Cultivating the Sociological Imagination through Digital Storytelling
Baozhen Luo, Ph.D., Sociology

In 1959, C. Wright Mills, one of the most influential contemporary sociologists, artfully captured what sociology is all about by inventing the term “sociological imagination” and articulating its key ingredients. According to him, the sociological imagination, a unique quality of mind, enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society (Mills, 1959). From a sociological lens, every personal story is a micro episode of history, a small window to the larger social forces, and a product of the “pushing and pulling” between structural forces and individual agency. Inspired by Mills, I firmly believe that the task and promise of a good sociological education (and liberal arts education) is to help students cultivate the sociological imagination, rather than simply deliver sociological knowledge.

Keeping this principle in mind, I consciously take a holistic and personal approach to pedagogy with the goal of sparking the sociological imagination among my students. To do so, I employ a wide range of teaching methods—interactive exercises, dynamic discussions, creative writing assignments, service learning, studying abroad. For instance, in my Theory course, I dedicate 10-15 minutes to a moment of collective sociological imagination. Students are invited to imagine the deeper social meanings behind an individual event. (e.g. From discussing Steve’s Jobs’ fashion style, students connected to Weber’s theory of the spirit of capitalism.) Service learning is a core component of my Aging course where students participate in community activities with a focus on meaningful interactions and relationship building with local seniors. (e.g. One of the activities involves students helping seniors record their life stories.) One of the most successful writing assignments in my Family course is an exercise of family history reconstitution, where students collect family stories and artifacts to reconstitute and interpret the changes in size, structure, and members’ roles in their own families. When reflecting upon these successful efforts, I notice that regardless of the variations in forms, they share one essential characteristic—the telling of a good story. Some of the most effective learning seems to happen when students are able to locate, interpret, and present stories of themselves or others in the community. I am convinced that a well-told story is a powerful way of learning that offers insights that knowledge-based instructions do not. To tell a good story requires the cultivation of many different qualities—the sensitivity and curiosity to notice stories, the ability and thoughtfulness to unearth the underlying meanings of these stories, and the skills to speak and write effectively. Good storytelling involves constructing a persuasive narrative and communicating it effectively, which requires the storyteller to be reflective, carefully consider the connections between the subjects and the audience. All of these qualities, in my opinion, are essential ingredients of the sociological imagination.

In particular, the most memorable learning experiences through storytelling seem to occur when deep emotional connections are encouraged, expressed, and embraced among the students. Sociological imagination flourishes the most when the analytical mind marries the sensitive heart. For instance, the final presentations of my aging course, where students tell the stories of their friendships with local seniors from their service learning experiences, always elevate the course to a different level that traditional presentations cannot. A Pecha Kucha presentation format is used for this story sharing activity. Each presentation is limited to 6 minutes and 40 seconds and 20 slides (images only). For each slide, the presenters have 20 seconds to present the prepared narrative, which has to be well thought-out. (see details about PK presentation through http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGqClWazLJ4). My observations and students’ feedback seem to suggest that the emotional connections, the laughs and tears stirred up by old and new pictures, songs, poetry, sentimental items, and other visual and audio elements along with a good narrative have made these presentations particularly memorable and powerful. When multimedia elements are incorporated into storytelling, the hearts are connected and the minds are activated, and the magic of sociological imagination blossoms in a communal way.
This success propelled me to explore the potentials in using more multimedia elements in a more systematical way. Earlier this year, I discovered digital storytelling at a professional conference by accident, watched a great number of digital stories online, and learned the increasing body of literature and resources in digital storytelling for interested instructors. Digital storytelling is the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound, and video, to create a short movie (3-6 minutes), typically with a strong emotional component (Lambert, 2009). "A digital story usually begins with a script. The storyteller then assembles rich media to support the ideas and emotions in that script, including music or other audio effects, personal or public domain images, animation or video, and other electronic elements" (Educational Use of Digital Stories, 2014). The storyteller pieces together and edits the digital story, creating a short movie, and then publicizes them through an online platform or a campus/community event. The growing availability of sophisticated and widely accessible tools (e.g. smartphone apps for short film making such as imovie and magisto) and a maturing digital infrastructure (e.g. youtube) for information sharing and dissemination place great power in the hands of storytellers, some of whom should be sociology students in search of the sociological imagination.

College students seem to desire using digital media for not only self-expression but also intellectual pursuit. For them, digital media has already become the main platform of self-expression. I also observed a strong interest among them to integrate digital media applications into their academic works (e.g. the quick adoption of prezi for presentations by my students). Furthermore, the process of creating a digital story forces the students to activate their sociological imagination, be reflective and emotionally connected, and seek for deep connections with the subject matter, themselves, and potential audience. This, in my opinion, has the potential to go beyond effective learning, and become powerful transformation. In addition, students will also be motivated to fully take ownership of their learning by using not only their own words but also their voices and artistic skills. We all know active learning often translate into effective learning. Instrumentally speaking, students can also use their digital films as artifacts to develop their e-portfolios for future job seeking.

In the summer of 2015, I plan to fully delve into the learning of a variety of digital storytelling software (using my own computer and smartphone), such as imovie, audacity, magisto, and blurb, and find a way to systematically integrate it into my courses. I have already discovered a rich pool of technical and interdisciplinary resources on campus to support my endeavor. Center for Innovative Instruction & Assessment will be my main source of support. I will also seek for technical support from ATUS if necessary (though no technical background is needed for digital story creation.) In addition, I plan to arrange several meetings with Prof. Joyce Hammond in the Anthropology department, who has already used digital storytelling in one of her courses. I will also talk to many faculty members who have rich experiences in employing conventional narrative-only storytelling, e.g. Prof. Marie Eaton from Fairhaven, Prof. Julia Sapin from Art History, Prof. Rosemary Vohs from Communication & Education, etc.

My short-term goal is to first slowly incorporate an addition element of digital media into my current course offerings. For instance, I plan to add an additional element of music into the current Pecha Kucha presentations for the Aging course; an audio component can also be added to the family history assignment using Canvas as a platform. My more ambitious long-term goal is to fully replace the current research papers with digital films as the final product in the studying abroad course to China (a capstone course). For years that I do not lead students to China, I will propose another capstone course called "Sociological Imagination and Digital Storytelling." I also plan to share the skills and experiences I gained from this innovative effort with colleagues across the college and the university. I have no doubt that well-told digital stories are not only useful for the cultivation of the sociological imagination, but also the historical imagination, the environmental imagination, the business imagination, and the educational imagination, etc.
Bibliography:

