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Student Perceptions of Digital Story Telling as a Learning-Tool for Educational Leaders

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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A study regarding students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a learning tool was conducted in the fall of 2012. The population consisted of 12 students participating in an Administrative Theory course as part of their doctoral program in K-12 or higher education administration at a Carnegie Doctoral Research University in Georgia. During the eight-week course, students created digital stories that synthesized an auto-ethnography with leadership theory using Bolman and Deal's (2011) four-framework approach to leadership. This allowed students to demonstrate the practice of continual reflection and assessment, a commitment to technology, diversity, and in-depth understanding of the knowledge and skills required of educational leaders. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study was to examine student's perceptions of utilizing digital storytelling in educational leadership coursework. The research question was: What are students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a tool for learning in Educational Leadership coursework? Findings are arranged by the 4 themes which emerged from the analysis of the data; assignment components, learning, identity development, and class cohesion.

Introduction

Reflective learning has been well established for developing critical thinking, self-awareness, and analytical skills (Castelli, 2011; Jordi, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2009). According to Castelli (2011), the reflective/transformational learner must possess critical and reflective thinking skills that interact to enhance awareness, which in turn leads to meaning and purpose in the learning experience. Jordi (2011) further describes the

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process of reflective learning when he cautions the learner to balance analytical and cognitive skills with experiential sensing to elevate awareness and maximize learning outcomes. This work built on Fenwick's (2001) research, which asserts that individuals can learn from distinct concrete experiences through a process of reflection that is undertaken separate from the experience. During Fall 2012, 12 students in a doctoral level administrative theory course completed a digital story focused on reflective learning. Initially the students conducted an autoethnography and examined biological, cultural, historical, and political contributions to their personal development. This initial reflection was conducted to develop a better understanding of self. During the next part of the assignment they examined their beliefs about leadership using Bolman and Deal's four framework approach using the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. By connecting the leadership theory with their own personal beliefs, the students synthesized their personal experiences and theoretical underpinnings that they identified in their leadership roles. As a culminating activity students completed a three to five page reflection about their experiences. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to examine student's perceptions of utilizing digital storytelling in educational leadership coursework. In addition, this research adds to the limited research on digital storytelling in educational leadership preparation.

Review of the Literature

Autoethnography and Digital Storytelling

Ellis et al. (2011) described the process of autoethnography as a combination of autobiography and ethnography. The combination of individual experience with cultural experience is crucial in the process phase of autoethnography, as the personal perception shapes the way that a particular culture is viewed. The authors also state that the process of autoethnography records epiphanies of a particular person in a cultural environment or that were possible because of the person's cultural identity. These autoethnographies can then be shared with others in similar situations seeking similar outcomes. Wall (2006) elaborated on the process of autoethnography by describing its roots in postmodern, nontraditional, nonlinear narrative syntaxes that create a space for new expressions of voice from marginalized groups. Preston (2011) further described the function of an autoethnography with regard to the practice of reflexivity, or constructive personal reflection for the purpose of self-development, as being a personalized research methodology that allows for descriptions of social phenomena from a first person standpoint. Drechsler, Sharp, Riera, and Jones (2012) discussed a similar process by which autoethnography is examined as an underlying mechanism of the research process by which a clearer understanding of personal identity development can be reached.

Ellis et al. (2011) utilized comparison to describe the product of autoethnography by stating that it is engaging in the same way that an autobiography is engaging. The author of the autoethnography is expected to use typical literary devices to convey cultural experiences encountered in such a way that meaningful qualitative analysis takes place. One of the major benefits of autoethnographic research, the authors state, is a wider potential audience as consumers of the research due to the greater accessibility of autoethnographic frameworks to the general population. In addition, it follows that

digitally produced narratives may be even easier to reproduce and disseminate to a wide audience. Digital storytelling, then, can be utilized to convey autoethnographic experiences using new media and technologies that can enhance the communicability of information.

Autoethnographies have been criticized, however, for being too subjective and non-empirical in nature. Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) detail the origins of autoethnography, which first appeared in academic literature in 1962 with the publication of *Facing Mt. Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta. Kenyatta's work was criticized for containing only positive perspectives of the Kikuyu ethnic group, as well as a lack of critique. Specifically, critics focused on "limited triangulation of sources, limited disconfirming sources of evidence, and irresponsible interweaving of narrative and scientific inquiry" (p. 211).

Dauphinee (2010) echoed many of these concerns recently with regard to research in international relations, and emphasized the need for a balance between storytelling and scholarship as a researcher engages in the process of autoethnography. She, however, confirms the importance of autoethnography as a research methodology by stating that it is an approach that allows for the researcher to step out of the role of impartial observer and become a more values-based, motive-driven agent in the research process. Hughes et al. (2012) go on to describe more positive views of autoethnography that have developed since 1962. For example, autoethnography has come to be viewed as an outlet for marginalized persons and groups, in spite of its potential drawbacks as a traditional research methodology. Perhaps the key shift in autoethnography occurred when social scientists began to view the methodology as an opportunity for social sciences to offer more limited, focused descriptions of phenomena that are intentionally values-based, as opposed to taking the traditional scientific approach of a broad explanation that is scientifically sterile. In recent years, researchers have begun to examine autoethnographies that are told in the form of digital stories. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a form of research that uses personal narratives to describe cultural events and dynamics. In other words, the cultural is viewed through the lens of the personal. Digital storytelling is the process by which a person uses digital media to convey a personal narrative that describes a cultural experience (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008).

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is an innovative, technology-based method by which 21st century students utilize technologically advanced resources to produce meaningful stories and presentations that in turn allow for an enriched co-construction of knowledge. According to Yang and Wu (2012), the widespread availability of affordable, easy-to-use digital recording technology has expanded the ways in which traditional storytelling can be done. Further, when storytelling is carried out by these means, students are able to thoughtfully produce and manage projects to enhance their co-learning. Digital storytelling can also be used to enhance opportunities for collaboration between students. Such collaboration contributes to the co-constructive synthesis of knowledge.

Xu, Park, and Baek (2011) described three major elements of digital storytelling: flexibility, universality, and interactivity with regard to community formation. Flexibility

in digital storytelling means that stories can proceed in a non-linear fashion, allowing the storyteller a wide range of communicative options framed in a technologically based pedagogy. Universality references the ability of a large population of persons to utilize digital storytelling as a result of the rapid and widespread dissemination of recording technologies that have become available in the first decade of the 21st century. Lastly, interactivity with regard to community formation describes the process by which digital stories can be created with available technologies, often through the convenient exchange of material and information in such a way that facilitates co-construction of knowledge through various members of the learning community. Given the potential for supporting learning outcomes, digital stories have begun to be used in various contexts.

Digital Storytelling in Other Contexts

Digital storytelling has been utilized in a variety of contexts outside of higher education including K-8 education (Ohler, 2006; Davis, 2004). Digital storytelling has also been used in high schools with students who were learning English, to explore community and personal identity in a particular geographical setting, in multimodal composing, and to teach writing (Yang & Wu, 2012; Wake, 2012; Yang, 2012; Xu, Park, & Baek, 2011). Digital storytelling has also been used in nurse education where digital stories were created by patients to detail their experiences with medical treatment and staff as well as in internships and other experiential learning settings (Christiansen, 2010; Mirrer, 2010). These studies suggest that educators are beginning to combine innovative creative procedures with advancing technology to create digital stories in contexts outside higher education. In the next section we explore how digital storytelling has been applied in higher education settings.

Digital Storytelling in Higher Education

In addition to other contexts, digital storytelling has been utilized in higher education as well (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2013). Examples can be seen in Swathmore College's Information Technology Services efforts to create a community of practice in digital storytelling and the efforts of Ohio State University's Digital Storytelling Leadership Team. In addition, researchers have described the benefits of digital storytelling for undergraduate medical students and in teacher education (Sandars & Murray, 2009; Tendero, 2006). However, research in educational leadership settings is sparse. One study conducted utilizing digital storytelling in educational leadership coursework was conducted by Guajardo, Oliver, Rodriguez, Valadez, Cantu, and Guajardo (2011). These authors suggested that digital storytelling can be used to create, analyze, and synthesize data. The researchers go on to propose the process of digital storytelling addressed the problem of educational leaders not engaging in inner, personal reflection, by providing a method by which they may undertake these internal activities in a definitive and meaningful way. Furthermore, the authors proposed that digital storytelling is a powerful tool by which students in educational leadership settings can become more fully developed as they prepare to take leading roles in educational contexts.

Digital storytelling has been used to engage and stimulate reflective learning in a variety of contexts but there is little research in educational leadership preparation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the doctoral student's perceptions of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for engaging in meaningful self-reflection and understanding of administrative theories. The research question was: What are students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a tool for learning in Educational Leadership coursework?

Methodology

Population

A study regarding students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a learning tool was conducted during Fall 2012. The population consisted of 12 students participating in an Administrative Theory course as part of their doctoral program in K-12 or higher education administration at a Carnegie Doctoral Research University in Georgia. Students were contacted after the course ended to request access to their reflections for this study. Eleven chose to participate in the study. Among the participants, eight were female and three were male. The racial make-up of the group included six white and five black students. The respondents were between the ages of 29 and 40 with a mean of 34. Ten of the students worked in K-12 organizations and one worked in a higher education setting.

Assignment

During an eight-week Administrative Theory course, students demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and reflective practice required for educational leaders by creating a digital story. Through this medium, students developed an autoethnography and synthesized it with leadership theory using Bolman and Deal's (2011) four framework approach to leadership (Figure 1).

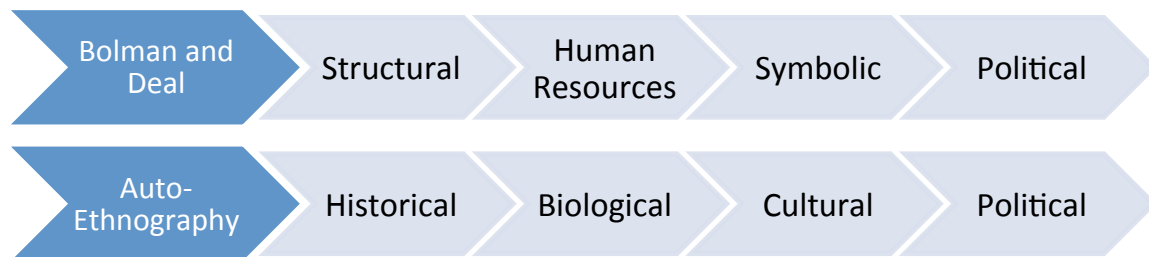


Figure 1: These two frames of reference were used for reflection and synthesis of personal and professional beliefs and values using a digital story.

Bolman and Deal's (2011) framework was selected based on its wide use in educational leadership preparation and its usefulness for understanding how leaders thinking relates to managerial and leadership effectiveness. This multi-frame theory of

leadership assumes that four frames; structural, human resources, symbolic, and political represent the ways that leaders perceive organizational situations, how these situations are defined, and how they can be led most effectively.

To guide students in the development of their autoethnography, they completed four reflections guided by prompting questions as they examined micro and macro historical events, their biology, culture, and political events that have contributed to development of self. Utilizing text, online resources, and classroom discussions, the students also examined leadership theories that have informed school leaders. Through this work they considered how each of the four components of the autoethnography informed their educational story and values, and how their beliefs aligned with various educational leadership theories. Traditionally an assignment like this may have been completed in a written form. However, a digital story was selected because it had been identified as a multimedia technology tool for collecting, creating, analyzing, and combining visual images with written text and engaging students in the content. Due to the limited time frame to complete the assignment, class time focused on the autoethnography and administrative theory. Students utilized iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, and Camtasia to develop their stories outside of class. They were left to their own resources to learn the technology at home and it was discussed in a limited fashion during class time. Figure 2 outlines the steps for developing the digital story.

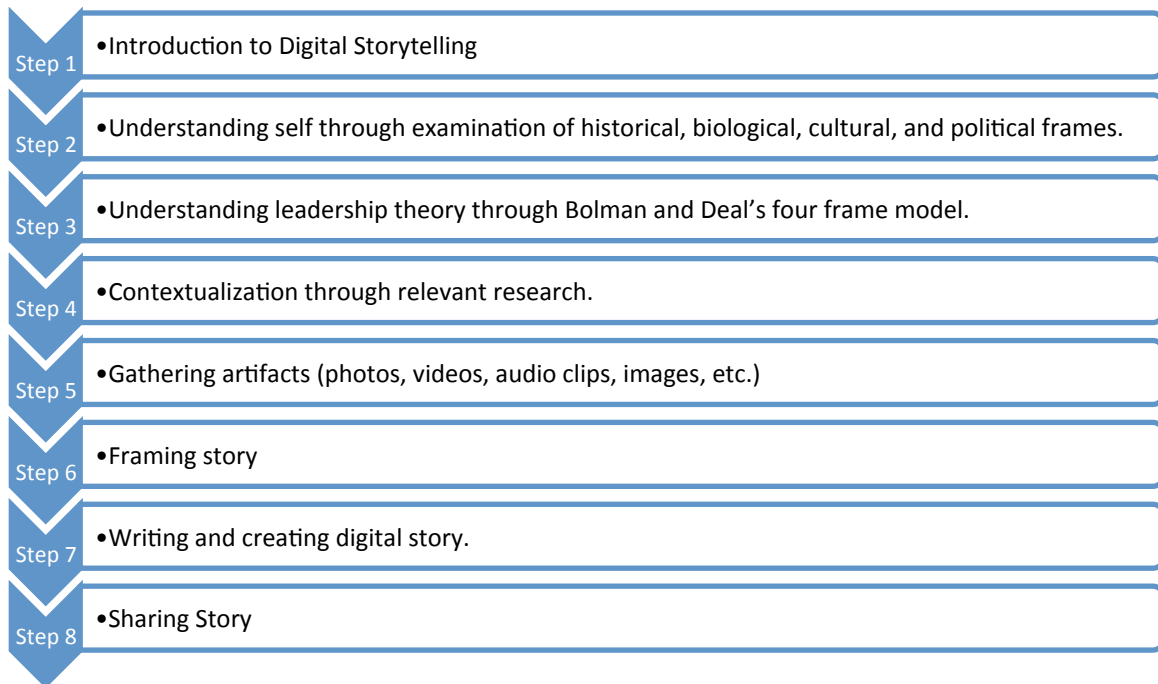


Figure 2: Steps for completing the digital story

As a culminating activity, students shared the digital story with each other, participated in a discussion, and completed a written reflection about the experience of creating the digital story.

Data collection

Archival data in the form of student reflections were collected as part of the normal curriculum for the course. Students were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and the purpose of these reflections was to gain valuable feedback regarding the efficacy of this assignment. For this assignment students received credit for completing the reflection. After the conclusion of the course, IRB compliance forms were completed and another faculty member distributed consent forms to students. Demographic questions regarding age, gender, race, and work setting were asked using Qualtrics' survey software after the course ended.

Procedures

This was a non-experimental qualitative study. Since all research questions, methodologies, conceptual frameworks, and fieldwork parameters are context specific, Patton (2002) recommends choosing “the right tool for the right job.” In this case, an inductive analytical approach was utilized for analyzing archival data from written reflections (Thomas, 2006). The purpose for using the inductive approach was to condense the raw text data into a brief summary format, to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings, and to develop a theory about the underlying structure of experiences. This approach is evident in several types of qualitative data analyses including grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2007; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). During the First Cycle coding process words and sentences were identified that had meanings to the authors. Based on this examination data was summarized and condensed. During a Second Cycle coding process codes were reconfigured and refined to capture the primary content and essence of the data (Saldana, 2009). During coding and recoding, categories and subcategories became more refined. Eventually, a coding framework was developed (Figure 3). Themes that were identified were: assignment components, learning, identity development, and class cohesion. Additional levels of subcategories under assignment components included benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Subcategories for learning included technology, higher order thinking, personal growth, and leadership theory. Under identity development subcategories include: biology, culture, history and politics. Class cohesion subcategories included diversity, adversity, and other similarities. Descriptive statistics were used for demographic questions.

Limitations

Qualitative researchers have wrestled with charges that it is too easy for the prejudices and attitudes of the researcher to bias the data (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982). As the instructor of the course and the creator of the assignment, the researcher acknowledges the potential for bias in support of this assignment. Therefore, the researcher confronted his own opinions and prejudices when making inferences and interpretations. To address this concern, the subjects and a second author reviewed data and interpretations. Care was taken in analyzing data to ensure validity and reliability of the data. Respondent validation, which represents one kind of triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993),

was used to validate the data. This also involved checking inferences drawn from the data.

Another consideration in collecting and analyzing this data was the degree to which students were forthcoming in their reflections. Understanding that the professor-doctoral student relationship may last beyond one course, the faculty member was very open about his own experiences and worked to establish a safe environment where others would be willing to share. It is assumed that gave their honest opinions of the assignment and accurately reported their past experiences.

Furthermore, this is a small sample of doctoral level educational leadership students who gave their opinions in a specific place and time. Therefore, findings from the study may not be generalizable to other settings. The context and the participants for this study were limited to those students who had participated in a doctoral level educational leadership course.

Findings

The research question was: What are students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a tool for learning in Educational Leadership coursework? Findings were arranged by the 4 themes which emerged from the analysis of the data; assignment components, learning, identity development, and class cohesion.

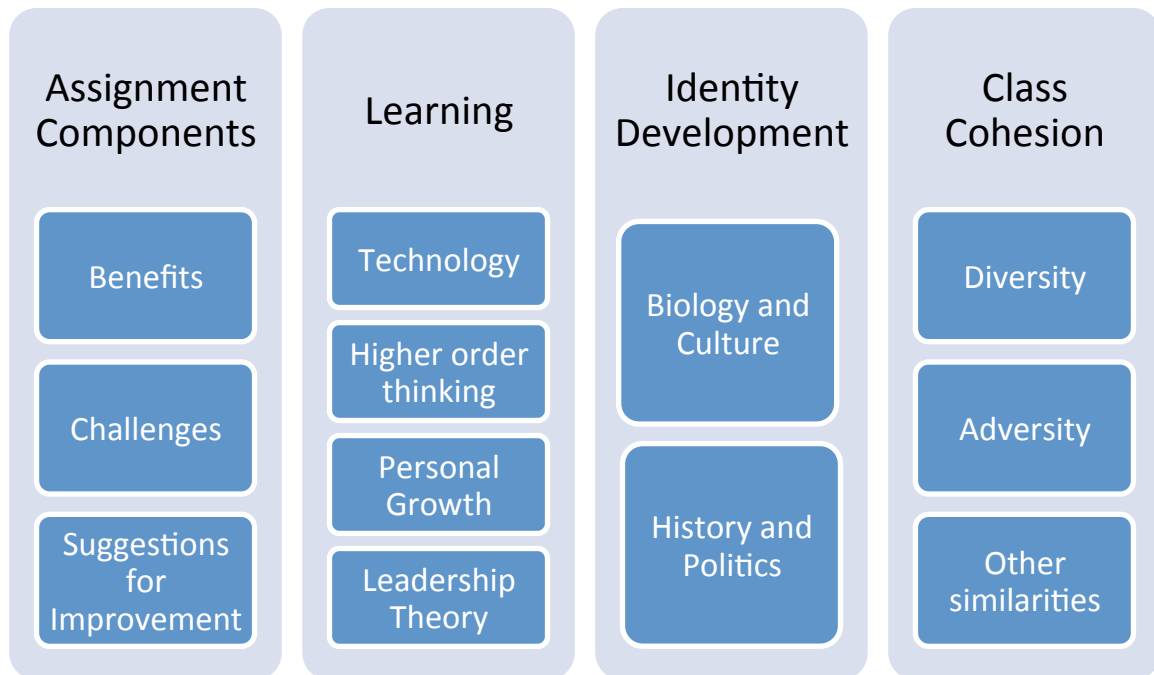


Figure 3: Thematic Framework for this study.

Comments about the assignment components were configured based on the students' discussion of the assignment itself in their reflections. Perceived benefits and challenges for completing the assignment along with suggestions for improvement are included in this section.

The theme “student learning” included discussion related directly to the learning that occurred as a result of the completion of the assignment from the students’ perspective. These included learning about technology, higher order thinking, and personal growth. Due to the large quantity and quality of statements made about identity development, this was labeled as a separate theme.

Identity development was mentioned frequently by each of the students. Reconnecting with artifacts from their personal lives and reflecting on how they came to their present beliefs had a strong impact. Introspection was at the heart of this component. In addition, external relationships and class cohesion were also strengthened.

Class cohesion was determined to be the fourth and final theme for this study. By sharing personal information about their development and beliefs, it appears that cohort members came to a better understanding and appreciation of each other. These findings are discussed in more depth in the following sections.

Assignment Components

In the area of classroom assignments students made specific statements regarding the assignment components. For example, some students noted that it was rewarding, challenging, or even that they had mixed feelings about it. They also noted specific benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

Benefits

In their reflections students made statements about a variety of benefits from the assignment. One of the primary benefits that students noted was the opportunity for reflection. Specifically, they discussed benefits of taking time to reflect on their past experiences and connect them to their current beliefs about school leadership. One student commented, “It was an interesting and extremely detailed experience, working on composing a digital story to communicate an autoethnography, while also identifying connections between one’s life story and the Bolman/Deal Model. The opportunity for reflection to occur as a result of this assignment was infinite.” This was reiterated by another who commented, “This digital storytelling experience was wonderful, because it allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the experiences in my life that influence the way I think and behave.”

One student discussed how elements specific to a digital format such as music was beneficial:

Although technology is not an area of strength of mine, it gives me a sense of accomplishment that I was able to complete a project of this nature. Being able to add music to help set the tone and focus of the video was also an added bonus and helped tell the story when words simply could not express my feelings. I think it is important for us to step back and take a look at where we have come from, where we are currently, and where we plan on going. This project has made us do those things. This digital story has helped me learn about how the experiences that I have had have shaped me into the person I am now in a way that a written assignment could not.

Two selected quotes that highlighted students' thoughts on the assignment summed up the feedback: "This assignment served as the bridge that connects my personal life to my professional career as a leader. Synthesis of these two worlds is powerful," and "In truth, this was one of the best assignments that I have ever done. It made me think introspectively, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and create." Although students responded positively to the assignment itself, they also noted challenges related to the assignment.

Challenges

The challenges which students reported primarily related to sharing personal information and using technology to create the digital story. As school leaders, privacy and sharing personal information within the cohort brought discomfort and deep consideration about the materials that they wished to share. For example;

The digital story assignment was a difficult assignment for me to complete for many reasons. I generally consider myself to be an introvert. As a public figure I prefer to keep my personal life separated from my professional. This involves me portraying a persona in which I do not divulge very much about myself. This assignment required me to open up about who I am and what experiences have helped mold me into the person I am.

Another student who had overcome multiple challenges wrote;

The theme and purpose of the story was difficult to identify without having to address feelings of potential humility and/or embarrassment. Pictures, video clips, images, potential talking points and dialogue detailing my personal life and background were meticulously mulled and edited to be able to relate a personal life to the Bolman/Deal Model while also not providing too much personal information to the other students.

Taken in context, these challenges were not seen as negative, but rather as stretching personal boundaries. For example, "This project did help me to step out of my comfort zone. It also gave an interesting way for us to gain information about our classmates, as well as, the content of the class." These statements brought forward student concerns about sharing personal information and touched on the depth of the assignment.

Some students also discussed technical challenges related to the assignment. For example, "This assignment challenged me to become more proficient in the use of technology as well as different software programs and applications." The challenges students mentioned most frequently involved sharing personal information and utilizing new technology. These also led to suggestions for improvement and played an important part in the growth of the students.

Suggestions for Improvement of Assignment

Due to the limited time for completing the assignment, meeting time focused on the

course content and discussions regarding the autoethnography. Students independently worked on this assignment outside of the course and utilized technologies which they had available. Due to this design, a number of recommendations for improving the assignment also evolved from the reflections. The statement “I feel that it would have been easier if we would have had some type of tutorial on how to use the needed software” reflected the feelings of a few.

In general, participants noted a few refinements that could improve the assignment. These included:

- Detailed resource sheet
- Tutorials
- Specific assignment parameters (time limit, file size, types of media)
- A more content specific rubric
- Guest speaker to demonstrate resources to help the students to identify the most effective for their individual digital storytelling needs.

Four of these five items were related to the technology use and one referred to specific criteria on the rubric that was used to grade the assignment. The next theme that evolved from the data was student learning.

Learning

Learning statements covered topics included higher order thinking, technology, and personal growth. Concepts related to higher order thinking such as synthesis and evaluation were frequently mentioned in the students’ reflections. What follows are samples of the participants responses about higher order thinking that occurred as a result of this assignment:

Creating an autoethnography involves the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. This project involved synthesis of ideas, analyzing how the Bolman and Deal model fit in, evaluating which parts of my story should be used, and creating the project in a digital format. Even though this was one of the most challenging projects I have had to do, it was definitely a worthwhile learning experience.

I spent a few days just reflecting. This was difficult for me because I really wanted to get started, but this was not the type of project to attack without a thorough analysis of the Bolman and Deal model and how to view my life through the lens of each area.

Thinking about the questions that were included with the assignment also were very thought provoking and made me examine how I really became the leader that I am today. I don’t know if I have ever stopped long enough to analyze my life and what has shaped me to lead others in the manner that I do.

By working at this level of thinking and connecting personal experiences and beliefs to course content students recognized that they would have a personal connection to the

content and would be able to retain information for an extended period of time. This is evidenced in the following statement, “This has been an extremely informative course for me. I was able to see my strengths and where I still need more instruction and improvement. I feel instant growth from this experience, and I will remember this feeling when I move into the next semester and future courses.” Analysis of their statements also suggested learning related to the technology they utilized.

In addition to learning more about themselves and about the content of the course, students discussed learning new technologies. Some students shared that they found using technology easy and were able to complete the program project without difficulty. One statement to support this was:

I have not had a lot of experience with Windows Movie Maker. The Digital Story was actually the first assignment that has caused me to utilize a resource such as this. I was surprised at how easy this program was to use for this assignment. Once I figured out the basics, the project was fairly simple to develop.

However, others noted challenges that they were able to overcome by using various resources such as the Internet, family members, friends from church, and coworkers. This statement highlighted the feelings of those challenged by technology, “I struggled with this assignment from a technology standpoint. Learning new technology can be a challenge for me.” Another noted, “Because I am not familiar with Windows Movie Maker or any video making software, I was excited to create the video, but I felt limited, anxious, and frustrated in what I could do to enhance the quality of the work.” Although some faced challenges, they did learn to use the technology. “I had to teach myself a lot of different technology to be able to complete this project,” one student wrote. This point was shared by a number of students. Evidence of the quality of their work supported the point that they were able to overcome these difficulties and learn to use the technologies they had available.

An additional point that was worthy of notice was that two students made the connection to how this could be used in his school. The first comment related to technology use in the classroom:

During the process I gained a better appreciation for the applicability of technology in the classroom. This assignment spurred creative ideas that I can share with my staff for integrating more engaging technology in the classroom. I can see teachers using this technology to create very engaging project based lessons for their students.

The second comment related to the potential for professional development of teachers. He noted, “This style of assignment could be beneficial to utilize at the school level with staff members as a reflection tool for professional growth.”

In addition to the technology, students mentioned the Bolman and Deal framework as an additional part of their learning. For example, “Thinking about leadership qualities in each of the four windows of the framework was challenging. Also, thinking about the theorists that related the most to me and my style of leadership was a very introspective part of the assignment.” Another noted, “The frameworks of Bolman

and Deal played an important role in providing theories to help demonstrate why we behave in the manners in which we do.” It was clear that using this framework gave students a clear method for organizing the various administrative theories and theorist that were covered in the course. Beyond the course content, analysis of the data also suggested that revisiting their past led to students thinking deeply about how their personal identity had developed.

Identity Development

In their reflections students discussed specific factors that helped develop their current identity based on their biology, culture, history, and politics.

Biology and Culture

When examining the biological contributions to the self, students compared pictures of themselves from their youth to the present and how their physical makeup and genetic composition impacted who they are today. They also discussed how their prominent characteristics had been inherited from their mother or father and the impact that this would have on them. For example:

I could see similarities between by parents and me. I had to work with the few pictures sent to me by my father, but as I age, I see more of my mother’s features emerging: red skin, high cheek bones, and almond shaped eyes. Biology is an amazing aspect of who we are, how we see ourselves, and as important, how others see us.

In conjunction with an examination of the biological self, they examined the cultural components of their upbringing. This included discussion of the values, beliefs and practices that they hold dear. They also discussed how these values influenced decisions they made in their daily lives and in their professional practice. Furthermore, they mentioned contextual influences that have helped mold their cultural identity. Finally, they discussed what diversity meant to them and how it had been beneficial at times and had created challenges during other times. Three selected statements highlight the influence of culture. First, one student wrote, “As an African American female, there are many challenges that I face daily. We, in comparison to our male counterparts, are considered to overwhelmingly be the educated and professional presence in our families.” A second asserted:

Many of the friends I had in high school that were males did not finish high school; of those that did complete high school, most did not complete college; and of those that did complete college, they did become successful professionals, but that percentage is quite low.

A third reflected:

Both of my parents were people of color who lived in a country that, at the time, did not want to recognize them as contributing Americans. Historically, they cherished the same values: land and home ownership, dignity, and respect. They were raised to work hard and ultimately reap rewards, and educate their children while teaching them an appreciation for heritage and culture. Historically, they believed in the American Dream, even if they were not who our country's forefathers had envisioned.

The experiences that students attributed to their race and cultural backgrounds clearly shaped their beliefs and how they perceived their roles within their school system.

History and Politics

Historical experiences that were discussed included both macro and micro events. Macro events included the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Micro events included participation in sports teams, prior work experiences, missionary work, friendships, church support, and adverse experiences such as car accidents and the death of loved ones (sometimes an early age). As part of the examination of the historical contributions students also conducted a generational analysis to see what brought them to where they are today personally, professionally, and academically. As such, students discussed many of the factors, which brought them to this moment in time and how it influenced their beliefs and behaviors. For example, "Having two parents at home, unlike many others within my ethnic community, gave me a different perspective. I was able to see and differentiate between gender roles and responsibilities." Additional examples of statements relating to history follow:

- My experience working on a horse farm taught me a great deal about how hard work pays off. Like teaching, you learn while working on a farm that you must constantly adapt and be flexible because you don't know what the new day will bring.
- Becoming a "big sister" heightened my sense of responsibility because as the oldest child, not only was I was accountable for my own safety and well being in a large, urban environment, but also that of my sister and brother. Similarly, as I lead adults, either personally or professionally, I feel somewhat responsible for their safety and welfare.

As a component of the assignment, it is not surprising that students discussed how historical events contributed to how they perceive the world around them.

When examining political contributions to the self, students explored and described the construction of their values and beliefs and the impact these had on their views on power and professional relationships. In addition, some discussed their gender identity and racial background and how they were able to utilize these characteristics to influence others. In reference to a younger brother that was much larger than she was, one student commented, "I have always been the dominating figure in our relationship although he is twice my size. Dealing with him is part of the reason why I am not currently intimidated by my much larger students." Students also spoke extensively about

the role of relationships in their lives and how they use these relationships to benefit themselves and to benefit others. This came through strongly as they described overcoming challenges and addressing conflict in their lives. It also came through in their description of how they used their leadership roles to help students. In reference to the obligation they felt as a result of their upbringing and culture, one student noted,

I have a responsibility to share my knowledge and experiences with the students so they can make better decisions. I have realistic conversations with my young men and women that concern the importance of education and applying the knowledge they gain in school to establish themselves as adults and as professionals.

One of the pervasive themes that emerged was the influence of significant adults that contributed to their development. These influencers included blood relatives such as grandparents, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and siblings. For example:

My grandmother was the mother to seven children and she really did help to mold me into an educator by making me watch after the younger grandchildren. She always told me to show the younger ones how to do things, but not to do things for them.

Other significant adults included coaches and teachers. Discussion of gender roles and how they evolved from being raised by grandparents, single fathers, single mothers, and in two parent homes was also important in their development. A number of students also discussed how caring for younger siblings that had an impact on their behavior as school leaders.

Finally they wrote about how they dealt with conflict as a result of some of their historical experiences. In two cases, students recognized that this was an area of weakness for them and something they had not thought much about. In hindsight, both stated that politics had influenced their behavior unknowingly.

Class Cohesion

Another consequence of the assignment was improved cohesion and understanding within this cohort group. This was the second course that students had taken together, however overwhelmingly the data showed that sharing their assignments with others led to a deeper understanding and respect for each other. Topics that were frequently addressed included similarities such as overcoming adversity and diversity (understanding new perspectives), and other similarities. One reflected,

It amazes me how technology can be used as a form of expression and sharing. The lesson taken from viewing the digital stories of my cohort members is very simple. Although we all come from different walks of life, we still have some of the same values that were instilled in us by our family members. The words hard work, teamwork, and determination were words heard in many presentations.

Additional statements that highlight some of the similarities and differences that students noted follow:

I am glad that we had this class early on in our doctoral program because I feel much closer to my classmates after we have shared such personal things with one another.

The Digital Stories have helped me to get to know my classmates on a much deeper level. I have such admiration and respect for all of them. I find it interesting that we have all had so many obstacles to overcome, but we all have persevered. Some of my classmates have had some tragic events happen and have been strong enough to pick themselves up and continue moving forward when many other people would not have been able to do so.

I am also grateful that we had to watch each other's autoethnography because I now feel that I know the members of my cohort so much better. I can appreciate where each person has come from and our diversity of styles. It helps to know how each of us has evolved over time as we are all in this doctoral journey together.

The statement that summed up the feelings from the group was "We each have a very special story to be told which includes triumph, adversity, challenge, triumph, rejection, and finally acceptance."

Summary

This study was guided by the research question: What are students' perceptions of digital storytelling as a tool for learning in Educational Leadership coursework? Analysis of student reflections revealed four themes: feelings about the assignment components, learning, identity development, and class cohesion. How these themes evolved from students' perceptions of the assignment relate to literature in this area are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The findings of this study support research on autoethnographies and digital story usage in educational leadership and in other contexts. From the students' perspective, digital storytelling brought them on a journey of reflection and self-discovery as they told their personal story. This aligns with the work of Guajardo, Oliver, Rodriguez, Valadez, Cantu, and Guajardo (2011) on digital storytelling in an educational leadership instructional setting. Students' comments about constructing a personal reflection and their personal identity development also support with the assertions from Preston (2011) and Drechsler, Sharp, Riera, and Jones (2012). In addition, students indicated that they had a greater understanding of their cohort members. This supports Xu, Park, and Baek (2011) who stated that as students co-construct knowledge in a learning community, they achieved greater understanding of themselves, the course content, and of each other.

Finally, these findings support research suggesting that the wide range of communicative options offered by digital storytelling is beneficial.

Although this was a small sample and not generalizable to other contexts, this research adds to the literature on autoethnographies and technologically based pedagogy such as digital stories in educational leadership preparation.

Conclusions

While this study was limited to 11 students in two sections of a doctoral level class, results suggest that this project may be useful as an authentic learning experience for students engaged in educational leadership coursework. In addition, the results of the qualitative inductive analysis have helped us better understand that students in this course valued the opportunity to reflect on how their belief system was developed and synthesize it with new knowledge about administrative theories. The findings of this study may help educational leadership faculty to utilize technologically suffused pedagogy to meet course objectives by revealing the perceptions of the students about the assignment in conjunction with suggestions for improving the assignment. In addition, the challenges, benefits, and suggestions for improvement add to the literature base on educational leadership preparation.

Recommendations

1. Based on this study we make the following recommendations:
2. Additional research is needed on the use of autoethnographies and digital storytelling for learning. Differences in learning patterns based on the comfort level with technology, academic program (i.e., Master's, Specialist, Doctoral), or course delivery (face to face, blended, or fully online) should be explored.
3. Qualitative research on students' retention of leadership theories would be beneficial.
4. Quantitative longitudinal analysis on ways to measure retention of material using this practice would be beneficial.
5. Faculty should explore the possibility of integrating a similar assignment into their teaching as they advance practices of teaching and learning. Instruction regarding technology that can be used to complete the assignment should be included.
6. Future research should evaluate the impact this experience has on practicing leaders' school based activity regarding technology integration.

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