

## **Reframing the praxis of school leadership preparation through digital storytelling**

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This article introduces a social innovation that contributes to the formation of educational leaders. Digital storytelling is employed as a process for data creation, analysis, and synthesis. Emerging educational leaders are guided through a process to better understand the experiences and social constructs that inform their identity. Through a dialogical and reflective mode this article employs a student’s story, where the text of story emerges as the unit of analysis as it is embedded into the text as primary data. Technology complements the storytelling process to construct a digitalstory of self as the student embarks in a leadership program.

“Throughout the class, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery and now realize I had such a small understanding of myself. This experience completely redefined who I am and gave me a bigger perspective about my life.”

– From Yvette’s digitalstory

The purpose of this article is to look at how an educational leadership program guides students through a process of deep reflection, self discovery, and the construction of personal story through the use of digital storytelling. The process responds to the problem many educational leaders face in not engaging in meaningful self reflection, nor personal foundation building. Through the process articulated herein, emerging leaders think about where they come from, what informs their ways of knowing as a process for self development, and they use a scaffolding process for the purpose of building personal narratives. The experience becomes the foundation for the remaining learning in the educational leadership program. A combination of professors and graduate students from two south Texas educational leadership programs discuss the process undertaken by an educational leadership student as she builds a personal narrative through a digitalstory.

We begin where most understanding and learning resides — in story. Thus, our conversation begins with [Yvette’s digitalstory](#).

## Yvette's Reflective Dialogue of Digital Storytelling Historical Reflection

Analysis and reflection are crucial skills that I had used in every course throughout my academic career. As I read Waite, Nelson, and Guajardo (2007) I was taken aback by the stories they shared about their lives and how, despite the differences in their journeys and experiences, they arrived at the same place. When it came to writing and drawing the first reflection, I was not so sure how to go about completing the assignment, partly because I was thinking about it in isolation from more macro contexts that had also impacted my historical self. I was not being analytical or reflective about my life; I had a very basic and micro understanding of my own personal history, and as a result produced a very basic summary of major events that occurred in my life. I only considered major things that had occurred in my life such as growing in the Rio Grande Valley, moving north to attend Texas State University, and getting my first teaching job.

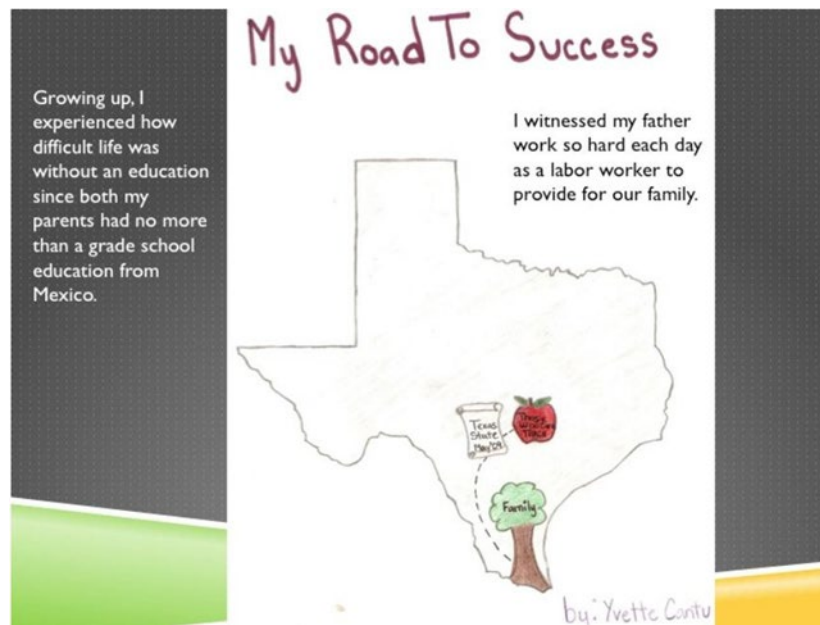


Figure 1. Historical reflection.

## Biological Reflection

I made connections to my personal life as I read Ornstein (1993) and began to analyze his theories and ideas as they related to my journey. Ornstein discussed how our genetic disposition has an impact on who we are, and also argued how our environment plays an even bigger role on the person that we become. I began to look at my life through a different lens, one of critical self-reflection, and began to identify how events and relationships had influenced and impacted my life. I realized then how to apply the theories that were presented in class readings, to my journey and reflect on the critical connections that were applicable to my personal life. Through this process, I

began to appreciate and value my personal experiences, especially that of growing up in a tiny border town where most of the people are Mexican immigrants who came to the U.S. in search of a better life.

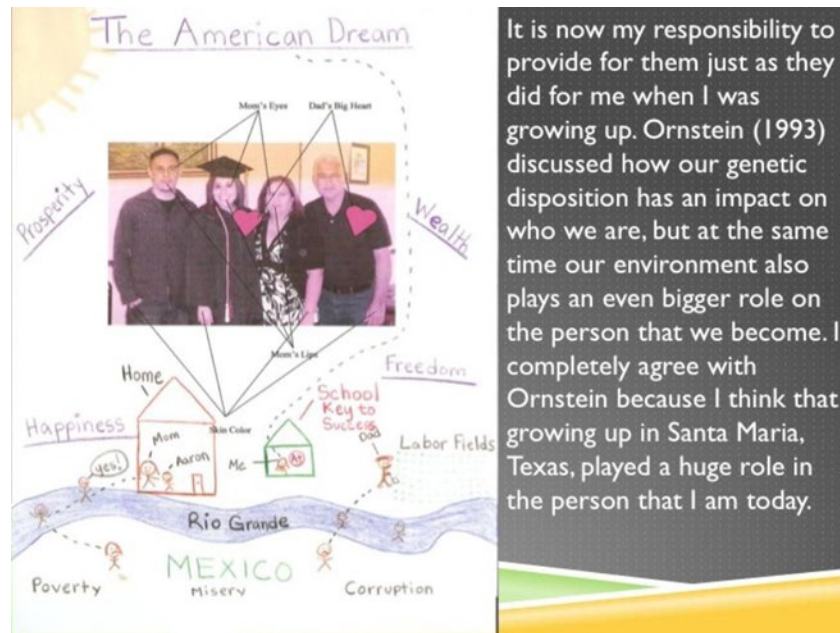


Figure 2. Biological reflection.

### Cultural Reflection

As the weeks continued, I pushed myself to develop an even deeper understanding of myself: Omi and Winant (1994) proposed that race is defined as a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. I began questioning if race defined and represented one's culture. As I thought about this, I reflected and thought back on the life and culture I had grown up in. As I thought about the roles that my parents portrayed, I realized how influential those roles had been on me. I had grown up seeing my mother serve as both the nurturer and matriarch of our family. I grew up without any limitations or hindrances because of my gender, but I also realized that this was not the case for every single Mexican American family. Race and culture could not be used interchangeably because they did not mean the same thing.

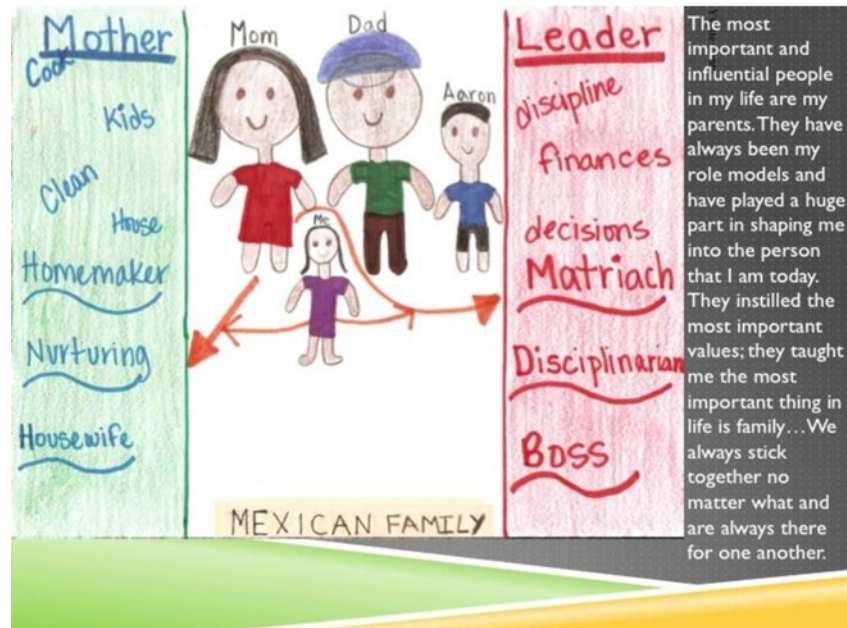
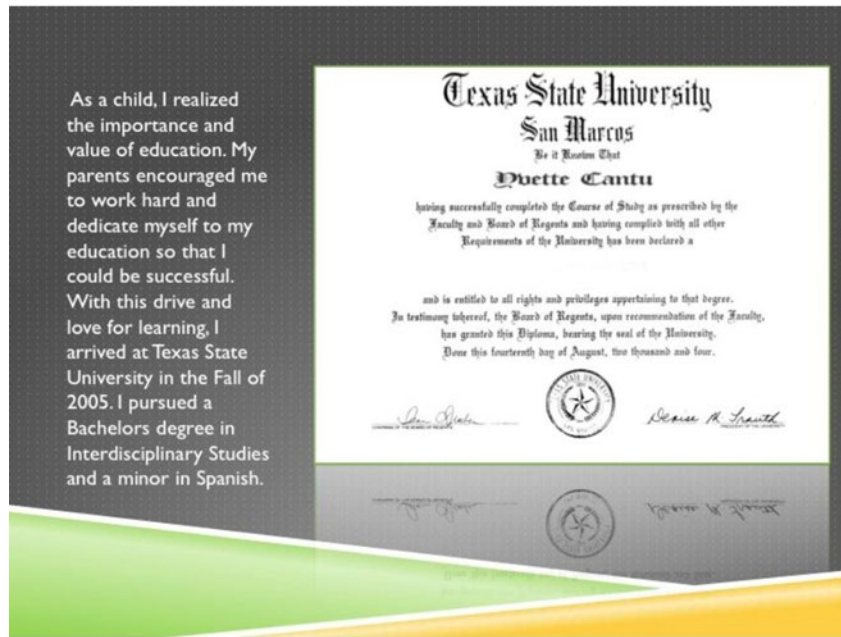


Figure 3. Cultural reflection.

### Political Reflection

Politics as a form of power... such a simple idea but one that I had never explored prior to this moment. Wheatley (2002) stated that we need to allow ourselves to be challenged, disturbed, and confused by others in order to deeply understand and move forward with our beliefs. This concept was one that redefined my life and my beliefs. I allowed myself to be disturbed by how politically driven schools were. Although it devastated me that the system which I credited for having given me an opportunity to better my life was not all that I had upheld it to be, I knew then that I now held the power to change it.



*Figure 4. Political reflection.*

### **Making Sense of Reflection**

It required a profound effort to make sense of how I would reconcile the insights from all of my reflections into a final product. In order to do so, I allowed myself to feel uncomfortable when analyzing my thoughts and beliefs. I wanted to be authentically reflective. Having to collect all of my work in a final digitalstory allowed me to present all of my findings into one cohesive product that tracked and summed up the path of my development and personal growth. By following the syllabus, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery and realized that I had such a small understanding of myself. This experience completely redefined who I thought I was and gave me a bigger perspective about my life. I gained a greater awareness that to understand our values and beliefs, we need to first understand how these were shaped by our past.

### **Digital Storytelling as Emerging Method**

As a relatively new medium, digital storytelling has quickly emerged as a useful pedagogical tool (Militello & Guajardo, 2011). It is a multimedia technology/method that uses a mixture of computer-based images, text, audio narration, music, and video clips to collect, reveal, and employ narratives and develop stories (Lambert, 2002, 2006; Lundby, 2008). The digitalstory can vary in length and content. For the purpose of this manuscript, the focus of digitalstories is to reframe leadership preparation and praxis. The methodology described in this manuscript will help learners to connect theories to practices by examining their insight of personal values, understanding of their foundational assets, challenges, self-being, exploration of how values influence practice as a leader and ultimately understand the role of leadership in making the above a reality.

The methodology also involves the process of data analysis through data reduction. Data reduction is a process of transforming information into a corrected, ordered and simplified form. Depending on the type of data collected, the process provides for information to be edited, sorted, scaled, coded, and produced into a summary form. The underlying phenomena is continuously revisited, refined, and redefined as needed. Digital storytelling generates a place-based product. It couples the research question with the method to generate accuracy, clarity and interpretation of the data. It provides opportunity to understand the nature of the case, its historical background, the physical setting, contexts, such as, social and economic conditions, political environments, and finally, its connection with other cases (Stake, 1978). It also provides participants with the opportunity to explore and describe their perceptions of their lived experiences.

Digital storytelling applies techniques that cross disciplines, fields, and subject matter. Digital storytelling pioneer Dana Atchley used the varied techniques such as case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interviews, artifacts, cultural texts, observations, historical interaction, visual texts, and others (Lambert, 2002, 2006). Atchley's techniques are firmly rooted in research methodology and collectively describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lambert, 2006). Qualitative researchers often refer to this process as a bricolage, or the creation or construction from a variety of things. This bricolage helps to clarify our ontologies and inform epistemologies. Ladson-Billings (2000) explained epistemologies as more than the traditional way of knowing. Instead, epistemologies are a system of knowing that has both internal logic and external validity. The assortments of experiences used to inform our way of knowing then become the deliberate choices between hegemony and liberation. This process allows individuals to move beyond a traditional epistemological stance, or what Stanley (2007) has called the master narrative. Shujaa (1997) has called it a worldview epistemology that looks at knowledge as a symbiotic interaction of how we view the world, the knowledge we possess, and the knowledge we are capable of passing on to others.

### **The Opportunity for Yvette's Story**

We describe here our perspectives as professors that frame our approaches to digital storytelling and the specific process used in our leadership preparation program. Then, we present a conversation between two leadership students, Yvette and Mónica, and their professor as they reflect on the digital storytelling experience.

Yvette's story, like all our stories, brings words, visuals, and experiences together as the story is rendered through the multi-pronged process of conversation and reflection through drawing and writing. It is also further contextualized by relevant research. The process utilized to construct the story equips students as emerging school leaders with a different way of understanding their values and actions through different lenses. Students use a conceptual framework to analyze their own story. Through the scaffolding and expansion of conversation between students and professors, this dialogue then expands beyond individual development.

Though digital stories are used for purposes of organizational development (Militello & Guajardo, 2011) and to construct community narratives (Lambert, 2006; Guajardo, 2008), our approach focuses on the learner, the self, as the unit of analysis. We highlight components that help to comprise successful leadership in organizational settings. We ground this process within social constructivist theory. Vygotsky (1978) informed us that most of what we learn is found within our daily experiences. By scaffolding the lived experiences, students begin to place their knowledge within a conceptual framework that is then organized by story. Bruner (1960, 1983) also has provided guidance on the use of autobiography and personal experiences as valuable educational experiences. Centering the process in this manner provides space to understand human behavior. We propose that understanding human behavior begins with knowledge of self and then moves us toward understanding others. This process enhances the student self-awareness of values, attitudes, and actions as they relate to school leadership.

Social constructivist theory provides the space for us to explore and critically examine, both by ourselves individually and ourselves as a community. Through these modalities we critically examine aspects of our lives that we had not closely looked at previously, particularly as those parts of our lives relate to the students' understanding of school leadership. The professors found that employing social constructionist theory offered students opportunities to make meaning of their own stories. As they engaged in the process of storymaking and storytelling, they also engaged in an introspective analysis that was "sharpened" by interactions with professors, classmates, and others. These interactions, combined with the sharing of stories, lead to the analysis, construction, and public presentation of latent knowledge and experiences that inform Yvette's digitalstory. Furthermore, the above interactions intersect and explain that historical factors, biological influences, cultural representations, and political framings not only influence power, the economy, political, and social factors, but also affect the ways in which groups of people form understandings and formal knowledge about their world (Phillips, 2000). Yvette's story demonstrates this sensemaking and knowledge creation process. It situates Yvette as both the storymaker and storyteller. Finally, the process connects storymaking and storytelling with the technology to develop a digitalstory to go public with her emerging story, leadership philosophy and visions of education.

This process of constructing the digitalstory is foundational to the graduate level course in the Educational Leadership program at Texas State University–San Marcos. The class is an introductory course required of all educational leadership students. It has become a popular course with students from other departments because of the opportunity created for students to examine their own story as it relates to their learning, values, and experiences. The class uses a multi-pronged approach to teaching, learning, and leading. Central practices of the process for engagement are reflection and conversation. The following write-up is from the class syllabus:

The **reflection** process is an inward search for meaning. Maturana and Varela (1992) wrote that the process of reflection is the only authentic form of assessment for knowing what we know, and without reflection little may change. As you read, listen, and participate in class, take time to write your impressions, ideas, applications, and

emotional reactions. The context of your reflections should be your developing self-awareness of values, beliefs, and attitudes related to your life and school leadership.

Through this reflection process, students begin to combine theory with practice as it relates to their lives. Reflections are then shared with two other classmates. Students then engage in a focused conversation on the reflections. In short, stories of their lived experiences become part of the class readings. Through the course of the semester, students write and draw four reflections. The reflections, conversations, and feedback from professors are then synthesized into a cohesive and coherent narrative we call an autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) described autoethnography as “writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Autoethnography is the process of painting a picture of the self; for this experience, further narrowed to focus on teaching, learning, and leading. During the process of constructing autoethnography, students are invited to use personal artifacts, photos, or other primary sources to support their narrative. The narrative students create is supported by class readings and theory. To this end, the autoethnography is not the sum of the reflections, but rather the semi-final product from the reflections, conversations, analysis, and story that emerges from this process. This text then becomes the foundation of each student’s digitalstory. The digitalstory becomes the vehicle for taking the student’s story public.

### **Digital Storytelling Framework**

**Macro level of production.** The digitalstory is the final product of the development process for this collective experience while the students are in the course, but to be sure, it is only the first step for continued development. The digitalstory becomes the culminating event and the public presentation of the individual story formation.

**Meso level of engagement.** The utility of the storymaking process is the students’ awareness of this process as a tool for making sense of their lived experience. In the development of this awareness, the students begin to develop a foundational understanding of their ontology, values, and ways for making sense of the world around them. This sensemaking tool that emerges from the engagement process is organic and transferable to others within their social context.

**Micro level of development.** The individual examination of our lived experiences as individuals and members of families and communities living and working within diverse cultural settings, sets the stage for critical growth and development. This process is explored from multiple perspectives and through multiple lenses including the historical, biological, cultural and political.

**Contextualization through relevant research.** Central to the development of self-critique and critical awareness, class readings provide an opportunity to promote and provoke alternative perspectives and lenses through which the student begins to make sense of his or her experiences as a sentient being within different learning spaces. Theoretical frameworks lay the groundwork for the student to engage in a multisensory process, analyzing his or her understanding of self as learner and fostering a greater awareness of the interdependence between theory and practice. This both problematizes how educators teach and learn within their



school communities, as well as provides an impetus to arrive at a greater appreciation for the utilization of critical reflection in evaluating and assessing their own craft. Class readings are multifocal and serve multiple purposes. At first glance, the student will often attempt to approach readings and critical reflections in isolation, as these are scaffolded within each of the four frames: historical, biological, cultural, and political, and presented in sequential order. This notion quickly dissipates and is often replaced with uneasiness; students will either continue to seek the demarcation of units of learning into four distinct categories or seek ways of blurring the boundaries between and amongst the four frames. Interaction with and analysis of class readings during class dialogues is fostered within a space in which students are invited to promote and challenge their own thinking as well as that of their peers, colleagues, and professors. These critical dialogues support the students and encourage them to identify, acknowledge, and critique assumptions, biases, values, and beliefs. Class readings present topics that include deficit thinking ideologies (Valencia, 1997), racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994), and identity formation (Spindler & Spindler, 1982; Trueba, 1999), among others. The readings provide insight into educational philosophies and the sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts in which they were conceptualized and developed. Subsequently, students arrive at a more holistic understanding of themselves and the ecological contexts that inform and impact their educational communities and their agency to act within these settings.

### **Yvette's Reluctance Turned Opportunity – A Conversation**

Yvette: As I reviewed the syllabus on the first day of class, I felt nervous about sharing my life with strangers. Perhaps the most nerve-wracking part of the syllabus was the digitalstory that would be a capstone showcase that would connect my story with all of the learning done through the course of the semester. The thought of using technology to create my digitalstory made me feel even more uneasy because, although technology can be a great tool, it can occasionally be unreliable.

Mónica: Yes, Yvette, I too distinctly recall the sense of overwhelming contention between my preconceived expectations of what I knew a syllabus to be and that which was presented for this particular course. I engaged in the process more than four years ago and since then have had the opportunity to help facilitate the course. Looking back on the experience, it was an intriguing and spectacular sensation as the paper syllabus, within the process in which I began to carve out my story, disintegrated. It was no longer a lifeless document, hole-punched to neatly fit within the confines of my binder; indeed it evolved to the point where it should not be contained. It brought life to a dynamic and guiding design that scaffolded me through the journey of acknowledging, unearthing, and creating my story.

Professor: As a facilitator of this learning and development process, i.e. class, there is a deliberate attempt to rupture the status quo. The social engagement process grounded in critical pedagogy inherently creates moments of disequilibrium and tension. This engagement process is then nurtured to become an opportunity for innovation. Innovations and breakthroughs will come only if we construct a safe space for on going conversation. This is the commitment we make to each other, learner- learner, facilitator-learner, learner-community. This safe space becomes the thin veil between innovations and fear. The pedagogical space becomes safer when students

begin to understand, and more importantly believe, that the syllabus is not what is on paper, but what they have lived and thought.

The technical aspect of the syllabus becomes a tool that gives traction to our social reality by helping us make sense of our lived experiences. This opportunity to reflect and discuss our thoughts, experiences, and memories then gives us the space for making meaning of our reality. We then use the autoethnography as the method to retell our story; indeed, it is an academic process for putting a mirror in front of us as we prepare to share our constructed stories in public. Through this experience, we've learned that by understanding our past, we will better inform our work for the future. In fact, the syllabus helps us transition from our lived lives to our future plans for action.

Yvette: As a young teacher in search of expanding my skill set, not only as a teacher and emerging leader, but also as citizen of a community that I wanted to impact in a positive way, this dynamic and living syllabus fostered the space to acknowledge how my ontology informed my choice to become a teacher and, in a noble and active way, create change within my community. I had just completed my teacher training program at one of the top teacher preparation programs in the state, but my view of education had never been problematized. Critically reflecting back on my trajectory, I acknowledge that my view of teaching and learning was innocent, neutral, and lacked a philosophical foundation.

Professor: Your view of teaching and learning was an important aspect of your class participation as a learner, but you brought so much more. You showed a critical willingness to think and push your own precepts to intellectual and emotional spaces you had rarely visited previously. You clearly stepped out of your comfort zone as you met the challenge of the class syllabus—an essential commitment to the knowledge creating process. You exacted a willingness to place your sense of certainty on hold as you made spaces for differencing new ideas, reflecting on friendships, and assessing theoretical constructs.

Yvette: I was very intrigued by the course because it was unusual to have a university class that focused on understanding yourself. I had never heard of a class where the students would serve as the primary focus of study. I was skeptical about how we would go about understanding ourselves throughout the course of the class. Even more terrifying was the idea that I would share my personal life with strangers. Furthermore, I was unsure what learning about myself I could really do because at that time I was sure I knew everything about myself.

Mónica: Intuitively, I sensed a profound apprehension. I acknowledged that I possessed certain learning competencies that had served me well throughout my undergraduate studies and were, in my estimation, reflected in my grade point average. I had an understanding of myself as a learner that was based on quantitative measures. This endeavor, however, invited me to develop a more profound understanding of who I was at that moment in time and the factors that had informed and influenced my development and growth as an educator.

I was the curriculum!

And it frightened and unnerved me to the core: ‘You want me to not only identify, unearth, and analyze potentially traumatic experiences that have shaped my identity(ies), but be public about these as well? This is supposed to make me a more effective leader?’ And as instinctive as the desire was to retreat and take refuge in the comfort of not knowing, I quickly came to the realization that this marked the first time someone within a classroom setting had not only taken an interest in my story, but also challenged me understand how it informed and influenced my practice as an educator and an emerging leader.

Professor: The syllabus at once guides the student in giving shape to their story, informs and propels, through wide ranging literature, the creation of an in depth self- exploration, and it fosters a sacred space in which the power of story is made evident in its public performance. The syllabus intentionally structures and facilitates the development of student stories. This process moves away from the professor as singular authority and invites learners to construct their own knowledge base. As a strategy for teaching and learning, the learner becomes the unit of analysis and a witness to his or her life experiences.

### **Technology and Digital Storytelling**

As scholars and students of the change process in communities and at the macro level, we understand and accept the power of technology and its utility. We do not let technology direct our work, but we use it for the access it provides to communities, students, and leaders outside of the traditional venue of academia. Video, audio, and pictures help bring the stories, the dreams, and actions to life; indeed, technology catapults us to a much more public sphere of leadership. Our intent is to use the digital storymaking and telling process to help develop a different type of leader who is aware of her or himself, i.e. knows her or his own story, can use story for pedagogical and community building purposes, as well as develops a new understanding of what teaching, learning, leading, and knowing can look like.

### **Digital Storytelling for Leadership Development**

Leadership preparation is one of the cornerstones of educational programs. These programs are generally expected to prepare leaders with particular competencies and skills (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium [ISLLC], 1996; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2007; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2010) that allow them to lead individuals and transform organizations and communities. A leadership quality often exalted is the ability to influence others (Carnegie, 1982). We suggest that prior to influencing others, it is important for leaders to understand the components that contribute to their own story. With the growing importance of critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; 1994), leadership programs have increasingly embraced critical reflection as a way to integrate theory and practice, and as a way to engage others in a reflective practice that clarifies personal values. This has emerged as an important process that connects emerging leaders to the larger whole (Huber, 2002). This reflective process provides opportunities to facilitate and stimulate self-discovery for students in their practice as educators, as leaders, and as more self-actualized people. The process helps create spaces for individuals to move from self-reflection to the process of authentic critical reflection and self-discovery.

Bennis (1994) explained that to become a leader, an individual must become one's self and be the maker of his or her own life. There are clear differentiations between becoming a leader and becoming a manager or administrator. Leaders focus on people, while managers and administrators focus on systems and structures. A manager relies on control and a leader inspires trust (Bennis, 1994). Applying the above descriptions to leadership preparation often creates somewhat of a paradox. School leaders are increasingly expected to rely on highly bureaucratized policies, structures, and practices. However, these same individuals seek avenues to create and implement the critical pedagogies they feel will build dialogically engaging learning environments.

The goal is to foster learning and build respectful relationships with students, colleagues, and communities.

To be sure, digital storytelling has been found to help organizations understand themselves (Militello & Guajardo, 2011). When organizations delve into introspective practices through the use of digital media, small and large organizations alike invite the opportunity to learn from deep, digital reflection. But this article proposes a micro process where we look carefully into one student's digital story as a way to understand the impact of the process of making and telling the story. The process is guided through practices that are collaborative, reflective, and that lead toward self-discovery. It provides students with opportunities to participate in activities with guided questions, written logs, the development of verbal narratives and other events that increase their reflective capacities (Smith, 2001). Morrison (1996) argued that increased opportunities for students to engage in reflective activities led to greater self-awareness, self-confidence, and feelings of empowerment. These capacities and skills provide individuals with the intrinsic components that transform their mental model, and foster systemic patterns of thinking that value collaborative learning in action (Raelin, 2004). The digital storytelling process encourages students to question their personal assumptions and broaden their perspectives in an effort to reach holistic understanding of the complex situations they encounter in their leadership practices. This practice encourages participants to examine their core values and beliefs and gain insight into self to understand their effect on others.

## **Conclusion**

By utilizing multi-media technology, students shift the autoethnography to a public space. The autoethnography is a process through which individuals record key features of their lives. They place an emphasis on those features that are important to them. They select points of views discovered by intensive self-reflection. It becomes an audiovisual report of particular findings discovered through critical self-reflection. It becomes a primary data source in itself. This type of data source becomes inherently reflexive. The specific sources identified by the author provide insight into their framing of their experiences. By highlighting their observations and experiences, individuals uncover the potential of revealing commonalities and connections that may have gone unnoticed prior to their reflective process. This process often identifies particular characteristics of mannerisms, or how a particular biological, historical, cultural, or political theme emerges in different contexts.

Use of digital storytelling provides space to develop a culture of critical visual literacy. This digital literacy helps to create new layers for interpretation. As writers, we articulate our thoughts and experiences through words. However, when provided with opportunities to utilize photographs, artwork, or artifacts individuals are able to make meaning of experiences in a variety of ways.

While much of this process is generated from a single source, it speaks directly to the experience of students who have gone through a process that is deliberately framed so that the learner decenters him or herself from the status quo, such as in listening to a lecture, and is asked to become the storyteller (Ah Nee-Benham & Heck, 1998). Becoming the storyteller moves the student to a point of inquiry and action that is engaging and challenging. The role of storyteller is a part of the process that works to position the student as a creator of knowledge and not a consumer of schooling. This process merges the art of story with the technology of the digital age. It builds a query of individual experiences, memories, relationships, and artifacts and scaffolds the learner through the process of understanding their reality of self through critical self-reflection. Specifically, this process uses autoethnography as the framework by taking the micro-narrative and moving it to a place of agency, praxis, and action (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2008)—and through that, brings the process to life.

The use of multi-media technology helps to bind the observed phenomena into a case that is easily conceptualized into themes or issues that can be traced back to specific research questions (Stake, 2000). Following the thread or themes presented through digitalstory assists the researcher in identifying patterns. These patterns help to triangulate observable incidents, as well as provide opportunities to develop alternative interpretations that may develop into specific assertions of generalizations. Careful analysis of digitalstory helps to identify the themes presented by participants. Analysis of digitalstory allows the researcher to ask what themes are connected and provides opportunities to build a broader description of the overarching theory of what is taking place. Digitalstory helps the researcher to sift through the data and locate places where themes are repeated. It also allows the researcher to carefully examine incidents that trigger particular reactions and responses from participants. Lastly, the use of digitalstory helps to pinpoint specific implications that particular themes carry by identifying scenes that relay why anyone should or would care about the observed phenomena. Use of digitalstory allows the researcher to reflect deeply on observed experiences and therefore interpret and present experiences in a manner that illuminates story and brings lived experiences and theory together through an artistic rendition of praxis.

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