

Possibilities for digital storytelling for language and literacies learning

What this research was about and why it is important

A growing body of case studies shows how teaching practices that draw on youths' everyday meaning making, including their digital literacies, effectively engage English learners in academic learning that affirms their identities. In this case study, we explored the potential for digital storytelling to draw from the fuller context of the lives and literacies of youth from refugee backgrounds to enhance language learning and identity affirmation. The study's findings show that multimodal meaning making used in digital storytelling can enable communication of complex, critical understandings; enhance development of digital literacies competencies; make visible the challenges of communicating in digital spaces; and encourage investment in identity affirmation in language learning.

What the researchers did

- The study took place in a secondary school in the Metro-Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. Approximately 20% of the students in this diverse school are from refugee backgrounds.
- We designed a two-part inquiry-based project. In part 1, the students explored as curricular content the themes of anger, love, fear, health, safety, freedom, trust, and hope. In part 2, drawing from their understandings and personal experiences, the students individually engaged in a digital storytelling project. Three experienced film-makers facilitated through a series of structured steps. On completion of their digital stories, students had the option to participate in a public exhibition in the school.
- We observed teaching and learning practices during a unit of study on big emotions; had informal conversations with students and teachers; conducted interviews to gain insight into students' digital composing processes; and collected students' presentation posters, digital portfolios, writings and reflections, storyboards, and final digital stories as well as the teacher's unit and lesson plans and reflections.

What the researchers found

- By using multiple representational resources for meaning making in digital spaces, the youth were able to communicate complex and profound critical thinking in language (written text and voice over) and other modes.
- The youth revealed their existing and developing competencies regarding critical digital literacies.
- Youth stretched their linguistic mode in English to complement their other relatively more advanced visual and musical modes of representation; they faced difficult choices in the digital composing process about what content to share; which genre/s to use; whether and how to create affect.
- By linking the curricular content via inquiry to students' interests and experiences, the youth were deeply invested.

Things to consider

- Digital multimodal composing can afford youth from refugee backgrounds opportunities to agentively frame their representations of themselves, reveal their competency in digital literacy practices, share and take pride in their knowledge about real-world issues as they communicate it to audiences, express and process their emotions, enhance their language learning, represent and reposition their identities, and narrate their lived experiences.
- Innovative pedagogies such as digital storytelling that build upon and enhance the literacies and representational practices of students from refugee backgrounds also have the potential to enable more independent language learning and identity affirmation, and to create space within the curriculum for stories that have deep meaning for learners.

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