Express Yourself: Improving Literacy in Under-performing Students through Literacy Identity Development, Mobile Devices and a Critical Digital Literacies Pedagogy

Dr. Janette Hughes
UOIT, 11 Simcoe Street North,
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, L1H 7L7
janette.hughes@uoit.ca

Laura Morrison
UOIT, 11 Simcoe Street North,
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, L1H 7L7
laura.morrison@uoit.ca

Abstract: *This study examines the impact of a critical digital literacies pedagogy and the use of multimedia tools to induct under-performing students into a community of practice. More specifically, our study examines how the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy can potentially transform teaching and help accelerate the development of struggling learners' literacy identities and, therefore, practices to become change agents in society. The study uses a qualitative case study analysis to investigate this relationship. The preliminary findings indicate the development of literacy identities in the students – from individuals who are under-performing in the language arts, to 'tech-experts' proficient at understanding and synthesizing information/ideas and collaborating with others to generate/communicate knowledge.*

Keywords: digital literacies, critical literacy, literacy identity, language arts

Introduction

Literacy in the digital age has developed into a "repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposely in multiple social and cultural contexts" (Mills, 2010, p. 247). It does not only involve reading and writing anymore but also meaning-making with images, sound and movement (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). This is an important development for struggling learners, as now more than ever, there exists an opportunity to engage and include these students who may have previously remained on the periphery of the classroom learning community due to a deficit in traditional reading and writing skills. Regardless of their traditional skills, however, these students engage in a variety of literacy practices out of school through gaming, online social networking, multimedia creation, re-mixing and so on. Importantly, Anstey and Bull (2006) suggest that "these domains or discourse worlds help form a person's literacy identity, providing a repertoire of resources that a person can draw on when engaging in literate practices" (p.34). They further note that a student's literacy identity "includes social and cultural resources, technological experience, and all previous life experiences, as well as specific literacy knowledge and experience" (p.35). So, literacy practices shape and are shaped by identity and they have changed significantly in the digital age. As a result, if we want to engage and support struggling learners, so that they succeed in developing positive literacy identities and skills, we need to draw heavily on digital and multimodal tools.

Public education in the 21st century is challenged with ensuring all Canadians have the requisite skills to participate in a digital, knowledge-based economy, an aspiration increasingly difficult to realize under present-day conditions of austerity in both K-12 and post-secondary education. The notion of a "digital divide" typically emphasizes unequal access to digital technologies, software and hardware, as well as the quality of Internet connectivity (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Warshauer, 2002). Still a significant barrier for many Canadians, a troublesome complementary issue focuses on unequal literacy and computational skills to engage

with technology. The proposed research addresses the need for concerted attention by faculties of education to the conceptual and operational challenges of assuring "digital literacy" across the digital divide. Its primary purpose is to build a research-based model for achieving education and equity in the 21st century, by bringing the resources, strengths, skills and expertise of faculties of education directly to bear on the 'digital divide' evidenced in low socio-economic status (SES), high-needs schools in order to assist them in improving the educational successes of their students.

As the demographics surrounding our faculty of education are characterized by low-income households and by public schools with lower rates of achievement, we wanted to work with one of the local elementary schools to help develop both the traditional and new literacy skills of under-performing students in one high-needs classroom. Our goal was to leverage the power of the university to develop sustainable, collaborative capacity for leveling the playing field for students and teachers.

Specifically our research investigated how the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy, which takes place at the intersection of critical literacies and digital literacies, 1) potentially transforms teaching, and 2) helps accelerate the development of under-performing students' literacy identities, practices and skills so they can become agents of change in society.

Theoretical Framework

Working from an "asset model" that assumes that using new technologies can work as a benefit to literacy instead of as a deficit (Mackey, 2002), we employ a critical digital literacies pedagogy for this study. A critical digital literacies pedagogy takes place at the intersection of critical literacies and digital literacies (Jones & Hafner, 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). At its core, this pedagogy helps students in the areas of agency and identity development. It teaches them to become critical producers and consumers of digital texts within and for a variety of contexts and social practices (Selber, 2004), improving students' traditional and new literacies skills through the multimodal communication affordances (Author 1 & Author 2, 2013). Nelson (2006) explains that multimodal practices allow students to understand and express meaning in ways that do not rely solely on linguistic communication and Lotherington and Jenson (2011) explain that multimodal communication is dynamic, as a reader can enter texts "in new and exciting ways" (p. 227). A critical digital literacies pedagogy draws on nine elements of digital literacies, shown in Figure 1.

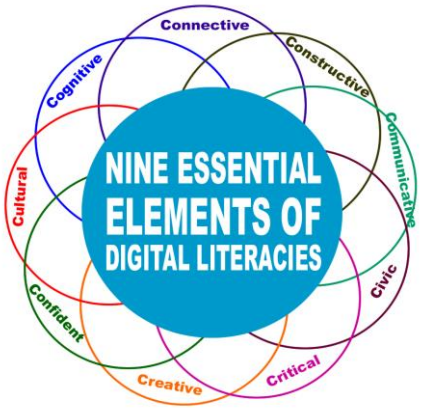

Figure 1: 9 Elements of Digital Literacies

Thurlow and Bell (2009) explain that the academic and social affordances of new, digital texts need to be carefully considered for use in the contemporary classroom, as modern adolescents exist in a participatory, digital culture. Furthermore, the use and creation of digital texts in the classroom can help students make the connection between their new/out-of-school literacy practices and their participation in civic, political and social justice structures.

Furthermore, Hughes (2008; 2009) and Östman (2012) believe that the performative potential of digital media can facilitate student engagement in the exploration and creation of digital texts surrounding social justice issues, as students can share their creations with others and feel agentive. Emancipatory actions can encourage students to write, read, and re-write their world, bridging literacy, human agency and the power to "effect social transformation" (Janks, 2010, p. 161). It is in their various discourse worlds and literacy practices (both in- and out-of-school) that student make meaning and construct their literacy identities (Antsey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Finally, we draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) Legitimate Peripheral Participation [LPP] to induct students with lower literacy skills into the community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that one way to induct learners into a community of practice is to set up a situation for Legitimate Peripheral Participation [LPP]. In this situation, a student participates in simple and low-risk tasks that contribute to and facilitate the goals of the community. Through these low-risk activities the novices acquire the skills and knowledge to take on greater responsibility – slowly, the novices are inducted as central members in the learning community.

A critical digital literacies approach aligns with modern adolescents' participatory culture, out-of-school literacy practices and leverages the educational potential of digital tools and technologies to induct lower-functioning students into the classroom community.

Methodology

Since this research focused on the transformation in teaching practices and student learning, an ethnographic case study approach was suitable. Creswell (1998) defines ethnography as a description and interpretation of a social or cultural group or system. The researchers were socially and physically immersed in the case, leading classroom activities and discussions, and thereby accumulated local knowledge. The case study method is appropriate for studying a 'bounded system' (the thoughts and actions of participating students or the learning-community connection of a particular education setting) so as to understand it as it functions under natural conditions (Stake 2000). Using an ethnographic case study approach allowed us to observe the actions and events that took place in the classroom. Finally, Bruce (2009, p.302) explains that case studies "provide the best articulation of adolescents' media literacy processes, especially as much of the emergent forms of their use has not been studied."

Participants

The study had a total of eight students between the ages of 11 and 12. There were four boys and four girls, who were identified with a variety of cognitive, behavioural, emotional and developmental exceptionalities, which included fetal alcohol syndrome, oppositional defiant disorder, various learning disabilities, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. All of the students in this program came from government-approved care, treatment, custody or correctional facilities within the Durham jurisdiction. In addition, the students had a range of experience with, and access to, technology and different digital tools both at home and in school from previous grades. The students' digital literacy skills also ranged significantly, for example, four of the students were experienced online gamers. Although their traditional literacy skills were low, scoring at level one or two according to Ontario achievement criteria, they were

intuitively able to figure out any of the digital programs we were using that may have had similar commands. While all of the students knew basic Internet skills, like searching for images on Google or for videos on YouTube, they did not have fine-tuned digital or critical literacy skills, like how to download and/or organize digital files for easy access, or how to analyze digital texts for deeper meaning and understanding. A few of the students had been exposed to some online educational programs like Bitstrips, but the majority had limited experience using iPads and laptops in a school setting. All of the students had marked gaps in their learning and in their general knowledge of the world, that ranged from items like how many provinces there are in Canada, who are the Indigenous people in Canada, what was the Holocaust and how to write a newspaper article.

Selection Process

Both purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used in determining the grade level and the school in which the research would be conducted. We wanted to work with one of three lower-achieving elementary schools located near our university, as one of the goals of the project was to develop a local schools-university partnership and to help increase academic achievement rates in the community. All three local schools volunteered to be part of the pilot project for the 2013/2014 academic school year. For the purposes of this paper, we report on findings from participants in a class from an alternative school (for students who are unable to attend a community public school because of placement in care, treatment, custody or correctional facilities) volunteered to participate in this particular research.

Setting

The study was conducted in two locations in downtown Oshawa, Ontario – our Faculty of Education's new Digital Literacies Research and Development Lab and the students' own classroom. Our lab is equipped with two Mac minis, Apple TV, a Smart Board, digital projector, two microphones with voice-recording capabilities, iPads and MacBook pros. When the students were in our digital literacies lab, they brought with them their class-set of eight iPads. When the students were in their classroom, they had access to their iPads, eight mobile laptop PCs and three desktop PCs.

Research Design & Process

Through an integrated arts-based curriculum, with a thematic focus on community and identity, the students learned about historical and modern Indigenous issues and bullying. The students were first introduced to Indigenous culture and history through the graphic novel series, *Rabbit and Bear Paws* by Christopher Meyer, Tanya Leary and Chad Solomon. This series is based on the teachings of the seven grandfathers, which is a collection of teachings used to instruct people on how to act and treat each other. They include: wisdom, love, respect, honesty, humility and truth. The students also participated in a smudging ceremony, led by a local Indigenous elder and read two additional Indigenous-themed novels -- one of which dealt with the residential schools system titled, *Fatty Legs* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton and one that dealt with Indigenous circle justice titled, *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelsen.

The Sugar Bush

To introduce the students to Canadian Indigenous culture, geography, and history (with a specific focus on colonialism) we started the unit with the graphic novel, *The Sugar Bush.* In order to engage the students, and to make the reading process more interactive and creative, the students were broken up into small groups and were each given one section of the story to read. They were challenged to make informed predictions about what had come before in the story and what would most likely follow after, based on what they read in their section. The students were then challenged to choose a creative way to interpret and represent their section of the story for presentation to the rest of the groups. When everyone finished, the sections were shared and the story was linked together. A brief discussion followed that focused on who Canadian Indigenous people are, what they value in their culture and where they live. The following session continued this conversation and included a deeper character reflection where the students were asked to choose a character and answer questions in the hot seat as that character. Here, we were interested in having the students explore perspective, empathy and character.

The Voyageurs

We then introduced the students to the voyageurs – an important aspect of Indigenous history – through the graphic novel, *The Voyageurs.* In this lesson, the students first did a pre-reading webquest, where they searched on the Internet, using only reputable websites, for the answer to the following question: Who were the Voyageurs? The students then took their information and put it into a mini-presentation using the free, web-hosted presentation software, Prezi.com. The students shared their Prezis with their classmates to further encourage collaboration and community building. After, the students were broken up into smaller groups for literature circles with assigned reading roles, for example, word wizard, artist, discussion director, and predictor.

True Hearts

To explore more deeply Indigenous culture, including the seven grandfathers, the historical familial/male/female roles and the role of nature and the community, we read the graphic novel *True Hearts.* As a pre-reading activity, the students created a digital collage on the iPads using any art-making app, like GoodNotes, that allowed the import of images, video, sound and/or text responding to the prompt: "What does it mean to love others?" We then read the story as a class; at the end, the students created tableau representations summarizing key plot points.

Fatty Legs & The Smudging Ceremony

To have the students better understand the residential school system and the injustices many Indigenous communities suffered during this time in Canadian history, we read the novella *Fatty Legs.* This text explores one girl's difficult experience as an Indigenous student in a residential school. Specifically, the book focuses on the emotional and psychological abuses many students suffered and the loss of their culture and/or identity. This was a particularly important theme to explore as the students learned about how one's culture, family and community shape one's identity and how a loss of connection to one's culture greatly affects the identity development process. The students were then visited by an Indigenous elder who introduced the students to a community circle and the smudging ceremony with burning sage for cleansing and truth-telling. He also talked about his experience as an individual who is half-Indigenous and half Caucasian and his own personal search for identity and belonging. The

students asked questions, made connections to their own family situations in group homes and they were able to hold Indigenous artefacts like a peace pipe and various musical instruments.

Touching Spirit Bear

In order to segue into the theme of bullying and why community, place and identity are important factors in preventing bullying, as a class, the students read the novel, *Touching Spirit Bear*. With this text, they further explored the community circle, circle justice and the role of elders and family in the decision-making and healing process in the Indigenous culture. In addition, the students explored the theme of bullying through the actions of the main character and his process of healing. While reading the novel, the students created their own mini-graphic novel, representing the main parts of the text through images, to further practice summarizing and to explore representation, symbolism and imagery. They also composed and recorded a song with a local song-writer on the topic of bullying, articulating what it is, why it is wrong and how one can deal with the effects of it/prevent it. In addition to this, the students worked with another local artist to take this song and transform it into a stop-motion animation movie in which the students helped write the script and make the set, props and characters.

Culminating Activity

For their culminating activity, the students worked in small groups to create a digital Public Service Announcement (PSA) on the topic of bullying – detailing the main characters, their roles, why bullying is harmful and what each person in the situation can do to prevent it. The PSAs included a one-minute commercial, a digital poster, a website, a comic strip, a song and a radio interview.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

At the start of the project, the students were interviewed to gain a sense of their prior knowledge of Indigenous culture, feelings toward literacy and their digital literacy skills. Throughout the project, the researchers recorded detailed field notes, collected students' planning notes and rough work, the digital texts they produced, still images/video recordings of the students' authoring activities and students' conversations and peer-evaluations. The researchers also engaged in informal discussions with the students and teachers, of which noteworthy points, themes, ideas or feedback were recorded through text or voice recorder. We also conducted a second set of interviews asking similar questions to the pre-project interviews in order to gauge if any attitudinal or knowledge-based shifts occurred in the students regarding their literate identities, skills or social presence in their learning community.

In order to code the data, we employed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) traditional coding procedures and then used Black's (2007) cross-case comparison to examine common emergent themes across the selected case-study samples. Thematic coding (Miles, 1994) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) were also used when examining the data sources. As major- and sub-themes emerged, the codes were revised and expanded. During the data analysis, we were particularly interested in what Bruner (1994) identifies as 'turning points,' looking for areas where the students presented increased confidence in their literate identities, skills, demonstrated agency and/or became more actively involved in the learning community.

Results

Cummins (2000) discusses the transformative possibilities of technology and its potential to assist students to make positive changes in their world. The use of technology in education should be judged by the knowledge gained and the skills attained, but most importantly, by the "social purposes to which these skills and information will be applied" (p. 536).

The study found that the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy and a strong community of practice accelerated the development of positive literacy identities. In turn, this allowed the struggling students to express themselves and contribute to the learning community much faster than with traditional literacies where stronger reading, writing and speaking skills would have been required. Furthermore, the students gained an awareness about modern and historical social justice issues surrounding Canadian Indigenous peoples. We report on our findings below and for clarity, they have been divided into our two research questions. The first question concerning a shift in pedagogy has been addressed from the perspective of the researcher and the teacher, for cross-comparison. The second question concerning an increase in digital literacy skills, traditional literacy skills and the creation of a classroom community of practice has been addressed from the perspective of the researcher and each of the students selected for close case study examination.

1) How does the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy, which takes place at the intersection of critical literacies and digital literacies, potentially transform teaching?

Researcher Perspective

The technology clearly leveled the learning 'playing field' and the normal pedagogical hierarchy was suspended during these digital, collaborative and interactive sessions. From our observations and informal discussions with the students, we saw they were more motivated to engage in the digital literacy activities, and that those who typically struggled with paper and pencil tasks excelled when using the digital tools, due to the inherent multimodality. The students were eager to use the iPads and laptops to create their own digital texts, and the level of engagement, empowerment and confidence rose dramatically for some students. Specifically, we saw them taking risks and experimenting with new programs, like how to import images to Prezi or how to layer text on stills in GoodNotes. As there was no one right way of doing something with the digital tools, the students had different entry points into the various assignments and their completion process.

A heightened level of creativity was also observed in the classroom, and the students all made gains in terms of their problem-solving and "trouble-shooting" skills. As a result, the students were naturally eager to share their knowledge and collaborate, which noticeably improved the sense of community in the classroom. As the teacher was no longer the "expert" in the room, the inquiry-based approach empowered the students, by promoting independence. Coming into the study, many of the students exhibited what appeared to be a type of learned-helpless or feelings of inadequacy in terms of their knowledge, literacy skills and/or ability to complete tasks. They would often check-out or claim to need a teacher or education assistant to help them complete a task. However, the inquiry-based and collaborative approach that digital tools facilitate in the classroom, gave the students room to re-define themselves as literate individuals and to feel a sense of agency and success they may not have previously experienced.

Teacher Perspective

The classroom teacher found that the partnership program with UOIT "…served to highlight the 'holes' in students' learning and in [her] teaching practices." As the students have changed schools and homes many times, the normal learning trajectory has been disrupted, resulting in noticeably large knowledge and skills' gaps. According to the teacher, these "gaps are difficult to identify through academic testing" and instead, it is "through the day-to-day learning environment that students exhibit their understanding or lack of understanding and their abilities to perform certain tasks." For this group of students, the multimodal tools and the collaborative group-work enabled them to participate in the learning activities and to communicate their ideas even when they lacked certain traditional literacy skills or did not know something related to the topic of study. For example, for one grade 8 student with low literacy levels, "removing the 'pen and paper' component from the equation and allowing alternative ways for this student to express himself, he [went] from rarely participating in class discussion to being an active participant." The variety of communication affordances inherent in digital tools meant that the students had multiple entry points into the texts or assignments. The teacher observed that the "students [had] the opportunity to create numerous arts-infused pieces used to assess their learning." Furthermore, the collaboration meant that the students relied on distributed knowledge, as opposed to individual knowledge, which kept them engaged, as they did not reach a knowledge wall or the resulting frustration that can come with that. As a result, the "students' confidence increased; students who ordinarily would not contribute to class discussions were fully engaged." The teacher elaborated on the benefits of creating this community of practice as she observed that "having the students do work in the conventional sense, i.e. pen to paper creates a learning environment that can be ambiguous, where individual students become lost." Instead, the digital tools present numerous opportunities for her to work from "the ground up, filling in all the gaps to ensure understanding and providing a richer creative experience." In addition, because at-risk students have difficulty with focus and perseverance with tasks that require sustained focus and effort, using iPad applications "removed a great deal of pressure from the students, allowing them to develop their abilities to interact, build trust, self-confidence, effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings and develop listening and cooperation skills." Overall, the digital tools and the collaborative learning environment created a "safe, secure, comfortable and non-judgmental learning environment." This is a major shift from the beginning of the year where students were "reluctant to work as part of a group."

2) How does the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy help accelerate the development of under-performing students' literacy identities, practices and skills so they can become agents of change in society?

Overall, we found that students made gains in their understanding of Indigenous issues, in conjunction with their digital and critical literacy skills. So a two –pronged effect was achieved as a result of using digital technology as a vehicle to the acquisition of knowledge.

During the project, the students created a variety of digital and multimodal texts responding to in-class discussions on the injustices of colonialism and the residential schools system. They asked important and difficult questions about inequities and injustices and internalized the content, as evidenced in the critical and empathetic perspectives they brought to their work and comments in class. It was through the creation of digital comic strips from the perspective of Indigenous individuals, stop-motion animation videos, digital collages, and

digitally-recorded songs that the students were able to play with perspective and empathize with the central characters and conflicts in all of these texts. They stretched their digital literacy skills through the use of programs like iMovie, Prezi, Glogster and Bitstrips and developed a critical and empathetic eye to the injustices Indigenous people and communities have suffered.

The following three case studies reported from the perspective of the researcher and the students themselves demonstrate the growth in literacy skills, literacy identities and observable and experienced feelings of agency:

Daniel

Researcher Perspective

Daniel was identified as operating at a kindergarten level in terms of his reading and writing skills. According to the teacher, he previously exhibited anger issues in the classroom, especially when it came to traditional literacy activities as he couldn't participate or perform at the same level as his peers. With the introduction of the research study and the critical digital literacies pedagogy, he was able to participate in the classroom activities as a Legitimate Peripheral Participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and to start crafting a new literacy identity – one where he was competent and had valuable insights to add to the learning process. The teacher noticed marked differences in his engagement in the classroom, his willingness to participate in the activities and the quality of work produced. He was able to express himself without the help of a teacher through digital tools, like iMovie, Prezi, GoodNotes and Bitstrips, which combine images and minimal text to communicate meaning. This autonomy gave him confidence and encouraged his participation in class.

Student Perspective

Daniel explained that he found it easier to express himself through visual means than writing assignments. He explained that, "I don't like to write stories and stuff, but I like when I can use pictures to tell the story. I have ideas, but I can't put them down on paper; it's hard for me. I like to be creative and make my ideas so that I can see things." This motivation to participate through visual literacy assignments was observed with Daniel throughout the project. His sustained focus when completing digital stories, specifically when using Bitstrips, was remarkable and the quality of work produced was exceptional. Although text was limited, the attention he paid to layout design, style, colour and balance showed a high level of understanding regarding visual communication.

Jordan

Researcher Perspective

According to the teacher, before the study, Jordan often exhibited acting-out behaviour; however, from the beginning of our research, his knowledge of and passion for technology focused his energy. He was extraordinarily engaged in the multimedia activities like the digital presentations, posters and comics. Furthermore, he was producing high-quality pieces of work based on his previous experience with a variety of technology programs, and he was extremely willing to help his peers and share his knowledge.

Student Perspective

Similar to Daniel, Jordan explained that "I have good ideas, but it's hard to get them out. When I can make my ideas into something different than just words on paper it's easier and I like it more." Jordan showed exceptional creativity when it came to creating digital posters and trouble-shooting/thinking creatively to solve problems and/or to exploit the affordances of the digital tools we used. As Jordan came into the project with more technology skills than some of the other students, he was able to adopt the role of tech-expert in the classroom. The teacher and other students looked to him to help solve any technical issues that arose. Where he was not known for his traditional reading and writing skills, he quickly developed an identity of being tech-literate. This noticeably increased his confidence and desire to share his knowledge and participate in class.

Dana

Researcher Perspective

Coming from an abusive past, Dana struggled with issues of self-control, attention, self-confidence and conflict resolution. As a result, at the beginning of the project when completing more traditional literacy practices, Dana appeared not to be engaged in the activities. However, Dana had natural artistic abilities and these were fostered through the multimodal tools we used to express meaning and understanding in class. For example, she was able to excel in areas that drew on layout design skills and the use of image and text to communicate meaning. When completing these types of tasks, she was completely engaged and it was obvious that she felt a sense of autonomy and pride in the creation process. She was very proud of the work she produced, sharing it with the teachers, researchers and her fellow peers with a positive and enthusiastic attitude. Furthermore, the affirmation she received for creating these pieces made a noticeable and positive impact on her literacy identity and confidence.

Student Perspective

Dana greatly enjoyed the multimodal, digital and visual aspects of the assignments we completed throughout the project. She always appeared extremely engaged in the classroom and driven to complete the activities thoroughly. She explained: "I liked when we did the song and the Claymation. VoiceThreads was one of my favourites…" After delivering her VoiceThreads presentation to the class, without any prompting, the students immediately applauded and asked how certain techniques were achieved. Her proud body posture and the smile of her face indicated that she felt a sense of accomplishment and recognition for the creativity and the quality of work she had put into this presentation. As Dana's strengths and interests lay in visual art and communication, she was always keen to engage in any activities that included digital posters, images or videos. She especially enjoyed programs that allowed her to exercise a great deal of control in the creative process: "I liked doing the Bitstrips…in Bitstrips you can get the background and can change colours on them. I liked the Voicethread one cause you can put videos, pictures and you can record what you want to say. It lets you be creative." Dana became known as the artist in the classroom and her visual literacy identity noticeably increased, as she and others looked to her as the visual expert in the classroom.

Educational Importance & Connection to Conference Themes

The study has found that a critical digital literacies pedagogy has the potential to shift teaching away from transmission-based practices and toward ones that are collaborative and

process-based. Subsequently, the teacher moved from expert to facilitator, developing the necessary scaffolding and guiding activities, but not providing direct instruction. In this way, the classroom was transformed into one that was learner-centered and reliant on a collaborative learning approach, which has been proven to increase participation, engagement and overall learning.

Furthermore, it is also clear that the use of a critical digital literacies pedagogy accelerated the development of positive literacy identities, which allowed these struggling students to express themselves and contribute to the learning community, as the tasks did not only rely solely on traditional reading, writing and speaking skills. For those students who previously exhibited aggression and/or inappropriate behaviour when it came to engaging in traditional literacy practices – these issues were reduced, as the students had a point of entry into the tasks and assignments and could experience success in their work. As a result of this, the students appeared to shed the adopted narrative or identity of struggling outsider and instead were able to use their new digital knowledge and skills to engage with the classroom work and achieve. It is evident that these new digital literacy practices have the potential to level the academic playing field, while also build the classroom community and the students' traditional literacy practices. This ultimately resulted in a safe and supportive space for the students to explore and construct stronger literacy identities. Finally, it was apparent that learning about social justice issues like Indigenous injustices and bullying, in tandem with learning new digital communication tools, helped sensitize the students to the plight of others. Showing the students how they can speak up, while also teaching them the tools to make a difference, has the potential to lay the ground work for action and the development of agentive literate identities.

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