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TELLING OUR STORY: USING DIGITAL SCRAPBOOKS TO CELEBRATE CULTURAL CAPITAL

Clarice M. Moran, *Kennesaw State University*

This design was intended to act as a template for technology integration for preservice teachers in an English language arts class. However, the unintended result was a celebration of cultural heritage and increased classroom community. Through the project, 23 preservice teachers used online tools to design digital scrapbook pages that reflected family ancestry and life histories. Participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds celebrated their unique names and cultural capital.

Clarice M. Moran is an Assistant Professor of English and English Education at Kennesaw State University. Her research interests include technology integration in English language arts and English teacher preparation.

INTRODUCTION

Situated in an English language arts (ELA) university methods class, this curricular design case was intended to provide preservice middle grades ELA teachers with an idea for integrating technology with literature in their future classrooms. The preservice teachers (n=23) were seniors at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States and were in the fall semester of a year-long program that led to licensure in middle grades ELA and social studies. However, the end result of the design was an unexpected appreciation of the preservice teachers' *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1977). Cultural capital is a construct devised by 20th Century French thinker, Pierre Bourdieu, who said that one's dress, mannerisms, accent, and other cultural markers could help or hinder one's social progress. DiMaggio (1982) has used the term to discuss cultural hierarchies and success in schools. Celebrating cultural capital is appreciating speech, dress, background, and unique ways of being.

Initiated on the premise that digital tools promote student engagement and interest (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013); I embarked on this project to encourage the participants to use technology in conjunction with teaching literature. The idea was to participate in a lesson that the preservice teachers then could duplicate in their own future classrooms. The lesson involved coming up with symbols, pictures, and images to illustrate the participants' names on a digital scrapbook page. Creation and presentation of the scrapbook page was meant to bridge the preservice teachers' own lives with that of a character's (Beers, 2003). This also was intended to lead to self-reflexivity (Smith & Watson, 2010). However, an unintended result of the design was an appreciation for ancestral background and cultural capital, as well as livelier and more engaged classroom discussions.

Participants used digital poster creation tools such as Glogster (http://www.glogster.com) and Canva (http://www.canva.com) to design a digital scrapbook page that reflected their names, their family ancestry and their own life histories (see Figures 1 and 2). The preservice teachers discussed their own complicated relationships with their names after a reading of Cisneros' (1984) *The House on Mango Street*—a young adult novel in which the main character reveals that she hates her name. After interviewing family members and researching their names' etymology, participants wrote short essays and uploaded personal photographs and symbols to use in the creation of the digital autobiography pages. The preservice teachers read their essays and presented the pages to their peers. A genuine community emerged in which people from all backgrounds were embraced and ethnically diverse names were appreciated.

CONTEXT

This project, like many projects, was born from frustration. Preservice teachers taking an ELA methods course at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States had segregated themselves into ethnic and racial groups at the beginning of the semester—a practice typical for this university. Non-White (Black, Latino/a, Native) students sat together, and White students sat together, and very little interaction took place between the groups. Although

there was no overt racism or apparent microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yasso, 2000), the participants simply did not mingle with each other. Classroom discussions consisted of a few intrepid souls raising their hands, but there was no cross-classroom conversation, and small group work did not seem to help matters. As part of the regular curriculum, the class read Cisneros' (1984) novel about growing up as a Latina girl named Esperanza. The lesson focused on the chapter titled "My Name" as a model for a project that would be appropriate for a middle grades language arts class.

The original lesson plan idea was for participants to copy Cisneros' writing style, but insert their own name history. In the chapter, Cisneros (1984) writes that her name in English means hope and that it belonged to her great-grandmother, who was born in the year of the horse. Cisneros (1984) writes, "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (p. 11). She goes on to write, "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees" (p. 11).

FIGURE 1. Michael's page. Family photos and representations of his name featured in Michael's design. Michael also chose to use the slide share feature in the online tool Canva to explore several facets of his identity.

The participants were directed to imitate the structure of the "My Name" essay as a way toward developing their own writing style (Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2012). Afterward, they consulted their family members and did some research about the etymology of their names on the Internet in order to acquire enough data to write an essay similar to Cisneros'. However, students' initial explorations into their names yielded a colorful picture of the classroom's ethnic diversity. Students were fascinated to learn how they were named, for whom they were named, and what their names meant in Latin or Greek. When they shared these findings, the classroom conversation was more electric than it had been all semester.

DESIGN PROCESS

I had toyed with the idea of letting the future teachers bring in a family photo or object of significance and simply discuss it in order

FIGURE 2. Amy's page. Symbols and text were incorporated in the final design to promote an identity of power and strength.

FIGURE 3. The design process for the project. Students conducted research first, then practiced with digital tools, and finally, created their scrapbook pages.

to increase their engagement with the essays. However, in a previous class session, I heard several of them expressing their love of social media sites with photography, as well as digital photography. It was clear a visual project might have more weight with them. I discussed options with our departmental librarian, and she suggested digital scrapbooking. The plan was hatched to allow the preservice teachers the space to explore their identities through family photos, as well as symbols and images—all uploaded digitally so that they could emphasize important images by making them larger or de-emphasize lesser images by reducing them. They would be able to choose the way their peers "saw" them, and they could implement the project easily in a future public school classroom.

Step One: Researching Names

Participants first were instructed to research their names by talking to their family members and looking their names up on the Internet. This was the first step in the design because students needed some historical background on their names before they could begin to write (see Figure 3). Participants gathered data on their first and last names, then used the information to write essays imitating Cisneros' (1984) "My Name" chapter. The goal of this writing exercise was to increase their fluency and "give a reason to write" (Robb, 2010, p. 105). After the essays had been completed, they were shared in small groups.

Step Two: Practicing With Digital Poster Creation Tools

After researching their names, students were introduced to several free online platforms that provide a way for users to create multimedia posters and flyers. They were encouraged to create "throw-away" digital pages of canned images on these sites to become familiar with the way the tools worked. Beers (2003) advises against a "just do it" approach, and this is also important when using technology. Hicks (2013) suggests that students need scaffolding and practice in order to become comfortable with a new digital tool. They also must learn to be deliberate in their choices, rather than just inserting random images or text (Hicks, 2013).

I emphasized that the preservice teachers should conduct this project inside their future schools' computer labs so that all of their future middle school students would have equal access to the technology. I suggested that the project also may help bridge the divide between the middle schoolers' digital literacies outside the classroom and those inside the classroom (Kajder, 2010), meaning that students would be able to bring into school any knowledge or skills they had acquired on computers outside school. And, I revealed that I was using the project to capitalize on their interest in social media photography.

Step Three: Creating Digital Scrapbooks

After settling on their favorite digital tool, the preservice teachers were instructed to create a digital page that visually described their names and their identities or personae. Each page was required to have a minimum of four pictures and to use visual images in an intentional way. Participants were encouraged to use family photos, as well, to emphasize the historical and familial ties that make up one's identity. Students made specific design decisions based on the social image and identities they wanted to advertise to their peers. They drew on their cultural capital to portray themselves in the way they wanted others to see them. They selected photos and symbols as evidence of their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonalez, 1992, p. 133), or rich bank account of experiences, to create their visual identities. They chose photos that broadcast a specific facet of their beings that they wanted others to understand. One Black student, for example, chose to emphasize her racial identity and blackness (see Figure 4), while another Black student chose to promote her personality characteristics. These photos and personally significant symbols and images revealed a surprisingly complex and diverse group.

The participants uploaded their completed projects to the methods class Wiki site. This allowed all participants in the course to view each other's scrapbook pages and added a degree of permanence to the project, because the Wiki contents remain even after the course has disbanded. The pages were reviewed in a digital show, and each preservice teacher described his or her process of choosing photos, as well as the design decisions that were incorporated in creating the digital scrapbook.

EXPERIENCE OF THE DESIGN

The participants were drawn initially to the Cisneros (1984) text because the narrator was highly relatable. The book is commonly read in middle grades ELA, so it was important for them to be familiar with it in order to demonstrate mastery of the ELA curriculum. They said they appreciated the narrator's honest assessment of her family, and they seemed

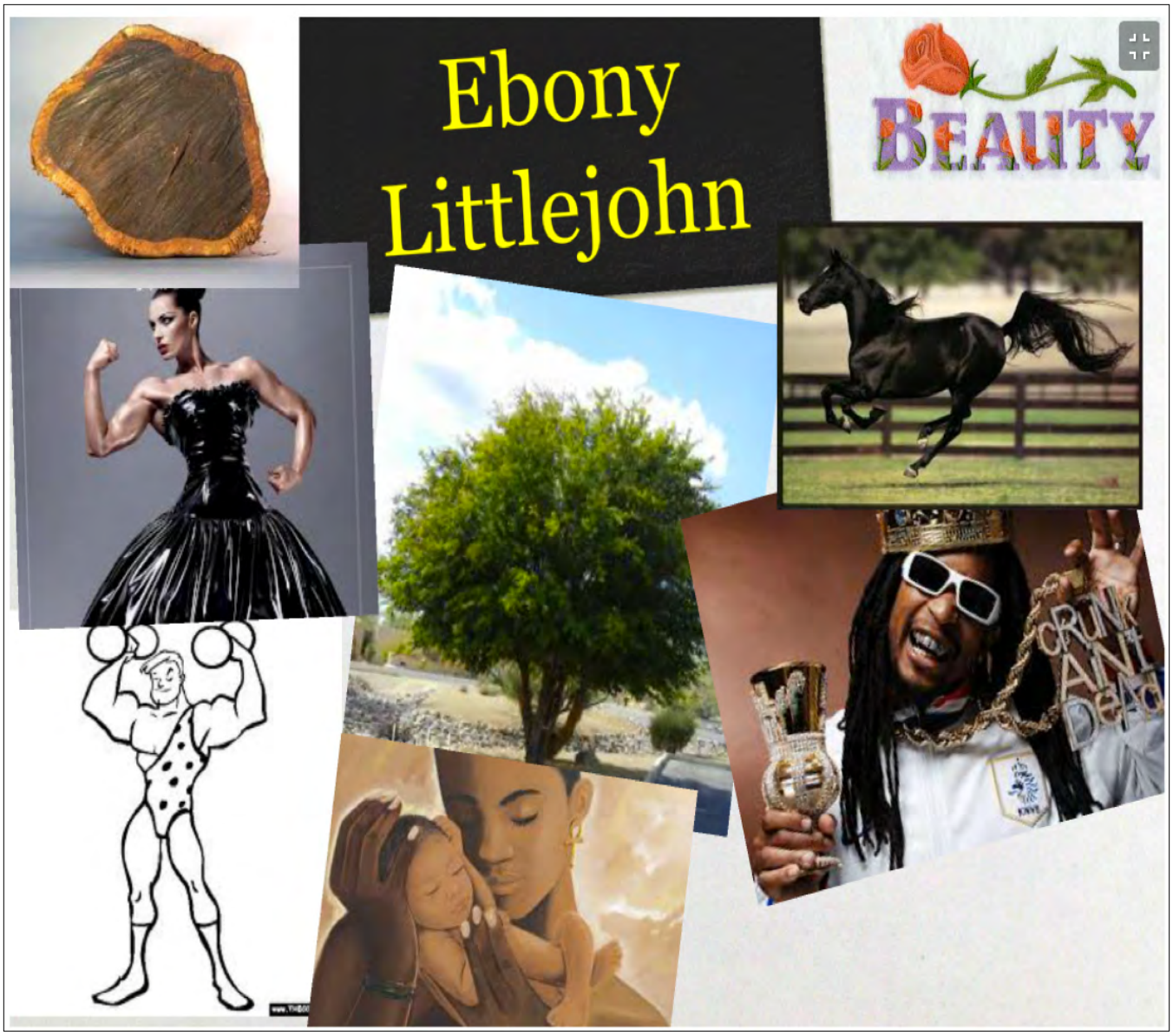

FIGURE 4. Ebony's page. Symbols of empowerment and representations of the words "ebony" and "Littlejohn" (and an allusion to the rapper Lil' John) were used to emphasize Ebony's racial identity.

more willing to discuss their own families' imperfections and annoyances after reading their essays in small groups and viewing the completed digital scrapbook pages. This led the participants to find common ground as they realized that all families—no matter the color or ethnicity—share some similar traits. Learning that the narrator was jealous of her sister, for example, allowed the students to talk about their own aggravations with siblings.

The discussions that evolved from this activity seemed to ignite the previously taciturn students. I was very surprised when the students openly began discussing their own family issues and squabbles in small groups. I circulated among the groups, pulling up a chair to listen, but I did not speak. I wanted them to connect with each other—not me—and find community through discussing the literature (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013). I was silently thrilled, however, when I saw White students begin to understand that a name like "Ebony" was special to a Black student and a source of pride. I had not witnessed any of my White students saying disparaging things about ethnic-sounding names, but I had heard other White students commenting and joking about names like "Shaniqua" or "Jesus." After a student—I will call "LaToya"—shared her name history and revealed that she sometimes felt embarrassed by its strong Black association, I saw a few of my White students look down at their desks, and I read their downward gazes as shame. Likewise, Black students appeared surprised that a common White name like "Amy" had complex familial associations (see Figure 2).

Initially, the students were shy about discussing their names, and I fully expected they would relate a few facts about their names' etymology in a practiced, report-giving voice devoid of emotion. However, their pride surprised me when they presented their finished products. They had done much of the work outside of class—because we met only once a week—so I had not witnessed any particular epiphanies regarding the assignment. Yet, as they began to discuss their findings—and display their digital creations—a new feeling came over the room. There was a reverence that had not been there previously. When students such as "Ebony" came forward to speak with fierceness, there was applause from all students when she said she was proud to be Black and proud that her name was a symbol of Blackness.

One White participant had a very unusual name and was rarely addressed by it. I had not heard a single student call her by her name. She quietly shared her own conflicted relationship with her name, reading:

> *"My name is complicated. There are no websites to describe it or provide a definition. In fact, one website claimed I was lucky to be named what I am because it's a name that is searched less than five times a year on Google. Interesting. My mom named me after herself, my uncle and my Poppop."*

After reading aloud her story and showing her scrapbook page, this student was addressed by name by her peers for the rest of the semester.

As students viewed each other's projects, they made specific, positive comments of support. For example, one Native American participant told the story of how his surname had been changed from "Feather" to another more common surname by government workers. In his initial essay, he wrote:

> *"My family were members of the Bird Clan. Although the Cherokee clan system was forced out by the white government, there are still those who cling to the old ways. As such, my family is very traditional and steeped in the old*

FIGURE 5. Sarah's page. Family photos emphasizing her Korean background, as well as Korean writing, were used to promote her cultural identity.

ways. As the song goes, 'although I wear a suit and tie, I am still a redman deep inside.'

This traditionalism resulted in my family having the last name 'Feather.' Even though there were Scottish settlers named 'Bell' who mixed with my Great Grand Mothers side, we hold firm to the Red Road.

I carried this name until I was enrolled into [deleted] public schools. In order for me to attend school my family was forced to give me a 'proper surname.' It was literally drawn out of a box at the council house."

Prior to sharing his name project, he had sat alone toward the back of the class and remained very quiet during discussions. After he had shared his name project, his peers remarked how "interesting" his heritage was and made eye contact with him for the first time. At the next class meeting, he positioned himself closer to the front of the room and began to talk with another male student during classroom breaks.

"Sarah" used the project to promote her Korean background, since she had been called "Asian" by her peers and wanted them to understand this term was very broad. Her lesson was that "Korean" described her far better than "Asian" and that non-Asians tended to lump everyone west of Russia together as one population (see Figure 5). While this was not a revelation to me as a teacher, it did cause me to question whether I had unconsciously lumped Asian students together, rather than thinking about their specific countries of origin. At that moment, I relinquished some of my power and, along with the other students practiced what Freiro (1970/1993/2011) describes as "co-intentional education" (p. 69), in which both students and teachers create a new understanding about knowledge.

In subsequent writings and their own lesson plans, students began to parrot back to me the importance of celebrating their own future students' cultural capital. On end-of-semester projects in which students were asked to design a unit of study, all 23 participants included a lesson or portion of a lesson that examined their future students' names or family histories.

The digital scrapbook project facilitated increased conversation as the students began to talk more to each other and write increasingly about the importance of celebrating heritage. I had not envisioned this result. My initial plan was simply to introduce the participants to an idea for use in their classroom—an idea that would link literature and technology and capitalize on their love of photographs. However, after finishing the project, it appeared that students who previously had been silent (such as the Native American) found more gravitas. This Native American participant wrote in a journal entry:

"Amazing how much you learn about someone from this simple exercise. At first I was embarrassed to share my experiences, but then I learned while sharing that [names] help make us who we are."

I had hoped and expected that students might use the name project as a way to respond to each other in a more personal and authentic way (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013). Yet, the design facilitated a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural differences, which I had not anticipated. The specific features of the design that contributed to this celebration of cultural capital were the commingling of research with visual imagery and the personal sharing of the finished products. Students researched their names—some for the first time in their lives—with an amazement that an aspect of their identity was worthy of classroom study. They also listened to the warbles and emotion in their peers' voices as they presented their findings. If I had simply posted the products in the room or on the class Wiki site, I do not believe they would have had the same impact as when the class heard the voice of the creator while viewing the creation. The design allowed me to use alternative means for the students to express themselves—a key consideration in multicultural education (Gay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

In educational philosophies that students wrote much later in the semester, the idea of inclusiveness and classroom culture remained with them. One White male student wrote of the importance of "*honoring all students' backgrounds;*" a White female wrote that she wanted to "*make sure that individual students' needs are met through an inclusive and collaborative classroom.*" A Black female wrote, *"Community is important when in the classroom because other people can provide support, assistance, and friendship."*

DESIGN FAILURE

Although the project succeeded in creating more classroom community, there were several design failures.

Not all participants put equal effort into the project. A few students resisted the "artsy" nature of the project and voiced their dislike of such a "babyish" design creation in a college course. They did not see the benefit of exploring names and identities, and their projects consisted of the minimum four images, most of them gleaned in a five-minute search on Google.

In addition, although they spoke up more, students did not change their seating arrangements. The class discussions were much livelier, and the students appeared to be friendlier to each other, but the Black students, in particular, continued to sit together in one group. This was discouraging. Marshall (2002) says such groupings are likely unavoidable since cultural synchronization usually results when Black students prefer to sit in social groups in which their behavior, language, and worldviews are valued and affirmed.

Therefore, in the following year, based on experiences with the design, I set up expectations for the project ahead of time and made strategic decisions to seat students in groups that I had created. I deliberately seated students of different races and ethnicities in the same groups and began discussions early on the importance of honoring our students' backgrounds and cultural capital. I also paired the digital scrapbooking activity with a chapter from Hicks' (2013) book on the importance of digital imagery in writing. The digital scrapbooking project seemed to make more sense in this context, and students more readily accepted the concept of constructing identities through visual images.

CONCLUSION

Since its initial inception, the project has become a mainstay of the methods course for the past three years. The results have been the same each time: increased community as students learn about each other, appreciation for classmates' uniqueness, empathy for common human experiences, and a celebration of the unique cultural capital that each student possesses.

As one White female participant wrote about her own desire to use the project in her future classroom:

> *"I want to create an open environment because of the bad teachers I had that made me feel like my ideas weren't important and also have an environment that allows students to work together to get to know each other and collaborate. I want students to be free to share their accomplishments within the classroom without judgment."*

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