In Another American Skin: Development of Empathy through Desktop Documentary Making

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This article analyzes a classroom project that integrated desktop documentary making with an educational foundations course in order to foster empathetic development in pre-service teachers toward unfamiliar cultural groups. The project required each tertiary student in the course to create a desktop documentary about the school experience of a cultural group with which they did not immediately identify with. The findings indicate that half of the students in this project displayed empathetic development with regard to their chosen topics, using their encounters with imagery and stories to link their world with that which was unfamiliar. Additionally, as a result of the compositional process, several students became advocates for their assigned cultural group, carrying this sentiment with them as they progressed to become teachers. Implications of this study, including possible approaches toward improving this project’s effectiveness in achieving its aims, are discussed.

Key Words: desktop documentary making, historical empathy, cultural identity, social justice, teacher education, technology

Introduction

It is paramount for democratic and multicultural nation-states like the United States of America to recognize its diverse groups in order to combat marginalizing forces from the majority civic culture (Banks & Banks, 2004). At the core of a society’s recognition of diverse groups is the nature of how its citizens are educated. Citizens in a democratic society work for the betterment of the whole society, not just for the rights of their particular cultural group, according to Gonçalves e Silva (2004). An essential goal of a democratic, multicultural society’s citizenship education, therefore, is to teach respect and recognition for and of cultural differences that exist within the society (Gutmann, 2004). James Banks (2006) developed a typology for researchers and educators, called the Stages of Cultural Identity, as a tool to understand and construct strategies that would help students develop an inclusive identification with unfamiliar groups. The six stages of the typology provide a useful model to understand and describe students’ development from an ethnocentric worldview to a firm commitment toward all human beings in the world community. According to Banks and Nguyen (2008), the typology explains how an individual may be categorized:

- Stage 1: internalizes and accepts negative stereotypes about a group (Cultural Psychological Captivity);
- Stage 2: believes in the superiority of their own particular ethnic group (Cultural Encapsulation);
Stage 3: clarifies personal attitudes and positively identifies their own cultural group (Ethnic Identity Clarification);

Stage 4: feels comfortable associating either within their own or with another cultural group (Biculturalism);

Stage 5: clarifies positive attitudes and positively identifies other cultural groups (Multiculturalism and Reflective Nationalism); and

Stage 6: committed to justice and not to one particular cultural group (Globalism and Global Competency).

The literature on historical empathy including work by Barton and Levstik (2004), Blake (1998), Van Sledright (2001), and Brophy (1999) is closely associated with Banks’ typology of cultural identity. Definitions of historical empathy vary widely. Barton and Levstik asserted that historical empathy is a cultural tool that encompasses two distinct realms: perspective recognition and caring. Empathy as perspective recognition is comprised of, among other things, a “sense of otherness” where individuals recognize that others’ perspectives may be different from their own as well as a “shared normalcy” that recognizes that those different beliefs may possess merit and validity. Historical empathy connects to citizenship education through its potential to increase self-awareness (Blake, 1998; VanSledright) and in its ability to recognize the existence and substance of alternate perspectives (Barton & Levstik). Brophy concluded that historical empathy can be developed through instructional intervention at all educational levels.

The context framed by this literature on diversity, citizenship education, and historical empathy provided a sound, theoretical foundation on which to base this study. This research effort was two-fold in that one form of instructional intervention, namely desktop documentary making, was investigated. Additionally, researchers examined the extent to which desktop documentary making fostered empathy in a course designed to promote diversity among tertiary students who are training to be school teachers.

**Purpose**

There are a growing number of teachers and teacher educators who are extremely interested in desktop documentary making (DDM) in the classroom including Ferster, Hammond, and Bull (2006) and Fehn, Johnson, and Smith (2010). A desktop documentary is a film production created on a desktop or laptop computer using software such as *Windows Moviemaker™*, *Apple iMovie™*, or *Photostory 3™* to develop a story with various online resources. The advent of free and easily accessible documentary-making software, combined with the rapid expansion of online archives, has given students and teachers the tools necessary to compose and share documentary productions. Desktop documentary making has the potential for empowering teachers to promote inquiry-based instruction while enlivening subject matter for students. Moreover, student interest in DDM is evidenced by the growing popularity of the National History Day annual documentary competition. The video-sharing website *YouTube* shows that many National History Day contestants have posted entries on topics ranging from the well-known such as President Harry Truman’s dropping of the atomic bomb after World War II (see Web-Based References) to the relatively unknown such as The Great Seattle Fire of the early twentieth century (see Web-Based References). To view sample award-winning desktop documentaries created by students for National History Day, see the URL addresses provided next to the title of each video provided in the Web-Based References.
Contemporary researchers on DDM (e.g., Hammond & Manfra, 2009; Hofer & Swan, 2006, 2008) have focused on teachers’ integration of the digital technology into a classroom. Hammond and Manfra (2009) focused on social studies teachers’ pedagogical aims and their choices with technology. Hofer and Swan (2008) determined that technology’s unpredictable nature discouraged some teachers from integrating DDM into their history curricula. Since desktop documentary making is primarily a student-centered activity, inclusion of DDM was also shown to be unnerving for teachers accustomed to a more chronologically-based, teacher-centered approach to history instruction (Hofer & Swan, 2006). Yet, little research exists that concentrates on the instructional outcomes associated with the integration of DDM. One study (Schul, 2010) examined the relationship between a history teacher with experience integrating DDM into his classroom who used it as an inquiry-based activity. This procedure resulted in his students making scholarly history in their own cultural language. There is, however, a silence in research that studies the role DDM may play in the development of democratic dispositions. With that said, this study proposes to fill this research void by exploring the effect of DDM on tertiary students’ development of empathy toward an unfamiliar culture.

While researching DDM in secondary history classrooms, it became evident to me that students become empathetic to the person or historical topic upon which they compose their desktop documentary. In the Fall of 2009 I studied a tertiary course that I instructed. As a means of developing students’ cultural awareness and sensitivity, students were assigned to develop a DDM. This course was designed for pre-service teachers with the specific purpose of promoting cultural diversity. The assignment, which was given to students during the last month of the class, was called “Schooling in Another American Skin”, as it required each student to compose a desktop documentary about a particular group (i.e., race, class, sexual orientation, physical/mental ability) which the student did not represent. The purpose of this action research study was to provide insight relative to whether or not a students’ cultural awareness and sensitivity could be affected by a project of this nature. This study was guided by the question: How did DDM affect tertiary students’ development of empathy toward an unfamiliar culture? Other more specific questions included:

1. What, in particular, caused students’ empathetic development during their documentary making process?
2. How did the empathetic development affect students’ professional dispositions as they prepare to become teachers?

This study is significant for a number of reasons. First, this study sheds light on the role, or lack thereof, DDM can have on a students’ empathetic development toward unfamiliar cultural groups. Second, this study is significant because it focuses on what may have influenced students’ empathetic development as they composed their desktop documentaries. Finally, this study is important because it looks at the role DDM may play in teacher education, more specifically, in challenging a prospective teacher’s professional disposition toward developing a broader, more multicultural perspective about school than she may have garnered as a student.

Context

This study was conducted within a classroom at a private, comprehensive university in the Midwestern section of the USA. The vast majority of the university’s student population is white and middle class. The course, a prerequisite for all undergraduate education majors at the university, was entitled “Culture and Schooling.” “Culture and Schooling” is the first course all
education majors take in the education department. According to the course syllabus, the course description is:

In this course, we will examine the foundational events and concepts in the development of the American public school experience. This focus includes the impact that cultural factors have on students, teachers, and the school curriculum. Emphasis is placed on the history of multicultural groups, women, and exceptional children in the United States.

The course description is based largely on the education department’s stated commitment to diversity, which requires teacher candidates to exhibit, among other things: “understandings of the difference among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, sexual orientation, and geographic region.” “Culture and Schooling” met four times per week for 50 minutes each meeting. This study was conducted during the Fall and Winter of 2009 where four different sections of the course were taught. During the Fall, two sections of the course were taught, with 18 students in one section and 21 enrolled in the other.

Table 1
Course Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009 #1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White (17); Black (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009 #2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White (20); Asian (1)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2009 #1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>White (17)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2009 #2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>White (6)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Winter sections had 17 students enrolled in one section with 6 in the other. The majority of the students were white females. See Table 1 for specific course demographics.

I used a myriad of instructional resources to teach the course. The assigned textbooks included The American People and Their Education: A Social History by Richard Altenbaugh (2003) and Critical Issues in Education: An Anthology of Readings by Eugene Provenzo (2006). Instructional activities included lectures, class discussions, debates over controversial issues in education, and student presentations. Also included was the aforementioned DDM activity entitled “Schooling in Another American Skin.” This project was assigned to the class in the final five to six weeks of the course. The basic premise of the project was to give students an opportunity to experience schooling through a cultural perspective of someone unlike them by making a three to five minute desktop documentary from that perspective. The perspectives from which to students had to choose were race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, or physical ability (see Table 2 for Student Topics). To introduce the project, I provided an assignment handout (see Appendix A), explaining the activity using the handout as a guide. I introduced the DDM software by presenting a basic tutorial on how to use it while also providing some basic filmmaking techniques such as juxtaposition, zooming in and out, and panning over images to help the students get started. I concluded the project introduction by showing the class a sample desktop documentary published on YouTube, entitled “This is the Enemy”, by Gretchen Jahn Bertram. It can be found using the following URL address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkaQqzumMGE. Each student was required to compose his
or her documentary outside of class meetings, with a requirement that each documentary was to be shown in its entirety at a mock film festival during the last week of the course.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Documentary Topics</th>
<th>Fall 2009 #1</th>
<th>Fall 2009 #2</th>
<th>Winter 2009 #1</th>
<th>Winter 2009 #2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-Americans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-Americans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically Handicapped</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally Handicapped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impoverished</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant Teens</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-Americans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant Families</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Methods

Since I was interested in finding practical solutions while fostering dispositional change within my students (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003), I employed an action research methodology (Stringer, 1996). The primary data source(s) for this study came in the form of two sets of reflections by the students. One reflection was written before, and one after, their completion of the assigned project. Additionally, the completed desktop documentaries, as well as my own documents and self observations, were used as part of my evaluation of the project. While no official review process existed during this research effort, a peer examination was used in which I shared a draft of this paper along with raw data from the study with a colleague whose feedback helped me challenge several interpretations I had made, subsequently leading to a re-analysis of the data (Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection

After gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance, I asked students to write down an answer to the following question prior to composing their desktop documentary: What do you know about your topic? Students were required to complete this initial written reflection one week after the project was assigned. Upon the assignment’s completion, each student was
required to submit a post-compositional reflection that asked the following questions: What do you know about your topic? Describe your compositional process.

Data for this study also consisted of document retrieval in the form of obtaining each student’s completed desktop documentary. In addition to understanding the compositional work of the students, the purpose for procuring documentaries was to aid in and reference any connection made between the written reflections and the actual physical composition.

Data Analysis

The analytical procedures of this study consisted of analysis, synthesis, and illumination (Shank, 2002). Thematic analysis was based on finding emergent patterns and trends that cut across data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis required the dissection of data into manageable forms for the sake of interpretation and understanding (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). I coded data by looking at key words and phrases in the post-composition reflections that I identified as being indicative of empathetic development. These words and phrases were contextually-based, meaning each was a signal toward empathetic development and dependent on how the words or phrases were used. For instance, the words “appreciation” and “understanding” were signals to me that the student may have experienced empathetic development, particularly if those words were followed by a description of what they appreciated or understood better as a result of their compositional process. Synthesis required a reassembly of the data so that it “[took] on a more anecdotal, more personalized, more interpretive character” (Shank, 2002, p. 138). I did this by using indicators (as described above) to separate students who appeared to experience empathy from those that did not show signs of empathetic development. I then focused on possible trends within the post-compositional reflections and between pre- and post-compositional reflections of students who had displayed empathy to “establish an evidentiary warrant for the assertions” (Erickson, 1986, p. 146).

The Documentaries

The three most common documentary topics chosen by the students were: African-Americans, homosexuals, and the physically handicapped. Several compositional trends and themes existed across these documentaries. The documentaries on African-Americans, for instance, emphasized the history of bigotry, with an emphasis on lynching imagery and the struggle for school integration in the mid-twentieth century. These documentaries usually included images of significant African-American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The sound track often included audio clips of King’s I Have a Dream speech mixed with contemporary hip-hop music. The overarching theme of these documentaries on African-Americans was one of victimization to victory, where the struggles of African-Americans are portrayed as concluding in eventual victory for civil rights in contemporary times.

The documentaries about homosexuals often emphasized hate groups, particularly those with a religious slant toward them, who hold up bill-boards displaying disgust for homosexuality. The hate group images were often juxtaposed with images of homosexual teenagers who were bullied in school. The students who composed these particular documentaries emphasized the victims’ humanity through the use of melancholic music that pled for the audience to consider homosexuals as human beings.
The documentaries about people with physical handicaps often portrayed the everyday struggles of the disabled by juxtaposing images of them with those of the physically able. Those who composed these particular documentaries portrayed the physically disabled as possessing perseverance and strength, which was woven into the documentaries’ narratives through the infusion of celebratory music.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Students’ Displays of Empathy, Cultural Awareness, and Sensitivity toward Unfamiliar Cultures**

The findings from this action research study indicated half of the students displayed empathy with the cultural group that inspired their desktop documentary production. As is shown in Table 3, 31 of the 62 students in this study displayed some form of empathy toward the cultural group that was the topic of their desktop documentary. The class sections varied in these findings, with 41.1% students displaying empathy in the largest class (n=21) to 83.3% of students in the smallest class (n=6). These findings provide several insights relative to the effectiveness of desktop documentary making as a means to nurture cultural awareness and sensitivity toward unfamiliar cultures.

**Table 3**

**Students’ Display of Empathy and Their Influences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Displayed Empathy</th>
<th>Mentioned the following influences:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009 1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 10</td>
<td>N = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009 2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 9</td>
<td>N = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2009 1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 7</td>
<td>N = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2009 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 5</td>
<td>N = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the students who did not display empathy, their pre- and post-composition reflections mirrored were very similar. Some students simply provided information they learned from the project without providing any emotive or affective interest in their respective topics. This is understandable given that the students were directed to share what they learned; since I kept the
question focused on what the students learned rather than leading them to think empathetically toward their topic as a result of any expansions to the question. In essence, I believed this study would be more beneficial if I had more students thinking solely along cognitive lines rather than cognitive and affective lines. Some students used such broad generalizations in their response that I could not determine whether these students actually experienced authentic empathy. For instance, one white female student who composed a documentary on the topic of African-Americans in the school experience shared: “I didn’t know much about segregation before I looked into it for my documentary. I read and learned a lot about their struggles for the right for education and how hard they fought for it.” While one can argue that there is evidence of empathetic development here, this response was not considered empathetic because she was not specific. In my view, specificity entails emotional attachment. If she had talked about a specific struggle or expressed some form of personal connection to the plight of African-Americans, then her statement would have been included as evidence of empathetic development. As written, the student’s comments were so general that she could have simply reported what is part of the collective memory (Wertsch, 2009) concerning the African-American school experience. It also is possible that the student may simply not have been as descriptive in her writing as her classmates, but this cannot be determined from the data collected. If there was any doubt in my mind as to whether or not a student actually experienced empathy through this project, I did not include it.

The other half of the students who showed evidence of empathetic development provided vivid connections to their chosen topics. For instance, John, a white male, composed a documentary about the African-American educational experience. Prior to making his documentary, John shared that he knew the basic general themes of segregation such as “African-Americans were denied education” and “they faced a lot of discrimination.” After his composition, however, he had much more to say about the topic. He reported that, during his compositional process, he became engrossed in reading the literature about the Little Rock Nine, and in so doing deepened his understanding of the struggle for integration of schools:

I began the project with a basic understanding of the hardships African Americans had with public education. I now realize that these problems have never faded, and they were much worse than I thought. I was very interested with the story of the Little Rock Nine. I had some knowledge of what they accomplished, but I found a site that had a firsthand account from one of the girls. I spent a lot of time reading about their story, and got sidetracked from my project. (John, Post-Reflection, November 3, 2009)

John’s situation was typical of that found among many of the students who displayed empathy: a general understanding at the beginning with a richer, more informed, attitude after the composition. Mary, for example, was like John because she had a general understanding that the people she portrayed homosexuals, were a prime target for bullying in the school setting. “I know that there is a lot of homophobia in a public school experience,” Mary shared in her pre-composition reflection. Mary, like John, claimed she encountered sources and information during her compositional process that helped her understand the nature of discrimination and marginalization homosexuals experience in school. She explained:

Most of the insight I gained during this project was through reading the stories of bullying of homosexuals in schools. I knew before that homosexuals in school
got a lot of bullying and harassment, but I didn’t really know of any instances in particular (Mary, Post-Reflection, February 8, 2010).

Some students, like John and Mary, had an enriching experience while composing their documentaries primarily because of some encounters with sources that they came across, but did not place in their documentary. Other students’ empathy matured as a result of trying to convince their prospective audience of the difficulties certain cultural groups have in the school experience. For instance, Mike, who composed a documentary on the physically handicapped, shared that he had a friend with muscular dystrophy and wanted to explore what school would be like for those who were like her. In trying to persuade his prospective viewing audience to understand the difficulties people like his friend encounter in school, he discovered change within himself:

> While doing this project, I realized how much I subconsciously avoided physically disabled people. I also realized how much the world is designed around the average or “regular” person. I felt bad that I had not tried hard enough to make physically disabled people more comfortable or fit in better. I successfully conveyed the feeling I wanted, but to myself. (Mike, Post-Reflection, February 8, 2010).

Like Mike, Brian attempted to persuade his classmates of the special rules and accommodations schools make for the physically disabled. As a result, Brian’s documentary contained images of handicapped restrooms and bathroom stalls. After completing his composition, Brian, a white male and former college football player, went from someone who looked at the disabled from the perspective of school policy: “I knew that society does have many rules for buildings to be handicapped accessible, such as wheelchair ramps, bathrooms, water fountains, etc.” (Brian, Pre-Reflection, October 9, 2009) to someone who looked at the issue from the perspective of the person who was handicapped. “In my opinion,” Brian reflected, “from observing the photos I have used, going to the restroom and shower would be the hardest part of being handicapped” (Brian, Post-Reflection, November 3, 2009).

The compositional process for many of the students served as a vehicle by which their broad perspective of their topic became more specific (Barton & Levstik, 2004), often times allowing them to relay specific instances or routine examples of the difficulties that many marginalized children face in the school experience. According to Banks’ (2006) typology of the stages of cultural identity, these students may have progressed toward multiculturalism and reflective nationalism (Stage 5), facilitating their ability to empathize with and look upon a cultural group with a positive attitude.

**Encounters with Images and Stories Influenced Some Students’ Empathetic Development While Making Desktop Documentaries**

Based on the results of the documentary making process, images and stories encountered by students during their compositional process were the most significant influences in altering empathetic development. Referring back to Table 3, 22 out of 31 students who displayed empathy were influenced by images or stories. To be more precise, 12 of these students experienced empathetic development referred to images as their primary influence while 10 mentioned stories as being their primary influence.

John’s encounter with stories of the Little Rock Nine and Mary’s stories of homosexuals being bullied in school are examples of how stories impacted empathetic development in
students. Those stories impacted the students’ dispositions toward African-Americans (in the case with John) and homosexuals (as was the case with Mary) with regard to their relationship with the American school experience. As the data revealed, John and Mary’s encounters with stories during their compositional processes were not insular in this study. Nick, a college senior, was a prime example of how stories influenced some students’ thoughts toward their topic:

What I slowly started to figure out after reading peoples’ stories and looking over articles and research was that these young men go through an experience I have a hard time relating to. Basically as these boys are going through and turning into men they go through all the struggles that I experienced. They are in a competitive environment, they are constantly trying to prove to themselves and others their worth. A constant struggle of finding one’s self identity is a huge part of teendom. The stresses of school, friends, and love are also surrounding them. (Nick, Post- Reflection, February 7, 2010).

Nick’s revelation was similar to the one shared earlier by Mike. When Mike composed a documentary on the physically handicapped, he aimed for getting his prospective audience to experience the discomfort and loneliness that sometimes goes along with being physically disabled amidst a multitude of classmates who are able to run or play. Mike, however, found that the person who changed the most was himself, as the project required him to live in a mentally simulated environment where he looked at life from the perspective of his topic. The same held true for Nick in that he started out with a basic idea that homosexuals in school were treated “harshly”, but otherwise knew “very little” about homosexuals in school and moved toward an understanding of their experience that he connected to his own experiences of insecurity and peer pressure as a teenager. For Nick, one story after another gradually changed him.

Another student, Chris, who like Nick was influenced by stories during his compositional process, was most influenced by one story that humanized the marginalized group he focused upon: Asian-Americans. Chris shared the following in his post-composition reflection:

I have learned that the Asian-American community has been through a lot throughout America’s history and I also discovered the case of Vincent Chin. Vincent Chin was a man brutally beaten to death and his killers only got a fine and were put on probation. This enraged and united the Asian-American community because he was killed for looking Japanese, but was really of Chinese ancestry. (Chris, Post-Composition Reflection, February 7, 2010).

For Chris, the story of Vincent Chin provided a specific instance he could connect with the marginalization of Asian-Americans and served as a prime example of the impact stories have on an individuals’ empathetic development. Such as story personalizes and subsequently humanizes, the group that often has been the subject of broad and glittering generalities.

Images also served as a prominent influence in students’ empathetic development. This was true especially with image saturated historical topics such as the Native American resistance to forced assimilation, and the Civil Rights movement that focused on school segregation. For instance, Stewart, a freshman student who composed a documentary on the African-American experience in school, noted the power of imagery by saying that “through the repetition of pictures of discrimination and segregation I really felt like I was present at the time of the civil rights movement” and, that as a result of the images, “I believe I have a better understanding of the difference in the black schools and the white schools” (Stewart, Post-Composition,
November 3, 2009). The images led Stewart to change a historical event that had at one time been distant to him into something that seemed very real to him. Stewart was able to humanize the African-American’s struggle for human rights and thus could better empathize with their plot as a result of his encounter with the images. This was a common occurrence for many of the students who cited images as a primary influence in their compositional process. As another example, Carrie, who also composed a documentary on the African-American experience in school, remarked how the imagery figuratively turned her stomach and sparked her awareness of the injustices that African-Americans have encountered throughout U.S. history:

I did realize that this hatred existed, but the scope had never really impressed itself upon me. That was, perhaps, what I really got out of this experience. The sheer number of pictures of lynchings, protests, and violence was enough to, at times, turn the stomach. Knowing about these sorts of things was one thing, but wading through thousands of pictures of the horrors of them, putting names to the bloated faces of hanging men, was another experience altogether. It is something I think I shall probably not quickly forget. (Carrie, Post-Composition, February 7, 2010).

Another student, Ryan, who composed a documentary on Native Americans in the American school experience, emphasized the unique aspect of working with images during his compositional process: “The images I found truly illuminated the suffering and inequality experienced by these Native Americans. It allowed me to emotionally connect with the topic rather than just factual information” (Ryan, Post-Reflection, November 3, 2009).

The images caught the attention of Stewart, Carrie, and Ryan, and as Carrie said, their imprint was lasting. These students’ scenarios fit well with current conceptions of history making that hold visualization as having an innate power to position students toward a greater depth of intellectual and emotional experience during history making than through the customary means of prose (Moss, 2010). This project, since it incorporated, and even privileged, the visual, may be unique in its effect on students’ empathetic development when compared to traditional classroom assignments such as research papers and classroom discussions.

Some Students’ Empathetic Development Led Students toward a Resolve to Act as Culturally Respondent Teachers

My hope in assigning this documentary making project was that, first, students would be enabled to change their dispositions toward other cultural groups. I wanted the students to empathize with a cultural group other the privileged one from which the vast majority of them came.

My second goal for the documentary making project was that the students act on their dispositions and become culturally respondent. These students were training to be teachers, and a primary goal of our teacher education department which I argue should be a primary goal of any teacher training program, was to foster cultural responsiveness among the prospective teachers. A true and valid means by which the effect of this project on cultural responsiveness would be more pronounced is if it were a longitudinal study, tracking the students through their professional preparation and into the beginning of their careers. Too many variables would be at play, however, making it virtually impossible to pinpoint the effect that this one particular project represented. Therefore, it is necessary to first look at this particular study’s data to see if any traces of cultural responsiveness existed among the students who participated in this study.
This study revealed that some students, though not many, showed signs of cultural responsiveness. One student from each class section affirmed a resolve to act as culturally respondent teachers during his or her career as a direct result of the experience with this study. Shelley, for instance, shared that her documentary on the physically disabled “showed …how much attention handicapped and disabled children need in comparison to normal students” and that, in her own words, “the project made me think of how I might have to deal with special children like this in my future as an educator” (Shelley, Post-Reflection, February 7, 2010). As I had hoped in assigning this project, Shelley began to think of herself as the teacher of the students she portrayed in her documentary. She recognized that she needed to change and learn how to teach the physically disabled because, as her documentary showed her, they are real people with needs different from the majority of students in the school experience. Similarly, Matthew, who composed a documentary about homosexuals in school, concluded that he would need to be a teacher who understood the pressures that homosexual students encounter as well as one who provided an environment of tolerance:

Though I don’t understand how a person can hate someone as much as those in my pictures and who caused my pictures do, I see that they are out there and as a teacher I need to be ready to help and support my students so that they can get through stuff like this and be better people because of it. I also will need to promote an environment in which others in my classroom can become accepting of these students. (Matthew, Post-Reflection, November 3, 2009).

Matthew, like Shelley, viewed himself as the teacher of the students he portrayed in his documentary. There is a difference between being aware of another marginalized or vulnerable group and actually making a resolution to act to improve that group’s condition. These students embodied Barton and Levstik’s (2004) conception of empathy as perspective recognition as well as caring toward the cultural group, with the latter providing evidence that some of the students had progressed from Banks’ fifth stage of cultural identity (multiculturalism and reflective nationalism) toward the sixth and final stage, globalism and global competency, because they were willing to act as a means to defend the cultural group.

Conclusion

The purpose of this action research study was to determine whether or not the students’ cultural awareness and sensitivity was affected by their participation in an assignment requiring them to make desktop documentaries about an unfamiliar cultural group’s experience in school. The results of this study revealed that this was an effective activity since half of the student-participants displayed signs of empathetic development. Examining the data from this project indicated it should be altered somewhat and only be considered as one step toward fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness. The students’ documentaries, though they were required to portray their topic respectfully, contained sweeping generalizations when portraying various marginalized groups. While I did not notice these generalizations as untrue, they are nonetheless, generalizations and may not completely capture the reality of various cultures. It is important for pre-service teachers to know that just because they portrayed a marginalized culture such as African-Americans through a lens of victimization and victory does not necessarily mean all African-Americans can be categorized that way. This project can be improved by also requiring students to make a documentary of what they perceived as their own culture. Showing both documentaries, one of the self-study and one of the other group, may lend
opportunities for focused discussion about the complexity of culture itself, and what it really means to recognize someone’s perspective. This project could be enhanced further by pairing it with interviews of members of one’s self-identified culture and of the culture of the marginalized group as a way to allow students to garner great depth of understanding about cultural complexity.

As is the case with any research endeavor, this action research study opened up more unanswered questions beyond it originally sought to answer. Many students, for example, reported little or no evidence of empathetic development as a result of composing their documentary while some reported significant changes. What led to this disparity in educational outcomes? Was it a natural consequence of a willingness by some students to change their dispositions while others were not so willing? Did it have anything to do with how the instructor assigned the project (i.e., allowing students to select their own topic?). Or, did students learn more than they reported and those outcomes were undiscovered by the research methods of this study? If so, then this study calls for a more in-depth analysis of students’ compositional process using think-aloud protocols that traces all aspects of the compositional process.

Further research also is needed that includes intensive pre- and post-compositional interviews of students for a more detailed, and perhaps more accurate, understanding of a students’ empathetic development as it relates to Banks’ (2006, 2008) stages of cultural identity. It is important to know what perspective of the unfamiliar culture students actually came to recognize. Was it an accurate perspective? Thus, it might be beneficial to construct a study analyzing the documentaries in regard to how individuals who belong to a cultural group portrayed in the students’ projects actually perceive their own culture. There are many routes yet to be taken with regard to researching the processes and outcomes that occur with DDM. The hope resting within this study is that researchers and teacher educators are better informed about the effectiveness of DDM to promote empathetic development amongst students and that these routes for further research have been opened because of it.

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APPENDIX A:
DOCUMENTARY ASSIGNMENT HANDOUT

Desktop Documentary Project:
“Schooling in Another’s American Skin”

No man is an island, entire of itself
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main
... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind
- John Dunne

Goal:
To provide an opportunity for each pre-service teacher to experience schooling from another perspective than their own through the use of visual and aural sources. It also provides an opportunity for the “discourse community” to be enhanced with regard to a discussion of diversity in the school experience.

Directions:

1. Each student is to create a 3-5 minute desktop documentary using the free software Photostory 3. You may also use other software, such as iMovie or Moviemaker, as long as you do not download pre-made videos into your documentary.

2. The documentary is to be themed around schooling from a perspective of a person other than yourself. You may choose from any of the following areas of perspective to base your documentary:
   - Gender
   - Race
   - Language
   - Socio-economic status
   - Sexual orientation
   - Physical ability

   For example, if you are a White-Caucasian, you may want to do a documentary on schooling from the perspective of an African-American. The point is to look at schooling from a perceptive other than your own.

3. The documentary must be a “teaching tool” for classmates. This means that a consideration of the audience must be prominent in the production. So, use the “art of filmmaking” rather than “death by words and subtitles.” This includes an understanding of juxtaposition (manipulation and order of imagery) and appropriate sound. An example of what I view as a good documentary can be found at the following URL:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkaQqzumMGE

4. The documentary is to be completed and turned in to me (via email: XXXX@gmail.com) by XXXXX. Be sure that the file is locked (ex: WMV) and not an unlocked Photostory file.

5. There will be a public viewing of these documentaries outside of class. This public viewing will be open to the public.

6. Make sure to cite your sources at the end of the documentary. A simple listing of websites will suffice.

7. The documentary is worth 100 pts. and will be gauged on the following criteria:

   **Time**: documentary stays within allotted time range.
   
   **Perspective Portrayal**: Respectful and accurate portrayal of schooling from the perspective that you chose.
   
   **Art of filmmaking**: Heavy reliance on imagery juxtaposition, with sound, rather than a word-based narrative.
   
   **Concern for viewership**: Weak documentaries will be fact-driven. The best documentaries will open up questions for the audience. The documentaries that are the most useful to classmates will likely illuminate some connection between the storyline of the documentary and material covered in class.
   
   **Attribution of sources**: Documentary conforms to stated requirements of citing sources for material used. Citing can be done at the end of the documentary or in another creative way.

**WARNING**: Some frustrations may arise with regard to converting your documentary into a viewable format (each documentary must be a locked wmv or quick time file). Please maintain a high level of patience, as this is a learning experience with regard to the unpredictable nature of digital technology. Give yourself some time so that any possible glitches do not add unnecessary stress to this experience.

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**About the Author**

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