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Somayeh Kamranian

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Article abstract

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Promoting Discussions About Diversity in the Language Classroom: Digital Storytelling as an Exploratory Case Study

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University of British Columbia

Abstract

Digital storytelling is a narrative technique that combines audio, video and animation elements. It can be used to provide opportunities for the promotion of cultural understanding in the university language classroom. In this study, pedagogy that combines digital storytelling techniques and computational technologies are explored, as part of language studies that can allow instructors to create an intercultural experience. The outcomes of an undergraduate learning exercise have been evaluated, along with this researcher's experience as an instructor who used digital storytelling in a French-as-a-second-language classroom, and includes these students' solicited feedback. In this case study, a group of students conducted internet research to explore the online cultural diversity and cultural differences of Francophone culture. They then created digital stories to represent this diversity. The findings have been analysed to evaluate the potential place of inclusivity and diversity tools in French-as-a-second-language learning, and to share the potential of this practical pedagogy approach for other university educators.

Higher Education in Canada: Demographics and Classroom Dynamics

Migrants and international students play a significant role in the Canadian higher educational system. Statistics from Canada's 2016 Census of Population found that 7,540,830 citizens (21.9% of the Canadian population) were "foreign-born (immigrants)," and research suggests the continuation of the trend towards increasing participation rates of second-generation Canadians in higher education (Corak 2008). The proportion of immigrants entering Canada with a university degree is on the rise, and the children and families of these degree-holders are statistically more likely to attend university themselves, due to the expectations of their parents. Worldwide, Canada ranks fourth overall as the destination of choice for higher education (Government of Canada 2021). In 2019, more than 415,000 Canadian study permits were issued to international students,

including extensions for students already in residence in Canada. This marked a 13% increase over 2018 (Government of Canada 2021). The University of British Columbia (UBC), a research and teaching university with campuses in British Columbia, Canada, published information on their website in 2020 indicating that 28.8% of students registered at the Vancouver campus were international, a 4.5% increase over 2018-19 (University of British Columbia 2020).

Culturally responsive teaching pedagogy is required to meet the often-unarticulated needs of the ethnically and culturally diverse students that comprise today's higher-education classroom participants. In general, international students and underrepresented groups face a wide range of barriers in the classroom, from language accessibility to culturally-based expectations. Based on my experience, the teaching and study of the French language tends to be focused on the technical elements of language. If a cultural context is provided in textbooks and other commonly used teaching resources, especially for introductory courses, it is limited to mono-cultural representations of France and Quebec. Instructors require tools to address the dynamics of cultural diversity, defined by Homi K. Bhabha "as an object of empirical knowledge," and cultural difference, which Bhabha suggests is "the process of the *enunciation* of culture as 'knowledg*eable*,' authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification" (1995, p.206). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and the resulting challenges to travel and mental health for regional and international students have increased the reliance on technological tools for teaching. Such tools are also part of the requirements for the careers these students will enter following graduation. It is therefore necessary to explore how digital tools can be used to facilitate and build cultural competency among students.

I have worked at three higher educational institutions since 2018, during which time there was an increase in the number of beginner-level French language courses offered to students. Most students who completed high school in Canada have fulfilled French language requirements, and do not need to take beginner French at the university level. Therefore, this rise in demand stems from the growing number of international and immigrant students in my classes. As a result, it has been necessary to re-evaluate my syllabi and my course content in order to be informed about the statistics pertaining to immigrant and international students. In this way, suitable pedagogical tools can be created that are relevant to the needs and educational goals of these students. As an immigrant myself, I have a sense of the ways that such approaches can improve learning outcomes and student receptivity.

My French language classroom at the University of British Columbia forms the context for an exploratory case study of my use of digital storytelling in the specific context in which immigrant and international students engage in French-language studies in Canada. Nine student participants engaged in the study by submitting digital storytelling projects and responding to my survey questions regarding their personal classroom experiences and self-identifications [University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board Number H21-03548]. Their study of French was as second- or third-language learners. I was inspired to evaluate the place of inclusivity and cultural difference and diversity in the French-as-a-second-language classroom, based on the questions of whether the students related to the course content and found their place in classroom interactions, the course content reflected the diversity of the student body, and if the course content presented the diversity of francophone cultures and the regions of the francophone world that often remain under-represented in academic teaching. The student participants volunteered their time, and the projects were not evaluated as part of their course requirements. Feedback was provided on the students' stories at different phases of the project, and they were encouraged to emphasize positive cultural aspects, with the suggestion that they give their stories a personal voice.

Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Inclusivity in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

At the time this case study was conducted, the published literature on the didactic effects (intended teaching) of digital storytelling did not focus on the French language classroom specifically. With this in mind, and working within the limitations presented by COVID-19-era restrictions on in-person learning, I set out to engage students in a project that encouraged them to explore francophone cultural differences, and the potential for digital applications to increase communication options. The growing corpus of literature on digital storytelling presents it as a viable means of acquiring the cultural competency needed to promote inclusivity in the classroom. According to Ruppert et al. (2017), digital storytelling is a tool that can be used to measure five "strategic elements that influence student ability to critically think about diversity in society" (p. 33). These elements are listed by the National Education Association (2016) as:

> [The] ability to understand the socially constructed nature of identities; understand the significance of individuals' differing relationships to power; understand how individuals, organizations, and institutions create, perpetuate, or challenge inequality; understand how multiple identities intersect; and understand [how] students are better equipped to re-evaluate their ideas about diversity and difference.

Ladson-Billings (1995) similarly suggests that "culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (p. 161). Based on this formulation of culture as a vital pedagogical tool, I focused on students' cultural backgrounds in an exploratory case study to investigate how digital storytelling can be used to promote the diversity of *francophones* (cultures of the French-speaking world) in the university classroom. A set of queries were implemented to ascertain whether using digital storytelling in the French-language learning classroom will assist the students. Does digital storytelling help students:

- to reflect on their own identities and cultures?
- to discover the diversity of their community (classroom, university, home)?
- to acknowledge the diversity of French languages and cultures and their course content?

I also set out to explore the effects of creating bilingual digital stories, determining whether digital storytelling could be an enjoyable and meaningful experience, and finding out if the chosen tools and platforms were user-friendly for both students and the instructor were included. As mentioned, this classroom project and case study research were undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. I observed that the introduction of online and hybrid learning, as well as social distancing, overwhelmed students and shifted, or restricted, certain types of interactive learning in my classroom. While the participants in this project were taking online courses, and did not have an opportunity to meet me or the other participants in person, working in this project was an opportunity to build personal connections between my students as they exchanged stories.

Study participants

Nine students volunteered to participate in this project as an optional exercise for French-language courses at the University of British Columbia. Of the nine students, 55.56% ($n = 5$) were registered as second-year students, and 33.33% ($n = 3$) as third-year students; 11.11% ($n = 1$) were in the

fourth year of their degree program. Using the online guidelines provided by the department to help students select appropriate courses in the French language, the participants selected from three potential learning categories. In terms of their French-language skills, 33.33% ($n = 3$) self-evaluated themselves as beginner-level learners, 11.11% ($n = 1$) self-evaluated as lower-intermediate level learners, and 55.56% ($n = 5$) self-evaluated as intermediate learners.

I surveyed the students for demographic data and linguistic self-identifications to better understand the linguistic and cultural perspectives they brought to this project. I made a distinction in my questions between "first language" (primary language spoken in daily life and/or at school) and "mother tongue" (language taught since infancy), as students who were born and educated in Anglophone Canada might be using a language other than English at home. Of the participants, 33.3% ($n = 3$) considered English to be their "first language;" 33.3% ($n = 3$) considered English to be their "second language;" and 33.3% ($n = 3$) declared English to be their "mother tongue." Three participants identified as international students, two as first-generation immigrants, three as second-generation immigrants, and one as the descendent of immigrants. Of the participants, 88.8% ($n = 8$) identified as being part of two or more than two cultures, and 88.8% ($n = 8$) spoke two, or more than two languages "fluently." Four students held two nationalities, including three of the five students with Canadian citizenship. Even with a relatively small sample size, the cultural diversity of the classroom participants is reflective of the wider University of British Columbia Vancouver campus community, and the demographics of twenty-first-century Canada (see Table 1).

According to the 2016 Canadian Census, the Philippines, India, China, Iran, France and South Korea are among the ten countries that have the most recent immigrant population in Canada. Seven students who participated in this research are connected to these countries. China, India, and South Korea are among the ten countries that have the highest international student population in the University of British Columbia's undergraduate program. The nine participants' respective connections with these countries corresponds with the reality of immigration and international student statistics in Canada, and within the University of British Columbia community.

Of the nine participants, 66.7% ($n = 6$) self-identified as female and 33.3% ($n = 3$) self-identified as male. Although French language courses are offered in the Faculty of Arts, 55.56% ($n = 5$) of the students were from other faculties and programs. Students shared different stated motivations for taking French courses: 100% ($n = 9$) mentioned the potential benefit to their career path, 88.8% ($n = 8$) mentioned the need to stimulate their thinking, 77.78% ($n = 7$) mentioned the fulfilment of their degree's language requirement, 77.78% ($n = 7$) noted enjoyment, and 66.7% ($n = 6$) the desire to learn from other cultures; 55.56% ($n = 5$) noted travel, and 22.22% ($n = 2$) mentioned reconnecting with their francophone heritage. While career paths and language requirements were expected motivations for enrolment, learning from other cultures was among the main motivations. This showed that cultural competency should be a key element to language instruction.

Table 1: Participant characteristics. Nine students who took French courses and volunteered to participate in this project.

Gender and Age	Year of study	English language is	French level	Immi-gration status	Immi-gration history	Number of cultural self identifi-cations	Number of nationalities	Languages with Speaking Fluency	Digital competency
F, 18-19	3	first	lower intermediate	Canadian	second generation	2	2	2	comfortable
F, 18-19	2	first	beginner	Canadian	second generation	2	1	2	comfortable
F, 23-25	2	second	intermediate	Permanent Resident	first generation	2+	2	3+	adequate
F, 20-22	2	mother tongue	beginner	Canadian	second generation	2	1	2	comfortable
F, 20-22	3	first	beginner	International Student	N/A	1	1	2	comfortable
F, 20-22	4	second	intermediate	International Student	N/A	1	1	2	comfortable
M, 18-19	2	mother tongue	intermediate	Canadian	descendant of immigrant	2+	1	1	advanced
M, 18-19	2	second	intermediate	Canadian	first generation	2	2	2	comfortable
M, 23-25	3	mother tongue	Intermediate	Canadian	N/A	2+	2	2	adequate

Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling is the creation of "a story by integrating multimedia elements such as visuals, audio, video and animation" (Chatterjee, et al. 2019; Dupain & Maguire 2007;)**.** The National Education Association, the largest educators' union in the United States, defines cultural competence as:

> [T]he ability to successfully teach students who come from a culture or cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, understanding certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching and culturally responsive teaching (Ruppert et al. 2017, p. 33).

The literature indicates a long list of positive impacts for students and instructors using digital storytelling. These include:

- creating new meanings of [a] media [and virtually] based world; inspiring individuals to create; providing rich opportunities for self-reflection; and appreciating other people's life experiences with depth and compassion (Anderson & Macleroy, 2017)
- "managing diverse classrooms;" facilitating "student-centred learning strategies [including] student engagement, reflection for deep learning, project-based learning, and the effective integration of technology in to teaching;" and the discovery of "voices, confidence and structure in [students'] writing" (Condy, et al. 2012, p. 278)
- engaging "students in critical thinking, development of cultural competency;" providing opportunities for "teaching and learning with community- based contexts;" facilitating "understanding and empathy of community inequities and diverse human experiences;" "generating feelings of empowerment and reward [by creating] a meaningful product;" creating "an alignment between faculty, students, content and concepts that enables transformative learning experiences for both faculty and students;" and students taking "pleasure and pride in their development and their creative product" (Grant & Bolin, 2016, pp. 44-57)
- "using digital storytelling as a reflective tool for personal and professional growth;" and building "language skills, higher level thinking skills, social skills, and artistic skills" (Ruppert, et al. 2017, pp. 31-33)
- providing more "vulnerable" learners with a voice (Matthews 2014, p. 40)
- assisting students to better understand "themselves, the course content," and "each other" (LaFrance 2013, p. 40)

In my teaching, I seek opportunities to build and share stories that relate to our own cultures, by using visuals that will make us more sensitive to the cultures of others. In the next sections, I evaluate some of the advantages of cultural competency in the French-language classroom, such as diversity awareness, giving a voice to underrepresented groups, having fun, building skills, expressing understanding and empathy, self-reflection, as well as management and inclusion for diverse classrooms, expressed through digital storytelling are undertaken.

Case-Study Procedure

Participants were asked to conduct research about their own family backgrounds, and an aspect of francophone cultures, along with a reflection on their findings and their own identities by writing a story about positive aspects of culture and diversity. They were also asked to make connections with characteristics of Canadian cultures and/or their own Canadian identity. They were provided with some open-access online resources about the diversity of *francophones* to use in their research about the variety of these communities around the world, and to acknowledge the under-represented people in this sect to make a connection with the notion of diversity in their stories.

To begin the project, participating students were invited to choose an idea or subject to write about which was related to their cultural research, and to discuss this with the instructor. They were given the option to create one story based on two subjects. They wrote their stories in both English and French, and produced a text of between 200-250 words for each story. They could also add the symbols that defined these cultures. Students submitted a written draft of their stories, received feedback, and submitted a revised text. The revised draft of all the stories were sent to the participants. They were encouraged to read the stories written by the other participating students and to answer a survey related to their reading experiences. Using the StoryboardThat platform (https://www.storyboardthat.com), students were able to create a visual version of their story in the style of a comic strip or graphic novel, by using pre-designed scenes and character options, all of which could be inserted into a storyboard. After reviewing several online storytelling tools, the StoryboardThat platform was selected for its potential to foster creativity and exploration of the imagination without the training of a visual artist, as well as its potential to help students in the process of communicating and reflecting individually and collectively about a complex topic, such as diversity, in a fun way. StoryboardThat also resulted in a final storyboard project that I could use to evaluate my pedagogical queries related to culture and language learning. StoryboardThat describes the value of storyboarding tools as "taking advantage of the way our brains process information [… by] breaking down a larger task into manageable chunks and then creating a visual representation of that task and information. This has been shown to increase […] understanding" (StoryboardThat). Students were informed about academic integrity, the copyright and privacy risks involved with using the platform, and the nature of the research in which they would participate. Finally, they completed a survey consisting of a series of short-answer questions that I prepared to guide them about how to express their opinions about this experience.

Digital Storytelling and Diversity

In this project, I tried to discover if digital storytelling provided the participants with an increased opportunity to think about the complexity and diversity of their identity, to help them gain awareness of the diversity of their community, to discover and appreciate the diversity of francophone cultures, and to seek and participate in more diverse course content. The students' responses to the survey questions confirm that they reflected on their own culture and identity, and that they shared their thoughts with their families.

Survey questions

"Did this process give you the opportunity to reflect on your personal life experience?"

- "Yes, especially in getting to know my own culture. I was able to talk to my family about it and get their perspectives as well."

- "It reminded me of a lot of great memories of mine, like Les Jeux de la Francophonie [sic] and the diverse culture of all people who speak [the] French language."
- "Yes. I reflected a lot about what citizenship means and how it relates to cultural identity."
- "I decentralized the process from my own experience and shifted it to those of my parents."
- "Most definitely! I talked to a lot of family members about who our family really is."

"What did you learn from reading other students' stories?"

- "how complex everyone is."
- "the diversity of our community."
- "I learned that people's experiences are so varied and unique [in] how they receive and experience a language. [There are] so many different ways to express a singular theme: relationship with the French language."
- "The students who participated in the project are from diverse backgrounds."
- "Most students described their own backgrounds; I took these stories as true evidence of the cultural diversity of UBC."
- "I learned that there are always more identities out there than I think. The list of people and cultures to learn about only ever gets longer."

The student participants collectively declared that they learned about the complexity of their identity and the diversity of their university community because of this project. After they finished writing their stories, they were also asked to consider how their identity is socially constructed: 100% ($n = 9$) answered that their identity was constructed by their family; 88.8% ($n = 8$) by their personal experience and learning/research; 77.78% ($n = 7$) by their cultural backgrounds and traditions, their language, their ethnicity, their nationality, and their friends; 66.7% ($n = 6$) by school and education and other communities that they belong to; 55.56% ($n = 5$) by the media and social media; 44.45% ($n = 4$) by their religion; and none ($n = 0$) by their political party. I conclude that by creating their stories and reflecting on their family narrative, their own path, and their cultural background inclusive of their nationality, ethnicity and language, the students were able to reflect on the complexity of their identity. The results of learning more about how students identify themselves could help educators create more relatable course content for the student body to reflect upon; asking students to ponder on this identity could subsequently help generate learning engagement.

The student responses suggest that building a digital story had a strong and positive impact, which led them to a parallel recognition and appreciation of the diversity of francophone cultures. I observed that it is possible to build varied content and an appreciation of the range of French cultures as the direct result of the assortment of the learners' own cultures. This reinforces my earlier conclusion that digital storytelling is a culturally responsive solution for creating inclusivity and cultural competence in the university classroom.

"What did you learn about French cultures by creating or reading the stories?"

- "how intertwined it is in Canadian society."

- "the subtle differences of francophones around the world and their impact on society."
- "I learned a bit more [about] how it affected immigrants to Canada. I do not have as much knowledge about Canadian Francophone culture, so it was interesting to read people's stories of coming to Canada."
- "There are francophone communities all over the world."
- "It is too easy to say that French comes from France. The French language has been, for such a long time, widespread around the world, [and] that, had the word 'French' not sounded like 'France,' I could not tell where the language comes from. More concretely, the diversity of francophone cultures is astonishing."
- "I learned that French culture is not homogeneous, but unique to every group that speaks it."

"Do you think reflecting on your cultural background and that of other participants could help you to reflect on the diversity of French cultures?"

- "definitely yes" 75% ($n = 6$)
- "probably yes" 12.5% ($n = 1$)
- "might or might not" 12.5% ($n = 1$)

"Do you think that this kind of storytelling activity is a valuable tool for sharing personal stories to create awareness of cultural diversity in the University of British Columbia (your university) community":

- "definitely yes" 33.33% ($n = 3$)
- "probably yes" 66.67% ($n = 6$)

The next set of questions asked if digital storytelling assisted the students in their awareness of the "universalities of human thought and activity" (Dupain & Maguire 2007; Chatterjee et al. 2019):

"Do you think that digital storytelling provides students 'with opportunities for wholesome social experiences [by] making them aware of the universalities of human thought and activity through ample scope of language practice' (Dupain & Maguire 2007; Chatterjee et al. 2019)?"

- "definitely yes" 66.67% ($n = 6$)
- "probably yes" 22.22% ($n = 2$)
- "might or might not" 11.11% ($n = 1$)

The responses suggest that the participants were more certain about the impact of digital storytelling on the recognition of the similarity of human beings' worldwide, rather than on the differences within smaller communities. They considered digital storytelling to be a practical way of learning another language. As an instructor, I could see that the students could use this process to improve their language skills in a way that required direct involvement. This reflects the finding that "students perceive digital storytelling as a beneficial teaching tool in multicultural classrooms, because it encourages the understanding of the differences existing among learners in a classroom" (Condy et al. 2012, p. 282).

Digital Storytelling and Inclusive Learning

International students and students from underrepresented communities may not actively participate in the classroom "due to the literacy practices and interaction of their culture being different from those in the classroom" (Condy et al. 2012, p. 283). In some cases, it is difficult for these students to engage in communication when they do not feel a relationship to the discussion for example, when there is a disconnect from the literary practices of another culture that uses unfamiliar references or metaphors. Students may also feel uncomfortable because of their beliefs, such as when their religious teachings prevent them from engaging in the open discussion of sexuality. As a result, the instructor and other students may perceive these students as "incapable or not cooperative" (Condy et al. 2012, p. 283). Digital storytelling provides a platform to underrepresented groups to participate actively in class activities and, more importantly, to use their own voice and cultural understanding to create the course content and find their place in the educational system. It gives them an opportunity to communicate effectively, as they are expressing their opinions and emotional responses to subjects that are familiar for them and to which they can connect.

To investigate students' opinions on this matter, I asked them a series of related questions:

"Do you think that digital storytelling can create opportunities for students to authentically engage with the complexity of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sex, and identity politics in language classes?"

- "yes" 62.5% ($n = 5$)
- "maybe" 37.50% ($n = 3$)

"How do you feel when reading the stories of others?"

- "as if I have an understanding of others" 100% ($n = 8$)
- "as if I have a sense of belonging to a community, a connection within the community, and empathy" 50% ($n = 4$)

These responses show that digital storytelling has the potential to reduce prejudices and stereotyping. Second-language learners often struggle to produce written work and oral presentations, due to their language level. As a result, they can feel less appreciated, and even excluded, from discussions and exchanges. Instructors (me included), therefore, need to be more sensitive to the engagement of second-language learners, and digital storytelling could be a "culturally responsive" solution. Students can be given the opportunity to create their digital stories in their mother tongue. In this project, students were learning French as a second language. As most of them felt more comfortable expressing themselves in English, I asked them to write their stories in English and/or their mother tongue, as well as in French, so that they could explore the effects of multilingual digital storytelling. The results of the survey questions are significant:

"Did you find writing your stories in English useful?"

- "yes" 88.89% ($n = 8$)
- "no" 11.11% ($n = 1$)

"Did you find writing your stories in your mother tongue useful?"

- "yes" 37.50% ($n = 3$)
- "no" 62.50% ($n = 5$)

The disparity of these results can be explained by the fact that most of these students were not able, or not confident enough, to write in their mother tongue. My assumption was that the three students who answered, "yes," might be the international students who were more comfortable writing in their own languages, rather than in English. Another explanation could be related to the concept of efficiency, and appreciation of languages other than English. The students may think that fewer people can read and understand their text, or that their text will be less appreciated if it is written in a lesser-known language, or when using their beginner and intermediate French skills. This flexible approach to multilingual digital storytelling, therefore, helps students to feel more involved.

Digital Storytelling and Skill Building

My principal goals in the classroom are to teach the French language and to empower students with effective communication skills. As part of the process of implementing digital storytelling to help in the achievement of these aims, I asked students what skills they think they gained or improved during this project. Significantly, learning about cultures and presenting culture were the main motivations indicated by participating students. When I asked why they participated in this project, 77.78% ($n = 7$) of the students mentioned learning more about French cultures, 66.67% ($n = 6$) noted presenting their own cultures, 66.67% ($n = 6$) mentioned improving their French skills, and 55.56% ($n = 5$) indicated an interest in being more engaged with the University of British Columbia community.

The students were surveyed with several response options to determine if they had achieved these learning objectives by the end of the project:

- "I learned about French cultural diversity." 88.89% ($n = 8$)
- "I had an opportunity to present my cultural backgrounds." 88.89% ($n = 8$)
- "I improved my French." 77.78% ($n = 7$)
- "I learned about cultural diversity in my community." 66.67% ($n = 6$)
- "I learned more about me and my cultural identity." 44.45% ($n = 4$)
- "I learned new technical computer skills that I had not known previously." 44.45% ($n = 4$)

The degree to which students improved their French-language skills corresponds directly with their learning about Francophone cultures. I can confirm that student expectations for this project correspond to my assessment of their achievements. They wanted to learn about French cultures and to present their own culture, and digital storytelling provided them the opportunity to do both. These findings demonstrate how culture and language are related. Among the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, I predicted the most development would come in the area of writing. However, students reported that their reading skills improved the most, and that they learned new vocabulary while completing their stories (see table 2). It is possible that a story platform with a video format may have generated more spoken-word narratives, but it is noteworthy that the students had the option to record their voice over their storyboard, yet only two chose to do so. Based on these observations, the likely explanation is that

the students were not confident regarding their accent and pronunciation, which are the most challenging aspects of learning the French language.

Table 2: Improved language skills via digital storytelling. Eight students answered this question.

Answers	Count	Percentage
writing skills	6	24
computer skills	4	16
reading skills	8	32
learning vocabulary	7	28

The students indicated that digital storytelling increased their awareness of the diversity of French cultures, as well as of the diversity within in the University of British Columbia community in Vancouver. They also indicated that this experience improved their creativity.

Table 3: Improved skills via digital storytelling. Seven students answered this question, and they had multiple options.

Answers	Count	Percentage
critical thinking	3	9
creativity	6	18
self-awareness and self-revelation	4	12
awareness of diversity in French cultures	7	21
awareness of diversity in the UBC community	6	18
problem solving	4	12
skills to innovate and construct new knowledge	4	12

Of the students who participated in the survey, 100% ($n = 9$) reported that they undertook research about Francophone cultures to complete the project. This indicates that they developed their multi-lingual research abilities.

Participants and Digital Technology for Educational Use

Studies have concluded that "students may understand a very limited number of technology applications such as texting, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, [TikTok] and music downloading, and are unfamiliar with other technology resources applicable in education" (Grant & Bolin 2016, p. 54). The outcomes of this pedagogical case study with digital storytelling show that, although our students are raised in a world filled with technological developments, social media, and ready access to the internet, they struggled when using educational-technology platforms, and do not always enjoy using their phones or other devices (often reserved for gaming and entertainment) for learning purposes.

An easy platform for creating digital storytelling projects was sought, so that I could evaluate it for future teaching use, based on the general impressions of the students during this

experience. No instruction about the use of the platform was provided, as it was part of the project objective for them to discover it for themselves. All the students who participated in this project stated that they had a functional ability with digital technology: 22.22% ($n = 2$) had "adequate knowledge;" 66.67% ($n = 6$) were "comfortable;" and 11.11% ($n = 1$) had "advanced knowledge." Of the student participants in this project, 77.78% ($n = 7$) found the recommended platform "manageable," and 22.22% ($n = 2$) found it "easy to use." Even though most of the participants found the use of the platform somewhat user-friendly, one student faced a technical problem, noting, "I had technical difficulties on my laptop, and thought I wouldn't be able to upload it. I had to redo it … which took a lot of time. I almost gave up on it."

Another student reported bugs on the platform's website that were not investigated, although all educational technology has potential challenges when used across a variety of systems. Ultimately, the students concluded that using the technology in a language classroom was beneficial. When asked if they thought using technology facilitated second language learning, 66.67% ($n = 6$) confirmed "yes," while 33.33% ($n = 3$) indicated "maybe," or were otherwise uncertain.

It was important for this project to be a joyful experience. All the participants described digital storytelling as an enjoyable and meaningful experience. When asked if making stories using StoryboardThat was "fun," 44.44% ($n = 4$) responded, "definitely yes," and 55.56% ($n = 5$) responded, "probably yes." As noted, the students' comments confirm that they enjoyed creating their stories and reading the stories of others. To further engage this aspect of the project, students were asked:

"What was the most interesting part about participating in the project to create a digital story?"

- "Seeing other digital stories."
- "Seeing the full story come alive before my eyes was exciting. At the beginning, [I] wasn't sure how it would turn out, but it was great! It was also nice to see my friends' stories and how unique each story was."
- "writing about my culture and French culture [and] personal reflection."
- "Actually, my story was loosely based on real events; my parents had told me of some of their experiences when travelling, and I chose to write a story based on these."
- "I got to learn more about French cultures and my own family history."
- "All parts are fun."

"What surprised you about the process of creating a digital story?"

- "how much I ended up enjoying it."
- "The storyboard platform was interactive, but harder to use than I thought. I liked learning about other French cultures outside of France."
- "the amount of detail you could add to each part to make the writing we did come to life."
- "It was not as difficult as I was worried about. It ended up being quite fun and engaging, and it was nice to see my story laid out on the storyboard."
- "The ease with which I could use *StoryboardThat* surprised me. I have always enjoyed reading comic books and thought it was somewhat impressive to be able to make one."
- "I didn't think there would be so much information available to write these stories. I

thought it would be more challenging."

• "It's really refreshing for me to visualize my text."

These comments, and the results of the survey, show that the students found digital storytelling to be a positive and pleasant learning activity. They could manage the platform, solve their technological issues, and locate the sources needed to create their stories. The students' comments imply that both learning and creating this digital story project was meaningful. This conclusion is supported by the survey data, with 75.00% ($n = 6$) selecting "yes" to indicate the meaningful role of the project, and 25% ($n = 2$) selecting "maybe." They enjoyed reading and creating the visual version of their stories, and they connected with the platform because of its visual aspects. The visual language employed is an essential element of digital storytelling that distinguishes it from the act of writing a story, which is connected to the fluency levels of the students.

Digital Storytelling Project Outcomes

I work in an educational environment with students from many different backgrounds, and I am not a first-language speaker of French or English. While differences are often enjoyed, the image presented of certain cultures and nationalities may also be accompanied by negative assumptions and stereotypes. Furthermore, some students' heritage includes tragic events and trauma. Encountering harmful stereotypes can be especially challenging for students who find themselves racialized, or living as a minority in the Canadian context. As a result, students have been encouraged to find positive aspects to use in their cultural self-presentation. I use different cultural activities used in my classroom, such as sharing family recipes, creating ideal travel itineraries for one's home country, and storytelling projects to promote diversity have been positive. Digital storytelling may be "considered a research methodology in its own right" (Ma & Zheng 2024, p. 34), and has been reviewed as a method of decolonizing the classroom for its inclusion of different ways of creating and presenting meaning (De Jager et. al., 2017).

In presenting digital storytelling as an opportunity to discuss personal struggles, I did not want anyone to feel uncomfortable exposing their thoughts and experiences. I therefore suggested that the stories could be based on happy and funny memories, yet still be as touching as the ones highlighting difficult issues. All students were free to choose what they wanted to discuss and how to approach their subjects. In this section, I will discuss how the students' stories, including their written drafts and their storyboarded final projects, reflected subjects such as diversity, identity and Francophone cultures presented and discussed in the classroom. StoryboardThat helped my students present a wider perspective on their respective cultures inclusive of family dynamics, community connections, language, food, music, dance, and festivals. All of these were themes discovered in their stories.

The story, *A Little Corner of France in India,* is set in a Franco-Indian community in Pondicherry in southern India. The student author recognized food, language and architecture as components of cultural identity and as central to defining a community. By using the word "blend," the author showed awareness of how different cultures could coexist, mix, and interact to build a new identity.

> A community is defined by its culture. Pondicherry has preserved its French heritage in its language, food, and architecture. While French is the official language, it is also commonly spoken among the people. It is so close to their hearts that it has developed into a dialect called Indian French, a blend of Tamil and French.

> In *A Simple Happiness*, the author introduces the conception of the family.

> Indian families are big, and our festivals are colourful. Everyone in the family, even the neighbourhood, is involved in each other's affairs. It feels as if we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. Even something as simple as a cup of tea is a celebration of life.

The student explained that being an international student far from their own large family provided an opportunity to gain "a deeper understanding and appreciation for both cultures," noting that in Canada, "people have more freedom to express themselves and to pursue their own goals and aspirations," making studying abroad a "fulfilling experience." This generation of global students is open to making connections between the diverse cultures to which they are exposed.

The Diversity of the French-Speaking World was presented as a letter to a Japanese friend who wanted to go to Paris to learn French. To introduce the friend to other French-speaking destinations, the author wrote:

> You don't have to go to France, as there are many French-speaking countries and cities where you can learn French. Besides, life will be cheaper in these places. When I started to learn French, I thought that all the French speakers live in Paris. This is so funny, isn't it?

Gentle self-mockery was used to acknowledge the diversity and breadth of the French-speaking world, in which "there are 33 countries […] that currently have French as an official language," including "approximately 115 million people in 31 African countries." This story contains information about French-speaking countries and communities and their dialects. It shows that course content needs to correspond to this rich diversity, particularly regarding Africa. Another student author shared their admiration for multilingualism related to cultural diversity and identity in "French Speaking Swiss," with language serving as a component of identity in an international context.

In *A Special Chinese Hometown Dish*, the student refers to food, festivals and holidays as important parts of culture. Readers are introduced to a deep-fried pastry that has a special meaning and is important for the community. The pastry also serves as an emotional connection between the author and their family, especially the grandmother: "In northern China, the custom of eating fritters is essential for important days or festivals. […] In my family, it is also considered as a symbol of reunion, because it has a golden crust, and the filling is usually red." This crispy dish is eaten during Chinese New Year and family gatherings, which the author connects to apple pie and the pastries eaten during Christmas family gatherings [in Canada].

Another student presents Francophone diversity in the fictional story, *In a Foreign Country*, set in an unidentified location suggestive of northern Africa. The trace of the French colonial presence is described through the architecture of the "building fronts in the Place de la Victoire, which so starkly contrasted the Saharan villages passed by the bus earlier." One of the characters, a taxi driver, "said smiling, in a heavy French accent, 'My shift is now ended. I will stop you here with a warning: do not go in a car in a foreign country when you do not speak the

language and do not know the driver." Language struggles are common for immigrants and international students, as are stereotypes related to specific accents. This story relates the feeling of being a foreigner, not knowing the language, and in this case, the fears of the principal character who does not speak French or Arabic.

In the story, *Language, Writing and Identity*, the author relates the complexity of their cultural background and some of the personal challenges they have experienced, due to their diverse identity is highlighted. The writer states, "Being a recent immigrant to Canada, of half-Korean and half-German descent, I am constantly challenged to connect to my dual cultural heritage." The author expresses the importance of language as a tool to connect to our own heritage, as well as to that of others, and to find a "sense of belonging" by connecting storytelling, language, and identity:

> It has been through an ongoing understanding of languages as a social mechanism, by which to connect to other people and to our shared history, that I'm learning to find a sense of belonging in today's world. Moreover, I now understand language as not only a social conduit, but also a means of individual self-expression.

Another family story begins with "I am the daughter of immigrant," a significant statement that shows how immigration affects our conception of identity. First-generation immigrants may experience involuntary immigration, loneliness, and missing home. Vancouver has a large Iranian community that celebrates holidays like Nowruz (Persian New Year), so the author has maintained contact with their Iranian roots, and has grown up speaking both Farsi and English. The student's parents went to university in a largely Francophone part of Canada, and have family living there, so they have also encouraged education in French.

The author of *Immigrating to Farm* explores their Canadian identity and the contribution of their family, including their Ukrainian ancestors, to Canadian society by making connections to the growing of food. Following a visit with family, the student writes that they "learned about family traditions I didn't know about. "I never knew that my family was so good at Ukrainian dancing and played so much Ukrainian music. Additionally, I have learned that I love Ukrainian food." As with the other participants, food, festivals, celebratory events, family gatherings, dance and music have provided them with the strongest connections to their cultural backgrounds.

The main character in *Franco-Columbian Means Multiculturalism* migrates from Douala, Cameroon to Vancouver. He is amazed by the diversity of the multicultural French-speaking community in British Columbia, where "according to 2016 Canadian Census data, roughly 1 in 4 French speakers [...] were born outside of Canada." This diverse community makes the character feel accepted and "welcomed into a community that was multicultural and willing to welcome him as though he were family."

The story, *My Culture* begins with an expression of gratitude directed toward the author's parents:

> Growing up in Canada [with] a Filipino background, I owe it to my family for shaping my cultural identity and providing me with opportunities that once seemed out of reach for them. Both my parents emigrated from the Philippines with the hopes of starting a better life in a land distant from what was once home.

The author explains "the importance of family as a system of support" that should be prioritized in Filipino culture, and recognizes the sacrifice made by their parents.

The author of *More Than Meets the Eye* lays claim to their own Francophone cultural background, which they note has "always had an indirect influence," as they self-identify as "Afro-Jamaican and European-French." As an international athlete competing in Les Jeux de la Francophonie, a sporting and cultural event for Francophone countries (many of them former colonies of France), the author had a rare opportunity to discover diversity within French cultures:

> Francophone culture was so much more than just Canada and France, [as well as] countries from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Central America, [for these places] had expression and identity in the French language as well. The ability to speak French was so valuable, as it allowed you to connect with other players and athletes from all over the world.

Knowledge of the French language helped the author to connect to their own European-French roots, as well as to a bigger reality that included other French speakers. This offered "a gateway to many possibilities and connections worldwide."

The storyteller in *The French Dialects* provides information about the role of French colonialism in popularizing the French language. While travelling to China, their country of origin, the author met people speaking different dialects, and became "curious about all the French accents found in Canada." French language and culture have been mixed with the regional, local, and Indigenous languages and cultures, which the author notes construct a unique Canadian Francophone identity: "In Canada alone, there are more than five French dialects, close to the number of English dialects. Yet, it is the shared language [that] builds a community that believes in the unity and diversity of Francophone culture."

The participants were able to acknowledge the diversity of French cultures in their stories, by drawing upon their growing knowledge of the different accents, dialects, expressions, and traditions that exist in all the cultures and communities in which they relate. By having personal and family migration stories or being international students, they can recognize the complexity and multiplicity of identity, which includes language. With this perspective, it becomes easier for them to appreciate the diversity of French cultures and to understand the cultural elements of language study.

Project Limitations

Rather than responding to a specific methodological approach to digital storytelling within linguistics and language pedagogy, I set out to engage teaching resources that would stimulate and engage students' exposure to difference and diversity in Francophone cultures were utilized. For the participants, this diversity was a parallel to their own cultural and linguistic experiences. This case study is significant for the Canadian context, in which many students are either first- or second-generation immigrants, or international students.

This project included nine volunteer student participants. Technical problems prevented one participant from answering all the questions in the survey, and another student could not successfully create their story on StoryboardThat. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions related to in-person meetings limited interpersonal relationships in a diverse classroom setting, and the students had no previous knowledge of one another, I did not organize a group workshop. For this reason, the participants did not have the opportunity to work collaboratively. They were able to view the stories of their peers, and to use their reflections on their peers' final projects in their own work. It would be interesting to continue to explore how a collaborative experience of digital storytelling

could affect learning outcomes. Benick (2012) asserts that, "[i]n the classic model of digital storytelling, pioneered by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, digital stories are narrated in the storyteller's own voice" (p. 148). However, as discussed above, in our project, only two students showed interest in recording a voiceover for their stories. Considering the pandemic context, the engagement of these nine diverse students with the project is significant, and demonstrates the value and necessity of such intercultural activities in the French-language classroom, and in the wider university environment. The stories written and storyboarded by my students reveal the potential for both the online research and storytelling aspects of Francophone pedagogies. Furthermore, the project reveals the growing number of accessible resources that instructors and students might implement in their learning. Digital storytelling was well established as a teaching method when I developed my study in 2020, but the literature on digital storytelling as a participatory mode of pedagogical engagement in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom settings has grown exponentially in recent years (Ma & Zhang, 2024). Online tools can continue to enhance and compliment in-person learning, or serve as a viable platform for digital-only exchanges.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that a digital storytelling approach exposed French-language university students from a wide variety of backgrounds in Vancouver to the diversity of French cultures, as well as to dialects and regional Francophone cultural histories. By reflecting on their own identities as part of the storytelling exercise, the students were able to appreciate both the diversity of their learning community and the potential global nature of their Francophone course content. Digital storytelling helped them to improve their language skills, including reading comprehension, vocabulary and general communication, to develop new research abilities, and to acquire cultural competency in an enjoyable way. Of the student participants surveyed, all found the experience beneficial, with 55.56% ($n = 5$) finding the project "extremely positive," 33.33% ($n = 3$) finding it "moderately positive," and 11.11% ($n = 1$) finding it "slightly positive."

Storytelling provides "opportunities to learn about cultural and linguistic difference" (Grant & Bolin 2016, p. 47) as well as similarities. Student participants made strong connections between underrepresented and restricted languages in different contexts. This shows how stories provide an opportunity for deep reflection on inclusivity and diversity issues. My findings indicate that digital storytelling increases diversity awareness and provides opportunities to give voice to underrepresented groups, thereby diversifying and decolonizing the French-language course content. This approach also helps students to improve intercultural competency and communication skills. Students' feelings of involvement in the language classroom depend on the communication level that they can exercise, as well as their familiarity with, and interest in, the subjects encountered in oral discussions and through written material.

Using a combination of autobiographical, family-centred, investigative, and fictionalized narratives, participants related the contents of their projects to their own cultural backgrounds via food, music, celebratory events, and family. Within the stories, these categories played the most important role in the construction of cultural identity, or in an understanding of diverse Francophone identities when the students did not integrate their lived experience. The word "family" repeats in many of the stories, at times when they discuss the concept of belonging to a community. So, as we see in the stories, and based on the result of the survey, "family" has the most impact on the identity construction and the conception of culture. The students were also able to make a connection between language diversity and cultural inclusivity through the possibility

of writing their text in French and the language of their choice. Allowing students to represent themselves and their plurilingual identity was a positive and meaningful experience of inclusivity in the French-language classroom. Digital storytelling could be an opportunity for students to be involved in projects which involve the use of more than one language, and to engage the visual language of the storyboard to assist them.

Participating students drafted written stories that they transformed into digital stories. As can be recognised from their comments, the creative and visual aspects of digital storytelling made their experience more enjoyable and less restricted by language level. Students explore their intercultural identities with a broader perspective via digital storytelling. Using the main characteristics of a digital story, which are media, pictures, visual elements and the economical use of words, the stories were more effective at capturing the readers' attention. This emphasized the emotional and personal connections of the narratives. As an instructor, I found it easier to store and share the digital stories, in comparison to some of the in-person, physical projects I have introduced in other classrooms. The possibility of online research and feedback made the experience interactive, despite pandemic restrictions. The students built a sense of community and a critical awareness of both their own social reality and the complexity of their individual identities. The students created their own diverse course content by creating and sharing their own narratives, and were able to recognize the diversity of French languages and cultures. This demonstrates the potential opportunities for collaboration and communication offered by digital storytelling.

Instructor knowledge of the way students define their cultural identity helps in the creation of inclusive course content. Bilingual and multilingual stories can facilitate language instructors as they create more inclusive, decolonized learning environments. Digital storyboards and other applications support students in combining visual and written content, foster language development, and encourage oral content, all of which enrich language learning.

Acknowledgments

Author Bio

Somayeh Kamranian holds a Ph.D. in Comparative and French Literature from Paul Valery University in Montpellier, France (2014). She has been teaching French in the Department of French, Hispanic, and Italian Studies at the University of British Columbia since September 2015. She is committed to fostering student engagement in their learning journeys and has a strong interest in intercultural activities, including digital storytelling.

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