

Multicultural Media Authorship

Using Technology to Create Children's Literature Texts

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Introduction

It is final exam week. Yet, rather than completing a traditional final cumulative test, teacher candidates in an elementary social studies methods course present their multicultural children's literature texts, which they have created as part of the course's emphasis on media authorship and project-based learning. The assignment guides teacher candidates through the design and layout of their texts using an online publishing tool called Student Treasures.

Teacher candidates choose multicultural-themed topics related to the history and diversity of people in the Southeast region of the United States. Teacher candidates draw from multiple resources to create their children's literature text. The text includes: (a) a narrative story; (b) an author's note about the resources that are drawn on to create the text; (c) pictures, interviews, historical documents, and primary source images; and (d) a reflection. As part of that reflection, teacher candidates share what they gained from the project.

One teacher candidate responded with the following reflection:

By writing this book, I have gained a deeper appreciation for Latino culture. The book

gave me the opportunity to talk with Latino students and families at my clinical school. Most of my time spent using technology is for watching Netflix and listening to music. But, authoring this book gave me the opportunity to actually use technology to create. I am happy with my book and plan to include the book in my classroom library in my future classroom.

The teacher candidate's quote reflects how media authorship is one of the affordances of the Internet and educational technology. By media authorship, we mean a person who designs and creates texts. We assert that texts are anything meant to communicate which can be read (Freire, 1970; Freire & Slover, 1983). Texts can include everything from books, memories, multimedia, posters, and signs, to newspapers and textbooks. Digital technologies—like the publishing websites on the Internet—democratize and speed up the process of authoring user-created content. Technology puts authoring tools in the hands of everyday citizens so that people can communicate their ideas.

Clearly, technology makes media authorship more accessible. Researchers posit that media authorship represents a mixing of knowledge and skills which reflect the multiple ways people use technology to communicate (Byker, 2013, 2015, 2016a; Byker, Xu, & Chen, 2015; Byker, Putman, Handler, & Polly, 2017; Zhao, 2010). According to Zhao (2010), using technology to create is a world-class skill that has even greater value than traditional skills like computing and keyboarding.

Professional organizations also extol the importance of the use of computer technology for creativity and media authorship.

For example, creativity anchors many of the standards for the International Society of Technology in Education's (ISTE) (2007) Technology Standards for Students. Standard six—the Creative Communicator standard—states that,

Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats and digital media appropriate to their goals. (ISTE, 2007, para. 9)

Focusing on what students and educators can actively create with technology is part of the larger vision of using digital technology to enhance learning.

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2014) also locates media authorship as a twenty-first century skill. Specifically, media authorship resides in the skill of achieving communication through multiple forms of text.

Media authorship also pairs well with cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2002) by utilizing multicultural forms of writing. Grant (1994) asserts that the practice of writing is a high impact strategy for integrating multiculturalism into teaching and learning. Villegas and Lucas (2002) explain how writing and reflection are ways that teacher candidates can be orientated toward a commitment to students who differ from the dominant culture and represent cultural diversity.

The purpose of this article is to describe and report on how a group of teacher candidates used technology to create multicultural texts which integrated literacy and social studies. To meet this purpose, we briefly describe the objectives of the assignment, examine 41 teacher candidates' perceptions

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of the assignment, and discuss media authorship technologies that educators can use for the creation of multicultural digital texts.

Multicultural Children's Literature Text Assignment

The Multicultural Children's Literature Text assignment is an example of technology-enhanced, project-based learning. While this assignment can be modified for the K-12 classroom, we designed the assignment for teacher candidates preparing to become elementary and middle school teachers. The project emerged from a collaborative effort by the authors, who are College of Education professors at a large research university in the Southeast region of the United States.

Two of the authors teach elementary literacy methods and two teach elementary social studies methods. We use a co-teaching model in these methods classes to help support the teacher candidates in making cross-course connections among the skills and content. Writing pedagogy is the major focus for the elementary literacy course. Teacher candidates practice the process of writing by investigating the features of multiple genres by reading and analyzing well-written texts (i.e., mentor texts). Then, teacher candidates write their own children's literature book, using mentor texts and authors as guides for their work.

The development of social studies pedagogical knowledge—including how to teach about culture and diversity—is a major focus of the elementary social studies methods course. The Multicultural Children's Literature Text assignment integrates the cultural awareness components of social studies through a literacy project. Teacher candidates apply the writing skills they learn in one methods course to then write a children's book with multicultural themes during the social studies methods course.

The project's scope and sequence is supported over an entire semester. The supports include: (1) local museum visits to explore special exhibits about the cultural diversity of the region, (2) a children's literature author visit, (3) research and writing workshops in which teacher candidates investigate primary sources and write an author's note about their topic, and (4) technological play times (Byker, 2016b) during which teacher candidates explore the Student Treasures technology to design and publish their multicultural children's literature books.

We have adopted the following objectives for the Multicultural Children's Literature Text assignment:

1. The assignment supports teacher candidates' content knowledge development of creating multicultural children's literature text to explore cultural diversity.
2. The assignment strengthens teacher candidates' pedagogical knowledge of ways to use technological tools to create texts that raise awareness about the cultural diversity and representations of diverse groups in the United States.
3. The assignment prepares teacher candidates to integrate subject area skills and content knowledge through the authorship of text.

Teacher Candidates' Perceptions

We used a mixed-methods research design (Creswell, 2014) to investigate the 41 teacher candidates' perceptions of the process of creating and publishing their Multicultural Children's Literature texts. Creswell (2014) emphasizes that mixed-methods research design "includes the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to triangulate findings" (p. 217).

We collected quantitative data with a Likert scale survey. The survey was designed as a 19-item pre and post questionnaire that included questions about media authorship, integration, and multiculturalism. Qualitative data were comprised of teacher candidates' open-ended responses on the questionnaires as well as artifact analysis of their actual children's literature texts.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the Likert scale survey questionnaire. We furthered analyzed the questionnaires' open-ended responses to identify the teacher candidates' perceptions of the assignment. We analyzed the qualitative data using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant-comparative method based on a three step interpretive process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, all the artifact data were read. Then, data were coded and organized into categories. Finally, categories were analyzed and compared to identify larger themes in the data. We report these themes as the larger findings of the study.

Findings

Three themes emerged from this study. First, teacher candidates developed great-

er confidence about including multicultural texts in their future classrooms. On the pre-survey more than 20 percent of the teacher candidates indicated they felt unsure in response to the statement:

I feel confident that I can include multiple perspectives and texts to connect with the diversity in my future classroom.

On the post survey, all the teacher candidates either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. Another survey question asked the teacher candidates to respond to the following statement:

I feel confident that I can create and use different genres of text to connect with the diversity of learners in my future classroom.

On the pre-survey, about 25 percent of the teacher candidates indicated they either didn't feel confident or they were unsure about how to create different genres of text. Although on the post-survey, all the teacher candidates affirmatively responded to this statement with more than 40 percent strongly agreeing that they can create and use different genres of text to connect with the diversity of learners in their future teaching.

Second, teacher candidates developed greater aptitude and skills for creating multicultural texts with the aid of technology. This theme was evident from the teacher candidates' survey data and from their reflections. The survey questionnaire included the following statement:

I know technological tools to use in order to create digital texts.

On the pre-survey, 15 percent of the teacher candidates indicated they were unsure or disagreed with the statement. On the post-survey data, all the teacher candidates agreed with the statement and over 53 percent strongly agreed. The assignment also developed the teacher candidates' conception of what it means to be a media author.

In their open-ended responses, teacher candidates shared how the project provided the opportunity to explore the affordances of using technology for media authorship. Here are two examples of the teacher candidates' reflections:

I enjoyed this assignment because it gave me a new way to see how technology can help my writing. In the future, I hope to write and publish books with my students in order to teach them about the content areas.

Something that was valuable about this

assignment is that I got to create a book for the first time and I learned how tangible it is to do this with Internet websites. I learned from this project that I am media author and future students can be, too.

These quotes reflect the lasting impact of this assignment on teacher candidates' conceptions of what it means to be a media author and the technological tools to do so.

Third, the assignment equipped teacher candidates with a greater awareness of the creation and inclusion of multicultural texts in their future teaching practice. Here are some direct quotes from the Author's Note section, which the teacher candidates penned at the end of their multicultural children's literature texts:

I want to aim to make sure that the next 500 years include many more authors of color by using and creating more books that embody diversity and the lives of many different types of children.

Writing a book about immigration has been a very eye opening experience for me. The book is not just about labels that we use sometimes unknowingly, it is about getting ourselves out of our own shells and lives to think of others.

Immigrants and refugees often get treated in inappropriate ways, they are dehumanized and it's seen in the everyday language people use when talking about them. It's seen in newspaper articles, online sources, political discussions, and every day talking amongst neighbors, friends, even strangers.

Much of children's literature is not as multicultural or diverse as we might think. I wrote this book to address the lack of culturally diverse children's literature available to today's students. I believe that children need to be able to see themselves in literature in classroom libraries.

Discussion

As the findings show, the Multicultural Children's Literature Text assignment made a significant impact on the teacher candidates who participated in this study. Not only did the candidates become more skillful with using technology for media authorship, but they also become more committed to utilizing multicultural and diverse texts in their future classrooms. The project demonstrates how subject area skills and knowledge can be integrated through a focus on multiculturalism, technology integration, and the use of multiple perspectives.

For this assignment, teacher candidates used the Student Treasures website (Link: <http://studenttreasures.com/>). Student Treasures

provides an online publishing template that runs 13 pages. The template includes a basic layout and design for the book's front cover, title page, content, and illustrations. Users create the book using this online publishing template and then have the option to purchase a hard copy of the text, which Student Treasures prints and publishes.

The Student Treasures system is just one example of a digital technology for media authorship. Educators can also explore the plethora of online publishing websites available on the Internet. Each of these sites has its own niche in terms of its purposes and user-friendliness. Some are free to use while others are fee-based or operate as a subscription service.

The Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (Link: <https://kdp.amazon.com/>) website allows users to create and author multiple text genres as well as publish their text on Kindle and distribute the text on Amazon. Another online publisher is Lulu (Link: <https://www.lulu.com/>) and Lulu Junior (Link: <https://www.lulujr.com/>), which is a kid-friendly version of Lulu. The Lulu Junior website includes hard copy kit creators and online publishing tools that kids can use to publish their own texts.

Finally, the Storybird website (Link: <http://storybird.com/educators/>) offers a unique tool for online publishing and media authorship. The tool starts with pictures and illustrations in order to inspire kids to write texts. Professional illustrators share their pictures and images on the Storybird website and student users can select and organize images to create a story that is inspired by the professional illustrators' pictures. This is a unique and playful approach to media authorship, which shows how the collaborative spaces made available by digital technology can inspire creativity and cultural responsiveness through writing.

Recommendations

As a school subject matter, social studies is often marginalized in the school day, especially in elementary schools. Projects like the Multicultural Children's Literature Text assignment provide a pathway for teacher candidates to explore how to integrate social studies with effective literacy practices.

We recommend more research be conducted related to the design of teacher-authored, multicultural children's literature. Research questions to guide future investigations might include: What makes for effective design of these texts? What

pictures and illustrations are included? How does the writing connect with the everyday lived experiences of children in schools? How does the writing connect with the diversity within the school community?

Additionally, we suggest and hope to see more research related to how teachers and teacher candidates use the multicultural children literature they have authored in their teaching practice. Do they read their books aloud? Do they use their books as a writing model? Do they implement similar kinds of user-authored multicultural texts with the kids in their classroom? These are all questions calling out for further examination.

We also recommend more research related to the affordances and constraints of using digital technologies to integrate culturally responsive pedagogies with media authorship. Gay (2002) uses the term "cultural scaffolding" (p.109) to explain how teachers help support cultural diversity in the classroom by connecting with the cultures in the classroom in order to expand the empathy and academic language of all children in the class.

We are interested in the degree to which the Multicultural Children's Literature Text project could be a multicultural scaffold in a diverse classroom. Future research questions might ask: How do multicultural texts—like the ones authored by the teacher candidates in this study—reflect cultural responsiveness? What are the challenges and dangers of user-authored texts related to issues like stereotyping and cultural appropriation? What is the role of digital citizenship related to media authorship and the use and remixing of Internet images?

Media authorship requires a certain degree of technological skill and understanding of what it means to be a digital citizen. Digital citizenship involves the ethics and etiquette of using the Internet and digital tools. There is a whole body of research yet to be thoroughly explored related to culturally responsive literacy, digital citizenship, and media authorship.

Conclusion

In this article we describe how elementary education teacher candidates authored cultural responsive texts by creating multicultural children's literature books using online technology. We also highlighted a few of the online publishing tools available for educators and a simple Google Search will likely uncover more. These tools all support media authorship.

Paulo Freire (1970) contends that education is the development of a critical consciousness through acts of literacy that equip learners to read and re-write the world. This article showcased how teacher candidates use computer technology to author multicultural texts, which they then incorporate in their future teaching practice.

Such media authorship enriched the learning of the teacher candidates in this study and also helped them connect with the cultural diversity represented by the children who will likely in the future read the multicultural texts the teacher candidates have authored.

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