Innovative Collaboration with Digital Stories:
Making a Difference through Invitational Education

Dr. Debra Coffey
Kennesaw State University

Abstract

This study was designed to explore and describe the impact of innovative group collaboration on digital stories in a children's literature course for pre-service teachers. Participants described the highlights of experiences with innovative creation and the ways they collaborated in an intentionally inviting environment while they prepared the digital stories. The results of this study aligned with the overarching goals, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice.

Keywords: Invitational Education, Invitational Theory and Practice, Children's Literature, Digital stories.

Introduction

Whether by the glow of a campfire or the light of a computer monitor, stories invite us to partake of new adventures. They give us opportunities to create imaginary worlds with our own heroes. Storytelling is a communication tool that goes back to ancient times and inspires new innovations. Stories convey significant aspects of our culture as they entertain and provide insights for effective living.

Digital storytelling brings the cinema into the classroom. Students become cinematographers as they paint visual pictures with multimedia and bring their stories to life. Stories can be used to invite students into a more compelling and innovative learning experience. Our digital natives in our twenty-first century classrooms feel quite comfortable with multi-media, and digital stories give them opportunities to capture ideas and experiences in ways that are significant to them. When they produce digital stories, they gain confidence, make personal statements in creative ways, and experience the satisfaction of accomplishment.

This study focuses on a university children's literature class in which pre-service teachers prepared digital stories in collaborative learning communities. In this university, administrators and faculty members have worked for many years to provide programs and policies to invite students to enjoy higher levels of learning and innovative academic success. The programs and policies of this major university in the Southeast are intentionally designed to align with the overarching goals, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013).

<center>**Review of the Literature**</center>

Invitational schools encourage students to experience innovation and develop leadership skills in student-centered educational environments. Digital stories and various innovative projects give students opportunities to make choices and experience higher levels of learning through engagement and active participation in the learning process. Invitational Education (IE) focuses on the positive aspects of learning and the affective side of the people, places, programs, policies, and processes in education (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). This aligns well with digital stories that combine the power of a story, one of the most meaningful educational tools for generations, with technology, one of our main tools for communication.

Digital Stories

A review of the literature demonstrates the remarkable success and the benefits of digital stories. This is an emerging educational tool that is coming to the forefront in many fields (Alexander, 2011; Ohler, 2013; Yearta, Helf, & Harris, 2018). Digital stories were originally promoted by Dana Atchley, who is considered the father of digital stories (Alexander, 2011; Ohler, 2013). When he popularized digital stories on his program *Next Exit*, his audiences were enthralled and realized that they also had stories to share. He traveled across the country sharing digital stories that spanned events over five decades of his life and conducted workshops with Joe Lambert. This led to the Center for Digital Storytelling and Joe Lambert's *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* (2010). The stories created in workshops were typically personal narratives illustrated by a series of photos on video. Most of the literature about digital stories focuses on this approach. There are many definitions of digital stories, and they can take many forms. Basically, digital storytelling is combining multiple modes of technology to tell a story (Castañeda, 2013).

Invitational Education

Purkey and Novak (2016, p. vii) described Invitational Education (IE) as a theory of practice "designed to create and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. vii). IE "is an imaginative act of hope that explains how human potential can be realized. It identifies and changes the forces that defeat and destroy people" (p. vii). IE recognizes five Domains: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, that comprise "everyone and everything in an organization…(that) will either build or destroy intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral potential for stakeholders" (p.vii).

Invitational Theory and Practice

Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) "is the overarching theory of Invitational Education (IE)" (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 30). Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) "addresses the total culture/environment of an organization to provide a more welcoming, satisfying, and enriching experience for all involved" (p. 34).

Invitational Theory and Practice aligns directly with the comments of pre-service teachers during interviews and focus groups in this study. Throughout this digital story project, the course

instructor and technology coach used the principles of Invitational Education to encourage students to actualize their potential in creative and meaningful ways.

Methodology

This qualitative interview study was designed to determine the impact of creating a digital story project with a group of pre-service teachers in a university emphasizing Invitational Education. Interviews, focus groups, reflections, class activities, and digital stories were the primary means of data collection, and typological data analysis (Hatch, 2002) was used to codify the overarching themes. Pre-service teachers explored quality literature and the components of effective stories by exploring story elements and using story maps and storyboards to create their own stories. Then they designed plans for collaborative stories and captured the results with videos in collaborative learning communities.

Participants

Pre-service teachers who participated in the project shared their experiences and insights during the interviews and focus groups for this study. The course instructor and technology coach provided ongoing support and guidance throughout the project. This project was completed as part of a university course in children's literature, which is part of a degree program to prepare university students to teach children from birth to five years of age. As students were taking this course, they were completing a field experience and taking courses emphasizing the value of play and technology in childhood education.

For clarity throughout our discussion, the degree-seeking pre-service teachers will be referred to as students. The teacher educators who were guiding the students applied the principles of Invitational Education throughout the program and emphasized the importance of providing a nurturing environment for children.

Procedures

During the preparatory stage, students explored quality literature and the components of effective stories by exploring story elements, analyzing quality stories, and using story maps and storyboards to create their own stories. They used these ideas when they created more extensive storyboards for digital stories in collaborative learning communities and captured the results with videos.

The teacher educator designed the digital story project so that students could make their own choices, enjoy the process, and experience success She gave them a rubric for major expectations and left aspects of the project open-ended. Then students designed their own rubrics for part of the project to show how they would use it in the classroom. This gave the students a sense of freedom and autonomy as they created their own stories. Then they could relax and enjoy the process rather than feeling like they had to just complete a checklist of requirements. Although they were well prepared for the experience, the innovative technology was new to them, and they gained new confidence as they experienced success with the process.

Students designed their stories in the classroom and the Innovation Lab. This was a place where they could extend their vision of what was possible and experiment to become makers of

technology rather than just consumers. As they created digital stories, the students reflected on what they learned after their project to share tips with others.

Data Collection

Interview questions and focus group questions served as the basis for data collection. They were designed to encourage participants to freely express their perceptions and feelings about the experience of creating digital stories in collaborative learning communities. Interviews and focus groups progressed from general "grand tour questions" (Spradley, 2016), such as a description of a typical day to more specific questions about their experiences. Open-ended questions gave participants opportunities to share their feelings in their own words. Focus group questions were designed to corroborate statements from interviews to give participants opportunities to elaborate on certain issues that were emphasized during interviews.

The semi-structured format provided the opportunity to follow leads from statements made by participants (Van Manen, 1990). These follow-up questions elicited rich descriptions and provided a more complete picture of the lived experiences of the participants.

Data Analysis

Hatch's typological model (2002) provided the framework for data analysis from multiple perspectives (Glesne, 2015; Patton, 2014). Initial categorization of the data into typologies was followed by repeated readings, line-by-line analysis, and color-coding of the data using *Microsoft Word*. This analysis was ongoing and utilized the nine steps for data analysis designed by Hatch (2002). According to Hatch (2002) typological analysis should only be used if the categories for analysis are evident. At the beginning of data analysis, it became evident that the data aligned with the assumptions, five elements, and five domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Regularities and common characteristics in the responses of participants quickly emerged in a review of the data pattern analysis. As these semantic relationships emerged, they revealed patterns that were suggested in the research literature. These semantic relationships served as links in the data set and provided elaborations on these ideas from the literature. During this codifying process, charts listing relevant data helped identify the integrating concepts that ran through this data.

Color-coded *Post-it flags* were used to label the patterns within the typologies as they were recorded in relation to the specific codes for the participants. While recording integrating concepts that ran through all of the data, stars were used to highlight powerful quotes to facilitate the selection of specific data to support generalizations from these patterns. Throughout these steps the typological model designed by Hatch (2002) continued to provide the framework that illuminated the process of data analysis.

Discussion and Findings

The findings of this qualitative study illustrate the ways that the teacher educators intentionally invited students to experience success, prepared the process, and guided the students

throughout the process. These students conducted their project in a university that emphasized the principles of Invitational Education. Teacher educators and colleagues nurtured and cared for them, and this was reflected in their digital stories.

Invitational Education (IE) emphasizes the ways "everyone has the ability and responsibility to function in a personally and professionally inviting manner" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 23). An intentionally inviting level of functioning creates a dependable stance that helps students to feel secure and increases the likelihood that they will consistently accept and act upon the cordial invitation to pursue an inviting educational experience (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 24).

Drs. Purkey, Novak, and Siegel have consistently promoted Invitational Theory and Practice as a way of life (Purkey & Siegel, 2003, 2013). As a result, they have made a difference in so many lives. They have emphasized the IE Domains, or powerful '5 Ps,' to promote a warm and inviting atmosphere wherever they go (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010). The arms of a starfish are used in Invitational Education to illustrate these domains. They have used a starfish diagram to illustrate the ways the five Ps of the domains of IE, people, places, policies, programs, and processes, work together to overcome challenges and make a difference in an organization and potentially the world.

This message of overcoming challenges to promoting a positive environment aligns well with "The Starfish Story," originally written by Loren Eiseley (1978), which has been shared in many versions and touched the hearts of people all over the world. We are familiar with the inspiring story in which a man sees a little boy throwing starfish back into the water. Then he asks the boy what he is doing. The boy tells the man he is saving starfish, so they will not dry out in the sun. Then the man laughs and tells him there is no way he can save so many starfish. After the boy listens politely, he says, "It made a difference to that one." This story is often shared to demonstrate the difference one caring person can make. Each person can make a huge difference in the world, and that should never be underestimated. The impact of the influence of one person is clearly seen in the lives of the creators of Invitational Theory and Practice.

When everyone in a group truly values each individual, the power and impact of one person is multiplied in amazing ways. Drs. Purkey, Siegel, Novak, and many leaders of Invitational Education remind us of the power of one as well as the impact of collaboration that leads to systemic change and makes life better for so many. They have accomplished so much, yet they have always been quick to give credit to those who collaboratively experienced success with them. As they have honored collaborators, they have often noted "that if you see a turtle on a fencepost, you know it didn't get there alone" (Purkey & Siegel, 2013, p. xi). As Margaret Mead stated, "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world" (Lutkehaus, 2008, p. 261).

In one video illustrating "The Starfish Story," a young girl is the one saving the starfish. A young man is jogging, asks her about the starfish. Then he also rescues a starfish. If the leaders of Invitational Education experienced this scenario, perhaps they might have led a collaborative effort to rescue starfish. When the starfish were safe and healthy, they might take this process a step further by collaborating with the community to create a better place for the starfish, such as a tidepool, marine preserve, or aquarium, where starfish could thrive rather than just surviving. As leaders, they would potentially create an inviting and beneficial place where starfish would flourish.

The starfish in the diagram for Invitational Education is in a healthy environment which flows naturally and comfortably. Invitational leaders have the responsibility to provide a safe, secure environment where people flourish comfortably. Then the invitation is given. In this scenario, the leader provides a meaningful environment where the learning process is appealing, and students have opportunities to choose paths to optimal learning.

Fretz (2015) noted that "Invitational Education provides educators with a systematic way of communicating positive messages that develop potential as well as identifying and changing those forces that defeat and destroy potential" (p. 28). "This understanding of the depth and breadth of messages is used to develop environments and ways of life that are anchored in attitudes of respect, care, and civility and that encourage the realization of democratic goals" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 4). Thus, when each individual is deeply appreciated while inclusiveness and collaboration are promoted, the entire system is influenced, and learning is maximized.

As they were developing Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP), Drs. Purkey, Siegel, and Novak spoke from their hearts and shared their life goals for the benefit of educators and students. For instance, as a university president for 25 years, Dr. Betty Siegel consistently worked to make the university a collaborative welcoming environment (Purkey & Siegel, 2003, 2013). She touched the lives of students so profoundly that a group of them sang in her honor during the commencement ceremony, and she was honored in many ways. As president, she promoted the principles of Invitational Education through university programs and policies, consistently touching the lives of students, faculty, and friends in meaningful ways. The campus is filled with concentric circles showing the impact of her inclusive policies of Invitational Education, and her legacy reverberates most profoundly in the Dr. Betty Siegel Fitness Center.

The students in this study were collaborating in a classroom that was impacted by the emphasis on Invitational Education promoted by the presidency and ongoing influence of Dr. Betty Seigel. "ITP focuses on increasing the authentically personal and professional verbal and non-verbal messages that seek to bring forth the best of human potential through care, trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality" (p. 34). Analyzing and improving each of the five Domains of IE: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, "within a framework of the five elements of IE: Intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT), systemically transforms the whole school (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). The results of the study aligned with the domains and elements of Invitational Theory and Practice as these teacher educators collaborated to ensure students' comfort, appropriate challenges, and success with the project.

Results of the Study

This section describes specific ways in which students' experiences in collaborative learning communities at a major university in the Southeast aligned with the overarching assumptions, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey, & Novak. 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). These results reflect patterns identified across the study's interviews and focus group sessions. The interviews and focus groups of this study consistently demonstrated the ways students designed digital stories that reflected their experiences in a welcoming, supportive environment. Invitational Theory and Practice "focuses on increasing the authentically personal and professional verbal and non-verbal messages that seek to bring forth the best of human potential through, trust, respect, optimism, care, and intentionality"

(Shaw, Siegel, and Schoenlein, 2013, p. 34). Throughout the interviews of this study there were many links between these elements of Invitational Education and the comments made by students as they discussed their collaborative digital story project.

Overarching Goals of Invitational Education

Implementation of Invitational Theory and Practice authentically creates and sustains welcoming learning environments. The systemic framework promotes intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). The goal is to promote "increased learning outcomes and personal growth" (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 33).

It was highly evident that these goals aligned with the approach of the faculty member and technology coach who orchestrated this project. They collaborated carefully and consistently to guide and encourage students as they completed their digital stories in the framework of the program. They regularly shared innovations to enhance success as they opened opportunities within and beyond the classroom.

The results of this study demonstrated the impact of digital stories that combine the power of a story with technology as well as the alignment between experiences of students in collaborative learning communities and the five Domains and 5 elements of IE. The elements of Invitational Education intensify the power and significance of each domain (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). The next section will highlight results of the study and discuss the impact of alignment with Invitational Theory and Practice.

Intentionality

"Intentionality is the keyword of Invitational Theory" (Haigh, 2011, p. 300). Invitational environments are both created and sustained by intentionality. As a process for defining school climate, Invitational Education encourages a Democratic Ethos to feature "collaborative and cooperative procedures and continuous networking stakeholders" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). Intentionality in the design of these processes emphasizes the value and boundless potential of each individual (Novak, Rocca, & DiBiase, 2006).

Systemic processes intentionally reflect care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT) to actualize the fullest potential of a collaborative atmosphere. These intentional processes encourage ongoing development of cooperative procedures with reciprocal benefits.

The teacher educator worked intentionally with the technology coach to provide relevant and meaningful experiences within the students' comfort zone, thereby promoting success without undue stress (Vygotsky, 1978). It was evident that this goal was achieved when a student stated, "This experience helped bring a story to life, and we used our creativity to create a cultural story and have fun at the same time."

Another student said, "One thing that surprised me while doing this was how much I enjoyed the process of it. Throughout the project we were able to laugh and enjoy what we were doing."

Care

Invitational Education focuses on people and the importance of each individual for a successful educational experience (Purkey & Novak, 2016). Students chose a country to emphasize at the beginning of the project, and they began conducting research after the country was chosen. They were careful to make their stories authentic as they connected with Kenyan tribes, Mexican villagers, and various cultural lifestyles. The education program is designed to

help students maximize their cultural awareness and connect with cultures around the world in meaningful ways. At the end of the project, students said they were more aware of the importance of cultural connections and books that promote cultural insights in the classroom library. This project was conducted in a university that emphasized an inclusive, caring environment, and the students created stories that reflected this nurturing environment. A student described one of the stories:

> This story promotes cultural awareness by teaching children about Kenyan culture and diversity. The story is about a little boy who imagines himself in a Kenyan safari and finds a baby elephant who lost his herd. Throughout the story the boy and the baby elephant work with different safari animals (a giraffe, a lion, a cheetah and a rhino). They come together and use their strengths to find the baby elephant's herd.

Another collaborative learning community created a story about a man who loved shiny gold coins. At the beginning of the story he was asked to share his coins with villagers. Then he a tragedy which damaged his home led to a change of heart, and he was glad to share his gold coins. The Mexican villagers were thrilled, and the man learned the value of sharing.

Optimism

The optimism of each individual helps to make a school inviting as it encourages everyone involved. Programs that embrace Invitational Education Theory and Practice can be "formal or informal, curricular, or extra-curricular. It is important for educators to ensure that all of the school's programs work for the benefit of everyone and that they encourage active engagement with significant content" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 21).

Optimism and enthusiasm were highly evident during this project. The teacher educators and students in the children's literature class consistently conveyed an optimistic perspective. When students discussed plans and chose roles for the digital story project in their collaborative learning communities, they considered the assets of each student and promoted the development of those assets using creativity and attention to details.

As a teacher educator taught the course on children's literature, she provided scaffolding to promote confidence and optimism when they began the digital story project. After analyzing quality literature, creating storyboards with ideas for their own stories, and discussing possibilities collaboratively, they gained more confidence. 'A student in a group using a chroma key screen and apps to create a digital story noted, "A highlight of this experience for me was after we finished our first scene and realized that we could do this, and it could be great. After that scene, each scene after came easier."

A student in a group that designed a small theater with shadow puppets summarized the process: "To make the digital story we did a story map, worked together, and filmed what we had done to showcase our story."

Respect

Invitational Education emphasizes the importance of documenting policies and emphasizing consistency for the benefit of everyone in the program. Purkey and Novak (2016) described policies as "critical semantic webs that influence the deep-seated structure of any school" (p. 21). Students in the children's literature class were collaborating in a university in

which those "critical semantic webs" reflected the structure of a respectful environment in which their ideas were honored and appreciated by their colleagues and teacher educators. Policies and procedures were intentionally designed to promote respect, and meaningful collaboration was valued for promotion and tenure. A student in the children's literature class noted, "I began this class saying that the creativity gene was given to my other siblings, but this exercise helped me to see that I do have creative ideas to offer. After she discussed benefits of the experience she exclaimed, "I AM PUBLISHED with some of the most amazing writers and illustrators in the world!!!"

Trust

Invitational Education highlights the importance of providing a pleasant, comfortable, and aesthetic learning environment which nurtures growth and promotes trust (Purkey & Novak, 2016). When leaders establish trustworthy patterns of interaction, schools augment the benefits of this pleasant environment. Reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, competence, and knowledge are keys for establishing this type of environment (Arceneaux, 1994; Purkey & Novak, 2016). The teacher educators worked from the beginning to establish trust and a pleasant rapport with students. The university itself is a safe, pleasant, and caring environment in which students feel comfortable. The education program is an extension of that atmosphere of trust, extending the basic needs for a safe and caring environment (Maslow, 1943) to the next level.

A student emphasized "the importance of trusting your team." She stated, "This project is too big to tackle alone, and if you cannot trust the people you are working with, you are going to be overwhelmed and do more work than needed." She was glad she could trust her team and work with them effectively for maximum success.

Another student shared, "What surprised me was how much I really enjoyed being in this group. Our members are in several classes together and are in other groups, but like one group members says, 'We have created an atmosphere of trust and togetherness!'"

Overarching Comments

Students consistently said they would use digital stories with their own classes. They were quite pleased with their accomplishments. When they were asked about sharing their digital stories right after they completed them, they immediately said, "Oh yes, we want everyone to know what we have done. We want to be famous."

Students noted that this project made them want to be more creative in their own classrooms. As they summarized the experience, students commented:

- "This project influenced me by opening my eyes to the power of technology in the classroom."
- "This experience impacts my future career by giving me insight into how children can create their own stories using technology."
- "I didn't know much about shadow puppets before we started, and now I am confident that I could do many more shadow puppet projects for my future classroom."

A student commented, "I will never look at a book or consider the story on the pages as just a story in a book ever again. There is something about doing something that changes your

perspective about it. When I moved to doing the next assignment (an annotated bibliography), I could imagine the character moving around on a green screen. I would, and have, recommended it to several early childhood educators as I think it would truly revolutionize their literary perspective."

Conclusion

When students gain confidence with digital stories, they develop leadership skills and feel like they have an opportunity to make a difference in the world. As teachers invite their students to share digital stories, a multiplication effect may result as they share digital stories in their own classrooms and give their students opportunities to generate their own digital stories.

As students say, "Lights, camera, action. . .." "they enter the world of cinematography and create new memoires of successful achievement in the classroom. These experiences inspire creativity and highlight the importance of culturally responsive literature. Thus, pre-service teachers discover new ways to make a difference and help their future students to gain confidence with creative achievement. This transformative experience could continue to multiply the impact and prepare them to make a difference in the academic achievement and creative potential of future students.

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To contact the author:

Dr. Debra Coffey, Associate Professor
Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education
Bagwell College of Education
Kennesaw State University
dcoffey1@kennesaw.edu