Sustaining Narratives of Hope: Literacy, Multimodality, and the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School

Patrick W. Berry and Alexandra J. Cavallaro, with Elaine Vázquez, Carlos R. DeJesús, and Naomi García

This article explores how an English teacher, students, and administrators at a public high school in Chicago participated in a multimodal writing project that negotiated the space between hope and critique, ultimately placing the community at the center of the curriculum. This project aims to illuminate how narrative renderings of possibility—or the lack thereof—construct understandings of reality, and how multimodality might be used to help teachers and students share their own visions with one another and with the public. Finally, this article suggests ways in which English educators, researchers, and students might collaborate to create productive spaces wherein disparate narratives can coexist.

It was a cold evening in February 2013, four years after we had begun our research on how a multimodal writing pedagogy that focused on community issues might help us better understand the place of hope and community in the teaching of English. One of us (Cavallaro) found herself chatting online, via Google Chat, with Naomi García, a former high school student in the Chicago community of Paseo Boricua, near Humboldt Park, and a coauthor of this article. After reading and responding to several drafts, García expressed delight, saying that she “loved everything that was written . . . . I got chills, I smiled, [and] I cried.” Moreover, she noted, it was an “eye-opener” to see the “self [she] used to be.” Through reading about and viewing images of her past self, García was able to observe how much had changed for her since she had left the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS). Now, although she tries to write regularly, maintaining an active presence on social media sites such as Facebook, she is nevertheless writing less than she did when she was in high school, in Elaine Vázquez’s English class. She had wanted to go to college immediately after high school, but financial difficulties prevented this from being an option for her.
This glimpse into García’s life highlights some of the challenges faced by students who are struggling to find a path to higher education. No matter how innovative their language arts curriculum—and García’s urban school was quite innovative—it cannot miraculously help them transcend material circumstances. Still, following literacy researchers and scholars in narrative inquiry (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011), we contend that the stories we tell and our ways of seeing a situation matter; they cannot erase material conditions, but they can help us see the world differently and, sometimes, can lead to social action. As Shirley Brice Heath (1994) notes, “The role of story as a way of explaining and of prompting others to new perceptions makes special sense for those who see their experiences as somehow marginal, as lying outside the mainstream of their associates” (p. 215). Stories offer even greater potential when they are able to circulate to those who may not know the storyteller or his or her community or who may have been overwhelmed by other narratives.

For educators who work in urban schools, the capacity to see possibilities is often hampered by the dominance of the repetitive narratives circulating in the media that reduce the lives of students to problems and sometimes to statistics, such as the dropout rate or low test scores. Teachers, too, can come to see students as problems based on such narratives. We cannot ignore the issues involved; however, they can mask the richness, particularities, and possibilities of urban students and communities. Too often, a statistic can stand for the whole story, functioning almost as a proxy that limits our attention to the workings of community. As Flores-González, Rodríguez, and Rodríguez-Muñiz (2006) explain, the making of stories is a political matter with consequences for our perceptions of those represented. In describing how the residents of the Chicago community of Humboldt Park have been portrayed in the media, they say:

Since the 1970s, the young residents of Humboldt Park have been criminalized by the media as gang bangers, dropouts, and teenage mothers. The local high school has been called a “Teenage Cabrini Green,” after the infamous Chicago public housing project, and its students have been labeled as “predators.” (pp. 175–176)

Lost in such media accounts are expressions of hope and visions for change. While the material struggles faced by students such as García cannot be denied, the stories we tell about community are consequential. In her award-winning study of the lives and literacies of Harlem youth, Valerie Kinloch (2010) calls for a new literate tradition and a pedagogy that “offers youth opportunities to assign alternative meanings” to a variety of places, from the classroom to the community (p. 188). She explains how students
and teachers in her study came together to narrate community transformation, specifically as related to gentrification: “Whether they believed that gentrification was a class or a racial and cultural issue, youth and adults talked openly about the perceived causes of gentrification and the impact it has on community structures, residents, history, and cultural institutions” (p. 188). Such narratives about community can inspire fruitful dialogue and community inquiry (Bruce, 2008) as well as serve as a productive topic for language arts pedagogy, especially when they are created using a broad range of multimedia composing tools.

Drawing on a narrative framework, this research concentrates on the work of multimodal narrative in community-building, and specifically on how teachers and students at a public high school in Paseo Boricua, a mile-long stretch of Division Street in Chicago, strive to make the community the curriculum. Coauthored by two literacy researchers, a high school English teacher, a school administrator, and a high school student, this article foregrounds the benefits of community collaboration in producing multimodal narratives. The questions that guided this inquiry were the following:

1. How will students, teachers, administrators, and university partners narrate their own histories through a video project?
2. How will the use of video affect the way participants and coauthors represent community and place?
3. How will participants represent their community in a video project?

Our study revealed that teachers and students told competing stories about community and place. When we viewed the stories told by the students, which were often stories of struggle, we became aware of the complicated ways in which histories are narrated, the challenges of telling a story that might be called one of success, and the complicated role of literate practices in this representation of community narratives. Our findings also indicated that the use of multimodality allowed for new ways of replaying histories across space and time, and that a pedagogy of possibility was dependent on a critical hope that would allow a space for the coexistence of stories of literacy and schooling that might otherwise compete with one another.

We begin by describing our research methods and our interest in processes of coauthorship and collaboration using video. Next, we provide some background on PACHS. We then feature three narrative accounts by coauthors and participants—those of Carlos R. DeJesús, an administrator; Elaine Vázquez, an English teacher; and Naomi García, a student in Vázquez’s class, whose later comments opened this article. Last, we discuss implications for writing pedagogy and research. Through a series of overlapping representa-
tions of education and place, we show how narrative renderings construct our understanding of reality, and specifically how multimodality can be used by those whose voices are often overshadowed by dominant narrative renderings in research and in teaching. Moreover, we aim to show how these multimodal narratives can be linked with a critical pedagogy of possibility.

Method

Our research is informed by our contention that a productive way to study literacy and community is to disrupt traditional researcher/participant models. Following Cannella and Lincoln (2009), we contend that critical inquiry must reflect on its methodologies and develop approaches that go beyond “evidence-based research” and that force alliances between the academy and the community as well as the public at large (p. 69). Rather than studying our participants and analyzing them as “data,” we set out to explore literacy, broadly conceived, and to have participants join us as coauthors. Following earlier collaborative projects that one of us had worked on (Berry, Hawisher, & Selfe, 2012; Hawisher et al., 2009), we sought also to make our participants visible through the use of video components. With five coauthors who were also participants, we aimed to foreground the diversity of perspectives of various participants on literacy and learning in Paseo Boricua.

Two of the coauthors, Berry and Cavallaro, learned about the work that was taking place in Paseo Boricua and at PACHS when they were graduate students in a course on community-based learning three hours away at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Rather than being part of an English Education or Writing Studies program, the course was offered through a Community Informatics Initiative (Community Informatics Initiative, n.d.), a collaborative effort among university partners and community members focusing on the use of various technologies to address community problems. Berry and Cavallaro were interested in the possibilities that could arise through community literacy efforts and the potential offered by an expanded view of literacy, one that embraced multimodality.

Berry and Cavallaro wanted to explore the possibilities of using video not only in the writing classroom but also in the community and in the representation of research. At the same time, it was important for them to recognize that they were outsiders and to develop a research approach that truly attended to the cacophony of voices. Frequently, white, middle-class college students and teachers develop projects at schools such as PACHS with the intention of telling a particular story, often one that challenges dominant (and problematic) representations. On the surface, this may strike some readers as a worthy goal, yet in Berry and Cavallaro’s case, it was a naive
one. When they first picked up video cameras, the two researchers wanted to celebrate PACHS. Hoping to build on what their colleagues had told them about life at the school as well as on earlier research, they wanted to help students, teachers, and administrators share what they imagined was going to be a series of amazing stories about literacy and learning. However, such a focus can undermine researchers’ efforts to really see what is happening in a community—to really listen.

Krista Ratcliffe (2005) describes the need to “listen pedagogically” to how teachers and students respond to particular narratives (p. 154). Many community-building efforts stress the value of listening to the often-overlooked stories of community members and students. Maisha Fisher (2007), for example, invites educators to consider “their role and responsibility” in helping urban youth build literate identities (p. 83). Her approach involved creating spaces in which students’ voices mattered, in which students assumed the literate identity of author, wrote about issues that were important to them, and received feedback from their peers. In many ways, García’s writings for her class and for this article honor Fisher’s (2007) recommendation that students learn to see themselves as active participants in their own learning.

To accommodate varying attitudes and comfort levels toward using video as a composing tool, Berry and Cavallaro assembled a collective video that interwove a series of interviews with teachers and administrators with a series of performative texts captured on video by Vázquez and students in her English class. Teachers and administrators tended to focus on the school’s accomplishments, with narratives that traced complicated histories and offered hope that things could become different. The students’ stories focused on community problems and serve as a reminder that this community, like all communities, is not a static entity, but a place that is constantly remaking itself in many ways, including through its stories. Vázquez, who joined us as a coauthor, worked closely with her writing class to compose videos about community and place. Rather than hoping that her students would tell a particular story, she offered them a space to reflect on place. García, as one of her students, produced a powerful video weaving together conflicting images of Paseo Boricua, documenting progress while highlighting the issues that still remained.

The nearly 15-minute documentary (Berry, Cavallaro, & Vázquez, 2009) that resulted from the above efforts, “(Re)voicing Teaching and Learning in Paseo Boricua” (available at http://www.pedroalbizucamposhs.org/revoicing-teaching-and-learning-in-paseo-boricua-video/), was shared with participants and revised based on their feedback. It features video created by students and was ultimately produced by Berry and Cavallaro.
Some Background: Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School

Before turning to the narratives of three of our coauthors—Carlos R. DeJesús, Elaine Vázquez, and Naomi García—we provide some background on PACHS, its history, and its place in Paseo Boricua.

When we visited PACHS in 2009, we saw signs of Puerto Rican nationalism as well as expressions of the school’s commitment to community-building, such as the slogan “Community Is a Place for Everyone” (as seen in the opening montage). But the school’s history—represented in words and images on the walls of the school, on its website, and in publication—is subject to alternative readings that are shaped as much by the narratives of those involved as by the participants’ political positions. For instance, writing about PACHS, René Antrop-González (2003) reported that school supporters believed that some new residents found the school an “eyesore” because it featured the murals of Puerto Rican political prisoners, offering critiques about capitalism and colonialism (p. 259).

On the PACHS website (PACHS Day Program, n.d.) were the words “Education Breaks Chains,” a belief that informs much of the work at the school. More than 50 years ago, out of a belief that the “complex realities of Puerto Rican youth” were not being effectively dealt with in the Chicago public schools, a community group organized to petition and seek changes to the curriculum of what is now Roberto Clemente High School, including the addition of Puerto Rican history to the curriculum. When the school board refused, a group of community members including parents, activists, students, and teachers decided to establish an independent school to address these needs.

Founded in 1972, PACHS has sought to counteract the erasure of Puerto Rican culture in the community and to address community problems, including a 70 percent student dropout rate (Lucas, 1971). PACHS is inspired by the work of Pedro Albizu Campos (c. 1891–1956), a man known as “el Maestro” who was “convicted to eighty years imprisonment for what
he said” (Villanueva, 2009, p. 632). Campos argued, and argued well, for the independence of Puerto Rico; the power of his words, of literacy, made some afraid and gave others hope. Campos’s use of narrative was tied to his rhetorical skill; Villanueva (2009) described Campos’s crime as “being an effective speaker” (p. 652). Indeed, a central focus of PACHS has been on helping its students develop into effective speakers through investigating and speaking about their community.

PACHS collaborates with community programs such as the Vida/SIDA, a community health clinic, and boasts many successful programs of its own, including a family learning center, after-school enrichment programs, a cultural center, and a curriculum that remains dedicated to critical pedagogy and the fostering of change in the community. Students have the opportunity to take courses in Puerto Rican history, Spanish, and Latino/Latina literature along with the more traditional subjects of math, English, and science. However, there is nothing “traditional” about even the latter courses. The curriculum (PACHS, Our School History, n.d.) places an emphasis on “developing higher order thinking skills of inquiry and analysis, primarily through problem-based learning,” enabling students to “engage in critical thinking and social transformation,” and providing the “educational experience needed to empower students.” Learning, in this environment, is never disconnected from the idea of “social ecology,” which “stresses the interconnectedness of people to one another [and] their community and world” (PACHS Day Program, n.d.). Here, we listen to the stories of three coauthors who took part in the documentary project as they describe their own histories in this community, and we analyze the extent to which they represent hopeful and critical perspectives.

**Scene 1: Carlos R. DeJesús and the Place of Literacy and Possibility**

“Students are always pleased to know that somebody who has dropped out can come back,” Carlos R. DeJesús explained when Berry and Cavallaro sat
with him in the Vida/SIDA health clinic in the spring of 2009. And DeJesús himself did come back. He went from dropping out of school to becoming assistant director of PACHS. “Dropping out does not mean that you’re a failure. It means the school failed you,” he explained. For DeJesús, the responsibilities of teaching and learning went far beyond what most teachers imagine.

DeJesús championed the potential of students and resisted the tendency to blame them by default for what went wrong in their lives. Sitting in the Vida/SIDA, an extension of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, he embraced a view of learning that was situated in the social, material, and economic issues facing his community. His passion, as he admitted, was not education per se, but something larger—something more integrated with the lives of those in his community. Whether learning occurred at PACHS or at the Vida/SIDA, the needs of the community needed to come first. He questioned how teachers of English could talk about a language arts curriculum without also understanding who our students were, where they lived, and how they lived. DeJesús’s need to address such issues led him to work for a host of community organizations, including one focused on public housing in the Latino community. He was not just practicing an attention to place in a language arts curriculum, a critical need that we discuss further in the next section, but also extending this work into the realm of public policy.

Leander and Sheehy (2004) ask, “Does one explain literacy life as that which can be immediately observed?” (p. 2). For DeJesús and for us, the answer is no. We contend that it is critical to understand the life histories—the processes—that bring students to classroom spaces and how our expectations of them play out outside of school. DeJesús asks, “How does a student go home to do their homework when there are 15 people living in a four-room apartment? Where do they study? How do they study?” While he strongly believes in the transformative power of education, he is still aware of the material realities students face. His interest resembles the work of other literacy researchers who have theorized the place of space (Kinloch, 2009, 2010; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; McComiskey & Ryan, 2003), but he also extends this commitment to venues far removed from classroom practices. Such diffuse attention not only allows us to acknowledge the rich practices that exist beyond the classroom but also helps us recognize the social, cultural, and economic challenges students face.

DeJesús’s recognition of the significant material obstacles confronting students did not prevent him from seeing possibilities, however. His own story
of coming to Paseo Boricua informed how he saw this space and provided him with what he called “an affinity” for working with other students who had dropped out. After all, his own life had been shaped by a sense of possibility, as his literacy narrative illustrates. He had not dropped out of school because he was failing. Instead, as he explained, he had dropped out because school just did not seem relevant or connected to his life. He remembers going back to talk to a counselor after he had dropped out to discuss the possibility of taking the GED so he could get a job as a mechanic. When the counselor asked him if he had ever thought about designing engines rather than repairing them, a light went on in his mind. He began to see himself and his place in Paseo Boricua as being filled with great possibility that he had not originally imagined. In listening to him talk, we realized that his life involved the ongoing reimagining of space, seeing potential when others did not. Drawing on the use of narrative in representing place, Kinloch (2009) writes, “As people create representative narratives, they discover stories about themselves, their place(s) in the world, and their sociopolitical stances that affect who they are and who they seek to become (i.e., the material and representational fabrics of their ‘beings’ are questioned)” (p. 156). In Dejesús’s story, we see a representational narrative in which Dejesús’s potential and the potential of those around him, while always in flux, remain tied to a sense of possibility.

Reflecting on his high school days, Dejesús remembered, “There were recruiters coming in from Harvard and Yale. . . . I didn’t see the point. I knew of those places in myth and lore [but] had no concept of the possibility that I could go to a school like that.” Like his earlier story, this statement indicates how ways of seeing can construct possibility. The story of Dejesús, who followed numerous career trajectories before returning home to Paseo Boricua, is perhaps more about the power of imagining new stories, new ways of seeing the world, than it is about literacy. It is this imaginative element that John Dewey (1934) wrote about in *A Common Faith*. Inspired by George Santayana, he explained:

> The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension. It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection. Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. (pp. 18–19)

As we listened to Dejesús’s commitment to the school and its students and heard how others admired him, we, too, recognized how extraordinary things could indeed happen in everyday lives and saw the power of ideals,
tempered by a recognition of social constraints, in dealing with community struggle and imagining alternative ways of thinking about education and the role of school. Caught on video, De Jesús’s story replays a narrative—a counternarrative of sorts—of what can be accomplished in Paseo Boricua. Because the story he tells is legendary, at least in this community, it tends to reaffirm hope. In the next section, we meet a teacher who made a home in Paseo Boricua, relied on her own struggles and learning to reimagine the language arts class, and developed a pedagogy incorporating video production.

**Scene 2: Confronting White Privilege: Elaine Vázquez’s English Class**

“...I had wanted to go to grad school for English literature, but halfway through my undergraduate career, I became really disenchanted with the academy and the canon and the elitism and racism inherent in saying, ‘Well, these are the great works of literature and, yeah, we have to add in all this multicultural stuff,’” explained English teacher Elaine Vázquez when we asked her about her early experiences in college. Although she believed that graduate schools had gotten better and were forging connections with community schools such as PACHS, she was nevertheless mindful of how the “ivory tower” continued to exclude.

“As a white person, I lived through a lot of privilege,” Vázquez remarked when we met with her. She explained how she had begun to immerse herself in theory about combating oppression through education. Like De Jesús, she maintained a hopefulness about what was possible, was cognizant of the historical successes of Paseo Boricua, and sought to address these accomplishments as juxtaposed against the everyday realities of her students. She believed strongly in the value of the spoken word as a tool for urban youth (Fisher, 2005, 2007) because of its immediacy and potential power: “It’s not just wordplay. It’s political wordplay.” She noted how the idea of the power of students’ language was finding favor even in the academy.
Sometimes, she told us, she wanted to write her own spoken-word piece about her experiences with white privilege and racism, but she found it difficult to find the words and to deliver an emotionally charged performance. In contrast, she marveled at how her students engaged with spoken-word poetry, recognizing that they could do what she could not. For her, commitment to teaching through social action was based on a belief that teachers would not always be the experts, that they should facilitate rather than lead.

As an undergraduate, she worked as a student guide and was required to talk about diversity. “I was petrified,” she explained. Until that point, she had not been exposed to much diversity: “I [had] personally had contact with two or three people of color,” she said, noting that this contact had been somewhat superficial. Knowing she wanted to learn more about issues of diversity, Vázquez found a relevant student meeting, but she remembers having gone there with a sense of arrogance. It was not that she did not share belief in the value of making the university more diverse, but rather that she had yet to fully appreciate the necessity of collaboration in the process. The humility she has since developed deeply informs her pedagogical approach, which positioned the language arts classroom as a location for working through community issues and listening to, and learning from, her students.

Sitting in front of her computer with its suite of applications, she explained how she strove to create a language arts class in which writing was recognized as a multimodal process, incorporating sound as well as still and moving images, and was also recognized as political. As an undergraduate student, she had discovered the work of Paulo Freire, which, she explained, was what had brought her to PACHS. Her commitment to critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987) and Augusto Boal’s (1979, 1995) Theatre of the Oppressed had led her to explore storytelling through performance, to develop a curriculum that invited students’ lives into the classroom through multiple media and modes of expression. She particularly focused on issues of conflict as represented through performance: “If there’s one thing that the students love talking about more than anything, it’s drama, because it’s big; it’s huge in their lives. So I figured, why not bring it into the curriculum?” The interactive spirit of such work is designed to foster dialogue, exchange, and political action, and this interest in social action underscored much of Vázquez’s work.

In describing the work of youth in remaking community and resisting gentrification, Flores-González and his colleagues (2006) noted how multimodal composing contributed to activism in the Puerto Rican community:

Accelerated gentrification in the Puerto Rican community since the 1990s has propelled youth to join the struggle to preserve their community.
geted by police, school officials, and the punitive “low-tolerance” measures that accompany gentrification, they resist and challenge unjust practices through hip-hop, dialogue, and civic participation. (p. 176)

Such community initiatives are valuable because they provide venues in which students can see how their words have power and can contribute to social-justice efforts such as fighting gentrification. Also, these initiatives recognize the rich literate practices of urban youth and explore how they can be used effectively in community work.

One example of how Vázquez created opportunities for her students to voice their concerns was an assignment she adapted called “Where I’m From,” a popular assignment among teachers with various inspirations including George Ella Lyon’s poem (1999) by the same name. In Vázquez’s class, students were asked to write a poem about the place from which they came without actually naming that place. The poems the students wrote depicted a community still in struggle wherein the ideals of education had not yet fulfilled their promises. One student, for example, announced, “I’m from a dysfunctional family, a place where slow suicide goes unnoticed, a place where help is asked for but never given.” This student, like some of the others in the documentary, suggested that this place was a community in trouble. The assignment allowed the students to share images of their daily realities and gave them a platform for voicing the complexities of their lives and the numerous crises and problems that still confronted members of Paseo Boricua despite the many progressive and successful programs there.

Through her English curriculum, Vázquez invited the lives and struggles of students into the classroom and created opportunities for students to speak publicly through symposia and multimodal publishing. She helped students capture their stories with video cameras and then share them on the class blog, thereby reaching a broader audience. (The culmination of this assignment appears in the documentary project mentioned earlier.) The students’ videos were, largely, marked by moments and images of pain and struggle. Vázquez’s students’ work illustrates how digital media can be used effectively in a language arts class and can provide students with a chance to participate in discussions of community. In the next section, we hear more from the student from Vázquez’s class who was mentioned earlier, Naomi García.

**Scene 3: Naomi García: “I’m from a Place”**

“I’m from a place where screaming, fighting, and crying is a symphony, where your friends got your back, but when you need them most, you’re
hanging alone.” These words were written and performed by Naomi García in the community documentary we produced. But García, with Vázquez’s help, also created her own video. In it, we see her standing in front of a black iron gate. Her narrative is strikingly different from those of our other two coauthors—Vázquez and DeJesús—in its attention to community struggle.

In fact, García and most of her classmates produced narratives that described images of violence, whether involving the dealing of drugs or the activities of gangs. Yet she, along with some of her classmates, did more than highlight the prevalence of abuse, gang membership, machismo, and homophobia in the community. García’s poem also expressed her pride in being a Puerto Rican and a member of Paseo Boricua. “I’m from a place where I’m familiar with familiar faces and familiar places,” she says. Her sense of familiarity was connected with the smell of foods, conversations with family, and the reading of community.

Reflecting on writing the poem featured in her video, García remembered her writing process:

I looked out my classroom window, and I saw the people, the kids, the family, my Puerto Rican people, and if you listen closely you’d hear salsa music playing next door to the school. Man, I was just feeling it, everything, and I thought, what can be better than throwing in some Spanish side to give it some flavor of where I’m exactly from?

Present in her video narrative is a strong sense of community and of her Puerto Rican heritage. She describes looking out the window, hearing music, and quite literally seeing where she is from. “When I look back at [the video],” she says, “I’m proud of it,” and she notes how it accurately captured a sense of her home. It also captures a sense of her identity as writer and contributor to the school and community.

By repeating the phrase “I’m from a place,” García locates her position
as a member of the community she describes in her video. For instance, she says, “I’m from a place where *arroz con gandules* is a familiar taste,” but also adds, “I’m from a place where to men it was okay to beat your woman if she got outta line” and “where I as a young Latina feel scared to roam the streets I’m from/I’m from a place where two women can kiss, but don’t let it be two men.” These words, along with many others in her video, focus on the serious problems that community members still face—for example, the issue of a homophobic double standard allowing for the acceptance of lesbian women but not gay men has not been adequately addressed. Despite the striking successes of Paseo Boricua, García’s and her classmates’ poems serve as a reminder that community goals are never fixed, but always evolving.

As García blends the personal and the communal in her work, moving from her individual life to general observations, she gives us the sense that she is talking not about a unique experience, but about an experience that is familiar to many members of her community, including those who attended PACHS. She recalls how PACHS created opportunities for community bonding:

> Every Wednesday, we would all meet next door to our school or at . . . Casa Puertorriqueña, and there we would have Matthew, our principal, giving out perfect attendance awards. . . . We would sometimes have talent shows and open mics or guests coming to talk to us.

It was during such events that García and other students shared their work and thus were exposed to perspectives both similar to and different from their own.

García’s video also offers an example of how the space between in-school and out-of-school literacies can be blurred. Although Vázquez was present with a camera and this recording was done during the school day, the project moved into the community and dealt with larger issues. Toward the conclusion of García’s video, she questions the power of her words to actually bring about change.

> I’m from a place where at points I thought I could handle words because they were just words, right?

In reconsidering her ability to handle “just words,” García underscores the potential of words to be influential, to be potentially something that one cannot handle.

**Implications**

Those of us who work with words might find ourselves asking similar questions as García: What can words really do? What can literacy do? While not
denying all-too-real social, economic, and material obstacles, we have come
to see how literacy initiatives such as this one can give students a valuable
forum in which to express themselves and potentially influence others.

We believe that multimodal narrative with a focus on community as
a pedagogical topic, as practiced at PACHS, offers potential inspiration for
other urban schools. The video narratives from Elaine
Vázquez’s language arts class, as well as those from out-
side of it, speak to the potential for digital and multimodal
productions to increase participation in community
dialogues that are both situated and able to circulate beyond the classroom
and reach a broader audience. These narratives, which circulated online,
align with Yancey’s (2009) suggestion, building on Hesse’s (2005) call, that
we recover a somewhat neglected type of composing: “the role of writing
for the public” (p. 7). Through multimodal narrative expressions, public
writing can highlight the nuances of experience. In this study, we see the
pride that García experienced in producing her video for public viewing (and
ultimately in having it become part of this publication). Her experience was
similar to that of other students who participated in the documentary project
who enjoyed having their narratives be part of a dialogue, along with other
voices, in class as well as at community meetings and online.

We have also observed the critical role of place in the literate lives of
our participants and coauthors: García’s story is steeped in the struggles
in one particular place, and she brings these into the classroom through
her spoken-word performance; DeJesús’s story of literacy and education is
anchored in his experiences as a student—and later as an educator—in that
same community; and Vázquez’s teaching is shaped by the lived material
realities of the students who come through her classroom. What makes
Vázquez’s pedagogy particularly effective is how she combines digital tools
with an assignment intimately connected to the places where students live, a
theme that has been supported by Kinloch (2009, 2010) and others. Through
multimodal approaches, students and educators can reflect—and replay—the
stories of our lives.

We have also attempted to illustrate the need for pedagogies that allow
spaces for students and teachers not only to voice their narratives but also to
listen to them. Specifically, we have shown the value of the replay, how col-
clective storytelling—rendered through words and video—offers a productive
way of studying community and self over time. Without a range of differing
stories, we would have an incomplete picture of the role of literacy and com-
munity in Paseo Boricua and at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School.
Additionally, this research shows how one’s location and subject position, as well as one’s past history, can inform one’s understanding of community. Rather than focusing on discovering the true story, students might be taught how their place in the world can inform how they see a particular situation. This study explores methodologically how educators, rather than allowing students to rush to argument, might create online forums (through video, blog posts, etc.) in which students can slow down and listen to other perspectives. By modeling a pedagogy that emphasizes listening and “[b]y engaging competing stories laid side-by-side, students and teachers may broaden [their] world views” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 155). In the language arts class, students can come to see community beyond dominant (and reductive) narrative representations. In this way, listening becomes a political endeavor in the writing class. It becomes a way of investigating how one can respond to narrative representations through the careful reading of the narratives of others. García was able to use this video genre around the theme “Where I’m From” to create a compelling story about her place in Paseo Boricua that contrasted with the others told here. In doing this, she was able to listen to her story in conjunction with others in her community.

Vázquez reminds us that students often have literate traditions and technological skills that their teachers lack, and she urges teachers and students to draw on one another’s resources to cultivate a multifaceted appreciation of writing in the twenty-first century. Through the class blog, Vázquez created a forum and a curriculum that allowed students to narrate their lives by drawing on a range of literate skills. Students created pieces via spoken word, a genre that Vázquez found rich and compelling for storytelling while recognizing that it was a skill that she herself had not fully mastered. This observation aligns with research that explores how traditional hierarchies are disrupted in the digital age and how educators can learn from the wide range of literacies in which their students are engaging outside of school (Yancey, 2009).

Moreover, as we began shaping this project and working with García, we observed the great challenge that comes when students are afforded the possibility of offering critique and when their critiques have the potential to extend beyond school. García is engaging not only in narrative but also in performance. Entangled in a particular community, she stages a performance in the documentary in which viewers get a glimpse into her life while also coming to understand larger community issues. We would
argue that there is an ethical dimension to García’s work in her insistence on mentioning what remains to be done. She accepts neither the celebratory rhetoric about her school nor the public critiques that have appeared in the media. Instead, she draws on her own impressions to illustrate the complexity of her experience. When her narrative is presented along with others, teachers can observe the value of a pedagogy that is critical of, but nevertheless hopeful about the potential of, community. While she was looking out the window imagining her video, García was not simply doing a multimodal assignment, but was also imagining a type of literacy that was situated, embodied, and attentive to place. Her reflections imply the potential of place-based and community-based assignments in the language arts curriculum and how, through multimodality, students might reflect on their community and their place in it.

Conclusion

In the reflections on community presented in this study, participants and coauthors offered diverse expressions that were shaped as much by their various subject positions as by their connection to place. By juxtaposing and overlaying narrative representations through video, students and teachers enact the power and potential of multimodal narrative to represent and reflect—really, replay—how various participants experience their community. This process of replaying is ultimately about more than teaching students the new literacies that are so much in demand. When represented online, as in this study, these multimodal narratives become publications, often expressing understandings and perspectives that may not align with popular representations of community and that may evolve over time.

Local contexts matter and can be drawn on to help make literacy efforts more relevant and intimately connected to students’ lives. We need to continue to find opportunities for collaboration between teachers and students. By identifying the beliefs of the storytellers discussed here and looking to understand their experiences, we have shown how community-building is always a work in progress, encompassing many perspectives. We contend that educators, when representing community, should neither simply relate narratives of success (like the one DeJesús’s story includes) nor focus solely on obstacles to it (like those in García’s story). In fact, stories such as those shared on these pages fall along a continuum of life experiences, and the whole is richer than any simple story of success or failure. We need neither to choose one type of story nor to desire a specific merging of types; rather, we need a space in which multiple views can coexist. No singular truth resides...
in one or another story; each one reflects the complexity of community experiences, and together they show us the different ways in which individuals occupy their positions, understand their community, and see themselves.

To return to the online scene that began this piece, when Cavallaro asked García to reflect on her best memories from PACHS, García noted that her favorite recollection was of “every time my pictures or writings were published.” To her, she said, PACHS “wasn’t just a school” but was “more like a family, until the very last day of school, until even the day I graduated.” In Vázquez’s class, García continued, “I learned many writing techniques and how to still be myself when I write so that you feel and see it all.” While the pedagogy expressed here may not really be able to “see it all,” García’s words of reflection on her experience point to the value that can be found—whether through alphabetic means, moving image, or some combination thereof—in the listening to and replaying of lives.

Notes

1. The use of literacy narratives to explore understandings of literacy has been addressed by numerous scholars including Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen (1992) and Mary Soliday (1994). More recently, literacy narratives have been explored in the digital realm for research and teaching (Berry, Hawisher, & Selfe, 2012; Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, n.d.).

2. Given the proliferation of digital media and social-networking sites, one might think that such multimodal processes would be more common. Yet this is hardly the case: Too often, students’ in-school composing practices are limited to paper-based methods (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010).

3. For related scholarship, see Maisha T. Fisher, Susie Spear Purcell, and Rachel May (2009).

References


Berry et al. > Sustaining Narratives of Hope

Fundatia pentru Studii Europene (European Studies Foundation Publishing House).


**Patrick W. Berry** is an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University. His publications include the award-winning born-digital *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times* (2012, with Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe).

**Alexandra J. Cavallaro** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include LGBTQ rhetorics and literacies and multimodal writing.

**Elaine Vázquez** taught English at the Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) and is currently employed with the San Francisco Unified School District as an English department head and teacher, helping teachers and administrators reform instruction and school climate in ways that address equity gaps at her school, Raoul Wallenberg Traditional High School.

**Carlos R. DeJesús** served as assistant principal at Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) and as the director of urban agriculture for the Greater Humboldt Park Urban Agriculture Initiative. He is presently the managing director of housing at Heartland Human Care Services of the Heartland Al-
liance, working to end homelessness in Chicago. Carlos has dedicated his professional life to working with and for his community, in the areas of food security, education, housing, health, and mental health. **Naomi García** studied at the Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS). She is a poet and spoken-word artist and has been an active member of PACHS and a contributor to the Youth Community Informatics initiative.

**Search for New Editor of *Language Arts***

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Language Arts*. In July 2016, the term of the present editors (Peggy Albers, Caitlin McMunn Dooley, Amy Seely Flint, Teri Holbrook, and Laura May) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 29, 2014**. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editorship. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, in November 2014. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2016. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “Language Arts Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.