



Digital Storytelling in Study Abroad: Toward a Counter-Catalogic Experience

Karen Rodriguez, PhD¹

Director, CIEE Study Center in Guanajuato, Mexico
Visiting Professor, Visual Arts Department, Universidad de Guanajuato
Email: krdriguez@ciee.org

Abstract

This article examines a pilot project incorporating digital storytelling into a short-term study abroad program in the small city of Guanajuato, Mexico. After contextualizing the project's pedagogical and theoretical concerns, the article examines the resulting stories, underscoring their potential for helping students pay attention to specific sites, to think beyond the usual images one is bombarded with and to spark critical thought. It argues that digital storytelling allows both students and host community members to become authors and representers of their experiences, thus creating a "counter-catalogic" study abroad experience, i.e. one that goes beyond the staid images used to market these experiences abroad. Digital stories afford an exciting mode for thinking about how to create critical, intimate and dialogic encounters with others.

Keywords: Digital stories, study abroad, sound, image, critical representation

Introduction

For many US international educators raised in the pre-digital era, the question of whether technology separates the student sojourner from a more embodied, emotional experience in a foreign study site has been a prominent subject of late. Too many students come abroad only to spend their time tightly wired into Skype, the Internet and Facebook, seemingly more concerned about capturing images for those at home than actually experiencing the wonders at their fingertips. Others rarely hang up the cell phones that connect them to significant others and family members, which can also prompt onsite educators to question whether they are truly "here" or not. But students are also using new media in intriguing ways, and within the field, there exists a growing fascination with employing new media to help students engage with the study site and to connect with local community members in meaningful ways.

This article examines a pilot project that includes digital storytelling within a study abroad program in Guanajuato, Mexico. With approximately a dozen American undergraduates per semester, the *CIEE* (Council on International

Educational Exchange) *Study Center in Guanajuato* is a small operation which espouses a critical, experiential pedagogy. In both January and July, the Center runs a three-week, community-based course that precedes the regular semester. The pilot project described in this article took place within one of these short, for-credit courses. The project is embedded within the Study Center's larger Digital Culture Initiative whose goals are: 1) to harness the possibilities new media affords for enhancing dialogue with and reflection about the local community; (2) to become more aware of *local* uses of technology as we incorporate our study abroad students into university courses; and 3) to use technology to create critical cultural information about the programs we run in order to attract students in a manner consistent with our pedagogy. Therefore, we are hoping to construct new ways of learning and communicating as part of a larger structural transformation.

This article attempts to critically connect emerging ideas concerning theory with our first experiments in practice before embarking upon a next round of digital projects. While digital storytelling does not embody or ensure critical intercultural thinking, I argue that it has a tremendous potential for re-creating both students and host community members as authors and representers of their experiences, thus creating a "counter-catalogic" study abroad experience that goes far beyond the staid images used to market these experiences. The stories created here were experimental in both theme and technique. Notwithstanding, the ideological and pedagogical possibilities they embody, however modestly, demonstrate the viability of using the digital story as a tool in critical study abroad programming.

Toward a Counter-Catalogic Experience: The Spectacle of Study Abroad

Student experiences are mediated long before they arrive on-site. In an early study of educational tour brochures on Latin America, Casella (1999) examined how the media constructed knowledge about what type of people, landscapes, artifacts and lifestyles to expect; namely, she identified repeated images that promoted Latin America as exotic, colorful, primitive and natural (p. 188). Today's images may have expanded in their breadth; nevertheless, they have multiplied into so many forms and into so many new spaces that the would-be sojourner is bombarded with pre-packaged visuals (as well as an increasing amount of audio material) about what to expect on-site. In this decade, we have also witnessed the burgeoning of social networking sites where students ask about where to get X at the abroad site, whether or not you can wear Y, how others evaluate classes at the local university, the sort of host family experiences to expect and so on. Their experiences become highly regulated, not only as academic oversight and safety precautions increase, but also as cultural encounters become over-documented and readily available out of context in both virtual and other sites not attached to the locality where students will study.

Indeed, as Debord noted in his 1967 *Society of the Spectacle*, modern life has become a spectacle. Representations are everywhere and are often preferred over the real thing. Not only has everything that was once lived bodily now been replaced by images and representations, but images mediate social relationships as well. Debord's premises of the 1960s are even more relevant for today's society: From news reports to tourism brochures, online photos and study abroad catalogues, there is a clear need to recognize the spectacle of culture that precedes the experience abroad. Correspondingly, we must find ways for students (and others) to respond critically with counter-images which first, reinsert the bodied, emotional individual back into the experience; and second, break away from the stereotypical images promoted through non-neutral media.

We define a “counter-catalogic” experience as one which resists pre-imaged types of sojourns and results in more intimate, unique representations. This sort of experience resists not only the tourist gaze, but also the inherently monologic orientation of a study abroad catalogue. Catalogues respond to the needs of stakeholders – universities, parents, students – by promoting messages that: 1) comply with good business policy, articulating what goods (experiences) will be delivered for what price; and 2) communicate necessary tenets: *you will be safe, you will learn, you will be accepted into the community and form meaningful relationships...* They also reveal what one can expect to see, which means that anomalies, ephemeral experiences and exceptions to the cultural rule must invariably be kept out. Catalogues play a specific and needed role, as do syllabi and other sorts of documents involved in academic programs abroad, and my goal is not to attack their content. But with the proliferation of new media formats, we are afforded an opportunity to promote other messages that celebrate the impromptu, the unexpected and the delightfully complex, gray areas involved in living and learning in another cultural context.

Digital storytelling fits into this framework because the stories that result are about both developing agency and hearing other voices as well; they are designed to let people represent themselves and their experiences, something the catalogue genre cannot permit. Definitions of what a digital story encompasses vary widely, although for the purposes of this article a digital story is defined as a 2-5 minute recording with voice or sound joined to a visual component that could include a video clip, still photos, ambient sound or music.

As is the case with traditional storytelling, digital stories revolve around a chosen theme and often contain a particular viewpoint. The stories are typically just a few minutes long and have a variety of uses, including the telling of personal tales, the recounting of historical events, or as a means to inform or instruct on a particular topic. (Robin, 2006: p. 709)

While there are myriad types of digital stories, Fletcher and Cambre (2009) assert that “If there is an overriding quality found in digital stories, it is their sincerity” and their brevity (p.115). They offer students an opportunity to engage “real” individuals in specific contexts and to listen deeply to their stories which might otherwise go unheard.

Digital stories can be created using free software (such as Apple iMovie, Apple Gargageband, Windows Movie Maker, Audacity) or purchased programs (e.g. Dreamweaver, Photoshop). They can be hosted online on blogs, websites and social networking sites, as well as downloaded and shared offline. Often, they are works in progress that are edited and updated regularly. Because they can be produced by just about anyone, they open up participation in culture making (or challenging). As Henry Jenkins has observed, a media creator is not a specialist, but rather “someone who has created a blog or Web page; posted original artwork, photos or stories, or videos online; or remixed online content into their own new creations” (2009, p. 3). Digital stories thus constitute a powerful and widely accessible means for challenging the status quo, whether by launching previously unseen/unheard representations, by exposing situations of inequality/injustice or by offering hopeful solutions to existing problems and inviting everyone to be an author.

Since the pioneering work of Joe Lambert at the Center for Digital Storytelling at Berkeley in the early 90s, and with the advent of other new media forms over the past two decades, digital stories have certainly been widely used in educational programs. They have served as a tool for developing multiple literacies as well as a means to help students engage relevant topics in their own and others’ lives within their communities. These stories engender social critique as they bring marginalized, neglected stories to light (see for example,

StoryCorps, its defunct predecessor site soundportraits.org and the Center for the Study of Human Lives at the University of Southern Maine to name just a few). Just as frequently, they function as a vehicle of empowerment, affording students and others a way to create “an agentive self” (Hull and Katz, 2006): through the narrating and visualizing of their own story, people regain a sense of coherency, meaning and control over their lives.

In study abroad, one can easily see the appeal of these modes of storytelling. Students abroad struggle to reassert their subjectivity and agency as they confront both subtle and radically different ways of making a life, and social critique is certainly central to critical education. Nonetheless, when studying abroad, students are repositioned in communities that are not necessarily “theirs” to critique. In the Guanajuato program, students find themselves in a decidedly middle-class setting, and one of our stated program rationales (in our own catalogue no less!) is precisely to provide views of Mexican daily life that connote neither *telenovela*/drug czar wealth nor Third World urban or rural poverty. For that reason, we are striving for something which edges into a different territory.

One of our promotional slogans is “What will your story be?” In our experimentation with digital stories in Guanajuato, we aim to open this up to an “our story” or at the very least, a “my story with you, another protagonist, in it.” However, as onsite workers we are aware of the risks involved – the implementation of digital storytelling could further objectify local community members; it could serve as a techno refuge for shy students or those who are hesitant to engage in a more embodied way; and it could be very “me-centered” and not provide any deep connection with local people and spaces at all. With these hopes and concerns in mind, this pilot project was launched.

Theory: In Search of a More Grounded Point of Departure

While many theoretical perspectives could (and should) be fruitfully enlisted for making critical sense of digital stories’ potential, the Study Center focused on two main framing ideas for this first project:

(1) The Ideological Quality of Images and the Non-Neutrality of Sound

Digital story making is about creating a representation through the purposeful, thoughtful choice of images and sounds. Images and sound, however, are imbued with ideological content. As researchers Garoian and Gaudelius argue, images “teach us what and how to see and think” (2008, p. 24). Tourist images particularly embody this pedagogical aspect. Aimed at both locals and outsiders, they point viewers to certain readings of city space (Dilley, 1986; Schneider and Sonmez, 1999).

When considering the context of a study abroad program, one must immediately ask how to open up (or at least acknowledge) the institutional gazes at hand, as well as consider who might be viewing the stories from which power points. Visual scholar Gillian Rose advocates:

A critical approach to visual images is therefore needed: one that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences, including the academic critic. (2007, p. 26)

Rose discusses both images and visibility, or how we look at and understand images (consciously or not) within a specific socio-cultural context. She underscores images’ ability to reveal or hide difference, emphasizing that they

have agency and produce ideological effects. An institution's gaze may smooth over differences or highlight certain types of differences, or both, thereby creating messages about how to view a place.

Researchers from many areas have echoed the idea that images have power. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) posits all of us as being subject to visibility, even colluding in our own surveillance. In psychoanalysis, visual images are studied with reference to the gaze and power, and related to desire, voyeurism, sexuality and consumerism (Lacan, 1978; McGowan, 2008; Ewen and Ewen, 1992). Among others, John Urry (1990), Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) and Michael Cronin (2003) have written on both the tourist gaze and institutional image making of the Other. In their different disciplinary voices, they tell us that images affect how we understand ourselves and others and produce intellectual and affective reactions that in turn have social consequences. There is also a long tradition of analyzing what it means to *create* images of cultural others as part of a research project (in anthropology, see Bateson and Mead, 1942; Collier, 1967; and more recently Pink, Kurti, & Afonso 2004; Pink, 2006; Pink, 2007; in the social sciences, see John Berger, 1972; Banks, 2001; Sturken & Cartwright, 2005).

All would concur with Stuart Hall (2003), who emphasizes that representations are not reflective of fixed realities; rather, they are constructed, constantly changing and intimately related to the context in which one produces and/or views them.

One soon discovers that meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed. (p. 9)

In short, understanding images is a challenge and creating images is perhaps even more so. Rose concludes rather succinctly that in order to create or understand representations, researchers must "take images seriously" (p. 12).

Following this, we must consider the effects and agency of a photograph taken by a student or a complete digital story. How can students (or anyone for that matter) think critically about a photo's infinitely multiple meanings as the resulting digital story is viewed by city residents, by their friends and family in the US and by people in other sites around the world? How will each viewer contextualize this within his or her idea about "what Mexico is like?" The multiple audiences involved (local, "home," and global/virtual) make any sort of representation complicated indeed. While it is not within the scope of this article to investigate all the potential viewings at hand, we were forthcoming during the project with the difficulties associated with image making about a place, and students critically reflected on what kind of images of Mexico are widely promulgated through the media. Our key aim with regard to visibility was to ask: What themes would students identify on their own as worth studying and how would they choose to represent them through their digital photographs? Would these images differ significantly from common representations in US media, tourist and catalogue information?

Of course, digital stories are not purely visual; they also include sound, something that must be politicized as more than a neutral, multimedia add-on. Working with sound makes us conscious that "...being fundamentally oriented toward visual communications, modern culture has little appreciation for the emotional importance of hearing" (Blessner and Salter, 2007, p. 6). Sound is often taken for granted, yet like imagery, it is imbued with ideological content. It is made sense of from specific cultural/power locations (Ferrington, 2003), which in turn contribute heavily to places' identities (Blessner and Salter, 2007; Schafer, 1977/1994). Researchers have examined soundscapes since Schafer's seminal work in 1977 (e.g. Columbijn, 2007; Courbald, 2007; Guastavino,

2006), while other scholars have also investigated the anthropology of sound (Steven Feld and Basso, 1996) and the technicalities of listening as audio specialists, a level that most of us will never attain (Everest, 2006; Corey, 2010). Studies of sound are complexly intertwined with the spaces and places of diverse sites that affect our experiences of different locales.

Schafer suggests that it is even more difficult to study sound than images because we have a limited vocabulary for discussing sound and because sound is not easily notated by the non-specialist. Moreover, we cannot achieve a sound equivalent to an aerial photograph, making sound even more detailed and context-specific than an image. Additionally, he asserts that “The ear is always much more alert while traveling in unfamiliar environments,” referencing the work of Thoreau, Heine and Robert Louis Stevenson (1994, p. 211), an intriguing idea for study abroad work. Finally, as with images, digital sound recordings are copies of the original: in its new saved rendition, sound is no longer “the” event – the same slippage that occurs between images’ meaning and the “thing” signified is repeated in the sonic sphere.

While we have worked with visual themes in a non-digital context in the past, this project marked the first time that we experimented with audio work. From reading about sound, we began thinking about how one might hear a city story through the sounds it makes. Can we hear that cultural differences still exist, despite the presence of global music and the sounds of multiple languages on the street? Could paying attention to the emotional and intellectual resonances of sound afford students a new means for engaging the local community in both its human and natural aspects? These are the questions we took into the project.

(2) The Critical Collage Nature of Online Postings

Visual scholars Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) argue that the collage genre affords a dialogic opening in the way in which we view images, which is an argument that can also be applied to sounds.

Rather than merely doling out information, capturing a scene, recording history, or telling a story, **the aim of collage narrative is to raise critical questions** [my emphasis] thereby generating new cultural discourse through art. (p. 4)

The collage metaphor is particularly well suited to the gap filled complexity of the digital mediascape. Websites, blogs, Facebook profiles...all bring together fragments, creating a digital “contact zone” of sorts, a space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). In other words, a blog filled with digital stories becomes a radical collage in which stories exist in juxtaposition without fitting into a single narrative, which allows for more writerly versus readerly interpretations (Barthes, 1975). Unlike the seamless look produced in catalogues and brochures, a blog forces the reader/viewer to think about how each piece, each digital story in our case, speaks to one another, encouraging more questions.

Though Garoian and Gaudelius critique the Debordian spectacle in which we are irretrievably enmeshed, they posit a flip side within which students can seek out ways to critically respond. They identify strategies for interruption and intervention in the artistic techniques of collage, assemblage, installation and performance. They contextualize these strategies within place, encouraging “site specific performance(s)” (p. 33) in an attempt to ground the use of imagery within the local. Digital stories created in study abroad answer this call directly; students work to capture local experiences and local residents’ stories and thoughts are undeniably site specific.

Finally, polyphony, as first proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, relates directly to the collage aesthetic; it is the visual collage's aural counterpart, a multi-voiced text in which the narrator's voice does not dominate other voices. Not surprisingly, the applicability of Bakhtin's theory to digital storytelling has already been discussed: Hull and Katz (2006), for example, discuss voice/double-voiced discourse in the context of digital stories; Nelson and Hull (2008) examine heteroglossia and addressivity in relation to the multimodal aspect of digital stories, while Hayes and Matusov (2005) advocate for a focus on addressivity versus ownership in digital storytelling work, something exceedingly appropriate for digital work when studying abroad. From these concerns emerged a desire to create a polyphonic blog that would bare both the connections and disjunctions among the various stories. Accordingly, the umbrella-blog on which our center's stories are posted (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/>) is also problematized as a non-neutral space of exhibition and interaction, something taken up in more detail below.

Methods

The pilot project to incorporate a digital story component into formal Study Center teaching and learning practice was initiated in January, 2010. Twelve students and three staff members created a range of loosely defined digital stories during this intense, three-week program. The pilot project was exploratory in nature which, not surprisingly, produced ample errors both technologically and pedagogically. Students were asked to engage in conversations with local people and to create a short story incorporating their own and the other person's words. The theme of the interaction and the person/people involved were left entirely up to each student. This is not the obvious or only way to tell a digital story – it does position the student, rather than the community member, as narrator – but given our linguistic and intercultural goals related to catalyzing interactions, the project was structured this way. The stories that resulted thus captured an interaction more than one person's personal story; even so, this approach could certainly expand in myriad directions in future iterations of the project. Study Center staff also created several stories within this timeframe in order to accompany students in the learning process; they used the same technology, but did not do the stated assignment.

In all the stories, students used inexpensive handheld digital recorders to record sound and their own cameras for visuals, ranging from cell phone cameras to stand-alone digital cameras which varied in quality. They were asked to shoot 4-5 candid photos during the experience, with no advice given on how to take to a good photograph. Students were simply told to: 1) ask permission, and 2) make sure not to include photos of children that could be easily identified, given the extortion issues/kidnapping threats that the city endures along with the rest of the nation.

Study Center staff put audio and visuals together using an inexpensive program downloaded from the internet (Soundslides), and the finished stories were uploaded onto a new program blog that we created using Wordpress. The production aspect of the process was efficient and easy. Despite the extremely constrained turnaround time from story creation to the end of this short program, over a dozen projects were produced from everyone's raw materials and posted in 3-4 days. For everyone, the time constraint was tight, and in a few cases, students switched photos and re-recorded bits of the audio files, although most of the stories were only edited once.

As was expected, errors occurred. Several pieces were seriously flawed vis-a-vis the sound quality, which had to do as much with the quality of the digital recorder (and the lack of a good microphone) as it did with simple error or not

pointing the recorder consistently at the speaker. We also realized post-experiment that we needed more photographs than were solicited from the students, and that aesthetically, more preparation on what sorts of visuals would create interest and variety would have been helpful. In sum, more time would have permitted more editing possibilities. Nonetheless, our stated emphasis was on the linguistic and cultural interaction, and we wanted to leave everything as unconstrained as possible in this first round of story production.

While the open-ended, do-it-yourself approach has many advantages since it elicits student generated themes, we will most likely define the subject matter more narrowly in the next iteration of this project in order to push it toward a more focused, critical discussion that examining various aspects of a sole theme would afford. Given that students were new to the site, their own critical vision was still very much in the process of emerging. Were students to create digital stories later in the semester, we would certainly see a different level of criticality as their cultural knowledge expanded and their local social interactions deepened.

Discussion of the Resulting Pilot Stories

Beyond the Usual Images

The stories that emerged included images unlike the images produced by the city for tourist purposes and unlike those in our organizational catalogue. Tourist texts produced by the city emphasize the romantic and colonial aspects of this place; they are rarely peopled, focusing more on iconic historical sites or architecture that conveys the correct colonial look – 200-year old buildings, large baroque or churrigueresque church facades, empty Spanish-style plazas, and the like. Together, these images on billboards, tourist brochures, posters and postcards work to tell a certain story about what one finds in this locale. Notably absent are the trappings of contemporary life (cars, modern grocery stores, imported goods, etc.) and actual people or individuals.

Our organizational catalogue for Latin America produces images that fit within a different set of categories, most of which are student centered. These include: student groups usually with their arms around one another smiling directly at the camera; students with arms around smiling hosts (communicating that intercultural friendships are forthcoming); students in action, often performing something linked to learning (shoveling for service work, observing a museum exhibition, listening to a host lecture); students interacting in various local sites, as well as city, university, and larger framed scenery shots. Together they are designed to show what the experience will be like for the student, the subject of study abroad. While these images are carefully woven into a larger pastiche of “what Latin America looks like,” what they do not show is much about the diversity of the local lifestyle. Additionally, one easily observes that one city or country looks awfully much like the next.

The institutional gazes in tourist and catalogue photos are prominent. In students’ digital stories, however, the photographs take us behind the doors into the non-special, concrete aspects of everyday life in Guanajuato. Their images are place-specific, proper-noun-oriented (Corpus gym, San Sebastian bakery, Margarita, Gorda), and emerge from each student’s interaction with one person or group in a particular moment and place. Their photos do not fit into a generic Latin American pastiche, thereby resisting standardization into an institution’s monologic discourse. Also, unlike the catalogue, the stories are not me-centered; students themselves are not featured, nor are the activities captured in the photos contracted for students’ entertainment or learning.

More importantly, despite the fact that students were asked to initiate contact with someone to do the assignment, the person chosen is centered as the

protagonist. The images show the protagonist's locale, things, tools and sometimes (but often not) their faces. This seems to work against the inevitable subject/object relationship of "I need to do this for a class/you must help me" since the protagonist is there, shaping the story and often opining about which images can and cannot be shot by the student. In this mode, students work against the power differential built into this, demonstrating a certain "correct disposition."

Another focus which comes through in the images is the emphasis on how things are made (processes) versus what can be consumed (products) (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/adentro-de-una-panaderia/>; <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/hora-del-almuerzo-un-puesto-de-gorditas/>; <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/%c2%a1haciendo-tortillas/>). These stories testify to the students' shift beyond a consumer role (*I like it, I buy it*), as they permit an encounter which allows those creating to contribute knowledge to their emerging understanding of everyday life in the city (*You know things, I listen*). Therefore, rather than imaging a market relationship, the stories feature images of *tortilla* machines and cooking *braceros*, trays of bread and the regional *gorditas* snack, and so on, and corresponding stories about how each is made.

While the images in the digital stories created for the pilot project are not, for the most part, particularly artistic (as per the stated focus of the project on the interaction), they are not voyeuristic, they do not objectify and they do not standardize the experience into a type of event or type of person you are guaranteed to interact with while on the Center's program, therein lies their critical value.

The Possibilities of Sound

Visuals make up a key part of digital storytelling, but although the pilot stories also illuminate the potential to think about sound in new ways. For example, one story juxtaposed audio taken at a local Catholic church and at the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, where our organization's most recent conference was held (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/the-sounds-of-spirituality-in-two-cities/>). In both cities, the day is punctuated by calls to worship. Are these two sounds radically different or much the same? Here we find a point of departure for reconsidering such black and white responses as these two recordings together offer the possibility of considering seeing human similarity across cultural/religious differences, as well as the specificity of sonic practices in a given area.

Another story in which the city is the protagonist highlights the quotidian sounds of life in Guanajuato (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/everyday-sounds-of-the-city/>). This story records the common sonic denominator of the city, testifying to the presence of a type of democratic cacophony as both wealthy and poorer city dwellers experience the same everyday sounds. Unlike those in US cities and suburbs, neighborhoods in Guanajuato are not class zoned: everyone hears the gas man, the early morning water truck, the symphony of barking dogs at night, the trash bell, etc. On another level, several of the noises captured here indicate the presence of an economic soundscape or a sonic economy: these sounds represent the various everyday goods and services that a range of workers offer. To live here and obtain access to these essential goods, one must know how to identify each sound. Sound offers an unexpected tool for gauging students' specific onsite, experiential knowledge.

While the sonic economy example demonstrates an underlying similarity throughout the town, one can go deeper to root out neighborhood specifics.

Indeed, the more closely one looks (or in this case, listens), the more one finds an “infinity of differences in finite spaces” (Cronin, 2000, p. 18), as one neighborhood looks slightly different from the next, linguistic accents may shift across town, etc. – all are an argument for paying attention to the complexity available even in a small city such as Guanajuato (population approximately 130,000). For example, slightly up the street from the Study Center’s office, there is a man who sits and sings 1960s tunes every day for about six hours (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/when-the-aural-clashes-with-the-visual/>). He serves as an anomalous aural marker on the city map, an idiosyncratic feature of this particular pedestrian street. Would this crooner of heavily accented Beatles, Elvis and Bob Dylan songs show up in a catalogue? No, but he provides an aural sign of place and his interruption (the accented rendering of songs from the previous generation and from another country’s musical repertoire) points to a moment in which the aural contradicts the visual - yet another area not covered in the catalogues which tend toward more complete and smooth displays.

From national markers to the city specific, a final piece brings the viewer down to a truly intimate level. On the last day of the three-week session, one of the students sang a Mexican folksong, “Yo no sé si tú me quieres” (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/23/christopher-hall-yo-no-se-si-tu-me-quieres/>) at our closing celebration. As noted by Forrester:

...we don't “hear” acoustic signals or sound waves, we hear events: the sounds of people and things moving, changing, beginning and ending, forever interdependent with the dynamics of the present moment. (p. 1)

For the Winter/Spring students this term, this song will resonate not only with Mexico and Guanajuato, but with the embodied memory of friendship and a shared meal in addition to group experiences of cultural immersion when they were brand-new.

Thus, the stories related to sound emphasized particular and shared events, ephemeral and repeated experiences, as well as connections and disconnections. The sound experiments offer a rich, complex area for further study and open up new ways to represent difference and locality that cannot be experienced in a traditional study abroad program catalogue. As catalogues are digitalized, video and sound are or will undoubtedly become commonplace; the question remains as to whether city sounds will be incorporated or whether we will simply hear students discussing their onsite experiences. Incorporating sound – not only speaking/hearing, but also the act of listening – provides a way to: 1) balance the visual-centric nature of contemporary life; 2) capture another aspect of the urban (or rural) landscape; and 3) remind us of the importance not only of “me-speaking,” but of others talking back, something woefully underemphasized in discussions of student learning onsite.

Mapping the Intimate: Creating an Increasingly Polyphonic Blog

Finally, as mentioned above, the stories were posted on the Study Center blog created for this experiment. While many international education programs have blogs, they often reiterate catalogue images, echoing at least to a certain extent basic marketing discourses, albeit from a more locally situated, “authentic” perspective. We aspire to a more polyphonic, critical collage-like blog that includes a diverse representation of who and what are in the spaces where students study, though this is not a straightforward task. Our blog is not structured to be polyphonic and democratic. It is authored by the institution, the CIEE Study Center in Guanajuato. It is not open access since contributions are posted by staff and could, in theory, be rejected or edited to fit our pedagogical ends. This relates to liability issues, safety questions and a host of

other professional responsibilities that require thinking carefully about the consequences of a posting before making access open to all. Therefore, despite the fact that we are aware that our editing power contradicts the ideas underlying critical pedagogy/participatory methods, this issue remains and must be problematized.

That said, we do hope that the content can indeed be polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense (1984) – multi-voiced so that the blog as a whole will not represent a single and narrowly defined ideological position of the Study Center. For that reason, we attempted to construct a first layer of polyphony for this pilot project on which to add future work. The resulting stories brought out voices that would not be heard in a catalogue. The blog further embodies an emerging polyphony in that it showcases both multiple and individual voices that are not tightly woven together to create a particular reading. We hear the voices of a baker speaking about his work, a host mother's opinion on healthcare, a migrant discussing his unexpected return to the city, a professional at the university press discussing book production in Guanajuato – the variety of walks of life comes through in the different voices here (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/una-opinion-sobre-el-sistema-de-salud-2/>; <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/venta-y-produccion-de-libros-en-la-universidad/>) Consequently, there is no assumption that the blog captures “the” local experience or “the” local opinion. Rather, the stories map the unique and the personal, thereby opening up the potential for critical discussion about a local reality that is not fixed and finished.

For example, one student's story focused on his host mother's knitting hobby, a seemingly non-radical, domestic topic (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/tejer-como-hobby/>), yet it opens up some significant issues. While women from all classes may knit, hobbies are a middle-class pursuit and his contribution: 1) disrupts expected narrations about saving money, and 2) gently nudges the viewer/listener to rethink previous ideas about gender in Mexico by underscoring the fact that women pursue interests on their own terms. As the *Señora* notes, she chooses projects that she enjoys, not projects that are dictated by others' needs, which also reminds viewers to avoid jumping to any quick conclusions that this is a “feminine task” in the traditional or patriarchal sense. In this story, knitting is a source of pleasure, and the *Señora* herself asked that the accompanying images be of her creations rather than of herself, again inserting her own agency.

Other stories are provocative and polyphonically-oriented more for the juxtapositions they create than for the individual stories themselves. For example, one student inquired about exercise and weight problems, noting her own observations and speaking with a gym owner, while another student spoke with the teacher of a zumba class, who was the owner of a different gym: (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/al-gimnasio-la-dieta-y-el-ejercicio/>; <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/a-moverse-una-clase-de-zumba/>). Taken together, the viewer/listener is immediately exposed to two different perspectives, which forecloses or at least stalls the possibility of jumping to conclusions based on a single story. Uncovering both the similarities and distinctions within several stories opens the way for critical thinking. In one instance, students wondered about how other people in the same line of work would approach a similar conversation and how their own ideas about these topics might evolve further over the course of the semester. Had they not engaged these two women centered in their digital stories, the students would not necessarily have voiced their own questions or thought further about these issues.

Finally, across the blog content one can find myriad connections and disconnections between the various stories. The juxtaposed religious sounds of Guanajuato and Istanbul are paralleled at the gustatory level as the ubiquitous

tacos al pastor, frequently referred to in Mexico as “tacos árabes” or Arab tacos, found their counterpart in the corner stands of Istanbul (<http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/if-we-are-what-we-eat/>). Another link emerged between the sound posts and literary mappings in which local poets were inspired in turn by dogs barking <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/noche-de-perros/> and the gasman’s calls <http://cieeguanajuato.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/the-gas-man-blues/>. It is this sort of messiness and layeredness that permits the blog to take on a strong place-based orientation. And I contend that these juxtapositions disrupt how a viewer/reader might think about such everyday things like dogs and food. Most notably, the conversation that emerges between the different images and sounds in the blog shuttles student thinking between the oppositions, breaking the divide between intellectual/everyday and inside class-learning/outside real living, creating the more holistic learning that study abroad aims to engender. This beginning series of stories on the blog provides us with a dialogic overall text infused with students’ and local residents’ voices.

While a study abroad catalogue strives to create a representation that suggests a coherent, seamless experience abroad, the blog establishes the open spaces between a city’s different aspects of self and the representations we make of a place. Moreover, the stories are produced in Spanish, which counterbalances the tendency to translate everything for an English-speaking audience: to think about the “write up” of field experiences in the local language for a potentially local audience reverses the outdated model (already rejected in anthropology) of researching “them/there” and writing/publishing/disseminating for “us/here.”

Jean Burgess, who studies vernacular creativity, writes that “Digital Storytelling...is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice” (2006). In digital storytelling, she continues, “...narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence are prioritized over formal experimentation or innovative ‘new’ uses for technologies.” The Study Center’s pilot stories, humble and homemade as they are, do exactly this – they amplify the intimate and make available to others the individual, insider encounters that are not possible to highlight in the program catalogue or tourist brochure genres.

Digitalizing Intercultural Experiences Abroad

While technology could hinder students’ integration into a local community during a study abroad experience, this article has attempted to show that as a broad yet specific technological endeavor, digital stories can also provide a route toward more intimate and engaged experiences of place. By standing behind the camera or recorder, students slow down the parade of images they have already been exposed to, and create more thoughtful representations that emerge from their own dialogue with others. Simple as they may be, these representations also begin to bring the other senses back in, allowing us to move away from a disembodied or exclusively ocular-centric portrayal of other sites. At least in a partial manner, digital storytelling restores a liberatory possibility of responding to the spectacle with (not for) others and of interrupting expected accounts of this particular place.

Educator Parker Palmer contends that teaching and learning spaces “should honor the ‘little stories’ of the students and the ‘big stories’ of the disciplines and traditions” (1998, p. 74). To date, the big story of international education has been overwhelmingly constructed by the American side – polarizing the “us” (sending schools, site staff, even if native; students) and the “them” (local community members, local universities, local sites). The students’ “little stories” created during this short program inject the personal, the Other, the anomalous and the contradictory into the would-be fixed narrative that higher

education tells itself about forming global citizens and internationalizing the curriculum. More importantly, the stories opened a way for local community members to insert their own voices into the representing process. The stories thus interrupt, intervening in the gaps between catalogues, news media and tourist propaganda to inject energy back into representations of place.

John Hartley notes that “Digital stories are simple but disciplined, like a sonnet or haiku, and anyone can learn how to make them” (2008, p. 197). While catalogues must concern themselves with truth in advertising, showing images of what is guaranteed to be experienced, these Mexican haikus of daily life in Guanajuato highlight the fact that there are other equally important truths within the ephemeral, quirky and individual encounters that infuse a place with intense emotion and meaning. Undeniably, digital storytelling affords us one way to ensure that students will have counter-catalogic experiences filled with little stories of their own encounters with people and places.

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