Digital Storytelling in a Bilingual Special Education Cross Category Classroom: A teacher’s story

The nature of literacy is rapidly changing as new information and communication technologies, such as the Internet, rapidly generate new literacies required to effectively exploit their potential for reading, writing, and communication (Bruce, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Scholars from diverse disciplines, ranging from cognitive science (Gee, 2003; Mayer, 2001) to sociolinguistics (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 2003; Gee, 2004; Kress, 2003; Lemke, 1998) to cultural anthropology (Markham, 1998; Street, 2003; Thomas, forthcoming), have begun to recognize these changes to literacy as they begin to study their consequences. As many new heuristics appear to inform this multidisciplinary work, a new perspective about the nature of literacy is beginning to emerge. This perspective, often referred to as “new literacies,” is still in its initial stages but it is clear to most that it will be a powerful one, redefining what it means to be literate in the 21st century (Leu, Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, in preparation).

The issue of whether language, as well as literacy, is a more cognitive or social construction has a long and complex history (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; 1973). The rapid changes to literacy brought about by continually changing ICTs and globalization inevitably shift the calculus of this issue to one that is far more socially constructed than ever before. This has important consequences for how we view the acquisition of both oral language and new literacies. Since students bring important linguistic capital to the classroom, they play an increasingly important role in their own learning, making it essential to recognize the social aspects of language learning. Taking into consideration the above aspects, a special educator decided to use ICT tools into her curriculum giving the students these powerful literacy tools to express their ideas, emotions and concerns with words, sounds, animations and a diverse media.

This has been a work in progress of this special educator’s process of implementing adaptive instructional strategies in her bilingual self-contain classroom in
an elementary school in the Midwest for the last year and she wants to continue it for one more year. During the last year, she crafted adaptations for her students with disabilities in the Language Arts curricular area using digital storytelling (Banaszewski, 2002; Dunn, 2000). Digital storytelling involves telling stories using multimedia technologies, providing a format for students to put their thoughts together, using visual and audio media. Some of the findings have been when the teacher have incorporated the process of digital storytelling into her special education classroom, these have produced numerous benefits with her Latinos/as students in their academic progress and acquisition of the new language (English). Her students are language learners who have different learning disabilities. One important aspect has been the students’ motivation in participating in these types of activities. These students appeared to be excited about their projects and committed increased effort in writing and verbal communication. They proved they were able to generate projects, using multimedia software as Kid Pix and computer technology. Therefore, the next media to use would be using Blogging in the next three months with her students in exploring their free writing style in an interactive digital storytelling format.

This is a very rich experience and illustration for teacher education programs of how to enhance a classroom with the use of new technologies in multicultural and multilingual environments. In addition, it is an important project for educator that will have students with special education needs and/or bilingual students.