

Doing Digital Poetry Empowers Language Learners

By Lynn Chih-Ning Chang

Silence

It never goes away from my room

Where is my old life?

Noisy but not boring

Exhausting but Energetic

Silence

Shadow in my small room

It follows me and sticks around me

Especially at nights, like a nightmare!

-- David (Pseudonym) 2010

This is the excerpt from David's poem, "Silence." David described how lonely he was studying in the U.S. This poem evoked many international students' emotions when he shared it in the writing workshop. Since many international students had experienced the same feelings, this poem led to a great discussion and built a connection among these students.

I first worked with David when he enrolled in a writing workshop for international students in 2010. David (pseudonym) is a Turkish student pursuing his master's degree in literacy education at our university. He always feels his English is not as good as other colleagues. The feeling of "I am not good enough" was a pain which tortured him. He used to be one of the best students in his country but he feels he is behind when confronting other outstanding students in the US:

I graduated from all the schools I attended with an honor's degree. I was always one of the most successful students in my classes in Turkey. But here, I feel like I am the worst student of the class. (Email, Aug 28th, 2010)

I felt sad to hear his frustrations. I witnessed his progress in the writing workshop and I've come to regard him as an effective writer and poet. He should be more confident. In order to help David regain his confidence and continue his poetry learning, I asked him to do an informed independent study of poetry with me. He was delighted and agreed right away. I then designed a non-credit, four-month course. Since I have been obsessed with digital writing, I encouraged him to compose digital poetry. I was wondering how that would affect his learning. The purpose of this case study was to discover what happens when working with David, to record his reading, writing and technology processes when participating in the activities, and to infer suggestions for teaching poetry to international students.

Just What Is Digital Poetry?

According to the online Wikipedia (2011), "Digital poetry is a form of electronic literature, displaying a wide range of approaches to poetry, with a prominent and crucial

use of computers. Digital poetry can be available in form of CD ROM, DVD, as installations in art galleries, and in certain cases, also recorded as digital video or films, as digital holograms and on the Internet.” Usually in the language arts classroom, digital poetry is known as the combination of poetry text, sound, and images created by digital tools. Some common software used in this creation are: “ Windows Movie Maker” “ PhotoStory 3” “ I-movie” and “ PowerPoint.”

Literature Review: What Does the Research Say?

There have been several studies conducted in investigating the impact of the convergence of poetry and technology in EFL (Learning English as a Foreign Language), and ESL classrooms. (Learning English as a Second Language).

Campbell & Warburton (2001) found that students display greater understanding and skill in the use of figurative language and poetic forms, and become more adept with the use of various computer graphics and word processing programs. Students are able to develop greater enthusiasm for poetry, to recognize of its place both in traditional and popular culture, to appreciate the unique and enduring power of figurative language, and to engage their imagination and the emotions. Also, students become more "visually" literate by communicating their ideas graphically as well as verbally.

Carroll & Carney's (2005) study “Personal Perspectives: Using Multimedia to Express Cultural Identity” also supported the use of technology in literacy teaching. From their observations, interviews and analysis of students' artifacts, Carroll& Carney (2005) claimed, “the technology is a great tool enabling students to tell their stories with music,

photos, and video, but she realized that the assignment itself is the important part. All the pieces, technological and pedagogical, had come together!”

A Canadian researcher, Huges (2007) pointed out, “ It is important for students to be able to read and write or construct texts in multiple genres. Moving beyond pen and paper and using a variety of representing strategies (including visual arts or drama, for example) provide students opportunities to express themselves and demonstrate their understanding in alternate ways” (p. 2). Nowadays, we have diverse students from different backgrounds, carrying different aptitudes, with different needs in the classroom; it is essential to provide them as many learning options as possible to help them learn in and out of the class. Learning pattern is changing, and teaching pattern needs to be adjusted as well. Teachers should strive for adopting the meaningful approaches to engage students.

Huges (2007) continued, “New media have an immersive and performative potential that encourages students to get inside a poem and play with it. Giving students opportunities to create poems or respond to and annotate existing poems using new media provides them with opportunities to use the technology in meaningful ways” (p. 3).

Methodology: David’s Poetry Journey

I met with David every other Friday at a coffee shop located in the Student Union on campus. Each meeting was about one hour. It was usually quiet on Friday morning, so we were able to talk without interruptions. Each meeting was recorded and I kept filed notes and a reflective teaching journal. I often jotted down words and phrases about my observation during the meetings and expanded them in short narratives when reflecting at

home.

The study started with some poetry experiments, such as doing a list poem, sharing our favorite poem, and then composing a digital poem. (A list poem consists of a list of items. The spectrum of items can be as broad as experience. List poems can be long or short; rhymed or unrhymed.) In the activity of doing a “list poem,” David composed a poem titled, “I saw something here” in which he described his experience of visiting a museum.

I Saw Something Here

The gun, the hat, and the stick...

They said they are American history,

But, I saw my grandpa here...

The guest towel, the baby clothes, and other home stuff...

They believe all those are from American history,

But, I saw my grandma here...

Gold, diamonds, and those beautiful statues...

Old shoes, kitchen stuff, and different kinds of calendars...

They are from history...

It doesn't matter from what country,

America, Turkey, Greece, or Italy...

I saw my ancestors here...

David said his visit to the museum reminded him of his grandparents and his

culture. He told me he could always find the connection among different cultures. He talked about the way Turkish people entertain guests and showed me some photos he brought from his country. He seemed to enjoy sharing items from his country, so I asked if he would like to introduce me to a Turkish poem he likes. He agreed.

At our next meeting, he shared a poem written by Turkey's first president. He read the poem aloud in Turkish first. While David was reading, I saw tears in his eyes. I couldn't understand what the poem was about, but I felt it was such an emotional and powerful piece. David read it beautifully. I was moved.

And then David translated some of the sentences for me and told me its main idea. That poem described how difficult it was to get the nation's independence. It talked about the war and the spirit of the nation. David also showed me some photos of that poet (their first president) and the war. He told me the reason he came to the U.S is that he loves his country. He received money from the Turkish government, and he is determined to make a contribution to his country when he gets his degree. He sees his country as one of the most important things in his life. I was stunned to hear how patriotic he is. I seldom see young people with this sentiment nowadays. That meeting lasted for 2 hours, twice as long as our regular meeting. David told me he really enjoyed it. I appreciated that he shared his favorite poem with me, and I encouraged him to compose it as a digital poem. I knew David had experience in creating digital writing during his summer participating in the Missouri Writing Project. Therefore, I didn't worry about the technical problems he might have.

Two weeks later, he brought to our meeting a digital poem about the Turkey's

Independence War. He said it was a work to show his love of his country. He used a song about the war as background music and recorded the poem rephrased in his voice. He did the subtitle in his native language but read it aloud and recorded in English. It was amazing to see this combination. He used some photos he found about Turkish Independence War online. It was wonderful to see how proud David was when he talked about his work. He appeared very confident. He said he enjoyed this project very much. Watch David's poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys2-Sh3gMs0>

Findings: David's Transformation

Attitude Change

David became more confident about himself. In the first meeting with him, he told me: "I don't want to share my poems in front of those Americans; they would feel my poems are like children's poems." I was sad he felt ashamed of his works. His writings were better than he thought. Yet it was exciting to see David's changes after a couple of months. He became eager to share his poems and read them aloud. He has become more confident about reading and writing poetry. He wrote poems when he felt right. One day, he composed a poem when he visited his friend. He told me, "They are such a happy family and I just felt like I can write a poem about it."

A Happy Family Portrait

*The girl asked her father,
“Daddy, why don’t we go on a vacation?”
The dad replied, “Where you want to go honey.”
“I don’t know” said the girl, “but far away from here...”
The dad whispered “such as New York?”
The girl sprang to her feet, and replied “yea, why not?”
“Well, wait a second.” said her mommy, “we need to have a good plan”
“So, you have a plan honey” asked to his wife, daddy.
“Yea, I am wondering Niagara Falls”
The girl was screaming “Oh my God, Niagara Falls”
“Well, how about this” said daddy, and everyone snapped to attention.
“First Niagara, then New York and Philly”
The girl became crazy, “I was wondering Philadelphia, too”
And continued “I love you daddy, you are just wonderful”
“You need to thank your mommy, honey” said daddy with laughing.
“I know” said the girl, “I have a wonderful family”
They went Niagara first, then New York, and Philly.
They enjoyed so much, and showed us the beauty of being family.*

I am glad he is comfortable with poetry writing and that he can find poetry everywhere in his life.

Poetry, Media, & Cultural Identity

David shared his nation's history, his affections to his nation and his dreams. Through poetry, he seemed to see himself more clearly and find his identity. For most of the international students, maintaining self-identity is a big challenge while adjusting to a new culture. Poetry is a way for David to remind himself of roots and build his cultural identity. The combination of music, photos, and texts told such incredible stories. It meant much more to see the video than to hear him talk about where he comes from. It truly helped me to see who he really is. Technology is a great tool that enabled David to tell his story with music, photos, and video, but he realized that the task itself is the important part. When students use multimedia to do the assignments, Carroll & Carney (2005) stated, "All the pieces, technological and pedagogical come together."

Digital Poetry Enhances Language Learning

When asking about David's process of doing his digital poetry, he told me that the images and music helped him express his thoughts:

When I saw the images or heard the music, I sometimes came up with some words. Sometimes, I would look up some English words to express my feeling. I learned some new words from the online dictionary or google site. But it was hard to translate every word from Turkish to English....those images also helped fill the gap. (Interview, Dec 3rd, 2010)

David was able to relate to poetry in new and engaging ways as he read aloud, responded to, and integrated technology in his study of poetry. Digital poetry "powered

him up” as he earned confidence in playing around with the arrangement of the images, sounds, and texts. He responded to a poem written by Turkey’s first president emotionally and interpreted it from his own experience. He took an active role in experiencing literature. Rosenblatt’s reader response theory (1978) recognizes that meaning-making is a transaction between the text and the reader. David apparently constructed meanings by using visuals and sounds to meet his needs. He might be limited in expressing himself in English, but he had found a way to turn up his voice.

Lesson Learned

My findings coincide with the previous research: digital poetry helps ESL/EFL students learn poetry. Below are some lessons that I learned from working with David.

Lesson one: Integration Of Technology and Reader Response.

One successful approach to teach poetry involves integrating technology with reader response. Rather than focusing on a close analysis of the text itself being central to reading, reader response encourages students’ engagement with the text. Reading and responding literature becomes an engaging “event” (Stuart, 2010, p. 27). I strongly agree with Stuart’s statement. From this case study, I learned that David’s manipulation of the image and his control of sounds and flow of the video affects his emotions and thinking. He told me that his words became stronger after mixing with the music and image. That poem had become *David’s creation*, not just the poet’s original work.

Engaging students in technology can be fascinating. Students will have a chance to physically take part in making meaning process from a piece of literature. I see digital poetry and the original written poem as two different works. When students compose digital poetry, they turn their poems into their own experiences. As Stuart (2010) states, “Digital poetry is a way to bridge the study of and respond to poetry through the media of the 21st century student.”

Lesson Two: Digital Poetry Helps EFL Learner Get Over The Language Hurdles

Digital poetry allows David to get over some of his language hurdles and focus more on the content of his work. He used images and music to help convey what he wanted to say. Digital tools helped with listening and speaking skills as David was able to record his voice and embed the file to enhance the work. While recording, David got the chance to practice his oral language and he was more aware of the tone and the pronunciation of his speech. David told me he practiced many times before he could get the one satisfied him. He improved some of his pronunciation through self-corrections.

Lesson Three: Digital Poetry Creates A Transformational Experience

David took the viewers to his country where his poem came from and that is also the place where viewers can hear, can see, can feel his country’s story-the independent war. The images and the sound he included enhanced the text and can bring up viewers’ emotions more easily. King (2009) stated:

The ability of a digital poem to create a transformational experience, to take the viewer to that place where poetry comes from, a place of intense internal understanding, is greatly enhanced by appealing to the mind in

multiple ways rather than with just text. The sound art behind the audio spoken word helps to disengage the logical side of the brain and allow the viewer's emotive mind to respond to the poetic experience in a different way (para.2).

Conclusion

When teachers and students compose digital poetry, their poems somehow become "larger texts" that more quickly and easily demonstrate literature's relevance to their own lives, as well as to the larger culture. Multimedia poems bring home the reality that literature--indeed, even poetry--has always been, finally, about creating a literate and humane community. It is important to teach digital poetry--to give students options in telling their stories. When students are doing digital poetry, they are more engaged and confident as they develop their reading and writing skills. Digital poetry gave David a stronger voice. And students with stronger voices are far more likely to build on this strength.

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