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Listen to My Story: The Transformative Possibilities of Storytelling in Immigrant Communities

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Since 2006, Open Borders Project / Proyecto Sin Fronteras has used digital storytelling in our work with teens and adult learners in summer workshops, computer courses and ESL classes. Participants write stories or interview others about their immigrant experience, record, edit and mix their stories on an open-source program, and create short audio stories. Their stories are published on our website, used to stimulate discussions, shared in public forums, and played on the radio. The process of creating stories and sharing them has been profound. Listening to each other's stories and reflecting on our common experience is an act of honoring our lives and affirming our sacrifices and dreams. Through our stories, we build a collective identity as immigrants. Telling our stories allows us to take risks, to talk about missing our families, our isolation, our frustrations as we try to feel at home in our new world. Our stories create openings for conversations with our friends and family, to say things unsaid. Our biggest challenge: how to use our stories as instruments for change, to give us a voice, to be heard, to organize, to become actors responding to issues that affect our lives. This article is accompanied by a CD of several of the stories produced at Open Borders Project and referred to in the text.



Open Borders Project / Proyecto Sin Fronteras is an educational organization based in the Latino community of North Philadelphia. Our mission is straightforward: to provide immigrants technical computer and language skills that will improve their employment opportunities, to use our classes as a venue to create a community, and to identify and develop leaders who can involve our community in a dialogue with the institutions that affect our lives.

As immigrants, one of the greatest challenges we confront in our new world is our anonymity. We are separated from those we love back home, are often isolated from each other on this side of the border, and are invisible to the larger world that does not know who we are, does not value the contributions we make as we work, pay taxes and add our rich cultures and sense of family and community to the weave of America. We feel like non-beings.

One of our great strengths is that we are a community of storytellers—our oral tradition is the glue that connects us to our roots in Guatemala or Mexico or Ecuador or Colombia or Puerto Rico. Our stories can help us create new communities in *El Norte*, affirm our common experience and dreams, and work together to speak to the larger society, to be heard, to become visible.

In 2006, Open Borders introduced digital storytelling into our work. We began with teens in our summer program, then gradually expanded to the point that we incorporate storytelling into almost all phases of our work with youth, communities, ESL classes and technical classes such as webcast design. Since the inception of our program, students from service-learning programs at several universities in Philadelphia have played important roles in our digital storytelling program, especially in our work with youth and English language learners.

This is how a digital story works: The producer creates a story, as a written narrative or an interview. The story is recorded, and the



recording is edited in an open-source program called Audacity. The voice is mixed with music, voice-over, and sound effects. The final product is an audio story, between two and ten minutes in length, which can be burned on a CD, put on a website, played on a radio station, sent to families back home, or used in a campaign. The producers learn two important skills related to literacy: to tell a story that has meaning to them and their community, and to use computer technology.

We chose Audacity as our editing tool because it is free (just Google *Audacity*, and follow the directions) and very user-friendly. Participants are energized by the ease with which they learn the program, and quickly begin to explore its creative possibilities. It is an ideal tool because it is accessible to our community, which has limited financial resources and limited experience working with computers.

The stories that have been produced in these workshops stop me every time I listen to them. But what is even more powerful are the stories around the stories: risks taken, experiences honored, thoughtful feedback given, conversations initiated, reflections shared, a community of storytellers cultivated, the potential for these stories to give the immigrant community a voice in the larger community of Philadelphia. I will share some of these remarkable stories, as well as their back stories—how they were produced and the effect they had on the narrators and the listeners. (In the jacket of this edition of *Reflections* is a CD that includes eight of the stories that I will discuss. Stories found on the CD will be noted by: [CD-Track #].)

The Open Borders Youth Radio Project

I ask Micaela Hernandez, Glenda Vargas, and Tatyana Martinez why they chose to be on the production team that will interview Gregory Taylor, an ex-offender who works for the National Comprehensive Center for Men, where he mentors other ex-prisoners who want to re-build their relationship with their children. Tatyana talks about



her father being in jail since the day she was born; Glenda tells of the years her father was away in jail; Micaela says, "It's just a topic I'm interested in." Two days later, when we are developing the question set for the interview, Micaela "comes out" about

her father being in jail since she was three—the first time she has told anyone for many years. After sharing the details of their fathers' incarceration, the three decide they will weave their own stories of being separated from their fathers into Gregory's story [CD Track 3].

For the last three summers we have held the Open Borders Youth Radio Project, in which 15-20 teens from North Philadelphia were paid to work as producers, twenty hours per week for six weeks. Seventy percent of the teens were Latino, thirty percent are African-American. We divided the project into two sessions. During the first two weeks, we used a set of exercises to teach participants the elements of telling a good story—how to build a story arc, using description and creating scenes, being specific while exploring a universal theme. Participants wrote personal stories about the most important thing in their room, or a sad or happy memory, or an event that changed them forever. During this period they also learned technical aspects of recording and sound editing in Audacity. Most importantly, the first two weeks were about taking risks by telling stories that were important to them, and building trust as they listened to each others' stories carefully and honored them. During the second session, which lasted four weeks, teens formed



production teams and interviewed local heroes in our community. For example, in the summer of 2008, a team produced a radio show about an ex-offender who mentors other men who have come out of jail and want to rebuild their relationships with their children [CD Track 3]. Another team did a show about a Mexican woman who fights racism and sexism in South Philadelphia [CD Track 6].

The Ecuadorians of Upper Darby

Martha has not seen her children—now 13 and 17—for ten years. As she edits her interview from 37 minutes down to 5 minutes, the focus narrows down to her grief of being separated from her children, of her guilt and pride and dreams for them. Her story tells of the day she left home, her desperation to find ways to communicate with her children, her hopes for reuniting with them [CD Tracks 1/English and 2/Spanish]. As we listen to her story on the final day of our workshop, all crying, Martha says, "This is the first time I've been able to say this to anyone since coming north."

A large community of Ecuadorians has recently settled in Upper Darby, a working-class community on the edge of Philadelphia. Many of these immigrants come from the village of Sidcay, in the Ecuadorian highlands; most of them have made the trip north alone and left family and children behind. Because of their undocumented immigration status they have not been able to return home for five, even ten years. On eight Saturday mornings we met in the basement of Lucia P., set up laptop computers and held a digital storytelling workshop. First, participants talked about what it meant to be an immigrant and developed a list of themes that would help them focus their stories. Their list was like a table of contents for the diaspora occurring all over the world, of people moving from poor countries to richer countries, from the country to the city, to survive: life at home and the decision to leave, the pain of leaving and separation from family and children, the dreams that brought them to *El Norte*, life in the United States, the



dream versus the reality. After much discussion, the group decided to focus on the theme of leaving home. We then held a mini-workshop on how to do a good interview—asking open-ended questions, putting the narrator in a scene and asking her to fill in the details, listening actively and going where the conversation leads. The group then developed a set of open-ended and scene-creating questions to explore the theme of leaving home, and interviewed each other. Most of the interviews were 15-40 minutes long, which were edited down to around five minutes in Audacity (a revelation for everyone, especially those who had never touched a computer). Finally, they added music to their sound track.

English as a Second Language at Open Borders

Xiomara has written her first story in English, and reads it into the recorder. She tells of taking her two young children on the bus to the County Assistance Office to get them Medicaid. They miss the stop and end up in Center City Philadelphia. She tries to ask for directions, but no one speaks Spanish. She and her children walk the three miles home to North Philadelphia. She promises herself this will never happen again. She will learn English [CD Track 9].

English as a Second Language classes are held at Open Borders. Most of the instructors are volunteers from undergraduate and graduate programs at Temple University. In the fall of 2008, Open Borders Project did a workshop with the ESL volunteers which focused on teaching students to write a brief story about their immigration experience. Students wrote stories, which we recorded and mixed with music; then we gave each student a CD of the class stories as a graduation present [CD Track 9]. We are working with Temple to make these stories an integral part of the ESL curriculum, to enhance written and oral language acquisition. One class has introduced cooperative learning: one participant discusses the story she wants to tell, and the group makes suggestions on how to improve vocabulary, grammar and structure.



Lessons Learned from Our Digital Storytelling Program

The vision of introducing storytelling into all phases of our work is very much a work in progress. However, after three years of developing and tinkering with the model, we can make four observations that make us feel we are on the right track, that we want to continue to deepen and refine our work in this area.

Lesson # 1: When they feel safe, people will take risks and tell stories that are important to them; they will begin to believe that they have an important story to tell. Reyna, age 15, initially wrote a superficial story about “one of the most important people in my life,” an aunt who she said she said she didn’t really know. I mentioned that it felt as if she didn’t really care about her story, and began to “peel the onion,” as we say at Open Borders. “Why did you decide to write about your aunt?” “Well, I didn’t know her, but I heard that she would really be there when you needed her.” “Does she remind you of someone who has really been there for you?” “Well (a long pause), my mom was there for me.” When was that?” “When I got pregnant last year.” “Is this the story you really want to tell?” We talked about risks, and Reyna decided to go for it. She wrote a brutally honest letter to her one-year-old, Jonathan, about how angry she was that because of him she couldn’t hang with her friends after school or on weekends; then described all she was going to do to assure he had the best shot in life. Devon, 17, with a history of problems in school but now back on track, wrote of being homeless, and his favorite toy in the shelter being a Power Ranger without any arms [CD Track 4]. Darnell’s story told of planning revenge with his brothers to punish his father for all the beatings his family had endured. Eduardo, an artist at nurturing his tough persona, described the favorite object in his bedroom—a photograph of his mother taken five years before, the last time she was happy, just before his father left.



Teachers decided that if we were going to push teens to take risks, we would have to take risks too: we offered them the opportunity to interview us. Any questions were legitimate, as long as they were respectful. Students worked in teams, developed question sets, and interviewed teachers while other students observed. One group asked a service-learning volunteer about her personal life, what she thought about living with her boyfriend before marriage. Another group interviewed a volunteer teacher about being bi-racial. An Anglo teacher was asked about why he worked in the Hispanic community, what he got out of it. Student observers gave feedback about the quality of the questions, extent of active listening, and opportunities for follow-up questions. With this feedback, the interviews were resumed.

Lesson # 2: A transforming moment within our workshops is the act of listening to each other's stories, giving feedback, reflecting.

Luis' story described his harrowing five-day storm-ravaged voyage from Ecuador to Guatemala on a boat loaded with sixty passengers, all of whom had to stay below deck all day to hide from the helicopters (his description of being crammed below deck in the fish holds lying head-to-toe sounded like historical descriptions of slave ships). His fellow Ecuadorians recounted their stories of paying \$14,000 for a guide, getting to Guatemala or Mexico by boat, and trekking north. People became very animated retelling their stories, as they realized that they were in a sense heroes who had embarked on a dangerous voyage, all for their families. Our last night, eating Chinese and listening to each other's stories, went on to midnight. People cried, told stories about their stories, talked about how the group was a safe place to share stories they had kept hidden—even from their families and fellow immigrants.

Listening, feedback and reflection were all critical components of the Youth Radio Project. We developed an exercise called "critiquing the cookie," to model a way of giving constructive feedback to help students improve their stories. Teachers baked cookies, and students



brainstormed a list of criteria of how you know a great cookie when you taste one. Students then (blind-) tasted the teachers' cookies, and chose the best according to their criteria. We then developed criteria for what makes a "good" story. Students met in small groups, listened to each other's stories, talked about what parts of the story moved them, suggested ways to make the stories more powerful. When the stories were completed, recorded and mixed, the entire group listened to the final cut. We recounted memorable scenes and images, and acknowledged the bravery of telling stories important to us. Long discussions were stimulated by the stories, about teen pregnancy, abuse in the home, difficulties communicating with parents, betrayal by friends, relationships between boys and girls. Micaela and Tatyana got into a long discussion about how their lives would have been different if their fathers had been home, rather than in jail, and tried to imagine would it would be like if they ever came home. After interviewing Irma Irma Zamora about the racism she had faced since coming from Mexico, Daquan and Vanessa reflected on their own experiences with racism [CD Track 6].

Wednesday morning ESL class: Anthony was stuck on his story about coming to the U.S. from Santo Domingo. He felt he had nothing important to say—he had obtained a visa and come legally, no struggles, no crossing the border in the desert, no danger. Not like other stories. *Uninteresting*. "Anyway, actually, my life was much better in Santo Domingo, I am not living my dream here." His classmates all chimed in: "There's your story, The American Dream."

Lesson # 3: Stories create opportunities for dialogue, for missed conversations with family and other important people in our life.

Glenda described her most precious possession—a letter her father sent her from jail. She decided to ask him to read the letter for her story. He had no idea she was making a digital story about him. They talked about his being away, his leaving suddenly, how important his letters and cards were, how much they meant to each other. He recorded his



letter with passion and tears (Glenda decided to edit out the tears—his and hers. [CD Track 7]) Vanessa recorded the story of the most important day of her life—the day she went to a baseball game with her traditional Mexican father. Miracle of miracles—the game was rained out, and they had The Talk—about her wanting more freedom, needing him to trust her, how it was hard for him to let go, how they loved each other [CD Track 5]. Vanessa’s father listened to her digital story and learned how important that moment was for her, how important he was. Darnell’s mother nodded with knowing and a sense of pride as he publicly played his story about how he and his brothers ended the abuse in their family. After completing her interview with Gregory Taylor, Micaela made the long trek by bus to visit her father, who had been in jail for the last fifteen years. They talked for two hours about how they had missed each other, what they wanted for their lives, what was possible. When Gregory Taylor listened to the radio story Micaela and Tatyana had made about him, he began to cry and asked for a copy. “My two older children understand why I went away for four years,” he said, “but my younger children don’t. I want to play this story for my two younger kids; it’s time we had the conversation about why I really went away.”

Lesson # 4: These stories have the potential to be instruments for change. As immigrants, we must confront many burning issues that impact on our ability to share the American Dream: poor schools, unemployment, lack of ESL and job training programs, limited access to health care, inability to reunite our families that have been split by our diaspora, having to hide in the shadows because we have no legal status. This is our greatest challenge: now that we have found our voice and told our stories, how can we use our narratives to organize, to be heard, to become actors in solving the problems that affect us? We are learning. An example: after sharing their stories of missing their children and families back home, the Ecuadorians in Upper Darby decided they wanted to find a way to communicate electronically, face to face with cameras, with their families in Sidcay. They formed a



committee and contacted some community leaders back home. Their plan: to create an internet café in their village which would also be an afterschool computer program for their children. Funds would have to be raised, people back home trained. (For many reasons related to organizing in a community where people work many hours and have many priorities related to survival, this project came to a halt). Another example: When Gregory Taylor and Kofi Asante, the director of the National Comprehensive Center for Men, heard Micaela and Tatyana’s interview of Gregory they hatched a plan: to incorporate digital stories into their work, use their computer lab to bring men and their children together to create mutual digital stories in which they talk about being separated, how they are learning to be together, future hopes for their relationship. A final example: The New Sanctuary Movement, which trains people about their rights and how to respond in an immigration raid, has begun to use stories of families that have been torn apart by the raids and deportations, a tool to educate and mobilize.

The Transformative Power of Stories

Telling our stories is a process towards achieving literacy. We learn to articulate what is important in our lives, what our dreams are, the barriers we confront as immigrants. We gain a better understanding of our own lives and the world we live in. Our stories can be a starting point for profound conversations, analysis and collective problem-solving.

We define ourselves and anchor our identity by our stories. Stories demand to be heard, they teach us to listen to each other. True listening is the foundation of all relationships—between students in a class, or parents and their children, within our immigrant community, as we negotiate with institutions of power to gain our piece of the American Dream. When we tell our stories and people listen, we become visible. Our stories give us power.



Endnotes

CD List for Digital Stories Referred to in This Article

Track 1: Martha (English translation, read by her friend, Lucia) (5:45)

Track 2: Martha (original, Spanish) (5:45)

Track 3: Tatyana and Micaela, Interview with Gregory Taylor, National Comprehensive Center for Men (5:18)

Track 4: Devon (2:54)

Track 5: Vanessa (1:53)

Track 6: Daquan, Vanessa and Janeth, Interview with Irma from Juntos (9:00)

Track 7: Glenda: Her Dad (4:11)

Track 8: Glenda: Her Mom (3:10)

Track 9: Tuesday ESL Class (Ricardo, Alexis, Jonathan, Xiomara, Armando, Edmira) (8:17)

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