


11-22-2022

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Recommended Citation

Goin Kono, Kari and Taylor, Sonja (2022) "Leveraging storytelling and digital artifacts to design social justice curriculum in urban communities," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 , Article 22.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2022.17.3.22>

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Leveraging storytelling and digital artifacts to design social justice curriculum in urban communities

Abstract

Many students in Portland's schools face racism and other forms of discrimination on a daily basis. Storytelling is a practice that is fundamental across all cultures and provides a vehicle that students from all backgrounds can access as a mechanism for engaging in the development of their academic identity. This article shares about how a digital workbook assignment was designed as an outlet for student self-expression dealing daily with racism and prejudice related to systems of oppression in education and the rapidly changing and evolving life of a city.

Keywords

storytelling, digital learning, culturally sustaining pedagogy, identity, community wealth, universal design for learning

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The curriculum should be representative of students' lives and lived experiences. From 2020-2022 the city of Portland, Oregon (and neighboring communities) experienced major changes when upwards of ten-thousand people showed up to protest for racial justice in June of 2020 and many protesters continued the fight for over 100 days, filling the streets and iconic Portland bridges with people, signs, and art (Outlet, n.d.). At the same time Portland was shut down due to a global pandemic that affected schooling for all students in and around the city. Students needed a way to process, heal and express how these major changes affected their lives.

Many students in Portland's schools face racism and other forms of discrimination on a daily basis (Goessling, 2018). Micro and macro aggressions that students deal with can present a significant barrier to learning and engagement in classrooms (Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019; Safir & Dugan, 2021). It is critical that students have a place to process what is happening within the context of their curriculum (Picower, 2011). Most recently, the urgent need for avenues to process systemic racism can be seen in the protests that happened in support of Black Lives Matter during the spring and summer of 2020. Many students joined the protests, held school walkouts, and did research related to the protests and sometimes missed their classes as a result. People showed up to stand together, share stories, hold signs, sing, post flyers, and paint murals throughout downtown Portland.

Storytelling is a practice that is fundamental across all cultures and provides a vehicle that students from all backgrounds can access as a mechanism for engaging in the development of their academic identity (DeNicolo, et al., 2015; Muhammad, 2020; Olivares-Orellana, 2020). As storytellers, students construct the academic narrative for themselves and insert themselves into their perception of an altered academic narrative--a narrative where students begin to identify and challenge racist issues including those present within the classroom. Storytelling in the context of the classroom can become an important practice for self-definition (Muhammad, 2020), a concept that evolved from self-authorship introduced by Kegan (1994) and then further developed through other research and teaching practices (Jehangir, et al., 2012). Contrary to self-authorship, self-definition specifically centers the perspective of historically excluded voices in considering the role of pedagogical approaches (Okello, 2018).

Because trauma associated with racism is immediately present and ongoing for many students, it becomes important to find ways to integrate their experiences through the lens of healing rather than trauma alone (Saleem, et al., 2021). Much of the K-12 curriculum related to racial justice emphasizes the harm and trauma experienced by Black, Brown and Indigenous communities (Ginwright, 2016). While education around this history is, and will continue to be important, developing a healing-centered approach to understanding and coming to terms with our history is becoming more and more relevant (Anderson, et al., 2019; Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015; Ginwright, 2016; Saleem, et al., 2021), particularly as access to higher education opens up for our historically excluded community members (Garriott, 2020). One way to get at a more healing centered approach is finding ways for students to personalize their learning and approach their experiences as a valuable part of their academic identity (Miller et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2009). In summary, centering lived experience and positionality along with the academic agenda is one way to guide students to explicitly bring what they already know into the foundations of their academic identity.

Next, the authors describe a digital workbook assignment designed to offer students the opportunity to document and tell their story, to build their academic identities, and in the process, offer students the practice of learning as a healing space. The described assignment serves as a counter narrative challenging traditional forms of curriculum that do not validate the lived

experiences of students who navigate ongoing change, racism, and oppression at school and in their daily lives. Finally, we connect how building an academic identity through storytelling practices can offer a healing practice in service to social justice.

Digital Workbooks, Community Wealth, and Self-determination

To address the needs of students during a time of critical transition for the city of Portland, an instructor and staff member worked together to design a digital workbook assignment for senior students at an urban high school that serves students who have been pushed out (of city limits) as a result of gentrification, and also who have immigrated, which includes a largely first generation student population. The workbooks were designed using ePortfolios which act like a digital container (similar to a website) for students to house reflections and make connections between their learning experiences from different contexts. Important to this process is the visual format that is easily shareable with others on a large scale and the creation of a type of archive of their learning that they can continue to reference and reflect on as their learning journey continues. Although an ePortfolio was chosen for this assignment, instructors and teachers may adapt the concepts from this example to other digital formats such as a website, blog, in a learning management system, or online folder system like Google drive.

The digital workbook became a guided assignment that challenged students to represent their identities and thoughts; to express themselves through a variety of mediums including words/text, digital assets like art, imagery, and video. Culturally sustaining pedagogy should reflect a teacher's efforts to sustain and uplift students' culture, language, and connection to their communities (Paris, 2012). As a culturally sustaining practice, the workbooks were designed as a humanizing space for student self-expression. Often when thinking of workbooks related to school, there is an assumption that the students are just filling in blanks and doing busy work - canned learning or a one size fits all approach. Alternatively, these workbooks were designed as antithetical to the concept of canned learning, or learning that is pre-planned without opportunity for students to personalize their practice. Canned learning is similar to the concept of disposable assignments (Kautzman, 2022), which illustrates concerns about learning that is designed for students to complete and then dispose of the work, having little to no relevance in students' lives or lived experiences. The workbooks instead used the power of visual imagery and reflection as an outlet for students dealing daily with racism and prejudice related to systems of oppression in education and the rapidly changing and evolving life of a city.

There were three workbooks for this assignment, one for each quarter of the academic year including fall, winter, and spring. The three workbooks scaffolded the building of academic identity using the prompts "explore" (fall quarter), "challenge" (winter quarter) and "imagine" (spring quarter). "Explore" was an opportunity for students to explore their identity and included a prompt for students to upload and share a digital artifact that represented part of who they are. On the first page of the explore workbook students were asked to upload an image, video, poem, or story and then write a statement about the piece of media they chose. Next, students were prompted to respond to the statement, "What is the most important aspect of your identity that is important for others to know"? Space was included for additional media upload if students wanted to share more than one element. The next page in the explore workbook included prompts for students to "integrate their identity" by writing reflections about their future in college, including their future interests. The final page in the explore workbook was framed around extending their identity to engage with the goals of the program including written

responses and media uploads relating to the themes of communication, critical thinking and inquiry, diversity and social justice and ethics, and agency and community.

The Challenge workbook had students describe their community by uploading any type of media and writing a reflection on the type of media they chose to upload. The next page in the challenge workbook prompted students to document their community and the final page had students write and upload media in response to course topics related to race and social justice in current times. The imagine workbook prompted students to reflect on what they have learned and what they will carry with them. Prompts asked for written reflection and media upload. The next page of the imagine workbook prompted students to document themselves and their peers relating to participating within their home communities. The final page of the Imagine workbook included written prompts and media uploads to respond to what their personal lives will be like without racial hierarchy.

Student Work

In course evaluations and in class reflections for this work, students appreciated what they learned from their peers, citing an increased capacity for acceptance of others after understanding similarities and differences learned from the digital workbook assignment. Students filled the workbooks with different forms of media including personal reflections, poems, photos, videos, gifs, and their own drawings and art. The workbooks became a type of digital journal that connected their individual learning processes with the moments of time they were experiencing in and around the city of Portland. Through interacting with the workbooks, students were surprised by how much their own expertise helped them in scholarly life. One student commented that they didn't realize that her own lived experience would help her so much academically. Several students opted to share their ePortfolio workbooks as examples for presentations and future students. A limited selection of these students' workbooks are located on Dr. Taylor's public ePortfolio.

The workbooks evolved from a department top-down expectation to include course assignments dedicated to the programs goals and was adapted to be culturally sustaining by building in opportunities for students to express themselves in different mediums. The staff-instructor partnership was critical to having support in the design of the workbooks, which may not be readily available to all who engage in this work.

Teaching for Social Justice

Social justice education is a philosophy to center equity (Picower, 2011). Social justice education necessitates instructors take an active stance to choose culturally relevant content and pedagogical practices, and to provide students with opportunities to examine oppression and take social action through their own lived experiences (Picower, 2011). The digital workbooks created an opportunity for students to creatively flourish, grow their academic identities, and share about how their lives connect to a city going through tremendous change. By contributing digital assets and writing reflections, the digital workbooks offered a healing counterspace for students to personalize their learning and process how they contribute not only to their education but also within their community (Goessling, 2018). Students who have previously hid their various intersecting identities were encouraged to center their lived experiences and identities and to reflect on each aspect of their lives as a strength. Each student's strengths contributed

towards their ability to process and heal from oppression and to begin to take a step towards action.

By using the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Implementation Guidebook (WK Kellogg Foundation, 2016) as an inspiration for the workbook design, we embedded a reflective healing process that students could adapt to their own lived experience. Although we could not guarantee that healing takes place, our scaffolded approach does offer one possible antidote to curricular epistemicide. The ideas from this case study on digital workbooks can be adapted for instructors and teachers who seek to design opportunities for justice and equity in their classrooms (Mirra & Morrell, 2011; Picower, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2019) and for students to grow the development of their academic identities and illustrate their varied lived experiences within the context of education (Cook-Sather, 2017). Educators should use storytelling and story-sharing as an avenue for having conversations with students about their lives and as a culturally sustaining practice connecting students' home communities with the classroom. By growing one's academic identity and personalizing learning with storytelling, educators can begin to disrupt curriculum epistemicide, make learning relevant for all students, and amplify moving toward justice for all.

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