Digi-Journeys: Engaging Preservice English Teachers in Reflective Practice with Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

In this study, preservice English 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-Journeys.” Preservice teachers were not given a pre-determined structure for how to think through the process; rather they were given the freedom to depict their growth through critical reflection. The researchers found that Digi-Journeys illustrated the preservice teachers’ growth and demonstrated a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction.

Introduction

As two teacher educators involved in teaching methods courses at a major southeastern university, we constantly seek innovative ways to critically engage preservice teachers in reflecting on their new classroom teaching experiences. One of us works with instructional technology within the framework of the methods courses while the other specializes in English instruction. This research emerged from our search for innovative methods of reflection for our preservice teachers that fit within best practices.

Teacher education programs promote reflective practice to teach preservice teachers the concept of best practice whereby teachers continually evaluate the effects of their instructional methods and actions on students, parents, and the school community (Krol, 1997). Reflective practice often takes the form of written journals because they tend to be accessible and easier for students to maintain. However, as discovered through feedback in our own methods courses, while preservice teachers see the value inherent in reflective journals, they find written journals 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 teachers.

Self-reflection is an integral part of teaching, and when paired with visual imagery (e.g. through use of digital photography and video), it allows diverse student populations to see their progress (Salpeter, 2005), to better link theory with practice, and to monitor best practice (Wursta, Brown-DuPaul, & Segatti, 2004). Reflection is a key element in teacher expertise, and it occurs when individual teachers have the ability to notice their own role, which can often be accomplished through the means of video technology (Sherin & van ES, 2005). 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, digital storytelling seems a natural method of reflection for preservice teachers.

Background

Reflective Practice

Reflection has special meaning when applied to classroom practices. In this context, reflection works to close the gap between what teachers do in their practice and the actual outcomes; it recognizes that intended outcomes may not match with actual outcomes. Additionally, reflection requires that teachers think about the possible disconnect between intentions and results in a lesson, and it is this thought process that brings a deeper level of meaning to the teaching and learning experience (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey (1916), this thought process and the seeking of knowledge is integral to development. He asserted that all learning begins only when people realize they are comfortable that their ideas are inadequate for a task at hand. It is then that teachers must use the process of reflection to find a way to change for the better. In this way, reflection plays an essential role in teaching; 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, 1994). 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. The process of reflection possesses an aesthetic aspect, which can provide teachers with one for the most
authentic and practical means of reflection and learning (Eisner, 1998). Aesthetics are integral to the process of perception and of imagination, and visual imagery plays a role in these processes.

Both perception and imagination hold real-world implications in the process of learning, which in turn stems from experiences (Dewey, 1938; Schlechty, 2002). Eisner (1998) states, “All experience is the product of both features of the world and the biography of the individual” (p. 34). With this framework, reflective thinking can be seen to hold the learners accountable while still enabling them to portray their experiences in a light that they feel will best represent them.

Forms of Reflection

Multiple methods of reflection are available to teachers, including journaling, conferencing, and videotaping. Organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) rely on the method of videotaped reflection in order for practitioners to review their own teaching methods’ strengths and weaknesses so that they might make changes to improve their classroom practice. These videotaped teaching segments become a central artifact in their teaching portfolio. Videotaped reflection has been a method of reflective practice for teachers since the 1960’s (Sherin & van ES, 2005). Videotaped reflection serves as a catalyst for effective assessment of teaching, particularly student teaching (Jensen, Shepton, Connor, and Killmer, 1994). Using video as a means of self-study allows teachers to reflect on a single situation numerous times. Additionally, 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 in the profession, from novice to veteran, to critically reflect on and improve their practice. Sherin and van ES also note the importance of video reflection because it acts as a “permanent” (emphasis added) record of teaching and allows teachers to develop new ways of seeing what happens in their classrooms.

Elements of Digital Storytelling

Photo albums and the telling of stories through pictures and/or photographs have been around for ages (Lambert, 2002). 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). Digital stories present a way for teachers to draw upon their natural inclination to tell stories within the aesthetic framework of reflection. Digital reflections can also minimize the negative aspects of videotaped reflection that include cumbersome tapes and equipment as digital photographs do not require the same physical space.

A well-told digital story takes a series of still images and combines them with a narrated soundtrack in order to tell a story (Institute for New Media Studies, 2004; Kajder, Bull, & Albaugh, 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, & Albaugh 2005). The story and pictures must stir emotions and connect with life (Lambert, 2002). This does not mean that producers of digital stories must excessively utilize flashy transitions and loud music; in fact, according to Lambert, using spectacle diminishes the storytelling process. Spectacle 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 was to examine how a group of preservice English teachers used digital stories to critically reflect on their journey to becoming classroom teachers. The researchers have dubbed this reflective process through digital storytelling as “Digi-Journeys.” The research question guiding our inquiry was: How do preservice teachers portray their growth in a clinical placement through the medium of digital storytelling?

Methodology

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Methodology

The participants for this study were eleven preservice English teachers enrolled in teaching methods coursework at a southeastern university. Of the eleven participants, ten were female and one was male. All participants were Caucasian with the exception of one African American female. For the purpose of this study, pseudonyms are used in data presentation. The methods block consists of four courses (secondary English 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 photography and video technologies. During previous semesters, students were required to take, label, and display a series of photographs from their clinical placement, a process resembling scrapbooking. Additionally the English professor’s research on teaching methods class had shown that the students began to find reflective journaling tiresome. Therefore, in an effort to make the digital photography component and the reflection component of the portfolio more meaningful for the preservice teachers in their developmental journey, the instructor chose to shift the digital photography assignment to a digital story as a method to foster reflective practice among her methods students.

The class was assigned the task of taking digital photographs (students also had the option of scanning photographs to create digital files) 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 an accessible (and free Microsoft download) program called Photo Story 3. The students were asked to use the digital images and other elements of media, including text, music, and motion to reflect on their teaching journey over the semester. Using Photo Story to combine all these multimedia elements, the final product was produced and then saved as a Windows Media Player movie.

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 professional 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.

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-Journeys instead. The researchers wanted the preservice teachers to view their experience as more than a singular story but, rather, the first of many on their journey in becoming successful classroom teachers.

The researchers realized there was potential for discrepancy between what the preservice teachers intended to convey through their Digi-Journeys and what was actually conveyed. Therefore, 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-Journeys with the intention behind the creation of each one. However, the researchers did not read these statements until they had reviewed and analyzed the Digi-Journeys themselves.

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the Digi-Journeys in an effort to track the preservice teachers’ growth 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 as classroom teachers based on the choices they made.

When analyzing the category of text selection, the researchers viewed the Digi-Journeys 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 proved the most subjective. When analyzing this category, the researchers considered the way in which the music or audio selection enhanced or complemented the story. They also considered how the tempo of the music contributed to the pace of the story the participants were trying to tell.

When 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-Journeys, 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, 2002).

When analyzing the category of design, the researchers considered if the Digi-Journeys 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 the story and the purpose were lost within the “bells and whistles.”

The researchers viewed the Digi-Journeys 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-Journeys, 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-Journeys, 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, 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-Journeys 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. By directly speaking to their growth as teachers, these two participants demonstrated a high level of critical thinking in their reflection. 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 and shows reflection on this concept and her place in the journey of becoming a teacher.

While elements of story do not directly relate to the reflective process in a traditional sense, for these preservice teachers they do tie the reflection of practice and growth into the content they teach. The inclusion of text to signify sequence of story also demonstrates the role of cueing the reader— an application of visual literacy on the part of the participants. Finally, it shows that the participants are considering how to best portray their growth to viewers as they apply traditional conventions of story to cue the reader and clearly portray themselves (Eisner, 1998).

Another element of story that participants implemented in their Digi-Journeys 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 began 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 alludes that Megan was 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-Journeys 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.

Of the eleven participants, eight focused on both themselves and their students as subjects, while two focused solely on themselves and one focused only on students. Of the eight who focused on both themselves and the students, three had a clear shift in the focal subject as their placement progressed and they grew as teachers. For example, in early pictures, Megan showed herself in front of the class disseminating information, and in later pictures she showed herself circulating the room and interacting with 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.

Sarah’s Digi-Journey provided 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 subject focusing on teacher tasks, 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 from the beginning. Her photos showed the students as the primary subjects and her, as the teacher, facilitating their learning.

Table 1 details 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Title Slide</th>
<th>Conclusion Slide</th>
<th>Transition Words</th>
<th>Complete Sentences</th>
<th>Teacher as Subject</th>
<th>Student as Subject</th>
<th>Varied End-Mark Punctuation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X1</td>
<td>X2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X1</td>
<td>X2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X1</td>
<td>X2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Integration of Music

Interestingly, none of the participants implemented any music selections outside of those embedded in the Photo Story program. 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. However, 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 told the story of how she began teaching, talking to the students, and receiving minimal
participation. As she shifted her role to that of a facilitator, she changed the music selection to one with a faster tempo, reflecting a new-found energy of her classroom.

Intention in Creation of the Digi-Journeys

The participants were asked to write a statement of their intention of what they were trying to convey in their Digi-Journey. The researchers then compared the statements to what they perceived to be the message in each story. After reviewing the Digi-Journeys and then comparing them to the statements of intention, eight of the eleven participants’ intentions matched their Digi-Journey. One of the remaining three, Michael, wrote, “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.

Upon viewing Meredith’s 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 third participant of whom the researchers were uncertain. The issue of intention versus product message presents a limitation of our inquiry.

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, their focus shifts from themselves to the students and the instructional environment (Sherin & van Es, 2005).

Discussion

As indicated in the data analysis, the preservice teachers implemented many elements of story in their Digi-Journeys. 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-DuPaul, 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 could prove more efficient and accessible to classroom teachers wishing to implement digital stories for reflective practice (Burns & Koziol, 2006).

Conclusion

Digi-Journeys did prove an effective means of encouraging preservice teachers to reflect their growth during their clinical placements. They allowed 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. 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 can be incorporated into methods courses. University supervisors should implement a balance of reflective methods. Doing so will aid students in reflecting via multiple modalities and provide both students and university supervisors with a more robust perspective of preservice teachers’ growth.
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. Additionally, while the reflective focus in the methods courses used the medium of digital storytelling, the students were still required to write some reflections, albeit fewer than those enrolled in the methods courses in previous semesters. With the lowered requirement for written reflections combined with the Digi-Journeys, the preservice teachers complained less about using reflection methods than did their predecessors. Fewer student complaints alone do not serve as a basis for making pedagogical decisions, such as a reduction in the number of written reflections submitted; however, in conjunction with the level of critical reflection provided by the preservice teachers, it proves an added benefit for the teacher educators. The participants' feedback indicated that they enjoyed the process of chronicling their teaching through photography and reflecting on the photos to create their Digi-Journeys.

A method that many teacher educators utilize in their own instruction is modeling pedagogical approaches the preservice teachers might use in their own classrooms to promote critical literacy. Digi-Journeys not only allow preservice teachers a new mode to critically reflect on their practice and growth, but they allow a model for applying digital storytelling in their own instruction to push their students' development of technological, visual, and textual literacy. Digi-Journeys offers teacher educators a method for modeling the production of a critically literate product for preservice teachers while gathering necessary data to evaluate their growth and teaching them about reflective practice.

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