

**A Narrative Celebration of Learning:
Young Children's Multimodal Literacy Artifacts on Display at Open House**

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In this narrative, I share from my experiences at the *Celebration of Learning* Open House as members of a small, suburban school community eagerly viewed (and celebrated) young children’s multimodal literacy artifacts. I was not a teacher here but became part of the school community during my doctoral research as I collaborated with Kindergarten teacher Grace¹ and second grade teacher Angela to design literacy lessons that positioned digital technologies as resources for expanding children’s literacy options (McKee, 2017). Though the research had ended weeks before, the teachers invited me to attend this event as the children’s digital artifacts produced within our collaboration would be shared with families. As the story unfolds, I describe the multimodal, multi-vocal literacy artifacts on display and the ways they were enabled through the teacher’s pedagogies. Through the telling of this story, I invite early childhood educators to envision possibilities for the ways they might design early literacy pedagogies that incorporate traditional and digital tools, celebrate diversity, and connect with families in their own setting.

The annual *Celebration of Learning* Open House was about to begin. As I walked down the hallway, I felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement because tonight’s Open House would introduce the school community to new uses of digital technologies in early literacy instruction. Due to a scarcity of digital resources in the school, Grace and Angela had explained that uses of technologies in literacy instruction had been limited to a “computer center” where individual students practiced early reading skills and/or accessed websites with leveled texts. The teachers recognized the potential that digital technologies had for expanding literacy learning but were challenged to find meaningful

¹ All names are pseudonyms selected by the individuals within the research study.

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ways to use the limited resources available. To respond to these challenges and realize their vision, the teachers and I formed a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) in which each teacher identified the literacy learning goals for their classroom, and the educators collaborated to identify supportive technologies and design a literacy lesson to respond to the goals identified (McKee, 2017)². I was curious how the school community would receive these novel artifacts supported through the teachers' collaboration.

I entered the Kindergarten classroom that was packed with excited children and an eager audience. I looked at the children's self-portraits (Figure 1³) hanging above the windows and then turned to the projection screen that displayed a message welcoming the visitors. I reflected on the array of traditional and digital resources the children used to prepare the artifacts showcased and smiled at the ways these multiple resources expanded literacy learning opportunities.

² Additional information about the research study, including the ways the educators collaborated to plan the literacy lessons, and the lessons themselves can be found at: (McKee, 2017).

³ Images were taken in the classroom as part of the research study prior to the Open House event.



Figure 1. Self-portraits of Kindergartners

My thoughts were interrupted as Grace welcomed everyone. She smiled and adjusted her tone to create anticipation around the digital artifacts about to be shared. Some of the children enthusiastically chimed in!

Grace began, “We have been studying trees and we made something special to show you about what we have been learning. We made video stories!”

“On the computer!” Bartman called out.

Sarah nodded and confirmed, “We really did, you know.”

As the first video story started playing, my mind traveled back to the moments in the CoP where Grace selected Adobe Spark video (ASI, 2017) to support her goal of expanding story composing ideas. She further selected the application for its useability; it could function on the school’s lone iPad *and* her laptop, and the interface could be navigated by young children when guided in a small group. With this in mind, Grace

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divided her students into groups, and each group created a video story that included text and images and featured each child's voice narrating a page accompanied by a musical melody. Within each group, each child added their ideas to develop the plot and made design choices such as color and font. Grace facilitated this process and made suggestions to promote the inclusion of each child's ideas. All children, even those who were previously reluctant to engage in literacy activities because they struggled to recognize or form letters, enthusiastically participated in creating the video stories. The audience received the stories warmly and I saw family members smile and nod as they heard their child speaking on video. A Grandmother leaned to me and whispered, "It's amazing what the little ones can do nowadays!"

After four stories had played, Grace announced in a serious tone, "This last story has a *very* sad ending because it is about a tree that gets chopped down!" Grace's tone then turned playful as she explained, "But don't worry—it's not *too* sad because it is also kind of silly!"

The children cheered, and Spiral called out, "I love this one!"

Hearing this chatter, I remembered this group's innovative story composing practices. The other groups had followed a similar story composing process where they quickly brainstormed ideas (that Grace wrote down), then selected images from the application (ASI, 2017), and then orally recorded the text. This particular group struggled to begin as no one volunteered story ideas, so Grace adapted her pedagogy and used the images on the app as a catalyst for story composing (ASI, 2017). As she scrolled through images of "trees" on the app, Hope excitedly pointed to the monkey eating ice cream in the tree (Figure 2). The group members were equally excited, and this image became the

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focus of the monkey story as the children brainstormed the events that led up to the ice cream. When the class of Kindergarten children previewed this video story in preparation for Open House, they squealed with delight at the twists and turns of the plot. As the video story played this evening, laughter returned to the classroom.

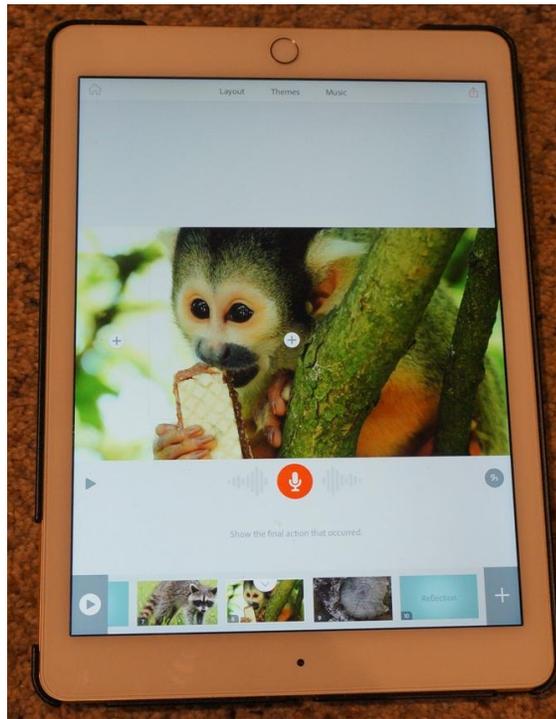


Figure 2. Monkey eating ice cream in a tree

The story ended with the caption, “To be continued...” Grace pointed to the words on the screen and asked her students, “Who can tell everyone what these words mean?”

Spiral called out, “The story isn’t over!”

“Cause we have more learning to do!” added Sarah.

“That’s right!” Grace confirmed. As she concluded the program, Grace invited the audience to look at the children’s journals and artwork on display. As families milled around, Grace greeted me excitedly, “The video stories were a real hit with families!”

I replied, “I think that some people were surprised that such young children could create *this* kind of story!” As our conversation continued, we reflected on the ways the video stories showcased children’s personalities and learning in different ways than the written journals on display.

As Grace mingled with the families viewing children’s work, I headed down the hall to Angela’s second grade classroom. Here, family members were moving around the room talking with students about the cultural artifacts the children brought from home and displayed on their desks. Angela greeted me at the door, and whispered excitedly, “You are just in time. I can’t wait for you to see the final edited video!” Angela walked to the front of the room, motioned to the green fabric hanging on the board and addressed the audience:

This is our greenscreen (Figure 3). As you know, we have been working on a special project. We researched our countries of origin, learned about the customs of our families, and wrote a video script about what we learned. Then, we used the greenscreen and the DoInk app (DK Pictures, 2016) to create videos that make it look like the children *actually* visited their country of origin! Let’s take a trip around the world to see our countries! We’re going to make stops in Nigeria, Korea, Australia—you’ll have to wait and see the rest!

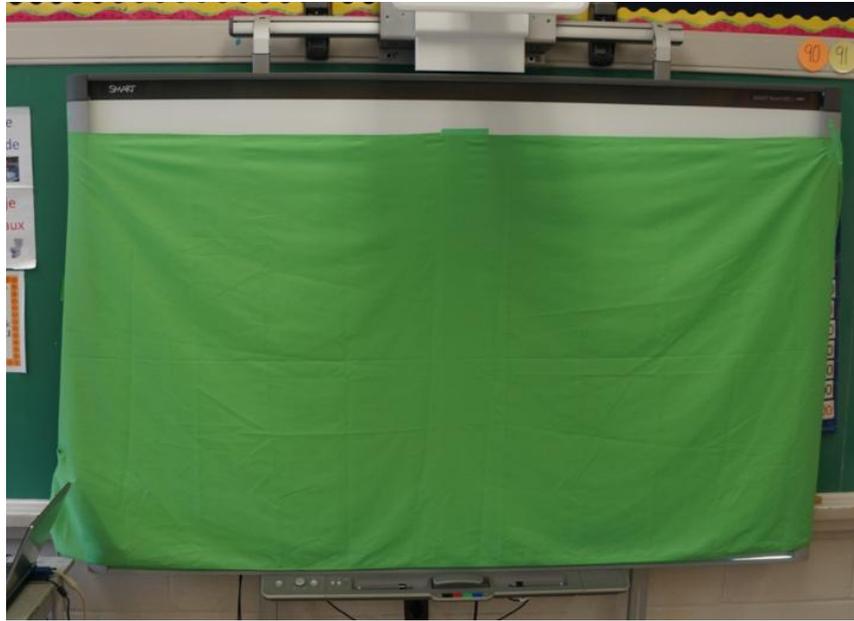


Figure 3. Image of greenscreen ready for filming

The video was a compilation of the students' greenscreen videos. It created the effect of traveling around the world, stopping along the way in different countries to feature the greenscreen clips of the children discussing their cultural heritage and family customs. The video editing had the effect of unifying the children in the class while also celebrating diversity as children spoke in their home language, shared their immigration stories, and discussed foods associated with cultural holidays. The sharing of this information would not have been possible without the assistance of families who supported their children in researching their histories and cultures, and a parent who volunteered to create the video compilation. As I viewed the video, I reflected on the ways the greenscreen project united families in celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity.

When the video finished, Angela announced, "Surprise! We also have a blooper reel!" As the audience viewed the outtakes, the room roared with laughter. As the

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bloopers ended, broad smiles remained as Angela invited the audience to revisit the students' displays around the room.

Angela and I had a moment to reconnect. I congratulated her, "The video was excellent!"

Angela shared, "It was so much better than we thought it could be! It was like the students were actually stepping into their family histories and telling their stories.

I agreed and responded, "I didn't know about the bloopers. That was fun!"

Angela nodded and explained

When we were filming with the greenscreen, we made *so* many mistakes. Sometimes children forgot what they wanted to say and we refilmed, but a lot of the time, *I* made mistakes with the app and we started again. We made the blooper reel because I think that the mistakes are just a part of learning.

As we continued our conversation, we recalled the initial days of planning in the CoP. Angela's goals were to create opportunities for children to discuss their countries of origin. She selected the DoInk app (DK Pictures, 2016) because she thought it would help her students experience their histories and cultures in different ways. She believed the project was feasible using the school's single iPad and so we purchased low-cost fabric to function as the greenscreen and support the project. Angela confronted many challenges as she found ways to use the iPad and one greenscreen to film each child within a busy (and sometimes loud) classroom. As we reflected, we recognized that the inclusion of the greenscreen in this literacy lesson was a challenge, but yielded powerful opportunities to

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celebrate diversity and connect with families while also expanding opportunities for literacy learning.

As I drove home, I reflected on the Celebration of Learning. The artifacts displayed highlighted the children's multiple literacies, including those traditionally celebrated in (e.g., journals) and those novel to these early elementary classrooms (e.g., digital stories). The artifacts were multimodal as they combined communication modes of written text, spoken word, image, and music through digital and printed media (e.g., Walsh, 2011). The artifacts were also multi-vocal as students' voices were heard within classroom meaning-making activities (NLG, 1996). For example, the kindergarten children spoke into classroom literacy practices when they innovated the established story composing sequence of developing a story and searching for images to support it by developing their monkey story from an image. In addition, the children's diverse identities were celebrated through the sharing of cultural practices in the greenscreen clips. Further, students' voices, that were previously unheard in traditional literacy events due to a reluctance to participate in skills-based activities, were heard through their active engagement in the creation of digital artifacts. These multimodal, multi-vocal artifacts celebrated particular children while also unifying the community. The quality of the artifacts showcased the children's capabilities as they surpassed the teachers' and audience members' expectations of what young children could create.

As I considered the artifacts, I recognized that the children's learning was enabled through a complex network of people, practices, and materials. Grace and Angela were instrumental to the children's learning as they collaborated to find new digital resources that could be used in meaningful ways in early literacy instruction. As these teachers

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implemented novel digital resources, they found ways to mediate pedagogical and technological challenges, with Angela recognizing the mistakes as integral to the learning. The teachers recognized that classroom learning was connected to the home as Angela thanked parents for their part in supporting the students in researching and with video-editing. The importance of these home and school connections were further evidenced through the audiences who packed the classrooms and joyfully celebrated the learning.

Though the Open House was intended as a culminating event to celebrate learning that had already taken place, I wondered what this evening might provoke for these teachers in the future. The children had experienced new ways of literacy learning and had demonstrated that they were capable of collaboratively constructing diverse texts in different ways. They had engaged in literacy activities where all voices were celebrated. *What might they expect in the future?* The teachers had envisioned expansive possibilities for literacy learning enabled through technologies. They had collaborated to work toward this vision. Though it was challenging, they experienced some success. *Where might their pedagogical vision take them next?* The family members participated in the literacy activities by sharing cultural resources, and celebrating the artifacts shared. *What might be possible for further home and school literacy connections?*

What might be possible for teachers in other classrooms? The learning activities identified in this narrative occurred before COVID-19, where learning in physical proximity, and events with large audiences were possible. Though the activities discussed herein could not be replicated in classrooms where teachers must navigate physically distanced, virtual, and hybrid classrooms, the principles integral to these pedagogies

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could be employed to support young children’s collaborative creation of multimodal artifacts using other technologies. In an unpredictable era of shifting instructional models and evolving digital tools, these principles invite early literacy teachers to consider the ways they can include opportunities for:

- *children to exercise their voices and capabilities,*
- *partnership with families in supporting and celebrating literacy learning,*
- *inclusion of various traditional and digital resources in literacy activities, and*
- *collaboration with other educators.*

Like the Kindergarten’s story about the monkey, this story is also “*To be continued*” as we have more learning to do.

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