Online inclusive pedagogy: A call-and-response dialogue on digital storytelling

Janet Ceja Alcalá\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Megan Austin\textsuperscript{b}, Mona Granroth\textsuperscript{c} and Breanne Hewitt\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston, MA, USA
\textsuperscript{b}John E. Jaqua Law Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA
\textsuperscript{c}Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA
\textsuperscript{d}Arizona State Museum, Tucson, AZ, USA

We propose digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for online Library and Information Science education that recognizes diversity and fosters reflection among students and teacher. In a course titled Documenting Diverse Cultures and Communities, students contemplated their role as future information professionals and produced a short digital story dealing with community, archives, and history. We use a call-and-response dialogue on storytelling to discuss how we access personal and social historical memory.

Keywords: Archives, digital pedagogy, digital storytelling, diversity, library and information science, inclusive pedagogy, memory, narrative inquiry, online education

1. Introduction

Janet: As a junior faculty member, one of my responsibilities is to teach in an online education program that values innovative pedagogy and caters to early 21\textsuperscript{st} century learning styles. In Library and Information Science (LIS), fostering remote educational opportunities goes as far back as the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century with correspondence courses [1] up to the vanguard of online education since the 1990s [9]. While the technical and assessment aspects of teaching online continue to be studied within and beyond LIS, there is a gap in the literature on how to address cultural inclusivity in online pedagogy.

This work focuses on our experiences with online pedagogy in a course that addressed cultural inclusivity within LIS. As online education forces us to re-think pedagogical approaches for a globally-connected population of learners we take heed of what Catherine McLoughlin keenly states: “the cultural dimensions of learning must be constantly problematised and not marginalized” [15]. Understanding the value of reflexivity as a tool for promoting a more inclusive theoretical practice [16][13][24]

\textsuperscript{*}Corresponding author: Janet Ceja Alcalá, School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, USA. E-mail: janet.ceja@simmons.edu.

0167-8329/16/$35.00 \textcopyright 2016 – IOS Press and the authors. All rights reserved
and the reciprocal relationship between teacher-student and student-teacher according to educational theorist Paulo Freire [8], we partake in a collective reflection between students and teacher to discuss how and what we learned about diversity by discussing a digital storytelling assignment that helped us engage with the cultural dimensions of learning. This participatory practice is significant because there is not much literature evidencing how to foster inclusivity online and the medium makes it challenging to unravel our experiences and emotions about diversity.

2. Course background

The digital storytelling assignment was developed for a course titled Documenting Diverse Cultures and Communities in a Master’s program in LIS in the United States Southwest with a robust curriculum focusing on cultural competency. Students enrolled in the program are expected to take at least one elective course focused on equity, diversity, and service. The course was designed to center upon the experiences of Native American and Latino populations with topics encompassing cultural heritage preservation, recovery, and transmission by way of autochthonous practices and collaborative efforts with allied library and archives professionals. The class incorporated literature from other fields and a speaker series on real-world projects, connecting us to active cultural community work. Introducing local practitioners, community members, and alumni into the LIS classroom is key to helping students feel they are a part of a larger community [10][19][23].

The course encouraged students to reflect on working with a diverse community of their choice and to consider their future responsibilities as stewards of information. Latino and Native American communities provided the cultural heritage frameworks, but students were free to choose who, how, and what topic to discuss and represent in their digital stories. All students were expected to have prior experience with or be willing to learn how to use consumer grade video-creation software independently.

The course used a blended learning format with different sections for on-campus and online students. The online section used asynchronous podcasts for the majority of the course content, while the lecture was delivered in person in the face-to-face section. Both sections interacted during the speaker sessions and via online communication in journal entries and discussion boards.

3. Theoretical framework

In the tradition of symbolic interactionism, I believe that social interaction forms and informs our behavior by way of language, culture, and the symbols that they afford, including the meanings we imbue on interactions. A central tenet of symbolic interactionism is that humans construct and define their social realities and thus take part in shaping the social order [2]. Applying this philosophy to digital storytelling,
we find a potential for building community between the story participants, the storyteller, and the audience. The digital story constructs a reality based on personal account that literally and symbolically reveals lived experience through vernacular video-making.

The founders of the Center for Digital Storytelling describe digital storytelling as having potential for catalyzing personal reflection and growth, education and awareness, movement building, policy advocacy, and research and evaluation [4]. As such, it also aligns with the ethic of an inclusive pedagogy, which seeks to advance equity, engagement, cultural relevance, and criticality [11, 21]. Digital storytelling combines traditional storytelling with video production, in a process-based approach with the following characteristics [12]: 1) stories have a thread of self-revelation; 2) a personal or first person voice is used for the narration; 3) lived experience is central to the story’s expression; 4) visual literacy is emphasized through photography; 5) a soundtrack is used for impact and meaning; 6) the duration of the story is short and raw; and finally, 7) the story’s intention and function is personal as opposed to satisfying a generic form or audience. The process encourages self-reflection and self-affirmation, which strengthens students’ personal and professional formation, as well as the whole learning community that interprets and discusses the different personal narratives brought to the LIS professions. For instance, Judi Moreillion and Ruth Nicole [18] introduced a digital storytelling assignment in an LIS course with public and school librarian students as a way for them to build advocacy skills through storytelling and to help increase their passion for the library profession.

In our course, digital storytelling helped promote student dialogue by valuing and leveraging their own experience and knowledge, and through the use of reflective practice to raise consciousness about the meaning of diversity. The students had to grapple with the personal tensions of representing and documenting themselves as socially or culturally diverse, or in relation to a social group or cause that spoke to diversity issues. As such, diversity was observed in terms of racial and ethnic categories, but also sex, gender, and human-to-non-human relationships.

3.1. Methods

To discuss the digital stories, the musical device of call-and-response [17], where one musical voice initiates a call followed by a response from other voices, was adapted. This back-and-forth has been identified as a signifying trope in the music of African and Afro-diasporic communities [7]. By casting a call from the students and receiving responses on their experience, we achieve polyphonic expressions that embody the diversity of our collective experiences in the course.

Participants were selected to participate in this project through a purposeful approach [14]. Students who produced digital stories that would be suitable for the topic were contacted. Twenty-eight students enrolled in the class, thirteen were in the online section, and from the latter group three students agreed to participate: Breanne Hewitt, Megan Austin, and Mona Granroth. All three identified as female and
Caucasian, which contrasts with my own identity in that I am a Chicana (Mexican-American). The demographics presented here put into perspective the most recent statistics on LIS educators, which found that 2.5% were Latino and over 80% of the LIS student body was white [22]. Thus, promoting cultural competency remains central to the work that I do as an educator, a duty that must be addressed by educators across the board as it is an issue that affects everyone.

After the three students agreed to participate, I watched their digital stories several times and conducted a close reading of their pieces. Using the qualitative analytic method of narrative inquiry, where the researcher is integral to the analysis and meaning-making process to understand experience with the participants [5], I identified and interpreted overlapping themes in their stories [20] and used them as calls to students.

4. Thematic reflections on diversity

Based on the assignment’s objective, all of the students’ digital stories inevitably shared some themes, such as serving diverse communities and choosing a specific type of professional identity to portray. At first, many students found it difficult to articulate their professional goals because they did not yet know much about the LIS field. The point of making a digital story was for students to research those opportunities and to consider what they wanted to achieve within LIS by reflecting on questions such as: What is my purpose in LIS? Why did I choose librarianship as a career? Is archival work for me?

The first theme I used to cast a call was “Diversity in Service.” Breanne, Megan, and Mona bring different degrees of expertise and interests to their career choices, which affected how they framed and represented themselves in their stories. Megan looked to her past when she was in law school preparing to become a lawyer and worked for the White Mountain Apache community. In her digital story, she revisited working on a “cow case” that ultimately changed her career direction. As a librarian, she now helps others access legal information to investigate law cases much like she used to as a lawyer. Mona’s digital story also engages with the past taking her back to growing up in a conservative religious community. Her story reveals how the public library became a refuge when growing up, because it allowed her to explore women’s rights, the history of feminism, especially the Suffragette Movement, and viewpoints that were different from those in her community. Finally, Breanne discovered part of her family history through her interaction with archival records. Having met her maternal grandfather only as a child and not knowing his Native American identity, Breanne researched this aspect of her family and cultural heritage.

The second theme addressed in the dialogue is that of “Public and Private Memory,” which was introduced in all of the digital stories. All three engaged with very personal and emotional memories that they made public through various forms of expression to convey meaning. Aesthetic, visual, and aural qualities worked in parallel with the memories they revealed in their narratives. We explored and reflected on these varying memories through the following discussion.
5. Teacher-student and student-teacher call-and-response dialogue


Breanne: The story I present is my journey of learning about my family’s heritage and who my maternal grandfather was through the archival collections that I have processed within my career. My journey starts with my only memory of my grandfather, him sitting at the kitchen table. While preparing for my career as an archivist, many of the collections I have processed triggered questions about different aspects of my grandfather’s life that I did not know. Through the help of my mother and my second cousin, our family historian, they were able to shed a light on who my grandfather was as a son, a brother, a husband, and a father whose voice will never be remembered, but whose story will resonate in our memory for a lifetime.

Janet: I know your experience with archival work was first introduced to you as a history student and much like a historian you anchored your work in the archives. Archives were the tools that helped spark your interest in exploring your grandfather’s Native American identity. You begin the digital story by describing your grandfather and who we immediately see in the picture as “not moving or speaking,” but by the end of the story, he ceases to be that static figure just “sitting at the table.” Can you say more about how your experience in various archives triggered questions about your grandfather?

Breanne: My interest in archives was sparked when I volunteered on a project to complete data entry of marriage records at Rutherford County Archives in Tennessee. The project ultimately started my path to a career as an archivist. As discussed in the video, this is also where my inquiry about my grandfather’s identity started.

I have very few memories of my grandfather; the memories I do have are only fragments from the times I visited him with my family. I was so young when he died that my memories are mostly observations. That is probably why I never asked questions about my grandfather until I started working in archives. The marriage records and the Battle of Little Bighorn records triggered some of my questions about him. I knew how my parents and my paternal grandparents got married but not my maternal grandparents. I wanted to know more about what their lives were like, of how they met and what their life was like as a young couple. Later, after working with the Little Bighorn collection, I learned more about how important the battle was to United States history. I know the Little Bighorn battle shifted the relations with Native American tribes and the United States Government. It wasn’t until working in archives that I knew I wanted to learn how these issues affected my grandfather’s tribe and how his Native American identity affected his time in the army.

Janet: It sounds as though your interaction and handling of these records helped unleash this forgotten part of your family history. I’m curious as to why you hadn’t investigated your Native American heritage until now?
Breanne: In the beginning of the digital story project, I had some difficulty framing diversity within my career path. I knew there was a connection but I did not know where. It was not until I spoke to my mom that I started to remember the archival records that I worked with and how they got me to ask questions about my grandfather. I always knew that my grandfather was Native American but it was not until working with the Battle of Little Bighorn and Sand Creek Massacre records that I became interested in learning more about my Native American heritage. For the first time, I wanted to know who my grandfather was, and of his life before “sitting at the table.” The reason I had not investigated my Native American heritage was because ever since I was a little girl I did not feel connected to it. When one is young or in their teens, if your ethnic heritage is not a significant part of your everyday life, you tend to not think about it. Having never been exposed to Native American culture, it was difficult to really understand the heritage, and I did not know how to explore it until my work in the archives and this project. For me, the archive was an initiator, to finally explore my grandfather’s life and my Native American heritage. It was my second cousin who was able to shed light on many aspects of my grandfather’s life and our heritage because he had most of the family records.

Janet: Besides your interaction with the records, your family was also significant in filling in memory “gaps” about your grandfather’s Native American heritage. This makes me think about the role of memory and orality as a taken for granted network of information that helps us contextualize the past. In this case, those “archival gaps” we often read about in the archival literature were “filled” with your family’s personal memories. Similarly, I find it curious how you did not view your cultural heritage as a significant part of your everyday life and in a sense it was taken for granted.

Breanne: The digital story was about me not having any significant memories of my grandfather. Because of that I had to rely on family member’s memories to be able to paint a picture of who he was. When talking to my family members, I started to see that their memories could create a family lore because everyone has a different interpretation of a certain event. Memories can be very selective and can change over time, so it can be hard to distinguish whether someone’s memory is accurate or not. This is where archival records could be beneficial because they are more fact-based and permanent. However, there is always the chance that the records may create more lore as the creator of the record could have miswritten or misinterpreted the information. When memories are murky or selective, archival records can clear any misconceptions, such as on whether or not my grandfather really went missing in action for three days during his time in World War II. I know that over the years family members could confuse someone’s story with another. For the digital story, I had to take everyone’s different memories to create an interpretation of who my grandfather was.

Janet: I agree that records can clear up misconceptions and that they can also lie to us. Knowing that you brought together competing family memories into your digital story imbues it with sense of authenticity; you were able to tame divergent interpretations in a very skilled manner, particularly with the use of sound. I especially liked
how you set-up and conveyed the part about your grandfather missing in action as an “unknown truth” in your family. I’m sure it will be exciting to investigate this further. Overall, your digital story resonated with me as one of personal discovery. Your journey, moreover, hinges on private and almost secret memories probed by your exposure to and handling of archival documents. Additionally, I found that as you unraveled and gave life to your grandfather’s identity, the music also played a critical role in the narration. I noticed a series of sound signposts that helped me follow along the historical periods you traced; the music guided me back and forth through different scenes and it helped me to both isolate and link the many memories you were recounting.

Breanne: Initially, I felt as though I did not put that much focus on the music. Now, looking back, I realize that the music is what gave me an emotional connection to my grandfather. While I got to choose which stories to discuss and which photographs to use I still felt I did not have any emotional connection to him because those stories and photographs were from my family members and not me. Choosing the music is when I actually started to feel a connection to him. The music was my contribution in telling his story. It was a way for the audience and me to make connections with what was being told and the meaning behind that memory. When I hear the songs from the digital story my memory triggers back to those stories that I have told. The project created new memories that have allowed me to connect to my grandfather.

Janet: You constructed new memories not only with all of the information you gathered and synthesized concerning your family’s recollections but also, sonic memory. It is fascinating how the digital story’s soundscape triggers a new type of experience for you personally as it does publicly for us viewers. This makes me think of how we forget about the importance of sound as a property of memory just as smells and tastes are too. Audiovisual archives and aural memory in particular are another type of diversity that as educators we should be thinking about in terms of curricular design.


Megan: My story is a deep reflection of my first experience with legal work. In the story, I remember my summer job at the tribal attorney’s office for the White Mountain Apache tribe, a time when I was grappling with learning law, legal analysis, and how to deal with “real life” legal issues, but also struggling to understand the cultural complexity of how Western legal principles affected and interacted with indigenous communities. I recount the story of working on a case involving a cow, owned by a member of the tribe that had wandered off the reservation and was being claimed by a rancher from off the reservation. The case was a source of humor in the office. “What did you do in your summer legal job?” “I worked on a cow case.” Underlying the humor, the cow case caused dissonance, and represented the injustices that often result from imposing Western legal principles on indigenous communities.
At the time I created the digital story, my experience working for the tribe was remote in time and I had not carried forward any official documentation of my summer job there. Recreating that experience in order to tell the story presented challenges. I had to confront my twenty-something year old “self” and accompanying naive perspectives through a lens that was very removed in age and experience. Because I had no photographs or documents from that time, the images in the digital story are hand drawn. The background soundtrack is mostly music sung or played by me. The raw-ness of the images and sound, for me, was the only authentic way to recall and re-examine that experience.

Janet: Your story’s narrative makes a haunting appearance in your life just as your entering your third career: law librarianship. The narrative also gives an impression of being both hopeful and cautious about how you will serve diverse communities as a librarian. You ask: “Someday, I might know how to walk across boundaries, to cross borders to connect with a community of people on their own terms, without my legal books.” Can you elaborate more on the sentiment surrounding this statement?

Megan: The description of my memory as “haunting” is perceptive, and useful in understanding my circuitous route to law librarianship. Law school and legal work seem so distant and vague sometimes, like a presence without a distinct shape or form. After law school, I practiced law for twelve years, but not in the area of indigenous rights that originally brought me to Arizona. After my experience working for tribe, I was unsure of what role that I, as a Caucasian woman, could take on if I worked with indigenous communities. I felt that if I were to work for a tribe, my work would not be truly authentic. Although I was aware of my cultural biases, awareness, I feel, would not be good enough. I believed that as an outsider, I would never really be able to do the work how it deserved to be done.

My work as an attorney instead focused on defending people accused of committing crimes, and then working on civil rights cases filed by people who were incarcerated. After twelve years of law practice, I made an abrupt career change to work as a music and musical theatre teacher at a small school that my children were attending. After six years, I decided to find my way back to some kind of legal work, and stumbled upon a fellowship program at the University of Arizona College of Law library. Law librarianship seemed to me to provide an opportunity to serve many different communities of people. As my digital story shows, I strive to find ways to serve communities on their own terms and to help empower people to find answers to their legal questions. That is the strongest attraction of law librarianship for me. There is still a tension though. I enjoy the academic community and the challenging projects that I encounter in an academic institution. But I wonder if somehow, I can find a way to work through an academic institution to serve communities that traditionally have been underserved or ignored in terms of access to legal information?

Janet: There are a number of social justice projects currently being undertaken by academic librarians and archivists across the country. In the Southwest there is the Human Rights Documentation Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin and the recently debuted Documented Border Project at the University of Arizona. There
has also been an increase in the professional literature on social justice and human
rights frameworks to help guide librarians and archivists in serving and empowering
oppressed communities. Although, I would say that some of the pioneering work
in this area can be attributed to the Progressive Librarians Guild and LIS educators
such as Kathleen de la Peña McCook, among others. Adding your expertise to this
growing activism in librarianship can enable you to work with other librarians and
archivists working on issues you find pressing; if not now, perhaps later in your
career.

Can you say more about your digital story’s production process?
Megan: I resisted the digital story medium at the beginning of the course, thinking
initially that digital stories lacked authenticity due to the very fact that they were dig-
ital. Perhaps underlying the initial resistance was a feeling that creating a digital story
would expose memories or thoughts, in a visual and public way that I felt uncom-
fortable exposing. The initial difficulties did not go away, but instead transmuted into
indecision about which particular story to tell. I first wanted to tell someone else’s
story (again, the avoidance of self-exposure); but after reading course materials on
digital storytelling, I knew that I had to tell my story. After coming up with the idea
of recounting my experience working on the cow case, I discarded and accepted that
story several times before I committed to it. Once committed to the story, I actually
enjoyed the process of re-creating images and voicing those haunting memories that
had been rattling around for so long. Although drawing the images by hand probably
took substantially more time than uploading digital images, the process was incred-
ibly satisfying. The digital story became an authentic medium for me, and it forced
me to process some memories in a concrete way. I wanted the story to represent
some growth in my thoughts about working with diverse communities, and I wonder
if my story did that, or if the lingering question at the end instead demonstrated that
I do not have any concrete answers about how, as a law librarian, I can serve diverse
communities on their own terms?

Janet: I certainly read an element of growt h, but I also noticed that same hesitation
revealed earlier about what you as a law librarian could actually do to assist under-
served communities. To touch a bit on how you represented growth through your
digital story’s narrative, I would say that through its tactile reconstruction you relay
the story from the point of view of who you are now; thus, the growth is indirectly
represented. The re-documentation process also demonstrates how we suppress past
experiences and can revisit them through the creation of new documentation. Ad-
ditionally, you raised a significant epistemological question when you ask, “What
if the tribe didn’t follow the same ownership principles or have the same kinds of
thoughts about property as those of the state or federal court system?” To me, this
statement is critical in affirming the value of difference, but also caution when ap-
plying information theories in service of communities unlike our own.

Megan: In terms of defining or considering diversity in LIS education, I think the
digital story underlined the importance of finding a cognitive awareness of silences,
of memories that are untold. That awareness seems essential. However, I clearly still
struggle with the next step. Once we are aware that voices of diverse communities have been silenced or left out, how do we find a way to document those memories and stories in an authentic way? What I would like to see in LIS education is a guided opportunity, such as an internship or field course, to work with a community of people in a collaborative way to document memories and stories on that community’s terms.

Janet: That is something I have struggled with – how do we create opportunities for students to authentically engage with the complexity of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sex, and identity politics through online education? Can it even be done meaningfully?

Megan: Your questions bring up another issue that I struggled with a little bit, and that is the mild frustration I had with online learning. All of my previous education involved sitting in a classroom talking to my fellow students and professors. With online learning, I felt that “discussion boards” led to disjointed conversations that were more like stressful performances of “showing what you know” rather than actually sharing ideas in a spontaneous and authentic (there’s that word again) way. So, I think part of my yearning for an internship or field experience is wanting to interact in person with an academic community as well as a community of people who seek to have their stories documented.


Mona: My digital story clocks in at about 5 minutes with around 10 seconds of credits and attributions afterwards. It encompasses two stories – that of Emmeline Pankhurst, a British suffragette from the early 20th century; and my own story about growing up in a patriarchal and very religiously conservative church and society. In the story, I tell of how Pankhurst became a leader of opposition within the British government in an effort to garner the vote for women, and speak of how her experiences were one of many that led me away from a traditional life as a wife and mother and into a more activist role. Photos of Pankhurst and suffragists serve as images in the first half of the video, whereas the second half moves into photos of myself as a child, colored black and white to match the overall vision of the story. I also included quotes from Pankhurst that I read aloud.

Janet: Your digital story expressed a great commitment to library service; this affirmation and feminist positioning is most powerful when you state: “I am a librarian because I want to be a force of positive education for young women. Like my public library that gave me a book on a forgotten woman of history that changed my life, I want to give young girls the tools to be leaders and innovators because in the textbooks of the future the contributions of fifty percent of the planet should not be contained to a few lines in the back of the book.” This quote also gave me the impression that you have had an important historical trajectory with libraries that now grounds you firmly as an advocate.
Mona: In some ways I feel like serving communities harkens back to my church upbringing. Women in my childhood church are traditionally mothers and wives, and serve their families as an act of selfless devotion. I knew early on that this type of service did not sit well with me. I did not see myself having children and was always upset at the idea that women so readily gave up on the idea of education in favor of staying at home. However, once I started working in my local library, I realized that what I loved most was helping people. This was solidified when I started working at a downtown branch of a public library a few years ago. There were so many people in need that came to the library for assistance with everything from finding a book to filling out SNAP benefits online. I feel that everything I do in the library is in service of the community. It’s why I don’t mind the changing notion of libraries, and have chosen to embrace the more community minded role as opposed to the idea of a library being a book repository.

Janet: The statement about how you have chosen to embrace the changing nature of libraries makes me wonder about the type of change you see yourself working towards in the future? Especially as we see growing social and economic disparity in our communities.

Mona: I currently work in an academic library, and while I enjoy what I do, and feel I provide an important service, I would love to go back to public libraries. I feel that in public, you impact a person from birth to death. People go through stages of needing the resources of the library and I want to be there to provide them. While of course I’m adept at assisting everyone, it is my particular mission to assist women and young girls because they are often the most vulnerable in our society.

Whenever I tell someone that I’m a librarian, invariably I get some form of “oh, are those still needed because of Google?” or, “well, people only read eBooks so libraries are becoming obsolete, right?” I don’t care if someone utilizes the library and never checks out books- they’re using our other services, and they find those important, and I think that’s what libraries are moving towards, becoming more of a community center rather than just a book repository. I grew up in an area with a strong sense of community where there were many opportunities for people to come together. I don’t see those opportunities existing as much anymore, particularly now that I live in a city. Libraries help to bridge that gap and to become inclusive of everyone in the community. When I explain to people why I love being a librarian, and why I think it’s an important profession, I don’t mention money or education or schedule perks. It’s always that this public service is what I want to devote my life to- serving my community and the people in it in any way that I can.

Janet: Thinking longitudinally about the impact of a library on a person’s life – from birth to death – is powerful. Yet, libraries are some of the first institutions to be threatened by budget cuts; for instance, the recent education budget cuts in Arizona will inevitably affect libraries, whether it eliminates jobs, reduces services, or it creates new demands for public libraries. If libraries have a positive effect on people throughout their lives, and these institutions are targeted and dismantled because
they are in the way of political ideologies, the comment you made about embracing the changing role of libraries is ever more important. Perhaps it is best that we also consider libraries as having a life cycle of sorts that must be continuously transformed given such threats and remarkable power to foster social inclusivity. Your digital story and how you situate libraries historically and personally in your life is a prime example.

Mona: My undergraduate degree is in American history, and had it not been for my love of libraries, I probably would have gone for a PhD in history. Women are marginalized from history. Women make up so many contributions to our society and yet they are consistently undervalued and dismissed, even within the library profession, which is predominantly female. The public school system of education is designed in such a way that women occupy a small portion of the curriculum, thus giving credence and legitimacy to the misogynist viewpoint that women don’t matter. For me, this idea was created and solidified not only in my church upbringing but also in my early formative education. The only place that gave me an alternate viewpoint, that women did have a voice, and should be heard, was the public library. I often see my role in the library as an activist librarian.

Janet: One of the most striking elements of your digital story was your decision to read the quotes you introduced by Emmeline Pankhurst. Memory as voice stands out as an aesthetic at the beginning and the end of your digital story, and which worked in parallel with your own feminist narrative. In fact, you practically embody Pankhurst through the re-articulation of her words; words that speak to the collective memory of the Suffragette Movement – a bold and public display of activism. Your own story, on the other hand, was a private memory of growing up in a religious conservative society that now anchors your own feminist activism for women’s rights.

Mona: My initial decision to read out the quotes by Pankhurst was at first an aesthetic one – I did not like the idea of just having the words be flat on the screen and I wanted to give them life somehow. Somewhere around the 10th time of reading it out loud, I felt like I was becoming a messenger for Pankhurst. This was an odd feeling for me. Deciding which quotes to use by Pankhurst took a lot of time. She had a lot of great, quotable speeches, and I found myself wanting to use a lot of them. However, I had to balance her words with my own.

This story was also a reconstruction of memory for me. It has been some years since I attended my childhood church, and even longer since I had conflicting opinions about my place in the world. I’m very aware, however, that my perception of my church and the impact it had on me regarding my perceived value is different than how many of my friends and family view the church. I am still close to my relatives that remain in the church, as well as many childhood friends who have taken very different paths than me in adulthood. I respect their choices, and recognize that my feelings of overwhelming patriarchy and oppression were not and are not felt by everyone in the religion. For myself, in creating this digital story, I had to think back on all of the emotions that fog my high school years, years in which I felt different,
inadequate, anxious about my future, and in many ways an outsider because I looked around at women in my church and thought, “is this it?”

Janet: How emotionally challenging was it to revisit your childhood and reconnect with that younger self? Something that initially concerned me about this assignment was the type of emotional support online students would need should they tackle parts of their past that had been emotionally suppressed. I tried to create different mechanisms for student interaction and support, and I know that some activities worked and others didn’t. At the same time, I imagine that working on this project as an online student perhaps removes a barrier in exposing oneself to others. It is not as though you are anonymous, but there’s a kind of detachment that may work to the advantage of students who may otherwise have trouble opening up emotionally in person.

Mona: It was emotionally challenging to think back, particularly on my teenage years. I moved from Michigan, where my church was located, to Arizona when I was 17 so in many ways I didn’t deal with the feeling of officially leaving the church. In my mind and in my heart, I knew that I didn’t believe the same way but moving saved me from having to live in the area while feeling that way. Because of that, I don’t think I ever fully dealt with my confusion and emotions from that time period. I’ve always been the type of person to just keep going no matter the adversity, so to sit down and actually reflect on those years for an assignment was difficult.

The level of exposure was something I was comfortable with, given that I was online and not in person. And I’m not a shy person – I volunteer in class and don’t mind giving presentations and the like, but I’ve never enjoyed writing personal narratives or talking about my personal experiences. One of the aspects I liked the most were the journal entries, because it felt more informal compared to the discussion boards. Something about logging in to the online class, and writing in a discussion board, feels more formal and judged than the journal entries, which felt like an anonymous blog being thrust out into the ether of the Internet.

6. Concluding thoughts

Janet: In spite of their brief and bite-sized nature, digital stories have the power to honestly display our cultural and social differences as well as our shared experiences. If thoughtfully designed as part of online courses, digital storytelling can be a powerful tool to reveal our humanity in what can easily become a detached online learning experience. At the same time, that detachment can be harnessed through digital storytelling to include students who are less willing to share their personal experiences through video-making. As spectators, students become keenly aware of their peers’ experiences and have an opportunity to learn about their classmates on an intimate level. Theorist Christian Metz once said, “Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator” (emphasis in original) [16]. I
would add to Metz’s observation that the experiences that inspired the making of students’ digital stories also inspired video production activities that were as affective in nature. Megan, for instance, literally constructed her past by creating documentation that represented a time period for which she had no documentary evidence. Whereas Breanne discovered her Native American identity through documentation that already existed in public and private archives. In both cases, tactile interaction with documentation created affective experiences linking their immediate present to a past that had been tucked away. This interactivity with documentation, moreover, is a manner through which archives can have an impact on online pedagogy.

The power of the moving image cannot be ignored in its ability to move us, but one central question that emerges from this discussion is: how far can we be moved to engage in library and archival social praxis? Because it is not enough for students to create and consume digital stories within an online learning community, they should also feel confident and empowered to act as advocates of diversity initiatives. Megan’s point about having a field experience attached to online courses speaks to the benefit of developing a successful model of service learning that caters to online students. Not to mention that other students, such as Mona enter the classroom as activists; these students are likely to expect to be active participants in service-learning and community-based projects.

Online education, then, has the potential to become a powerful social force much like libraries have been by providing access to alternate viewpoints and as represented in Mona’s digital story. Another important observation that emerged from our discussion is that in order to foster diversity in LIS education, online pedagogical models ought to be flexible, blended, and socially engaging. Thus, diversity in online education means taking into account different learning styles and developing a curriculum to help students build skills that allow them to wrestle critically with diverse narratives, affirm their social and cultural identities, and as Breanne encountered, to be challenged to explore taken-for-granted phenomena that affect our lives and society.

References