Opportunities for Identity Investment for Youth from Refugee Backgrounds

Lauren Johnson and Maureen Kendrick

Introduction

Many youth from refugee backgrounds, especially those with interrupted schooling, are at risk of underachievement unless the reproduction of social disadvantage is altered through more equitable educational opportunities (Cummins, 2014; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Although there is a consensus among researchers and educators that diminishing social disadvantage involves extending students’ knowledge of academic language, scaffolding meaning, and activating background knowledge, the role of literacy engagement and identity affirmation have been largely ignored in recent debates on closing the achievement gap of social groups defined on the basis of language, income, and racialised status (Cummins, 2014, p. 146). There is an urgent need for school cultures to better understand how to design language and literacy learning experiences that respond to the identities and background experiences of this vulnerable population. In this chapter we examine how digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool can provide more equitable opportunities for literacy engagement and identity affirmation for refugee-background youth.

This chapter presents Abdullahi’s digital story as an “instance of practice” (Cummins & Early, 2011) that demonstrates possibilities for powerfully engaging refugee-background learners intellectually, affectively, and agentively in telling stories of accomplishment and depicting future aspirations in meaningful ways (Appadurai, 2004; Cummins, 2014). It addresses how engaging with the affordances of different modes such as audial, visual, and linguistic through digital storytelling can offer individualised entry points into self-expression and help students from refugee backgrounds become more aware of their skills, knowledge, strengths, and capacities, ultimately promoting positive identities as students imagine their futures and a place of belonging within their new social environments.

Interrupting Educational Disadvantage: Identity Investment and Multimodal Pedagogies

Tracking studies show that an unacceptably high percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs), and in particular those who entered as refugees, do not graduate from high school (Garnett, 2010; Gunderson, 2004, 2007; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). Gunderson (2004, 2007) reports that refugee-background youth, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, disappear from academic courses (between grades 8 and 12) at an alarming rate. A contributing factor is that
many educators in secondary schools struggle to identify, understand, and meet the language and literacy needs of learners with limited or interrupted schooling, and experiences of trauma (Cummins, 2014). Moreover, there has been little success among educators to make visible “who refugees are as individuals, what literacy skills they possess, and their experiences navigating a new and unfamiliar culture and language” (Saleh, 2018).

‘Disadvantage’, however, is not a fixed construct socially determined by what takes place outside of schools; rather, it is a dynamic process enabled or disrupted through the structures of schooling, including the patterns of interaction between teachers and students (Cummins, 2014). In other words, “significant components of the background experiences of [at-risk] groups . . . are transformed into actual educational disadvantages only when the school fails to respond appropriately to these background experiences” (Cummins, 2014, pp. 147–8). Dooley and Thangaperumal (2011) argue that educators need to interrupt the reproduction of social disadvantage through literacy education and educational opportunities that “capitalise on students’ affective and identity investment” (p. 386). This chapter focusses on how digital storytelling as a multimodal pedagogy can nurture educational opportunities for refugee-background youth by prioritising their lived experience and background knowledge, affirming their identities, and engaging them in imagining possibilities for the future (Cummins, 2014). This ability to ‘write a map of a journey into the future’ has been referred to by Appadurai (2004) as the “capacity to aspire” (p. 76). A map of the future, he argues, needs to be made “more real, available, and powerful” for all members of a society, including those belonging to marginalised populations who may have more limited access to the kinds of diverse experiences that manifest into personal wishes and wants, enabling individuals to produce their own narratives and pathways linked to larger social contexts and more abstract norms and beliefs (Appadurai, 2004, p. 70).

We take a multimodal approach to designing learning experiences. This approach recognises that language alone only partially reflects how people make meaning in the world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Digital storytelling as a multimodal pedagogy offers opportunities for youth to use images, sound, and language. This broad array of semiotic resources taps into how cultures and individuals select from and choose to develop particular possibilities to “produce and communicate meanings in specific social settings” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 264). In this study, these semiotic resources are understood as having the ability to simultaneously communicate the here and now of a social context while representing the resources youth from refugee backgrounds have ‘to hand’ from the world around them (Kress, 1997).

The study focusses on pedagogic possibilities for students from refugee backgrounds, aligning with an innovative area of research that examines the dialogic process of multimodal meaning making (Campano & Low, 2011; Early, Kendrick, & Potts, 2015). Historically, devaluation of the linguistic and cultural knowledge that refugee-background students bring to school has reinforced societal power structures that exclude certain minority groups from social participation and advancement (Cummins, 2014). Digital storytelling, because it capitalises on learners’ communicative resources, identities, and ways of being, has the potential to shift the power relations in classroom settings. As a pedagogy, it is rooted in collaborative and interactive relations of power that enable students to draw on their own life experiences and communicative and intellectual resources to tell their own stories in their own voice, empowering them to achieve much more than what might be possible through more traditional print-based pedagogies alone (Cummins, 2014).

Digital storytelling as a multimodal pedagogy can provide enhanced opportunities and intellectually engaging ways for students to tell stories about their lives, experiences, and preferred ways of knowing. Kress (1997) insists that it is necessary to uncouple the assumed link between language and cognition and to instead adopt the proposition that cognition is accomplished in all modes. Different modes give rise to different ways of thinking, and digital
Digital Storytelling and Youth

Digital Storytelling Pedagogies

Digital storytelling as a narrative form first emerged in the 1990s. It was originally developed by Lambert (2013) and his colleagues at StoryCenter in California and took the form of a two-to-three minute film that used digital media such as photographs, video clips, music or sound, and voiceover to tell the story of the author’s lived experience. Research has foregrounded how digital storytelling can provide a compelling way to share rich life lessons and experiences (Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2015). Digital storytelling has also been advanced as pedagogical innovation. Vinogradova, Linville, and Bickel (2011) illustrate how using photos, voice, and music can enhance the development of multimodal design, especially for English language learners (ELLs), as they learn the affordance of different modes as integral to the storytelling process. Similarly, Hull and Katz (2006) emphasize that digital storytelling’s integration of personally chosen resources and artifacts enables authors to express important moments in their lives from a reflective position of strength. For refugee background learners, Emert (2013) argues that digital storytelling can foreground rich learning resources over academic challenges, enabling them to advance their abilities as multimodal meaning-makers.

The digital storytelling composing process has most often been described as a collective linear one that engages learners in a series of steps beginning with script writing. Because this pedagogic design begins with writing, it typically positions nonlinguistic modes as supplementary to the linguistic (Shin & Cimasko, 2008). Research shows, however, that when the composing process is open and flexible with no predetermined sequence, learners will bring their communicative resources together dialogically (Yang, 2012), simultaneously reflecting, thinking, and designing in different modes (Nelson & Hull, 2008).

We opted for a non-sequential pedagogical design to maximise students’ understanding of the communicative potential of each mode (e.g., visual, audial, gestural) as integral to the storytelling process. This design was critical for the participants, many with limited English or first-language (L1) literacy abilities, because of its “empowering and agentic potential” to enable students who “are low-performing in . . . traditional written assignments . . . the opportunity to express themselves in new ways . . . other than the written text” (Erstad & Silseth, 2008, p. 221).

Context and Methodology

As a means of showcasing how digital storytelling can open up identity options for diverse students, Abdullahi’s process is traced as he shares a personal accomplishment. The research was conducted in a school district’s transitional class that provides specialised support for refugee and immigrant background senior-high-level students. The class was located in the Metro Vancouver area in an English language learner welcome centre. Pseudonyms for all project participants are used throughout this chapter.

Of Somali background, Abdullahi was born in Yemen. At the time of the study, he was 20 years of age and had no formal schooling in his country of origin. He arrived in Canada at age 17.5 and had been enrolled at the welcome centre for approximately two years. He is the eldest
child in a single-parent home and carries considerable family responsibilities. For this reason, he was often absent from class.

At the beginning of the digital storytelling project, the students completed a handout which involved filling in sentence stems related to their identities (e.g., I am a _____; I enjoy ______) and circling images representing their preferred ways of expressing and learning information (e.g., singing, watching television). On this handout, Abdullahi describes himself as ‘happy’ and a ‘nice guy’. Activities that he enjoys include reading, dancing, and playing on the computer. He defines himself as a ‘student’ and a ‘brother’. He identified his countries of origin as both Somalia and Yemen and wrote that he speaks Indian, Somali, English, and Arabic. He explained in an interview (25 February 2014) that he likes to communicate or learn information through ‘writing’ and indicated that he prefers the visual mode, emphasising that he likes “to look at the movie”.

The ‘instance of practice’ example comes from an ethnographic, qualitative case study focussing on the possibilities of digital storytelling for meaning-making and identity-affirmation among youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Abdullahi’s story represents one example of an accomplishment story that the students in the study were able to communicate through digital storytelling. His story was selected because it included clearly defined future aspirations. (Even though students were not instructed to describe future goals in their digital stories, a number of students chose to include more general ambitions, such as graduating from high school and helping their families; for other examples see also Johnson & Kendrick, 2017.) Although, as Hull and Katz (2006) note, human lives can rarely be reduced to simple cause and effect, this analysis here aligns with Cummins and Early (2011) who stress that “actuality implies possibility” (p. 19). That is, “if a particular intervention has happened, and if particular effects have been observed, then this intervention and its impact can happen” (p. 18). Such cases “have immense power to effect change both in the instructional choices made by teachers, administrators and policy-makers, and in the identity options opened up to diverse students” (p. 19).

The methods of data generation included classroom observations, field notes, informal in-class conversations with participants, semi-structured interviews following the project to gain understanding of the students’ composing processes and the effects of participation in the project on their identities, student-created artifacts (e.g., storyboards, writing), and the digital stories.

The study used a multiliteracies framework (see New London Group, 1996) in collaboratively designing the digital storytelling project with the classroom teacher. The need for a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996) is premised on a two-pronged argument: the salience of cultural and linguistic diversity amidst a rapidly changing multimodal communication landscape. Fundamental to the framework is the concept of Design, which includes six major modes of communication: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial, plus “multimodal” that relates the five modes to each other. The data were coded categorising modes of communication and common themes (e.g., accomplishments, aspirations).

Rose’s (2011) sites of visual meaning making are used as the organisational structure for presenting the findings. Rose describes three sites through which meaning is made in visual (or in this study, multimodal) texts: “the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences” (p. 19; emphasis in the original). These three sites refer to the circumstances surrounding the production of an image (site of production), the compositional nature of an image (site of the image), and how it is viewed (site of audience). Working across the sites of production, image, and audience, the findings showcase Abdullahi’s digital storytelling process and the slides he created, drawing attention to how he was thinking visually, musically, and linguistically to realise a fuller range of affective expression.
Participants

The students in the study had all been in Canada for a maximum of three years. The centre had identified them as ‘at-risk’ because of critical barriers to successful participation in the mainstream education system including significant gaps in literacy learning in English, social and communication barriers, and mental health challenges stemming from trauma or grief (programme information sheet, prepared 21 September 2012).

The Digital Storytelling Project

The digital storytelling project took place on Friday mornings over five consecutive weeks. The pedagogic design included the following overlapping stages: gathering artifacts, designing a storyboard, and using digital storytelling software to assemble the story. First, the teachers defined ‘digital storytelling’ as a short, personal video containing visual and audial layers (Lambert, 2013). A few examples of digital stories were presented (from StoryCenter’s YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/channel/UCKLPPDavG0bCj1Yqy6PlcouQ). Afterwards, the students were asked which elements made the stories powerful and effective (e.g., music, colours), and they grouped them on the Smartboard according to mode (e.g., hearing, seeing). The class discussed how each mode had distinct potentials and limitations for communication, and explained how the authors had been intentional in their design choices. The teachers told the class that each student would be creating an accomplishment story (Lambert, 2013), which described a past experience of achieving a goal. The authors explained to the students that their digital stories would be shared at a screening event held at the centre for their classmates, teachers, staff members, and parents. Students were given free time to create or locate images and music and prepare a script in whichever language(s) they felt most comfortable using. Because of the project’s limited timeframe, many students chose to use photographs and recorded songs. Most of the students either had few personal photos or felt uncomfortable sharing photos of family and friends. For this reason, the photographs mainly came from various online sources. Finally, the students were presented with a number of options for organizing the elements of their digital stories on a storyboard (e.g., paper-based templates or computer software such as PowerPoint). Students assembled their stories using Photo Story 3, a digital storytelling software that was selected because it was free, user-friendly, and compatible with the centre’s PC laptops.

Abdullahi’s Digital Story of Accomplishment and Aspiration

Site of Production

Abdullahi completed his digital story in class in January 2014. First, he began searching for visuals from his Facebook account and Google images that connected to his life (e.g., photos of Yemen and interests such as Middle Eastern dancing). He saved them to a flash drive. He also began searching for music on YouTube. Abdullahi then selected a paper storyboard. He chose one of his saved images and wrote a description in English. The authors asked Abdullahi which specific accomplishment he had decided to share, and gave him examples from his classmates. He remembered how his uncle had taught him mechanics, a skill he acknowledged that his classmates did not know about him. Following this, Abdullahi began to write a script in English on his storyboard. A discussion followed with him about how he could expand his story with more detail (“What skills did your uncle teach you?” “How did you feel when you were learning these skills?”).
Then he completed his storyboard by searching for visuals in Google images. He used keywords such as ‘Yemen people’, ‘Somalian young man’, ‘Somalian woman’, and ‘Somalian mechanic’. After this, he continued his search for music on YouTube. He specified that he wanted “relax music” because “if you put loud music, it won’t be comfortable with the story”. He decided to search for music from Yemen, and selected “the music dancing Arabic . . . because it connect with my story”. He explained the beginning of his story was “sad” and the ending was “happy” (excerpts from interview, 25 February 2014).

Abdullahi was asked about the approach he had taken to gathering ideas for his digital story. He explained,

I tried to research my family information including my mom in the Facebook and elsewhere but then I figure out the easiest was to do my uncle’s mechanic because at that time I was ten years old and he taught me a lot. I did not have a picture that time that I could write about. But I had all the story in my head and I said if I start writing then I will be able to tell.

(interview, 25 February 2014, translated from Somali by a welcome centre settlement worker)

When Abdullahi was asked which modes he used in his story, he recalled “picture” and “writing”, which reflect what he had expressed to be his preferred ways of communicating information (excerpts from interview, 25 February 2014).

Site of Image

Abdullahi’s digital story begins, “Hello. My name is Abdullahi [last name]. I’m from Yemen”. We see a photo of Sanaa, a town in Yemen. He explained in an interview (25 February 2014), “This is where I grow up. You need some picture to show the people . . . where you come from” (interview, 25 February 2014). The words “Learning about Mechanics/By Abdullahi” are centred at the bottom of the page in distinctive white font. We hear a fast-paced Arabic song.

In the following slide, Abdullahi narrates, “When I was ten years old, my mom and I we went to visit my uncle in Sanaa”. The image is a school-aged boy holding a long, narrow wooden board with Arabic script written on it (see Figure 44.1). Abdullahi shared that he did not have a photo of himself as a ten-year-old boy, so he searched Google images and found this picture of a boy who looked approximately that age and was of a similar ethnic background. He also pointed out that he chose this image “because he’s writing Hadith” (referring to literature reporting the deeds and sayings of Muhammad) in the Arabic language (interview, 25 February 2014).

The story continues, “I stay with my uncle six month. He was teaching me how to be a mechanic”. We see the image of a Somali man sitting cross-legged on the ground (see Figure 44.2). He has an expression of concentration as he focusses on the small mechanical tools he is holding in his hands. Abdullahi explained in the interview, “This picture I chose ‘cause it’s a man confused and he have a hard time fixing cars, and that’s why I used this one” (interview, 25 February 2014).
Abdullahi then narrates, “He was teaching me how to use oil and wrench”. We see the image of a large yellow can with the word ‘oil’ written on its centre against a white backdrop. This image is followed by that of a silver wrench, also against a simple white backdrop.

In the next slide, Abdullahi shares, “Now I know how to fix my bike and a car”. It shows a man kneeling down to fix the gears on the back tyre of his bike. He specified that he wanted a picture of a man fixing a bike to represent that he had learned this skill.
The narrative continues, “My uncle always he told me, Abdullahi, you are a good person”. For this slide, Abdullahi repeats the image of the man who resembles his uncle, used on the third slide of his digital story. In the next slide, he narrates, “My auntie always she believe in me to do the right thing”. This image shows the faces of two African women smiling at the camera and wearing black headscarves. He found this image through a Google search and selected it because the women’s friendliness reminded him of his aunt.

The following slide continues: “my mom she came back from the vacation. After I went with my mom in Sanaa”. The picture is an African woman wearing a bright blue head-covering with stars. She is sitting on a chair as part of an audience and smiles as she claps her hands. He thought this woman looked “almost same” as his mom – “like the smile and her face” (excerpts from interview, 25 February 2014).

Abdullahi’s voiceover says, “My uncle were not happy about me leaving him alone”. Again, there is the image of the man who looks like his uncle (“Because I still talk about him, and me leaving [leaving] him in Sanaa … so we need [his] picture” (interview, 25 February 2014).

The slide that follows is an image of the exterior of the Canadian Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, Ontario. Abdullahi narrates, “The government sent me and my family to Canada”. The final picture shows a stone university with a well-groomed lawn (see Figure 44.3). His voiceover expresses, “My goal is to be a mechanic when I finish school”. He explained that he selected this image because “it’s big college and there’s [so] many people, so I say when I finish college, so I wanna be a mechanic you know” (interview, 25 February 2014).

Abdullahi concludes his narrative, “As you can see, this is what I wanna be for my life. Thank you very much for your attention and I appreciate” (video cuts out). (He believes the final words are “for your attention”, interview, 25 February 2014.) The slide shows the words “Thank you very much for your attention!!!” in red font against a blue background.

Figure 44.3 The long hall and the clock tower of the UCC quadrangle.
Site of Audience

Abdullahi knew that his digital story would be shown on a Smartboard to a ‘safe’ audience of his classmates, teachers, parents, and staff members at the welcome centre. His awareness of audience is evident within his story through the narration of his opening and closing slides in which he introduces himself (“Hello. My name is Abdullahi”) and thanks his audience for watching his film (“As you can see, this is what I wanna be for my life. Thank you very much for your attention and I appreciate [for your attention]”). It is also revealed through his decision to include a photograph of Sanaa, Yemen “You need some picture to show the people ... where you come from” (interview, 25 February 2014).

Pride and Affirmation in Accomplishments

Abdullahi’s digital story conveys his pride in learning mechanics. He expresses, “Now I know how to fix my bike and a car”, and follows this with several statements revealing the affirmation he felt from his aunt and uncle: “Abdullahi, you are a good person.” “My auntie always she believe in me to do the right thing.”

Additionally, Abdullahi communicates his future aspirations through stating twice that he plans to be a mechanic in the future. He narrates, “My goal is to be a mechanic when I finish school” and emphasises, “As you can see, this is what I wanna be for my life”. His use of visuals gives us insight into his feelings of pride and positive construction of self. He uses the image of a “big college” (Figure 44.3) when he expresses his future aspiration. Arguably, this image is reflective of his imagined sense of achievement upon completing his goal. He also uses the image of a boy ‘writing Hadith’ to represent himself as a child (Figure 44.1). Abdullahi had not completed formal education prior to attending the welcome centre programme; he explained in the interview, “when I was [in Yemen], I wasn’t know how to write and research, but here I learned” (interview, 25 February 2014). He expressed that through participating in the project, “I felt I’m ... student learning about everything” (interview, 25 February 2014). This image reveals how he now sees himself in this light.

Upon completion of his digital story, Abdullahi expressed a sense of pride at having created a “movie”. As earlier mentioned, he stated how he likes “to look at the movie” and was pleased that “after I could do it [make a movie himself]” (interview, 25 February 2014). He furthermore demonstrated pride in his accomplishment through expressing in the interview “in future I could teach more people” (interview, 25 February 2014). He explained his plans to share his story on Facebook: “and maybe after two years or three my brother if he wanted to do story by his country, so he could see example from his brother” (interview, 25 February 2014).

Abdullahi was also asked about his participation in the screening event at the welcome centre. He said that sharing his digital story “was scary” at first, and he felt “nervous”. He thought that it might have been an “embarrassment” to watch the stories on the big screen. However, he added, “after it was excellent. I felt very happy that time”. The audience, he expressed, were his “fans”; he described their reactions to his digital story as being “Like a fan, you know, the many people. Like when people watching football and that stuff” (excerpts from interview, 25 February 2014).

Final Thoughts

The lived experiences and knowledge that refugee background learners bring to formal education contexts are rich learning resources that offer possibilities rather than disadvantages. Educators need to design learning experiences that help all students meaningfully communicate their knowledge and identities, and facilitate their “capacities to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004). A multimodal
approach to learning enables students to feel capable of self-expression in spite of any gaps in formal education. It also encourages them to think more deeply about themselves and their experiences through engaging with the intellectual and communicative possibilities of different modes. This process can ultimately act as a powerful navigational tool for students, accentuating positive identities for them (i.e., their strengths, knowledge, capacities) and guiding them to capitalise on their own life experiences and ways of knowing and being.

Abdullahi’s digital story, as a multimodal pedagogy, is a window on his identity. In the absence of family photos, he searched for Google images to help reconstruct his memory and remembered his uncle teaching him mechanics when he was ten years old. His process of selecting images and music for his story invited him to think visually, musically, as well as linguistically, and through the process, he was able to consider his experiences in different ways. For example, selecting an image that represented the personally challenging experience of learning mechanics involved contemplating how this experience made him feel (i.e., proud). In order to choose music that “connect[ed]”, Abdullahi reflected on the trajectory of his story as a whole.

The process of identifying the skills and knowledge he gained through past experiences, and remembering affirmations from loved ones, opened up imagined future possibilities such as attending a “big college” where he envisioned himself as part of a learning community with “[so] many people”. His pride in his accomplishment, as evident in the exit interview, revealed other imagined future identities that involve teaching others how to create digital stories. A StoryCenter facilitator, Daniel Weinshenker, comments on personal growth as part of the storytelling experience. He insightfully notes that “oftentimes the stories we tell are the stories we don’t understand” because “digital storytelling is about getting underneath of that surface”; it creates “a space where people feel listened to” as individuals (Nurstory: a documentary).

Multimodal pedagogies such as digital storytelling can be powerful tools through which students can become more aware of their strengths and skill sets, recognising them as important resources that can be harnessed to build positive identities in their new social contexts. Digital storytelling also has the potential to make visible to educators the literacy knowledge and individual identities of a population of students that educators so often struggle to understand and engage intellectually, affectively, and agentively.

**References**


