



visible knowledge project

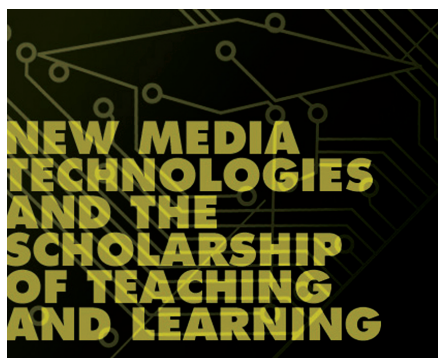
a collaborative investigation of learning, inquiry, and technology



The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning,
from the Visible Knowledge Project.

Edited By Randy Bass & Bret Eynon



"The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project," *edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon*

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Table of Contents

The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

A Collaborative Case Study on Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project

Capturing the Visible Evidence of Invisible Learning (Introduction and Synthesis of Findings)

Randy Bass and Bret Eynon

Reading the Reader

Sharona Levy

Close Reading, Associative Thinking, and Zones of Proximal Development in Hypertext

Patricia E. O'Connor

Inquiry, Image, and Emotion in the History Classroom

Peter Felten

From Looking to Seeing: Student Learning in the Visual Turn

David Jaffee

Engaging Students as Researchers through Internet Use

Taimi Olsen

Trace Evidence: How New Media Can Change What We Know About Student Learning

Lynne Adrian

Shaping a Culture of Conversation: The Discussion Board and Beyond

Edward J. Gallagher

The Importance of Conversation in Learning and the Value of Web-based Discussion Tools

Heidi Elmendorf and John Ottenhoff

Why Sophie Dances: Electronic Discussions and Student Engagement with the Arts

Paula Berggren

Connecting the Dots: Learning, Media, Community

Elizabeth Stephen

Focusing on Process: Exploring Participatory Strategies to Enhance Student Learning

Juan-José Gutiérrez

Theorizing Through Digital Stories: The Art of "Writing Back" and "Writing For"

Rina Benmayor

Video Killed the Term Paper Star? Two Views

Peter Burkholder and Anne Cross

Producing Audiovisual Knowledge: Documentary Video Production and Student Learning in the American Studies Classroom

Bernie Cook

Multimedia as Composition: Research, Writing, and Creativity

Viet Nguyen

Looking at Learning, Looking Together: Collaboration across Disciplines on a Digital Gallery

Joseph Ugoretz and Rachel Theilheimer

"It Helped Me See a New Me": ePortfolio, Learning and Change at LaGuardia Community College

Bret Eynon

From Narrative to Database: Protocols and Practices of Multimedia Inquiry in a Cross-Classroom Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Study

Michael Coventry and Matthias Oppermann

Multimedia in the Classroom at USC: A Ten Year Perspective

Mark E. Kann

Theorizing Through Digital Stories: The Art of “Writing Back” and “Writing For”

Rina Benmayor, California State University, Monterey Bay

From *The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study on Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project*¹, edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon

“Writing and making my digital story was the easy part of this whole project; the challenging part did not come until I began writing this paper.” In her final theorizing essay, Inga, a student in my Latina Life Stories class, pinpointed the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning challenge I embraced seven years ago: Does centering one’s own personal experience as the subject of analysis facilitate learning how to theorize? Does making a digital story (as opposed to a written story) enable theorizing and the construction of new social knowledge? Does multimedia authoring open up a different, more visible, and perhaps more polysemic space for “theorizing from the flesh”?²

Seven years and more than two hundred digital stories later, I find that my initial questions are still compelling, and that I’ve learned a few things along the way. I’ve learned that a good theorizer is not necessarily a good storyteller and that to narrate theory well requires considerable creativity and integrative skill. I’ve also learned that the movement from storytelling to theorizing, from narrative to critical discourse, is not necessarily a linear, cumulative process. I’ve come to recognize multiple and co-existing theorizing strategies in the same work, and that every student achieves at least one moment of critical theorizing, whether they realize it or not.

1 About VKP: In all, more than seventy faculty from twenty-two institutions participated in the Visible Knowledge Project over five years. Participating campuses included five research universities (Vanderbilt University, the University of Alabama, Georgetown University, the University of Southern California, Washington State University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), four comprehensive public universities (Pennsylvania’s Millersville University, California State University (CSU)--Monterey Bay, CSU Sacramento, Ohio’s Youngstown State University, and participants from several four-year colleges in the City University of New York system, including City College, Lehman, and Baruch), and three community colleges (two from CUNY--Borough of Manhattan Community College and LaGuardia Community College, and California’s Cerritos College). In addition to campus-based teams, a number of independent scholars participated from a half dozen other institutions, such as Arizona State and Lehigh University. The project began in June 2000 and concluded in October 2005. We engaged in several methods for online collaboration to supplement our annual institutes, including an adaptation of the digital poster-tool created by Knowledge Media Lab (Carnegie Foundation), asynchronous discussion, and web-conferencing. The VKP galleries and archives (<https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/vkp/>) provide a wealth of background information, including lists of participants, regular newsletters, and reports and essays by participants, as well as a number of related resources and meta-analyses. For this article, the author gratefully acknowledges the students whose work is cited here. All students whose work is included have granted the author permission to use the material.

2 Cherríe Moraga, “La Güera,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 34. Moraga refers to learning from women about “racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of their writing.” “Theorizing from the flesh” refers to the production of “situated knowledge.” That is, the production of new social/cultural/historical understandings and frameworks derived through speaking about, reflecting on, and analyzing lived experience.

Over these years I've also discovered that my questions have shifted from whether to how digital storytelling engages the leap from narrative to critical discourse. How has digital storytelling made visible to me the co-existence of multiple modes and sites of theorizing, just as there are multiple literacies, intelligences and ways of knowing? How do these understandings change the way I "read" and assess students' abilities to theorize? Ultimately, I've learned that the digital medium requires me to see, teach, and assess theorizing differently.

This journey has been fascinating and deeply moving, as life story work should be. Inspired by the work of Latina autobiographical writers, students who take my course become authors in their own right, inscribing themselves into a body of identity literature, *digitally*.³ They write one-and-a-half-page scripts, record their stories in their own voice, select and scan images, add music, and produce small three-minute movies (using i-Movie) about their own identities. Then I ask them to reflect on their narratives and theorize them, drawing larger social, cultural and historical understandings and implications from their stories. From narrative authorship I try to move them toward critical discourse.

In this essay, I'm drawing primarily on two bodies of student evidence: students' digital stories and their corresponding theoretical essays.⁴ I narrowed my evidence pool to the 2004 and 2005 classes because they reflected my more developed pedagogical strategies and the culmination of the Visible Knowledge Project research. Nevertheless, I continue to teach the class and develop the pedagogy. I begin with a brief exposition of two positional strategies that help generate and support a critical, theorizing voice: "writing back" and "writing for." I then present a rubric to capture the patterns I've seen over the years and to locate and describe what I see as multiple acts of theorizing. Following that, I illustrate different stages of theorizing through detailed examples from students' written reflections on their stories. Then, I take a focused look at theorizing through multimedia and examine creative theorizing through students' visual texts. I conclude with some reflections and insights into how this analysis of evidence will ultimately reshape what I do in the classroom to engage students in the art and practice of "theorizing from the flesh." Given the constraints of rendering voice and image in a print format, I provide cursory descriptions of the digital stories, illustrating with a few key screen shots.

"Writing Back" and "Writing For"

Over the course of this project, I puzzled as to how to best engage students in theorizing, in stepping back from the story itself and drawing insight into its larger social meanings and implications. Key to theorizing is standpoint, so I worked with the concepts of positionality--oppositional and propositional. Translating these concepts into common-speak, I asked students to approach their stories as "writing back" and "writing for," rather than simply "writing about" personal experience. Writing back was to be intentionally testimonial and dialogic, a response to an experience and a reply to social structures, institutions, individuals and ideologies that shaped that experience. "Writing for" asked students to identify their intended audiences. As storytellers, who did they intentionally seek to reach and who might benefit from seeing and hearing their story? The premise is that acts of writing back also become spaces for constructing new perspectives, concepts and theories, spaces that write for

3 The course readings include texts by Chicana, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban-American, Central American and mixed heritage Latina writers in the United States.

4 In addition to the digital stories and theorizing essays, I also amassed a huge body of additional evidence, consisting of in-class observations, literary analysis essays, and digital story scripts, which I don't bring into this essay.

others. Most Latina autobiographical narratives are positioned in this way, as testimonial responses to historical, cultural, and ideological oppressions. Therefore, opposition and proposition, “writing back” and “writing for,” are two sides of the same coin, providing an axis that guides the story, its theoretical reflection, and my pedagogical practices.⁵

In order to model this binary relationship and build toward the writing, production, and theorizing of the students’ digital stories, I scaffolded a process that is both sequential and overlapping. In truth, the process is messy, as students weave in and out of the readings, relating them to their own personal experiences and feelings, analyzing the texts historically, sociologically, and aesthetically, and thinking all the while about the stories that they themselves will tell (see Figure 1). Once the digital stories have been produced and can be viewed in almost final form, we return to the concepts of “writing back” and “writing for” to help organize theoretical reflection and to prepare for the final assignment (see Figures 2 and 3). Over the years of examining my pedagogy in this class, I began to see a pattern in how students understand and approach theorizing their own lived experiences.

Multiple Modes of Theorizing

I designed the rubric below to express a pattern of evidence and its polysemic potential. The pattern that I observed consists of three modes of theorizing: narrative or embedded theorizing (located within the story or image); applied theorizing (using concepts and theories to explain a story or an image); and critical theorizing (foregrounding the way in which a story or image dialogues with theory and pushes new thinking). To get a better grasp on where and how theorizing takes place, I broke the rubric down into six main aspects of the theorizing process:

1. The type of writing voice used
2. The relationship between the student’s story and the stories read or seen in class
3. The relationship of the digital story to social structures and ideologies (“writing back”)
4. The didactic and theoretical intent of the story (“writing for”)
5. The effectiveness/emotional impact of the digital story qua story
6. The effectiveness of the visual text as creative/critical representation

Criteria 1-4 refer to theorizing through writing. But, creative representations (the multimedia stories themselves and their visual texts) are also acts and sites of theorizing. Criteria 5 and 6 focus on creative multimedia aspects of the storytelling: the dramatic arc and the visual text.

⁵ Most Latina autobiographical narratives are positioned in this way, as testimonial responses to historical, cultural, and ideological oppressions. Many new cultural theories have emerged from this process. For example, I commonly refer to how the now widely invoked concepts of “borderlands” and “intersectionality” emerged from women of color and Latina feminist writings. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes the concept of borderlands as a geographical, cultural and historical space, where dominant and subordinated cultures intersect. Intersectionality is a theoretical response to second-wave feminism’s focus on gender, bringing class and race as intersecting forces in explaining differential oppression and identity.

Theorizing Rubric

Criteria for Written Texts	Narrative Theorizing	Applied Theorizing	Critical Theorizing
1. Type of writing and use of voice	Begins to think more broadly, but falls back into retelling the story. Conceptual thinking lurks in background.	Shifts from storytelling to critical discourse; identifies and applies theoretical concepts to interpret the story.	Foregrounds conceptual and theoretical insights as the goal.
2. Relation to other stories seen in class	Connects digital story to readings in terms of plot similarities.	Refers to readings in terms of concepts and critical insights.	Uses the story to exemplify existing theories but also their limitations.
3. Relation to larger social structures and ideologies	"Writes back" to specific individual(s) or institution(s); some connection to social or cultural structures.	"Writes back" to larger cultural and historical forces/audiences	"Writes back" to theory.
4. Didactic and theoretical intent of the story	Writes for" specific individual(s), including self; didactic intent.	"Writes for" larger audiences and larger ideas.	"Writes for" new theoretical ground.
5. Multimedia Texts: emotional impact of the digital story	Presents the idea of a story but narrative is weak and doesn't develop a dramatic arc.	Story effectively develops a dramatic and emotional tension.	Story develops dramatic and emotional tension, and reflection—strong message and effective punch line.
6. Multimedia Texts: effectiveness of visual text as creative/critical representation	Visual text follows script in a literal way. Theorizing is embedded; image contains emotional meaning for the creator but not necessarily for the viewer. Or, audience may derive an emotional response without understanding the depth of meaning.	Visual text exhibits greater creativity & aesthetic planning. Consciously transmitting meaning to viewer through visual metaphor, juxtaposition, and other artistic/visual interventions. May still be embedded, or verbally supported, but use of images is less literal.	Visual text represents the critique itself, not just the story. The critique is also articulated clearly in the written reflection. Combines visual and verbal theorizing.

In terms of movement, the rubric displays two main writing shifts: 1. an incipient move from narration to conceptual application, and 2. an emerging awareness of the limitations of existing explanations and a shift into theoretical proposition.⁶ In terms of multimedia visual representation, 1. a move from literal use of images to intentional or intuitive artistic intervention; and 2. from the embedded forms of representation to more explicit articulation of the intent and representation of the theory itself. Locating these critical shifts within students' theorizing essays and digital images helps me identify, *grosso modo*, different stages of progression and seek more focused pedagogical strategies, which I address toward the end of this essay.

In most Scholarship of Teaching and Learning rubrics, there is an implied linear progression from novice to expert learner. However, my evidence leads me to resist that progression and to posit instead a more complex usage of theorizing strategies. In reality, students' theorizing essays criss-cross the grid, demonstrating different modes of theorizing at work in the same essay. In addition, when taking into consideration the variable between writing and multimedia forms, I find that students who are narrative theorizers in their written essays may be applied theorizers in their visual texts. Thus, the rubric calls my attention to the unruliness of theorizing and the need for a quantum approach to the evidence, looking at different medium-specific instances of theorizing rather than using a single linear measure of achievement.

Consequently, I'm led to a closer reading of evidence to explore what different modes of theorizing across different media look like within one student's work. In the examples that follow, I first examine each of the three modes of written theorizing—narrative, applied, and critical—drawing examples from different students' theorizing essays. I address the question of trajectory from narrative to critical theorizing. Then I examine evidence of theorizing through multimedia, focusing on the ways students use visual images to theorize, selecting screen-shots from the digital stories and locating these images within the dramatic structure of the story. By separating and juxtaposing theorizing through words and theorizing through multimedia, we get a truer picture of what theorizing looks like across variables and multiple proficiencies.

Narrative Theorizing through Writing

I commonly find instances where students attempt to connect their stories, or the experiences behind them, to some larger concept. A concept may be named, but there is an immediate impulse to fall back into elaborating the story itself. The story, or the lived experience it recounts, remains the focal point. In such instances, a connection to theory may be lurking, but the writer does not yet make a visible connection. I call this "narrative theorizing," as theorizing is embedded in experiential examples, in stories themselves, and it becomes the task of the reader/viewer to uncover them and interpret the story.

For example, in "Those Male Stares," Jade Alvarez produces a moving story about the traumatic experience and her response to being ogled by an older man when she was thirteen. She goes on to recount how even the men in her own family do the same thing to other women. In her theorizing essay, Jade begins to conceptualize the sexism, violation, and erasure of women in both Anglo and Latino cultures. However, rather than using the experience to engage gender concepts *qua* concepts, there is a stronger pull toward reliving the moment when this memory was formed and give voice to

⁶ This movement describes the trajectory of the testimonial process that so many Latinas and other women-of-color have undertaken, beginning with telling their stories (writing back), then challenging the ability of existing theories and concepts to adequately explain their realities, and ultimately proposing new theories (writing for).

unresolved feelings. Each of the following pieces of her narrative illustrates this shift, starting with a generalizing statement, then moving quickly into narrative examples:

"Those Male Stares" is about the gender roles that we surrender to in society. For example, my experiences were very forward and invading but instead of me yelling back or choosing to 'uncover' myself as a way of rebelling against those attitudes, I felt it was my duty to cover up. . . . "Those Male Stares" is about being able to find your identity or adopting one for the wrong reasons. I was thirteen when this incident occurred. . . . I became insecure. . . . I also assumed then, before the incident, that 'dirty' men existed outside my home. But when "I thought back to the men in my family" I realized that "men in my family were definitely nasty." It was then that I saw my family men as contributors to my erasure.

Lurking behind her words are several theoretical underpinnings for her story: internalized oppression, gendered standpoint, and erasure. But only one—erasure—is named. It is embedded in her reflection on the men in her own family: ". . . I saw my family men as contributors to my erasure." I call this narrative or embedded theorizing because I believe that Jade understood the concepts and could use them to explain her experience, but her story was fundamentally therapeutic—a way to process a scarred memory. For Jade, 'writing back' was a form of personal empowerment and a retort to sexist violence. She was not yet ready to step back and talk about her experience in more abstract, conceptual terms. This then posed the challenge of how—and when—to stimulate a shift to a discourse of interpretation, to other modes where abstraction and conceptual discussion become more prominent and prioritized. In some cases, to expect this distancing to take place immediately after making the story—which is in itself a re-living of the experience—may not be realistic. So, I looked for clues of embedded theory.

Applied Theorizing through Writing

In applied theorizing, a more conceptual discourse predominates. Ideas and the readings that generate them come to the fore and are then applied to the story. Thus, the narrative voice takes a back seat to interpretation. Lilly Cabrera-Murillo's digital story is about forging identity as a fourth-generation Chicana, caught between an Anglo society and a immigrant farmworking community. She finds her identity through folkdancing and links this to her family history. In the following excerpt from her theorizing essay, Lilly uses Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* to articulate a breakthrough in understanding, a new consciousness. Here we see how one reading empowered her and motivated her entire digital story project. Lilly writes:

It now seems ironic that the name that I've found to identify my experience is a consciousness that requires me to embrace a comfort in ambiguity. "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness" defined this 'cultural collision' for me and the claim to empowerment that it provides. . . . With this new paradigm available to me, I have learned to use the privilege of my education and begin to dissect it with this new consciousness, aware of oppressions, the systems that support the breeding of future oppressors, and a new position for me to join the resistance against them. . . . I now recognize my space. The space that includes oppressions, privilege, and transcendence. My experience entails the suffering of my parents and the educational opportunities that their struggles provided me. My experience is that of the transgression of cultural traditions as I chose to train my legs to dance rather than strengthen them to hold future oppressions (or a

husband) on my back. I accept the "westernized" aspects of my education and use my new consciousness to turn it on its side, finding a way to tell the real histories.

Lilly's analysis is conceptually organized and the specific story is examined through larger historical and cultural lenses. She applies portions of story to illustrate larger ideas and the changes in consciousness she experienced. Her focal point is not the experience itself but how this fits into a larger framework of meaning.⁷ In applied theorizing, the story becomes the catalyst for conceptual analysis.

Critical Theorizing through Writing

In my definition, critical theorizing illustrates a seamless integration of personal experience, conceptual frameworks, and critical discourse, where empowerment, new knowledge, and future theorizing are derived from the confluence of story, theory and critique. The following excerpt from Linda López's essay shows reciprocal framing—of story through theory and theory through story:

Witnessing the mujeres of my family weaving through economic and societal hardships encouraged my decision to develop their immigrant experience as a valuable source of empowerment and knowledge. Through the digital story, I use their immigrant experience to establish discourses of transnationalism and "underground feminisms"⁸ so that my experience as a daughter of a feminist border crosser is validated. . . . After reading many Latinos' testimonios I now compare my departure into higher education to my mother and aunt's departure from Tijuana to the U.S. Through their immigrant experience the inherited desire to seek new ideas and walk beyond borderlands remains the point of departure that connects us both. . . . Using theory to analyze the testimonios we read in class and to write this paper has also produced an effect on the way I perceive family, society, and myself. . . . From this process I also learned that functioning within the demands of dominant ideology is an inheritance passed through the women in my family. The primary sources for theorizing their everyday interactions are the street-smart words they prepare me with, and their "differential consciousness"⁹ to act in opposition to everything that says they are inferior. I thank them for exhibiting to me their "differential consciousness" at a young age and for claiming disruption as their method of survival.

Linda understands the decisions her mother and aunts made as not just circumstantial, but as acts of every-day theorizing from which particular concepts in Chicano Studies have emerged. She finds her own theoretical grounding not only from readings, but from the very acts and language that the women in her family have modeled. Her focus is not just on understanding her own identity and location, but on the process itself of "theorizing from the flesh." She now sees theorizing not just as a way to understand, but as a vital act of disruption and survival.

7 For a more detailed discussion of Lilly's creative and theorizing work, see Benmayor, "Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy for the New Humanities," in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2008): 188-204.

8 Aida Hurtado, "Underground Feminisms: Inocencia's Story," in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela Arredondo, et al, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 260.

9 Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 258.

Pablo Judkins's reflection on his digital tribute to his father demonstrates another shift into critical theorizing. Using Anzaldúa, he situates his father in a borderlands between maternity and paternity, framed by the larger social framework of patriarchy. This leads him to pose questions about gender, power and privilege for his own life. He writes:

I chose to focus on the role of my father as an immediate caregiver to dispel numerous myths of what it means to be a "man" in the United States . . . It sounds a bit utopian, but in order to confront American machismo [sic] attitudes toward both men and women, both men and women need to critique how socially constructed gender roles are institutionalized, perpetuating damaging stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that reinforce current patriarchal paradigms. As I have witnessed from how my father has been treated for the choices he has made to raise my brother and I, I have become convinced that male privilege and power is honorable as long as it fits into the larger framework of patriarchy. It is in-between paternity and maternity, in the borderlands of gender roles where my father has placed himself, and it is in these borderlands where only I can define what it means for me to be a white male of privilege.

Pablo places himself in dialogue with Anzaldúa, agreeing with her and proposing consideration of the legal system in social oppression:

Reading the court system in this country as a manifestation and enforcer of patriarchal paradigms, I agree with Anzaldúa's statement, "Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchangeable, are transmitted to us through culture."¹⁰ While it is white patriarchal culture that has defined the spaces for men and women in this country, I would expand on Anzaldúa's statement to include that this governing oppressive culture is sustained and enforced through our legal system, specifically the courts.

One of my hopes is that through digital storytelling, some students begin to formulate and propose new insights and theories. That some students explicitly position themselves as contributors to theoretical discussions is for me a source of great excitement.

Visual Theorizing

In the above excerpts I've focused on ways in which students write to theorize. But what does theorizing look like on the screen? To address this issue, I draw a few salient examples to examine how students have approached images and representation conceptually. What has become crystal clear to me is that a critical theorizer is not always a compelling visual theorizer and vice versa.

Visual theorizing is like narrative theorizing, in that meaning is embedded in the image and it is up to us to "see" it. Most students approach their digital stories as visual illustrations of a written text. Usually there is a fairly literal correspondence between what is heard in the narration and what is presented on the screen. Students tend to rely more heavily on family snapshots to illustrate or represent the people or events being referred to. I try to emphasize the importance of giving a story an aesthetic 'look' and visual coherence, by adding a recurrent background for the photographs, or not mixing clip art with archival photographs. I try to break the notion that each piece of narration has

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1986), 38.

to be 'illustrated' on the screen. We also try to give movement to still images through techniques of fading, dissolving, zooming, panning, mirroring, etc.

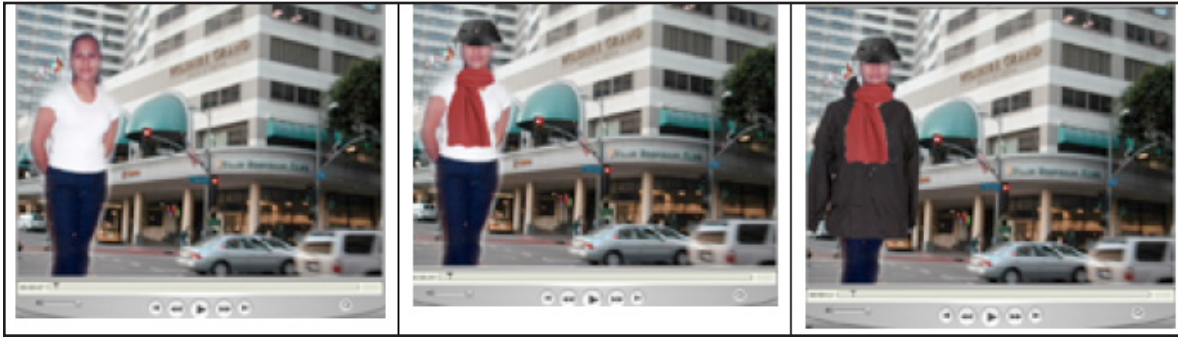
Jade, who in writing I classified as a narrative theorizer, is a consummate visual theorizer. Her images are highly creative. To capture the feeling of violation she brings in close ups of peoples' faces, zooms in on their eyes, bordering on the surreal:



She likens these stares to "crows in the desert circling their prey before they feast on it" and collages herself into a hard landscape to give visual power to the feeling.



She also takes advantage of digital techniques in an interesting sequence of images, rendering her response to unwanted attention: adding layers, as if on a paper doll, to cover up.



Visually, this is one of the more creative and effective stories in the group. I see a coherent strategy of symbolic juxtaposition and metaphor in the visual text and her poetic narration, where the conceptual ideas are juxtaposed with narrative examples. Jade's story "writes back" visually. Consequently, visual representation provides a useful clue to understanding different theorizing processes.

Judith Pérez explored another strategy of visual representation. Her own words eloquently explain:

My purpose was for the audience to view my story through the eyes of a child. All of the images I incorporated were drawn by me and my style of drawing is childlike. This made it easier for the audience to understand both my life in and outside of school. . . . I wanted the people to see my feelings through my own images. . . . [F]inding images online that expressed exactly how I felt were [sic] impossible. When I was drawing the pictures I felt a knot in my throat. I could not believe I was drawing the images of the pain I left behind. This gave me a chance to reflect back on the pain and overcome it by sharing it with others.



Here she portrays her struggle as a Spanish-speaking child, doing her homework alone every night at the kitchen table, with her parents unable to help her because of language barriers. Her evident artistic talent, rendering detail, physical appearance, posture, color and shadow, enables her to convincingly achieve the naïf style of children's drawings. Her drawings recall the work of Chicana artist, Carmen Lomas Garza, who paints miniature stories of Chicano family and community life and culture. Judith theorizes her images as expressions of the interior world of feelings, much the way children do. In the case of her story, her drawings reflect a story that writes back about isolation, shame, struggle, achievement and pride.

The last example of visual theorizing pertains to the melding of identity and American history. Kristen LaFollette is a descendant of Robert LaFollette, known as "Fighting Bob," governor of Wisconsin, Progressive Party presidential candidate, and the sole vote in Congress against World War I. Her story, titled "Fighting for my History," is about discovering their common connection in their fighting spirit and commitment to honesty, integrity and social justice. Her visual text is central to this nexus.



After finding a treasure trove of archival photographs in her family attic, Kristen builds her story through them, but in a wry digital twist, she inserts herself in some of them. In the photograph of Fighting Bob as a young boy on a horse, she cuts out and inserts a parallel image of herself on horseback. "I am writing back to the people who discourage dissent, those who try to fit people in boxes. Who use intimidation, name-calling, threats and ostracizing to keep people in line," she says. Notice that her horse acquires prominence through color, and, true to her heritage, it is in the lead and defying the constraints of the frame (!):

She adds:

. . . In my story, the concept of advocacy is also closely related to alliance and solidarity. Robert was an ally for the common people . . . Through my story, Robert and I can also be allies for each other. His actions give me the power to stand up when others do not. . . I included a picture of Robert standing on a wagon platform with his fist in the air while I stand beside him with my fist in the air too. Through these images I show that we can become sources of strength for each other. . . .



"The old family photos are beautiful," she writes. "They make me want to learn about my history...." They also inspire her to theorize her story, to inscribe herself in that history and to claim a space for herself in the world.

Conclusions

Just as I ask students to write about the process of making a digital story, I now offer my own reflections. Writing this essay has been illuminating. While I started out with a set of questions, a framework, a five-page draft from a VKP (Visible Knowledge Project)-sponsored writing residency, and carefully selected evidence, I made some discoveries along the way. The first is that analysis and pedagogy are deeply intertwined. As I was writing and revising, I began to see my next pedagogical strategies emerge. The process of inquiry has provided me with some answers. If I want students to move closer to "critical theorizing," I need to present them with my own analysis to enable them to see where in their own writing they are using one strategy or another. So, this essay does double duty. It moves me a bit closer to answering my original question: does making a digital story facilitate theorizing one's life experiences within larger social, historical, and cultural frameworks and build new knowledge? At the same time it provides me with a pedagogical framework for advancing student learning. This discovery has been grand and satisfying.

I've also come to see, by looking at multiple modes of theorizing within and across essays, that students have been deeply engaged in the theorizing process and that they each "got it" in different ways. I am happier with the evidence than I anticipated. I've acquired a new respect for the work students have done, not only in producing amazing stories, but reflecting on their meanings. I've learned to recognize, value, and interpret "hidden" theorizing and never cease to be inspired by the eloquence of the visible. My "oppositional/propositional" binary seems to work and has given students a way to conceptualize their stories and theorize them as well. I will continue to ask them to "write back" and "write for," as I believe they do provide standpoints for theorizing. At a later point, I also want to address the learning that goes on in the lab, or as students say, through the "hands on" approach, which they valued. I also want to explore script-writing, an important stage which I haven't considered here.

As for multimedia, my foray into visual theorizing suggests that indeed, even students who are novice theorists with words can be expert theorists with pictures. And there are those who achieve a synergy between the two. I now have a better sense of how to guide students toward thinking through their images more intentionally, and how the interpretation of visual images can stimulate deeper thinking about the meaning of the story itself. I continue to believe that there is magic in digital storytelling, and that creativity and inspiration cannot be scripted and should not be over-determined. I look forward to helping students to become more aware of their own capacities to make this magic and their potential to express its social significance.

Acknowledgements

Student papers cited in this essay include: Jade Alvarez, "Those Male Stares" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2004); Liliana Cabrera-Morales, "Dancing into Mi Cultura" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2005); Pablo Judkins, "My Father, My Family" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2005); Kristen LaFollete, "Fighting for my History" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2005); Linda López, "Feminisms on the Border" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2004); Judith Pérez, "My Inspirations" (CD-Rom and student paper, Spring 2005).

Appendix

Figure 1: Class Structure

I structure the class in four stages:

a. Reading and Analyzing: During the first four weeks of the class, we read and analyze testimonials and short stories from U.S. Latina writers of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Central American, and mixed heritages. We examine how each text "speaks and writes back" and to whom, and how each re-centers identity from the margins of dominant cultures to new centers of cultural affirmation and consciousness. Simultaneously, we view and critique selected digital stories from previous classes, analyzing them as cultural texts. One analytical strategy that I've found particularly effective is the "multi-disciplinary experts circle." Dividing the class into groups of four, each student assumes a disciplinary expertise and does a close reading of the text from that perspective. Depending on the text, a group might include a historian, a psychologist, a sociologist, an economist, or a literary critic. The group analyzes the assigned text from these multiple perspectives as a way to see beyond, beneath, and behind the story itself. Then the group then synthesizes how the text "writes back" and how it "writes for."

b. Writing: During the course of the semester and leading up to the final theorizing paper, students write two short critical essays based on a text of their choice. The first essay asks the question "How does this text express a genealogy of empowerment?" and the second, "In this text, how does the body map the social history of a people?" The purpose of these essays is to practice connecting text to context. The first essay aims at exploring how the narrative "writes for" an audience, expressing a proposition of empowerment; the second question aims at how an individual can embody a larger collective history, and how the metaphorical body can "write back."

c. Moving to Script: During the first four weeks, we also devote ten minutes of every class to jogging the memory through brief “memory-writes” on specific themes, including: genealogy, childhood, favorite family photograph, and a significant life turning point. Many students have reported that these small journal reflections seeded the idea for their digital stories. We also practice “listening” to digital stories by omitting the visual projection and listening for tone, pace, and inflection. This drives home the point that the core of digital storytelling is the story and the voice. We use the Digital Story Cookbook to highlight the elements of effective storytelling, and we critique the esthetics of previous digital stories – narrative and visual components, presence or absence of stylistic coherence, use of visual as well as narrative genres (e.g. testimonials, witness writing, fotonovelas; letters, diaries, comic strips).

d. The Digital Story Assignment: After modeling the analysis, I introduce the digital story assignment (see Figure 2 below), beginning with a story idea, a story circle, and a short, 1.5-page draft script. The main instruction is that the story (and script) should ‘write back’ to something or someone(s), “write for” something or someone(s) and it should also affirm a new awareness or understanding about the subject or experience, hence be both oppositional and propositional. The assignment, including a set of guiding questions, intentionally attends to three dimensions: the story’s narrative effectiveness, its visual effectiveness as a digital story, and its ‘theorizability’ as a social, historical, and cultural text. Students workshop their drafts in class, and I give feedback and final approval. I should add here that I do not “grade” the digital story itself, as these are intensely personal stories that students invest countless hours in producing. Each is unique and to be valued as such. Consequently, students know that they will all get full points (or A’s) for their digital story. However, I do grade all the written work.

Figure 2 - Digital Story Assignment

Write a personal story no longer than 1.5 pages, double spaced, 12pt. Times. You may use any of the themes from the class syllabus, any themes from stories you have read, but ultimately, the story must have deep personal meaning to you. Feel free to work on a piece you’ve already written in class (photomemory, genealogy, turning point) or write something entirely new. In addition to the script, explain in a few sentences what visuals you think you may use and what kind of visual concept and style you are thinking about using (photo album, fotonovela, original illustration, historical documentary, cartoon, etc.). Remember, for a 3 minute story you’ll need about 30 images. (If you are artistically inclined, you may be able to work with fewer images, but you’ll need a strong visual concept to guide this).

Read the handout on the most important elements in writing a digital story. Then, read the criteria for review below, to make sure you’re on the right track. Your story should have social content that enables you to theorize (social content and meaning), it must be written in an effective way (narrative form), and it must be visually interesting and not simply illustrative of the story line (visual narrative).

Social Content and Meaning:

- How does the story “write back” and to whom?
- What theoretical concepts and social issues are important to understanding this story?

Narrative Form:

- Does the story tell a truth? What is it?
- Does the story have a conflict, a tension, and a dramatic twist? What is it and where does it fall in the story?
- Does the story grab you? Do you respond to it emotionally?
- How can the story be improved to achieve greater emotional value? Is there a good balance of detail, description, feeling? Is the story written in a way that draws you into the moment? Where/how could this be better achieved?
- Is the narrative voice speaking directly to you or does this sound more like a piece to be read?
- Are you left with a lingering thought/realization? What is it?
- What overall changes need to be made to help this be a more powerful story?

Visual Narrative:

- What is the visual plan for the story?
- Does the plan have a stylistic and aesthetic coherence?
- Is the visual plan appropriate to the tone and meaning of the story?
- Does the author have sufficient images? What needs to be done?

Figure 3 Theorizing your Digital Story (@7 – 8 pp. 12pt Times)

This essay gives you the opportunity to analyze/interpret, reflect upon, and theorize your Digital Story. This theorizing essay is an intellectual reflection and commentary on the meaning of the testimonio/digital story you produced and the process of creating it. Please do not engage in retelling the story you’ve already told. Talk about it but don’t retell it.

Analyze/Interpret: This means explaining the meaning/message of the story and showing where and how the story constructs that meaning.

Theorize: The focus here is to examine how theories have helped you uncover and explain the larger meanings held in this story. This is also an opportunity to suggest new ways of thinking where current theories do not account for or explain the problem you are addressing.

Reflect Intellectually and Creatively: on what you’ve learned intellectually through your story - the theories and ideas it raised, as well as reflecting on the process of making it. Also, reflect on the process of creating this story, the choices you made and why you made them.

PREPARATION FOR WRITING

Before you begin to write, spend time thinking and analyzing your story as follows. Make detailed notes for each of the following sections:

IDENTIFY CONCEPTS: Following the process we've used in class, brainstorm and identify a list of concepts present in your story. Think back to the readings we've done in class and to the concepts that we've talked about: e.g., solidarity, abandonment, isolation, gender roles, stereotypes, cultural identity, individualism, collectivity, etc.

LOCATE the important sites of meaning in your story. Sites of meaning are those words, phrases, sentences, visual symbols, music, intonation of voice that say something important. Sometimes the meaning is overt; sometimes it is beneath the surface, or symbolic and metaphorical. Sometimes the meaning is lodged in historical background. Locate all these sites of meaning in your story.

IDENTIFY the stories we've read in class that connect to your story in some way—similar situations, similar problems, or similar issues. Think about how these stories and the themes of the class (see syllabus), and our discussions may help you interpret your own story.

IDENTIFY THEORIES: Theories are attempts to explain why things are the way they are, by connecting an individual experience to larger social forces and arrangements of power. Which theories (use at least two or three) best explain the individual experience captured in your story? Old theories like assimilationist, acculturation, pluralist, feminist, etc? Or new theories like: new mestiza consciousness, intersectionality, hybridity/mestizaje, borderlands (real, psychic, and metaphorical), border feminisms, transnationalism, underground feminisms, power and privilege, positionality, etc. Explain how the theories you've chosen help explain the significance of this story to others, to yourself? How do these theories help you look at the problem, tension, conflict, or celebration in a new or different or empowering way? Does theory help you explain the experience in a deeper way, or change how you feel about that experience emotionally, now that you have been able to name it?

SPEAKING BACK/FOR, WRITING BACK/FOR (your positionality): reflect on how your story responds to forces of oppression, history, or social arrangements of power and privilege; or how it supports positive cultural values. Are you speaking back to power and privilege? Are you celebrating positive identities and relations of kinship? Are you supporting traditions or critiquing them? Are you speaking on behalf of others? In support of others? Are you proposing some new way of understanding and achieving greater equality? Where is your story expressing oppositionality? Where is it being propositional?

STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: Has this class and process changed your understanding of your relationship to larger communities, social movements, and social change, or the need to chart new ideas and concepts to bring about future social change? You as an agent of social change? Your voice as important to social change? What changes specifically?

CREATIVE PROCESS: Reflect upon the process of becoming an author of a digital story—the selection of your story (why you chose to write this one), the importance it has for you, the meaning

Voice and Tone of the Essay:

I encourage you to write in the first person voice, in a reflective voice, connecting your own story to the theories that help explain it. This is your intellectual reflection. It is not a place to do more storytelling. So, don't fall into retelling the story or elaborating the background to the story. In other words, don't start telling what happened. Instead, tell us about what you think the story means. If you need to provide some background storytelling to make a point, limit yourself to one sentence to clarify the background. So, as soon as you start telling what happened to whom, you are on the wrong track. Instead, focus on explaining the story in more abstract terms.