

The Story behind the Stories in Community-Based Digital Media Projects

Reviewed by Alan Davis

Community-Based Multiliteracies & Digital Media Projects: Questioning Assumptions and Exploring Realities. Heather Pleasants and Dana Salter (Eds.) (2014). New York: Peter Lang. ISBN: 978-1-4331-1975-0

Suppose you are skilled in using digital media to tell stories, and want to work with members of a community to equip them to use digital media to tell their own individual and collective stories. You believe that the activity will be empowering, even transformative for the participants and possibly for the larger community, and armed with that conviction you obtain funding from a foundation. But in carrying out your project for the first time, issues arise that had never entered your mind when you wrote your proposal. You consider yourself a member of the community you are facilitating, but some participants are wary of you and think of you as an outsider. You hope to be able to showcase the products of your project for future funders, but participants want to tell stories that funders may find offensive. Community leaders have signed letters of support, but now seem to be changing their minds or renegeing on promises. You have worked on building trust and encouraging authenticity and disclosure in your participants, but disclosures by some are interpreted by others as putting the community at risk of censure or attack. In preparing your project, you'd read lots of books and articles, but you wonder why none of them had focused on the very issues that you now find yourself focusing on from week to week.

Community-Based Multiliteracies & Digital Media Projects explores the complex issues that can and do arise when members of communities, especially vulnerable communities, come together with the support of expert facilitators to author and share stories using media. Each chapter is authored by facilitators with extensive experience with such projects. Chapters are grounded in a rich range of contexts; a partial list includes Aboriginal Canadian youth creating a video game; personal digital stories by queer and trans persons, youth in foster care, and patients in medical facilities; male African American youth participating in a documentary film; immigrant youth participating in a photo-voice project; and a village in Ghana hosting a talk radio program. The editors identify four main "tensions" explored across these contexts: managing

the integrity of process and product, maintaining communication, thinking critically about impact, and sustaining the work.

This is not a book about theory, but editors Pleasants and Salter provide an insightful exploration of the conceptual relationship between community and multiliteracies in the introductory chapter. They trace the term multiliteracies to the New London Group (1996), scholars who emphasized the need of educators to recognize the pedagogical implications of the shift from print-based text to screen-based communication and global shifts in community lives. They draw also on Heath's (1983) cultural linguistic documentation of how distinct communities may engage in distinctive forms of expression and interpretation even when all speak English as their first language and have attended school in the same region. Literacies are more than skills divorced from communities. They are, as the authors state, practices that are always mediated by the interplay between local and global social interactions, cultures, assigned meanings and values of communities.

Although Pleasants and Salter don't mention it, Heath (1983) went on to argue that tensions quickly arise when a teacher from one literacy community seeks to impose literacy practices on children from a community embracing different "ways with words." In some of the stories in this book we see similar tensions at work. One example is the chapter by Lewis and Fragnito describing a project in which Aboriginal youth wanted to create a video game called *Grand Theft Rez*, when funders and facilitators had something less larcenous in mind. Another successful resolution is explored by Rob Simon et al. in their "Teaching to Learn Project" in which teenagers and beginning teachers in Toronto read and discussed young adult fiction together outside of a school setting, positioning the teenagers as experts on teen culture and experience. The description of their shared experience contrasts with many bleak efforts I have witnessed in which White middle class teachers tried unsuccessfully to engage teenagers of color in discussing literature.

Several chapters touch upon complex ethical issues of ownership and disclosure regarding personal narratives. Amy Hill, in her chapter “Digital Storytelling and the Politics of Doing Good,” does a particularly sensitive and insightful job of exploring the ethics sharing personal narratives. She uses case studies to describe her shift from a position of wanting to “surface rarely heard stories in the service of justice,” a stance she now describes as naïve, to a much more cautionary stance governed by clearly articulated principles. In her examples, a teenager from California creates a digital story about his former life as a gang member and wants to include photos of his friends. Women in Nepal, a country with a very high incidence of violence against women and a stigma against women who have suffered sexual abuse, create digital stories about experiences of sexual violence which could have severely negative consequences for them if viewed by outsiders. At a digital storytelling workshop in South Africa for women with HIV/AIDS, one woman felt betrayed when her digital story was shared with members of the organization’s staff who hadn’t been present when she first created it. The examples highlight the complexity of safeguarding storytellers from their own desire to reveal information that can put them or others at risk, the difficulty in communicating information in advance about who might view a story, the impossibility of knowing in advance how some people will respond to one’s story, and matters of ownership when a participant agrees to share her story and later changes her mind.

“Impact” is one of the four tensions identified by the authors to be dealt with in this book, and they place it in quotation marks as I have here, perhaps to convey a slightly ironic tone. In my opinion, it is the topic least persuasively dealt with. Digital media production is a huge commercial enterprise, from Hollywood to YouTube, and students pay tuition to take courses in film and multi-media production, in part because they want to use the skills commercially. Here, however, we are talking about activities funded mainly by government grants and charitable giving via non-profit organizations, and funders want to know how the activities they support benefit the participants. For those facilitating the projects, this is often a tension: The funder expects certain proposed outcomes, and the effort to achieve those may impinge on the process in artificial and negative ways. For many facilitators, the value of the effort seems self-evident from their daily experience. Diana Nucera, co-director with Jenny Lee of the Allied Media Projects in De-

troit, eloquently describes her own experience of personal transformation and the role of mediated self-expression in that transformation, and uses her personal experience as a means of facilitating transformative experiences in others. I was moved by her personal account, and at the same time I wanted a more systematic account of how facilitators approach the problem of evaluation and documentation, and how participants are impacted by the projects described in her chapter and in other chapters. Certainly this is a topic for a different book, but it wasn’t addressed as carefully as the other themes in this one. However, this is a minor criticism of this much-needed sharing of personal experiences in the facilitation of community-based multiliteracy and digital media projects.

References

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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About the Reviewer

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