

Figured worlds in digital storytelling and transnational communications

What this research was about and why it is important

Increasing diversity, globalization, and digitalization is significantly impacting human relations and communication. This study investigated digital transnational communications among youth through the dual lenses of *figured worlds* and *transmodalities*. Figured worlds are the scripts, rooted in cultural models, that people have that enable them to make sense of the world, and themselves and others in it. Transmodalities refer to the multiple modes that people use to make meaning in communication, including but not limited to language (such as image, movement, sound, material objects, and so on), valuing all modes of communication equally. Specifically, we explored how youth in communication with culturally and linguistically diverse global peers co-constructed understandings of one another, and of themselves as global citizens, through video making and online chat. We identified a series of critical moments and incidents that illuminated the different ‘figured worlds’- or perceived ways of knowing and being- of the youth, and traced their impact. We considered how meanings were represented across multiple modes, and how together they (re)shaped cultural and global understandings and relations. We demonstrated how the dual frames—*figured worlds* and *transmodalities*—can serve as interpretive tools for understandings of digitally mediated representation and transnational communication that are increasingly common in our world.

What the researchers did

- We considered a subset of data from an out-of-school project, Global StoryBridges (GSB). In 19 GSB sites in under-resourced communities around the world, youth make digital stories (short videos) of their communities and lives to share online. For this article, we focused on martial arts as discussed and shown in a Chinese video, and a community broom-making activity portrayed by Ugandan youth.
- We collected youth-produced videos and subsequent online chat data posted on the project website, field notes from site observations and semi-structured interviews with participants in the US, Uganda and China.
- We analyzed our data using tools from discourse and multimodal analysis, seeking to understand what youth wanted to convey and how, and how that was understood and responded to by global peers. We also sought to understand how these meanings under construction were shaped by youth’s experiences and contexts, and the impact on the relationships they were forging.

What the researchers found

- Through engaging in digital story making and global communications, youth leveraged their cultural knowledge and communicative resources to expand their cultural worlds and those of their global peers, through encountering and negotiating cultural and social differences. Through analyzing typical community activities portrayed in videos and the online discussions they engendered, this study showed the power of global communication for expanding learning.
- This study addresses communicative modes in youth’s digital communications; language was centralized, but other modes (such as image, movement and sound) worked together with language to convey complex messages.
- There were disruptions because of adult interventions (for instance, decisions made by adults on what comments were inappropriate to be posted on the website) and administrative restrictions (for instance, on project time and internet access in different sites) that constrained youth decisions, voices and creativity in this project. We considered these incidents as rich analytic points, showing that structure and context matter.

Things to consider

- Youth in the GSB project were facilitated to use their preferred ways of representation and communication with their global peers; we recognize the need to attend to all modes of meaning making in analyses and in learning.
- Models of cultural worlds—*figured worlds*—matter in global encounters as we consider ongoing learning and identity negotiation in transnational transmodal communications and projects.
- Global learning is enhanced (if complicated) when diverse youth in different global locales learn with and from each other.
- Our findings suggest the need for redesign of youth engagement focusing on openness and equity as key for preparing critical global citizens.

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