University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Organization and School Leadership Faculty Publications and Presentations

College of Education and P-16 Integration

2008

"Young man, turn that camera on"…Stories on cross cultural connections

Francisco Guajardo
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/org_fac

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

Recommended Citation

"Young man…turn that camera on…"

Stories on Cross-Cultural Connections

By Francisco Guajardo

<u>To Record, Or Not…</u>

As 20-some-year-old Chaney Bell sat across from an elder at the Flathead Reservation in rural western Montana, he fumbled through his gear--handling video cassettes, stripping a tripod out of its bag, and pulling out a digital video camera, microphone, and the obligatory headphones. He seemed nervous, exceedingly cautious, yet displayed a demeanor of great respect as he prepared to speak with a tribal elder. The source of Chaney's anxiety was the presence of the camera and other technology. Although the elder had agreed to be interviewed, Chaney wasn't certain whether the technology would be a distraction to the conversation, or whether that same equipment would be a symbol of disrespect to the elder or his stories, which Chaney so passionately wanted to capture on videotape.

Chaney's apprehension was rooted partly in history, which points to research as an invasive practice in indigenous communities. Smith (2002) and others have suggested that Native communities historically have viewed research as yet another strategy through which to extend the colonization process. On the other hand, Smith cited storytelling and oral history as decolonizing research methods through which indigenous people can own their own research and stories.

As he gathered the equipment, Chaney addressed his interviewee:

"Elder, may I have your permission to videotape this interview, because…"

Before Chaney completed his question, the elder interrupted, sensing young Chaney's anxiety, but also determined to make a point.

"Young man," he said, "you better turn that camera on because if you don't, my stories may die forever."

And with that, Chaney Bell began to document the stories of elders in Flathead.

<div align="center">The Context</div>

This story is about how Chaney Bell and members of other tribal communities across the country who have worked closely with the Llano Grande Center, a nonprofit organization based in Edcouch-Elsa High School in rural south Texas, in order to strengthen young people's storytelling ability through digital media. Our story is also about cross-cultural connections between the Center, which is operated largely by Latino youths and educators who live in a rural place along the Texas-Mexico border, and Native American communities from Flathead in Montana, Lummi in Washington, and Laguna in Eastern Cibola County, New Mexico. But the connections are also more expansive because they tend to be about youths and adults working together in respectful ways—and in a manner in which they purposefully reflect on issues of history, culture, identity, and power. These cross-cultural and cross- generational relationships were facilitated through a national leadership initiative called Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC), the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's earnest attempt to move leadership development from an individual-based model to a collective or community leadership framework.

The communities came together as participants in KLCC's first two sessions, which focused on teaching and learning, as well as youth-adult partnerships. As the early leadership development work unfolded in 2003, the Llano Grande Center strategically videotaped its work,

both locally and nationally, when the Center's leadership Fellows participated in national meetings. The Center used the video data for evaluation and program- development purposes. In addition, the Center produced edited videos to show conference participants the possibilities of using videos for reflection, evaluation, and teaching and learning opportunities. As youths and adults from Llano Grande produced these videos, which we call digital stories, participants from other KLCC communities expressed an interest in learning how to use video technology to produce their own digital stories. And so, the Llano Grande Center launched its digital-storytelling workshop series.

The origin of the Center's video work is found in its oral-history project initiated in the mid-1990s. As youths and teachers ventured into the community to engage elders in conversation, or as elders traveled to the local high school to share their personal narratives, the Center carefully video recorded these oral histories. The video work, however, is of secondary value. Of primary importance is building a relationship between youths and elders, and on learning from elders' life stories. The Center employed video recording to document these stories, but only after several years of collecting stories by using much more rudimentary technology, such as paper and pencil at first, then audio recording. But the faces of the elders were too compelling not to capture on video, and the grace, vigor, and stories they wore on their faces had to be recorded. The old technology could not capture those qualities; video could, so the Center purchased cameras and began to convert oral histories into digital stories.

The Center uses this technology to enhance its leadership-development work, which follows a model of participatory and collaborative processes. Contrary to the mainstream model of individual leadership practice and development, the Center operates on a collective-leadership model, in part because it allows more people to participate in decision-making and power-

sharing experiences, but also because collective leadership is much more consistent with the history and culture of our Latino community along the Texas-Mexico border. Our elders teach us through oral histories and through present-day conversations that families and relationships are central to how we build leaders in our communities. The individual leadership model, or the "Lone Ranger" model, as one elder called it, is not consistent with the history of our communities.

<div align="center">The Connections</div>

The Center began convening digital-storytelling workshops in south Texas during the summer of 2005, but it also organized training sessions at different sites across the country. Chaney and others from Flathead came to south Texas in 2005, but Fellows from other KLCC sites received training at their home sites. As these sessions developed, so did a strong cross-cultural connection between members of Native American communities and members of the Llano Grande Center, a community of people not traditionally viewed as indigenous.

As an organization informed by community- and family-based Latino epistemologies, the Llano Grande Center is anchored by its work on finding, cultivating, and celebrating personal, family, and community stories. To be sure, the people who populate the Center have undeniable indigenous roots, but those roots largely have been lost as a result of centuries of political displacement, immigration, and other historical forces. The identity of the Center is thus consistent with the Mexican immigrant and the Latino experience in the United States. Anzaldua's (1987) notion of the "lost" indigenous identity of Chicano(a) people is a direct product of a history of conquest, colonization, and oppression, particularly in the physical spaces along the "borderlands." In addition, many of the immigrant children who continue to populate schools along the border originate from indigenous communities in Mexico, although the

children and parents themselves are largely unaware of their indigenous roots. The historical forces of oppression, the persistent lack of knowing of one's origins, and the silencing of people and communities shape important parts of the Llano Grande Center's vision and work. Thus, the curricular focus on oral histories, place-based pedagogy, and digital stories is a strategic attempt to help youths and others cultivate a clearer sense of history, culture, and identity. Digital storytelling emerges from this teaching and learning spirit.

<u>A Sampling Of Stories</u>

One cool morning, 15-year-old Joseph sat in the back of a classroom in a Laguna Department of Education building. Llano Grande youths and teachers had traveled to the Laguna Reservation in the open lands of eastern New Mexico to deliver a digital-storytelling workshop. A typical Llano Grande team includes youths and adults working as co-trainers and co-creators. Adults take responsibility for youths, and youths understand that power is to be shared and negotiated in a respectful and democratic manner by adults and youths alike; this is a central tenet of the work of Llano Grande (Guajardo et al, 2006). On this morning on the reservation, Llano Grande staff found 10 eager participants ready to learn the art of digital storytelling. The eleventh, Joseph, presented a challenge. To be sure, the challenge did not appear rooted in cultural differences, i.e., Native versus Latino; rather, Joseph seemed more like a normal teenager who was not captivated by what seemed to him a traditional workshop.

"Joseph," asked one of the facilitators, "what story might you want to tell?"

"I don't know," responded Joseph disinterestedly.

"Well, what are your interests, what do you like to do?" continued the interviewer.

"I don't know," echoed Joseph.

"Hmmm," said the facilitator, at an apparent loss for words.

This pattern continued for a couple of minutes, with little or no apparent connection made between Joseph and the facilitator. Facilitators, both youths and adults, asked questions, but Joseph sat silently and without expression. But a turning point in the conversation occurred when the facilitator asked Joseph about his family. His response was rather mundane, but he perked up a bit. The facilitator then posed follow-up questions, which led to fuller responses, and soon thereafter Joseph was engaged. After 30 minutes of exploration, Joseph had his story, and he went on to produce an emotionally riveting digital story that featured at least a dozen immediate family members who had fought in foreign wars for the United States of America.

"My Uncle Frank," he said, "served in Vietnam, but I don't know much about his stories. But my grandma does . . . maybe we can go talk to her."

So off we went, in a borrowed van, to Joseph's 93-year-old grandmother's house on the Laguna Reservation. The conversation with his grandmother was a historic event--for Joseph, for the accompanying guests, and for Uncle Frank, whom Grandma summoned to her house some time during the second hour of the visit. The emotional intensity heightened when Uncle Frank arrived, as he expressed both joy and great pain in reliving his Vietnam stories.

Joseph produced a beautiful digital story that he titled "Native Americans in War," and he did it by initiating conversations with his grandmother, his uncle, and others as he explored the family narrative deeply and authentically. Although he initially appeared isolated, Joseph emerged as an engaged listener and processor of stories. Collective leadership development is fundamentally connected to the conversations and to the process of people working and building together, as opposed to the individual leadership model in which the leader is more apt to create

and act by him/herself. Joseph exemplifies the emergence of collective leadership, grounded in conversation and community, and creating together.

The last report we heard at the Llano Grande Center is that Joseph is interested in pursuing a film career.

Other stories produced by youths from the local middle school addressed issues that appeared to be of great urgency to them. As they conducted research for their stories, they interviewed the school principal and selected teachers, and crafted then their own narratives to complement the voices of interviewees. The stories had an impact. They alerted school leaders, who feared the digital stories' going public, to think more deeply about issues such as discipline, more responsive teaching, and the need for greater youth voice in the school. The youths succeeded in raising awareness, while they built storytelling, technology, and advocacy skills. The middle school storytellers worked collaboratively to produce their story. Rather than the single moviemaker producing a story that alarms an intended audience, this group of youths worked together, built skills together, and approached the school principal together. In that process, they felt more supported as their collective leadership behavior took shape.

Other digital storytellers produced pieces that were equally important. A group from the Lummi Reservation told the story of the Cedar Project in the lush timber region of northern Washington state, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, where nature, tradition, and spirit intersect in ways that celebrate the past, the present, and the future. Yet another Lummi group featured the symbolic value and vitality of the totem pole. The Lummi work around digital storytelling, and storytelling in general, offers a compelling example of how youths and adult members of a community have come to share power. Through a commitment to explore the roles of youths in leadership roles on the reservation, Lummi elders have modeled exceptional power-sharing

behavior, and in so doing have enlisted the talents and energies of emerging youth leaders. The digital-storytelling exercises were but one mode through which this relationship was manifested. The formation of collective leadership development is on display on the Lummi Reservation, and the stories of that kind of leadership will continue to emerge. Indeed, there is no shortage of stories emanating from Flathead, Laguna, and Lummi.

<center>Making Cross-Cultural Connections</center>

The purpose of the Llano Grande Center's digital-storytelling workshop was to probe our new friends from tribal communities—to challenge them to tell their stories through a distinctly digital mode. The work began years ago by focusing on personal storytelling for identify formation, and it has since evolved into storytelling for collective leadership for community change. Beyond that, the work has allowed one largely Latino community located along the Texas-Mexico border to build deep cross-cultural connections with Native American communities across the country.

The epistemologies that inform Llano Grande's leadership-development work are shaped by *platicas*, or dialogues, as well as by the stories youth researchers and teachers collect and put to use. This dialogical and storytelling method, which is consistent with Smith's decolonizing methodologies, finds a deep degree of compatibility in the leadership-development work of Native American communities, such as Chaney's. The conversational and storytelling modes emerge as a centerpiece of collective-leadership formation, and begin to define a leadership model dependent on groups of people engaging in *platicas* as a foundational part of this brand of leadership for community change (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004).

The Llano Grande Center finds connection and affinity with the groundedness and richness of Native cultures. Moreover, as historian Rodolfo Acuña (1987) suggested, the history

<center>8</center>

of Mexican American people in the United States is one of conquest and colonization—two historical processes that have plagued Native communities most profoundly. In this socio-historical context, honor, respect, value for elders, family, land, spirituality, and the narrative form are important qualities shared by Native communities and those who work with the Llano Grande Center. They are qualities essential for the healthy development and existence of Latino families and Native American communities alike. Indeed, they may be essential for the healthy development of all human groups.

<div align="center">Closing Reflection</div>

"Thank you, young man. Thank you for recording this. It's a good way to make sure my stories, and the stories of other elders, stay alive," said the elder to Chaney.

"It is my privilege," said Chaney, "I take this very seriously. And thank you for helping me keep your stories."

References

Acuña, R. (1988). *Occupied America: A history of Chicanos*. New York: Harper
& Row.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Guajardo, F., Perez, D., Ozuna, J., Guajardo, M., & Davila, E.; Casaperalta, N. (2006, October-December). Youth voice and the Llano Grande Center." *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. 9(4), pp #.

Guajardo, F., & Guajardo, M. (2004, Fall). "The impact of brown on the brown of South Texas: A micropolitical perspective on the education of Mexican Americans in a

rural South Texas community." *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(3), 501-

526.

Smith, L. (2002). *Decolonizing methodologies : Research and indigenous peoples*.

London : Zed Books.