



Digital storytelling with refugees in formal and non-formal settings: A comparative spatial analysis

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Abstract

An increasingly unstable global environment has led to significant displacement and precarity for individuals and groups. There is a growing trend of refugee resettlement in western states, and comparative educators are considering how increased people and knowledge flows across nations will require “diverse learning perspectives and alternative ways of knowing” (Hayhoe, Mundy & Manion, 2014, p. 26). As such, one of comparative education’s continuing priorities will be to create learning spaces that are ‘beyond the human’, i.e. those that adopt multi-modal educational approaches and consider refugee learners’ diversity (e.g. culture, language, ethnicity and transnationality) (Zajda & Rust, 2009).

These considerations form the basis of our presentation in which we will explore the use of one innovative educational activity, Digital Storytelling (DST), with refugees. Specifically, we engage in a comparative analysis of how DST may be implemented in two distinct education settings—formal and non-formal—to foster refugees’ learning that is situated across time(s) and space(s) and transcends nation-state boundaries.

Our analysis adopts a theoretical framework informed by principles of postmodernist theory, spatial theory, and a corresponding methodological approach of Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) Spatial Triad. We rely on postmodernist theory given its focus on subjectivity, pluralism and heterogeneity of the human learning experience (values which embody refugees’ lived experiences) (Giroux, 1996). This is precisely why educational approaches which value the arts, aesthetics and stories of everyday life (such as DST) find a home within the postmodernist lens (Rust, 1991). Also, our spatial lens for this topic is inspired by Cowen (1996) who notes that comparative educators must “read the global” (p. 166) and focus on the social and cultural dimensions between people across nation-states. This is precisely where a spatial lens is viable for assessing DST with refugees in formal and non-formal spaces because each site has distinctly “shifting sites and boundaries” (Paulston, 2000, p. 17).

Our modes of inquiry followed a Lefebvrian spatial analysis through which we explored how formal and non-formal DST spaces with refugees may be constructed by its participants. Specifically, we used a case study approach to analyze one DST project with refugee learners in a non-formal learning setting (i.e. a local community organization). For a spatial analysis of this setting, we relied on participant observations, informal interviews and select portions of participants’ artwork used in their digital stories. We also reviewed secondary data sources (i.e. published studies reporting on learner outcomes of DST projects with refugee learners in formal and non-formal settings) to analyze how these spaces were constructed and transformed.

Our findings from the case study and review of secondary data sources indicate that formal and non-formal settings are spaces that are differentially produced by its main developers (i.e. educators) and its learners (i.e. refugee participants). In each of these spaces, refugee participants take on an active role to transform the DST learning space into a vibrant and alternative postmodern entity by bridging their global and local identities and learnings through their digital stories. Educator roles in both settings become less strictly educative and more on supporting refugees in their quest to resist and change perceptions of their conceived 'other-hood' in society and build a collective community.

The contribution of our findings complements the existing knowledge base about refugee learning in the comparative education field. Our analysis raises new areas of comparative inquiry which wrangle with how to develop creative digital education approaches which consider refugee learners' lives across time and space in a hyper globalized world.