

# **THE POWER OF STORY: USING PERSONAL NARRATIVE, COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND PODCASTING WITH YOUNG ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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## **Abstract**

One way to ensure a high quality, personalized literacy program for English language learners is to use the learners' own lives and experiences as curriculum. Creating spaces for students to compose and share stories results in a strong sense of community facilitates the development of authentic literacy skills and increases student motivation and achievement. Present day, multimedia, networked computers provide a range of informational communicative and publishing tools that can be used to dissolve classroom walls, bringing the students out and the world inside. Moreover, students who work on projects using computers demonstrate increased cooperation and collaboration.

For this project, young adult learners from diverse cultures, studying English as a second or other language at a community college made use of computer technology to compose personal narratives and share them with others. Results indicate that using student stories as texts and sharing those texts via podcasting enhances literacy skills, increases student confidence and self-efficacy, and inspires them to work for the common good. The study involved only two small classes of multicultural students, but the strong success of the project suggests using students' life stories as curriculum and computer technology as a means of sharing is a powerful model of instruction.

## **1. Introduction**

My experiences working with English language learners of all ages have convinced me that using student's own stories as texts facilitates the development of strong and authentic literacy skills. Creating spaces in which students' voices can be heard and valued also helps build vibrant classroom communities in which students express concern for each other's welfare, work cooperatively and collaboratively and honor each other's culture, language and values. Technology also plays a critical role in facilitating effective language teaching and learning. Using network-based technology increases student motivation and results in impressive student achievement.

This exploratory study explores the power of story, personal narratives written by young adult English Language Learners, and published as podcasts online. It was completed when I was an instructor of ESL at a local community college. The instructional format included a variety of cooperative learning activities that I believed would help students grow in both competence and confidence. Instead of using lectures for instruction, I facilitated class activities and discussions designed to help students find their voice. Throughout the semester, students created their own texts, written in English and shared them with classmates. I also made extensive use of computer technology. I created a class website to provide announcements, information concerning assignments and personalized practice exercises. Students sent recordings of their pronunciation exercises electronically, using computers or cell phones. They used PowerPoint and multimedia presentation tools to share ideas and experiences. I worked with students as a class, in small groups and individually, creating poems and personal narratives that were later transformed into short, yet powerful podcasts. Results suggest that sharing stories via network-based technology allows student-voices to be heard and appreciated in new and powerful ways. Combining interactive, collaborative, reading, writing, listening and speaking activities with innovative computer-assisted pedagogies facilitates the development of self-confident, highly motivated and competent English language users.

## **2. Background**

The number of English language learners in American schools is growing by leaps and bounds. During the year 2000, enrollment for ESL students grew by 105 percent, compared to a 12 percent overall growth rate among the general population (DelliCarpini, 2006). “In fact, the ESL student population represents 10.1 percent of the total public school student enrollment” (DelliCarpini, 2006, p. 48). As linguistic and cultural diversity in America grows there is an urgent need for educational programs that effectively serve English language learners, extending beyond K-12 to adult education.

Currently more than 35 million residents of the United States, or 12 percent of the total population, are foreign-born. Immigrants constituted nearly half of the net increase in the American workforce in the 1990s and they are expected to constitute most of the net growth in the coming years (Chisman, 2007, p. 3). Lack of English proficiency presents a huge barrier to these newcomers as they seek higher paying jobs or try to continue their education.

Despite a pressing need for quality programs, they are not available to the majority of those in need of help. A recent study by the Lexington Institute indicated that programs

overseen by the United States Department of Education reach only a fraction of those who would benefit from them and in places where they are established, are terribly ineffective. “With 23 million Limited English Proficiency adults, the Department of Education Program only served 913,000 of them or 4% of eligible adults and only 1.7% of adult English learners managed to improve proficiency” (Kennedy & Walters, 2013, p. 5).

Part of the problem lies in using inflexible approaches to instruction and course design rather than using individualized and innovative practices. One way to end the dismal cycle of failure and to ensure high quality, effective literacy programs for ELLs is to use the learners’ own lives as curriculum (Weinstein, 1999, 2006). This innovative pedagogy is a model for instruction in which learners’ texts including language experience, dictation, poem, story or folktale or interview, are used as catalysts for discussing themes of interest or concern. Teachers invite their students to collectively construct knowledge by telling stories for real readers and listeners. Materials created by learners themselves are far more engaging than anything a textbook company can devise and market. Using student stories enhances learning and facilitates the development of authentic reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (DelliCarpini, 2009). Moreover, the creation and sharing of personal texts allows a teacher to connect with his or her students and the students to connect with each other. Ordinary stories become extraordinary when learners can see themselves reflected in each other’s tales (DelliCarpini, 2009, p. 102).

Literacy imbues learners with a sense of agency. As students read the word, they become inspired to work together to change the world (Freire, 1987). Reading and writing empower individuals and communities by inspiring them to learn more about social problems and work collectively for social justice. Mayer (2006) asserts that narrative is the fundamental human device for enabling collective action:

First, narratives play an important role in constituting mind: enabling memory, structuring cognition, making meaning, and establishing identity. Second, because we are creatures constituted by narrative, we can be called by stories: engrossed by them, moved emotionally by them, persuaded by them, and ultimately motivated to act by them. Third, because narratives are shared, they can operate at both the individual and the collective level, constructing common desires, enlisting participation in a common drama, and scripting collective acts of meaning. Narratives are particularly important tools for empowering communities of resistance, which face significant obstacles to collective action and which, therefore, operate at considerable disadvantage in the political arena.

(Mayer, 2006, p. 2)

Weinstein (1999, 2006) clearly understood the power of student stories to effect change. Her students moved from the writing of personal narratives, to the development of thematic units, which lead to collective action within students' homes and communities.

*The English Action Center* began with a folk tale project in which Southeast Asian women drew on their own folk tales to develop curricula for pre-school teaching. In the second project cycle, focus shifted to a group of Mien hill tribe refugees who documented their lives in Laos before the exodus. "*For the Children: Remembering Mien life in Laos*" is the resulting project with learner texts developed around extraordinary photos.

In a *Breast Cancer Oral History Project*, the *Alameda County Library Literacy Program* prepared ESL students to gather multilingual oral histories of medically underserved women with breast cancer. The project resulted in a sourcebook and a traveling mural to display in other communities.

A grassroots women's group, *Mujeres Unidas*, of the *Northern California Coalition on Immigrant Rights*, developed "*Taking Charge, Taking Care: English for Home Health Care Training*". They tapped the resources of the Initiative to incorporate a language component into the training. The curriculum evolved into a learner-directed research project to investigate working conditions of other home health care workers, while learning the language needed for the work (Weinstein, 2006).

While acknowledging the potential power of innovative pedagogy, many ESL teachers are reluctant to step outside the box of familiar techniques. It may be difficult to persuade students to move from skills and drills activities to personalized curriculum that draws on their own lives and experiences. Students are reluctant to assume control of their own learning when they are accustomed to being directed by autocratic teachers and pre-packaged materials. Sometimes innovation is challenging for teachers as well. It takes courage and support to deviate from ineffective yet entrenched ways of doing things. In the end, innovation is well worth the effort; using student stories as springboards to language learning and collective action is tremendously rewarding for teacher and student alike.

One innovative teacher, Linda Christensen, director of the Oregon Writing Project, author of *Reading, Writing and Rising Up-Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, emphasizes that appropriate curriculum is

grounded in the lives of students, rooted in their unique needs and experiences. A social justice classroom is participatory and experiential. In other words, I'm not just delivering the Paolo Freire thing, that teachers are not bankers depositing checks every month in the students' brains.

Rather, we are engaging in a dialogue with them, so they are partners in their education. It's hopeful, joyful, kind and visionary.

(Golden and Fink 2008, p. 60)

As an experienced ESL teacher, I realize providing opportunities for my students to write and share their own stories not only enhances development of their language skills, but also helps them to understand that their prior knowledge and culture are appreciated, valued and respected. Composing and sharing personal narratives helps students see the similarities between their cultures rather than focusing on differences and fosters the development of a caring and compassionate classroom community.

I am convinced that in addition to using student-centered pedagogies, an effective ESL teacher must use technology-assisted instruction. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) increases motivation, raises student achievement and facilitates greater interaction among students. Computers can also help teachers develop authentic materials for study and allow for individualized, collaborative learning. At its best, Integrative CALL “combines information processing, communication, use of authentic language and learner autonomy, all of which are of major importance in current language theories” (Lee, 2000, p.4).

Present day, multimedia, networked computers provide a range of informational, communicative and publishing tools. In the hands of an astute ESL teacher, these tools can be used to dissolve classroom walls, bringing the students out and the world inside. Using integrative technology allows students to become creators rather than receivers of knowledge. Through use of Internet resources, students learn vicariously about others' experiences and make meaningful connections to their own lives and cultural experiences. Creating narrated PowerPoint presentations and movies empowers them to share their stories with others. Publishing student authored narratives as podcasts allows for sharing with a world-wide audience.

Using technology in the creation and communication of student stories also provides for student choice. It is the student who must decide how to generate, obtain and manipulate information. It is the student who defines goals, makes design decisions and ultimately evaluates his own progress (Lee, 2000).

Another positive effect of computer assisted language teaching and learning is an increased level of cooperation and collaboration on the part of students. Even when students are working on individual projects on individual computers, they are more likely to help each other. Computer assisted story telling also redefines the role of the teacher. When students are engaged in writing and publishing their stories, “...the teacher is no longer the center of

attention as the dispenser of information, but rather plays the role of facilitator, providing guidance and support for students” (Effects of Technology, n.d., p. 3).

ESL teacher Magda Kahn explains why she believes it is critical for students to have a means of sharing their personal narratives: “These are the stories that are never told. We are familiar with the American family, the culture and the issues that surround them. These stories are quite different...I want to provide my students with a respectful way to delve into their past and share their experiences with the rest of us. I want the world to hear their voices” (Riddle, 2009, p. 3).

Like Kahn, I know it is important to provide many opportunities for ELLs to compose personal narratives, using all the skills related to traditional language arts; writing, reading, editing, pronunciation and inflection (Riddle, 2009, p. 3). But I also use computer technology to facilitate writing and enhance student work. After students write their narratives, I help them transform their stories using a multimedia format. This gives them an even stronger voice and infuses more power into their stories.

One ESL teacher, Alicia Hannah at East Ridge High School in Hamilton County, Tennessee earned an eight hundred dollar grant to provide each of her ELLs with an iPod for use in their language learning (New Technology for New Language Learners, 2010). Another iPod using teacher, Grace Poli, discovered using technology to create personalized movies and podcasts resulted in a dramatic increase in English language proficiency and a boost in student self-esteem (Ullman, 2010). Inspired by these success stories, I set out to explore the effects of having my young adult ELLs first write and share their stories, then use their computer- enhanced voices to send their stories out into the world.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. Participants and methodology**

The setting for this study was a local community college. Classes there are comprised of young adult ELLs, from countries around the world, including India, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Russia, Nigeria, Kenya, Spain, Korea, Mexico, Turkey, Albania, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Ethiopia and Liberia. From January until the middle of May, I worked with two classes of English Language learners, comprised of 40 students in all. The focus for one class was intermediate level grammar. The focus of the other class was listening and speaking. The listening/speaking class used a book intended to help students improve pronunciation and

*Noteworthy*, an integrated program that encourages students to relate their own ideas and cultural experiences to their study of United States history and culture.

Throughout the semester, I planned and implanted many learning activities that facilitated the development of classroom community and student voice. For example, when my intermediate grammar class was studying the use of the passive voice, they applied this concept as they wrote descriptions of a favorite place back home. Their stories were shared with the entire class, using the classroom computer and projector. My listening and speaking class wrestled with difficult questions concerning culture and conflict. When a young man was shot and killed in a local community, the class shared in the grieving process with two students who knew the boy and his family. We also gathered in groups to discuss what might be done to help curb violence.

I decided that as a culminating activity for the semester, each student would compose a personal narrative that would be published as an episode of a class podcast. Because one class focused on grammar, their presentations would take a slightly different form than those of the listening/speaking class. Their presentation would include information about their interests, homelands and goals for the future, while my listening and speaking students would include personal reflections combined with a poem of their choosing. These poems would be practiced and read orally, with emphasis upon correct English pronunciation and inflection. Every student in each of my classes wrote an “I Am” poem. This is a highly personal poem, written in response to a template. Composing and sharing poetry of this kind helps students connect with each other and appreciate each other’s lives and experiences. The template for the poem can be found at <http://ettcweb.lr.k12.nj.us/forms/iampoem.htm>.

It is important to note that my work with the ESL students was not confined to the classroom. I spent countless hours working with students in small groups or individually. Sometimes we met in an empty classroom. Sometimes we worked in a hallway or public space. Sometimes we worked in an empty computer lab. During my meetings with students, we completed listening, speaking and grammar exercises together. But we also shared stories. The students spoke eloquently of their histories and experiences and what was most important in their lives.

During the last month of class, every student created a PowerPoint presentation. This work was transformed into a movie then a podcast. The results of selected student work can be listened to and viewed via a computer or iPad using this address: <http://teachersusan.com/StudentStories>.



### 3.2. Results and findings

The results of my work with young adult English Language Learners clearly indicate that in order to effectively teach we must first reach our students. Using pre-packaged curricula materials, whether grammar books and workbooks or listening/pronunciation guides, is not sufficient to ensure quality education for ESL students. It is critical for a teacher to listen to her students' stories, learn their personal histories, and work collaboratively to develop personalized learning materials.

At first, the grammar students resisted my attempts to do something "different" than what they were accustomed to. They were used to sitting passively in class, listening to explanations of grammar points, and completing fill in the blank grammar exercises that were included in their *Focus on Grammar* workbooks. Interestingly, most of them had "borrowed" or purchased used workbooks from previous students that included all of the answers, filled in with pencil. When I told them we would not be using the workbooks, some were disgruntled. I made up personalized exercises for them instead that required them to think critically about what they were learning. Instead of using the already filled in workbooks, they were able to complete grammar exercises online. I also put presentations explaining points of grammar on our class web page so they could view these at home or from a school computer.

As the dark, cold, dreary and often snowy days of January slowly evolved into the promises of April, my students got used to my approach. They wrote reflective paragraphs and journal entries relating course materials to their own experiences. They shared their ideas, orally and in writing. My classroom became a forum where students shared their thoughts and feelings in an atmosphere of acceptance, respect and trust. In this process of interactive meaning making, my students learned that their lives and voices had value. Their stories became a vehicle not only for language acquisition, but also for self-discovery (Auerbach, 1999). For example, William, who had majored in economics in Liberia, prior to the outbreak of civil war, discovered that he would like to major in a subject that will allow him to serve humanity. Perhaps he will study nursing. I think he would make a fabulous teacher.

All of my students made dramatic progress. Of the forty students enrolled in my classes, all but one received a high passing grade. Jennifer, who began the semester struggling, improved her speaking and grammar skills. She received a 46 on her first test. By the spring, she was earning grades in the high 70s and 80s. Riche, who was afraid to speak at first, gained fluency and confidence. He scored 46 on his first test, but received a perfect score on his final exam. Yalamba, who has two young children and struggled with an impossible schedule, still managed to do well in my class. She worked all night in a nursing home, and



then came to the speaking/listening class. She worked hard on each assignment and demonstrated real talent as a writer. She always participated in class discussions and shared her personal experiences, although some were very painful. When we were studying rites of passage in our *Noteworthy* book, I invited students to bring in wedding pictures or anything else related to rites of passage in their own countries. Yalamba brought in a video of her son's naming ceremony, directed by her Imam. The other students were enthralled. William, who escaped war in Liberia and sometimes wondered aloud why he did not die, did outstanding work, especially with discussion questions and oral presentations. As the semester progressed, he gained an even stronger voice. He often spoke eloquently both during and after class concerning his hopes for creating a better world, where drugs and violence do not claim the lives of so many young people.

I learned that using student stories enhances literacy skills, build community and increases students' self-confidence. When my students shared their movies with the rest of the class, everyone listened respectfully and attentively. The students voiced their appreciation of their classmates' efforts. Furthermore, they formed friendships that carried over outside of the class. My students began helping each other with school -work and childcare. They have gone out to eat together and shopping for supplies. Many have visited me at my home, just to talk, to share a meal or to work on English assignments for other classes.

Sharing stories also imbued the students with a sense of social agency. At the suggestion of several individuals, students in both classes completed service projects. The speaking and listening class made spring bunny baskets and filled them with candy. These were gifts for 60 elderly patients at the nursing home where Yalamba worked. As she explained, in Sierra Leone elderly family members are honored and cared for. It made her sad to see the tears of her patients when no one came to visit them in the home. After the baskets were delivered, she reported that everyone loved them. One particularly lonely and frail old woman insisted on sleeping with her basket for three nights in a row. One man died soon after receiving his basket. The students said they were glad they had in some small way, brightened his last days.

My grammar class also made baskets and filled them with small, flowering plants. These were created at the request of Jennifer, who also worked in a nursing home. She reported back to the class that her patients were delighted with the gifts. The flowers, which Jennifer continued to water long after the semester ended, brought color and joy to their lives.

Bringing student lives to the center of the curriculum not only brought the students closer together, it also created and sustained a strong bond between teacher and students.

When Yalamba shared memories of losing her father in war, I cried with her. When William returned triumphantly from sharing his presentation with another class, I beamed with pride for him. When Jennifer shared her experiences fleeing war in Sierra Leone, first to Guinea, then to the countryside, I understood the gaps in her schooling. She was never able to attend school as a child, and went right to high school at age 16. Now, at age 30, she is struggling to play catch up with basic literacy and math skills. I am determined to do all I can to help her.

Sharing stories with the help of computer technology was very important to the students. Although initially unfamiliar with multi-media presentations, they were highly motivated and worked hard to complete their projects, frequently meeting to help each other outside of class. Once they created basic PowerPoint presentations, they enjoyed adding music and images, which helped make their stories even more compelling. Once their stories were online, they were able to share them with a wider audience, including family members who still live in Africa or other places overseas. Yalamba told me that everyone who has viewed her podcast so far “loves” it. Jennifer has shared hers with friends in the United States and family back home in Sierra Leone. William has thanked me countless times for help in making such a “beautiful” movie.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This project has affirmed my conviction that using student stories as an integral part of curriculum is key to effective ESL teaching and learning. Moreover, the use of network-based technology enhances this process. My results show that students are highly motivated to share their poems and personal narratives via narrated PowerPoints and i-Movies. Their English language and computer skills improved, but perhaps even more importantly, they grew in self-confidence, came together as a community of learners, and were inspired to engage in service projects to help others.

Providing opportunities to “publish” their work via the Internet increased the efficacy of my instructional plan. In designing their podcasts, students gained invaluable technology skills and in viewing each other’s work, they gained appreciation for each other’s cultural and literacy journeys.

My extended meetings with ESL students helped me grow as a teacher of young adult learners. I now understand more than ever that it is most important to find out what matters to individual students and to develop lessons around their needs.

At the present time, over 23 million adults in the United States lack adequate English proficiency. This impedes “... economic mobility and assimilation of those immigrants and

some native-born Americans, who are trapped in generational linguistic isolation. Although many are highly motivated to learn English, the current system of adult education in English as a Second Language (ESL) is serving adult English Language Learners (ELLs) especially poorly – with high drop-out rates, low proficiency gains, and rigid barriers to participation and rapid language acquisition” (Kennedy & Walters, 2013, p. 2).

Results of my project indicate that using students’ lives as curriculum, including stories, told and shared through computer technology, is a powerful means of ensuring success for adult English Language Learners. My story may encourage other teachers to abandon pre-packaged materials prescribed by traditional ESL programs, bringing learners’ lives and interests to the center of their teaching practice. Using students’ personal narratives as texts and sharing them through the use of podcasting is a powerful tool for helping young adult English Language learners both to discover their voice and to use their new found literacy skills to work for social justice.

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### Appendix. Selected Student Writing

I Am

I am a modest person.

I wonder what the world will look like in future years.

I hear a melody of song.

I see myself excelling.

I want to change the world around me.

I am a modest person.

I pretend that things are OK even when they are not.

I feel great lending a helping hand to others.

I touch the sky.

I worry when things don't seem to be falling in place.

I cry when I cannot accomplish a goal I have set for myself.

I am a modest person.

I understand my responsibility.

I say, "I have what it takes to succeed."

I dream of changing the world in which I live.

I try to be the best I can be.

I hope to succeed in my academic pursuits.

I am a modest person.

*By William*

I Am

I am nice and funny.

I have always wondered what it will be like to ski.  
I hear voices in my head.  
I hear the sound of happiness.  
I see my Dad in my sleep.  
I wonder why minds work the way they do.  
I am nice and funny.  
I pretend to love my reading class.  
I feel like my Dad is with me.  
I touch the hands of my Dad.  
I am worried about my family.  
I cry about missing home.  
I am nice and funny.  
I understand it is hard to be the only one in the U.S.  
I say, "One day my Mom will have a visa."  
I dream about helping people and having a house.  
I try to help my family back home.  
I hope for a better future.  
I am nice and funny.

*By Yalamba*

My Dad

My dad was killed by the rebels.  
This happened in 1999.  
Although many days have passed,  
I can still feel him near me and there are times that I miss him so.  
As long as he lives in my memory, he will always be close by.

*By Yalamba*

I Am

I am friendly and quiet.  
I wonder who is my brother's girl.  
I hear singing.  
I see back home in West Africa.  
I want to be a nurse someday.  
I am friendly and quiet.  
I pretend not to hear when someone says a bad word.

I feel love for my grandmother.

I was touched by the sweet love letter he wrote to me.

I worry when I get a bad grade.

I cry when I do not have money for school.

I am friendly and quiet.

I understand that he does not have money.

I say, "I am from West Africa."

I dream of becoming a nurse.

I try to study hard.

I hope for a good husband and good children.

I am friendly and quiet.

*By Jennifer*