Walk a Day in My Shoes: Cultivating Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Digital Literacy

Lane W. Clarke

> How can you use digital literacy to support elementary students' growth in cross-cultural understanding?

The fourth graders in Maine walked around the room with markers in their hands, recording what they knew about different countries on hanging chart paper. The chart on France was filled with French landmarks (Eiffel Tower), food (baguettes), and famous people (Napoleon). Ireland was filled with the word *sheep* written over and over, as well as *leprechaun* and *green*. The charts for Morocco, Romania, and Malaysia, however, were pretty much blank. A couple of students knew that Malaysia was in Asia, some thought that Roman numerals came from Romania (they did not), and some had eaten couscous (that was from Morocco, right?). Slowly, students passed by those countries, knowing relatively little—but that would soon change.

According to Short (2017), a "fundamental change for children is that the world is visibly present in their daily lives through technology, mass media, economic interdependency, and global mobility" (p. 3). Becoming a global citizen involves developing an awareness and understanding of the surrounding world. Helping students see themselves as part of this interconnected global community is crucial to fostering a climate of cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication. Short pointed out that "an understanding of global cultures is thus a necessity, not a luxury" (p. 3). One of education's goals must be to increase cultural competency, but how do we start to educate students to become global citizens? Ripp (2017) emphasized that we "must provide students with the opportunities to connect the dots to dots that surround them in the outside world" (p. 18). However, Short (2017) also said that there is a "lack of existing curriculum around global issues and cultures" (p. 4).

At the same time that we are becoming more globally connected, we are also learning more about how digital literacy can support the development of multimodal expression. Digital literacy can generate opportunities for students to engage with others in a variety of ways with and through texts (Burnett & Merchant, 2015). Digital literacy also can be used to promote new literacy practices in the classroom through the production of new kinds of texts and provide opportunities for students to broaden the confines of what counts as literacy (Burnett, Dickinson, Myers, & Merchant, 2006). Supporting connectedness to the world through social media such as YouTube videos provides new opportunities to enable students to create, access, and share multimedia resources and to engage in collaborative learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Marsh, 2011).

As I was thinking about finding ways to incorporate global citizenship and to harness the power of digital literacy, I sent out a survey to 75 teachers in five different countries to better understand what global citizenship looked like in elementary classrooms. Only 13% of these teachers indicated that they were able to cover global citizenship/ intercultural awareness in their classrooms. When I talked to teachers involved in this project, they reported that the biggest obstacles were integrating global citizenship into required curriculum, finding resources and materials, finding texts that were grade-level appropriate, and making time to collaborate. If global competence is a necessity (not a luxury; Short, 2017), then we need to be more creative in finding curricular spaces for students to increase their curiosity and understanding of cultural similarities and differences.

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It was in this context that I created the Walk a Day in My Shoes project to provide a starting point for teachers to cultivate cross-cultural understanding among elementary students. The students used photos of their shoes as a storytelling device to create digital stories about their lives and share these with students in five different classrooms in other countries. The goal of this project was to lay the groundwork for students to learn about others and, at the same time, learn about themselves as part of a global community. This project harnessed the power of digital technology as a way to explore other cultures and increase students' experiences with people different from themselves without leaving their classrooms.

Students as Producers

The project began in a fourth-grade classroom in Maine. As in the vignette that opened this article, the students walked past the charts and wrote down what they knew about each country. Students then brainstormed as a class about what they wanted to tell other students about their school and where they lived, chose several important details, and created a storyboard for a story about their school and town (for more information, see https://www.globalinmyshoes.com). From that storyboard, they used iMovie to create a digital story.

After the students created a collaborative story, they were tasked with creating their own personal stories about a day in their own lives. The students first used a brainstorming worksheet to think about what is unique about their lives (e.g., sports, hobbies, food, celebrations, traditions, clothes, pets). They then used their information to make storyboards and create their own digital stories. Using words, music, photographs, and iMovie (on iPads) or WeVideo (on Chromebooks), the students narrated their individual stories about a day in the life of their shoes and uploaded them to a YouTube channel associated with the project (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPz_tgFkSbJK2-7--VZ_6KQ). Although all students created personal stories, only students whose parents gave permission had their stories posted on the YouTube account.

In the survey about barriers to global awareness, teachers frequently mentioned time constraints: "We are so loaded down with curricular demands that teaching global issues and cultural awareness is only done when it is part of the curriculum." The Walk a Day in My Shoes lessons took two days, with approximately 90 minutes allotted for each day. Another comment from the survey was that many teachers were not able to fit social studies into their curriculum. Although this project clearly connects to geography, it also connects to literacy and technology standards and represents an opportunity to connect to multiple disciplines.

These lessons were then replicated in fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classrooms in Tangier, Morocco; Bucharest, Romania; Maisons-Laffitte, France; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Cork, Ireland. One thing I learned about creating a global curriculum project is that once you reach out, a web of connectivity exists to aid in finding classrooms in different countries. My connections put me into contact with their connections. I settled on these five countries more out of convenience and teacher willingness, but I had a whole host of teachers who were interested. There are many online resources that are mentioned in the Extensions section to aid you in finding interested partners. It is important to note that all of these global classrooms had instruction in English and the students completed this project in English, which more easily facilitated sharing these stories. However, YouTube does have the ability to add subtitles to stories in different languages if English is not the primary language in that country.

Students as Consumers

Creating personal stories was an important part of the project, but sharing them with students from around the world was key to creating global awareness and intercultural exchange. Students engaged in one another's stories in multiple ways.

First, in each classroom, students watched stories created by other students on the YouTube channel. They then completed a response worksheet to track their thinking around several prompts:

- What is similar between this student's life and your life?
- What is different between this student's life and your life?
- Is there anything that surprised you about this story?
- What questions do you have about this student's life after watching the story?

In addition, I created a traveling exhibit to bring to schools. The participants in the showcase walked around to find pictures of shoes, each connected to

a digital story by a QR code. The students scanned the codes with an iPad and listened to the stories through headphones. There were dry-erase boards positioned around the display for students to track their thinking while they engaged with the stories. Students were also given exit slips as they left the exhibit to track their thinking as well as information about how they could learn more.

When I examined the response sheets from the students, several themes emerged. The first was that the students noticed a lot of similarities. No matter the country, students there loved video games, had similar food interests, loved their pets, liked to read, and enjoyed sports. Students in my class were interested in seeing these similarities with other students who lived far away, and they mentioned this when I talked with them about the project:

- "It made me realize how similar we all are—even from across the world—plus it made me want to travel."
- "It made me realize how alike my day is to other kids' days."
- "It made me happy because there was a girl just like me."

The students also readily picked up on the differences. They observed that some students wore uniforms, some got to go sledding on their playgrounds, and others had outdoor pools at their schools. However, the differences were usually shades of the similarities: which gaming systems students owned, how many pets they had, and which musicians were more famous. Students were most curious about the differences in schools:

- "Why do you raise chickens at your school?"
- "Why is your playground on the roof?"
- "Why do you have an hour and half for lunch?"
- "Why do you have a slide *inside* the school?"
- "Why do boys and girls not go to the same school?"

When I talked to students about these differences, a few mentioned the following:

- "Everyone is different and they are all great."
- "It made me think about what it really felt like to be in a different country."

Although the students' observations were surface level, they provided entry points for critically engaging with these differences and opened a space for more conversations around power and privilege. This project can be seen as a way to open the door to deeper conversations about what it means to be a global citizen.

This project also was connected to ISTE Standards for Students (https://www.iste.org/standards/for-students); specifically, as Global Collaborators, students are required to "use digital tools to connect with learners from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, engaging with them in ways that broaden mutual understanding and learning" (standard 7a). The project also drew on Common Core State Standards in Speaking and Listening—"Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations" (SL.4.5; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 24)—and in Writing: "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others" (W.4.6; p. 21).

There were some challenges as well. First, although the schools were in different countries, they represented similar cultural traditions. It would have been interesting to have worked with countries with very different cultural traditions. Technology created some hurdles (iPads vs. Chromebooks, and one-to-one vs. sharing), but it is important to note that although the popular rhetoric is that technology is omnipresent, we do need to attend to the digital divide that still exists in different countries, in communities, and within classrooms (Rowsell, Morrell, & Alvermann, 2017). Finally, although we shared the videos on a password-secured YouTube channel, there were challenges in advertisements and in unsanctioned videos automatically playing after students watched a video. One teacher suggested this project could use TeacherTube (https://www.teachertube.com) instead.

Extensions

Short (2017) said that teaching students in a global context is a necessity, but teachers are hamstrung by tight curriculums and limited time. The Walk a Day in My Shoes project is one example of how teachers can harness the power of literacy and technology to support students' growing intercultural awareness. The following are some extensions to this project.

Country Walking Charts

Hang charts around the room and have students write down what they already know about different countries. Using the comments from the chart, create word clouds with Wordle (http://www.wordle.net)

and share them with the students. Ask students to think critically about their own knowledge of other countries with questions such these: What do we think we know? Is that a true representation of the country? What does what we know tell us about ourselves? What does it tell us about the country? How could we learn more about that country?

Using Commonalities to Probe Deeper Into Similarities and Differences

In this project, I used shoes as an organizing lens through which students could think about their own lives and compare their lives to others. Having a concrete object gives students a bridge to think more deeply about others. There are many other ways to organize a cultural gaze. Gregg Segal's book *Daily Bread: What Kids Eat Around the World* used photos to chronicle what children eat in a week in different countries. In *This Is How We Do It: One Day in the Lives of Seven Kids From Around the World*, Matt Lamothe examined categories such as school, food, and families for similar-age children in different countries. *Home* by Carson Ellis is about the different places that people live.

Reaching Out to Other Teachers Around the Globe

Teachers are also part of a global community, and it is not difficult to find others interested in collaboration and sharing ideas. There are many online resources to connect with other classrooms around the world. This is a short list, but a Google search can provide many more options:

- Global Schools Program: https://www.global schoolsprogram.org
- iEarn-USA: https://us.iearn.org
- OneWorld Classrooms: https://www.oneworldcl assrooms.org
- PenPal Schools: https://www.penpalschools.com
- TakingITGlobal: https://www.tigweb.org
- The Global Education Conference Network: https://www.globaleducationconference.org
- World Education Connection: http://worldeduca tionconnection.org

Conclusion

Observing students' stories about their lives in other countries encouraged students' curiosity about others and provided a starting point to develop diverse cultural perspectives and examine cultural assumptions. This project also harnessed the way that digital literacy can grow students' multimodal practices, which enabled students to explore, develop, and convey meanings in ways that may otherwise be overlooked in the classroom (Burnett & Merchant, 2015). These types of projects, however, can also lay the foundation for students to dig deeper about the world around them. Digital literacy can support engaging in critical literacy activities. Being a global citizen may begin with being aware, but it can shift toward probing into disparities in the world, racial and cultural diversity, and working together to tackle difficult global issues (Comber, 2015; Vasquez, 2004).

The students in Maine started with sheep and baguettes. Engaging with student stories from around the world helped them see that there was much more to a country than what they thought they knew, and they learned how to use digital literacy to connect with others.

NOTES

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