

Installing a Dia de Los Muertos Altar to Teaching a Digital Storytelling Workshop for a Kokomo Experience and You (KEY) Trip

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Women divulge crucial events from their lives by “voicing” their narratives, and this can be the voicing of one’s smaller stories (Pahl and Rowsell 2010) within significant events, which can be reflected upon through the power and practice of storytelling. The storytelling itself uncovers deeply rooted traumas of women’s experiences. The intrusion of the feminine wound - a metaphorical wound that oppresses women’s identities, voice, behaviors through contexts of silencing (Kidd 1996; Romero-Ivanova 2020) emerges in women’s storied narratives.

In this article, I present my own backstory within the grand narrative of becoming and claiming identities of free woman, Latina, narrative researcher, and narrative teacher and weave in storytelling as an empowering meaning-making practice (Medina 2018). I purposefully subtitle different sections in Spanish to add emphasis to my identity claims and the becoming I am still experiencing, by providing reflections on traumatic experiences from my youth.

In this manuscript I share writing connected to traumatic experiences from my youth, which serve to magnify women’s crucial experiences, the importance of creating spaces to honor their pivotal experiences, the embodiment of stories through artifacts and artifactual practices, such as the construction of a memorial altar as an identity-claiming practice and teaching digital storytelling as a practice of mentorship, and the power of women’s storytelling to resist, testify, and demonstrate resilience. My writing culminates with the story of my teaching a digital storytelling workshop to university students prior to attending an Indiana University Kokomo Kokomo Experience and You (KEY) campus Spanish cultural field trip to Dia de los Muertos altar displays at the Indiana State Museum.

La Doncella The Maiden *Dreamdust*

Gather out of stardust
Earthdust
Cloudust
Stormdust

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And splinters of hail,
One handful of dreamdust
Not for sale.
- Romero 1989

Though this poem does not reveal my identity as a survivor, during my growing up years, I identified early on as one. As a rape, sexual assault and domestic violence survivor, like many other young women who experience physical and emotional violence, I lived my life invisibly and numb for many years, just as Melinda, a young woman from *Speak* (Anderson 1999) does - silenced by a marginal existence and fearful of speaking my story:

When I was experiencing that sexual assault, from touching to comments to physical hurt, I didn't think about reporting because I was truly afraid no one would believe me. I tried to report. I tried telling my mother and she did not believe me. So for years I've carried this inside myself and it just became a really traumatic secret (WHTR.com 2019).

Only recently, in 2019 (as referred to above) did I decide to claim and project my identity as a survivor, when I was invited as a panelist on a domestic violence panel at Indiana University Kokomo (WHTR.com 2019). From this point forward, I decided to dynamically advocate for women and for the power of storytelling. My literacy work began to soar and move me into spaces of teaching and research that involved work at the state level. I was soon invited by the Howard County Family Services Association to create digital stories centered on rape survivors' storytelling. As I began gleaning stories, these involved my own daughter's story being raped during her senior year of high school as well as a close friend's experience of rape during the time period of being a single mother. I was able to present each of these digital stories at the fall 2020 state senate session, which helped, along with many others' testimonies, to move Indiana rape law forward to include the language of consent. Many others, myself, and my daughter celebrated with the organization Women for Change at the Indiana Statehouse in April 2022.

As an educator who worked closely with different individuals in the secondary classroom for multiple years, I realized years ago that there are many individuals who have embodied stories of their crucial experiences. A few years ago, my own storytelling on the domestic violence panel sparked conversations with others, and it sparked an advocacy and honed a focus within me to become more deeply engaged with storytelling, and not just within my writing and in my own classroom. As I reflected on my own students in years past who had narratives they embodied through their attitudes and classroom behaviors to private conversations and testimonials on bathroom stalls, I began to think of storytelling as a crucial campus practice. Thinking about my university students carrying stories into my classroom as transitive artifacts (Pahl and Rowsell 2010) upon their bodies in clothing they wear, tattoos inscribed, rememberings they discuss, I realized that others on my campus could use digital storytelling within multiple disciplines to allow for students' storied experiences to emerge.

La Maestra The Teacher

During one fall semester I decided to embed aspects of Artifactual Literacies (Pahl and Rowsell 2010) into my course, Methods of Teaching Sr High/Jr High/Middle School English. Years

before, I had used artifacts and storytelling as an English teacher at an urban high school. That year as a secondary English teacher who was new in her school, I faced an exceptionally large class of 55 juniors. Trying to imagine how to connect with so many students and engage them in the writing process, I asked each of my students to bring an artifact to class (I also brought an artifact - a Holly Hobbie candle) and through communal storytelling, we each shared artifacts of our lives and their important connections.

Figure 1
Replica gift from Tomorrow's Teachers High School Students



A Holly Hobbie Memory

During one fall semester, I decided to use a similar method of teaching writing to my college students as I had used with my secondary students. I needed my students to understand that writing can easily flow with the uses of engaging practices such as artifactual mediation talk - using artifacts to mediate storytelling. During one class I encouraged my students to bring a significant artifact from their lives, one that had been connected to a crucial event of some kind. The next class, we formed mentor circles in which we each wrote for 15 minutes about our artifacts and the meanings that were connected to them and then shared our writing in the circles. Below is an excerpt from my own classroom writing about a Hollie Hobbie candle my aunt had given me as a child:

The periwinkle-colored candle, which rests on the second shelf of my gray steel bookshelf in my memory, still comforts me when I think of its scent and flickering light. I would sit there in my room, my small book space of Harlequin Romance novels – ones that I had ordered and never paid for. In the quiet space, I felt the candle's glow from its shadows that flickered from the shelf to the wall. I could melt away in my room just being in that quiet, peaceful space, wishing that somehow Hollie Hobbie could transport me to her world – a world where young girls could smile and stay beautiful and untouched. I would sit and dream of such a place for hours. I rarely left my room during the years of pain – those years started when I was very young and continued until I left for college. It was only in my teen years that I was able to craft a place of thinking and

being in my room that I understood the need to remain in my room. Too many harsh forces had interacted with my head, arms, legs, breasts, and mind.

I remember going into my room and not leaving once for three days. My room became a place of solace, as the rest of our house and my life was a prison. My Hollie Hobbie candle's scent and glow set a calm for me to cry, think, and be beautiful and untouched.

The candle provided an entry point to my life, and through the storying of this remembered artifact, I was able to talk about pain and trauma. The candle, as an artifact of memory (Pahl and Rowsell 2010) allowed me to share pieces of my life and habitus with my students and made our class experience a humanizing one.

Story Habitus

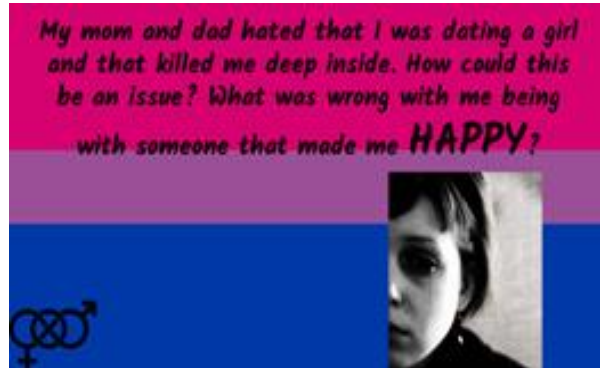
As artifacts, individuals' stories help to reveal their habitus, or ways of being and living their experiences. Since young women are the individuals of focus for this article, I continue to frame the writing so that it centers on their experiences. As ways of living and being are unearthed, stories reveal how women navigate issues they have confronted related to others' comments or perspectives imposed on their bodies as social and political spaces (Pitts 2003; Woods 2012). My poem "Dreamdust" (initially presented in this article) does not necessarily reveal a grand mosaic of a life. What it does reveal is a habitus of hope for a better life. The Hollie Hobbie memoir offers an entry point into my identity as a young woman who had experienced different kinds of trauma. Young women sitting in classrooms, dwelling in settings that can offer spaces for voicing experiences, can begin revealing their own difficult or joyful experiences, and as ways of moving beyond their spaces of hardship, can develop writings that offer hope and strengthen future aspirations.

Digital Storytelling as an Empowering Digital Literacy

Digital storytelling involves using images, text, a voiceover, or textual narrative (Romero-Ivanova, Cook, and Faurote 2021), and symbolic meanings to convey a story. My experiences teaching digital storytelling in the college course Using Computers in Education and having taught high school students in past years has provided me the wisdom to do crucial event storytelling, which is a narrative practice involving the storytelling of a highly impactful event from one's life (Romero-Ivanova, Cook, and Faurote 2021).

As Pahl and Rowsell (2010:3) state, literacy "involves many different scripts, and it can exist in many different languages and settings." Literacy is dynamic and cultural: it reveals identities, connections of oneself and identities to others and to the world. One of my first-year students in the Tomorrow's Teachers (TT) program (a program in which I teach high school students pre-teacher education college courses) created a digital story about coming out as a bisexual youth (Romero-Ivanova 2020):

Figure 2
Erryn's (pseudonym) Digital Story



Erryn's story, which centers on her transcendence from hidden to empowered, relates Erryn's choice to come out to her parents. However, the larger issues that emerged focused on acceptance and Erryn's identity as a bisexual youth. This digital story, along with others which students have created in my classes through the years, continue to influence the ways in which I continue to advocate for the power of narratives as dynamic cultural and experiential practices in classrooms. In Spring 2021, I was asked to create and present a digital storytelling workshop for Indiana University Kokomo prior to taking students on a multidisciplinary Kokomo Experience and You (KEY) trip to the Indiana State Museum's gallery of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) memorial altars in Fall 2021. Before creating a digital storytelling workshop that would be thematically connected to Dia de los Muertos, I felt an urgent need to honor those in my own life who had passed away.

Encontrar la Identidad a Traves de la Creacion de un Memorial **Finding Identity through Creating a Memorial**

Starting with memories and images of loved ones who had untimely passed, I gathered photographs for my aunt Thelma who had passed in spring 2020 and my oldest daughter's friend who had ended his life in 2021. I obtained a small table, jeweled photo frames, Halloween candy, a velvet black cloth, a sugar skull candy dish, and masks.

Putting these together, I laid out battery-operated candles which surrounded the different objects and created a simple but beautiful memorial altar which I placed outside of my office in my school of education. I began a daily tradition of "lighting" each candle daily to honor my loved. This memorial literacy practice allowed me to embody important facets of my Hispanic identity of sacredly and spiritually connecting with those who had passed, as well as speaking to colleagues, students, and others about this practice. I felt that displaying this cultural and artifactual memorial would invite students to pause at my altar as they passed through our hallway and to ask questions.

Figure 3
Memorial Altar



Constructing the memorial altar allowed me to connect with my Latina self, immerse myself in the cultural practice of honoring my loved ones, and helped me to purposefully authenticate the reasons I considered storytelling a cultural practice, especially in preparation for helping students to understand digital storytelling prior to going on a KEY field trip to visit a display of sacred, artifactual, memorial storytelling.

Otra Forma de Realizacion: La Ensenanza de la Narracion Digital
A Further Embodiment: Teaching Digital Storytelling

As I began making preparations for teaching the digital storytelling workshop on campus, I considered its core purpose: experiential learning. Students would be attending a KEY trip that centered on Día de los Muertos memorial altars. The reason for this trip was to provide a cultural experience for students to understand more about the Latino culture. I used Google Slides to design and format my presentation accordingly.

Figure 4
First Slide, Digital Storytelling for the Fall 2021 KEY Trip



Figure 5
Second Slide, Digital Storytelling for the Fall 2021 KEY Trip

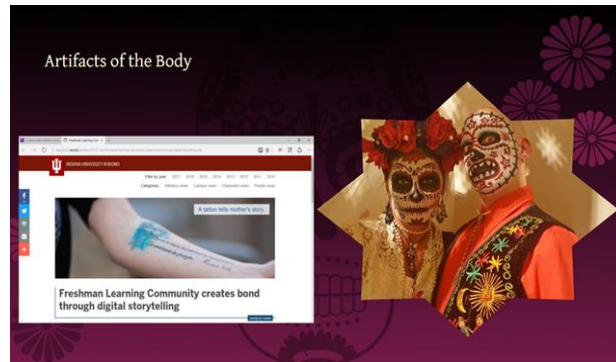


Figure 6
Third Slide, Digital Storytelling for the Fall 2021 KEY Trip



As presented above, the Google Slides I created for my presentation included a design that centered on Day of the Dead kinds of images. I included a definition of digital storytelling, background of the 7 elements of digital storytelling (Robin 2016) with examples of each from sample digital stories, and examples from my teaching of digital storytelling within the course “Using Computers in Education.” These elements, along with my presentation of a few students’ example stories, as well as news stories of how my students’ artifacts in their lives (tattoos) mediated their digital stories, helped my audience to understand the importance of purposes of storytelling in a digital mode: some stories are more difficult to mediate than others and experiential learning, as in the above slide in figure 6, is visually presented so that others can see artifacts from one’s life, and this process helps to create empathy and build rapport.

El Curacion **The Healing**

The process of creating digital stories is therapeutic (Romero-Ivanova 2020; Romero-Ivanova, Cook, and Faure 2021) and allows the storyteller to be able to reveal experiences and various identities and habitus or ways of living and being (Pahl and Rowsell 2010), as previously described in the storytelling that emerged in my own secondary English classroom with 55 juniors and in my own life as I wrote stories and poetry. Also, it allows the listener and watcher of the digital story to commune with the storyteller. When individuals commune with self and

others through writing their lives, there is a testimony that emerges and strengthens their efficacy as a human being and creates empathy in the listener. Artifactually displays, such as memorial altars extend one's lived experiences to cultural identifications and sacred literacy practices. Digitalizing stories goes further to provide lived experience storytelling that is multimodal, descriptive and emotive.

As hooks (2001) posits, human beings are meant to be in communion with one another and listening to another's story allows us to be able to understand their background and empathize with their experiences.

Below are listed ways in which educators can un-silence through the privilege and promotion of digital storytelling in their classrooms.

- 1. Use storying as a way to understand students' textured and differentiated lives.** Allow students to free-write on a crucial event - any crucial event they would like to story. Crucial events are impactful events in lives that have caused shifts (Ivanova 2014). The event can be joyful or traumatic but allow them to freely choose their event. Elementary students could write about a special event in their lives such as a favorite birthday party or the birth of a younger sibling.
- 2. Encourage students to bring a significant artifact/object into class that relates to a crucial event in their lives.** Artifacts carry with them embedded stories (Pahl and Rowsell 2010; Ivanova 2014; Romero-Ivanova 2020). Artifacts can help to mediate stories and/or allow students who find writing challenging, to freely story the meaning their artifacts hold. Younger students can bring in a significant object from a special time in their lives.
- 3. Promote digital storytelling in your classroom.** Digital stories can easily be created using PowerPoint, iMovie, Prezi, or other digital applications and programs. Allow students to choose the format and whether they would like to provide a voice-over or text to narrate their stories. Digital storytelling involves critical thinking in which larger social issues emerge, uses the writing process, and allows audience members to read the stories that are shared. Elementary students can be assisted with digital story creating through online applications such as Storyboard That or Gotcha Life.
- 4. Allow small group/large group sharing of digital stories in your classroom.** Allow students choice to present their story in small groups, pairs, or large groups.

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