

## Reflections of Identity in Multimodal Projects

### Teacher Education in the Pacific

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#### Introduction

Contemporary societies, whether in the United States or the Pacific are overwhelming visual in character. Yet, schools at all levels continue to privilege written text as demonstrations of learning over any other form of communication. A visual curriculum has the potential to strengthen instruction across disciplines and offers students another way to express their knowledge. As a receptive mediator, images can provide support for students who may be new to school, or English, or otherwise in need additional scaffolding of verbal language experiences (Cappello & Walker, 2016; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). When used for literacy production, visuals may also help students to communicate their new ideas and understandings (Cappello & Hollingsworth, 2008; Cappello & Lafferty, 2015; Eisner, 2002). Moreover, privileging visual texts as student demonstrations of knowledge may provide students an otherwise missing opportunity to express cultural knowledge and identity (Franquiz & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006).

Indeed, visuals can improve learning outcomes by creating new op-

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portunities for students to display their knowledge within and beyond the curriculum. Keeping this in mind, I designed instructional opportunities for teacher education students to express their ideas through transmediated classroom experiences where visuals were integrated alongside traditional oral and written language forms. This article explores the ways visuals enabled student expression of curricular knowledge and personal identity in a master's level teacher education context in American Samoa.

The following research questions guided the study: In what ways did privileging visuals provide students with another way to express curricular understandings?; How did the process of creating visuals mediate opportunities for learners to reflect and explore identity?

### Theoretical Framework

In 1973, Dondis wrote that schools “still persist in an emphasis on the verbal mode to the exclusion of the rest of the human sensorium and with little sensitivity, if any, to the overwhelmingly visual character of the learning experience” (p. 10). Sadly, not much has changed, except the increasing visual nature of contemporary society. Visual texts are an integral part of our communication process. It is important for us to remember, “our language abilities do not define the limits of our cognition” (Eisner, 2002, p.12).

Emerging from semiotics, a multimodal perspective that values multiple and diverse communication systems has been well developed and much has been written about applying these theories in K-12 schools (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). A multiliteracies perspective has also been explored in the context of teacher education. Cervetti, Damico, and Pearson (2008) offer five recommendations for promoting a multiliteracies perspective in preservice teacher education including placing student teachers in setting where multiliteracies are at regular play and in programs where future teachers “learn about, through and with technology based media” (p. 383). Ajayi (2011), Cappello (2011), and Sheridan-Thomas (2006) focus on expanding teacher education to include opportunities to explore multiliteracies in their coursework as a way to help teachers redefine literacy for the 21st Century and include complex instructional experiences that involve more than traditional print-based literacy engagements.

Multiliteracy and multimodal experiences may be used specifically for the purposes of exploring identity, especially in contexts when school is seen as an “act of social reproduction as well as that of education in skills and knowledge, students can struggle when their personal and

cultural backgrounds differ from the expected norms” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 505). Several studies explore how students’ visuals may express relationships and “provide data not available via language-focused approaches” (Zenkov, Harmon, & van Lier, 2008, p.162). In another example, Kendrick and Jones (2008) offered photography and drawing to Ugandan schoolgirls as tools to situate their own lives and experiences alongside school literacy practices. Students’ visual texts “opened broader dialogues on literacy, women, and development” (p. 372). Franquiz and Brochin-Ceballos (2006) describe how children’s use of visuals created a safe space to “link cultural practices from home and community to broader struggles for social change” (p. 7) and articulate their border identities. Giampapa (2010) created “curricular modifications” that were designed for fourth graders to create multimodal images that express dual language identity. Her pedagogy was designed to “draw from the linguistic and cultural forms of capital and identities of students and their families...to open up opportunities for students to access the academic literacies that are valued within schools” (p. 409). However, Lenters (2016) found families resistant to the idea of sharing their stories for digitally produced multimodal compositions. Even within the revised curricular approach, she calls for the consideration of affect in multiliteracies pedagogy.

Other researchers have explored the use of multiliteracy projects for identity articulation at the university level (Brenner, Andres, & Collins, 2004; Vinogradov, Linville, & Bickel, 2011; Wang 2009). Brenner, Andres, and Collins (2004), all visual artists, created coursework specifically designed to prepare university students for degree programs that built on “existing strengths and culturally familiar ideas in order to ensure that students’ experiences are given an active role in the curriculum.” Similarly, Vinogradov, Linville, and Bickel (2011) studied the multimodal digital stories created by international students learning English in preparation for matriculation in degree programs. Wang (2009) engaged American college students in a book-making project in which their visual texts were composed as interpretations of their personal identity and then used content analysis to critically examine the cultural messages and meanings.

Although the multiliteracy engagements at the core of this study were not specifically designed to support teacher education students’ expression of identity, the projects created a way for students to share their perspectives and insights on power and status in Samoan culture with each other and with me, the teacher researcher from the mainland. I believe “how students reveal their identity texts through multimodal engagements reflects the significance of being able to understand,

communicate, and think in alternative ways”(Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011, p. 340).

## Methods

This interpretive case study includes an analysis of qualitative data generated from multiple visual and textual sources, including teacher education based learning products. Data from student work included digital photographic stories and visual based lesson plans. Photography was included because it has wide reaching access, can be simply taught, and thus could easily serve as another means for expression. However, the key reason photography was included was because when we photograph something, “we confer importance” (Sontag, 1977, p. 28). Indeed, the act of making photographs demonstrates the need to capture an idea, event, or a moment in time.

### *Context and Participants*

San Diego State University has a 40-year history of partnerships in the Pacific as described on their webpage:

San Diego State University partners with community colleges and other governmental and educational entities in the Western and South Pacific regions to offer degrees using a unique educational model where individuals seeking an education must work with foreign or U.S. universities to gain admission and matriculate through an on-campus program. Through technology and innovative instructional design, this model blends virtual technologies and face-to-face instruction with site-based facilitators, enabling Pacific Islanders to access undergraduate and graduate degrees without having to travel abroad (San Diego State University in the Pacific, n.d.).

I have been involved with the Center for Pacific Studies for four years, in which time I have designed curriculum for and traveled to teaching assignments in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau. This research evolved out of a hybrid course on visual literacy, the second course in two years I was fortunate to have the opportunity to teach to a cohort of master’s students in education on American Samoa. Both courses on American Samoa included trips to Tutuila for face-to-face instruction that comprised one-third of the course meetings, as well as teaching engagements conducted through Blackboard (and Collaborate) and Skype. Central to this study are the digital storytelling student products created for TE 605 Innovations in Instruction: Visual Literacy in American Samoa. Through the partnership, I was able to provide students with inexpensive digital cameras in lieu of textbooks. These cameras, along with the computers

they received when they matriculated, provided the tools needed to fully participate in the course. Online and face-to-face workshops that guided students through the process of creating a digital story were scheduled throughout the semester. Students participated in activities that supported topic choice, resource collection, and storyboard development. They also received support on the use of Microsoft Photo Story 3 that came installed for free on their computers and was the primary software used for creating their digital stories.

In American Samoa, you can become an elementary school teacher with a high school diploma. Although my students brought a range of classroom and administrative experiences to our courses, all 24 (five men and 19 women) were matriculated in a master's degree program in education in partnership with San Diego State University, evidence of their dedication to our field and the children in the communities they serve. Since there is no local institution offering degrees beyond Associate (American Samoa Community College), too often, the students who leave their home island to pursue degrees elsewhere do not return to contribute to the advancement of their local community. This model is designed so that participants can continue to provide resources and expertise to their local communities throughout their program and after they have earned their degree. My students were committed to supporting and maintaining their culture and the cohort included leaders in their education community as well as chiefs and wives of chiefs that held high status. Other students traveled from outlying islands such as Manu'a to come to class while I was on Tutuila.

### ***Data Sources***

Central to this study are the digital storytelling student products created for TE 605 Innovations in Instruction: Visual Literacy in American Samoa. The project was designed to support the student learning outcomes identified for the course including helping students to "(re)define literacy through a new literacies perspective" and "find innovative ways to meet standards, benchmarks, and indicators across the curriculum." The project was heavily weighted and contributed 50% of their overall grade for the course. Expectations were made clear in the syllabus:

You will use your own photographic images to create a digital narrative. 'Digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories. As with traditional storytelling, most digital stories focus on a specific topic and contain a particular point of view. However, as the name implies, digital stories usually contain some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and/or music.' (Digital storytelling, n.d.)

Your digital story will illustrate a standard/benchmark/indicator. It does not have to TEACH the standard, but rather demonstrate one. For example, you might create a biography of a famous American Samoan to fulfill a history standard or you might tell a story that uses alliteration to meet a literacy standard. Your story will emphasize the visual and highlight your own images. It will also include music and/or voice narration. Remember, you are expected to create the photographs for your narrative.

Although the syllabus made it clear that students were expected to create their own images for their digital stories, several students requested permission to include Internet images and video clips and in one case described later in the paper, images on loan from an outside source. The final projects were rich multimodal narratives that combined their own images and videos, as well as existing visual resources including drawings, cartoons, advertisements, signs, photographs, and short video clips. Some students included computer graphics. All of the digital stories included music and narration.

### ***Data Analysis***

Visual research methods, and specifically visual discourse analysis offers a helpful perspective to interpret the lesson outcomes created through transmediated university classroom experiences where visuals were integrated alongside traditional oral and written language forms. The process used to interpret the digital stories drew upon the methods of visual discourse analysis described by Albers, 2007, 2014; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; and Serafini, 2014. These researchers' methods have several factors in common: they are both practical and critical, they advocate for an exploration of visual grammar as a tool for understanding messages, and they focus on the ways images create relationships between the maker and viewer. This last perspective, on social interactions, guides my close and critical reading of the visual data for illustrations of teachers' beliefs about their identity.

Specifically, I chose to focus on the visual aspects that represent interpersonal functions and "project a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 41). Albers (2007) describes the interaction among the maker, image content, and viewer as conversations because "when learners create visual texts, they do so to communicate or have a conversation with viewers" (p. 92).

These conversations framed my understanding of the makers' communication of identity (see Figure 1). My examination focused on the critical aspects of how the student's multimodal projects served as "language used

to convey power and status in contemporary social interaction” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p.13). Thus, these conversations may illustrate social identities and conventions. As all of the digital stories were created in response to an expectation in a university course, I thought it would also be interesting to explore their “social acceptability” (Albers, 2007) as a response to the requirements of assignment.

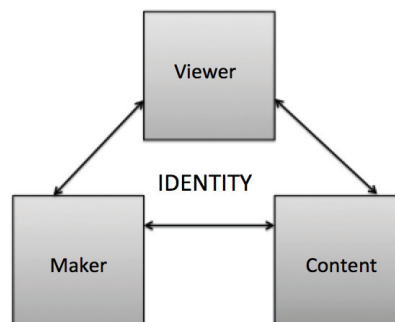
### Multimodal Messaging Within and Beyond the Curriculum

Findings suggest the multimodal and visually integrated classroom experiences became means for expression within and beyond the curriculum.

### *Expressions of Curricular Understandings*

The required multimodal project provided opportunities for teacher education students to meet the expected course learning outcomes. Twenty-three of 24 students created a digital story (a curricular innovation) that focused on a specific grade level standard or benchmark they felt should be included in their education portfolios. While most students chose to address language arts, music, or social science benchmarks that lend themselves to narratives, others challenged themselves to focus on mathematics and science. In addition, the project helped students understand the potential of offering multiple communication tools to their own students. One student reflected surprise in what he learned from using a camera to create images for his assignment. “A very simple exercise... opened my eyes to view things from different angles. Ever since that simple lesson, I began to perceive things from

**Figure 1**  
*Understanding identity through multimodal conversations*



various perspectives instead of one.” Sasa’e reflected on how the course and specifically:

The project made me see a world in which images and visuals are vital to student learning. I believe that my artifact demonstrates the automatic connection students make between what is being taught in the classroom to what they see happening everyday outside of the classroom. The images teachers choose to use to teach their lessons are powerful, in that they make an impact on what and how students learn.

Masina recognized that visuals are used for both productive and receptive purposes within the curriculum:

I explored the way visuals may support language learning and development and how visuals maybe used for students to demonstrate new learning. The other way is to engage the students in thinking about ways to read images as well as make images.

While is it unclear if the teacher education students redefined their ideas of literacy, it is clear that they see the potential of projects such as digital storytelling for their own pedagogy and specifically as a tool to express curricular understandings. Teuila shared:

I can see myself using digital storytelling in my own classroom. My students will have fun creating their digital storytelling as a way of introduction in my class to portray who they are, what their hobbies are, and what they hope to learn from my class this school year. Achieving this goal will help my students explore adventures they have never explored before, and I can’t wait to inspire them and implement digital storytelling in my class.

Another student, Isaac, one of three men who taught high school choir, has become an advocate for using multimodal projects:

[This project] identifies how we can put complex ideas into a different medium that will help students learn better and more effectively. Implementing and encouraging this new approach can be successful when all stakeholders, from administrators to teachers, parents and the community come together to share and help develop better practices to enrich the learning experiences of the students.

### ***Expressions of Identity***

Privileging visuals not only provided students with another way to express curricular understandings, but the digital storytelling project also gave students opportunities to express understandings beyond the syllabus. Although not a requisite component of the assignment, the analytic conversations revealed the ways teacher education students

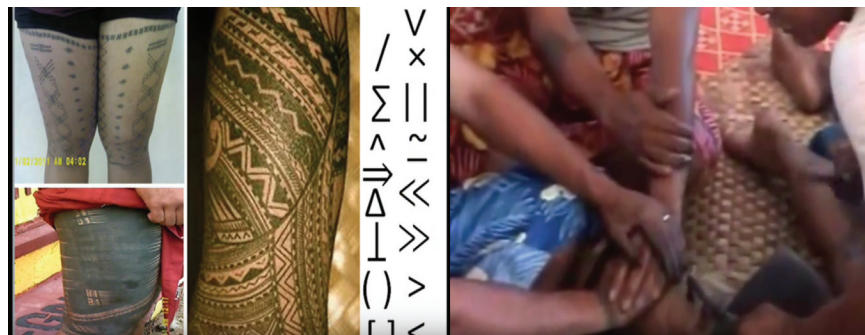


used multimodal communication to display and reflect their social and cultural identities and expressed identity through demonstrations of power and status within their social relationships. Understanding the ways students (makers) used content and were influenced by viewers, including the perceived social acceptability of the student work contributed insights into the maker's identity. Together, these elements represent each teacher's unique social identity in the American Samoan educational and clan hierarchy. In the following sections I emphasize each for illustration and not as a suggestion that we can isolate contributions and deconstruct their multimodal conversations.

**Maker.** Final projects reflected the status and power of the maker. For example, three female students decided to retell classic Samoan myths and legends as part of their elementary language arts curriculum. The images included in their projects included family members reenacting myths in the rainforest and at the sea that reinforced their roles as mothers responsible for sharing cultural stories.

Manaia, a math teacher and chief descendent (matai) created a digital story that explored the relationship between geometrical shapes and traditional Samoan tattoos (Pe'a) (see Figure 2). In his project, Manaia narrates how tattooing is regarded as the "ultimate challenge" and those who undergo the painful process are "regarded with the greatest respect." Indeed, tattooing is a matter of cultural pride showed off in village gatherings and ceremonies, especially in the fale. Conversation in class revealed not everyone gets Pe'a; it is usually reserved for the matai, the holder of the family chief title. Manaia was the only matai in class and had the full "tatau that covers 85% of the body beginning from the upper back down below the knees." As such, he was the only person with the status needed to make this visual argument.

**Figure 2**  
*Geometrical shapes and traditional Samoan tattooing*



**Viewer.** Identity can also be understood when considering the role of the viewer in students' multimodal conversations. As a course requirement, teacher education students composed their digital stories for me and also for their classmates in the cohort. In Manaia's example above, he was aware of his role among his peers and recognized viewers' expectations of him as a matai. Another student, Masina created her digital story around the environmental concerns plaguing contemporary society on American Samoa (see Figure 3). "Keep Samoa Clean" depicted many sites of pollution around the island. The compiled images in her digital story show her embarrassment about the overwhelming amount of litter, perhaps intended to embarrass others. Masina's multimodal project speaks directly and names many reasons why viewers must make a change. Her role as an environmental advocate is evident in the way this multimodal conversation communicates with her viewers.

**Content.** Several students chose to focus on topics that reproduced content and maintained cultural norms such as the three female students' projects that illustrated traditional Samoan myths, and others who created visual representations that highlighted their "beautifully decorated classrooms." However, others chose topics that confronted long standing social and cultural roles. For example, Tao, a history teacher,

**Figure 3**  
*Screen shot from Masina's "Keep Samoa Clean" digital story*



faced several unexpected challenges as he worked toward the standard, “Students draw conclusions about the changes in the relationship between people, places, and environments.” In his digital story, Tao “wanted to create a project that would showcase the changes to our Pago harbor from the early 1900s to today (see Figure 4). Such a project required photos taken in the past.” Through the research for this assignment, he learned that there is no archive, library of images, or government agency that catalogs historical images on American Samoa. His investigation led him to a website created by a son of a former White US Naval doctor who was stationed on Pago Pago Harbor just prior to and after the start of World War II. Tao wrote to the owner, asked for and was granted permission to use his images for his university project. However, he was frustrated that a son of a White Naval officer stationed briefly on American Samoa would have the images he needed, images that should be valued and stored as historical documents by his government. As a cultural historian, Tao found this an important learning outcome:

Now, if I can't locate visual aids I can make them. This is very valuable to me because there are not a lot of visual materials on American Samoa history. I can use the skills I learned through this course to create my own material.

**Social Acceptability.** The teacher education students created digital stories that focused on a standard or benchmark. Many students highlighted their successes at school by including their students' accomplishments such as choir competitions or deaf students learning to use sign language to communicate. Teachers furthered the social acceptability of their multimodal projects by capitalizing on Samoan folklore, history, and tradition when designing standards based lesson products. The digital stories provided students a way to align cultural knowledge with university expectations.

Since 98% of Samoans identify as a Christian denomination (2006 Census) religious beliefs also guide what is socially acceptable among

**Figure 4**  
*The changes in Pago Pago Harbor from 1940 to present day*



the cohort. Many students included religious references in songs and bible quotes and psalms appeared at the beginning of many digital stories. Religion (tacit or explicit) plays a role in public schools, including our university classroom, framing content understanding. Samaria, a middle school science teacher, intentionally defied accepted religious beliefs in her digital story that focused on the standard, "Explore how biological evolution explains unity and diversity of species." Samaria's digital storytelling project "focused on the common characteristics shared by all primates which include humans, gorillas and monkeys." She knew the concept of evolution would contradict the biblical beliefs held as truths by most of the cohort and asked me for her support in creating her project. Samaria's digital story address academic knowledge; there was no indication she intended to be disrespectful to her peers. Nonetheless, the cohort sat in silence during her presentation and offered no more than polite applause when it ended, despite my efforts to facilitate conversation.

Teula also confronted norms of social acceptability in her visual story addressing a standard that requires students "identify leaders in different groups and situations." Her narrative began with images of different well know leaders including then President Obama and then governor of American Samoa, Togiola Tulafano. In addition, Teula's story focused on leadership in the extended family (aiga), central to Samoan culture. The visuals and accompanying leadership quotes appeared to target her elementary school student audience. However, about 3.5 minutes into her five-minute digital story, the tone changed. She posted a slide stating, "The leaders chosen today will impact our tomorrow." At the time this course was offered, an election was approaching. Teulia used this opportunity to voice her support for a particular candidate, one not popularly advocated for by many teachers as his opponent (and future Governor Lolo Matalasi Moliga) was a former educator and recent graduate of a concurrent master's program offered by San Diego State University in public administration (see Figure 5).

## Discussion

This critical class study demonstrated how visual opportunities in the classroom provided ways for students to express themselves within and beyond the curriculum of the university and curriculum designed for the context in which they teach. Teacher education students capably used visuals along with digital technologies to communicate standards and benchmarks.

The digital stories and the corresponding analysis of the multimodal conversations among the maker, viewer, and content revealed several

ways students asserted and built upon their social and cultural identities while using images to target curricular understandings. Teacher education students reproduced or confronted established norms of acceptability when they made decisions as part of the process of creating their visual narratives. Although not a project requirement, most students' digital stories highlight American Samoan culture and their personal role(s) within the education and social hierarchy while meeting a grade level and subject specific standard or benchmark. The multimodal experiences and the transmediation process encouraged deeper thinking about connections to culture and community in ways that may have been previously absent in school experiences. However, I may have been unaware of the identity meanings in their projects had I not closely examined their multimodal conversations. The suggested multimodal (visual) analysis process may be a helpful tool for others who want to better understand the messages students at all levels communicate through their digital projects and visual communications. Considering the impact of visuals in our students' worlds and the potential for teaching and learning, using visuals and multimodal projects in teacher education classrooms is clearly important and beneficial.

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**Figure 5**

*Teuila's digital story on leadership shared her political perspective*



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