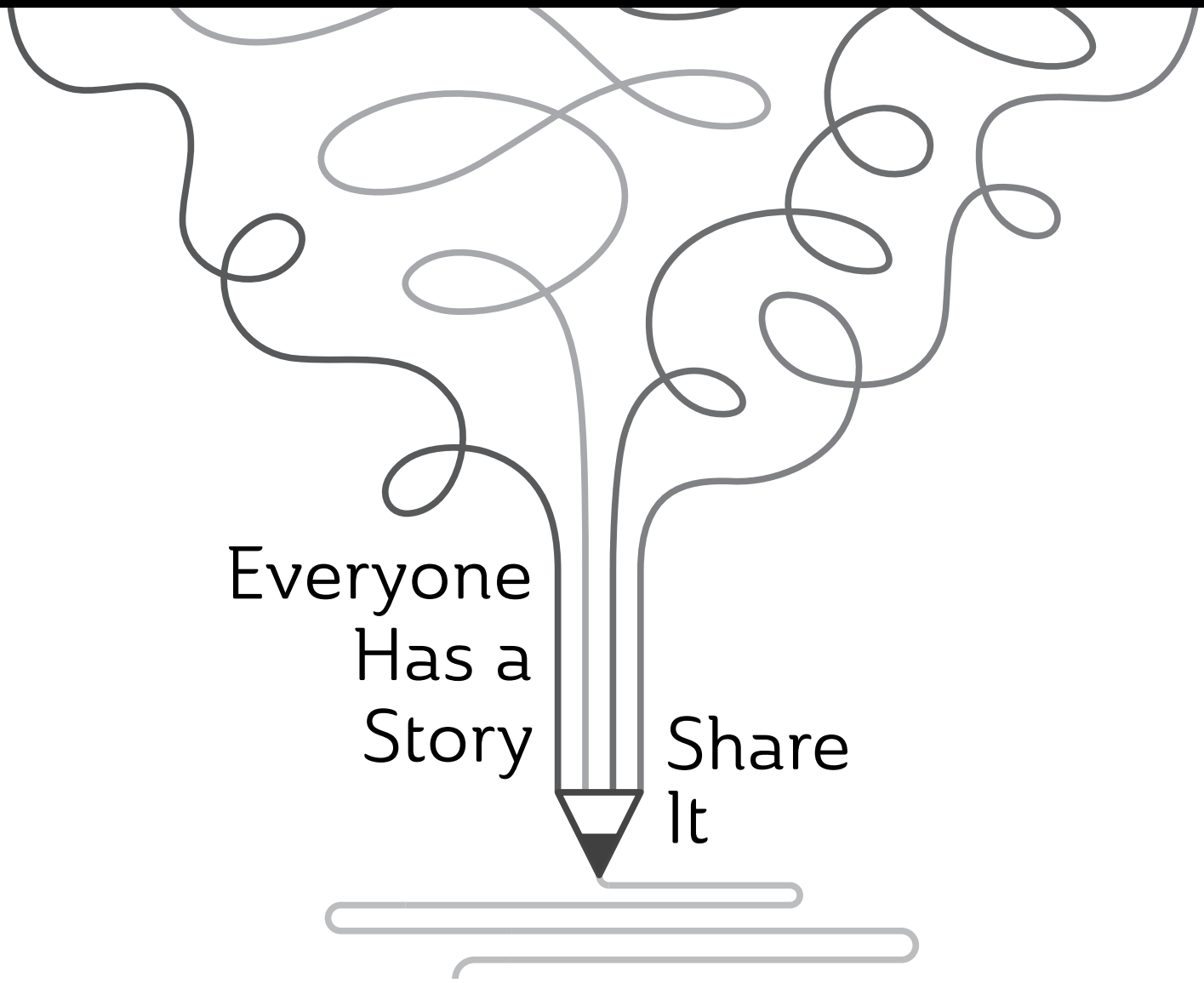
EXPLORING STUDENT VOICE ACROSS A DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

By Kevin D. Cordi



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Abstract

Investigating student voice in the classroom, the author suggests methods for integrating digital texts, both for student research and student writing. He recommends a variety of platforms that support digital storytelling and offers examples of student products and students' reflection on those products.

Keywords: voice, storytelling, digital storytelling, critical literacy, multigenre

I explore places to weave student voices into my curriculum design. I search for innovative pathways for students to respond and generate new perspectives. Most recently, my exploration includes digital learning.

As a high school teacher in California, I distinctly remember asking Maggie, an Honors student, to spend two weeks recording anytime a teacher asked her to share a personal reflection or story. Shortly after my request, Maggie, normally reserved, rushed into class, red-faced and out of breath sharing, "Mr. Cordi, I either can't do the assignment or I don't know how. Outside of your class, no one has asked me what I thought, let alone to share a personal reflection." Stunned, I immediately communicated this news with my principal who wanted a meeting to discuss this situation, but never set a date.

As an assistant professor for the past eight years at both Ohio Dominican University and Ohio Northern University, I have never forgotten Maggie and her frustration and disappointment about not having a voice in the classroom. I explore places to weave student voices into my curriculum design. I search for innovative pathways for students to respond and generate new perspectives. Most recently, my exploration includes digital learning.

Understanding the importance of voice in the classroom

Voice is viable in the classroom. Students should have more choice in the classroom. Ralph Waldo Emerson (in Shea, Scanlon, & Aufes, 2008) said, "Our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he should know, what he shall do" (p. 102). These are sage words to consider. When students are able to choose what and how they work when understanding literature, this increases engagement and the shaping of one's own voice.

What is voice and why is it important in the classroom?

Elbow (2000) states,

> We can distinguish two dimensions to someone's "voice": the sound of their voice and the manner with which they speak. The first is the quality of noise they make … and the second is the kind of "tunes, rhythms, and styles" they play on their instrument. (p. 194)

Elbow views text as something non-voiced until the reader creates a voice as he or she reads it. "All texts are literally silent, but most readers experience some texts giving off more sense of sound—more of the illusion as we read that we are hearing the words" (p. 195). In order to support this argument, Elbow quotes Robert Frost (1917) who said,

> A dramatic necessity goes deep to the nature of the sentence … all that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. (Introduction)

Considering Frost's words, why then do we have students like Maggie who is never provided a chance to voice what she is learning? To promote voice from our students, teachers need to think about control.

As Simmons and Page (2010) state, "Teacher control in the classroom has constructed an environment in which we no longer trust students, and they do not trust themselves" (p. 65). Outside of school contexts, students freely share their voices in many ways such as talking with their friends, but also specifically when electronically engaged. Students are immersed in electronic literacy writing blogs; they respond on Facebook, compose fan fiction, and so much more. Their voice permeates their social media responses. However, when so many states are immersed in test preparation, students see their ideas and opinions not as essential within the context of the test-driven curriculum. Rigid curriculum can lead to student silence. Students need time for their voices to surface. Sawin, Graves, & Morse (2015) argue voice simply doesn't just happen, it takes time to emerge:

> Voice grows out of the rich soil of student writing, not from drills or lectures or admonitions, not from workbooks or textbooks. Voice emerges in the course of the composing process, a by-product of the writer's focus on content, purpose, diction, style, and audience. The key word is emerge. The creation of a voice is not an end in itself by itself but a by-product growing out of the process of writing. (p. 33)

Voice is hard to simply define but can easily be recognized. Like Maggie, I know what happens when students are silenced. Students disconnect from learning.

Teachers, too, are often constrained by mandated testing. Educators feel they must teach to the test. As high school teacher Janet Atkins (2011) states,

> It is ironic that the very time when our students, by choice are reading and writing—and publishing—more than in the past, their opportunities for doing so in school are constrained by the emphasis on mandated tests and assessments that do not take into account the realities of 21st century literacy. (p 12)

Using digital tools to invite student voice

Talk is more pervasive than writing in the classroom. Elbow (2000) states one speaks more than one writes:

> Almost always, people learn to speak before they learn to write. Normally we learn speech at such an early age that we

Britton (1970) states, "writing floats on a sea of talk" (p. 164), but what happens when "talk" occurs across a digital landscape? Britton did not consider digital conversations directly. Still, in this platform, students can write, research, revise, and compose. These opportunities lead me to consider what emergent student voices develop through digital platforms. Do they create spaces to echo students' thinking and ideas—in other words, their voices?

> are not aware of the learning process. Speech habits are laid down at a deep level. Also, speaking comes before writing in the development of cultures. (p. 195)

Although I advocate for both a spoken and written classroom, I have also introduced digital tools so students can "speak" in multiple ways rather than simply writing a paper. Electronic tools uncover alternative and engaging communication channels. Britton (1970) states, "writing floats on a sea of talk" (p. 164), but what happens when "talk" occurs across a digital landscape? Britton did not consider digital conversations directly. Still, in this platform, students can write, research, revise, and compose. These opportunities lead me to consider what emergent student voices develop through digital platforms. Do they create spaces to echo students' thinking and ideas—in other words, their voices? In our era, talk can be captured, remixed, and published across a multitude of media and genres. We teach in a "classroom without borders" (Ballanca & Stirling, 2011), enabled by digital space.

Digital Storytelling

There are many ways now to tell a story. Story is essential to the meaning making process (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Digitally created narratives can help students discover their voices.

According to Robin, creator of the Educational Digital Storytelling website (http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/page.cfm?id=27), digital storytelling "at its most basic core is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories" (n.p.). This is the process of using audio, digital, images to help tell a powerful story or stories.

My students have created digital storytelling projects each academic semester for the past nine years. Initially, we produced digital trailers similar to those of book companies. As an educator, instead of quick advertisements, I wanted students to develop digital trailers illuminating their own voice and understandings. Like Beers (2002) suggests to "struggle *successfully* with a text" (p. 16), I wanted students to wrestle, create, and learn. Students need not passively watch something, but instead be more active in responding to it. Gainer & Lapp (2010) share,

> Consumers need not be passive recipients of expert-generated knowledge and products. Instead, technologies allow us to take much more active roles in the creation of new materials using existing ones. (p. 64)

Students can promote their voices digitally with nonfiction to persuade readers to consider a larger issue using a technique called digital storytelling.

Cassie, a student, read three nonfiction books about Patty Hearst. Cassie retells Hearst's story using newspapers, media reports, and images. However, Cassie not only uses these tools, she takes on the role of Hearst. Equipped with a live gun and another actor portraying a kidnapper, she unfolds visually and acts out the torment of Hearst as Hearst. As the story unfolds, she dramatically switches from retelling Hearst's story to displaying a powerful, strong statement, which includes images of women (bikini clad models carrying guns, including a meme of Sarah Palin photoshopped in a bikini holding a gun). This stark image asks the viewer to question how the media portray women. She evokes a powerful and persuasive voice advocating change.

We see Cassie dressed as Hearst as her kidnapper taunts her with a knife. As the video progresses, we see Cassie transform. Instead of being frightened, she holds a gun, and we see Cassie use Hearst's life to make a critical statement. At one point Cassie's video displays this headline, drawn from *US News and World Report*: "From car thieves to murders, female outlaws are in the headlines … raising the question: are they influenced by woman's lib?"

What follows is a series of pictures of women protesting for different causes. Then, we see in bold text: "The armed woman is rendered unthreatening through objectification: A mere accessory to her gun, she fires as instructed. There seems to be no danger that she would use her gun to reconfigure her social order."

With these words, Cassie questions how much the media downplay the image of the armed woman and instead make her an object with a gun, instead of a threat. This dramatic turn enables Cassie's digital lesson to be a critical one. She used images, choice of material, and even role to voice the way she wants the viewer to hear and see her digital representation. (Readers can view Cassie's digital lesson at https://vimeo.com/album/1852422/video/31001111.)

Another student, Justine, shared her voice through a digital lesson on *Ninth Ward* by Jewel Parker Rhodes (2012). The book

is a fictional account of the damage to the Ninth Ward from Hurricane Katrina. When I asked if there was a voice she wanted to hear more deeply, she answered, the water. Although the water did not talk, she knew from how the book was positioned, "it had something to report." Justine shared,

> I loved the book Ninth Ward, and I was trying to find a different angle/twist for the project. At first I wanted to approach the book trailer from a mystical point of view. After speaking to Dr. Cordi, the idea of looking at the tragedy of the hurricane from the water's point of view intrigued me and the water's voice came alive through the photos of its growth, its devastation and its sorrow with an added bonus of hope and rebirth. (Personal reflection, 2009)

(Readers can view Justine's video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah6Ys51qHOg move this.)

Justine and Cassie used innovative ways to talk about a text. Using digital stories, they found their voice by responding to the text.

The Importance of Storytelling

In all the assignments illustrated, stories were the constant. As Ohler (2006) states, "Through creating electronic personal narratives, students become active creators, rather than passive consumers, of multimedia" (p. 1). Personal narrative and storytelling are valuable tools for learning. For over 25 years, I have told stories as a professional storyteller and served, according to the National Storytelling Network, as, "the first full-time high school storytelling teacher in the country." I also understand the value of the told story and wanted to create this same connection for my students through digital media. From these experiences, I agree with Ohler: The story must come first. Notes Ohler, "As the technology becomes more powerful, their stories become weaker, illustrating the truth of the saying. What happens when you give a bad guitar player a bigger amplifier?" (p. 2). Students need a broader landscape to give voice to their stories. I found that landscape when in the Spring of 2015 I heard Tom Romano speak at the 2014 Ohio Council Teachers of English Conference. It was there that he re-introduced me to the multigenre project.

Multigenre Research Papers

Romano for years has his students create multigenre projects as a form of research. In his address, he said he would share a new form of research, in particular the research paper. My memory of the research paper did not carry positive connotations. I recall creating massive numbers of index cards and the numerous hours buried in books that may or may not connect to the subject. I distinctly remember being berated for placing "you" or "I" in the paper. Although when hearing Romano, I thought this, too, would be a distant project removed from personal expression, I could not be any further from the truth. In *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multi-Genre Papers* (2000), Romano defines a multigenre paper as one that

> arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self –contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author's. The trick is to make such a paper hang together. (p. x)

His students were invested in the research. They choose how they represented and the work, including using "I" for connection.

After hearing Romano, I went to his website (http://www.users.miamioh.edu/romanots/Tom_Romano.html) and read about Ashley Szofer's multigenre work on Dracula. Immediately, one can tell this is not standard research. The title is dripping with drawn on blood. Each genre bleeds (pardon the pun) into another. There is concrete poetry in the form of a cross, journal entries from key characters, a fictional report in the *London Evening Standard* and even a Starbucks application and interview where Dracula himself reports, he can "only work on the night shift." The reader experiences the Dracula from multiple perspectives including Szofer's voice. I wanted to fuse this new way of conducting research with the digital landscape.

Weebly Projects

With new enthusiasm, I searched for the most effective digital tool to create digital multigenre projects. I called my colleague Troy Hicks, author of *Crafting Digital Writing* (2013), and he suggested Weebly, a website application. In the spring of 2015, I assigned my students the challenge of creating digital stories using Weebly.

In my Applied Storytelling class, students chose a book that could have been a guide for their life. This was different than composing a typical book report; instead, they digitally created a multigenre site, which displayed diverse forms that connected her life to the book. Although narrative guided the site, the stories could be shared or illustrated in many ways. Sarah told her story through images. She loved photography and decided to use her friends as models for the site. She was deeply influenced by the book *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chobsky, 1999). She reports: "I made the photos the center of my project because photography is such an important part of who I am. It is a similar way Charlie (main character) and his friends look to music as their outlet" (Personal reflection, 2014). The cover of the original book displays modern teens. Sara using Photoshop created the cover but supplanted her friends in the place of the original teens. In the section titled "About the Project," she shows how connected she is to the book.

She states,

> Growing up I was an incredibly shy kid. I kept to myself and didn't particularly value the idea of friendship. As I got older this mentality only grew. I was a very negative person, battling depression and suicide for the better half of my life. … Charlie also struggles with feelings of unhappiness in the book, he however didn't know why. Charlie's best, and only friend committed suicide at the beginning of the book, leaving Charlie to cope with losing him and also the death of his aunt that he blames himself for. When his freshmen year began Charlie met his group of friends and things started to turn around for him. He began using music as his outlet, as well as writing letters to his "friend." During this project I explored the importance of the different outlets we as individuals use in our lives, including our friends, family and different outlets (music, photography, writing, etc.).

With Weebly, Sara tells the way she wants to, including photo shoots with her friends, creating musical fictional playlists that she and Charlie enjoy, as well as composing a digital video combining her life with Charlie's story, equipped with additional photos, text, and music. (Sara's site can be seen at http://storyofperks.weebly.com/about.html.)

In my Teaching Methods class, students used Weebly to share their field experience, using metaphor. Deborah is studying to be an art teacher so it was only natural for her to choose art as her metaphor. Her headings for her website included form, line, shape, space, and color.

Metaphors are strong ways to reflect. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980),

> Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ imaginative rationality. (p.193)

Deborah's use of metaphor enriched her writing. She used vibrant colors illustrating what she learned and displaying text through three-dimensional shapes. These shapes represent layers in her students' thinking, which would be difficult to create on paper. She is personally connected to the research. (Deborah's site can be seen at http://nased.weebly.com/form.)

In my current university, I extended Weebly in a Social Studies Methods class to discuss Ohio history. Students developed inquiry questions on some element of Ohio history, such as What happened to the Cincinnati subways?, How did the Longaberger Basket influence Ohio and the nation?, and How did the Ohio asylum change over the years? Dusty and Connor's story, "The Story of the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings," stood out among the rest. For his part, Dusty created a video that begins, after hearing orchestrated music:

> Baseball is just a game. As simple as a ball and bat but as complex as the American symbolism it symbolizes. … We hear video clips of Lou Gehrig, pictures of Babe Ruth, and after a collection of baseball images, he ends, … this is a game for America … when you look back to the names we know by heart Ruth … they all come back to one place, the place where baseball was born, Cincinnati, Ohio.

One can almost hear the crack of the bat from his video as Dusty provides not only information, but also an emotional appeal to listen and learn the story of the first national baseball team. The video mirrors the Old-time Radio Hour of the 1950s but instead he tells the story of baseball during 1869. Dusty created not only a captivating video recounting the time, but also a letter of complaint by someone who does not like how the team is developing. It is rich with the language of the time:

> Hello, good sirs.
>
> As a person that knows my onions, I am well aware of the tommy-rot that Mr. Wright and his team of professional baseball players have been up to in that baseball park. This type of humbuggery might be acceptable in a cow-slaver town like Boston or New York, but in Cincinnati, that kind of codswallop just won't do. I've heard all the bafflegab Mr. Wright has been taradiddling around town, but anyone with half a brain knows the flapdoodle out of his sauce-box is just jiggery-pokery. Selling the giggle water and getting the good people of Cincinnati spifflicated on Sundays makes a stuffed bird laugh. I will not stand for you to turn the decent men and women of Cincinnati into a herd of slubberdegullions. I advise you to terminate this collyweston moonshine on the water, or risk suffering the indignity of your team being kicked out of Cincinnati for good.
>
> Yours truly,
> Richmond D. Maplewood III

One can see how Dusty personalized the research. When asked about the project, he said,

> The biggest difference between a traditional research project and one that incorporates technology is the added dimension of creativity. Using Windows Movie Maker, I created a digital video that allowed me to put my own stamp on the information I was researching, as it enabled me to present my findings in a very personal way. Utilizing edited video footage, music, and my own voice; I was able to create a video that captivated our class while piquing their interest in my topic. It is this level of creativity that provided me more ownership of the project, as students experienced the information exactly how I had intended. Echoing that, I was able to include my own voice in the project through creativity as well. From creating the digital video to writing fictitious letters in language from the time period, every little nugget of creativity added a different piece of my voice to the project. The end result was a successful presentation that displayed my research in a clear, concise, and creative way. (Personal correspondence)

Conclusion

Dusty and so many others share powerful stories. As an emerging digital and story-based educator, story drives my thinking, especially when working with digital multigenre projects.

> Story carries the multigenre load. Not exposition. Not even poetry. That work is done by story, tale telling. Multigenre wants readers to see, to participate, to experience. Through story, we visualize characters and their actions, are aroused by twists of plots, feel life played out through the sensory language of narrative. (Romano, 2000, p. 77)

All of these elements, aligned with story, create voice for students. As educators, we need to provide spaces for these sounds to be heard. And if we do, Maggie will not be red-faced or puzzled because no one has asked her to speak, but instead she will proudly smile and share her voice, whether vocal or digital, depending on the choice she has made to help us hear it.

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