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Speaking the Lower Frequencies 2.0: Digital Ghost Stories

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SPEAKING THE LOWER FREQUENCIES 2.0: DIGITAL GHOST STORIES

Keynote Speaker

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University of Minnesota Walter R. Jacobs is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of African American & African Studies at the University of Minnesota. A sociologist (PhD, Indiana University, 1999), Jacobs is the author of *Ghostbox: A Memoir and Speaking the Lower Frequencies: Students and Media Literacy*, and co-editor of *If Classrooms Matter: Progressive Visions of Educational Environments*. His current research explores personal and social possibilities of students' generation of creative nonfiction.



Abstract

In Speaking the Lower Frequencies: Students and Media Literacy Walter R. Jacobs explores how college students can become critical consumers of media while retaining the pleasure they derive from it. *Speaking the Lower Frequencies 2.0: Race, Learning, and Literacy in the Digital Age* builds on its predecessor by examining pedagogy and literacy through theories and practices of digital media making, specifically digital storytelling methods used in a fall 2008 undergraduate class, "Digital Storytelling in and with

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Communities of Color.” Jacobs begins his keynote with the course description and then examines one component of the class project: students’ engagement with “social ghosts,” the strong but usually hidden and unexamined forces that structure their educational experiences.

“Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color,” fall 2008. Storytelling is a tool for preserving memory, writing history, learning, entertaining, organizing, and healing in communities of color. It is in the telling of stories that communities build identities, construct meaning, and make connections with others and the world. In this course we will investigate modes and power dimensions of digital storytelling, analyze the role of digitized media as a method of individual healing, and examine media as tools for community organizing and development. We will explore media making, creative writing, and memoir in both literary and digital writing, and examine the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of digital storytelling. We will create projects to tell our stories, examine our social ghosts, and work with community members as part of the 40th Anniversary of the African American and African Studies Department to develop digital stories about Twin Cities communities of color. Students will learn to produce creative work (writing, video, photography, sound, and artwork) and gain technical proficiency in Mac-based editing. Students will produce photographic and video work that will be shared on the course blog. No technical expertise is necessary!

—course description for “Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color” undergraduate class, University of Minnesota, fall 2008.

In my 2005 book, *Speaking the Lower Frequencies: Students and Media Literacy*, I investigated strategies for encouraging undergraduate students to become critical consumers of the media without losing the pleasure they derive from it (Jacobs, 2005). Sonia Livingstone, however, notes that in the digital age literacy should provide students with “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Livingstone, 2004, p. 3). In other words, students need to become producers of media content in addition to being critical consumers of media worlds. In my new project, I explore this expanded understanding of literacy. *Speaking the Lower Frequencies 2.0: Race, Learning, and Literacy in the Digital Age* examines pedagogy and literacy through theories and practices of digital media making, specifically digital storytelling (Jacobs, Raimist, & Doerr-Stevens, 2009). This project is centered on a fall 2008 undergraduate course I co-taught at the University of Minnesota; the epigraph above provides an overview of the main elements of the class. In this chapter, I examine one component of the project: students’ engagement with “social ghosts,” the strong but usually hidden and unexamined forces that structure their educational experiences (Jacobs, Reynolds, & Choy, 2004).

Kristina Woolsey notes,

We are extending infrastructures to support the newest digital technologies that are introduced by industry. However, at the core, we are not focused on learning with technologies. We are supporting students with computers so that they can better take advantage of an educational system that is at its heart still an idiosyncratic face-to-face, text-based enterprise. (Woolsey, 2008, p. 218)

My co-instructor (Rachel Raimist) and I attempted to challenge this unfortunate reality for many students. In our “Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color” class, students learned to use technology to transform their learning experiences, to see themselves as active agents who can use technology in ways not always envisioned by the designers. While the class did employ text-based readings, these were delivered in non-traditional electronic formats. More importantly, the readings provided a foundational structure on which we built the computer-mediated tools and processes that formed the core of the class. Students developed a new paradigm for confronting the many social ghosts fostered by the educational systems they inhabit. I believe that instructors in a diverse array of education locations can deploy technology in ways to facilitate constructive engagement with these ghosts. I present one method here.

Using the Center for Digital Storytelling method

The Center for Digital Storytelling is a California-based non-profit 501(c)3 arts organization rooted in the art of personal storytelling. We assist people of all ages in using the tools of digital media to craft, record, share, and value the stories of individuals and communities, in ways that improve all our lives.

Many individuals and communities have used the term “digital storytelling” to describe a wide variety of new media production practices. What best describes our approach is its emphasis on personal voice and facilitative teaching methods. Many of the stories made in our workshops are directly connected to the images collected in life’s journey. But our primary concern is encouraging thoughtful and emotionally direct writing.

—Center for Digital Storytelling website (<http://www.storycenter.org/index1.html>)

According to Leslie Rule’s oft-quoted definition, “Digital storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, experiences, and insights” (Rule, 2009). Such digital stories are both created and shared via the use of computer tools. One of the leading proponents of using Apple Macintosh computer-based products in digital storytelling is the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, CA. As one can readily discern from reading the first page of their website (reprinted in this section’s

epigraph above), CDS has created a powerful approach to digital storytelling, one that has influenced thousands of individuals and groups.

At the center of the CDS approach to digital storytelling is the 3-day “Basic Workshop.” In a setting of 8-12 participants, each student designs and produces an individual digital story. Students are taught to scan and edit images using Adobe Photoshop, craft and record first-person narratives, and use Apple Final Cut Express to combine the elements into a rough draft of a 3-5 minute digital story. After the workshop CDS staff polish the digital story and mail a compact disc (CD) to the participants. The CD contains the final version of the digital story, along with all of the source materials in order to allow students to complete additional edits on their own.

Upon completion of the Basic Workshop students can attend an “Educator Workshop” or a “Facilitator Intensive Training Workshop.” The 3-day Educator Workshop is designed to guide K-12 teachers in the practical application of digital storytelling as a classroom program for K-12 age students. The week-long Facilitator Intensive Training Workshop explores curricular and technological issues educators should consider when adapting the CDS digital storytelling process to their own pedagogical environments.

I enrolled in a Basic Workshop in May 2008, and produced a digital story called “Letter to my Mother.” (This digital story may be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/JacobsDS/>). “Letter to my Mother” is a memorial to my mother, who I believed helped me survive adolescence with an abusive stepmother. It is the digital story manifestation of my memoir *Ghostbox*, in which I explored a life where family problems were blamed on “disrespectful” children who refused to accept “Mom’s” authority (Jacobs, 2007). My stepmother is one of my social ghosts, a force that limited my thoughts and decisions until I filled a special shoebox with objects that evoke significant memories: good, bad, and ugly. My “ghostbox” has rendered my stepmother’s seething presence benign.

In our fall 2008 “Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color” course the students read *Ghostbox* and discussed it with Rachel and me in class. Students also watched and discussed the “Letter to my Mother” digital story. In these discussions, students interrogated the social processes of digital storytelling. For example, students learned that it takes courage to share their stories publicly; they risk judgment from others. But once they develop confidence and commitment to the storytelling process, students can generate many new insights. After a thorough analysis of CDS’s seven social elements of digital storytelling (Lambert, 2006), we conducted several classes where we taught students the technical skills necessary for creating their own digital stories. These digital stories can be viewed online: <http://tinyurl.com/UMstories/>.

A digital story on literacy and learning

This is a story examining my time teaching in Brooklyn, New York. Through layering of images, voice, and music, I try to explore my memories as I’ve stored them in my

mind. In many ways my memories are limited, focusing only on certain aspects. This story is an attempt to open up that past and perhaps re-remember these moments in new ways in order to reshape how I view myself now.

—Candance Doerr-Stevens's description of her digital story, "White Teacher"

We did not explicitly require students to include social ghosts in the digital stories, but some students did. One student not only produced a story that engaged a social ghost, this social ghost was one explicitly about learning and literacy. Candance Doerr-Stevens' "White Teacher" provides us with a powerful example for rethinking how K-12 educators can view classrooms with diverse student populations. ("White Teacher" may be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/WhiteTeacherDS/>).

The fall 2008 "Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color" course was a 3000-level class, meaning that it was primarily designed for juniors and seniors. We did, however, enroll several sophomores. Graduate student Candance Doerr-Stevens also enrolled in the class using a graduate directed studies mechanism, given that it fit perfectly with her interests in new media literacies. Rachel and I were so impressed with her early contributions to that class that we invited her to be the third author on our in-progress *Speaking the Lower Frequencies 2.0* manuscript (Jacobs, Ramist, & Doerr-Stevens, 2009).

Candance analyzes "White Teacher" in chapter 6 of the manuscript. She writes,

I chose to focus on my experience as a fifth grade teacher in Brooklyn, New York, looking specifically at my identity as a White teacher. My choice to revisit this particular memory was inspired by reading Walt's memoir Ghostbox. In his book, Walt describes social ghosts as memories from our past that haunt us. Walt proceeds to present the process of creating a "ghostbox," as a space and process through which to re-visit traumatic memories for purposes of "productive haunting." To avoid and forget these memories, Walt argues, is "to let them be born anew in another shape, a form that rots my identity and crumbles my self-worth" (Jacobs, 2007, p. 16).

Wanting to channel some of my own productive haunting, I hoped the process of digital storytelling would help me work through some of the shame and regret I had attached to my memories of teaching in New York City. I decided to revisit this memory through examining the trope of teacher as White savior, looking specifically at how this trope may have influenced my thinking and teaching at the time.

Candance goes on to interrogate dominant discourses that position urban students of color as "downtrodden," "poor and disadvantaged students," or "second class citizens." She was able to present her students less as victims and more as the happy 5th graders that they were; she captured the energetic children who had loving families and enjoyed school. At the same time, she avoided representing herself as a villain who did not understand students from a social world that was very different than her own. She posed complex questions about intersections of race, literacy, and learning in public school systems. She shunned easy answers; instead she presented

the story as more complicated than “nice White lady goes to Brooklyn.” In an age where we are increasingly seeing mainstream commentary such as “The End of White America?” (Hsu, 2009), we need digital stories like Candance’s to remind us that race will not go gently into that good night . . . if ever.

Conclusion

One way forward for higher education is to nudge more digital content into the open web, combining our honed wariness about privacy and security with our awareness of the full-blown social web. (Alexander, 2008, p. 199)

Bryan Alexander explores ways in which we can integrate social networking tools like blogging and wikis and/or sites such as Facebook and MySpace into collegiate learning environments (Alexander, 2008). An integral component of the “Digital Storytelling in and With Communities of Color” website was for students to post their digital stories to the course blog, <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/afroam/storytelling/>. In light of issues of privacy and confidentiality (alluded to above by Alexander), Rachel and I allowed students to choose pseudonyms under which they could post their work. Most students used their real names, however, in order to fully create a space where everyone could freely share aspects of their lives, and receive support and encouragement in confronting their social ghosts digitally.

One of the comments posted in response to the “White Teacher” digital story states:

I enjoyed the mix of images and the music, which was present but not overpowering. Even more, I appreciated the self-critique and the critique of identity in relation to the classroom—both yours and that of your students. Positioning is a powerful factor that often goes unnoticed, unacknowledged.

Indeed, “Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color” students explored how “colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination, recognize that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle” (Hooks, 2006, p. 389). Students learned to not fear this site of struggle; they discovered how each and every one of us can explore our combination of privileged and disadvantaged identities in a quest to create a more democratic society. “If we want our students to engage the world as critical, informed people, then we need to reshape our plans as that world changes” (Alexander, 2008, p. 200). Digital stories help our students (and ourselves!) confront a world in constant motion by opening windows into spaces we don’t know, as well as by guiding us in complicating understandings of contexts we believe that we thoroughly comprehend.

By the end of the semester, the students in the fall 2008 “Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color” class at the University of Minnesota viewed digital stories as gifts: “Those of us fortunate enough to be able to talk out loud

should love our voices, because they tell everyone so much about who we are, both how strong we can be and how fragile” (Lambert, 2006, p. 54). I invite readers from places throughout the educational spectrum to explore how they may similarly help their students develop strong voices and create digital stories as gifts for themselves and others.

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