them to reflect and share about family and home may bring up difficult or painful memories or feelings. This might pose special challenges for immigrant and refugee students, but these are important risks to take since all students have voices and stories that need to be heard.⁷

Drafting a Poem

The next phase of the project was actually drafting the poem. During this session, students were able to refer back to the examples provided by their teachers and recorded on their brainstorming sheets. More advanced students were able to use language in creative ways to evoke sights, sounds, smells, and emotions while other children’s poems were much simpler and more concrete. For example, Crystal utilized images, clip art, and text from various websites to compose her slides. While the majority of students chose to compose their poems in English, Manuel, a child who had arrived in the United States the previous January, composed his in both English and Spanish with the assistance of his teacher.

As these samples demonstrate, the project allowed students to use various modes of communication to express their ideas and identities. In both examples, students had selected images that best captured their personal narratives and were able to creatively improvise with images and texts. Since the teacher and student were composing these poems on the computer (using either PowerPoint or I-Movie), some creations included audio clips. Students used images they found on the web or they scanned images of photos brought from home. In merging these different modes of communication, our goal was to provide the students multiple points of entry and the ability to successfully complete the project at different levels of complexity.

A Storyboard

Next, we showed students how to create a storyboard using sticky notes and a simple graphic organizer. The assignment to create a storyboard challenged students to map out a sequence of images to illustrate their poems. An example of a storyboard was adapted from a template found at the DigiTales website to help students organize their ideas.⁸ After the students had constructed their poems, selected their images, and mapped out a tentative plan on their storyboards, they used either I-Movie or PowerPoint to organize their images and select transitions. Now they were ready to practice their narrations.

The purpose of using computers was to provide multiple tools for expression rather than to provide instruction on how to use specific software or hardware technology. If students wanted to use a particular technology to help construct their project, then we provided them with support and instruction as needed.⁹ To record their poems or narratives, most students used the computers' built-in microphones, although some participants did opt to use external microphones. Recording narrations required several attempts for some students, and there were a few who were uncomfortable with recording their own voices, but overall this aspect was straightforward and simple to accomplish.

Our Neighborhood Library

Throughout the WIF project process, there were crests and troughs in students' interest. Some struggled with the creating the poem, but were engaged in building the storyboard; others became quickly frustrated with the computer program. We looked for a way to build enthusiasm and maintain interest. Why not take this opportunity to share the lives of our students with members of our local community?

In our county, the public library hosts monthly book talks, "how-to" seminars, and various organizational meetings. With samples of works-in-progress, we met with library staff about a potential community sharing of the WIF Projects. The events coordinator looked over the projects with great enthusiasm, expressed an interest in scheduling our group, and even offered to promote our venue in the weekly library newsletter. This deadline made quite an impact on the students, to say the least. Flyers, in both Spanish and English, were constructed and distributed at the

school and around the community. The students and teachers worked feverishly over the next two weeks, finalizing the multimedia projects. In the end, 17 students produced a PowerPoint or iMovie with narration; the other four students decided to read their poems aloud as images were projected on the wall.

Sharing Our Work

On the evening of the event, we encouraged our students' families to come early to explore the resources available at the library and to consider bringing identification for getting a library card. While we did not get as many outside visitors as we had hoped, the room was filled with families and teachers.

Each child who took the stage was clearly proud of his or her work and excited to share with families and friends. At the conclusion, we served pizza, allowing families and guests to mingle and converse. It was a memorable event for all who attended.

The WIF project was an interesting way for students to explore and share their cultural identities with their teachers, families, and even the wider community. Teachers were able to expand their own understandings of "immigrants" or "English language learners." Students' poems and multimedia projects highlighted the dynamic nature of culture and cultural identity in ways that were natural and accessible. Such projects, highlighting the voices and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students, are crucial for developing literacy and positive school communities that are inclusive of all learners. 📖

Notes

1. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "English as a Second Language (ESL): LEP Headcount Data 2002–2007," esl.ncwiseowl.org.
2. The "Where I'm From" project was developed during the Tuesdays Tutors after-school program, which is a required component of the introductory teacher education course at Appalachian State University. Potential preservice teacher candidates work one-on-one with K-8 ELLs. Typically, the first ninety minutes of the Tuesdays Teachers program is spent on academic support and review; the remaining hour is spent on enrichment.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994). While Mexican-American culture and history may influence or be part of the social studies curriculum in other states, this has not been the generally the case in North Carolina. "Where I'm From" helped to fill this gap.
4. Linda Christensen, "Where I'm From: Inviting Students' Lives into the Classroom," in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, Volume 2, 6–9, Williston, VT: Rethinking Schools; George Ella Lyon. "Where I'm From," www.georgeellalyon.com.
5. Jim Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* 2nd ed (Los Angeles, CA: California Association of Bilingual Education, 2001).
6. Linda Christensen, 6–9.
7. Gerald Campano, "Honoring Student Stories," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (2007): 48–54.
8. Bernajean Porter, "Story Boarding Template," *DigiTales* (2004), www.digitales.us/resources/seven_steps.php#.
9. Students' selections of technology tools were mediated by the tutors, who had varying levels of comfort and expertise. Most of the elementary students used PowerPoint in this project. Student names are pseudonyms.

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