Using Literature and Digital Storytelling to Create a Safe Place to Address Bullying

Carrie Jones, coeditor of *Dear Bully: 70 Authors Tell Their Stories* (Hall & Jones, 2011), spoke at the National Council of Teachers of English convention. She told us about how when she was in the seventh grade, a teacher berated her, telling her she would amount to nothing in life because of her squeaky voice. This story made me wonder how many students feel this way and what we as educators can do about it.

I (Kevin) was the shortest person in my school. I spent time in a trashcan, but there were also times when I was the bully. I showed Hall and Jones’s book to my colleague (and coauthor), Kimberly, at Ohio Dominican University, and we reflected on our bullying experiences and decided we needed to address this with our college students. The book is comprised of young adult and children’s book authors’ responses to their bullies. Students laughed with authors like R. L. Stine as he used humor to conquer his bully, but they also shed a tear as Heather Brewer, author of *The Chronicles of Vladimir Tod*, states, “Bullying is a horrible thing. It sticks with you forever. It poisons you . . . . [E]veryone deserves a happy ending. Except, maybe, for Greg [her bully].” Tears and laughter were shared with each account, and each story was echoed by our students’ stories.

One particular student, Julia, had never considered the impact bullying could have on her future students. “I had no idea I would have to worry about this as a teacher.” Reading *Dear Bully* opened her eyes to her enormous responsiblity as a classroom teacher. How many other Julias were sitting in our classrooms? How many regarded bullying as a non-school matter? Bullying is a problem. According to the American Medical Association, 3.7 million kids bully, and more than 3.2 million are targets of “moderate” or “serious” bullying each year (Cohn & Kanter, 2003). Cyberbullying is growing at an alarming rate. In the past, most bullying happened at school, but now it can occur with the ease of a keystroke or images on a website. Student Jennifer stated, “The bully can now follow you home.” It was alarming to hear how many of our students were victims of cruel words and actions via the Internet.

Harmon (2004) calls cyberbullying the most problematic and least-studied form of emerging social cruelty in schools. New technologies have unleashed a new arsenal of weapons for teens (Harmon, 2004; Leishman, 2002). Screen names can be stolen and used to send inflammatory messages to friends. Racist, sexist, or homophobic statements and compromising sexual photographs . . . can be altered and sent to unlimited audiences once relationships sour. Bullying generally involves a power imbalance between victims and perpetrators (Shariff, 2003, 2004). Cyberspace enhances this power imbalance (Kincheloe, 2005).

It is time to shift the balance by providing a venue for our students’ voices to be heard. We could reclaim and remake a Web space to address bullying using digital storytelling (Ohler, 2009). Digital storytelling is telling stories using digital means, which can include sound, images, and music. However, according to Ohler, the key is the story. He states:

In the mid 1960s, Marshall McLuhan explained that
conventional literacy caused us to trade an ear for an eye, and in so doing, trade the social context of the oral tradition for the private point of view of reading and writing. To him, television was the first step in our “retribalization,” providing a common social experience that could serve as the basis for dialogue in the global village.

However, television told someone else’s story, not ours. It was not until Web 2.0 that we had the tools to come full circle and produce and consume social narrative in equal measure. Much of the emerging nature of literacy is a result of inexpensive, widely available, flexible Web 2.0 tools that enable anyone, regardless of technical skill, to play some part in reinventing literacy. (p. 8)

Kimberly and I wanted to expand our classroom and teach without borders. We realized that in global 2.0 learning, our educational arm could reach out to hundreds, even thousands of adults and kids if we reclaimed digital space. We invited our students to tell their bullying stories. Drawing inspiration from the books of authors, students created videos documenting personal stories and stories of others, offering these as messages of hope along with concrete, practical ways to defend against bullying.

Connections to Fiction

One powerful method to encourage our students to talk about bullying experiences was to ask them to find fiction and nonfiction books that focus on the subject. This is especially important because many students echoed the thoughts of Taylor, a student who stated, “The only bullying book I have read was Dear Bully; it really made me think about what I say to people and how I could be hurting their feelings.” Drawing from Bott’s books The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom (2004) and More Bullies in More Books (2009), our students used fictional texts to identify characters whose stories parallel their own experiences with bullies, or whose stories provide alternative choices for similar situations. By reading these stories, many students said they felt as though they were not alone. They included these selections in their digital stories.

The fictional literature also helped them question the choices of others. Two students, Lauren and Mary, inspired by Katherine Otashi’s picturebook One (2008), demonstrated that one person can make a difference. Like the book, they used color in their video—using a free computer paint program—to represent the choices of the bully and the bystander. The result was a visually colorful account that demonstrated how middle school teachers can use picture books to help students find their own stories. Another student interviewed middle schoolers who discussed how bullying affected them; he ended the recorded interview session by recommending the book Bystander (2009) by James Preller. This authentic mix allowed students to see the work in the context of their lives. Another student, Jennifer, shared Uglies (2005) by Scott Westerfield and added her story of being made fun of because she was not like everyone else. Imagine the rich teaching that can occur when students identify with the text in a digital frame.

As classroom teachers, we often use students’ stories to connect to literature. For example, one student who told of being ostracized related to the fictional character Zero in Louis Sachar’s Holes (2000), wherein the behavior of the main character, Stanley, helped validate Zero’s story (http://vimeo.com/37988341). Another student, Katie, found comfort in James Howe’s The Misfits (2003). In that book, young people create a political party that they call the Gang of Five and find a new way to define “fitting in.” These examples show how fiction gives students’ concerns a personal voice. This is evidenced when Katie quotes J. K. Rowling: “It is our choices . . . that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

Whether the students are reading a classic such as The Outsiders (1967) by S. E. Hinton, The Misfits (2003) by James Howe, or even a picturebook such as Thank You, Mr. Falker (1998) by Patricia Polacco, they can use books as aides in telling their own stories in a digital and audio form. One student, Ellyn, used Polacco in the frame of a public service announcement to suggest caring prevention techniques against bully-
ing, reminiscent of the care Mr. Falker provided for Tricia in Polacco’s personal bully story. This can be viewed at http://vimeo.com/37142089.

Another student, Joe, was able to create a video with the purpose of developing empathy for the bully. He did this by presenting possible reasons someone might choose to bully another student. His digital narrative included the voice of the bully. Imagine what happened in a student’s life that made it permissible to become a bully? See this video at https://vimeo.com/album/1852382/video/31058877.

Students also referred to nonfiction sources. They compared what they read and experienced with information found on websites and books. They used statistics, advice, and suggestions from anti-bullying programs to complete their digital narrative, which provided a rich resource bank for addressing bullying on a local and national level.

**Using Digital Storytelling to Address Bullying**

Some students chose to interview middle school students, whereas others interviewed adults (family, friends, school officials) about their experiences with bullying. One student even recorded a member of Columbus’s professional soccer team, The Crew, to explore the value of speaking out. We then began to share methods for creating narratives using digital storytelling. We began a practice of “exercising real literacies” (Kajder, 2006):

I believe in teaching students how to mindfully use, author with, and critically evaluate the most powerful cultural tools we have for communicating meaning. I don’t believe that you learn by keying in “a, b, c, or d” in response to multiple-choice tests, or by watching flash animations that illustrate a cartoon adventure. I want my students to read and write for authentic purposes. (p. 11)

**Becoming Comfortable with Digital Tools**

Teachers should not let a lack of familiarity with digital tools cause them to dismiss the use of digital storytelling. Our advice is to just start and then grow through experimentation. Each attempt builds confidence as well as awareness of the multiple uses of programs like iMovie and Windows Movie Maker. We found that our students collectively shared whenever they were stuck or wanted to demonstrate a technique, and then the class worked together to solve the problems and explore the new techniques. Only 4 of our 60 students were familiar with digital storytelling tools when we began our digital narratives, yet everyone created worthwhile projects. Here are some tips:

1. Put story first. Stories are critical to the meaning-making process. Do not become immersed in the technical web, but instead concentrate on how the stories can best be told using digital tools. It is helpful to start the project by drawing a physical storyboard outlining the key components to the story: how you will begin, how you will sustain audience interest, and how you will conclude. Each of our students’ stories contained a) a personal response to bullying, b) stories from adults or students about bullying, c) a connection to a work of fiction or nonfiction, and d) specific recommendations for addressing bullying.

2. Incorporate sounds and images into your stories. We recommend using the websites www.publicdomainpictures.net and www.bestphotos.us to gather these elements. When working with images and/or sound, students need to be aware of “royalty-free images” and “creative commons.”

3. Be flexible with time, and allow changes in the process. Students will have stops and starts; allow those to happen.

Teachers should not let a lack of familiarity with digital tools cause them to dismiss the use of digital storytelling. Our advice is to just start and then grow through experimentation.
4. Educate yourself. Real writing and reading can include digital publishing. YouTube has helpful tutorials.

Making Bullying Stories Visible

We observed that bullying stories are usually invisible. They are generally not discussed in the classroom, but there must be a place for them. However, in order to vocalize them, we must, as Schultz (2003) stresses, place “listening at the center of teaching in stark contrast to the trend to hand teachers prescriptions or scripted texts from which to teach” (p. 7). Until we discussed bullying stories in class, our students were silent about their personal experiences. After we provided a space for them to be heard, we listened to repeated accounts of “my parents were shocked when I told them I was bullied as a kid” and “I did not go to school sometimes because of bullying.” None of these students felt that their schools addressed this issue. At best, the schools punished the bullies after the bullying occurred, but there was no preventative action. Kristin reported, “I would say that students would get in trouble for bullying, but we were never taught how to prevent bullying or get out of a situation.” Carly said that before taking our class, “I never thought to ask my sister, ‘Hey, have you been bullied?’ and now I know she has and so have 51% of kids.” We needed to make these stories visible.

One student created a digital video response dedicated to her friend who killed himself by stepping in front of a train because of being bullied. Although she did not want to be there when we showed the video, she said it was important that the world know her friend and his story via the Internet. Her video can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/album/1852382/video/40453332.

Another student shared in his video (http://vimeo.com/ 37990677) that he has a condition called hyperhidrosis, which results in sweaty hands. After seeing his video, a classmate who also has this condition felt comfortable coming forward with her own story of hyperhidrosis. Their narratives became a springboard for discussing real-world solutions to bullying.

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK**

**Digital Storytelling to Thwart Bullying**

This article describes how digital storytelling can be used to share tales of bullying. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Tell and Show: Writing with Words and Video” invites students to work together to author and design a digital video.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/tell-show-writing-with-1099.html

“Making Memories: An End-of-Year Digital Scrapbook” asks students to reflect on their school year, creating a digital scrapbook consisting of images and text to present to their school community.


Striking images can leave lasting impressions on viewers. In the lesson plan “Digital Reflections: Expressing Understanding of Content through Photography,” students make text–self–world connections to a nature- or science-related topic as they collaboratively design a multimedia presentation.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/digital-reflections-expressing-understanding-985.html

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

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Recommendations for Using this Project with Middle School Students

The Importance of Presentation

It is essential to talk about the process of creating the digital narratives as it is occurring. It is not enough to do the project; the conversation about making and presenting the work is invaluable. Too often students work alone and simply hand in a project, but this project needs to be showcased, discussed, reviewed, and, most of all, shared. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Although we used interviews in our class narratives, interviews are by no means mandatory. Students can create a digital presentation from what is available on websites and/or from school resources. Students can also concentrate on using reactions from adolescent literature and nonfiction sources.

2. If students interview others, real names and faces do not have to be included. In our projects, students used the information from the interviews but did not attribute their sources. Instead, they used partial quotes, a collage of accounts and voices, and even changes in screen and type color to represent their stories.

3. Read stories from the Dear Bully book and website (www.dearbully.com) and from the books listed on educational consultant C. J. Bott’s website (www.bulliesinbooks.com) for fictional accounts. The Olweus Project (www.olweus.org) and Bully Free Classroom (www.bullyfree.com) are other helpful resources.

4. Students can also work with a partner or a small group.

Taking the Digital Work into the Schools

Our students insisted that we share their narratives with schools. We have applied for grant funding to have professional storytellers travel to middle schools and work alongside our students to share the stories and to create a website. Each storyteller will recount bullying tales while the students share their digital narratives. We are now in the process of hosting these videos and purchasing the domain name www.ourstoriescount.com.

We never thought this project would affect us the way it does. It was not easy for us as professors or them as students, but when it was over, we viewed our students differently, and the project has not been forgotten by any of us. We shared our bullying stories and engaged in a bigger practice than we had anticipated. Our students wrote, told, and shared their stories with a discerning and critical eye toward accuracy and faithfulness to their experiences. They continue to exchange new books on bullying, critiquing those books in light of their own experiences as authors of digital narratives.

Whether they’d been a bystander or a bully, everyone had a bullying story. They did not have to identify with their story, but many used this project to talk about their experiences. Bullying stories were rampant, and that’s just scary. We know that using digital storytelling accentuates students’ voices, that reading Dear Bully in the classroom makes bullying visible, and that opening spaces to discuss intolerance and difference will matter because, after all, every story counts.

References


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NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2013: April 18
Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 18, 2013. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.

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