Finding Latino/a Voices in the Storytelling Process: Preservice Teachers Tell Their Stories in Digital Narratives

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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

By focusing on the issues of teaching and learning in culturally diverse settings, theorists (e.g., Vygotsky, Hanfmann, & Vakar, 1986; Giroux, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003) identify the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory. The sociocultural framework places people in living situations in their world and views them from within their cultural, social, and political settings. Rather than living in isolation, people are a part of a bigger social context that involves their social, political, and cultural worlds. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes that students' cultures *do* matter in teaching and learning environments. Learning cannot take place in the classroom when students experience a discontinuity, or a mismatch, between their home culture and the school culture (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

An undeniable relationship exists between language and culture. Language, a medium for the expression of one's thoughts, is shaped by the values and customs of society. Therefore, language instruction must incorporate authentic cultural elements in order for language learners to achieve true fluency, a tenet of social learning theory defined by Vygotsky et al. (1986). Language development is achieved more effectively through balanced literacy frameworks comprising interactive approaches to learning to read, write, think critically, and express oneself orally. Therefore, culture, literacy, language, and learning are integrated events that define the model of balanced literacy development implemented in the teacher education program in this study. By recognizing the students' existing sociocultural backgrounds, teachers bridge the gap between teaching and learning, thus enabling students to make integrated connections to their worlds (Freeman & Freeman, 2015).

CONNECTING SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY TO CRITICAL LITERACY

Teaching literacy is broader process than simply teaching students how to read; rather, it includes the concept of Freire (1993) of reading their worlds and understanding the global interdependence and interconnections that are changing the world today. Freeman and Freeman (2006) depict critical literacy as "literacy that helps readers understand their own history and culture, and how they fit into and also shape the social structure" (p. 88). They propose a sociopsycholinguistic approach that focuses on reading as "a process of constructing meaning from texts within a social context using background knowledge, psychological strategies, and linguistic cues" (p. 26). In this critical literacy model, children begin reading and writing by building on their heritage language. By integrating their heritage language

into the learning process, families become integral parts of the literacy process, which demonstrates the value of their home culture and language. They read and hear stories about their family backgrounds from the storytellers in their lives. As they begin learning more and more about their cultural background, they begin connecting their stories about family, traditions, values, and beliefs to the literature they learn in school. Freeman and Freeman (2006) found that when the value of the students' home language and culture are brought into the learning process, students are encouraged to value their heritage. They build on their prior knowledge of language and learning by developing literacy in both their home and school languages.

STORYTELLING AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Throughout history and in many different parts of the world, historians and storytellers have found stories shared by diverse cultural groups. The beauty of the oral tradition, shared by all the world's cultures, is that the storyteller retells family stories to maintain traditions, teach lessons, and share historical perspectives. Anderson and Folley (1998) posit that stories construct meaning and build community. The structure of the story is defined by time and narrative, so stories can connect the storyteller with the stories' listeners. The connecting act of telling a story brings groups of people together.

In order to tap into the time-honored literary tradition of storytelling, teacher educators can guide preservice teachers in the creation of stories that document the oral traditions of their family. Beginning with oral language and following with the written story, teacher educators build a strong literacy framework by providing a platform for their students' diverse voices. Viewing culture through the lenses of sociocultural theory, preservice teachers discover that they can connect to their future students in meaningful ways. Revealing these connections through storytelling illuminates the cultural elements shared by people bound together through geography, language, and traditions. The exercise becomes even more powerful when oral stories are converted to visual and auditory stories that incorporate computer-based images, text, audio narration, video clips, and music. When the oral storytelling tradition merges with the multiple modes that characterize 21st-century literacies, the cultural and emotional barriers inherent in school-based printed literacies are weakened considerably (Toohey et al., 2015).

In the dominant European–American culture, however, teachers often continue to describe literacy from the perspective of reading a book (Agosto, 2012). They value the time spent reading a literature book with

their students or the act of reading at home with a family member. They assign students books to read at home with their parents. Too often, students hold their heads in shame when they report that their parents are unavailable for nighttime, at-home reading assignments. Parents' shift work and varying levels of English proficiency compromise their capacities to read to their children at home. As a result, students feel embarrassed when they are unable to complete these assignments.

Many times, teachers overlook the value of other forms of literacy, particularly storytelling. Coming from linguistically different cultures, the preservice teachers in this study described how they had felt left out of the literacy process when their own teachers had used books as the most important form of literacy. When students were encouraged to include storytelling as a part of their literacy development, they described with enthusiasm their family stories told by valued family members. They described the act of storytelling as a vital part of their literacy development. The students found that the power of the story was valuable to them, whether it was in the form of a book or an oral tradition.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR USING STORYTELLING WITH HERITAGE-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS

Traditional storytelling, rich in vocabulary and highly interesting, stimulates the imagination of the listener and evokes the five senses as a story comes to life in the listeners' minds. Theoretical support for using storytelling as a method to teach language, which in reality is tens of thousands of years old as a method for teaching first language (L1), is recently gaining traction under the umbrella of a method for teaching heritage or second language (L2) called Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), and sometimes Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS).

This newly recognized teaching model for second-language acquisition uses a combination of reading and storytelling to provide students with comprehensible input (Valeri, 1998), the cornerstone of the seminal work of Krashen (1987) on language acquisition. Developed in 1990 by Blaine Ray, a Spanish teacher (Davidheiser, 2002), the instructional method is designed to follow the total physical response (TPR) model, in which beginning language students respond physically to commands given in the imperative form. This limited teaching method, perfect for beginners, develops listening skills in the target language. TPRS provides beginning–intermediate and intermediate language students with more advanced comprehensible input in detail-rich narrative and descriptive forms of speech. The additional task of converting these oral stories to a

digital format provides students with valuable, transferable technology skills.

Storytelling in the form of a digital story enhances the familiar format of an oral story with digital images and emotive background music. Additionally, the act of creating, viewing, and discussing stories told in a digital format—a familiar language structure presented in a modern format—lowers the affective filter, thereby allowing students to acquire language in an anxiety-free environment. Krashen (1987) contends that language learners with a low level of anxiety possess a necessary affective trait for language acquisition. Similarly, the preservice teachers in this study experienced a lessening of anxiety as they openly shared their cultural identities. By experiencing the process firsthand, they could readily acknowledge how powerful this process could be for their future students.

METHODS

In this study, 15 students in a bilingual (Spanish/English) education teacher preparation program created digital stories to reflect upon their cultural identities and the important cultural elements of their lives that had led them to a career as bilingual education teachers. Students explored their cultural identities by naming the social markers in their lives as described by Nieto and Bode (2012) and claimed their identities by writing their own cultural identity stories. The research questions were these:

1. Will preservice teachers increase their cultural competence through reflective writing and storytelling by retelling and writing their family stories?
2. Will preservice teachers increase their multicultural awareness through reflective writing about their own stories from the storytellers in their families (e.g., parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) who tell family histories, folktales, legends, and fairy tales?

CREATION OF THE DIGITAL STORIES

In creating the digital stories, the preservice teachers followed the writing process by first using prewriting activities to brainstorm ideas of ways to name their culture (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Through a series of guided journal prompts using excerpts from emotionally based narratives by Latino(a) authors, they described their traditions and family stories that were important to them (Table 1).

Table 1. Journal Prompts for Personal Narratives.

Writing Prompt	Literature Selection(s)

How did you get your name?	Ada, A. F. (1995). Names and surnames. In *My name is María Isabel* (pp. 7–12). New York, NY: Athenaeum Books for Young Readers Cisneros, S. (1980). My name. In *The house on Mango Street* (pp. 10–11). New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries
What are some special memories of your family?	Cisneros, S. (1980). The house on Mango Street. In *The house on Mango Street* (pp. 3–5). New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries Cisneros, S. (1980). Hairs. In *The house on Mango Street* (pp. 6–7). New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries
What were some embarrassing moments in school for you?	Anaya, R. (1992). Seis. In *Bless me, Última* (pp. 59–67). New York, NY: Grand Central
Who were the storytellers in your life?	Villasenor, V. (1991). Foreword. In *Rain of gold* (pp. 9–11). Houston, TX: Arte Publico

Next, each participant chose one narrative to develop into a digital story. Working with partners in peer conferencing sessions to read, edit, and rewrite their stories, the preservice teachers wrote their stories in a storyboard format as preparation for conversion to a digital visual format in Microsoft Movie Maker or Photo Story 3. After incorporating photos, music, and film clips with their written narratives, the preservice teachers presented their digital stories to the whole class.

DATA COLLECTION

In the research study, the data collection was completed in two cycles. The first cycle consisted of five students, and in the second cycle 10 students completed the project. In the first cycle, the students focused on learning to use the digital story software, Microsoft Movie Maker and Photo Story 3, to create their stories. Therefore, they had a relatively short writing period in which to develop their story ideas and create their digital stories. In the second cycle, because of the students' advanced knowledge of the digital story software, they devoted more time to the writing process. The stories

that the participants developed focused on their families and how they were connected through traditions, family histories, or descriptions of life events. They reported that by following the writing process, they were able to explore many ideas and concepts about their families and cultures. They had several story ideas to choose from, and each of them finally selected the story that held the most importance.

The participants in the first group chose to write about their family members. For example, one participant described an event in which her father took her to a baseball game. Another participant described how her grandmother had suffered with dementia before she died. Yet another wrote about a painful event during which she was a bone marrow donor for her little brother, who had cancer. Poignant and emotional, these stories revealed deep family ties and valued family connections.

The participants in the second group wrote about family traditions. Two participants wrote about how their families celebrated Easter and Christmas, while one participant described her wedding in Oaxaca, Mexico. Several participants shared special events in their families' lives, such as the birth of a little brother or of one's own child, growing up playing sports, and loving a family pet. One participant began describing her love for jewelry. As she continued, her story evolved into a description of her daughters. By the end of the story, she had crafted a narrative about the love she had for her family through the life events that they had experienced around their dining room table. The participants affirmed that they wanted to show the importance of their families by describing traditions and family gatherings.

SETTING

The study was conducted in an urban education teacher preparation program within a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution in the south central part of the United States. The participants were preparing to become bilingual education teachers in a Spanish/English program. All of the participants were immigrants or the children of immigrant parents from Mexico or Central America. The participants were identified as teacher candidates because they were in the last stages of a teacher preparation program.

DATA ANALYSIS

Using narrative analysis, the researchers explored the depth of cultural reflection and realization documented in the future bilingual education teachers' digital stories. Initially, the researchers coded themes within the narratives to compile the data into conceptual components. Next, the

researchers viewed the digital narratives a second time, performing a constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) of the initially coded themes with newly emerging concepts and categories. Once the coded categories had emerged, the researchers linked them to existing theoretical models of cultural and linguistic identity to determine whether the digital narrative process provided a platform for the development and expression of this identity in preservice bilingual education teachers. The entire process was replicated with an analysis of reflections written by the preservice teachers after they had viewed their peers' digital stories. The researchers used ATLAS.ti 7.0 software to analyze the data collected from the digital stories and reflections, a commonly used platform for qualitative analysis and research (Lewins, & Silver, 2007).

RESULTS

During the creation of the digital stories, the participants began to change their thinking processes about how they wanted to express their cultural identities. They explored the different ways in which their colleagues shared their stories. Then they described how that process influenced them in reflecting not only on their own stories but also on how they could share additional stories by using the digital story process. The participants asked if they could continue the study by completing the next assignment in the digital story format. They wanted to write about their cultural identities by using a digital narrative process rather than the traditional written paper. As the professor of both classes, I wanted to honor the student-led process they had initiated by giving them the opportunity to change the assignments (Vygotsky et al., 1986). This created a truly student-centered learning process because the participants found new and exciting ways that they wanted to use to integrate digital narratives into their learning processes. As a result of the interventions of the study, the participants experienced shifts in their cultural perspectives and developed new and innovative ways of exploring their cultural identities.

Some of the themes that emerged from the data analysis of this study showed how important it was for the students to work through the writing process to develop their stories. The participants realized that they had important autobiographical stories to tell. They discovered that they wanted to develop their stories carefully to honor the persons who were in the stories. Gaby reflected emotionally about the development of her story with her brother who needed a bone marrow transplant:

> *De este proyecto aprendí que no es tan fácil de hacer como parece. Se tiene que escoger bien las imágenes de las que uno quiere*

hablar, escoger las palabras adecuadas y el tono de voz para que los oyentes puedan sentir lo que uno está tratando de transmitir. También aprendí que esta es otra manera de poder desahogarse si se trata de una historia triste o es una manera de hacerle honor a alguien o expresar el cariño que uno siente por algo o por alguien. En mi caso, siento que muchas de las cosas funcionaron bien. Tuve muchas fotos de las cuales escoger y también representaban lo que yo estaba queriendo expresar. Lo que si fue difícil fue representar algunos sentimientos porque es muy difícil capturar una imagen cuando uno está sufriendo por algo malo o mostrar el proceso de algo. Antes de encontrar las imágenes de caricatura del proceso del trasplante de medula, se me hacía difícil poderle hacer entender a los oyentes como funciona ese proceso. Quería que vieran lo que con lleva ese trasplante y afortunadamente encontré las imágenes. Otra parte que se me hiso difícil fue contar esta historia, ya que la enfermedad de mi hermano es algo con lo que tengo que ver y vivir todos los días y el haber tenido la muerte cara a cara, por así decirlo, me ha dejado con estragos emocionales. Cuando estaba grabando la historia de Luis, se me quería cortar la voz. Pensaba en lo poco que mi hermano a vivido, en lo mucho que le falta por vivir, que él tiene todo el derecho de vivir y en que yo no me imagino poder vivir sin él. No estoy preparada para un golpe tan duro, pero a la vez, creo que nadie nunca lo está.

In this project, I learned that it was not as easy as it sounded. You have to choose the images that you want to use carefully, and the right words and tone of voice so that listeners can feel what one is trying to convey. I also learned that this is another way to let off steam if it is a sad story or a way to honor someone or express the love you feel for something or someone. In my case, I feel that many of the things worked well. I had many pictures to choose from and also represented what I was trying to express. What was difficult was to represent some feelings because it is very difficult to capture an image when one is suffering from something bad or something to show the process. Before I found images of picture drawings of the marrow transplant process, I found it was hard to be able to understand how it works. My brother wanted them to see what was involved in a transplant, and unfortunately I could not find some pictures to use. Another part that I found difficult was to tell this story because my brother's illness was something I had to see and live every day and I had to face death, so to speak, I was an emotional

mess. When I was recording Luis's story, I thought about how little my brother lived, how much he was missing in his life. He had every right to live, and I could not imagine living without him. I was not ready for such a blow, but at the same time, I think no one ever is.

Leticia described how she felt about developing the story about her father and the memories they shared with each other. She wrote this:

> *Me gustó mucho poner el proyecto en conjunto. Me dio tiempo para reflexionar sobre mi padre y llevado en muchas cosas que no he hecho antes. Puso mi mente y mi corazón en lo que sentía por él y su enfermedad. Fue emocionante imágenes tiran al recordar los buenos y malos momentos que hemos compartido, o pasamos. Aprendí una historia puede ser contada con sólo unas pocas palabras. Las imágines tienen un poderoso significado.*

> I liked putting the project together. It gave me time to reflect about my father and took me back to many things that we did together. I remembered how I felt about him and his illness. It was emotional to remember the good and bad moments or times that we shared together. I learned that a story can be told with just a few words. The images had a powerful meaning.

Participants' reflections also revealed the theme of technological hurdles. The participants identified challenges in learning the digital story program. They found that working through the writing process helped them develop stronger stories. They used the support of their classmates to learn the digital story program. Sandra described her experience as she learned Photo Story 3:

> Using Photo Story3 was a new experience for me. I did not know it existed; in fact, I was intimidated by the program, but once I began working with it, the program was not that difficult. The process of choosing the story to share was more difficult. I was unsure of what to share because I normally do not air my personal stories or feelings with strangers. However, choosing the topic was not as hard as putting the story together. You want your story to be worthy of someone watching it, so the pressure adds up to make the story entertaining and real at the same time.

Jenny found the process of developing her story exciting and empowering. She wrote:

> *Aprendí a manejar este programa por mi misma, me gusto mucho y disfrute mucho haciéndolo. Anteriormente lo había hecho en un trabajo de grupo pero esa vez fue diferente, yo colaboré con una parte del trabajo y ahora lo hice yo solita ya que era una autobiografía.*

> I learned to manage this program for myself, I really liked and enjoyed doing it. Previously I had done this as a group project, but this time was different, I did all of the work myself because it was an autobiography.

Geo described his process in learning to edit his story and how his confidence grew:

> Working on this project was a new experience in using a computer program that deals with video editing. At first, I thought it was going to be overwhelming because I am not photogenic, meaning I don't take many pictures. So it was going to be difficult for me getting hold of pictures. Second, I had never dealt with video editing software, so I had no clue how I was going to put together what I kind of had in mind. I had no clue how I was going to edit the audio, the timing, the pictures, and most importantly how it was all going to be compatible with other computers. Fortunately, I got the hang of the video editing program, and slowly but surely everything was successfully completed.

Letty described her experience as one that merged her tentative application of technology and her developing writing process:

> I was familiar with other programs used for digital stories but I had not used this software before. Not only did I learn a new software, but I also learned how to tell a story using pictures and my voice. What went well for me were the memories that came along as I put the story together. Also, once I had a title, everything else came into place because I had the idea from the beginning of what I wanted to say but I didn't know how to say it.

The participants also recognized the importance of their stories as they began to think about teaching in the classroom. They realized that their stories did matter and that they were important stories to tell. Consequently, they determined that their future students would also have important stories to tell. They wanted to continue the process of telling their stories in their future classrooms so that their students would be able to create their own digital stories. As future teachers, the participants hoped that they would be able to develop the storytelling process further, creating meaningful ways to integrate literacy development with their future students' cultures and identities.

CONNECTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

The participants in this study immersed themselves in what Pesado Palmieri (1995) defines as the three components of culture: *lengua*, "language"; *fe*, "faith" or "religious traditions" and *sangre y tierra*, "blood and soil." These are the allegiance, heritage, and roots of a culture that identify cultural identity. Similarly, Nieto and Bode (2012) referred to these components as language, faith, and heritage. These components gave the participants a place to name their own cultural identity. By looking at specific events in their lives, such as the birth of a child or the celebration of a tradition, they were able to claim what was important to them. The participants recognized that they did not live in isolation; rather, they emerged from the digital narrative process as members of a social context characterized by their social, political, and cultural worlds.

The participants reported they could tell their stories in unique ways through the digital narrative process. They said that because they had explored their cultural identity through the social markers described by Nieto and Bode (2012) and the cultural elements described by Cummins (2000), they were able to pay attention to and technologically highlight the details that were truly important to them. As they began to develop their stories, they found that the simplicity of the stories highlighted the personal importance of the narratives. The stories the participants chose to tell represented who they were and what they valued. They were proud that their stories described their cultural heritages and their families. In recognizing the importance of their families' traditions, the participants expressed a marked sense of pride when they shared these stories with others.

The participants in this study discovered that combining a writing process of personal reflection with their knowledge of literacy development and practice enabled them to create digital narratives depicting the important stories of their lives. When producing these narratives, students

mined their journals for compelling stories, located relevant images and music, and then created fresh interpretations of their chosen personal narratives. Ultimately, the combination of literacy skills and technology skills enabled them to integrate their life stories into a sociocultural framework and a balanced literacy program. These preservice teachers realized that their cultures did matter, as Ladson-Billings (1995) describes, and that their life stories could provide the connections they will seek with their future students.

DISCUSSION

Through the lenses of sociocultural theory and critical theory, the preservice teachers applied the cultural elements or components that they could use in several writing processes to explore their bilingual/bicultural identities and, as a result, become the storytellers of their own lives.

For possibly the first time, these preservice teachers identified their cultural identities. This self-reflection gave them the opportunity to reflect on their lives and the lives of their families as the storytellers of their lives. They saw how the storytellers in their lives followed patterns in literacy, capturing the traditions, values, and desires that their families claimed for them. The preservice teachers realized that it was now their time to become the storytellers for their families. They found that as they used the tools of the writing process and the digital media, they could capture the essence of their cultures and identities. The preservice teachers delved deeper into their life stories in order to discover the essence of what was important to them and their families.

The preservice teachers in this study had been successful in school. They demonstrated this by graduating from high school and progressing toward university degrees with teaching certifications. They were the ones who surpassed their immigrant parents' dreams for their success. They not only graduated from high school and contributed to the family income but also became teachers in urban schools. They learned that through the power of self-reflection, they could maintain the cultural identities of their parents and grandparents while simultaneously taking on new traditions and values in their current cultural identities. They were able to name what was important to them, let go of what they did not need, and claim their own bilingual/bicultural lives. This created a sense of belonging with their families and with their school families. As they told their stories, they became culturally literate about the elements of their lives that made them uniquely Latino/a, an important competent of their preparation for a career in bilingual education.

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