



# Lessons learned: Using the literacy histories of education students to foster empathy



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Literacy as a normative practice is challenged using [Barton and Hamilton's \(2000\)](#) view of literacy as historically situated.
- Education students questioned their notion of learning as they discovered it was different for their peers.
- The powerful affordances ([van Leeuwen, 2005](#)) of digital storytelling help authors tell their stories.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 August 2015

Received in revised form

18 June 2016

Accepted 28 June 2016

### Keywords:

Education students

Digital storytelling

Reflection

Difference

Empathy

Multimodal

Equity

Qualitative

Case study

New literacies

## ABSTRACT

In order for new teachers to foster equitable literacy learning environments, they must first understand the scope and variety of experience that will pervade their classrooms. The following multi-case study describes the potential of digital stories as an instructional tool in a literacy methods course at a northeastern university and college where the authors examined four digital autobiographical stories created by their students and the subsequent reactions to these stories by classmates. These stories were shared to allow the preservice teachers to reflect on social equity with a goal of building empathy.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Living in a safe neighborhood: Janette's story*

I grew up in the inner city of Cleveland. My neighbors knew me as the girl who always had her nose in a book. I didn't think I realized this, but reading became a way of escaping the hopelessness that surrounded me. In a book, I could meet interesting people ... these literary trips were my ticket to experiences that were off limits to me in real life, things like going to a movie, or

seeing a play, or eating at a restaurant ... I found possibilities in books; they enabled me to have nice clothes; to take vacations to a beach, but I think the most important thing that I got from a book was the ability to imagine that I lived in a safe neighborhood (Janette, teacher).

Janette, a preservice teacher, was reflecting on her time as a middle grader when reading provided an avenue for coping in the gritty urban environment that she lived in and the lack of resources that she had as a young adolescent. Her memory of reading is a clear connection to the *aesthetic* purpose of reading, where her transaction with text is purely for pleasure, and in Janette's case, for escapism ([Rosenblatt, 2005](#)). Janette's comment, which was an excerpt from a digital story assignment that she completed for a

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literacy methods course, raises an important point about the diversity of literacy experiences that preservice teachers have, and the potential for drawing from those experiences later on when they support their own students' literacy development. Janette's comment also suggests the importance of knowing how the scope and variety of literacy experiences that students bring into the classroom will have implications for shaping how language and literacy is utilized in the classroom. Awareness of one's own literacy autobiography can help teachers better understand the kind of interactions that students have with literacy development, delving deeper into a student's narrative of motivation, or resistance, to developing it.

Starting with self-awareness and engaging the notion of what signals as difference for each individual seems critical particularly for beginning teachers who are preparing to work with a diversity of learners. According to Johnson (2005), what constitutes as "normal" is a matter of one's social construction of reality, and "how people notice and label and think about such differences and how they treat other people as a result depend entirely on ideas contained in a system's culture" (p. 19). This article describes the potential of digital stories as an instructional tool to foster teacher education reflection that engages this notion of difference and how it may relate to equity. We (the authors) examined four digital stories that our students created to begin to understand how they view difference and equity in the context of their own stories. These education students were tasked with identifying who they were as literate beings and analyzing how they got there. In addition, we asked our students to document initial reactions to each other's stories upon viewing them. We posed the following research question: How do these digital literacy autobiographies motivate education students to reflect on issues of difference and equity thereby fostering empathy?

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Equity and literacy education

Fostering the importance of cultural-relevant pedagogy is a common element of most teacher education programs, but there are differences in how educators may refer to and describe *culturally relevant* teaching, and even more, how to approach teaching it (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lazar, Edwards, & McMillon, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Much has been written internationally on equity and social justice in teaching and teacher education programs (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Banks & Banks, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2010; Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Gay, 2010; Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Mosley, 2010; Jones & Enriquez, 2009; Kaur, 2012; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Whipp, 2013) signaling a continuing challenge for schools everywhere to provide equitable learning for all learners. Associating literacy education with equity reinforces the idea that we cannot teach students how to read, write, and engage multimodal literacies without also teaching them how to think critically and problem-solve in a democratic society (Hall et al., 2010; Lazar et al., 2012; Mikkelsen, 1990).

In this study, we use Gorski's (2014) definition of *equity literacy* as "the cultivation of the skills and consciousness that enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to educational and other opportunities enjoyed by their peers and, in doing so, sustain equitable learning environments for all students and families (p. 19)." Gorski acknowledged the challenge with using different terms in school communities to describe equity and diversity including cultural competence, and he was also concerned about making the distinction between equality and equity. According to Gorski, equality represented the

idea of sameness meaning equal resources, which did not always necessarily result in equity for all students. For example, this idea of sameness is reflected in the institutional services U. S. schools provide for children such as special education and reading services promoting the idea that equity can be leveraged as a result of these services. Gorski argues that equity should also hone in on what counts as equitable recognizing the diversity of backgrounds that represent all students regarding gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, disability, social class, or religion. This concept of equity literacy focuses specifically on skills and dispositions that teachers should incorporate to create equitable teaching for all learners.

A philosophy of education that promotes an awareness of the needs, interests and characteristics of students is instrumental in creating schools that structure their own thoughtful visions and policies centered on the unique experiences of its learners (Brinegar, 2010). Motivating teachers to explore more nuanced views of equity and diversity themselves or with their students has been taken up in the research literature in several ways through the lens of language perspective (Cole et al., 2012), discussions of racism and White privilege (Flynn, 2012), and service learning and identity (Harrison, 2013). Despite these studies, there is still a need to explore literacy research and equity with preservice teachers to which this current study hopes to contribute.

The issue of equity in literacy is also relevant here, as the authors suggest that according to Barton and Hamilton (2000) "the notion of *literacy practices* [and *literacy learning* - authors' emphasis] offers a powerful way of conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape" (p. 7). In order to create equitable literacy learning environments, teachers must understand the range of experiences and meanings that their students have about literacy.

### 2.2. New Literacies and digital storytelling

What literacy "is" has been a much researched topic and has been explored alongside the question of how it should be measured. Scribner (1984) noted that "[Literacy] inevitably involves social analysis: What activities are carried out with written symbols" (p. 6). Functional literacy has mostly been defined as the development of skills (traditionally reading and writing) (Goodman, 1980; Halliday, 1978; Heath, 1987) and the proficiency level at which they should be acquired for individuals to succeed or *function* in our world. Although we briefly summarize the definition here, the description does not account for the complexity with which it has been problematized, politicized, and explored (Scribner, 1984). However, it has pushed our understanding for exploring literacy as a social practice and laid the groundwork for what we now understand as the multiple natures of literacy or New Literacies (Gee, 1996; Perry, 2012; Street, 2003). It is this concept of New Literacies and the sociocultural practice of using different literacies to communicate, not functional literacy, that is of interest to our study.

Digital storytelling is central to the theoretical framework for this article, as it proposes a connection between the technical aspect of literacy and the social construction of literacy. The social is rooted in one's own historical development of literacy, which Barton and Hamilton (2000) explore:

Literacy practices are culturally constructed, and, like all cultural phenomena, they have their roots in the past. To understand contemporary literacy it is necessary to document the ways in which *literacy is historically situated*: literacy practices are as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part (p. 13).

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