Digital Storytelling With Youth From Refugee Backgrounds: Possibilities for Language and Digital Literacy Learning

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Abstract

This study addresses the urgent need to develop innovative pedagogies that build upon and enhance the digital literacies and representational practices of culturally and linguistically diverse youth from refugee backgrounds. In Canadian high schools, this population of students enter school with varying levels of literacy in their first language(s), as well as potentially difficult experiences due to their forced migration. For many, learning English, may become a formidable challenge. A growing corpus of case studies is beginning to show how pedagogies that draw on youths' everyday meaning making, including their digital literacies, can effectively engage English learners in academic learning. In this qualitative, ethnographic case study involving nine youth in an English language learning classroom, we addressed the question: What is the potential for digital storytelling to draw from the fuller context of the lives and literacies of youth from refugee backgrounds to enable more autonomous language learning and identity affirmation? Our study is informed by interrelated conceptual frameworks: learner autonomy; investment in language and literacy learning; and digital literacies. Using thematic and multimodal/visual analysis, data were collaboratively coded to identify four interweaving themes: 1) use of multimodal meaning making to communicate complex, critical understandings; 2) emergence of digital literacies; 3) challenges of communicating in digital spaces; and 4) investment in identity affirmation in language

learning. Implications focus on how digital storytelling as an innovative pedagogy has the potential to create space within the curriculum for stories that have deep meaning for learners.

INTRODUCTION

Youth from refugee backgrounds enter Canadian high schools with varying levels of schooling, coupled with potentially difficult experiences due to their forced migration (Barber, 2019). Rapid development of English, required for graduation, may also become a formidable challenge. A growing body of case studies (e.g., Cummins & Early, 2011; Leurs et al., 2018; Michalovich, 2021a) illuminates how pedagogies that draw on lived experiences and everyday meaning-making, including digital literacies, effectively engage youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds in academic learning that affirms their identities (e.g., pedagogies focused on the creation of texts that mirror back students' communicative competencies in a positive light). Yet, despite calls for essential changes in literacy pedagogies to include multilingual, multimodal, and digital text forms (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2013), many of these students still learn in classrooms that emphasize monolingual, print-based pedagogies. The case study we report on extends the research on digital literacies to a high school program focused on language, literacies, numeracy, and workplace competencies for learners from refugee backgrounds (16–19 years old). We addressed the question: What is the potential for digital storytelling (DST) to draw from the fuller context of the lives and literacies of youth from refugee backgrounds for identity affirmation and more autonomous language learning?

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND THE CONCEPT OF INVESTMENT IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEARNING

Learner autonomy is a key concept in considering how, within the various contexts of their lives, youth set their own goals to meet their daily needs. Following Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, and Trebbi (1990), we define learner autonomy as the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning, needs, and purposes both independently and in collaboration with others. Hafner and Miller (2019) identify three

important elements in course or project design that contribute to learner autonomy: structure (e.g., curriculum, tasks, and assessment), power that is created and shared collaboratively between teacher and students, and agency (i.e., students controlling their own learning). We link learner autonomy to Darvin and Norton's (2015) concept of investment, which they define as learners' commitment to the identities, purposes, and goals integral to their learning processes and negotiated in ongoing social relationships and changing power structures (Darvin & Norton, 2018). They explain that while a learner may be very motivated to learn, they may not *invest* in the classroom language practices, if the practices marginalize learners in any way. Thus, the constructs of identity and investment are interrelated, as Darvin and Norton (2015) spell out,

> As identity is fluid, multiple, and a site of struggle, how learners are able to invest in a target language is contingent on the dynamic negotiation of power in different fields, and thus, investment is complex, contradictory, and in a state of flux (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). (p. 37)

Darvin and Norton (2018) advocate that by using multimodal and multilingual practices in the classroom (e.g., composing digital stories), teachers can design activities that make visible learners' talents and affirm their identities. Furthermore, Darvin and Norton (2014) argue, opportunities for migrant and refugee background learners to author their own stories through the use of multimodal and multilingual resources can enable them to become agents of their own learning. From our perspective, we see a strong relationship between learners' investment in telling their own stories and their autonomy as language learners.

DIGITAL LITERACIES

Technological advancement over several decades has led to the rise of digitally mediated multimodal texts and platforms, such as social networking sites, podcasts, blogs, vlogs, animations, infographics, video games, virtual reality, augmented reality, and more. These developments have changed how people organize and document their lives, revolutionized personal communication, information processing, and social participation and blurred the boundaries between private and public (Barton & Lee, 2013). Undoubtedly, these developments will continue to change the modes of communication employed in various social, cultural, economic, and political arenas.

As language is crucial for the vernacular, everyday activities associated with digital media (Barton & Lee, 2013; Capstick, 2016), inevitably, these developments have also led to a rethinking of language and literacy education to include a focus on digital literacies in addition to —and different from—print literacies (Hafner, 2019; Jones, 2016). Since most digital practices are mediated by language (Barton & Lee, 2013), a focus on digital literacies in language and literacy education can help language learners, positioned as social actors, gain more access to ever-increasing digitally mediated information in a new language. It can also help them employ the information to construct their identities, and harness it for their participation and membership in different communities (Jones, 2016). Language and literacy educators can learn how digital environments facilitate student-initiated and student-controlled—i.e., autonomous—language learning (Barton & Lee, 2013). Understanding youth's everyday practices with digital media and their potential for language learning may support educators in bringing new technologies to the language classroom in a way that meaningfully draws on the various contexts and settings of youth's lives.

Following Jones and Hafner (2021), we understand digital literacies as the practices of reading, writing, and communication associated with digital media. These literacies go much beyond any set of technical competencies as they are situated within a wide range of differing sociocultural contexts (Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007). Furthermore, as technologies evolve quickly, competency in *specific* tools in specific social contexts will not suffice. Rather, language and literacy education must support learners in identifying and adapting the *broader* affordances and constraints of different *types* of digital tools for specific contexts, i.e., the perceived possibilities for action (or lack thereof) associated with digital communication forms (Hafner, 2019). Thus, language learners need to understand what people can do with digital tools (doing), the varied meanings they can make through multimodal texts (meaning), the digital means through which they can form relationships with others (relating), how they can think about the world, assuming new norms and values in digital spaces (thinking), and the digital means through which they can construct and maintain their identities (being; Jones & Hafner, 2021, pp. 6–12). One way to integrate such an agenda in English Language Teaching is engaging students in digital multimodal composing (DMC), defined as the use of digital tools to construct various genres of texts that draw on multiple modes (e.g., languages, visuals, sounds, etc.; Hafner, 2019).

Digital Storytelling with Youth from Refugee Backgrounds

One promising type of DMC project in the language classroom is digital storytelling (DST; Kim & Lee, 2018). A digital story is a 2–3 min media presentation combining a variety of digital elements to tell a story related to personal experiences. Media may include photographs, video clips, voice-overs, and music (Lambert, 2018). In a series of studies employing DST with refugee-background children and youth in community-based and summer literacy programs in the U.S, Emert (2013, 2014a, 2014b) showed how the narrative form of DST drew learners to demonstrate their real-world knowledge, express their identities, build connections with each other (e.g., through collaboration), and engage in developing and showcasing their English language learning for authentic purposes, be it through composing key sentences and practicing new vocabulary for their digital stories, translating their poems to a visual medium, revising for clarity, or presenting orally to real audiences, all of which increased learners' academic confidence.

Similarly, Luchs and Miller (2016), who focused on the outreach phase of a DST project (showcasing the digital stories to various high school audiences), showed how DST has much potential for facilitating refugee-background youth's public speaking skills, techniques, and confidence. Johnson and Kendrick (2017) further showed, in a project situated in a Western Canadian school district's transitional class, how DST's emphasis on extra-linguistic modes of meaning-making provided opportunities for refugee-background youth to communicate difficult knowledge or feelings. Importantly, DST projects can harness the experiential knowledge that youth from refugee backgrounds draw on for language and (multiple) literacy learning, countering their positioning as "disadvantaged" in school settings. Coupled with a non-sequential pedagogical design that encourages extra-linguistic entry points to the composing process, DST can prompt learners to communicate meanings in multiple modes. In turn, this can support self-expression for learners whose schooling might have been interrupted and whose academic skills and proficiency in the new language are emerging (Johnson & Kendrick, 2017). While developing language and academic skills (e.g., sentence construction and sequencing events in a narrative), DST also fosters an awareness of audience, especially the power of digital texts to shape others' perception of youth (Emert, 2014b). Such projects can thus strongly support youth's resettlement and sense of belonging.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT

The project we report on is based on a qualitative case study design (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) that regards literacy as a multimodal social practice. It blends ethnographic language and literacy research methods such as participant observation, informal conversations, and artifact collection (see e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998) with multimodal/visual methods (see e.g., Rose,) in order to capture the contexts of our participants' lives in general and their digital multimodal composing practices in particular. The project is part of a larger nationally funded research project investigating the language and literacy education of youth from refugee backgrounds, a growing population that has been insufficiently included in research studies.

As teachers and researchers who work with youth from refugee backgrounds without shared lived experiences, we approached this study with respect and sensitivity. Authors 1 and 2 are Canadian researchers with extensive experience working with children and youth in Canada and East Africa. Author 3 is a researcher and filmmaker who recently immigrated to Canada from Israel. Author 4 is an English language teacher and researcher with considerable experience working with refugee background youth. Our collaborative analysis is shaped by our own investment in addressing issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in education systems in Canada and beyond.

Our youth participants were primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, El Salvador, and Nepal. They attended a community[1] secondary school in the Metro Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. Approximately 20% of the students in this diverse school are from refugee backgrounds. All participants were enrolled in the Paving a Way for Success (PAWS) program established in 2008 for youth from refugee backgrounds (16–19 years old). This was a full day program where students came together for classes in the morning and had individually timetabled, subject-area classes, according to their English language and literacy competencies and interests, in the afternoon. There were 15 students in the class, all of whom engaged in the class project reported in our study, although only the nine who returned signed consent forms[2] were included in the research. Many of the PAWS

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[1] Through government and non-profit partnerships, community schools offer various programs and services to meet the specific educational, recreational and social needs of the area they serve.

[2] When conducting research with students from refugee backgrounds, written consent can sometimes be challenging. For families and individuals who have been oppressed by government systems in international contexts, there are sometimes issues of trust and fear of consequences when asked to sign letters of an official nature.

students have experienced limited or interrupted formal schooling, making it difficult for them to graduate with their peer group. For students to invest in their learning, Author 4 cultivated conditions that allowed for safety, healthy relationships, risk, autonomy, reflexivity, criticality, and perhaps most foundationally, awareness of body, mind, and emotions. In addition to developing essential workplace skills, the aim of the program was for students to acquire an explicit understanding of the core curricular competencies (communication, thinking, and personal and social competency) and to feel empowered to speak to the intricate intersections of their lived experiences and identities.

Each day began with check-ins, which started with a mindfulness exercise, followed by questions that ranged from hobbies/interests, big emotions, global issues, meta and counter-narratives, as well as the sharing of personal struggles and inspirations. The check-ins lasted from 20–80 min; for students to feel authentically invested in their learning, static lesson planning was replaced with purposeful flexibility in the structure of classroom operations that enabled students to openly share what they felt empowered and disempowered by, were curious about and most immediately, what they were thinking, feeling, and doing. As a common pedagogical practice, the information that became available in the check-ins allowed the teacher (Author 4), through free-flowing conversation, to co-create meaningful curriculum that integrated language and content instruction.

Students were also encouraged to critically engage with identity markers such as refugee, language learner, youth, etc., to evoke counter-narratives that shifted their language and emotions toward confidence and agency. The authors, led by the classroom teacher, designed a two-part inquiry-based project, conducted over one trimester. In Part 1 of the study, the students explored as curricular content developing social and emotional competency in keeping with classroom practices for designing units of study, as reported earlier. Anger, love, fear, health, safety, freedom, trust, and hope were integral themes that students and their teacher collaboratively identified, explored, and critically negotiated within this two-part unit. Additionally, the students reflected on their emotional self-awareness, including noting stressors and developing coping strategies. For the inquiry, there was rich, comprehensible input in relation to each emotion (e.g., a video, a performance, and a presentation by an invited speaker). The students worked in small groups to address one of four questions (e.g., What are people your age most afraid of?) that were posed specific to each emotion, and then, each group presented to the larger group, their insights and understandings through multimodal presentations. Students then engaged in follow-up tasks where complex aspects of their experiences and understandings were

represented and communicated textually (e.g., life writing and poetry), visually (photographs), orally, musically, and/or via other embodied modes as part of a project portfolio. Through each step, targeted language objectives were intentionally interwoven with content objectives and core curriculum competencies and in the moment language teaching occurred.

Part 2 of the project is the focus of this study. Drawing from their understandings, personal experiences, and the individual portfolios constructed in Part 1, in Part 2, the students each created their own inquiry question related to one (or more) of the emotions they had investigated and individually engaged in a DST project. Three experienced filmmakers facilitated the DST through a series of structured steps. The students created iMovies that ranged from 01:00 to 02:30 min and used a range of visual and textual modes, with music and/or voice-overs. On completion of their digital stories, students had the option to participate in a public exhibition in the school. During the past week of school, the students' digital stories were shown to their classmates and school staff in the auditorium on a large screen. Subsequently, their digital stories were compiled into a single iMovie and projected, on a loop, in the school atrium, for a wider school and public audience.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The methods of data collection included participant observation and informal conversations with students and teachers recorded as field notes; semi-structured interviews with the students about their representational choices for meaning-making; post-project interviews (5–10 min) to gain insight into students' composing processes; and student artifacts (e.g., student inquiry presentation posters, digital portfolios, writings and reflections, storyboards, and students' final digital stories). Data also included the teacher's unit and lesson plans, reflections, and an end of project semi-structured interview that lasted 60 min. Interviews with participants included issues related to representations of self and identity.

We engaged in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the digital stories as a collection, using contextual data such as semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and informal conversations as part of our interpretive process in order to identify how the digital stories intersected with the lives and experiences of our participants. We worked collaboratively to identify recurrent narratives and related themes with the intention of providing a rich description of how the students' digital stories captured something important in

relation to our research question (e.g., how students were able to draw from the fuller context of the lives and literacies for identity affirmation and more autonomous language learning). We looked for patterns in how the digital literacy pedagogies that shaped the project interfaced with the fuller context of the participants' lives, their interests, and issues, to enable identity affirmation and more autonomous communication.

Additionally, we analyzed the composing processes and digital stories of two focal students (Shafi and Shegofa[3]) concentrating on the convergences of the various contexts of their lives and their use of different modes to tell their stories. These two stories were selected because they show different kinds of narratives but also because we evaluated them as exemplary stories overall in terms of content, multimodal construction, and identities realized. We present the analysis of these two stories using a multimodal adaptation of Rose's (2011) sites of visual meaning-making as an organizational structure. Rose describes three sites through which meaning is made in visual (or in our case, multimodal) texts: "the site(s) of the **production** of an image, the site of the **image** itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various **audiences**" (bold original, p. 19). We consider the circumstances surrounding the production of Shafi and Shegofa's digital stories (site of production), the multimodal digital stories as texts (site of the image), and students' preferred reading of their stories by audiences (site of audience). We see the sites of production, image, and audience as interrelated and we worked recursively with an emphasis on each students' DST process and the slides they created, drawing attention to how the story is carried visually, musically, and linguistically.

THE DIGITAL STORIES

In this section, we show how the digital stories were initially categorized in relation to patterns concerning the emotions. The emotions were identified through observations of the preceding work on the student-selected emotions in Part 1, analysis of the brief written text on the slides to identify stated emotions (e.g., fear, hope, and love), and conversations with the students in the exit interviews. At the risk of essentializing variations, we determined four categories (see Table 1 below).

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[3] Both students provided signed assent and consent for their real names and images to be used in publications and presentations resulting from the project. We see their digital stories as artistic works for which they have the right to attribution.

TABLE 1
Digital Story Types and Patterns Concerning Emotions

Category / Subcategory	Emotions communicated variously through multiple modes
Communicating stories of their journeys	Fear, love, trust (lost and gained), and hope.
Telling stories of their homeland	Fear, love, and hope. The beauty of people, places, and culture was interwoven, not uncommonly, with depictions of atrocities.
Stopping violence against women and promoting gender equality	Fear, anger, and freedom. Powerful, shocking images were not shied away from.
Accomplishment stories	Narratives of moving from marginalization and lack of investment/boredom to belonging and pride

It was telling that in the composing process, students did not conform to the commonly adhered to steps in creating a digital story (see e.g., Lambert, 2018) but instead took ownership and developed strategies, points of access, steps, and processes that worked for them as individuals. One of the expert facilitators also noted that the participants appeared to adopt different stances in their video making, ranging from what they termed "journalistic" (i.e., less personally involved/ factual opinion) to highly personal (recount-narrative). Drawing from the students' (draft) digital stories, the facilitator worked with the students to raise their awareness of different genres and registers that can be taken up by storytellers relative to their preferred reading of their stories by the audience. Four of the students used voice-over with images and five used written language, image, and musical soundtrack. Additionally, from our observations during the public exhibition where students freely chose to showcase their digital stories, it was clearly evident that the digital stories positively reflected students' communicative competencies, and our participants displayed pride in their accomplishments in voicing, to an authentic audience, issues of significant personal importance. In her post-project interview, author 4 (the classroom teacher) noted that students invested in their learning and used the inquiry project as an opportunity to become autonomous producers of powerful texts that affirmed their identities.

TWO EXEMPLARY STORIES

Next, we present two individual stories and the composers' processes at a more individual level using Rose's (2011) three sites of meaning-making (sites of production, image, and audience) and

selecting and adapting key analytic questions for each of these sites to inform our multimodal analysis. At the site of production, we focus on issues related to the relationship between the social identities of the composers' processes and the subject of the digital story, and how these intersect with the ecological context of the learners' lives. At the site of the image (i.e., the digital story as a multimodal text), our analysis addresses what is being shown, what the multimodal components of the story are, how they are arranged, what they signify, and how they carry the story. Analysis at the site of the audience is concentrated on the viewing positions offered by the composers and their preferred reading of their stories.

Shafi's Digital Story

Site of Production. Shafi's accomplishment story begins with the words: "I didn't want to join the Rugby team . . ." which signals the backstory to his production. As a student in his home country of Afghanistan, Shafi was a star member of his high school wrestling team. At his new school, however, he was not on any sports teams and in informal conversations indicated that he often felt invisible when he walked through the halls of the school. He had a small group of friends, mostly those in his PAWS class and other students from his home country. Not wanting to join the rugby team seemed in part linked to a social identity that Shafi did not think he had at that time in his new school. But the statement was also made on reflection, thinking back to how it all started with an incident with another student on the school grounds. As Shafi explains, "It was my experience, and, uh, I, thought it would be okay to make it a story . . . [when the coach decided] he's our guy [laughs]" (post-project interview).

What Shafi refers to in this short quote from our post-project interview was how he caught the rugby coach's attention in the first place. Following the schoolground incident, school staff, which included the rugby coach, reviewed video from the school security cameras to determine what had happened. What became evident to the coach (and the school administration in general) was that Shafi had tremendous skill and strength (Coach, informal conversation), which was exactly what the rugby team needed; he was asked to join the team, an invitation that was refused by Shafi multiple times over several weeks until the coach finally succeeded in convincing him. His digital story traces his trajectory from not wanting to join the team to becoming a champion rugby player in one season. It is a story about a transformation as much as it is about an accomplishment. He explained informally how he went from feeling invisible in the school hallways to gaining

widespread recognition from other students and forming many new friendships outside of his ELL program.

Site of the Image. Shafi's story is 02:18 min long. He uses 13 still images and applies a Ken Burns' effect so that each image plays for approximately 10 s. The narrative is told through the motion of these still images, carefully synchronized with language in the form of short poetic sentences and thoughtfully chosen music lyrics. The sequencing and synesthetic use of modes to tell the story are strong in that Shafi begins the story with images in which he is framed as an individual but increasingly shifts to images in which he is framed as part of a group (along with exhilarating music throughout), signaling his transformation and new sense of belonging in a synesthetic combination of images, words, and music.

Many of the images Shafi includes are from the school photographer's publicly available collection of photos taken during rugby games. There is considerable information made available through the images, for example, how skilled Shafi is but also how his perspective shifts from being an individual to finding a place of belonging in a group. The first image shows a headshot of him wearing a navy button up t-shirt with his hair braided in rows on the top of his head. The photo represents a hip-hop version of Shafi (Figure 1: slide 1), at a time when he first arrived at the school and was engaged with Afghani hip-hop. The story then shifts to a contemplative pose, a backshot of Shafi overlooking a river. The next sequence of images initially locates him at the center, then pans out to show him as part of the team ("a big family" as he writes). As the narrative unfolds, the reverse happens with the focus moving from the larger group to Shafi within the group.

The short phrases Shafi includes are written in English and displayed across key selected images, sometimes in the center and other times at the bottom. He takes the viewer from the ideas "I didn't want to join the rugby team" (Figure 1: slide 1) and "The coach wanted me to join the team but I was not interested" (Figure 1: slide 2), using language to build tension. He then transitions to headshots of all the players, with Shafi listed as #1 and the label 2019 RUGBY TEAM, written in all caps. The next sentence, "Finally I joined the Rugby team" shows an action shot of a team practice. "Working hard for success" brings the focus back to Shafi as an individual and "Become my favourite sport" (slide 6) shows the full team of rugby players and the sentence "Found lots of friends and we all made a big family" (Figure 1: slide 7), overlaying an image with the whole team with the Ken Burns' effect perfectly timed to transition from the group to an image of Shafi within the group. He uses the words "After all hard work…"

Slide 1	Slide 2
I didn't want to join the Rugby team ...	The coach wanted me to join the team but I was not interested
Slide 7	Slide 11
Found lots of friends and we all made a big family	And I can't wait for next year

FIGURE 1. Still frames from Shafi's digital story. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and then two additional slides to showcase trophies and medals from the team's second place win. The story concludes with the statements: "I'm so glad I took a chance and tried out for the team" and "I can't wait for next year" (Figure 1: slide 11). Both of these final sentences bring our attention back to Shafi as an individual, and it is noteworthy that the final image in the story is very dramatic with three opponents trying to tackle Shafi as he grips the ball.

The language component in a digital story is not expected to be lengthy, and much like poetry, Shafi's short phrases are infused with meaning. We see his use of language as particularly empowering in terms of affective expression and meaningful engagement with classroom work because of the way it is tied to aspects of his life that he may not have anticipated would give him such benefits in the classroom. His use of language also builds tension for the viewer. We see the short sentences as a strength of the narrative overall in that they encourage viewers to contemplate the images, music, and the story itself. In other words, the language serves as an anchor to collect meanings already conveyed (Barthes, 1977) rather than being responsible for everything.

Shafi's use of music is one of the most powerful components of his narrative. He uses U2's song *California* and expertly times the lyrics to synchronize with his words and images. When asked about the modes and elements he used for composing, he emphasized the music as an

important part of the design, "I was lucky I got like, good music, it was so good on my story, and then, um, the topic, and the sentences" (post-project interview). As the tension builds during the initial part of the story with the statement "I didn't want to join the rugby team", he uses music to release the tension. Also, as he transitions to images of himself in a rugby jersey, we hear the lyrics: "The weight that drags your heart down. Well, that's what took me where I need to be. Which is here…" As the story concludes with the statement "I can't wait for next year", U2's poetic lyrics play: "At the dawn you thought would never come… But it did… Like it always does.. . And all I need to know is… There is no end to love… I've seen for myself, there's no end to grief… That's how I know…. There is no end to love." Together, these layered modes tell a powerful story of resilience that is complex and reflective in how it reveals past feelings, present achievements, earned belonging, and future identity.

Site of Audience. When asked about which emotions from the larger unit he wanted his viewers to connect with, he responded: "I wanted to show the people that… had everything they want, they can do everything they want… we have to try…." (post-project interview). He elaborated, offering a window on his preferred reading of his digital story: "… they have to feel like I work hard, I work hard for everything, like I work hard for my school and my team" (post-project interview). The digital story is very much an identity text (Cummins & Early, 2011) that showcases how Shafi wants to be seen and understood. The story is a kind of life writing, which the classroom teacher (Author 4) linked to the check-in model she uses in the classroom:

> It goes back to that check-in model…life writing is tracking, like being able to track your life. So, knowing that these stories are not necessarily about the thing themselves, they're about… tracking the parts that have come to this point (Exit interview).

The possibility for Shafi to track, represent, and communicate his trajectory of belonging through multiple modes in a digital story for an audience would not have been as profound if he was limited to the use of print-literacy alone, especially because of his emerging English speaking and writing competencies. Arguably, the same applies to the richness of his engagement with digitally mediated information in English. It is through the integration of this digital multimodal literacy practice of DST in his classroom that Shafi could explore the possibilities for action (doing) associated with it, along with taking up its affordances for communication, including the use of English with other modes (meaning), for contemplating digital forms of communication (thinking), as well as the connections and identities he could establish

for himself through this practice (relating and being, respectively; Jones & Hafner, 2021).

Shegofa's Digital Story

Site of Production. After the digital story facilitator showed sample digital stories, including one (Three Little Birds https://digitalstories. ca/video/three-little-birds/) in which Canadian Indigenous storyteller Kathy Walker recounts her family history and uses Cree language (as text in the video), Shegofa decided to go beyond the material she had gathered in Part 1 and tell the story of her country. As Shegofa explained,

> . . . . you guys, show us . . . some videos . . . Some person . . . they talk about their story, about their life and then I decided to . . . make . . . this story about my country. . . . my story's kind of fear. And . . . kind of love . . . . at the start, we can see, it's so bad situation in Afghanistan. And then at the end, it's a lovely country as well. (post-project interview)

As a first step, she wrote a draft text of 150 words, considering how each short sentence could correspond to a single digital image. After selecting the images, importing, and ordering them in iMovie, she added and edited her text for each slide. Finally, she added the music track.

The themes of fear and love that transition in Shegofa's story are related to her social identity as a resilient Afghani (-Canadian) youth who seeks to present a counter-narrative of Afghanistan that shows not only the despair and devastation common in the media but beyond. The "bad situations" are portrayed at the beginning of her digital story, but in turn, the strength and beauty of her country and its people are also communicated, as Shegofa tells the audience what she wants them to get, which is the way she remembers so much that is "lovely" (post-project interview).

The second point of view that intersects with the ecological context of Shegofa's life is, in her own words, "I want to show in my story, for other people, that they have a good situation and then they have to use their opportunities . . . the most important, again, education" (post-project interview). In this, she also positions herself as a knowledge broker of remarkable lifeworld experiences and social justice issues. She employs a journalistic reporting, at times hybrid personal-analytical, genre to communicate " . . . some young generation, they study, in really bad situations" (post-project interview). Among the several "bad situations" she depicts are bombed schools, specifically her own school. She explains, " . . . it was a bomb, bomb explosion, and

then all of my friends, like, they injured. And some of my friends, killed, and then I was so upset" (post-project interview).

Within her digital story, Shegofa passionately advocates for safe and quality education for all; sad for the lost futures of her friends, hopeful for a better future for Afghani people. This claim is supported by the texts on the slides and Shegofa's comments in the exit interview. Her story is about strength, hope, and seizing life's opportunities, particularly regarding education, as much as a story of fear and love of her country. She positioned her identity as looking backward, remembering the atrocities, injustices, *and* the beauty, as well as looking forward, as a person with agency and voice who wants to "tell about human rights in other countries" (post-project interview).

Site of Image. Shegofa's story is the longest of the participants. It is 02:30 min long. She used 30 still images with text, and each image plays for approximately 5 s. The text was written first, but the images are very compelling, the text edited for fit, and the music plays to good effect, so all three modes serve together multimodally to structure and sequence the story. After the title "AFGHANISTAN", the digital story starts with the sentence, "AFGHANISTAN IS A WAR-TORN COUNTRY" and concludes with the sentiment "Afghan people make a better future." There are four key turning points in the story between the beginning and ending slides, each written in capital letters to signal the turn (see Figure 2: slides 1 and 21). Succinct sentences placed strategically on slides following each 'turning point' slide ranged from an eight-slide sequence to a two-slide sequence. Just as each turning point sentence brings coherence and cohesion to the digital story, unveiling a carefully constructed multimodal digital text, each sentence following a turning point is coherently linked, alongside sequential images assembling a textual-visual chain of powerful synesthetic meanings. The use of language will be discussed further in connection with the images used.

Many of the images are from Google searches and some, related to Shegofa's friends from her former school, appear to be drawn from her personal photo file. For instance, following the title slide (Figure 2: slide 1), slides 2–9 included in the segment "AFGHANISTAN IS A WAR-TORN COUNTRY", depict crying and injured infants, explosions and burning vehicles (Figure 2: slide 5), and images of a bombed school and friends. Each with a text honed to fit the image. As noted earlier, Shegofa makes strategic use of captions/titles with those for the major story turning points shifting to capital letters right when the story takes a turn e.g., slides 10–12, "BUT AFGHAN CHILDREN SMILE" with photos and captions of children smiling while living/working in "bad situations." This strategic use of "turning point"

Slide 1

Slide 5

Slide 21

Slide 27

FIGURE 2. Still frames from Shegofa's digital story. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

titles repeats for "AFGHAN PEOPLE ARE STRONG", including slides 13–20, which depict physical and emotional strength but also highlight children's and youth's love of education. One powerful image is in Shegofa's description "...of girls who sit in middle of garbage and then they found a, like notebooks or books, and they trying to write something and then it's show that education is very important" (exit interview). Also in the next turn, the use of capital letters in stark white on the solid black background, for "...I REMEMBER AFGHA-NISTAN THIS WAY" (Figure 2: slide 21) is employed as an emphasis and emotively leads to slides 21–29 of memorable moments, beloved built spaces, natural beauty places (Figure 2: slide 27), clearly labeled. One special moment of remembering is captured in capitals, "BECAUSE OF THE WIN [of the Afghani men's soccer team] A WOMAN'S TEAM WAS MADE" and then the final turn is to the last slide (no. 30), "Hope Afghan people make a better future."

In addition to the powerful, concise text and striking images, the third mode, music, is used to great effect. The music track is at the first solo piano, then accompanied by other stringed instruments at the turning point of slide 11. As Shegofa explains, "I like the second music [a friend had replicated her music and she re-edited it to be unique], because, also it's quiet music and also it's not too sad, it's not too happy. It's like and, I decided too it's good for my pictures, and for my videos" (post-project interview). Her chosen instrumental soundtrack fits extremely well to the multiple points of view of the

content, wherein she tries to bring a balanced perspective, but the sound also rises and falls in harmony with the mood and dramatic shifts of the story.

Shegofa invested deeply in digitally composing the images, succinct, at times poetic, text, and music. In a post-project interview with Author 1, she reported that she was up late, "maybe midnight or at one o'clock in the morning searching for music" and learning, "how I should use the iMovie, how I should do this one, how I should do download. . . . [because] . . . I'm trying to do my best, and then it was so important for me."

Site of Audience. As noted earlier, we viewed Shegofa's story as narrated from a place/locus of belonging as an expert, agentive advocate for human rights, sharing her knowledge of real-world (and social justice) issues. In her post-project interview, Shegofa explained the audience she wants to view her video and what she hopes they will 'see'.

S: I know, my story . . . maybe it's not too strong from other stories, but I want
[all Canadians or more people] to know about all peoples, and I showed . . .
some young generation, they study, in really bad situations. it was like so hot,
warm, and . . . the children don't have a school, they stay . . . in the yard, and
they study. I want to show . . . other people that they have a good situation and
they have to use their opportunities . . . education is very important.:
 M: Right.:
  S: I didn't like this photos, and then I want it. Tell about . . . human rights
  in other countries.

What is interesting about Shegofa's response is that while at the outset, she reports that her story is about her country, which on viewing it clearly is, in the interview about audience and what she wants them to understand, is a passionate statement about appreciating educational opportunities, the deeply held beliefs in the value of education and her advocacy for human rights and quality education for all.

Across the different sites of meaning-making, it is evident how the digital literacy practice of DST supported Shegofa in expressing her deep emotions and reflections in relation to her home country, her resilience and advocacy for human rights, and her emerging understanding of her own place within the narrative. Because of her current emerging speaking and writing competencies in English, integrating DST in her classroom opened a window for Shegofa that—arguably— would otherwise be shut, a window to reflect upon and powerfully share her lived experiences, her values, and her hopes for the future of her home country, as part of her school learning. It is also evident that Shegofa meaningfully accessed and engaged with digitally mediated information in English for the project, including outside of

school, which arguably supported her English language learning. She-gofa's digital story, especially in light of her reflections upon it, made evident her understanding of the possibilities for action embedded in DST as a digital literacy practice (doing), the depth and expanse of communication that it affords (meaning), how it can shape others' perceptions of her and her home country (thinking) while connecting her to others (relating), and how it afforded her the possibility of imagining herself as an agentive knowledge broker (being; Jones & Hafner, 2021).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Four interweaving themes emerged from our thematic analysis of the nine digital stories overall. We describe each, in turn, to provide a general overview of what learners were able to do through this DST project, adding insights from the two exemplary cases that highlight how the digital literacy pedagogies that shaped the project interfaced with participants' lives to enable more autonomous language learning, investment, and identity affirmation.

First, by using multiple representational resources for meaning-making in digital spaces, the youth were able to communicate complex and profound critical thinking in language (written text and voice-over) and other modes. This made visible the unique perspectives and experiences of these youth, their families, and friends, that would otherwise likely remain hidden. Their digital multimodal texts attest to the deep forms of thinking that these youth are capable of and demonstrate the potential of what might be achieved in language and content learning and core curriculum competencies when the rich resources inherent in students' knowledge and experiences are empowered and accessed through different modes in digital spaces.

Second, the youth revealed their existing and developing competencies regarding critical digital literacies. To varying degrees, they demonstrated a fairly well-developed awareness of digital design and composition, with regard to each mode and components within modes (e.g., choice of language/s; color, images, layout/ format; sound effects, voice-over, music), and understood how to take up the affordances of different genres (e.g. when to use narrative/personal or persuasive/analytical) and the ways in which linguistic and other modes of digital representation contribute variously to what a digital text means. This is a good start to developing essential competencies wherein students have a critical awareness of how knowledge is effectively positioned, represented, and communicated in and across different modes in digital multimodal texts. Potentially, developing such

essential competencies may enable them to challenge dominant discourses in digital spaces.

Third, in the students' desire to represent and communicate their ideas and intentions, two insights were evident to their teacher from her observations of their language and (multiple) literacy practices, and supported by authors 1 and 2's observations from two trimesters volunteering in the classroom: i) the threshold of their linguistic repertoires at the phonological, lexical, grammatical, and genre levels, as the youth stretched their linguistic mode in English, over the course of the unit of study, to complement their other relatively more advanced visual and musical modes of representation; and ii) some of the difficult choices they made in the digital composing process (e.g., what content to share; which genre/s to use; whether and how to create affect, dilemmas concerning the use of voice-over because of the permanent representations of their language proficiency at that point in time). All of which added to the already deep understanding that the teacher held of each of the students.

Fourth, in terms of identity affirmation, by linking the curricular content via inquiry to students' interests and experiences, the youth were deeply invested (Darvin & Norton, 2015) in their learning. They were remarkably open to engaging in discussion on difficult topics and demonstrated keen social and emotional awareness. They used the project as an opportunity to exercise their agency and to some considerable extent, given they created their own pathways and strategies, to become active, autonomous knowledge producers of powerful multimodal texts that affirmed their identities. A number of students worked for many hours after school on the DST component of the project in particular. Two students, who either lost or wanted to change their stories, revised and created new ones. One student did much of this work independently on a cell phone. As reported earlier, each digital story had a powerful message about a topic such as violence against women; biased or mis-information about their home country and culture; social justice and equality; and achievement stories that the youth wanted to convey to a wider public audience, including educators, other stakeholders, the community at large, and particularly youth who may be experiencing the same challenges they experienced. Jiang (2021) similarly reports that DMC involving creative remixing of videos and visuals, layered with narrations, facilitated students' engagement in civic participation, making visible their authentic concerns and community experiences related to sexual discrimination, poverty, and disease.

Through DST, the students in our study were also able to make intentional investments in their learning through a strong dialogical foundation, targeted and spontaneous language development, new digital

literacies and skills creating counter-narratives of empowerment and pride by going public with their digital stories, reiterating how flexible classroom structures and routines can be guided toward nuanced learning and agency. Our findings support previous research (see review in Michalovich, 2021b) that shows how digital multimodal composing can afford youth from refugee backgrounds opportunities to agentively frame their representations of themselves (e.g., Leurs et al., 2018), reveal their competency in digital literacy practices (e.g., Gilhooly & Lee, 2014), share, and take pride in their knowledge about real-world issues as they communicate it to audiences (e.g., Luchs & Miller, 2016), express and process their emotions (e.g., Jang & Kang, 2019), enhance their language learning (Emert, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), represent and reposition their identities (e.g., Michalovich, 2021a), and narrate their lived experiences (e.g., Johnson & Kendrick, 2017).

We extend this body of literature by focusing on how innovative pedagogies such as DST that build upon and enhance the literacies and representational practices of students from refugee backgrounds also have the potential to enable more autonomous language learning and identity affirmation, and to create space within the curriculum for stories that have deep meaning for learners. In our study, DST in the classroom became a way for the students to track their own lives and awaken quieted identities and express deeply held values. As StoryCenter facilitator Daniel Weinshenker observes, "...oftentimes the stories we tell are the stories we don't understand" because "digital storytelling is about getting underneath of that surface"; it creates "a space where people feel listened to" as individuals" (Nurstory, 2008). In closing, we turn to the words of Haddix (2020, p. 34), who reminds us, "Youth writers seek spaces that allow them to write for real audiences and for real purposes, that value writing that is personal and political, and where they are free to express themselves in their own voices and from their own perspectives. To reimagine students as writers requires an expansion of our definitions of what counts as writing, what counts as texts, and what counts as knowledge."

FUNDING STATEMENT

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

There is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This study has been reviewed by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board (Certificate no. H17-01074), and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Images in Figures 1 and 2 have no copyright restrictions and are reproduced with permission from the digital story authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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