

Digital Stories: Using an Arts-Based Approach for Social Justice

Learning

Christine Cho

Julie Corkett

Abstract

This paper explores the use of an arts-based assignment, the creation of a digital story, in a mandatory Diversity and Inclusion course for Bachelor of Education students (future educators). Our paper explores the rationale for using experiential learning to develop students' social justice self-efficacy to counter dysconsciousness and outlines the process we implemented to scaffold the students' creation of their digital stories. It is our belief that through the creative, interactive, and reflective process of an art-based assignment, TCs become cognitively, somatically, and emotionally absorbed in a process that encourages critical awareness and, ultimately, transformation.

Keywords: experiential learning; arts-based learning; social justice; equity; diversity; teacher candidates

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Story is learning, celebrating, healing, and remembering. Each part of the life process necessitates it. Failure to make story honor these passages threatens the consciousness of communal identity. Honoring a life event with the sacrament of story is a profound spiritual value for these cultures. It enriches the individual, emotional and cultural development, and perhaps ultimately, the more mysterious development of their soul.
(Lampert, 2010, p. v)

Context

The authors both teach several sections of a mandatory Bachelor of Education course, Diversity and Inclusion. It should be noted that most teacher candidates (TCs) in the programme represent dominant or privileged groups in the teaching profession. For example, in an anonymous on-line survey taken by the instructors at the start of the course in the fall of 2023, 84% of TCs identified as middle-class, 87% identified as heterosexual, 92% identified as white, 95% were born in Canada, 92% indicated English was their first language, 75% identified as Christian, and 62% identified as cis-female and 35% as cis-male. Similar statistical demographics are collected at the start of the course every year. The TCs' representation has consistently represented the dominant or privileged groups.

Freire (1970) argues that to challenge and change dominant discourses, critical social consciousness is required. Critical consciousness requires students to acquire a deep awareness of the social constructs that affect their lives (Darder, Baltodando & Torres, 2003). Many TCs inhabit a state of dysconsciousness, something King (1991) defines as “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). For social justice change

to occur in schools, the future teaching workforce (TCs) must develop social justice self-efficacy (Miller et al, 2009) to challenge their state of dysconsciousness and examine the invisible internal and attitudinal dimensions of privilege (Sensöy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Using an Arts-Based Approach to Foster Deeper Thinking

As instructors of a diversity and inclusion course, one way in which TCs block and resist the content of the course is through their use of the social justice language. We have found, like Matias and Grosland (2016), that TCs are apt at using the politically correct verbiage associated with social justice but do so without feeling a deep connection to those words and their implications, beyond the purpose of using social justice rhetoric as a means of obtaining a good grade in the course. As such, we choose arts-based assignments to press TCs to connect with their own positionality in relation to social justice work (Cho, Corkett, & Pitcher, 2022). Arts-based assignments enable us to integrate authentic aesthetic and intellectual work, which incorporates the principles of performance accomplishments. Rather than simply regurgitate facts and theories, we use experiential learning to prompt TCs to apply their knowledge and skills in a unique and original manner (King et al., 2009; Kraehe & Brown, 2011). Arts-based assignments facilitate vicarious experiences, as through art TCs share diverse perspectives. In developing their arts-based assignment, TCs provide each other with constructive feedback and encouragement. The feedback serves as verbal persuasion that reinforces TCs' self-efficacy through their belief in their ability to address social justice issues. Thus, through authentic artistic expression, TCs are exposed to a broader range of experiences, foster a collective sense of empowerment, with an aim to connect with social justice issues on a deeper level.

Arts-based assignments also enable us to consider TCs' emotional states that often cause tension when confronting one's positionality in relation to social injustice. Since art-based

assignments are an authentic aesthetic experience that is nurtured through interactive reflective problem finding and solving, it generates a constant recursive process; as the art speaks back to the artist thereby continuing to transform their knowledge and understanding (Kraehe & Brown, 2011). Through the creative, interactive, and reflective process of an art-based assignment, TCs become cognitively, somatically, and emotionally absorbed in a process that encourages critical awareness and transformation (Kraehe & Brown, 2011). This process results in the manifestation of meaningful insights (Dewey, 1934) and enhances self-efficacy.

The Digital Stories Assignment

Every year, we expand, refine, and re-imagine our assignments, and in doing so, we identified a need to scaffold the arts-based approach for our students. Specifically, we noticed that TCs were either focusing too much on the creative process to the neglect of content or were focusing too much on integrating social justice terminology to the neglect of a personal and emotional connection to the content. We chose, therefore, to scaffold the TCs' learning through a digital story assignment that made direct connections with the textbook we use in the course: Sensöy and DiAngelo's (2017) *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Critical Social Justice Education* (Second Edition).

The digital story assignment we designed for the course connects with chapter 11 of the course text, common rebuttals, or the "yeah, but..." objections to common issues in social justice education. These rebuttals include: Claiming that schools are politically neutral; Citing exceptions to the rule; Oppression is just human nature; Insisting on immunity from socialization; Ignoring intersectionality; Refusing to recognize structural and instructional power; Rejecting the politics of language; Invalidating claims of oppression; oversensitivity; Reasoning that if choice is involved it can't be oppression; Positioning social justice education as

something “extra”; and finally, Being paralyzed by guilt (pp. 202-215). These rebuttals are the topics we invite our students to shape as digital stories. The digital story assignment requires TCs to develop responses to the common rebuttals and to explore the statements, questions, and opinions that serve to redirect, ignore, or negate the lived experiences and narratives of those historically marginalized. TCs are asked to work in a group of four and, from their own positionality, as well as drawing from current and relevant academic research, create a digital story that inspires viewers to think differently about the rebuttal.

Digital storytelling is a well-established assignment in higher education courses that have a social justice focus (Chan et al., 2017; Grant & Bolin, 2016; Neely et al. 2023) and can either consist of a personal experience or, in case of our course, use a fictional narrative representative of their positionality to enhance the viewer's understanding of an issue. The purpose of the digital story is to provoke thought, reflection, and discussion with the intent to increase TCs’ confidence when addressing social injustices. For us, a digital story has the express purpose of telling a story through the creation of a narrative presentation mediated by images, text, narration, sound, and video (Chan et al., 2017). By exploring the concepts in the course through storytelling, TCs are provided with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of complex ideas and learn about their personal subjectivities (Brushwood Rose, 2009; Chan et al., 2017; Matias & Grosland, 2016; Neely et al., 2023). Furthermore, the slower pace associated with the development of a digital story provides students with the opportunity to engage deeply with the topic (Chan et al., 2017; Neely et al., 2023) and engage in interactive reflective processes associated with an authentic aesthetic experience (Kraehe & Brown, 2011). The TCs’ narratives serve as powerful tools for empathy and understanding. As TCs develop and share their digital stories it allows their peers to vicariously experience the emotional and

intellectual aspects of navigating social justice issues.

Methodology

At the conclusion of our course, after obtaining REB approval, a link to an anonymous survey was sent to all TCs enrolled in our sections. Participants were asked to complete a 30-minute (approximately) survey asking them to provide general demographic information (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, age, ethnicity, race) and answer 13 short answer questions and 3 Likert Scale questions administered via Qualtrics software. All responses were anonymous. The link to the survey was open for 6 weeks following the end of the course. We sought to explore how the digital story assignment influenced students' social justice self-efficacy and to identify places of evasiveness or reluctance to engage with challenging topics and concepts. To structure our paper, expand on the assignment's design, and provide clear instructions to students, we turned to Lampert's (2010) Digital Story Cookbook. The cookbook offers seven key guidelines for creating a digital story which include: Owning Your Insights; Owning Your Emotions; Finding the Moment; Seeing Your Story; Hearing Your Story; Assembling Your Story; Sharing Your Story. Throughout this paper we explore each of these guidelines in relation to our assignment and some of the participants' responses.

Owning Your Insights

"Finding and clarifying what a story is really about isn't easy. It's a journey in which a storyteller's insight or wisdom can evolve, even revealing an unexpected outcome" (Lampert, 2020, p. 10).

The first task was for TCs to form their groups of four. Initially, we had created an online sign-up sheet through the BlackBoard platform. We asked TCs to form their groups through the self-enroll option. As the second week of classes began it was apparent no groups had been

formed. One possible factor was that TCs had not yet read Chapter 11 of the text. It was clear that TCs needed time in class to interact with each other to determine who they would like to work with, see what topics they were drawn to or more comfortable with, and to determine if they understood what the rebuttal was referring to. It was also clear they needed to sign-up in real time and so we carved out that space in class during the second half of the week, something we will continue to do, moving forward. Most students did not care which topic they covered, rather, who they worked with was paramount. However, a few TCs were very drawn to certain topics and were open to working with whoever else wanted the same topic. For the most part, groups formed organically.

We then invited TCs to watch samples of digital stories either from the previous year's classes or samples found online (some professional, some amateur). The goal was to help the TCs grasp different approaches for expressing their insights through a digital modality. By providing samples of digital stories, TCs gained knowledge and began to formulate their approach to their own digital stories. We explicitly stated that our focus was on the communication of ideas and insights rather than a Hollywood-esque production. Another key point that we emphasized was to avoid a recorded PowerPoint presentation with voice over, encouraging, instead, a narrative that would evoke an emotional response from the viewers. We encouraged the TCs to reflect upon their audio and visual choices as they can play a key role in shaping the emotional content of the story. TCs were guided through the practical aspects of the assignment including suggestions for using their phones to record and introducing them to some free software that could facilitate the creation of their digital stories. We eased TCs fears about acting on screen by promoting creativity using alternative methods such as puppets, animation, whiteboard software, etc., thereby allowing TCs to express themselves as elaborately or as

simply as they desired, in accordance with their comfort level. What was paramount was the integration of clear audio and thought-provoking content and visuals. Finally, to ensure that the digital story was inclusive, TCs were required to provide accurate closed captioning. By addressing potential fears and providing options that aligned with the TCs' comfort levels, we attempted to reassure the TCs that they could tackle an arts-based assignment.

The next major task, after the groups were formed, was for each group member to find four peer-reviewed journal articles that pertained to their rebuttal. This proved challenging as we were front-loading the course – that is, to understand the rebuttals, they needed to understand the socio-cultural theory that informs the issue in the first place, and that is the majority work of our course. TCs had to post a summary of their journal articles (not the abstract – we turned on SafeAssign to ensure that did not happen) and to explore why and how they thought these articles would be useful for their digital story. We understood not every article they found would make its way into the digital story, but it would give them future theoretical underpinnings for their projects. The articles were due at the end of the third week of class and reflected a contractual 5% of their grade for the digital stories. As this was a component of the scaffolding, we were ensuring key milestones were completed in a timely manner to facilitate a good final product.

As all the TCs have completed a four-year undergraduate degree, they were confident in their ability to engage with academic articles. Therefore, the act of summarizing four peer-reviewed articles draws on the TCs' past performance accomplishments. However, one of the main challenges for the TCs was finding relevant articles. As we were front-loading the course, some TCs were using search words that directly matched their myth/rebuttal rather than finding articles that pertained to the concepts associated with their topic. One benefit arising from this

challenge is that the TCs realized early on that social justice issues are complex and require critical analysis and synthesis of information. They began to appreciate that you cannot simply “google” an answer. We hoped that by critically engaging with academic articles it would empower the TCs as they moved forward with their digital story because they would have insight from literature pertaining to their topic and they could use the understanding to help create an emotional connection within their story.

Owning Your Emotions

As we help storytellers find and clarify what their stories are about and ask them to consider the meaning contained within their stories, we also want to help them become aware of the emotional resonance of their story. By identifying the emotions in the story, they can then decide which emotions they would like to include in their story and how they would like to convey them to their audience. (Lampert, 2020, p. 12)

The Diversity and Inclusion course is designed to be cross-divisional, with TCs from diverse teaching specialties and divisional levels. Thus, the course offers TCs the opportunity to observe and learn from peers with varying backgrounds and abilities as they grapple with their own positionality in relation to the dimensions of privilege. By witnessing a broad spectrum of experiences and successes in addition to developing a capacity for critical thinking, TCs are better positioned to increase their social justice self-efficacy.

We established our classrooms as brave spaces by embracing Boostrom’s (1998) belief that bravery is a required part of learning as “learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things” (p. 399). Following the process outlined by Arao and Clemens (2013), during the first week of class we have TCs contemplate what they think a brave space is and why their professor would choose to

encourage a brave space over a safe space. As a class, we then discuss the guidelines for a brave space, informed by Arao and Clemen's (2013) work: Agree to disagree (controversy with civility); don't take things personally (own your intentions and your impact); challenge by choice; respect; and, no attacks. We then overlaid Arao and Clemen's guidelines with Sensöy and DiAngelo's (2017) five guidelines for learning:

strive for intellectual humility; recognize the difference between opinions and informed knowledge; let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader society patterns; notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge; and, recognize how your own social positionality informs your perspective and reactions to your instructor and the readings in the course. (p.4)

The process's objective was to help foster engaging and insightful in-class discussions and to assist TCs when working in their digital story groups. Specifically, we wanted to ensure the TCs had the tools required for navigating the emotionally charged and tension inducing discussions (West, 2021) that may arise while creating their digital stories.

During their group discussions, TCs had the opportunity to hear different perspectives which has the benefit of preparing them for robust and constructive dialogues aimed at challenging the state of dysconsciousness, both in their university coursework, and by extension, in their future work in schools. During the creation of the digital story, TCs witnessed their peers grappling with their apprehensions about discussing and engaging with dimensions of privilege. By observing their peers successfully addressing their negative emotions, TCs acquire coping skills that may enable them to overcome their own negative feelings or reluctance to engage with difficult subject matter. Emotional-social intelligence is one of the foundational skills we attempt

to encourage in our students. Emotional-social intelligence is the spectrum of intertwined emotional and social skills, competencies, and behaviours that dictate our ability to comprehend and articulate our emotions, understand and interact with others effectively, and handle the demands, difficulties, and stresses we face on a daily basis (Bar-On, 2007). To foster emotional-social intelligence we urge TCs to acknowledge the emotions triggered by their resistance to course content. Once students recognize that they are in an emotional state of resistance, they can begin to explore the source of their emotions, which are intertwined with their positionality and socialization.

Finding the Moment

Finding and clarifying the insight and emotions of the story can be the most challenging and rewarding part of the storytelling process. As the storyteller becomes clear about the meaning of their story, we want to help them tell their story as a story by identifying a single moment that they can use to illustrate their insight. (Lampert, 2020, p. 13)

In the fifth week of the course, before TCs went on a five week teaching practicum, our milestone marker for the students was to identify the main points they wanted to address in their digital story; assign roles (i.e. who is responsible for filming, editing, writing the script, integrating the research, finding interviewees (if applicable), etc.; drafting a script; deciding where and when to film. We encouraged the TCs to outline the creative process for their digital story to establish boundaries and parameters from which they could work together. As Shalley and Gilson (2004) argue, parameters and constraints are a necessary component of the creative process.

One of the more challenging aspects of the digital story was establishing an emotional connection with the audience. Affective learning “is concerned with how learners feel while they

are learning, and the ways those learning experiences are internalized to help shape . . . attitudes, opinions, and identity” (Jacobs, 2023, p. 6). Regarding the digital story, developing a heightened emotional response can be enhanced by TCs’ individual experiences with social injustices, such as racism and homophobia. Privileged TCs were confronted with the challenge of conveying an emotional connection to something in which they might not have personal insights or experiences with. Furthermore, privileged TCs need to address the personal stress and anxiety inherent with white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) as social justice topics can conflict with personal moral and/or religious values. When TCs view the confrontation of emotions as a positive learning experience, they are more likely to create a compelling story that resonates with the viewer. On the other hand, negative or resistant emotions can foster a sense of self-doubt in one’s ability to address their social justice issue due to lack of personal insight. Therefore, the digital story was a vehicle for TCs to navigate conflicting tensions within their own emotional response to their social justice issue as well as how they work to convey empathy with an audience. Thereby creating an effective learning environment in which emotions are tied to intellectual processes as it inspires curiosity in the learner (Dewey, 1938).

Seeing Your Story/Hearing Your Story

Finding the moment of change in your story and describing it within a scene is the starting point to telling the story as a story. However, because we help storytellers share their stories in the form of a digital story, we also want to look at how the use of visuals and sound bring things to life for the audience. There are many choices that come along with designing how the audience will “see” and “hear” the digital story. (Lampert, 2020, p. 15)

One of the reasons we chose the digital story assignment is we recognized the power of voice and image for conveying individual experiences, perspectives, and emotions to the course's content. Most students placed the greatest emphasis on voice, followed by music. However, as demonstrated in powerfully crafted podcasts, it is the nuanced background sounds that truly bring the story to life and thereby generate a strong emotional response from the audience. To be effective, the TCs must believe in their ability to articulate their experiences and perspectives in relation to their assigned social justice topic. It is the personal that authenticates a story and brings to life the factual elements of social justice. It is for this reason that TCs were encouraged to tap into firsthand experiences and emotions to create narratives that will resonate with an audience by evoking both empathy and understanding.

Once TCs returned to class from their teaching practicum, we suggested they begin filming their digital stories. Despite all our front loading and scaffolding, at this point, we began fielding a lot of questions regarding the actual meaning of their topics and, somewhat to our surprise, what we meant by a “digital story”. The TCs’ questions revealed the various ways in which they were approaching this assignment in a more traditional manner (i.e., as an essay) rather than embracing an arts-based framework. Perhaps a reflection of their own workload, TCs may not have been prioritizing the on-going necessary work required for an arts-based assignment, rather, assuming the “video” could be pulled together in short order, despite our milestones and check-in points. While both traditional research papers and digital literacy skills require research, organizing and the synthesis of information, the TCs did not automatically recognize the transference of these skills to the digital story. Rather, as the assignment due date approached, TCs seemed overly focused on their technical skills, or assumed lack thereof. Some TCs indicated they did not have what they perceived as the requisite training with technology

and software to create a successful video, which may have been a manifestation of dysconsciousness. That is, they were using a “lack of skill” as a way to avoid engaging emotionally with a topic that made them uncomfortable. While we had shared exemplars and indicated we were more concerned with content and messaging than final product, the TCs were still anxious to embark on unfamiliar territory. The assignment was not without parameters and constraints as we stressed the importance of clear visuals and good audio and felt confident that could, at the bare minimum, be achieved using their Smartphones alone. It became apparent that the students’ focus on the act of *creating* the digital story was overriding the foundational act of *telling* a story, the act of sharing (Riberio et al., 2014). As Cho and Vitale (2019) argue,

it is impossible to teach the entity of creativity, innovation, and risk-taking through a predictable, linear, and formulaic pedagogy. Rather, a pedagogy that actively models creativity, innovation, and risk-taking simultaneously teaches students the very essence of said principles, regardless of the subject matter. (p.5)

Telling a digital story required the TCs to take risks and relinquish their concerns with a grade-related product over process and most importantly, consider the messaging embedded in their stories, aspects we were also modelling in our content delivery.

Assembling Your Story

At this point in the process you have found and clarified what your story is about and how it sits with you today. You have also established the overall tone you want to convey. You’ve identified a moment of change and begun making choices about how to use visuals and sound to bring the story and scenes to life for your audience. Now you are ready to assemble your story by spreading out your notes and images and composing your script and storyboard. This requires answering two questions: How are you

structuring the story? And, within that structure, how are the layers of visual and audio narratives working together? (Lampert, 2020, p. 19)

To successfully assemble their digital story, TCs must have a clear understanding of what their story is about and how it resonates with them. As a group, the TCs discussed their individual experiences and perspectives to decide the elements they wish to draw out and emphasize. It is during this process of debating and negotiating the emphasis of story and academic content that begins to shape the TCs' social justice self-efficacy as they must strongly articulate their perspective on the social justice issue and express it in persuasive manner to their group. As one participant shared,

We chose to convey ideas through acting in a bid to connect with the audience and engage them in self-reflection. In the final scene, we decided to break the actors' "fourth wall" by looking straight at the camera. This was intended to bring the audience into the story, to make the characters' lives more relatable to the viewers. Ultimately, we wanted the audience to feel, think, and reflect on the different experiences lived by the two main characters due to gender discrimination.

(anonymous contributor)

Thus, throughout the development process, TCs made decisions about how to present their story, which events or moments to emphasize and how to sequence the content in an impactful manner.

Sharing Your Story

The climax of the assignment is viewing the digital stories. The feedback and discussions arising from their stories serves as a validation of both their ability to address a social justice issue and their ability to participate in a meaningful way in social justice conversations. Through the discussions that arose after the viewing of each story, both the creators and viewers reflected

on their personal perspectives, biases and assumptions associated with the rebuttals. By viewing the stories, TCs have the chance to witness a diverse range of perspectives and experiences related to the social justice issues addressed in the course. We watched digital stories that took the form of podcasts, some utilized puppets, others chose a whiteboard animation approach. Some digital stories were done through interviews, while others took the form of mock newscasts. There was an incredible range of final products. When the TCs created an emotionally charged digital story, the viewing of the story fostered understanding and promoted empathy towards marginalized groups. As one participant wrote,

I listened to my heart. I wanted to make something that would have an impact. I thought of the opportunity to present something to a room of future teachers. I also chose the topic because it was a message I heard growing up and I knew I wanted to craft a response that would feel true and honest to me. (anonymous contributor)

There were times when we had to take a break after viewing a digital story. Indeed, the viewing took place over several classes, so no one was too emotionally drained. Empathy is significantly connected to social justice attitudes and perceptions with students who are empathic, demonstrating a greater concern for social justice issues (Cartabuke et al., 2019). Through viewing the stories in class, the TCs realized that others share similar values and experiences about social justice, or they were exposed to new perspectives. As one participant shared in response to the question “what emotions were you hoping to elicit from the audience”,

Reflection, pause and think if they are actually the main character (or know someone like that). We intended our main character to look and believe like they are a good person--something we all believe we do, but their actions were contradictory to their

message and beliefs. We wanted our audience to think if they were doing the same as well. (anonymous contributor)

The realization of a shared experience may instill a sense of teachers' collective responsibility for addressing social injustices. That is, the TCs will not feel that they are a lone voice fighting against injustice. It is our hope that both the act of creating and viewing digital stories that TCs will feel empowered to engage in social justice advocacy in their communities.

Conclusion

Through our experience teaching a Diversity and Inclusion course to TCs we have come to appreciate the debilitating effect a state of dysconsciousness can have on TCs' willingness to engage with social justice issues. To counter dysconsciousness, we utilized an art-based assignment, a digital story, to foster social justice self-efficacy in our TCs. Specifically, by incorporating peer interactions throughout the entire digital story process, TCs were exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences. Using an arts-based approach, TCs had the opportunity to critically reflect on the ways in which their own positionality and privilege intersect with social injustice. Finally, throughout the assignment, TCs navigated feelings of stress and anxiety and worked to convey powerful emotional messages in their stories. They conveyed their emotional states informed by personal experience with social injustice, unrecognized privilege, and conflict with personal values. Throughout the digital story assignment, TCs' learning and process was scaffolded to enable them to overcome their anxiety and reluctance both to create an arts-based product and to engage with and confront social injustice. Overall, it is our belief that the digital story served as transformative experience that fostered social justice self-efficacy to confront dysconsciousness.

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