Chapter 4
The Power of Digital Literacy to Transform and Shape Teacher Identities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors focus their attention on the case studies of three beginning teachers and their use of digital storytelling in their preservice education English Language Arts classes. They undertook this research to determine if preservice teachers who are exposed to new literacies and a multiliteracies pedagogy will use them in transformative ways. The authors examine their subsequent and transformed use of digital media with their own students in the classroom setting. One uses a digital story to reflect on past injustices. Another finds new spaces for expression in digital literacy. A third uses the affordances of digital media to raise critical awareness of a present global injustice with secondary school students. The authors explore their shifting perceptions of multiple literacies and critical media literacy and how these shifts in thinking help shape or transform their ideas about teaching and learning in English Language Arts.

INTRODUCTION

It seemed fitting to begin our English Language Arts course, which is framed theoretically by a focus on multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and views literacy as social practice, with a digital literacy narrative assignment through which the preservice teachers examine their own literacy histories. The assignment positions preservice teachers as storytellers of personal learning and growth, and offers opportunities for them to experience "narrative reconstruction" as they reflect on their lives, their learning, their choices, their past experiences and their goals for the future (Hull, 2003, p. 232). As Hull points out, "The ability to render one's world as changeable and oneself as an agent able to direct that change is integrally linked to acts of self-representation through writing" (p. 232). There is ample research on the role of narrative in the construction of personal agency and identity (cf. Ochs & Capps, 2001). Bruner's (1996) studies of narrative indicate that changes in conceptions and representations of self are typically associated with "turning points" in personal narratives. Bruner identifies turning points as "thickly agentive … whose construction results in increasing the realism and drama of the Self" (p. 50). There is a dialogical relationship between narrative and self: to shape our narrative is to shape ourselves, and vice versa. Encouraging preservice teachers to reflect on their own literacy stories provides them with the opportunity to connect their past experiences as literacy students with their present and future goal of becoming effective literacy teachers. As Harste (2003) points out, a multiliteracies approach has implications for how we think about literacy and, in turn, influences our classroom practice. Harste argues that, rather than viewing literacy as "an entity (something you either have or don't have)," when coupled with the notion of multiple literacies, "literacy can be thought of as a particular set of social practices that a particular set of people value" (p. 8).

One of the key objectives at our Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) is to prepare our preservice teachers to teach in a digital age. We aim to encourage these beginning teachers to be users of technology certainly, but more importantly, to be questioners and producers of technology as well (Selber, 2004). We see critical media literacy production and deconstruction as facilitating instruments of learner analysis (reflection), growth, empowerment, and transformation. Preservice teachers indicate transformative practices in two ways: first, through designing lessons that indicate that they will teach differently than the way that they were taught; and secondly, through utilizing digital literacy as a means of reflecting on their own social identities and working for changes in culture and society.

Pedagogy that encourages "full and equitable social participation" (New London Group, 1996) is centred on four aspects of a multiliteracies framework: situated

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