DIGITAL STORYTELLING ACROSS CULTURES: CONNECTING CHINESE & AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on a 2013-2014 Australia-China Council project in which school students in Australia and China produced and shared digital stories about their everyday lives and local cultures, with students being invited to give feedback on the language and content of the stories produced by their overseas peers. The main lessons learned during the project involved the need to seek common ground between the expectations of the Chinese and Australian partners. These pertained to five main categories: motivation, educational culture, organisation, technology, and pedagogy. Despite the challenges, students engaged in some valuable language and cultural learning, teachers developed some insights into the learning possibilities at the intersection of pedagogy and technology, and the researchers are beginning to develop a list of key recommendations to consider when setting up such cross-cultural, technology-supported projects.

KEYWORDS

Digital storytelling, Language Learning, Culture, Cross-Cultural, Intercultural, Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, there is an ever greater need to build bridges across cultures to enable students to develop intercultural competence (or intercultural literacy), ideally accompanied by competence in key languages (Byram 1997; Dudeney et al. 2013). These competences can support the broad set of 21st century skills – often connected with ICTs – demanded in the global workplace, such as creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, and digital and multimedia literacies (Dudeney et al. 2013; Mishra & Kereluik 2011). Many of these points are recognised in both Australian and Chinese education. The Australian Curriculum, introduced in 2011, aims to produce a 'successful learner, confident and creative individual, and active and informed citizen', in part via seven general capabilities including 'intercultural understanding' and the 'ICT capability' (ACARA n.d.). ICT competency is also required of teachers in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers,* likewise introduced in 2011 (AITSL n.d.). Meanwhile, the 2012 *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper stresses Australia's 'need to broaden and deepen our understanding of Asian cultures and languages, to become more Asia literate' (Commonwealth of Australia 2012, p.2), with Chinese (Mandarin) named as the first priority foreign language. China has long recognised the need to incorporate ICTs in education, with the 2000 *Popularising ICT Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* paper requesting all schools to offer a course on ICTs (Li 2003), and the *Ten Year Plan for the Development of Education Informatization (2011-2020)* (MOE 2011) focusing on improving technology-enhanced education. Meanwhile, the *Education Technology Capacity Building Plan for All Primary and Secondary Teachers* (MOE 2005), *A Promotion Project for Education Technology Capacity Building for All Primary and Secondary Teachers* (MOE 2013) and *The ICT Application Competency Standard for Primary and Secondary School Teachers (Trial)* (MOE 2014) target teachers' ICT competency, with the last of these documents setting higher level goals for teachers in using ICTs to support student

autonomy, collaboration and inquiry-based learning. China has also recognised the need to foster English learning since at least the 1980s (Hu 2002), with a renewed emphasis in the new millennium ensuring children now learn it from kindergarten (Ward & Francis 2010).

This project, entitled *Multimodal Stories for Language and Cultural Exchange* and funded by the Australia-China Council from 2013-2014, involved the design and implementation of a mechanism for the exchange of multimodal (i.e., multimedia) digital stories created by middle school students in Australia and China. It sought to build co-operation and understanding between Chinese and Australian students, teachers and institutions; to support students in learning each other's language; and to support them in learning about each other's culture. The digital format of the stories offered the practical benefit of allowing their exchange online, and the pedagogical benefit of letting students express themselves in rich, multimodal ways while honing their digital literacies. The collaborative, creative story writing task supported the development of their 21st century skills.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

The project was overseen by the first and second authors, who recruited and liaised with the three participating schools in Western Australia, one each in Bunbury, Geraldton and Perth. The Chinese participation was facilitated by the fourth author, who worked with the participating school in Guilin, and the fifth author, who liaised with the three participating schools in Shanghai. Figure 1 shows the interrelationship of the components of the project: PD (professional development) seminars, story rounds, story collection, and data collection. Delays have led to an elongation of the planned time structure, but all these elements remain in place.
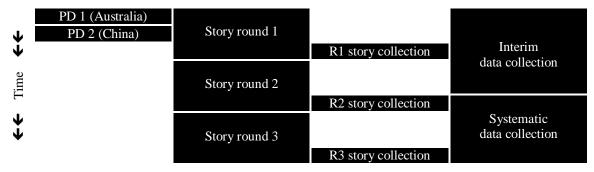

Figure 1. Time-based interrelationship between project components

PD seminars were held by the first and second authors in Perth in November 2013, and in China in April 2014, to give participants an overview of the project, discuss timelines, and showcase web 2.0 and app-based digital storytelling tools. For the duration of the project, interaction between participating teachers and students primarily took place on a password-protected wiki, *ACC-Digital*, set up with the Wikispaces service. Students in Western Australia were around 13-14 years old, while those in China were slightly older at 14-15 years.

The original plan comprised three rounds of digital storytelling. Each school was to be paired with a different partner school in the other country in each round (with two of the three Shanghai schools working together as one school). Students were invited to work in small groups to describe their daily lives, their schools, or their cities or towns, as a way of introducing themselves to students in the other country. To minimize technological difficulties, it was suggested that the Round 1 stories should be created as 1-2 minute PowerPoint presentations, ideally with audio voiceovers, and exported as videos. Most schools followed this procedure, though one Australian school opted to use an iPad app, Creative Book Builder, instead. Students took photos and videos, and added written and/or audio text. Students in Western Australia wrote and recorded in Mandarin; students in Guilin and Shanghai worked in English. Round 1 began in December 2013, but posting of the stories was delayed until February/March 2014 due to holidays in both Australia and China.

Once the Round 1 stories were available, students from the partner school were invited to make comments via a discussion board feature on the wiki. Though responses were sometimes considerably delayed, all of the videos posted did receive at least some feedback, which highlighted points of interest as well as including suggestions for improving language use, e.g., '*We really loved the number of pictures you've used and the music, which was highly moving. We could feel the enthusiasm in your video! There are some improvements you could make with the grammar. Sometimes you didn't put the 's' at the end of verbs in the third person, and some words weren't used correctly. Try to proofread carefully .... Overall we really enjoyed your presentation*'.

The structure planned for Rounds 2 and 3 was the same as for Round 1, with changing content and technology, and new pairings of partner schools. Students were to choose a traditional fairy tale or story from their own culture and translate it into the language they were learning, giving it a contemporary twist, i.e., it had to be set in modern times and reflect students' everyday life contexts. This made it more relevant to students and avoided possible issues with plagiarism. Any digital storytelling website or app could be used; those recommended in the PD seminars included Capzles, Glogster and VoiceThread (available in web and app versions) and Book Creator, Explain Everything and StoryMaker (apps), with further options suggested on a *Digital Storytelling* webpage (e-language.wikispaces.com/digital-storytelling). The Round 2 stories are due to be shared, somewhat belatedly, in late 2014. Meanwhile, teachers in at least one Chinese and one Australian school have started discussing with each other the possibility of a direct, ongoing collaborative relationship.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

Although the project is not yet completed at the time of writing, interim data have been collected through feedback obtained from participating facilitators, school principals and teachers at PD seminars in Australia and China, observations of and interactions with classes involved in digital storytelling in China, and analysis of students' completed stories. More systematic data collection, which will commence in late 2014, will include interviews with teachers and further observations of students.

The lessons learned to date have involved the need to find common ground between the expectations of the Chinese and Australian participants. Firstly, the *motivation* for taking part differed. The slight age gap between the Australian and Chinese students was compounded by the fact that most Chinese had been learning English since kindergarten, and by middle school were spending 7.5 hours a week on English lessons, while most Australians had been learning Mandarin for only 1-2 years and their lessons were limited to around 2 hours a week. As a result, the Chinese students' English was far more fluent than the Australian students' Mandarin. In general, Australian teachers and students were more motivated to focus on language improvement, while Chinese teachers were more concerned with opening up students' perspectives on other cultures, and students were focused on learning about daily life in Australia. Although our digital storytelling project differs in some ways from telecollaboration projects which promote intercultural learning through online conversation, it is striking that mismatches in student language proficiency, and differing motivations, are flagged up as problematic in studies of failed communication in such projects (e.g., Belz 2001; O'Dowd & Ritter 2006).

Secondly, differences in *educational culture* led to quite distinct structures of participation, with the decision to participate in the project being taken by Chinese principals on behalf of their schools, while Australian principals devolved the decision about whether to participate to individual teachers. Participation was thus better integrated as a whole-school endeavour in China as opposed to the more individualistic approach typical of Australia. While it is important to be wary of essentialism or oversimplification in cultural comparisons (Bowe et al. 2014), it is interesting to note some congruence between our experiences and past anthropological and sociological research which contrasts Confucian heritage cultures and Anglo-Saxon or Western cultures: countries in the former group, like China, are generally perceived as more hierarchical and collectivist, and those in the latter group, like Australia, as more egalitarian and individualistic (e.g., Hofstede & Bond 1988; *The Hofstede Centre* n.d.). But any underlying cultural differences are certainly compounded by practical considerations. In Australia, this project competed with many other enrichment activities and opportunities. Chinese principals and teachers were more proactive in seeking one-to-one relationships with Australian schools, and Chinese students were keen to engage in digital

'pen pal' relationships with Australian students, while Australian teachers and students struggled to find time for such engagement.

Thirdly, practical *organisation* proved problematic, echoing findings about factors such as calendar misalignment and differing contact hours in the telecollaboration literature (e.g., O'Dowd & Ritter 2006). In our project, differences in timetabling ranged from semester and holiday dates to the frequency and duration of language lessons, with Chinese teachers and students having far more class time to spend on the stories. Australian schools also followed a more prescriptive curriculum while Chinese schools were freer to shape their own content. The fact that there were far larger numbers of English learners in China than Mandarin learners in Australia dramatically increased the time commitment for Australian students in responding to the relatively large number of videos produced by their overseas peers. Moreover, language barriers between project co-ordinators and staff members sometimes made it difficult to broach and discuss these kinds of issues.

Fourthly, practical issues related to *technology* were perhaps most vexing of all. The amount of technology available, and whether it was school-owned or student-owned, varied both within and between countries, as did the kinds of hardware, which ranged from Apple through Samsung to more generic Android devices. This made it difficult to use the same apps and to find common output formats; hence the suggestion that all completed stories in Round 1 should be exported in video format. However, sharing the videos proved to be cumbersome. It is possible to either upload videos to a wiki, or embed them. However, the former does not allow the videos to be displayed within the wiki and was found to be a slow process in China. The latter, though preferable, requires the videos to be hosted first on a video sharing platform, from which an embed code can be obtained. It was difficult to find a platform that was accessible and acceptable in both Australia and China: Videobam, used in Australia in order to avoid students accessing inappropriate materials on YouTube, is not accessible in China; while YouTube's Chinese equivalent, Youku (优酷), though accessible in Australia, contains materials considered inappropriate by Australian schools. Following experimentation with filesharing services Dropbox, Pan Baidu (百度云) and SmartFile, it has been decided to explore a paid account with Youku, which should not contain unsuitable content, in Round 2. Views of the digital storytelling technology also varied, with Australian teachers and students perceiving it as challenging and Chinese students, by contrast, reporting that it was easy to use. This difference, however, turned out to have pedagogical underpinnings.

The fifth and final category consists of differences in *pedagogy,* or more precisely, pedagogical approaches. As regards language, the Australian students, while at a much lower level, were expected to engage in original composition in Chinese, while many Chinese students were observed composing texts first in Chinese and then translating them into English. As regards technology, Australian schools provided some encouragement to explore and learn about new tools, while Chinese schools tended to allow the repetitive use of PowerPoint (which may explain the contrasting views about whether the technology was challenging or easy to use). As regards digital content, Australian teachers insisted on the use of original student-generated material, while in China students were allowed to borrow web materials with little understanding of the copyright issues involved (though teachers were keen to learn about this in PD seminars). Again, the dangers of essentialism and oversimplification notwithstanding, it is interesting to note some congruence with past research into differences between Chinese/Confucian and Western education, with the former seen as emphasising more linear, systematic, accuracy-focused approaches and the latter more creative, critical, problem-solving approaches (e.g., Gu 2014; Yang et al. 2006). But once again, culture cannot explain everything: some Chinese schools are now trying out new digital storytelling tools, for instance. Moreover, there was common ground in teachers' initial inability to envisage the transformational potential in fusing appropriate pedagogy and technology for language and intercultural learning – but in both countries shifts occurred over time, resulting in promising suggestions. One Chinese school suggested that mixed groups of Australian and Chinese students might engage in collaborative digital storytelling. Another suggested moving to a bilingual story format, allowing Australian students to work at their lower language level and Chinese students at their higher level, while providing sufficiently rich content to engage the Chinese students' interest in exploring Australian culture. These suggestions indicate that exposure to such a project operating at the intersection of pedagogy and technology can lead teachers, over time, to gain a greater sense of the possible learning benefits.

4. CONCLUSION

In the upcoming systematic data collection phase, the five categories of lessons learned to date will be used to shape semi-structured interviews with teachers and, where relevant, conversations with students during class observations. Participants will also be prompted to suggest other lessons they feel have been learned through the project. The coding of this data may lead to an expansion or reconfiguration of the categories established thus far. The potential also exists to analyse stories to compare language use, cultural references, and digital literacies, and to analyse story feedback to evaluate aspects of language and intercultural skills development. But even before completion of the data collection and analysis, some conclusions have already been reached.

Despite disappointment on the part of some participants at various stages of the project, connected with mismatched expectations between partners, it has become evident that with enthusiasm, perseverance and goodwill it is possible to find common ground across cultures. Students were able to produce digital stories, practise language, gain some insight into each other's culture, and develop digital literacies. In time teachers were able to envisage expanded possibilities for active, collaborative, technology-supported intercultural learning. There are numerous barriers to overcome in such a project, and in this case the full potential remains unrealised as yet. However, the learning which has taken place to date – for students and for teachers – has made it worthwhile conducting the project. Furthermore, the lessons being learned – by the researchers – will serve as pointers for future projects in this territory. Despite the challenges, we believe there is much value to be drawn from such intercultural digital storytelling projects.

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