Representation radio: digital art-making as transformative pedagogical practice in the college classroom

Michelle B. Bass \(^a\) & Erica R. Halverson \(^b\)

\(^a\) Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA
\(^b\) Department of Curriculum & Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

In this article, the authors unpack a first-year college seminar where students explored digital representations of self-afforded pedagogies of possibility for traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically students of colour and first-generation college goers. An artefact analysis model is used to trace the relationship between the design decisions we made about the course and what these decisions afforded students in terms of their understanding of the relationship between identity, narrative and digital media production. The authors found that certain key pedagogical choices – from individual assignments to the presence of an authentic audience for their radio pieces – empowered students to make informed decisions, explore personal identities and represent themselves using the digital audio medium.

**Keywords:** identity; digital art; representation; minority students; first-generation college goers

**Introduction**

The transition to college is an important developmental milestone for all students; this time period is especially important for young people who are more likely to struggle in the college environment, including students from low-income families, racial and ethnic-minority students and first-generation college goers. These students often experience a disconnect between their college and non-college lives, making persistence difficult (Kirst & Bracco, 2004). Specifically, there is a strong correlation between a student’s family income and his or her college completion (Arnett, 2004); currently, fewer than half of the African American students who enter college complete their degree within 6 years (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Many college communities have responded to the challenges of entering, completing and succeeding in college with the development of supportive transition programmes. In transitional experiences, students are able to explore what it means to be college students and to define who they are.

While programmes such as these have been around since the 1970s (Hunter, 2006), very little attention has been paid to understanding the pedagogical practices that contribute to programmatic success and how the programmes afford the retention of traditionally marginalized student populations. Meanwhile, emerging work in the field of adolescent
development has demonstrated that participation in artistic production processes supports positive developmental trajectories for traditionally marginalized groups (Heath, 2000). Specifically, producing autobiographical art supports adolescents in exploring possible selves and in affiliating with traditional stigmatized identities in adaptive ways (Halverson, 2009). Furthermore, artistic production processes support both individualistic and collectivistic conceptions of identity, opening up the possibility that multiple models for development can be accommodated within the same type of instructional setting (Doerr-Stevens, 2011; Halverson, Lowenhaupt, Gibbons, & Bass, 2009), an important feature for learning environments that hope to include students from a variety of home communities and to facilitate positive developmental trajectories.

In this article, we analyse the pedagogical choices in a specific First-Year Interest Group (FIG) course, “Representing Self through Media”, whose explicit design and curriculum focus on issues of identity, digital media production and representation make it a valuable research site to study transitioning college students in action. In order to focus on the role of the seminar in the transitional experiences of underrepresented college students, we asked the following questions: (1) how did the “Representing Self through Media” course support first year college students’ engagement in identity exploration and representation, and (2) which pedagogical choices most influenced students’ progress?

Over the course of our freshman seminar, we aimed to work with transitioning college students at the intersection of identity and narrative in the context of digital media production. Through theoretical readings, in-class activities and discussions, and a large digital radio production project, the class explored the reciprocal relationship between the stories we tell and the identities we take on. The class also attended to the role of representation in storytelling; in this case, we focused on radio, and specifically the popular radio documentary show This American Life as a medium for communicating complex insights about self. We used an artefact analysis model (Halverson & Halverson, 2011) to trace the relationship between the design decisions we made about the course and what these decisions afforded our students in terms of their understanding of the relationship between identity and narrative. We found that certain key pedagogical choices – from individual assignments to the presence of an authentic audience for their radio pieces – empowered students to make informed decisions about exploring personal identities and representing themselves using the digital audio medium. Through teaching about the relationship between representation, identity and literacy, we actively developed a pedagogy of possibility, redefining literate practices in terms of the changing world in which our students and we live (Naiditch, 2010).

Digital media production and identity

Digital art-making is a fundamentally representational practice – the digital media products youths create should serve as an expanded way to learn about how young people represent identity and lived experiences. Digital media literacy as a social practice enables young people to “embrace multimodal forms, combining, and remixing visual images and video clips, words, sounds and songs, dance and gesture, and costume . . . [and use] their bodies as canvases in communication and self-expression” (Burke & Hammett, 2009, p. 1). The task for adolescent literacy researchers and practitioners is to create “culturally responsive pedagogy” which “shake things up in their teaching] in ways that still uphold rigor and excellence” (Jocson, 2009, p. 271). It is up to students and teachers to co-design their multimodal worlds.
Pedagogies: An International Journal

Digital media production has become an essential outlet for many adolescents to think about and represent their changing identity as they progress from adolescence to adulthood; many young people make this transition in a collegiate environment. While the literature chronicling new college students’ participation in digital media literacy and production activities is sparse, the literature on out-of-school media production organizations who work with adolescents aged 14–20 shows the value of these opportunities for empowering young people through digital media literacy (Halverson & Gibbons, 2010; Halverson et al., 2009; Hull & Katz, 2006; Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008; Soep, 2006).

In our work, we used radio as the digital production medium for the “Representing Self through Media” FIG course. The use of radio as a digital medium for young people to represent self has been studied almost exclusively in out-of-school settings with a focus on middle and high school-aged students (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Doerr-Stevens, 2011; Glevarec, 2005; Walker & Romero, 2008). Radio production as a medium for expression has empowered young people to represent ideas that matter to them and bring these issues to a public audience (Chavez & Soep, 2005). Through the process, young people learn valuable literacy skills, most notably the ability to monitor the quality of their own work through critique (Soep, 2006). We hope that a focus on the pedagogical choices of the course directly relate to the identity development and artistic self-representation choices made by students from underrepresented student populations, demonstrating the value of digital media production in institutions of higher education.

College as a site for adolescent identity development

College is the primary space where late adolescents experience and develop identity (Arnett, 1994, 1999, 2000; Côté & Levine, 1988; Newman & Newman, 1978). While some adolescents easily lay claim to a college student identity, underrepresented student populations, including racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation college goers, may be less sure the collegiate “system will accept them, or that they have a right to enter, or that the identity ‘student’ fits with other important aspects of their lives” (Anderson & Williams, 2001, p. 2). Research that focuses on the experiences of underrepresented students, then, ought to follow the identity development of college students from their first days to assess their ideas about their future and who they do and do not want to be at the beginning of their journey and then see what experiences affect these goals, including their college completion.

One way to turn an explicit focus towards identity in the college setting is to construct an environment where students can share their personal stories. hooks (1989) notes that the telling and sharing of stories of personal experience can provide a meaningful context for students from underrepresented groups to connect to an academic context. However, when stories are represented in a traditional academic text-based mode, it may “alienate most folks who are not also academically trained and reinforces the notion that the academic world is separate from real life” (p. 78). hooks reminds us that we have choices when we represent self, we choose our audience, voices to share, voices to silence and the language and mode of representation. The choices of representation for today’s young people, regardless of their status as underrepresented or in the majority culture, are not limited to traditional academic texts. They have available to them an arsenal of new digital media technologies to make artistic meaning and present their identity to any audience they choose.

In analysing our FIG course, we explored the pedagogy associated with digital art production, with a focus on how these pedagogical practices impact students of colour...
and first-generation college goers. The research on the use of digital art production in college settings is sparse; we believe this study will show the power and possibilities of identity-focused courses that include digital art production integrated in their curriculum.

Methods

The course we taught was part of the FIG programme; FIGs are “learning communities of about 20 students who are enrolled in a cluster of three classes that are linked by a common theme” (FIG Annual Report, 2009–2010). At our large mid-western university, students who have participated in the FIG programme throughout its 10-year existence have demonstrated higher GPAs and higher student satisfaction, as compared to their non-FIG peers (FIG Annual Report, 2009–2010). The university is predominantly White and the FIG programme targets underrepresented student populations to enrol in their courses. As a result, students of colour and first-generation college students are overrepresented in FIG courses, though their academic accomplishments are comparable to the broader student population.

The course and research participants

Participants for the research component of our work were solicited from our FIG course, “Representing Self through Media: A Personal Journey” through This American Life. Students were explicitly made aware that their decision to participate in the study would have no effect on their grade in the course. The instructor (Halverson) was not aware of which students gave their consent to participate until after the course had ended. All 19 students in the course consented to participate in this study by signing the Institutional Review Board consent form, necessary for all protocols and studies with human participants. Both authors were deeply involved with the course. Halverson’s role was clearly established as the course instructor; Bass’s role in the course was less defined. While Bass’ primary goal was to collect data for her dissertation, and focusing on the effect an explicit focus on identity has, if any, on students transitioning to college, her daily presence in the classroom and time spent interviewing and interacting with the students out of class on their projects also earned her the unofficial titles of teaching assistant and mentor.

All participants were college freshmen at the time of the study and so were all 18 years old when the course started in September 2010. Of the 19 participants, 5 identified as first-generation college students. The breakdown of students’ self-identification of ethnicity was as follows: 2 Black, 1 Hispanic or Latino, 5 others (e.g. multiple ethnic backgrounds) and 11 White. Ethnic minorities comprised 37% of the class, much larger than the overall 11% at the university as a whole.

The learning goals of the course were defined in terms of both theory and practice. The course covered three topics: identity, literacy and representation. In terms of identity, we explored both sociological and psychological constructs. We took a “new literacies” approach to the study of literacy, focusing on both paradigmatic and the operational shift from traditional conceptions of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Finally, we used representation as a bridging concept between identity and literacy, focusing on the role of external representations in meaning making, specifically how different tools for representation afford communication of meaning. The practice-based component of the course involved the creation of a representational identity piece by producing a radio show in the style of National Public Radio’s This American Life. This American Life airs radio programmes grouped around thematically similar stories; the producers describe the format
as a “movies for radio” approach rather than a news or talk show format (This American Life, n.d.). Students participated in a complementary small seminar course focused on radio production, which afforded them the opportunity to focus on the technical skills necessary for their piece’s creation.

**Data collection**

**Class observations and field notes**

The course met twice weekly in 75-minute sessions for 15 weeks. Bass attended all classes except for two due to previous engagements. On those 2 days, a visiting scholar shared his notes with her for use. Notes were taken using the Live Scribe pen-and-notebook system; this software afforded the capacity to record audio in real time and to sync the audio with corresponding notes written in the notebook. In this study, field notes were used as both the primary and supplementary methods, in the case of interviews, for data collection (Warren & Karner, 2010). Field notes contain both thick descriptions of in-class events and interviews, and Bass’ personal responses, or autobiographical notes, to these events.

**Class assignments, artefacts and learning management system**

The artefacts that students produced as part of the course were solicited from participants for inclusion in the study. Students produced three types of artefacts:

1. Documents showing students’ progress with the major This American Life project;
2. Assignments independent from the This American Life project and;
3. Drawings (or photos of drawings) that were created in the context of class discussions.

The final assignment, a This American Life-styled radio production about the self, was the major assignment from the semester and the instructor structured the progress assignments throughout the semester to gauge the status of each student’s individual story. This was then compiled into a three-to-four persons set of stories, a This American Life episode. At the end of the fall semester, in conjunction with their assignment for their paired FIG seminar course Radio Production, students submitted their individual, 10-minute pieces as part of their thematically devised group episode.

In addition to their radio pieces, students completed the “Representing the Other”, assignment where they were paired and instructed to get to know one another. They were then asked to represent the other pair member using any medium they chose. Creativity was encouraged. Students were asked to post responses on the learning management system (LMS) website after they represented their partner and after they were represented by their partner about how they felt regarding both experiences. Photos and audio files of representations were collected.

Students also wrote post-class reflections on the LMS about the three main topics of the course: identity, literacy and representation. Students were prompted with questions provided by the instructor for each topic, or they were given the opportunity to make up their own question to answer. The instructor responded to each student response in turn and sometimes there was extensive dialogue between the student and the instructor regarding their post thread. Students produced an average of two posts per topic resulting in approximately 120 total LMS posts. Some students wrote more than three posts per topic.
while others only wrote the initial post with no follow up conversation. The longest written exchange between Halverson and a student was six posts.

Drawing and other representations were often constructed as part of breakout group discussions during class time. Additionally, Bass would often ask students to “draw out” visual representations of key class ideas or storyboard themes from their radio project within the context of one-on-one interviews. Over the course of the semester, we collected approximately 15 of these visual representations.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Fontana & Frey, 2003; Patton, 2002) were conducted with 17 students at the beginning and 10 students after completion of the course. At the beginning of the semester, students were interviewed in pairs covering their life history. These interviews lasted 30–40 minutes. End-of-semester interviews were completed individually and lasted approximately 75 minutes. Interviews were modelled on Seidman’s (2006) three-part life history sequence: life history, details of their experience and reflection on their experience. The aim of these questions was to understand how participants represented their identities in a face-to-face setting with the researcher as well as push to them to think about their identity in the future.

**Data analysis**

In order to examine the relationship between student experiences and the course design, we began with an artefact analysis model (Halverson & Halverson, 2011) positioning the FIG course curriculum as the central artefact. When placing an artefact at the centre of a data analysis process, we can explore “four key analytic opportunities”:

Designers build intentions into artefacts in the form of features that will hopefully guide use... Users, on the other hand, perceive artefact features as affordances. Affordances reflect how users make sense of artefacts features... Finally, outcomes display the effects of artefacts use on practice. (pp. 330–331)

We used the artefacts analysis model to identify the relationship between the designers’ (our) intentions, the features built into the course, the perceived affordances for students and learning outcomes for students. In order to trace these connections we looked at our data over time that referenced the features of the course including pre- and post-course interviews, project artefacts, LMS discussions and in-class discussions. Since we designed the course, we were also able to reflect on our own intentions and how these intentions were instantiated in the features of the course. We were most interested in aspects of the course where there was alignment among all four components – where our intentions got taken up in features, which were perceived as affordances by students and resulted in positive learning outcomes.

**Results**

The task of representing the self to others is complicated and often evolving. This task can become more difficult when students who have been marginalized or underrepresented are asked to engage in this work within the context of a majority culture. In this section, we describe the four features of the course where we found alignment across
intentions, features, affordances and outcomes: the “Representing the Other” assignment, focused classroom discussions, in-class grouping practices and the presence of an authentic audience for students’ evolving digital representations. Some we expected; others were a surprise. We will briefly describe each feature and outline how students discussed these features as affording identity exploration and representation with a focus on our traditionally marginalized student groups.

Representing the other

This was the introductory assignment for the class and was intended both as a method for creating a comfortable, safe classroom community and as an opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with the relationship between identity and multimodal representation. Students were paired up with a classmate that they did not previously know (some students had participated in summer programmes together at the university). They were then given the task of getting to know one another and then to represent their partner to the rest of the class using whatever media they chose. No other requirements or restrictions were provided but students were encouraged to spend at least 30–60 minutes talking with their partner. Following their presentations, students were asked to discuss the experience of representing a classmate as well as the experience of being represented by a classmate.

The experience of representing

Many students discussed the “Representing the Other” assignment as one of the more important features of the course. Jimmy, a White male first-generation college student, described the assignment as one of the most meaningful and memorable moments of the FIG course explaining, “I feel like after doing that everyone kind of found another person in the group that they knew really well and that made everyone else feel like they knew each other more” (Interview, 12/10). This is despite his initial anxiety around the task of representing his classmate Kendra:

For me, the biggest challenge was deciding what medium I wanted to use to represent Kendra. After being blown away by the presentations on Tuesday, I felt sort of uncomfortable with how my PowerPoint would hold up in comparison. Another thought that was constantly crossing my mind was “What if I’m doing an inaccurate job and the stuff I’m including is not entirely representative of Kendra?” (LMS post, 9/10)

In a Spring 2011 interview, Bass asked Jimmy to reflect on the assignment. Specifically, she was interested in learning why he created a PowerPoint presentation when he was given full creative license in the assignment and had previously been seemingly intimidated by the representations other students had generated:

[PowerPoint] was the mode I was most comfortable with. I don’t have a Mac so I couldn’t use garage band, not that I was going to write a song. I wasn’t going to paint a picture, that’s just not what I do. Whereas PowerPoint is something I can do, I can do that. So I did. It wasn’t necessarily a reflection of her, it was more of me. Which I guess is part of the project. (Interview, 2/11)

Jimmy highlights the role of representation for both his partner (what if he created an “inaccurate” representation) and for himself (“It wasn’t necessarily a reflection of her. It was more of me”). These insights were influential as the students began work on their
This American Life stories as they became aware of the important role played by the representational medium and the specific choices within the medium in constructing and communicating identity.

Partners in representation

Like Jimmy many students referred to the importance of the mutual construction of identity across those who are representing and those who are represented. Stephanie and Kayla, both multiracial females, were partners for the assignment. Stephanie reflected on the LMS discussion board about her partner Kayla’s representation of her:

Kayla represented me, and her description of me was absolutely phenomenal. She pointed out things about myself that I didn’t even know but were true. She captured the true essence of who I am and how I wish to be portrayed. The aspects of my personality that she described that stood out the most to me were the traits of brightness and honesty. It felt real great for her to describe me as such a caring and lovely person. She definitely made me feel good about myself. (Interview, 9/10)

Kayla created a theoretical Facebook profile page for Stephanie. Bass noted Stephanie’s positive affective response to Kayla’s presentation: “Stephanie has a smile on her face throughout Kayla’s presentation” (field notes, 9/10). In a retrospective interview, Bass asked Kayla to recount her feelings about the “Representing the Other” assignment, particularly about whether it was helpful in thinking about her own identity:

It was hard because I didn’t want to mess up and make her seem like a different kind of person than she was cause I didn’t know her really well at all and I didn’t know if she would get mad at me if I did something bad. But definitely think that listening to her talk about me helped...it was a good project...I’m glad I was her partner because then we probably wouldn’t be friends now because that is how I got to know her. (Interview, 2/11)

Stephanie was equally worried about representing Kayla, which she did through a series of diary entries, because she loves writing herself and uses her journal as a way of, “letting go of certain issues on paper and advancing my writing style. Journals are a very personal thing; so I thought what would be a better way to represent someone than through their journal?” (LMS post, 9/10). However, using a journal as her representation tool proved to be harder than she imagined; she was not sharing her own personal memories but was instead tasked with sharing Kayla’s personal experiences.

I felt as if I was revealing all of her secrets that were meant to stay hidden. She gave me permission to do it; I asked her plenty of times to make sure because I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. I’m just so glad that she was completely open with me and let me get to know her past all the mundane introductions. She let me see who she truly was, not only the good but the bad as well. Her mannerisms while she spoke and the things that she said made it real easy for me to write a lot of journal entries, pretending to be her. I couldn’t have picked a better person to represent. Overall, it was a great and nerve racking experience. (LMS Post, 9/10)

Stephanie and Kayla’s experience as partners was representative of all 10 partnerships. Most of our students discussed how their representational choices (e.g. the creation of a Facebook page or a Power point presentation) communicated as much about them as it did about those they were representing. They also discussed an emerging awareness of
the importance of representational choices in communicating identity; having to represent someone else meant not wanting to “mess up” and miscommunicate someone else’s sense of self.

Focused classroom discussions

Since the course had both theoretical and practical goals, most of the classroom discussions were designed to access the relationship between theories presented in the course readings and the practice of creating multimodal representations of the self. Halverson guided most classes, opening with a review of the reading including defining unfamiliar terminology and then divided the class into groups for discussion or served as a moderator for a class-wide discussion. Here we focused on a discussion around a topic late in the semester that Halverson titled, “What’s so bad about stereotype?” To prepare for the discussion, the class read Fleetwood’s (2005), “Authenticating practices: Producing realness, performing youth”. Halverson began class by explaining why she had chosen the reading and by providing guiding questions:

I think Fleetwood raises a lot of interesting issues about representation and what makes a representation real. So a lot of the focus of this ... if you’re making a piece of art, that is supposed to be about personal experience, what makes that experience real? How do you understand the realness of that experience? (Class Audio, 11/10)

To begin the discussion, Halverson asked students to describe normative and non-normative populations. The class came to a general consensus that normative meant: “The assumption of the norm, which in America is a straight White middle class male”. Halverson then prompted the students to think about the possible problems associated with producing art focused on non-normative populations: “A lot of attention is paid to capturing the experience of the non-normative populations. Fleetwood says there is a problem with that. What is the challenge when we focus on capturing the non-normative experience?” Matt, a White middle class male, responded: “[That] makes it even more non-normative, calling someone out. Making them more obvious of not being normal”. Halverson concurred: “It maintains the dichotomy between what is regular and non-regular. She [Fleetwood] also says, what ends up happening is that in many ways this deteriorates into stereotype”.

The dialogue then moved to a discussion of what makes something, specifically an artistic production, “real”. Students responded: “it has a message”, “genuine-ness”, “not candy coated” and “believable”. Jonah, a White middle class male, raised the idea that the realness of a piece depends on the audience: “Something that seems really real to one person will maybe seem off base to somebody else. The more relatable it is, the more real it is. Depends on who is listening or watching”. Discussion continued to an examination of television shows and movies where there seem to be conscious choices about including characters of different racial and ethnic backgrounds as friends, even though in “real life” they might not be.

This prompted Bryan, a young man who identified as Mexican American, to describe a situation on campus where an invitation to represent the campus in photos was sent to a student group of predominantly students of colour:

They wanted to take a picture of [this group] at school ... a very diverse group. The e-mail said “Come to these three points at these three times. We want to take a picture representing
[the university]” and that does not represent [the university] at all. In that situation, their obligation is to tell the people who are receiving this picture, this is not what campus is like. . . .
The e-mail never said a representation of [the group], it said a representation of campus.

Stephanie, a multiracial young woman, commented that the e-mail made her angry, “They are just trying to show, ‘Hey we have people of colour!’” Maggie, a White middle class student, shared a similar situation where her Catholic high school tried to make sure a certain number of students of colour where in photos in the school’s brochure.

Seeing that the class seemed to be coming to consensus on the impropriety of the photo, Halverson presented a counter-argument:

To be fair, part of the argument is, if we just take a random picture of White people on campus, that doesn’t capture the scope of the experience because there are lots of different kinds of colour on this campus. This room is relatively multi-coloured compared to the broad array of colour on campus. I have [also] walked into rooms of a whole lot of White people. Which is the truer representation of folks [on campus]? Are we just keeping up with the dichotomy? Do we just reaffirm that . . . are we just perpetuating it?

Chris, the only Black male in the class, entered the conversation supporting a photo that targets minority students:

They are just trying to attract more students of different backgrounds. Not anything wrong with that personally. If you are just taking pictures, they see pictures of White people all the time, but when they see a group of people of minorities, there are minorities here, if you want to find out the statistic, you can go online. If you see diverse people it is going to draw or attract more diversity. By them taking that picture, it appeals to someone who is searching for school.

Chris also raised the argument that it is important that the university place a caption under the picture, which led the discussion back to the idea of representation and how different media afford varied tools for representation.

Conversations such as these afforded opportunities for a mixed classroom to openly discuss how minority students are represented on a predominantly White campus and whether and how students can challenge these representations in their own work. These nuanced understandings of the relationship between race/ethnicity and representation made their way into many students’ final pieces and into their reflections on their pieces.

Lilly, for example, struggled with whether or not to make mention of the racial and ethnic markers of her interviewees in her radio piece about the way the American Dream has changed over generations. After meeting with her finalized episode group members the first week of October, Lilly had to submit an outline with interview questions or a script draft. In her story outline, she laid out her hopeful interviewees: a fourth grader, college students, her dad, and a senior citizen. Lilly described wanting to talk to her father about what motivated him to come to the United States from Mexico and “what drew him to succeed in the US. I want to find out how others around him influenced him to succeed, and what hopes he came to the United States with” (LMS Post, 10/10). However, when it came time to include her father in her final piece, she chose not to connect her father’s interview to her own experience:

Michelle: One big question I had when I heard your thing, why didn’t you say that [first name] [last name] was your dad?
Lilly: I don’t know. I just, there was no significance behind that. I just thought for the sake of the project. Like to be professional about it. I don’t really know.
Michelle: It doesn’t matter, I was just curious
Lilly: I think it was just kind of. I wanted to keep that fourth grade student kind of, I don’t think I said his name. I didn’t want to give like such a specific identity, like this is why I’m choosing this person. I didn’t want to be like, cause I didn’t choose my dad because he’s my dad . . . I chose him because of like his background, obviously. You always find out something new about someone, you know it’s just my dad but it’s interesting to talk to people about those kinds of questions. I mean I had fun with it, I liked it. (Interview, 5/11)

In her digital radio production, Lilly chose to put the focus on her interviewees’ generation rather than other identity markers (e.g. gender, ethnicity). Lilly expressed in interviews throughout the semester that she felt conflicted about the degree to which she should embrace her identity as a Mexican American, specifically her status as a scholarship recipient as a result of her minority status. This tension seemed to surface in her radio production process. While conversations about the role of stereotype in representation did not “solve” Lilly’s problem, through open conversation, we validated the tension and made the topic a central part of our learning process.

Grouping practices

One of the markers of the This American Life genre is the use of a theme tying together different kinds of stories into one coherent episode. For the course, we were interested in creating episode groups around common themes so that each student would produce an individual 10-minute piece, which was nested in a 30- or 40-minute episode with two or three other students. Practically, we knew that first-year college students, most of whom had no experience with radio production, would benefit from working in teams. Additionally, This American Life radio products are rarely stories told with only one narrator or voice. We also knew that their radio production instructor preferred that students produce completed programmes.

Several students commented that talking with others about how to fit their stories together caused them to think about how their personal identity could be represented explicitly through radio. One student remarked:

After our last class, I realized that I hadn’t exactly put myself into my own “This American Life”. This topic of secrets obviously had a significant meaning to me. This idea of everyone having secrets they don’t want anyone to know about relates to me so much, and I didn’t even realize it. (LMS post, 10/10)

Another student also described how “it sort of became more apparent to me that since the story I had planned on telling isn’t about me, the identity aspect may be hard to portray” (LMS post, 10/10). We saw evidence of students’ evolving sense of the relationship between identity and narrative throughout the grouping process. Nicole began her art-making process by troubling the concept of “home”:

I had always had the same home up until my sophomore year. I lived in the same town, in the same house. The summer before my sophomore year, however, I was forced to move to California and attend school there . . . I questioned where home is. To this day, I don’t know the answer. I believe that my story could relate to others and make people think. (LMS post, 9/10)
Through Nicole’s interactions with different classmates, she began exploring the relationship between “home” and identity representation. For example, she describes how talking to two classmates (with whom she was not eventually paired) helped her to understand “how a big part of my ‘Home’ concept is who you’re connected to. I think a big part of my story is the story other people – friends, family, teachers – play in your life” (LMS post, 9/10). Nicole’s story was eventually placed in an episode they titled, “Where the Heart Is”, an explicit homage to the importance of home in peoples’ lives.

The importance of connecting individual narratives to broader ideas is consistent with our prior work on analysing youth-produced films as products of identity, that transitional moments serve as the richest sites for multimodal expressions of identity (Halverson, Bass, & Woods, 2012). Transitions within narratives offer opportunities for producers to provide metacommentary, either by reflecting on the story they are telling or by juxtaposing multiple perspectives. In this case, the discussions within groups encouraged students to think about how they might create a radio programme that highlights both their individual narratives and the broader whole. Doerr-Stevens’ (2011) analysis of high schools students producing radio documentaries has shown that transitions afford students the opportunity to, “[oscillate] back and forth between performances of individual and community identities” (p. 3). This is consistent with our understanding of the importance of these grouping practices and also continues to value both the individualistic and collectivistic approaches to identity that students from different cultural communities bring to the production process (Halverson et al., 2009).

**Final sharing/authentic audience**

Alecia Magnifico’s work on the role of audience in writing instruction has demonstrated how the presence of an authentic audience for adolescent writers is a crucial factor in their motivation to write and revise, in the development of their cognitive models of writing process, and in the sociocultural space for learning to write (2010). Whether adolescents are writing in a classroom, an out-of-school writer’s workshop, or for an online zine, an informal home-made publication on a specialized topic, knowing that there is a real audience for their work provides the impetus for communication and motivates producers to do their best (2010). Considering digital audio production as a form of literacy, we brought these insights to bear in the design of our course.

From the first day, it was clear that students were producing *This American Life* segments for the purpose of sharing them with outsiders. Students were initially suspicious of the public sharing opportunities, in part because they doubted their own production skills and likely also because students often lack genuine opportunities for sharing their class work, even in the college classroom. The sharing opportunities were purposefully left open-ended, though our prior work with digital media production processes indicated that a face-to-face public sharing of digital art was an especially useful format for sharing (Halverson & Gibbons, 2010). There were 18 out of 19 students who signed up for a voluntary one-credit seminar the following semester. Students pursued venues for sharing their work including a live public listening party they planned as a class, on-air opportunities with the students radio station and the city’s community radio station, and on-campus opportunities including the campus’ annual undergraduate research symposium.

**Changes from graded project to public sharing**

One of the primary affordances of preparing for a public sharing in the second semester was that students had the opportunities to make changes to their episodes after they received
their final grades. Doing so decoupled the assessment of their work in the class from the piece they wanted to share with a public audience. Many students used the opportunity to make changes, to transform their pieces from class projects to digital art. Matt, for example, shared his story about being the sixth man on his high school’s championship basketball team:

My project was about my senior basketball season and originally I kind of wanted it to be more of an inner look at it, but it ended up being more just like a story about the season . . . I am planning on changing it, having it be more of a personal story rather than a general sports story I guess . . . I still really liked it and I made choices that reflected me. I was in it in that way. I just think I need to put a little bit more of myself in it. (Interview, 2/11)

Like many of his classmates, Matt struggled with “putting himself” in his story. Time pressures of the semester and a focus on the goal of putting together a coherent episode prevented Matt from being satisfied with his piece. Knowing others would be hearing his piece provided motivation for him to revisit and restructure his piece to achieve a balance between the episode’s focus and Matt’s individual identity story.

Anxiety about sharing with people you know

Though students were eager to share their pieces with a public audience, both through the face-to-face listening parties and on the air, many of these students expressed anxiety about sharing their pieces with the family and friends who played prominent roles in their stories. This trend was most pronounced with our students of colour and first-generation college students, many of whom told stories of struggles in their home communities and reflected on the disconnect between their lives at home and their lives at college. Jimmy, for example, expressed resistance towards sharing his piece with his family because he was worried they would interpret it as a focus on self-aggrandizing: “If I had made it about someone else, I wouldn’t care so much about who I was sharing it with but since it was about me, I’m a little more hesitant to show it off to everyone” (Interview, 2/11). Jimmy’s parents lived within driving distance of the university, and thus could have made the trip to attend the listening party. However, in the end, he decided not to ask them to come:

It’s not that I don’t want to share it with them. I mean, eventually I do . . . but it will not be here. It will probably be at my house. I just feel like they won’t, I feel like my mom will really like it but that my dad won’t really appreciate it . . . He’ll think it was a waste of time. (Interview, 4/11)

By contrast, Stephanie decided to invite the friend whose voice she had used for dramatic re-enactments of her experiences with sexual assault in high school. She was unsure of whether he would feel comfortable hearing his voice in that context, especially since she had made changes to the piece since he had heard it in the recording studio. In the end, she did invite him and was glad that he came and he was able to talk with her after about the challenges she had to overcome as a victim of sexual assault.

Why “representing self through media” matters

We designed the “Representing Self through Media” class with the explicit intention of working with students to explore the relationship between identities and narratives by creating autobiographical digital art and reflecting on how this production process was related to the core ideas of the course. Building on our prior research, we aimed to structure a
learning experience for students that would afford their engagement with positive identity trajectories as they worked towards the creation of digital representations of self. We were especially interested in whether and how students from underrepresented populations – students of colour and first-generation college students – were influenced by the experience of the course.

Through an analysis of the artefacts students produced in response to our instructional and pedagogical choices, we found that four of the course’s features afforded students the opportunity to engage with identity and narrative in ways that created alignment between our intentions as designers and outcomes for students. Two of these instructional features involved class work. First, students used the “Representing the Other” assignment as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of representational tools and how they communicate the identity of the producer, even when they were not the focus of the representation. Second, classroom discussions focused around issues of minority status in a majority institution afforded students the opportunity to think about the nuances of identity representation, especially for underrepresented populations. We also saw evidence of students’ bringing these experiences into their radio pieces. Students wrestled with how to use the radio medium to communicate the “truth” of theirs and others’ experiences.

In terms of the radio project, encouraging students to explore the thematic links across their projects through several grouping exercises afforded students the opportunity to reflect on both the community identity and individual identity aspects of their pieces that would later allow them to “oscillate back and forth” between them (Doerr-Stevens, 2011). Finally, in providing opportunities for the public sharing of their work, students were afforded an authentic audience beyond the traditional teacher-only audience, which provided motivation for them to improve their pieces and to continue to focus on the connections between identity and narrative. While students were motivated by this public audience, they also shied away from their families and close friends as audience members, especially our underrepresented students who tended to share personal experiences of struggle in their home communities.

We see course experiences like ours as part of the emerging movement to design for pedagogies of possibility (Jocson, this issue; Naiditch, 2010; Winn, this issue). By working at the intersection of identity, literacy and representation, we focused on the theory behind why making autobiographical art matters and the practice of creating, and sharing digital representations of the self. Through this focus, we aligned ourselves with Ivanic, Edwards, Satchwell, and Smith (2007) who describe pedagogies of possibility as embracing an inherent creativity in the ways in which people use and do literacy, which, rather than being decried as a loss of standards, can be embraced as the achievements of people making meaning for themselves and others in their lives (p. 704).

We are especially interested in how embracing multimodal forms of communication and destabilizing the relationship between codified knowledge and students’ experiences can support students who may feel marginalized by the university academic context.

**Pedagogies of possibility and the college experience**

We know that differences between high school and college for all students include dramatic changes in the relationship between students and teachers, expectations for work and intellectual development. We also know that most young people are experiencing their first significant independence from family and, importantly, from the role of child; it should be no wonder, therefore, that the transition from high school to college is a difficult one (Conley, 2008). As a result it is crucial to study the freshman year as a time of transition,
especially for underrepresented students who often lack positive experiences at this transition time with respect to the valuing of their minority status (London, Downey, Bolger, & Velilla, 2005).

Scholars have demonstrated that schools are not organized for the broad scale adoption of digital media-rich pedagogical practices (e.g. Hull & Greeno, 2006; Leander, 2009). Many school environments have not yet changed to accommodate “the evolution of new technologies, geographies, and communicative modes” (Vasudevan & Hill, 2009, p. 5) that young people use in their out-of-school lives. Furthermore, most school-based production practices continue to focus on single-mode communication and top–down structures for teaching and learning rather than embracing “a world replete with multimodal text, remixing and mashing, and fluid novice–expert relations” (Leander, 2009, p. 148). In other words, students are forced to leave their digital media literacies at the door. While this issue needs to be addressed at all levels of the education system, our particular site of interest is the college classroom, specifically in courses targeted to freshman students. Our focus on the pedagogical practices in a course using autobiographical digital art-making demonstrates that it is possible to embrace a pedagogy of possibility in the collegiate classroom through an explicit focus on the relationship between identity and narrative in the digital context.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our students for the passion, care and enthusiasm with which they embraced the course and their final radio projects. In particular, Michelle wishes to thank them for allowing her to follow their transition to college their freshman year.

References


