

Stories from Corners of the World: Visual Storytelling for Online Learning

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are calls to action worldwide to make our world better. This article first demonstrates how a United Nations Fellowship in visual storytelling provided the opportunity to use open pedagogy and create assignments where students can tell the stories of their communities across Canada and internationally. Then the author identifies her own research interests in relation to the UN SDGs that ignited a vision for post-secondary students to become changemakers in research.

Keywords: visual storytelling, United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, holistic education, online learning

Teaching online has opened opportunities for post-secondary students to study from their own communities within Canada and internationally. This past year, I noticed the different stories that students revealed about their community experiences and of people in their communities. Stories depicted poverty, hunger, poor well-being, educational challenges, gender inequality, lack of clean water, housing insecurity, and challenges to just living. How can we as holistic educators provide the opportunity for our students to share their corners of the world?

Many students were already documenting their own stories visually on various social media platforms. As part of a new online course, they were also learning to create informative writing and media content as visual storytelling. Creating ways for online students to use their stories within their multimedia assignments emerged as key to increasing student engagement in a more holistic online learning experience while also supporting our United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Holistic Educator Identity

Having had a brief career as a holistic classroom teacher, then as an administrator, and transitioning to working as an online post-secondary educator, I have not shaken the holistic out of my educator identity even if I have changed the age range that I educate. Holistic education is a way of being, a

way of living. I approach teaching online with a critical perspective. designing online learning experiences, but then balancing the use of digital tools with offline experiential learning experiences. This strategy defines how I bring holistic practices to online education.

In 2016, leaving face-to-face teaching behind to move my career online meant that mind, body, spirit, and soul, my foundations of holistic education, became even more significant in a teaching and learning environment where we do not have the nuances of meeting the students in person. In addition, with asynchronous courses, I am not online at the same time as my students nor are there live sessions! Throughout my online teaching career, I have had a vision of holistic education where I expand ways to decolonize online learning experiences, thread in practical themes that connect to equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility, and in the process, increase student engagement.

Open Pedagogy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

I was among the recipients of a 2021-2022 United Nations Fellowship. The other Fellowship recipients and I worked on ways to use open pedagogy in our courses to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. As open pedagogy evolves to address our hopes for education and the

challenges that students face in learning, so does its definition:

Open Pedagogy is an access-oriented commitment to learner-driven education. It is also a process of designing architectures and using tools for learning that enable students to shape the public knowledge commons of which they are a part.

Open pedagogy can include creating, adapting, or updating [open educational resources] with students, building course policies, outcomes, assignments, rubrics, and schedules of work collaboratively with students, or facilitating student-created and student-controlled learning environments. (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2021, para. 1-2) For my project, I worked on developing open pedagogical ways to deepen student engagement in visual storytelling in response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In relation to those goals, students are now expanding ways to actively engage in their communities, examining and conveying information through multimedia content while demonstrating examples of social change in their online coursework that reflect what they are experiencing, seeing, and knowing in their communities.

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are a call to action to make our world a better place. “[The goals] recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests” (United Nations, 2021, para. 1).

Designing Learning Experiences

Codesign

Lewin et al. (2018) describes how designing learning experiences can benefit from codesign. As part of the United Nations Fellowship, I was privileged to be partnered with a post-secondary fellow from another institution to create a repertoire of interdisciplinary learning experiences for our students at both institutions. Two brains are better than one.

Teaching online is challenging. We do not know what digital inequities will be present. We try to create assignments that will increase student engagement and to develop meaningful learning experiences for the applicable courses. Having someone with whom to codesign a few assignments has provided the benefits of feedback, revision, and collaboration that are not available when designing courses solo. In addition, we are able to navigate the resources and their

connected challenges as mentioned by Lewin & Lundie (2016, p. 236):

The promise that digital education will revolutionize teaching and learning through, for example, the wide availability of digital learning resources or radically restructured virtual learning experiences, often passes without comment on the problematic social, ethical and epistemic assumptions underpinning such changes.

Decolonizing the Curriculum in Online Learning

With a continued goal of decolonizing the curriculum in online learning, I can play a role in developing and furthering digital educational practices that provide opportunities for my post-secondary students to be change makers, to notice what is happening in their communities, and to make us aware of the challenges that we may not know about. I can also play a role in helping the students navigate the technology needed to complete the coursework and addressing the digital inequities that they may face as students in their learning process and access to education. Most importantly, I can provide the opportunity for students to create their own curriculum by encouraging them to bring forth the thinkers, methods, ideas, and people of their place or culture and, through visual storytelling, convey their stories. Keele University Students’ Union states:

Decolonising the Curriculum therefore refers to the practice of liberating a discipline from the control of a single group, opening it up to contributions from a greater range of thinkers, methods and ideas. In order to do this, we have to actively unlearn assumptions we make about other people and places by being critical about what we assume is ‘normal’. (2021, para. 2)

The stories that students have shared have impacted my worldview in terms of my understanding of how success can be achieved. They have expanded my worldview on what it means to be Indigenous in areas throughout the world outside of North America. The stories have meaningfully made me aware that perspectives and issues from around the world matter. At a minimum, in visual storytelling, the students work to expose their personal or community challenges such as poverty, lack of healthcare, deficits in access to education, inequalities within and among countries and many other facets connected to the SDGs. While this project is implemented, a future goal is to prepare students as community-based researchers where the research within the communities is determined by the communities and are involved in the entire research process, from identifying needs to implementing change.

Connecting with My Students Through my Own Research Interests

The United Nations Fellowship is a valued extension opportunity for research that I have been conducting for many years. My arts-based research examining global challenges stems from my own rural living in comparison to urban living and the inequities that I have lived. The research has taken me on a geographic journey that triangulates broad expanses of Canada and research adventures overseas. More importantly, my research has also taken me digitally into the communities of all my international online students, from India where I learned of ongoing agricultural challenges, to Haiti where I discovered bakeries trying to feed the country, and to Oman where repeated power outages limit access to online learning opportunities for students unable to travel to Canada. Water insecurity, food insecurity, housing insecurity, limited access to fresh foods, and threats to our oceans, wildlife, and nature are some of the issues that I have encountered in my research and through the visual stories of my students.

Figure 1

City Produce. Paris, France. (Woodford, 2020)



Food security has long been a challenge in my family living in a rural area where the trip to the grocery store can be costly not only in purchases but also in time and transportation expenses. In my research, whenever I travel to a new region of the world, I am intrigued by questions of where food is coming from and how much it costs. The changes that I saw in the past five years have been further exacerbated by the current pandemic. Just as my family was on the verge of being sent back to Canada due to Covid, the access to fresh food imports began to diminish in Europe due to the distribution challenges including a shortage of truck drivers and restrictions on transport (not sure how the return

to Canada and the rise in food prices are linked). As a result of these challenges, food prices began to increase. Fresh food access begins to diminish as Covid spreads across Europe affecting transport and distribution and increasing prices.

Figure 2

Double Mark Up. Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. (Marriott, 2021)



While it's been a few years since I have travelled to Nunavut, a location that sparked my interest in food security, I continue to dialogue with another researcher about the current state of food security including prices. In Figure 2, the fresh food shown is subsidized in eligible regions, yet still averages over \$6 / lb in northern Canada. The federal government's food nutrition subsidy program, Nutrition North Canada, strives to make nutritious food and some non-food items accessible and affordable (Government of Canada, 2021). There are limitations though as the program is not available in all communities. As well, Northerners who wish to purchase food in the Nutrition North Canada program must shop at identified registered retailers.

As we experienced a heat wave, I considered the effect on food harvesting and other impacts for the years to come. My own crops were harvested earlier this year. Some are sparse. One pear. One plum. Some are plentiful. I can't count the number of hours we spent harvesting wild raspberries. What will next year bring?

Concluding Vision

After my return to Canada in 2020, the time I have taken to reflect has helped me to create a vision for my students and ignited the fellowship idea of visual storytelling as a way for post-secondary students to take their learning into the community as change makers and bring us with them as viewers of their visual storytelling projects. Acknowledging and witnessing the challenges and threats in our own communities is the first step towards developing open

pedagogy assignments and courses that expand our knowledge and worldview of the lives of our students. As a result, we as holistic educators can provide the opportunity for our students to share their corners of the world. And on this journey of online teaching and learning, visual storytelling based on open pedagogy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provides the basis for student engagement and opportunity to share their stories.

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