

“Space to be heard”: Facilitating, researching, and documenting digital storytelling in a church summer program

Abstract: Youth development work within and beyond religious settings should honor and engage the experiences participants bring with them, as well as the directions they wish to take their learning. This paper presents such an approach to using digital storytelling to foster healthy identity development. I illustrate and analyze a mini-ethnographic project conducted during a weeklong storytelling experience at the summer program of a Mainline Protestant congregation in a primarily Latinx northeastern suburb. I show that for these three participants, explicit, agentic self-reflection was mediated significantly by the sociotechnical affordances of digital storytelling and the sociocultural structures of the summer camp itself. The resulting identity work clarified and deepened the participants’ understanding of the role of the camp in their development and the contributions they have made to this dynamic community.

Background & Motivation

In a 2017 blog post, social justice education scholar Jamilah Lyiscott warns readers against a harmful framing for much youth development work. After sharing an anecdote about a “savior complex” conversation with a white educator who congratulated Lyiscott for “giv[ing] so many young people voice,” she unpacks the exchange:

We did not give them a voice. What we gave them was space to be heard. Students navigate powerful spaces of learning every single day in their homes and communities. Especially when it comes to students of color, the skills, experiences, and rich knowledges that shape their voices are devalued in the classroom, but are still powerful and have absolutely nothing to do with our “salvation.” (Lyiscott, 2017, n.p.)

In the midst of our everyday religious education practices, it is easy to make similar mistakes. Like our colleagues in K-12 and higher education, we too easily undervalue the life experience of the people we serve, especially young people (Bunge, 2008). In Mainline Protestant denominations like mine, we often center the particular religious and cultural practices of Christians who are middle-class, suburban, and white (e.g., Aelabouni, 2018). And none of us is immune to the tendency to overlook the developmental objective of forming healthy relationships with God, neighbor, and self in favor of the content of our traditions, as if it were the content and not the relationships that are life-giving (Root, 2013).

Mary Hess (2011, 2012, 2014, 2018) has made the case to religious education researchers and practitioners that digital storytelling (see Lambert, 2012) represents a promising activity for supporting healthy religious identity development in a changing and diverse society. Digital storytelling takes the everyday and the extraordinary life experiences of participants as a starting-point for self-reflective and self-authored meaning making. At the same time, it is a practice conducted in small groups of fellow storytellers. As such, we can understand it as

contributing to what Hess elsewhere calls a “community of communities” approach to religious education (2017, p. 35), one that asks some urgent questions of how we approach our work:

Can we embody religious education that educates within and for specific religious communities, but also and concurrently with and for people who are not part of religious communities? ... I fear that until and unless religious communities can communicate – in all the rich senses of that word – our integral and inextricable commitments to relationship across, among, within, between and amidst various kinds of difference, we will lose even more ground (2016, p. 1)

Digital storytelling cultivates relationship across difference by convening what Luttrell calls “audiencings” (2010, pp. 227–229) and what Ackermann calls “conversation with artifacts,” during which “[p]eople learn by switching roles from being producers to being critics, from being actors to being audiences, from holding the stage to moving into the background” (p. 4). It’s a powerful experience to move back and forth between creator and audience. This role flexibility is especially important to a genre that incorporates the semiotic affordances of collaging and remixing. Even in the process of “writing” our own multimodal texts, we are constantly “reading” potential constituent components (photographs, musical selections, etc.) that we and sometimes others have produced in times and places both immediate and distant to the present storymaking in progress. Digital storytelling is a space to be heard and a space to hear—and hopefully also to be understood and to understand.

I have recently situated Hess’s proposal alongside related work in the K-12 literature that takes up the challenge of cultivating an ethic of cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2008; Hansen, 2017) through an assortment of creative literacy practices (Oliver, 2018). These projects (e.g., Hull & Stornaiulo, 2014; Vasudevan, Kerr, Hibbert, Fernandez, & Park, 2014; Choo, 2018; relatedly Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2015) share with Hess a sophisticated understanding of the ways that personal narrative, multimodal design, and community-based authoring and performance serve to scaffold the sociocultural dynamics of self-reflection, identity negotiation, and empathy, in diverse communities and settings. Digital storytelling offers participants regular and structured opportunities to, in Hansen’s words, “hold their various cultural roots in one hand ... and any number of new possibilities in the other hand, with these possibilities triggered for them both by the curriculum and by the constant stimulation of their peers’ ways of responding to the curriculum and to what might be called the quite miraculous experience of being together day after day after day” (2017, p. 215). The present study seeks to examine that miracle, bringing digital storytelling practices to bear in and on the collective exercise of care, belonging, and “being together” that happens at a church-run summer camp.

Partly due to Hess’s influence, there is also a growing *religious* literature—practitioner-oriented, researcher-oriented, and sometimes both—responding in various ways to the promise of digital storytelling (McQuiston, 2007; Kaare & Lundby, 2008; Hess & Clark, 2011; Clark & Dierberg, 2013; Fentress-Williams & Williams-Duncan, 2015; Oliver, 2017; BimBam, 2018). This and other creative practices can help faith leaders convene diverse, inclusive learning spaces. As such, they become all the more appealing in light of the rapid changes taking place in U.S. religious affiliation and practice (Putnam, 2000; Putnam &

Campbell, 2010; Drescher, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018), as well as—consequently and additionally—in religious education (see Foster, 2012; Roberto, 2015; Avni, 2017; Root, 2017).

Against this backdrop of change and uncertainty, I believe religious educators serving in congregations will increasingly need to adopt pedagogical modes and models already quite familiar to many who teach in diverse religious schools. To speak only for my Christian tradition: When religious diversity is a given and when interest in (church-as-)institutional programs and (belief-as-)institutional belonging are waning, Christian education can remain vital by expanding the scope of who and how we serve.

For educators committed to particular traditions, this will often mean a shift in orientation from “teaching for commitment” to “teaching from commitment” (Tan, 2009, p. 209). Such a decision does not necessarily represent a retreat from what I would want to call “proclamation” over “exposition”; indeed, an educator who explicitly acknowledges and makes space for the diverse perspectives of multiple storytellers—nurturing the freedom to make meaning according to whatever beliefs and values they bring to the work—may paradoxically find those storytellers more genuinely curious about the teacher’s own perspectives and commitments. At any rate, there will be more opportunities to support the healthy personal development of more learners—and a humane societal understanding of religious traditions—if researchers and practitioners embrace a variety of settings both within and beyond religious communities. Of course, each setting will have its own limitations and opportunities with respect to the enactment of the content of particular faith traditions.

The present work is my first attempt to facilitate and represent the digital storytelling experience with a small community of learners in a faith-adjacent setting. My intention was to trust the meaning-making power of this activity and be alert to a variety of ways in which religious education would happen—at least implicitly. Thus, this paper reports on a short ethnographic study of a digital storytelling project conducted as part of a church-run, non-sectarian summer camp. I facilitated the weeklong experience with a group of three first-year counselors, all rising ninth graders and all children of Latinx immigrant parents. The prompt was simply to “tell a personal story about a meaningful experience in your life.”

The young people chose to collaborate on a piece about how their roles in and experience of the summer camp had changed over the years. Drawing on analyses of field notes, recorded and transcribed conversations and voice memos, and the participants’ multimodal artifacts, I examine the learning experience with particular attention to the dynamics of our co-creativity in shaping both the space and the media we made together. I show that for these three participants, explicit, agentic¹ self-reflection was mediated significantly by the sociotechnical affordances of digital storytelling² and the sociocultural structures of the summer camp itself³. The resulting identity work clarified and deepened the participants’ understanding of the role of the camp in their development and the contributions they have made to this dynamic community.

¹ Defined by Lewis and Moje as “strategic making and remaking of selves; identities; activities; relationships; cultural tools and resources; histories” (2003, p. 1985).

² E.g., taking and discussing photographs in light of both personal experience and the intended message of a collaboratively authored video.

³ E.g., a campwide valuing of collaborative performance as both everyday activity and culminating experience.

Context and Participants

St. Sebastian's⁴ is a mainline Protestant church in Woodfield, a primarily Latinx immigrant community in a northeastern U.S. metropolitan area. The church is located near a major commuter rail line, providing access to both the city center and the neighboring suburbs where many Woodfield residents work in service industries. St. Sebastian's is a primarily Spanish-speaking congregation. Most adult congregants are immigrants from Central and South America. Most of the congregation's children were born in the U.S. and speak both English and Spanish. Each year, the church runs a summer-long, non-religious day camp for children in nearby communities. Approximately one quarter of campers' families attend services and other events at St. Sebastian's.

Most campers and counselors have a Latinx background, and camp is conducted in both English and Spanish according to the needs of the moment and the skills and preferences of the people involved in a given activity. These include outdoor recreation (daily at a Woodfield city park and weekly at a nearby beach), music, art, karate, indoor games, summer homework help, and—increasingly as the session progresses—group performance practice. The camp culminates in a weeknight performance for parents and relatives in which most campers participate in choreographed dances set to both U.S. and Latin American pop music.

I became acquainted with St. Sebastian's as a clergy colleague of the pastors there, and as an occasional volunteer in the church's religious education programming over the course of about three years. When I began looking for a faith or faith-adjacent field site to pilot my participatory ethnographic approach to studying digital storytelling, I reached out to the camp director, Denise. She agreed to have the camp host the project, pending the approval of a second volunteer instructor. Penelope is an area filmmaker and educator who had already signed on as a partner to work a couple times per week with the six counselors-in-training to produce a documentary about the camp. After a couple of conversations, Penelope and I agreed to work separately with our distinct groups but with some common production tools and some mutual facilitation support when we each were available to help the other.

Together Denise and I identified five potential participants: four girls and one boy, two of them rising eighth graders (therefore counselors-in-training) and three of them rising ninth graders (first-year counselors). The three ninth graders (Veronica, Dylan, and Lauren) assented to participate. Dylan and Lauren are cousins; Dylan's parents immigrated from Guatemala, Lauren's, from Guatemala and Argentina. Veronica's parents, now divorced, immigrated from Peru. All three young people were previously known to me. The four of us spent part of four afternoons on the project, about twelve hours total. I also attended the daylong Wednesday field trip during the week of the study (week four of seven) as well as the end-of-camp talent show several weeks later.

Methodological & Theoretical Frames

I locate this research in the tradition of multimodal ethnography (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016) identified by Wissman, Staples, Vasudevan, and Nichols (2015) as *research*

⁴ All person and place names are pseudonyms. Most were assigned by me; two of the three study participants elected to choose their own.

pedagogies. The aim of multimodal ethnography is to use the theoretical tools of social semiotics in order to “make visible the cultural and social practices of a particular community” (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016, p. 132). This process often involves collecting, producing, and discussing a wide range of artifacts, often including sketches, photographs, and text- or audio-based journals and sometimes a more general sampling from the material culture of participants’ lifeworlds (e.g., Pahl, 2006). The goal of these conversations with and around artifacts is to surface the deeply personal meanings participants create and leverage with them.

Incorporating digital storytelling into this methodology is powerful because the researcher gets a first-hand view and explanations of practices common to the setting while at the same time the participants encode them, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, into their story. In their important study of digital storytelling in a community technology center in West Oakland, Hull and Katz (2006) discuss Bruner’s narrative research on autobiographical storytelling and how it is shot through with “thickly agentive” turning points (Bruner, 1994, p. 50). For Taylor, the turning point is the “strong experience” that occasions the story in the first place and shapes the tellers’ and hearers’ conclusions about its meaning (2016, p. 308). For Ricœur, the turning point is the interpretive key to how a diachronic account holds together and proves “productive” for author and audience (1991, p. 7). For Lambert, it is the “moment” we search for in the story circle and scripting process—and around which meanings will solidify and story arcs will pivot (2012, pp. 59–60). In short, thick description of the digital storytelling process is likely to yield significant insights into the personal meanings of both the events that have shaped the storyteller’s life and experience as well as the media representations storytellers create and appropriate in order to “emplot” (Ricœur, 1991) those meanings. Thus, the convergence of multimodal ethnography and digital storytelling allows for rich forms of triangulation and interpretation.

Within multimodal ethnography, Wissman and colleagues’ research pedagogies framework interrogates the possibilities made present when the ethnographic site(s) are simultaneously research spaces *and* teaching spaces. These scholars describe the approach according to three “grounding dimensions of inquiry” (2015, p. 188): created spaces, engaged participation, and embodied inquiry. The significance of (co-)created spaces springs from Wissman and colleagues’ conviction that adolescent literacy practices develop both “within and outside institutional boundaries” (2015, p. 189). A created space can cordon off or “huddle in” an informal learning experience within an otherwise formal one, or vice versa, or it can connect an experience that spans multiple physical, virtual, or hybrid locations. I take these researchers’ rejection of any assumed primacy of formal schooling settings for understanding literacy practices as analogous to my own desire to privilege understandings of meaning-making that may extend beyond the boundaries of institutional religion (e.g., McGuire, 2008; Campbell, 2012; Drescher, 2016).

Engaged participation means that “youth and adults are guided by aims that are emergent and negotiated” (2015, p. 189). Thus, part of how this approach to teaching and research creates “space to be heard” is through a principled commitment to the young people’s autonomy⁵ in determining the scope and priorities of the activity. Finally, these researchers take *embodied inquiry* to “refer to how the realignment of roles and responsibilities, and redistribution of

⁵ Their autonomy is significant but still contingent, obviously. On navigating the inevitable power differentials in youth media, see also Chavez and Soep’s work on a pedagogy of collegiality (2005).

materiality within a space, substantively changes the nature of the inquiry that can occur” (2015, p. 189). Throughout the present study, there is ample opportunity to notice and learn from the apparent meanings and outcomes of the role-flexibility of the participants, the researcher, and various authority figures in and around the camp.

These three “grounding dimensions” spring from the influence on the research pedagogies framework of a broader movement to “spatialize” both literacies research and practice (Sheehy & Leander, 2004) and critical understandings of education more broadly (e.g., Morgan, 2000; Gulson & Symes, 2007). Especially influential in this movement is the work of postmodern geographer Edward Soja, who developed the notion of Thirdspace from the trialectic spatiality of French theoretician Henri Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, space is produced by sociality. Social practice enables and coordinates (1) perceived or material space, (2) conceived or imagined space, and (3) a binary-disrupting, distinct-but-also-encompassing lived space (Soja, 1996). Spatialized studies of literacy practices have examined the social production and function of Thirdspaces in various contexts, such as the hybrid “space between inside and outside” created by people in prison as a site of identity performance and resistance (Wilson, 2004, p. 74).

I have found the the Thirdspace concept useful for understanding the complexly spatialized dynamics of the present study. In particular, I want to focus attention on the ways that the material, imagined, and lived dimensions of the St. Sebastian’s summer camp were interwoven with those of our temporary, negotiated space of teaching, learning, improvisation, and research. What we experienced and documented in the course of this study was a kind of hybridized Thirdspace shaped significantly by both of these overlapping social endeavors: the “camp-ing” and the storytelling. A flexible and shifting gaze between the two should protect us somewhat from “the interpretive loss experienced when a context of literacy practice is considered to be background to the situated practices happening within it” (Sheehy & Leander, 2004, p. 3). As we shall shortly see, there was no way to ignore the challenges and opportunities the camp context created for the storytelling practice.

Before we examine in earnest “the story of the story,” there is one last bit of interlocking methodological and theoretical machinery to discuss, and that regards the question of whether and how this experience—and this study—represents religious education per se. In a time when the conditions are waning for robust, congregation-based, schooling-model religious education programming⁶ (see Foster, 2012), I have followed in the footsteps of many wise colleagues⁷ returning for guidance to the vision of Maria Harris’s *Fashion Me A People*.

For Harris, and in her Christian setting, the pastoral and educational vocation of the Church is embodied by five “curricula” in the broadest and richest sense of that word: *koinonia* (community), *leiturgia* (prayer), *didache* (teaching), *kerygma* (proclamation), and *diakonia* (service). Harris calls for us to “consistently distinguish between the curriculum of schooling and the curriculum of education” (1989, p. 64), that is, to acknowledge that the people of God are formed not only or primarily by the curriculum of Sunday school or adult formation classes but by the integrated experience of living (and participating) as the people of God. However, there’s

⁶ Here I have sometimes used the shorthand “Sunday school as we know it,” though this is admittedly an oversimplification. Also, lamenting robust faith formation infrastructure is not the same as glorifying the original model, about which so many religious educators have significant reservations.

⁷ Foremost among them Lisa Kimball and Dorothy Linthicum of Virginia Theological Seminary and John Roberto of LifelongFaith Associates.

a significant trap involved in this faith-forming ethos, one with its own often-unnoticed gravitational pull:

forms of education other than schooling ... often become the null curriculum. They are left out of our concepts and understandings. Or, at best, they are left implicit, not spoken of or paid attention as part of the educational process. (Harris, 1989, p. 69)

It's well and good to trust that "lex orandi, lex credendi" (roughly: praying shapes believing) and that everyday experiences of belonging and serving form us as disciples. But if religious educators don't help learners *reflect* on how liturgy and private prayers, and how the experience of receiving and offering hospitality, are helping to form their faith—if we don't create explicit opportunities for noticing and claiming these connections—the potential for genuine transformation is limited.

My final observation regards the "explicitness" and "implicitness" at work in our weeklong experience. Since this was a non-sectarian camp, the extent to which any of our shared activity could be explicitly theological was limited. Still, Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica are members of the St. Sebastian's congregation and have at times experienced me, (some) other camp authority figures, and the church grounds in the midst of religious activity. Furthermore, the digital storytelling process made *quite* explicit the participants' understandings of themes and categories (belonging, care, hospitality, etc.) that religious educators know to be relevant to theological formation.⁸ Even though the limitations on our conversation did not allow us to explicitly address "the divine dimension" of their learning, I am nevertheless convinced that "the reign of God was at hand" in the camp around us and in our meaning-making conversations and storytelling. I hope that we planted seeds for such an understanding to develop as they do—and as further opportunities for more explicit theological reflection surface in more appropriate contexts. I believe the explicit meaning making that does surface in the story that follows demonstrates the power of digital storytelling and other creative practices to provide integrative experiences across the settings and the curricula of religious education.

The Story of the Story

As one way of registering the impact of the digital storytelling process on our time together, I will structure this account around a series of turning points. This first of these quite literally occasioned Dylan, Lauren, and Veronica's artifact, and all of them shape my interpretation of our experience together. Although I realize ethnographies of this kind (and length) are not especially common in REA discourse, I also believe that having a relatively detailed account of the project on record will be useful to those considering trying digital storytelling in their own settings.

⁸ Even in a more traditional (i.e., congregational) religious education setting, participants in Kaare and Lundby's study nevertheless focused their stories on "existential themes like dreams for the future, joy, curiosity, friendship, and love" (2008, p. 115).

Getting to Yes—and to the Sprinklers: Negotiating the project’s scope and focus

I noticed a momentary hesitation when I walked into camp director Denise’s office an hour or so before lunch on Monday morning. She asked me if I wanted to get started now, because “some of them would get wet” this afternoon. Somewhat confused, I told her I had some setup to do and asked if we were still OK to start the workshop after lunch as we had planned. She said that would be fine. I didn’t know it yet, but this missed cue on my part set the camp’s rhythms and structures on a collision course with what I was still thinking of as our digital storytelling *workshop*. (Later that day, Lauren would tell me that, due to weather, the day’s typical schedule had been flipped, with structured indoor activities in the morning and outdoor recreation time—today, playing in the sprinklers—in the afternoon.)

After some setup, some lunch, and a complex gathering, the five young people joined Penelope and I in the conference room. Although I had positioned the high-backed, faux-leather chairs evenly around the long conference table and set up my stuff in the center rather than either “head” of the table, they rearranged the chairs without prompting and all sat down opposite opposite Penelope and me. Dylan remarked as he sat down that it felt “like an interview.” I welcomed and thanked the young people and explained what I hoped we could do together this week. Already sensing that the schedule Denise and I had discussed might not be realistic, I elected to skip the “warm-up” activity I had planned.

Instead, I began my brief introduction to digital storytelling, which culminated in an audiencing, as a multimodal “mentor text” (Gainer, 2013), of *Las Abuelas* (Vigran, 2012). This Storycenter-facilitated video about food and family is almost always what I use when introducing people to the genre. The story is vivid and transporting yet technologically unremarkable; it raises questions of culture and identity in an explicit but approachable way; Vigran’s voiceover is expressive but not overly affected; and the story’s turning point represents a straightforward breakthrough in personal understanding. In short, I show this story because I have found it to be accessible in a variety of settings.

We then came to our first turning point. I wasn’t yet “rolling tape” on our conversation, because the young people had not yet assented to participate in the study. My field notes pick up the story:

I asked if any of them might have a story of their own they might want to share in this style. There was a lot of silence. Eventually Veronica said that there was the story of being inspired by her parents coming here as immigrants. ... I asked about other possible “big moments” in people’s lives and didn’t get much of a response. When I probed a little bit, they reluctantly admitted that they weren’t really very interested in doing a story in this style, with Veronica the first to say that, and Dylan agreeing ... When I asked why there wasn’t a lot of enthusiasm about this idea, Veronica volunteered that it [*Las Abuelas*] was a very emotional story. I asked if that seemed like kind of an intimidating thing to make and she said yes. I asked if making a more fun or less personal story might be better, and she said that there wouldn’t really be much point then.

We sat for a moment of excruciating silence (“well that was awkward” were Penelope’s first words after the end of the session) while my facilitation planning shifted more fully into an

improvisational mode (Vasudevan et al., 2014; Wissman et al., 2015) to try and negotiate a way forward.

I asked a quick series of “pivot”-al questions seeking buy-in: Would they perhaps be willing to at least *start* the process to see if they liked it? (Noncommittal looks all around.) Would it perhaps be best for us to begin in earnest tomorrow so they wouldn’t miss sprinkler time today? (Some nods.) Would it perhaps be more fun to work on a story together rather than each producing one? (Some further perking up.) Might *camp* be a fitting topic for a shared story? (Verbal confirmations now.) This last question was inspired in part by earlier comments made by Veronica: (1) that “the church is really like a home” for her, (2) that she’s “been a part of this camp for for six or seven years,” and (3) that camp “felt a lot different this year” because of their increased responsibilities. (Elliot, one of the pastors at St. Sebastian’s, had told me earlier that Veronica had said something similar to the third comment the previous week.) The picture that was beginning to emerge here was that the camp is a locus of both meaning and enthusiasm for this group. In retrospect, it’s unsurprising that the opportunity to tell a story about camp is what turned the tide in our conversations.

By the end of this conversation, Veronica, Lauren, and Dylan said they were willing to participate in at least starting a group-authored story about the camp experience. Sofia and Katherine, the two counselors in training, who were both already participating in Penelope’s documentary film project, opted out. I asked the participants to be sure to get some photographs of the sprinkler play and any other scenes they thought would help tell the story of the camp, and now they seemed genuinely excited. They headed outside, and Penelope and I turned on the recorder to capture our first impressions.



Figure 1. Outdoor sprinkler time on Monday. Photo by Dylan, shortly after the session recounted here.⁹

Our conversation and my subsequent analysis turned up three important insights that shape my understanding of what happened in this session. The first involves the challenge of

⁹ In this and subsequent photos, I have sometimes strategically cropped and blurred photos to obscure faces and locations.

creating a space, within the camp experience, to do the work of digital storytelling. From Dylan's comment about the gathering feeling "like an interview" to the obvious tension between the timing of our session and the day's major fun activity to the complexity of Veronica's feelings about the changing experience of the camp given their new role, it seemed clear to Penelope and I that setting up the digital storytelling experience as a separate workshop removed from the camp's rhythms, locales, and pervasive spirit of fun was unlikely to be appealing to the group.

We saw evidence in support of this interpretation in the participants' increased interest in telling a story as a group (there are no solitary activities at camp) and especially in having the topic of the video be the camp itself. Although the hybrid space we would carve out together would necessarily involve some separation from the counselors' regular responsibilities,¹⁰ I endeavored from this point forward to look for ways to let the digital storytelling experience *deepen* the participants' experience of camp rather than, as it likely felt in this session, cutting them off from it. I later realized that this model of digital storytelling as embedded documentary is consistent with Harris's call (1989) to create opportunities for reflection on our faith-forming experiences while we are in the midst of them.

Still, some discontinuity between the noise and everyday fun of camp and the more reflective storytelling space may also have been important for the participants. It was quite striking to us that Veronica felt comfortable sharing with the group that she could relate to the *Las Abuelas* story because "all of us here are children of immigrants and our families went through a lot of pain and suffering." The pain and suffering of the immigrant experience as portrayed in this digital story is quite subtle. While Vigran reflects implicitly on the colonial history of California and explicitly on differences between her household experience and others', the overall tone of the piece is positive and reflects a pride and appreciation in the author's Latinx upbringing.

As we reflected on the moment through the lens of the "camp should be fun" ethos, we regretted that this mentor text audiencing, at least for Veronica, may have reinforced the "stress being put on immigrant families" or even participated in how "all aspects of Latino identity have been sort of non-consensually politicized in this moment" (Penelope, conversation transcript). It's certainly true that the tone of this part of our conversation and at other times when we discussed immigration was different than the tone during much of the rest of our time together. However, it's also true that St. Sebastian's holds immigration advocacy events with youth participation, and Denise had told me that this year at camp they planned to discuss "hard topics" like immigration and race. As the week went on, I believe the opportunity to reflect on their experience in the presence of peers and a supportive adult was helpful for our participants. Certainly it was clear that they were engaged in active reflection during these exchanges, including identifying and sharing their feelings and day-to-day coping strategies as well as learning to see both similarities and differences between their own families' experiences and their peers'.

Most of all, Veronica's contributions reinforced for me the importance of continuing to hold space for the young people's agency—to take our conversations and media making in the

¹⁰ The counselors work in redundant teams so that the ebb and flow of mandatory breaks, doctors appointments and other absences, etc. don't interfere with the staff's ability to safely supervise the children. That being said, the participants did tell me that they felt some pressure to return from our sessions in time to still be helpful to their teams in the afternoon.

directions that interested them and in which they felt as safe as possible. In this respect, I was later quite grateful that Katherine and Sofia had exercised their right not to participate in the study. Their decision highlighted the power I endeavored to share with the group. Indeed, Penelope helped me see how this “assent form moment” represented a rare opportunity for self-determination in the culture of the camp. She told me that the participants in her project, which is not formal research but simply another part of the official programming, hadn’t really been given a choice about participating. She said she sometimes struggled to motivate the young people in her group to participate. After our initial conversation, such struggles were rare with this group.

In short, I believe that from the earliest stages of the digital storytelling project, a clear ideological commitment to the process of negotiating its role and scope with the participants had an impact both on the product and on our co-created learning space. Although our Monday session underscored that this process isn’t easy, such negotiations may provide one possible approach to addressing the critique that camp¹¹ and church¹² are spaces of frustratingly limited agency for young people.

From Campers to Counselors: Representing camp and changing roles within in

I made several important changes to the style of our convening when we began on Tuesday. First, I got permission to gather our group in the seating area of Elliot’s office. It’s a much more comfortable and informal room for a group of our size, and we occasionally benefited from insight and friendly banter with the pastor. Second, following the word-for-word identical advice I’d gotten from both Penelope and Elliot (“make them feel special”), I got the group donuts. Third, since we had chosen the topic of our story on Monday, we got to begin the session with an informal conversation about their favorite topic: camp. This process roughly paralleled what Lambert calls the “story circle” in a digital storytelling workshop. During this component, participants share—usually individually—about the events and experiences they wish to represent in their stories, discovering insights for themselves and seeking feedback from the group (2012).

Right away, Veronica returned to a theme I was hearing for the third time now: that the experience of camp had changed this year. The conversation quickly turned to the new responsibilities they had now as counselors. Lauren spoke about the importance of being role

¹¹ Only 9% of campers surveyed (10% of white campers, 7% of nonwhite campers) in a large benchmark study commissioned by the American Camp Association reported optimal levels of opportunity for decision making at camp (e.g., “I get to decide what activities I’m going to do here”); just 2% of campers (white and nonwhite) reported optimal levels for leadership opportunities (e.g., “How often have you helped plan activities and events?”) (Thurber, 2006, p. 5).

¹² There was a telling characterization of differences in generational agency and buy-in at church by Dylan in our final conversation: *Kyle*: What would you think about doing a project like this in Sunday school? *Dylan*: I feel like it would be different. I don’t think we’d be talking about camp we’d be talking about like church and how if we like it. *Kyle*: Like if you like church? Okay. You think it would make a good video? *Dylan*: **Depends on the people who make it. If it was kids it’d probably be like “Oh I have to sit in the church listening to people at the altar and just sit there.** But if it would be like the parents it would be like “Oh, we’re talking about God, that’s helping me” (boldface mine for conceptual emphasis).

models for the kids. Veronica spoke about the responsibility of getting the children safely to the park. I asked if that sense of responsibility was a new feeling for them, but all three said it's a common responsibility from their family life, caring for siblings and cousins.

Both of these responsibilities, being a role model and attending to campers' safety, were represented for the participants by a photo Dylan had taken, which we started to call the "rules" photo (Figure 2). In it, Keith, the assistant director, speaks to campers about what rules they will need to follow before an activity can begin or continue. I had seen a similar rules session Monday after my conversation with Penelope, when I joined campers for an hour or two of observation. As our week together continued, I noticed that this photo in particular took on a placeholding role. There was a taken-for-granted understanding that *this* photo formally represented the rules/safety dimension of camp and that that dimension needed to be in the video.



Figure 2. Keith explains the rules before an activity, to keep everybody safe. Photo by Dylan.

This process of "audiencing" particularly meaningful photos for the group often proved fruitful. The first photo Lauren shared (Figure 3) became the jumping-off point for nuanced and concrete reflections on the emotional dimensions of what it means to be a counselor. It shows a camper, Juliet, reading a *Junie B. Jones* book. What's somewhat difficult to grasp spatially is that Juliet and Lauren are both up on the stage of the church's large multipurpose hall, and Juliet is actually leaning on Lauren's lap. When I asked if the two have a good relationship, Lauren told me that Juliet is new this year so she (Lauren) has been "sticking around her, like, helping her around."

This exchange immediately prompted both Lauren and Veronica to tell a story about a past counselor who played a similar role for them:

Veronica: I remember when I was a child ... in my first year here I was really nervous cuz I didn't know any of these people. And the first counselor in that time was Emma. ...

[S]he helped me out and I realized that she was a nice kind person so I got stuck to her, and, like, I'm a little upset that she left.

Elliot (pastor, from across the room): I know!

Lauren: My first encounter with Emma was at the park. I was on, like, this, like, little game and I needed someone to like spin me. So I was just sitting there bored and she, like, spoke to me in Spanish and she's like "Do you need help?" And I was like, yeah, but I was like so nervous just coming here for the first time.

This pattern was pretty common during our time together: a photo would occasion an explanation of some phenomenon of camp culture, often with the sharing of memories. Sometimes this “historical consciousness” merely took note of the way a particular tradition had developed. Other times, like this one, the photographs prompted a kind of an ethical reasoning I thought of as empathy-across-time. In this mode of reasoning about their current practices, the memory of having had a particular experience as a camper in the past affected the way they behave *toward* the campers as counselors today. As Pahl notes in her analysis of a different multimodal ethnography project: “Past selves are placed within the present as the ‘ensemble’ of resources is assembled” (2012, p. 212).



Figure 3. Lauren literally supporting Juliet, just as Emma had previously supported her. Photo by Lauren.

Like the rules photo, the picture of Lauren and Juliet became, at least for me and I think for the others, a kind of icon of what I started calling Lauren's "camp persona."¹³ After hearing another story or two painting this picture of Lauren as unofficial camp nurturer, I tried out the idea with her:

Kyle: I'm getting the sense that, like, that you are a very supportive person. Is that ... am I getting that right?

Lauren: My mom gets really mad about it too because she says I put others' needs before mine ... I'm just that type of person.

Dylan and Veronica also each had ideas about their own persona. Dylan described himself as someone who "usually do[es] what they tell [him] to do," lots of logistical support and literal heavy lifting. The group had a harder time pinning down the role Veronica plays:

Lauren: She's like the one that mostly, like ... I like think, like, the kids respect Veronica a lot, because she's like serious and everything. Because Veronica can be a fun type of person but when she's serious, she's serious. So she, like, gives directions and everything.

Kyle: How do I like tell the difference? How do I know if I'm with fun Veronica or serious Veronica?

Lauren: You can tell.

Veronica: You can really tell. Um, when I'm with the kids, I have fun with them. Like, for example, if one of them, like, we have a friend of ours that likes to talk a lot. And she comes and talks to us and I tell her, "Oh it's not the right time."

This confident role flexibility, and awareness of same, was very consistent with the emotional intelligence I'd noticed in Veronica throughout our brief time together—an ability to read the room, determine what kind of contribution would be helpful, step forward or step back as appropriate, and keep things moving. That ability proved increasingly important as our experience progressed, especially as we made the "final push" toward completing the story.

By now well into Tuesday afternoon, I was really getting to know the camp, and we were really getting to know each other. Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica had a conceptual shape for the story (I summarized it as "Campers to Counselors: The Movie"), and we had a plan for assembling our remaining materials. They were going to lead me on a walking tour of the camp, explaining to me what was happening in the different activities and taking photos that we would use in the video. They decided they wanted to start the story from a collection of photographs and put words to it afterward.

¹³ For a summary of the rich ways camp experiences support youth identity development, see Garst, Brown, and Bialeschki (2011). In particular, the authors discuss camp as a site both of identity revision and, for staff, of learning to honestly and confidently show forth one's "true self."

The day's turning point came at a literal "turn" in our tour. We were coming down the narrow hallway that leads from the art room to the homework room, and the assistant director, Keith, saw us coming. Wanting to minimize disruption and explain my presence as an unfamiliar adult hanging out with young people, I started to explain what we were up to. When I said to Keith, "They're giving me a tour," he replied with an observation I hadn't fully grasped myself: "Well it looks like you guys know what you're doing."

He was right. We had become a group, a well functioning one. The normally taciturn Dylan was giving detailed logistical narration, focusing on aspects of the camp experience he thought I might be interested in based on our afternoon's conversation.¹⁴ Lauren was using the opportunity of our meandering to catch up on the afternoon's goings-on, figuring out which groups were at which point in the rotation process. Veronica was quietly and efficiently snapping photographs. It didn't look like the "workshop" I had planned to facilitate. Still, almost without me realizing it, the group had "owned their insight," "owned their emotions," and found "the moment" (Lambert's steps 1–3). They were now confidently "seeing" their story (step 4) while continuing to acculturate me to the camp they'd spent the afternoon reflecting on. We had carved out for ourselves in the day-to-day life of St. Sebastian's Camp a hybrid identity as embedded digital storytellers, built a Thirdspace in and of the camp but also distinct from it. Not everyone at camp knew what that meant—yet—but they could see us living it. Best of all, by this point the young people were leading the way.

Assembly required: Adopting and resisting media and camp conventions

Lauren, Veronica, and even Dylan were more enthusiastic and talkative from the beginning when I gathered them on Thursday afternoon. We reviewed Tuesday's work and planned what we would do today. I passed out laptops for the first time. Not wanting to get bogged down in file transfers given our tight schedule, I'd preloaded all the photos the participants had taken thus far. We chatted more about camp as we looked at the photos they had assembled.

Since our learning space had come together around a conversational and improvisational process (and certainly not a workshop with delineated segments of instruction and solo work time), I embraced "teachable moments" when opportunities presented themselves. For example, when reviewing photos we came back to one portraying the "jok[ing] around" camp tradition of taking "baby pictures," in which male counselors pose in a way that makes them look pregnant:

Kyle: You said you like the rules photo and you like the baby picture photo.

Lauren: Yeah, because it shows how we like to joke around but at times when it's like a serious matter we're serious about it, so.

K: You know I was thinking about it ... that there's another ... you can look at it later but there's another photo of those same two guys and they're more serious. So like one thing you can do—

L: When they were just standing like that?

¹⁴ For example, when the hit game Fortnite came up in our conversation earlier, I expressed my ignorance and curiosity about the game and got a detailed demo, led by Dylan.

K: —yeah, so one thing you can do with a digital story is, like, put two things together, you know. Like, so if you're trying to say, like, “OK, sometimes we're silly and sometimes we're serious.”

L: Cuz I was like guys you want to get together for a picture? And they just stood there like that and I was like okay.

K: So you could do, like, you could show one of the pictures and then the other, or you could put them like next to each other. It depends on how you want to do. But that could be a cool thing.

And then the conversation moved on to another photograph. This is a very representative exchange. In the recording it's even clearer that I was floundering a bit as I introduced the idea, perhaps as I mentally debated about whether or not to use the technical term of *juxtaposition* in my description the technique. It's also not clear how actively Lauren was considering this design option or whether she was thinking more about the moment in which she took the photo.¹⁵ The serious photo and one of the “baby pictures” did both make the final video (see Figure 4), but they're temporally separated from each other. On the other hand, there are other moments of conceptual and temporal juxtaposition in the final piece. Notice that I finish the exchange as I did so many times, by reaffirming that I was just making suggestions. I think the participants tended to take me at my word when I repeatedly reinforced that these were their decisions to make.



¹⁵ This process of moving back and forth through time is, of course, one of the reasons digital storytelling is a helpful process for mediating reflection. However, that same phenomenon can occasionally make it difficult to stay on task.



Figure 4: Above, a “baby picture” screenshot from 0:15 in the final digital story (voiceover: “we still find a way to have fun while doing our job”). Below, its more serious partner photo from 0:57–0:59 (voiceover: seemingly unrelated).

After our review, they decided based on the rule of thumb I shared (from Lambert) that they might need a few more photos to support a complete 1–2 minute video. This necessitated a quick lesson in using AirDrop to send photos from their iPhones to the laptops, as they returned from various photo hunts. At first, Dylan took the lead on overseeing the transfer of images, but over the remainder of the experience he proved to be an effective coach of technical skills. By the end of the week everyone seemed comfortable transferring and cropping photos and making edits to the video.

The group came quite organically to the solution to the problem of imposing a structure on their collection of images. At one point, Dylan made the suggestion that they make the video “like a trailer,” dramatically impersonating a voiceover artist and saying “three kids, will join their camp, to unite ... their family. Duh duh duh.” He also mentioned that he knew iMovie allows you to make trailer. Lauren had stepped away to participate in a dance practice session, so Dylan and Veronica scrolled through and previewed a dozen or so of iMovie’s genre-based trailer templates. Along the way, they gave reasons why particular templates might work (e.g., Veronica: “We should do Family, because we’re basically like a family”). In the end, they chose Coming of Age, a good genre match given their major theme.

While as an educator and researcher interested in the semiotic affordances of multimodal storytelling I was somewhat disappointed the group chose to work from a template, the decision had two important advantages. Editorially, iMovie trailer templates have a “Storyboard” mode, which helped Veronica and Dylan begin to organize their photos conceptually. The first title screen in the main “Coming of Age” trailer template comes preloaded with the words “the story of a boy” followed by slots for inserting five still photographs to show the boy growing up. Dylan entered the phrase “camp generations” as new title text, and began to insert photos of camp participants increasing by age—a much beloved photo of one of the youngest campers, the one of Juliet reading on Lauren’s lap, and the counselors’ “baby picture” from Figure 4. This

choice established a pattern in which the participants inserted related photos into the storyboard, tried to identify a proper heading to describe them, and then iteratively adjusted heading and photo choice based on trial and error, conversation among themselves, and feedback from me and eventually others.

Logistically, the advantage of using the template was that it kept the process moving. Suddenly, they had a rough heuristic for judging how close the video was to done, and this helped build a sense of momentum. For a while it looked like they might be able to finish in time to audience their story at Friday morning's "fake" talent show, in which the counselors "show the kids that they shouldn't be nervous for their talent show." This possibility motivated them to continue working efficiently.

The turning point on Thursday happened pretty late in the day. Lauren had returned from her earlier dance practice; Veronica had returned from her later orthodontist appointment. All three had weighed in, done some editing, watched and discussed dozens of drafts. And then came this:

Dylan: Now all we need is our voices on there.

Lauren: I'm not putting my voice,

Veronica: No.

L: Because I feel like our voices will like ruin it.

D: But. But. we were supposed to record our voices.

L: I don't wanna do my voice. [...]

Kyle: I mean, you went with a template that has a lot of text included. So, I mean, I feel like that kinda helps you tell the story.

D: Eh.

L: Yeah.

D: I mean they're all like that.

L: Cuz it explains all the pictures too.

V: That's so true.

One challenging aspect of honoring the young people's autonomy was deciding how to advise them when they disagreed about how to continue. I decided that I wasn't going to try to steer them toward recording voiceover given Lauren and Veronica's apparent firmness here, especially since Dylan had had his editorial perspective well accounted for by being the most comfortable with the computer.

The conversation briefly turned to other concerns, and then someone went to get Denise to show her the (nearly) final product. Knowing that the young people valued her opinion, I probed a bit after her initial glowing reaction:

Kyle: Did you notice anything in particular?

Denise: Just how you guys captured everything, every aspect of it. We do do safety, we do have fun.

Lauren: Yeah.

D: That was cool.

L: I like it, it's nice.

D: So all you need is the CITs, right?

L: Yeah, just that one photo of the CITs.

V: Tomorrow in the morning, in the breakfast I
 L: Serving like lunch or something.
 D: OK.
 L: Cuz it's, like, mostly, like, a video of, like, our, like, experience going from, like, campers from, like, CITs to, like, counselors.
 D: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Mm hmm, that was cool, that's different, that was cool.
 L (*referencing computer screen*): So it's like camper.
 D: Mm hmm.
 L: CITs, counselors, and you guys, directors.
 D: OK OK OK, cool. That's fun.
 L: Yeah.
 K: I think you guys did awesome.
 D: You guys did a really good job.
 L: It was fun, I liked it.
 D: So they don't actually talk in the video?
 K: Well, we we were talking about that. That's up to—
 Elliot (*from across the room*): He wants them to.
 K: What's that?
 E: He wants them to.
 K: Oh, I, it's up to you guys. This is your video.
 D: Just because. Alright. Now that you guys are explaining it to me, it makes sense. Just watching the pictures ... I wouldn't have—like, ok, when you say camp generations, like, if you guys had been ... if you had said exactly what you just said, that would have just made it fit together for me in my mind. So think about adding just a little. You guys have pictures of yourselves already. Talking isn't, you know, it's just gonna make us understand, really, what the video is about.
 L: Yeah.
 K: You wouldn't need a lot of words words.
 D: Yeah, just sum it up.
 V: Mm kay.
 L: Yeah, ok.

From here I described a few options about how we could proceed: formally writing a script, playing the video and letting them improvise, doing interviews and then looking for representative quotations to isolate and edit in. I used provisional language (“you wanna try ...?”, “another thing we could do ...”) throughout. Eventually Denise cut in:

Denise: Yes, sorry, I'm gonna step out. Great job guys. Consider doing that. (*Leaves*)
 Kyle: Like, so tell me... do you just wanna be done, or you think it's gonna be hard to do the voice, or you think you really shouldn't do the voice?
 Lauren: I feel like in the very beginning we should say our experience from, like, campers to CIT to counselors ...
 K: Mm hmm.
 V: —has been an amazing experience, we look forward to more in the future ...
 L: We look forward to assisting this camp more in the, like, throughout the years.

K: Yeah, yeah, so you wanna just open up a word doc and just type some stuff up? I think you guys can do this. I think it'll be cool.

This moment seems to me an almost perfect encapsulation of the complex web of influence, mutual care, pride in work, and desire for approval that had formed in our co-created storytelling space within the rhythms and structures of camp. Veronica and Lauren wanted to be done, perhaps mostly for the sake of being done, and perhaps also to make it possible to screen the story at the “fake talent show” in the morning. However, the power of audience feedback is always strong, even more so when it comes from a beloved authority figure. And Elliot had added a crucial piece of context for Denise, knowing from observations and from conversations with me that I find scripting and voiceover to be powerful dimensions of this work but that I wasn't going to force them to do it.

Whose agency, whose design, whose *voice* does the final product represent? Primarily, still, the young people's. Although Lauren and Veronica were at first resistant to adding a final voiceover layer, I believe ultimately it was the content-based feedback from Denise that was the most important factor in their decision to move forward. We had clearly established that they loved this camp and that the “camp generations” journey was deeply meaningful to them. The group shared a commitment to getting a particular idea across, and they had just found out it didn't land as forcefully as they had hoped with an uninitiated audience. Having observed these three all week, having seen the respectful but not overly deferential way they interacted with Denise and Keith in ordinary moments, I am reasonably confident that if they hadn't felt compelled *by the desire to improve the story*, they would at least have put up a fight about having to do more work.

The role I tried to play in this moment was as mediator between two negotiating parties: the camp and church authorities (Denise and Elliot, respectively) and the storytelling authorities (Lauren, Veronica, and Dylan). I elaborated possible ways to follow up on Denise's suggestion, and when she left she mirrored my provisional language (“*Consider doing that*”). Notice finally that last leg of the negotiation led directly into the composition process—a process that unfolded remarkably quickly once it had started.¹⁶ The three of them basically talked it out, in the turn-taking manner suggested by the final lines of the previous transcript excerpt. Eventually they created three labels to describe where each snippet of voiceover should be inserted. This initial exchange and the period of fruitful work that followed represents a moment when everyone's interlocking role flexibility dynamically resolved to scaffold a sound conclusion that honored the integrity of the story and the storytellers.

After the script was complete, we moved immediately into recording. By now it was almost time for camp to end for the day. I had been using a handheld field recorder during our sessions throughout the week, but the group was more excited than I expected when I broke out a shotgun mic for better sound quality. Their enthusiastic reaction and playful engagement with the recording process made me rethink how I might motivate voiceover in the future, and it served as a reminder of the importance of research pedagogies' emphasis on redistributing not just authority but also materiality within the learning space. In retrospect, I associate this realization with the advice Penelope had given me early in the week, that the chance to work with special

¹⁶ The time from the moment when Denise asked if they were planning to record their voices to the point where we began recording was just twenty minutes.

equipment often had a motivating effect because it was “flashy” and “not elite but, like, glamorous”—that it was part of how to help participants “feel special.”



Figure 5: Veronica engineers the recording of Lauren’s voiceover.

The final script is reproduced in Table 1, along with details of how the young people overlaid the voiceover onto the 1 minute, 9 second trailer¹⁷ during the first hour or so of our session on Friday afternoon. While I regretted that we didn’t have time for the participants to choose more personally meaningful music,¹⁸ I was grateful that to add the voiceover we did have to convert the trailer into a regular iMovie project. This change allowed the young people to get a taste for the more finely detailed editing control that is possible in the digital storytelling process. For example, the group was (understandably) delighted that they could position Dylan’s voiceover so that the word “express yourself” in the recording corresponded perfectly to the “express yourself” title already present in the video.

Although a detailed multimodal analysis of the completed video is beyond the scope of this paper, notice in particular that Denise’s advice bore good fruit. Lauren’s portion of the voiceover makes more explicit the connection between the textual and photo elements that communicate their main idea, and Veronica’s portion extends the trajectory of this personal journey into the future. The middle section describes the camp experience more generally, including the experience of belonging and family that we had discussed so much on Tuesday. At the center of this portion—and of the video itself—is the idea I plan to take up in subsequent, more detailed analyses: “You are cared for, respected and you won’t be forgotten.” That could be the motto for more than just the camp and its role in these young people’s identity development. In my understanding, it summarizes the core vocation of St. Sebastian’s Church, especially in these days of brutal intimidation, deportations, and government conducted family separation.

¹⁷By the time of the presentation of this paper I will have produced a de-identified edit of the video for publishing online.

¹⁸ As an integral part of the talent show dances and a regular soundtrack in the art room, music is everywhere at camp. One reason I’m excited for the opportunity to tell this story elsewhere as a podcast rather than a paper is to let these and other sounds do more of the scene-setting.

Table 1: Final script of The Summer Camp by Lauren, Veronica, and Dylan

<i>Label: In the beginning Time: 0:10–0:25 Narrator: Lauren</i>
[on-screen title: “St. Sebastian Films”] we grew up at this camp, we’ve been attending it for 6-7 years. Now that we are counselors [title: “camp generations”] it’s a whole different experience we now have more responsibilities. But we still find a way to have fun while doing our job. From being playful campers, [title: “Family Bondings”] to c.i.t’s assisting this camp, to full-grown counselors helping our head counselors the responsibilities have grown along with us.
<i>Label: Before “express yourself” Time: 0:26–0:35 Narrator: Dylan</i>
At this camp there is something [title: “FUN!!!”] for everyone. You are cared for, respected and you won’t be forgotten. There’s always a way to [title: “express yourself!”] express yourself. [title: safety] [title: activities]
<i>Label: Before “our second home...” Time: 0:57–1:05 Narrator: Veronica</i>
[title: “our second home...”] Our experience from campers to c.i.t’s to counselors has been an amazing opportunity, we look forward to assisting this camp more years to come.

That line has opened up for me a new interpretation of what followed the completion of the project. Once the three had finished up their edits and re-screened the completed product for Denise¹⁹, they asked for permission to show it to the various camper groups individually. (Recall that they had narrowly missed their chance to include it at the “fake talent show.”) As I followed them through the spaces of the camp, watching them assertively request an audience over and over again, my first interpretation was to view these mobile screenings as a performance not unlike the talent show’s dances and karate demonstrations. V.D.L. (as they had identified themselves as directors in the credits) were digital storytellers. They had done good work, and they wanted their peers and their charges to see and appreciate their take on the journey of their involvement with this community. Remembering especially their “empathy-across-time” reflections from Tuesday, their implied message seemed to be “You too can become counselors someday.”

I think that was part of what was happening. But remembering also the sight of Veronica, Dylan, and Lauren shepherding the youngest campers around the screen, laughing along as little ones recognized the authors’ voices and sometimes even photos of themselves, it occurred to me that these screenings were also embodied acts of caring. The participants were still also *counselors*, still making sure everyone was in their proper place, still seeking to balance fun and

¹⁹ Her response: “I was able to understand it better, when you guys, like, had the voiceover. ... With the pictures, I didn’t know you guys felt that way ... I mean I don’t know, it could have been that you guys were counselors and you hated it: ‘I wish i was a camper again.’ But like just to explain the transformation for you guys. It gave me a different perspective. Cuz I didn’t have that transformation.”

seriousness from moment to moment. “You too are cared for and respected” was their secondary message. Perhaps in our final journey together through the camp, I wasn’t just watching troubadours. Perhaps, for a moment, they were itinerant pastors and preachers, bearing a contextually appropriate gospel of love and inclusion.



Figure 6: Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica, on the couch in Elliot’s office, being serious and silly. These are the opening and closing images in their story, respectively. Photo by me.

Final Reflections and Future Directions

I've attempted in this mini-ethnographic treatment of our digital storytelling experience to balance the descriptive with the analytical, the potential for insight and new knowledge with the potential to model and advocate for a particular way of orienting our work with young people in religious education. This choice corresponds to my belief that the existing digital storytelling literature, especially in the religious sphere, is insufficiently transparent about how the process unfolds. Filling this gap has the potential to (1) ground researchers' claims about outcomes in a concrete and detailed picture of how those outcomes may have come about, and (2) help other researchers and practitioners imagine and perhaps plan for how they might take up this activity with the people they serve. Moreover, my focus on how we carved out a space together within the larger structures and practices of camp has the theoretical value of foregrounding the interplay of the context with the practice and, I hope, inspiring creative thought in particular about ways to incorporate the practice as a mode of embedded reflection within some larger sphere of shared activity in faith and faith-adjacent settings.

I hope in my follow-up dissertation study to work with camp leadership partners to more substantially formalize the space for engaging the practice. While I value having had the opportunity to explore the complexities of building buy-in for the very idea of participating, we could have spent more time on different questions if digital storytelling had been one among many choices of natural camp activities (perhaps for a group of campers and counselors together?) rather than something campers had to “step away” from camp to participate in. I would also like to increase both the length of engagement relative to the length of camp and the total amount of time spent together.

Analytically, my next steps with the data from our experience is to focus more tightly on the themes that emerged from the big-picture work I've conducted in this paper. Regarding the culture of camp, I'm interested in the age- and role-differentiated practices of caring (cf. Lutrell, 2013), especially as they relate to campers' experiences in immigrant families and communities during a time of increased anti-immigrant sentiment. There is much that I have “seen” but not said about our discussions of immigration—purely from a concern for length—and doubtless even more that I have not yet seen. Regarding the mediation of the digital storytelling process in the participants' reflection, I'd like to do a much more fine-grained analysis of their treatment of the various artifacts: decisions to include or exclude, the specific role of each included artifact in the final whole, the editorial interplay between the three participants, etc. The role of Denise—and, to a lesser extent, Elliot and even Penelope—as framers and respondents was relatively easy to see because it was relatively easy to isolate. More detailed work on the conversations within our four-person core group will likely surface new insights about collaborative media authoring in this context.

Methodologically and “documentarily,” I am most excited by the prospect of examining and representing this experience in different modes. As I mentioned in the proposal for this paper but have had to defer to another venue for space, I conceived of this project in part as an experiment in “ethnographic podcasting.” While this paper has benefitted throughout from the detailed transcriptions I made of our recorded conversations and work sessions, there is much to learn about this experience that is better said and heard than written and read. During my transcription process, I was quite amazed by occurrences, behaviors, and even a whole interpersonal storyline to which I was *entirely* oblivious during our week together but that practically leapt out of the recordings. I want to tell those stories in a more appropriate format.

And with my colleagues in the Media and Social Change Lab (see Literat et al., 2018), I am optimistic that “Dissertation: The Podcast” (working title) might also have the potential to reach a wider, more practitioner-heavy audience than, if you will, “Dissertation: The Manuscript” or “Dissertation: The Journal Article(s).” Given that this project sought to shape and hold “space to be heard” in the St. Sebastian’s Camp and beyond, this trajectory in both research and religious educational advocacy seems especially urgent.

What I heard—and saw—most clearly in this space agrees very strongly with Lutrell’s conclusions from a not-unrelated study and context: “children tell and live stories that recognise and place value on caring as a *relational activity and collective responsibility* rather than an individual, private matter” (2013, p. 296, italics mine). As I attempt to imagine an “inventory of traces” (see Pahl, 2006) connecting the modes and practices of caring I observed across the time, spaces, and artifacts of this study, I now “see” those traces all originating from a material, imagined, and ultimately lived space (Soja, 1996) hiding in plain site in the data from my very first day at St. Sebastian’s.

While I was inside licking my wounds after our first rocky session, Dylan was outside with the others taking the photograph I cropped as Figure 1. I’ve slightly recropped (and slightly rotated) it as Figure 7 to pull out the important constituents: four counselors arrayed in a U-shape around the center of the sprinkler activity. Whenever the camp is in an outdoor space that requires careful supervision, the staff creates a shape like this. It’s a circle(ish) of inclusion, attentiveness, and safety. The shape was more obvious on Wednesday’s beach field trip. As I stood on the shore helping Penelope keep track of the CITs swimming with GoPros, I would watch the “human U” flex and distort, as individual counselors moved slightly to focus on a particular camper(s) in their direct vicinity, trusting that others could hold the intended purpose of the wriggling constellation for a moment and attend to the camp as a whole.

I wish I had a photograph of Dylan, Lauren, and Veronica as part of that “human U.” This may be their first year as “full-grown counselors,” but “6-7 years” as campers and CITs has taught them plenty about how to hold space as an act of caring. It’s no surprise then, in retrospect, that they would so thoughtfully and lovingly hold it when given the invitation to tell the story of the place and the people they care so much about.



Figure 7: The lived shape of caring at St. Sebastian’s Camp.

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