

Notes from VPA 495 classes

February 4: First visit with Rina Benmayor, professor at CSUMB who teaches a class called Latina Life Stories, which uses the digital storytelling format. During this session the CSUMB students/mentors got to see sample projects produced by other students. In addition, they participated in a writing exercise. In the exercise the women were asked to write about a moment when their entire life took a dramatic change.

What worked: The writing exercise was very powerful and the women shared some deeply touching stories. This exercise really brought the group together and we all shed a few tears.

What could be improved: To improve this project for next time, we need to make sure that each woman (instructor, coordinator, visiting artist, consultant, staff from community-based organization) knows her exact role in the project. That way, she can better prepare her piece.

February 11: Girls from Watsonville Community School come for their first visit on campus and get a tour of the child development center.

What worked: The campus provided two excellent role models who shared their experience about being a college student and young mother. In addition, the WCS girls were excited to be on a college campus and were very open to participating in the project. The girls seemed to enjoy the visit to the university's child development center, as did their teacher.

What could be improved: The mentors and the girls did not make a good first connection – the mentors did not have a chance to introduce themselves properly and no rapport was established. Also, the tour of the child development center was a little “academic” for them. The director talked about such things as “taxonomy of cognition,” when what the girls really wanted to know about was “can my child get in here” and “how much will it cost?”

February 14: A staff member from the Center for Digital Storytelling put on a workshop for mentors on CSUMB campus.

What worked: CSUMB students got a chance to complete about 75% of their project in an intensive two-day workshop. CDS put on an excellent workshop and was well prepared with equipment, knowledge and input.

What did not work: There simply was not enough time to finish the project. The women were very motivated about their stories during the workshop, but had a difficult time finishing that last 25% independently.

February 18: WCS girls visited for a second time. Rina Benmayor came back and gave a presentation showing various project samples. At the end of the day the teen

mothers were given a list of prompts to write about for the next class meeting. (See “prompts.”)

What worked: Because Rina arrived late, WCS girls got a chance to meet the CSUMB women and hear more about them. In addition, the girls filled out a questionnaire that helped to match the teen mom with a mentor based on their interests and needs.

What could be improved: Rina arrived late, and instead of using her expertise in oral history to lead the WCS girls through a writing exercise, she spent her time showing examples of projects. So, the teen moms did not have the important experience of participating in a free write exercise and sharing their stories.

February 25: Mentors met with teen moms at Watsonville Community School. All women shared their stories.

What worked: Everyone had the chance to hear one another’s story and give feedback. It was good practice for the teen moms to read their stories aloud.

What could be improved: Lori (the teen mom teacher at WCS) was hoping the teen moms would have a chance to dig deep for issues that often did not surface in the girls’ daily lives. Because the mentors from CSUMB produced stories that for the most part did not delve into such issues, they shared stories with the girls that were more “glossed over.” In return, the teen mothers felt safer producing a “happier” story.

Over the next few sessions a discussion grew over what form the stories should take. The situation was never fully resolved, but I came to the conclusion that each story has its own purpose for each mother. While some mothers may choose to dig deep into hidden pasts, others were simply using this project to become more familiar with computers and the English language. I feel it is better not to pressure a mother into telling a story she is not comfortable sharing. Because there was never an initial meeting set up with all of the facilitators of the project, there was no clear picture of where to direct the stories. In addition, what is directed to the mentors should be the same as what is directed to the mothers. If the mentors’ stories are safe and sweet, they will model this for the mothers.

March 3: Mentors meet mothers at WCS to revise scripts.

What worked: Mothers had a chance to simplify and revise story.

What could be improved: Mentors may have needed more coaching in what to tell the mothers in terms of revisions.

March 10: Filmmaker Lourdes Portillo, the visiting artist on this project, makes her first visit to CSUMB campus. Teen mothers shared their stories with Lourdes.

What worked: Mothers got one-on-one attention and feedback from Lourdes on their script.

What could be improved: Teen mothers were beginning to feel that they had gone over their stories too many times and were ready to move on to the next part of the project.

Mentors were at a loss as to what to do with their students while Lourdes met with each mother individually.

March 17: Mentors meet at WCS to work on storyboards with moms.

What worked: Moms moved further along in their story and got a chance to visualize and organize how the story would come together.

What could be improved: Many of the mentors showed up late and this affected their ability to mentor the girls through the process.

March 24: Moms were given cameras to take pictures for their project. They had a short lesson on tips to taking good photographs.

What worked: The moms were excited about taking pictures.

What could be improved: We should have given the girls better tips on specifically what kinds of pictures they could take to add into their project.

March 31: Spring break for CSUMB students.

April 7: Spring break for Watsonville Community School. Girls were using this time to take photos with their disposable cameras. The cameras were to be turned in on Monday, April 12 for pickup and processing so that their images would be ready by the next class meeting.

April 14: Girls from WCS worked with CSUMB students on incorporating images into their stories. Most had images to work with – either photos they took with their disposable cameras or ones they brought from home – but a few had not used their cameras or brought in other images.

April 21: Several of the girls from WCS worked with CSUMB students on incorporating images into their stories while the others went in pairs to the recording studio to record their voice tracts. It became apparent that they needed more practice on this – so that the stories would sound like they were being “spoken” rather than read. We realized that today’s recording session would have to be viewed as practice, and next week’s session devoted to the real recording.

What didn’t work: More practice in class the last week would have been very helpful.

April 28: Four girls came today. The plan was to record their voice tracts, and while they were doing that one at a time, the others would be working with their mentors assembling their images.

Lourdes came to act as voice coach and help the girls with their recording. All four completed the task. Lourdes was a big help, instructing them in the most effective ways to do the recordings. She has developed a very nice rapport with the students – firm and no-nonsense, but friendly and kind. The girls are responding well to her approach.

One of the younger girls told Jenny that she really liked coming to campus and wanted to go to college. Lori, the WCS teacher, mentioned to us that Inez' attendance has been erratic of late – but she always comes on Wednesdays.

There's an interesting thing going on with one of the students. Her story deals with her relationship with her baby's father. She's portraying it as a loving, happy, almost saccharine relationship; the reality is much different. When asked – gently – why the disparity between the story she's telling and the reality of her life, she explained that she's portraying what she wants her child to know. She says she doesn't want her child to know the truth.

May 5 – With the voice tracks finished, we were able to concentrate on assembling the photos and music tracks. As I was talking with the teen mom teacher, Lori, two things became apparent to me: these girls have never had anyone to model responsible behavior; and while this project may not impact their lives, it may help their children. It takes time for them to learn what responsible, adult behavior is. One of the girls has been at WCS for years. She's only now changing her behavior – after seven years where the staff at WCS was the only stable, constant thing in her life, she is finally learning how to be a responsible adult and a responsible parent.

May 12 – Lori and the four girls came early today because it's the last session and we need to get everything finished. The mentors were here; some still have to complete their own stories.

Lori talked about how much she admired Lourdes and how effective Lourdes was in pulling the girls stories from them. She felt, however, that the girls' emotional maturity level was such that they weren't ready to have someone try to pull their stories from them the way Lourdes did. All of them started to cry while working with Lourdes individually. Along the way, two of the girls told Lori that they didn't want to work with her again because "she made us cry." By the end of the project, however, they understood why it was necessary, and why their stories were better for all their hard (emotional) work.

May 14 – Several CSUMB students meet with Jenny to complete their own digital stories and to help smooth out and duplicate copies of the WCS girls' stories

May 17 – About 75 people – including the superintendent of education in Santa Cruz County and several other high-ranking county education officials – attended the showing of the digital stories. We put together a presentation that involved three of the girls' stories (the fourth young woman declined to have her story shown, but changed her mind later in the day) alternated with three of our students' stories, as well as a photo montage of the process. All the stories were well received.

The girls themselves seemed to swell with pride – they clearly enjoyed being the center of attention, and felt good about the work they had done.

Sandy Mast, the COE administrator in charge of alternative education in the county and the person with overall responsibility at WCS, introduced Amalia and spoke of the four-year relationship with CSUMB, thanking us for our work with the high school students. Amalia explained that “it’s not our benevolence, it’s our responsibility to serve the community and to recognize you and to make students want to come to the university.

“We recognize the value you have. You have helped us learn how to serve you when you come to us as students.

“What makes these stories valuable is that they’re YOUR stories – they tell us who you are as mothers, daughters, students.”

In the stories, the girls were able to articulate what they want for their children. That’s important because if they can say it, that’s a step toward accomplishing it.

“We produced something that is about you and speaks on your behalf,” Amalia said.

Afterward, the girls talked with a reporter, and received the congratulations of the district administrators. They were also acknowledged by their peers.

Later in the day, Lourdes Portillo called me to apologize for missing the event. She had wanted to attend, but was traveling in Europe and had just returned home the night before. Expressing her sorrow at missing it, she said, “It was a very meaningful time for me.”

What we’ve learned – overall impressions:

We saw some changes in several of the kids over the course of the semester. One of them came to school only on Wednesdays, because that’s the day the kids came to campus. Another one was very quiet the first few times we met. But as she bonded with her mentor, we started to see a spark, some teasing with her peers. A third kid, who had very limited English at the beginning, showed steady improvement during the course of the semester and was more willing to attempt to speak English by the end.

It would have helped if the CSUMB students had been more proficient in the technology before they started to work with the high school girls. We should have scheduled more time in the beginning to work with them and get their own stories finished – thereby improving their proficiency level – before introducing them to the girls.

We haven’t seen the bonding between mentor and WCS student that we’d hoped for. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that we’ve had some attrition on the part of the WCS students, leaving some of the CSUMB students with no one to mentor. As a result, some of the CSUMB students are just kind of hanging out at the class sessions.

Computer problems have plagued us. That's the downside of using a lab open to all students – files are disappearing. Despite the fact that we were told that files could be saved, things we stored in the itunes and iphotos libraries have disappeared repeatedly. A technician would help tremendously, freeing Jenny to do more creative stuff with the students.

A discussion with several CSUMB students, Jenny and Joan brought these issues to light:

Most CSUMB students didn't have their own stories done, so they didn't really understand the process and weren't able to help the girls.

Being Mac-proficient needs to be a prerequisite for a class like this. The students also need to have taken the Tech Tools class.

Some CSUMB students didn't answer emails. We made it clear in the beginning that since the class would meet only once per week, most of the communication with the instructor (Jenny) would be done via email. Yet some students didn't bother to do that, and it caused a problem.

CSUMB students didn't take advantage of the open labs to finish their own stories. They didn't take any initiative to do this, as we had suggested in the beginning that they would need to do.

It might have made the process start on a firmer footing if the teens had done some classroom work in preparation for the project. Reading Sandra Cisneros' "The House on Mango Street," for instance, would have been helpful.

The CSUMB students had trouble with the mentoring part of the project. Perhaps that had to do with the fact that the teens were Latino and the CSUMB students mostly white. Or maybe it was simply an age-related issue.

One CSUMB student noted, however: "We got them to open up with their stories. The girls are happy with what they did and proud of what they did. One girl said, 'I want it to be perfect.' "

Maybe we didn't create a safe enough space for the university students. One of them said: "You guys were trying to take us to a place we didn't want to go." She said this in regard to Rina's exercise of getting them to write about hard stuff. The student thought this educational forum isn't the right place to expect people to make themselves vulnerable.

In summary:

Lori said that when kids get to WCS, they feel like no one cares about them – they are very aware of what they don't have – no prom, no sports teams, etc. – and feel that the "system" has given up on them. Then, CSUMB comes along and offers them the

opportunity to do some cool things – the garden project, the “windows” project, the photography project, the digital lifestories project, trips to campus, etc. It makes them feel valued that a university cares about them.

Final email from instructor Jenny Angelacos to students in the VPA 495 class:

Hi All,

I wanted to say thank you for your participation in the digital story-telling project. This may have been some of the hardest-earned two credits of your college experience thus far.

I truly believe it was well worth the effort. It was amazing for me to watch the young mothers’ faces as they heard their voice and watched their stories come to life on the big screen. I think this was a very special moment for all of us. Despite the computer glitches, and periodic schedule changes, we managed to pull it off.

I am very pleased with the outcome. I hope you all are satisfied as well, knowing that you were able to make a difference in a young woman's life, as well as your own. I hope you all keep your stories and share them with your families and friends.

If you have a PC, just make sure you have Quick Time installed. For best viewing of the movies, copy the file to your desktop and play it from there.

Good luck on your future endeavors and have a great summer.

Sincerely,

Jenny