

Perceived changes of identity construction through digital storytelling: A collective study abroad case study

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ABSTRACT: Study abroad (SA) is considered one of the best ways to learn a foreign (FL) or second language (L2) while developing open-mindedness and intercultural awareness (Williams, 2009). Yet, less attention has been placed on students' perception on identity development. Thus, the current study focuses on how the outcome (identity awareness in a SA setting) is achieved through the relationship between subject (students), instruments (tools and artifacts), community and rules (classroom and SA experience), division of labor (peer feedback) in relation to the object (Digital story). The study includes six SA students' perceptions on identity construction through the incorporation of multiliteracies and multimodal texts (digital stories) in a second-year foundational Spanish course and an Advanced Spanish Grammar course in a Study Abroad (SA) program. Analyses of questionnaires, and DSs were grounded in Rogers' (1959) notion of self-concept and Activity Theory (Leontiev, 1978). Results suggest that the digital and multimodal nature of DS creation facilitated greater opportunities for students to document their self-perceived gains in terms of identity awareness.

Key Words: Study Abroad, Digital Stories, Identity, Activity Theory, Foreign Language

Cambios en la construcción de la identidad a través de las historias digitales: un estudio de caso en un programa de inmersión.

RESUMEN: Estudiar en el extranjero (EE) se considera una de las mejores formas de aprender una lengua extranjera (LE) o una segunda lengua (L2) a la vez que se desarrolla una mentalidad abierta y conciencia intercultural (Williams, 2009). Sin embargo, se ha prestado poca atención a la percepción de los estudiantes sobre su desarrollo de la identidad en este proceso. Este estudio se centra en cómo se logra el resultado (consciencia de identidad en contextos de inmersión) a través de la relación entre los sujetos (estudiantes), instrumentos (herramientas y artefactos), comunidad y reglas (el aula y la experiencia de inmersión), división del trabajo (retroalimentación de pares), en relación al objeto (historia digital). El estudio incluye la percepción de seis

estudiantes de EE sobre la construcción de la identidad a través de la incorporación de multialfabetizaciones y textos multimodales (historias digitales), en un curso de español de segundo año y un curso de Gramática Española Avanzada en un programa de EE. Los análisis de cuestionarios, historias digitales y artefactos finales se basaron en la noción de autoconcepto de Rogers (1959) y la teoría de actividad (Leontiev, 1978). Los resultados sugieren que la naturaleza multimodal y digital en la creación de las historias digitales ofreció más oportunidades para que los estudiantes documentaran el crecimiento autopercebido de su identidad.

Palabras clave: Estudio en el Extranjero, Historias Digitales, Identidad, Teoría de Actividad, Lengua Extranjera

1. INTRODUCTION

Many universities encourage study abroad (SA), which promotes benefits, such as the development of a global mindset, intercultural competence and a competitive edge in the marketplace (Kubota, 2016). For many students, developing language skills and cultural knowledge are among the primary reasons for choosing to study abroad (Williams, 2009); yet these outcomes vary among participants, reflecting a non-simplistic causality between the act of studying abroad and the outcomes believed to be inherent to the experience (Tullock, 2018). Many researchers have examined factors that aid or impede a positive experience with language, cultural, and personal gains in SA (Anya, 2016; Kinginger et al., 2016; Tullock, 2018). For instance, findings show unanticipated challenges stemming from identity-related development in a new linguistic context (Vasseur, 2017). This is explored, for example, in underrepresented African-American students in SA learning to speak and live multiple identities during sojourn in an Afro-Brazilian city (Anya, 2016), or in SA students' perception of demonstrating respect and power dynamics in classroom settings (Kinging, 2013). Often, SA participants express frustration with their ability to communicate feelings in the second language (L2) and to perceived changes in identity formation (Tullock, 2018). This frustration adds to the cultural differences that require an understanding of customs and patterns of communication, potentially increasing the risk of withdrawal from new communicative contexts (Kinging, 2013; Vasseur, 2017).

In recent years, studies have begun to focus on the importance of identity construction through digital media and the effects of multimodality on learners' abilities to express themselves. Hull and Katz (2006) found that the multiple media and modes afforded in digital story (DS) creation allowed creators to construct an identity different than the one(s) they inhabit in their real lives. Furthermore, multimodal digital literacies have also been signaled for their role in assisting students to overcome challenges in identity formation and articulate their evolutive process (Gaspar, 2018). Based on new tools to express identity through literacies, the present study seeks to explore how multiliteracies and multimodality can aid students to communicate their growth in terms of identity construction during SA. To document SA experiences in this investigation, we use DSs, which are defined as short, multimodal, personal narratives that use images, voice, sound effects, and music to convey meaning (Vinogradova et al., 2011). Thus, this study explores the ways students perceive and demonstrate their identities during a SA program through DSs.

2. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION FOR PRESENT STUDY

2.1 Activity Theory

The current study chose an Activity Theory (AT) (Leontiev, 1978) perspective to bring the social setting and situated learning to the forefront of the SA experience and students' identity construction. AT holds that cognitive development has both social and cultural roots (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006); that is, cognitive acts (decision-making, categorizing, perspective-taking, ETC.) are not isolated and are activated and informed by everyday interactions with different people and systems. Thus, the intrinsic desire to understand, study and explain how people interact in a specific context, or activity system, is activity theory's main goal. Furthermore, Activity is defined as a multifaceted systematic formation which includes a complex mediational structure and as individual's conscious or unconscious actions directed to an object, such as a DS (Engeström, 1999). Activity refers to a scaffolded series of collaborative and individual actions at the nexus of three factors (see Figure 1): tools and artifacts such as language and technological media; the communities and their rules (inside and outside the classroom) as well as division of labor in those communities (peer feedback or educator's instruction). Under AT, students will direct their actions to the achievement of a goal (the completion of the object, in this case the digital story) with specific outcomes in mind; thus, the fulfillment of actions under certain conditions or operations creates the diverse activity systems (Lantolf, 2000).

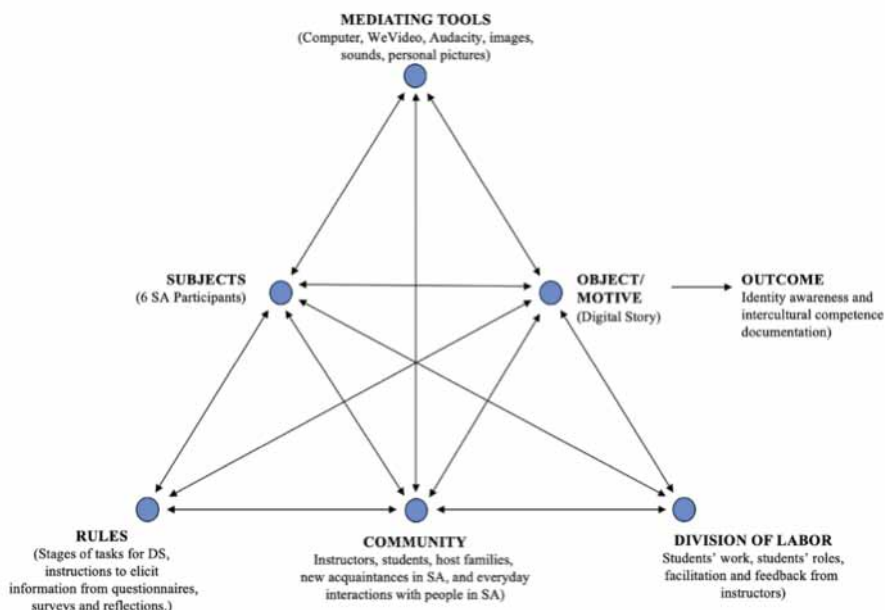


Figure 1. Activity theory model in the creation of Digital Stories (Adapted from Elola et al., 2018)

Taking the AT facets and individual differences into account explains how, although different actors may participate in similar tasks and share a goal for an activity, the outcomes vary as in the case of Elola et al. (2018), who looked into the researcher identity growth of three graduate students (Spanish as an L1, English as an L1, and a simultaneous heritage speaker). Due to the lack of studies grounded in AT in study abroad settings, the current study focuses on how the outcome (identity awareness in a SA setting) is achieved through the relationship between subject (students), instruments (tools and artifacts), community and rules (classroom and SA experience), division of labor (peer feedback) in relation to the object (Digital story). Then, the creation of DSs become the vehicle for documenting identity construction as an outcome of SA.

2.2 Identity, Study Abroad & Digital Stories

Identity is defined in this study as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 45). This definition is paired with Rogers’ (1959) construct of self-concept. According to the author, self-concept can be defined by three parts: (1) self-image, which is a combination of traits like physical characteristics, personality traits and social roles; (2) self-esteem, whether positive or negative, which is directly related to how much people value themselves; and (3) the ideal self, which is related to the way the person wishes to be in the present or near future (Ewin & Ewin, 2019).

Identity has been studied in different manners. For instance, mirroring the social turn in second language acquisition (Block, 2003), the mid 1990’s brought a new wave of research making use of qualitative techniques rather than the largely quantitative work that had been conducted to that point. For example, identity was a central theme affecting differences in sojourners’ experiences, however it was treated as an emerging theme in an exploratory approach (Tulloch, 2018). More recently, scholars focus on investigating identity from the initial design and make a strong case for identity formation as a central component to SA experiences due to the constant negotiation of belonging and communication required (García-Nieto, 2018; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Tullock, 2018; Vinogradova et al., 2011).

An important component in documenting identity formation during SA is increasing student awareness and reflection during their sojourn. Because the SA experience creates dynamic and often variable outcomes due to factors such as background and disposition to engage, there is growing recognition that students have autonomy and agency over their SA experiences (García-Nieto, 2018). In other words, the opportunity to be affected by a SA experience works in tandem with activity on the part of the student in the setting provided. This presents an opportunity to connect digital tools for communication with a need to assist students in communicating growth meaningfully and empowering them to use their newfound skills to reach others. Such an application often seems natural to digital generations, though, the translation of such skills in a new language or cultural context in a way that is reflective and meaningful is not guaranteed; students must often be guided to engage meaningfully, and instructed on creating and communicating significance out of situation (Elola & Oskoz, 2017).

As new digital mediums become more integrated into our classrooms and everyday

lives, new writing genres such as blogging, tweets or digital storytelling emerge that integrate a range of modalities and media (Elola & Oskoz, 2017). Accordingly, multiple platforms have been integrated into studies within the L2 classroom such as blogs (Lee, 2011), tele-collaboration (Tecedor & Vasseur, 2020), Facebook, Instagram (Izmaylova, 2017) and DSs (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Gregori-Signes, 2008; Oskoz & Elola, 2014; Vinogradova, 2014). Such tools represent an opportunity to foster storytelling, an age-old component of cultural transmission of the human experience, in students (Oskoz & Elola, 2020). The inclusion of digital storytelling—two to five minute videos that integrate text, images and sound—in studies within an L2 pedagogic framework has grown. See, for example, DSs and Heritage Learners (Vinogradova, 2014), English for Tourism in Spain (Alcantud-Díaz et al., 2014), English in Second Language classrooms (Vinogradova et al., 2011), and task-based applications (Oskoz & Elola, 2016). However, studies using L2 digital storytelling in SA contexts which focus on identity construction remain novel.

Unlike a simple video, a DS asks learners to consider and construct the message first, then make it more robust with multimodal components and affective tools (Oskoz & Elola, 2020). Furthermore, the language choice used to tell a personal story affords students a chance to practice informal FL use (Vinogradova, 2014). Additionally, in sharing their stories and voices, students have the opportunity to share their views in a collaborative, structured setting (Gregori-Signes, 2008). The creation of DSs involves a process of identity construction, in which the student's abilities, points of view, and cultural knowledge are represented in the final product they create (Vinogradova, 2014). The DS medium with its semiotic affordances is easily influenced by the rich variety of students' culture and language, serving as an excellent reflection of "diverse, multilayered, and dynamic identities" (Vinogradova, 2014, p. 318).

While studies exist about the use of DSs in L2 classrooms and about identity development in SA (Garcia-Nieto, 2018; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Tullock, 2018; Vinogradova, 2014), to our knowledge no studies have explored perceived identity construction through digital storytelling in a SA context. In this study, we analyze how students perceive their SA experiences through the development of a DS. Through content analysis and AT, the goal of this study is to uncover how SA experiences lead students to develop new facets of their identities, and how DSs afford them the opportunities to articulate and share these developments. This study is guided by the following research question:

- How do Spanish L2 undergraduate students perceive and demonstrate their identities through the process of creating a DS during their semester-long SA experience?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Context, participants and instruments

This collective case study was conducted at a US university's satellite SA center in Seville, Spain, where all students resided with host families. Data were collected during one semester in a second-year Spanish course and an advanced Spanish grammar course, where two of the researchers were SA instructors. Of the 26 students participating in both

courses, six students were included in the current study. These students (foundational level: Michelle , Maria, Amanda; advanced-level: Rosa , Samantha, Ava) were selected based on the similarities of their DS topics and the completion of all data collection instruments. The students were aged 18-25 L1 English speakers learning Spanish.

Following a task-based approach, students developed a DS to document their experiences while abroad. As their final course project, the DS was related to personal growth during their SA experience such as linguistic or identity awareness. The data collection procedures included analysis of the following coursework: 1) three SA Questionnaires (SV); 2) three written reflections on the students' experiences; and 3) the DS (see Table 1 for a schedule).

Table 1. Schedule for Digital Story Development and Data Collection

| WEEK | TASKS | DATA FOR THE STUDY |
|------|---|---|
| 2 | | SA Questionnaire 1, Background and proficiency questionnaires |
| 3 | | Reflection 1 |
| 9 | Introduction to platform | Digital Story pre-questionnaire |
| 10 | DS Script version 1 | |
| 11 | Story circle 1 | SA Questionnaire 2 |
| 12 | DS Script version 2 Story circle 2 | Reflection 2 |
| 13 | Workshop on integration of sound and images | Reflection 3 |
| 14 | Individual meetings for feedback | |
| 15 | Completion and presentation of DS | DS |
| 16 | | Post Digital Story questionnaire |
| 17 | | SA Questionnaire 3 |

The SA questionnaires asked participants to reflect on their new and pre-existing beliefs, cultural knowledge, and life experiences concerning their ideas about language use, the Spanish speaking culture, and their own identities. The written reflections helped students document their feelings, sensory awareness, language use and comprehension, and expectations throughout the semester. They worked in groups (story circles) to share their scripts and to work collaboratively on story theme, flow, conciseness, and possible multimodal elements to develop the story or to replace written text. They also received teacher feedback on the aforementioned elements for each script revision and multimodal composition. Students were introduced to WeVideo (platform used to produce the DSs and integrate semiotic resources) and to Audacity (audiorecording) because they were the tools available and used in the classroom. Lastly, students presented their original DSs and completed the final questionnaire.

3.2. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis of participants' DSs was conducted to determine general tendencies for identity. We used inductive Classical Content Analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) selecting all words, phrases and paragraphs that could be related to identity; for ex-

ample: personality (e.g., *I am a wanderer, I am a traveler*), self-value (e.g., *I am proud of myself for stepping outside of my comfort zone and embarking on this journey*), and development (e.g., *I feel more grown up, and more responsible for myself since coming abroad*). Researchers then met to compare their emerging codes and discuss the final coding until an agreement was reached. The analysis of the data resulted in emergent themes similar to those in Roger's (1959) identity theory. Researchers agreed on how to classify the different codes into the three parts of Rogers' notions of self-concept and re-coded the data accordingly. Researchers discussed their re-coding until agreement was reached (Table 2). After coding all data the categories related to identity were summarized numerically (Table 3).

Table 2. Identity characteristics within Rogers' self-concept construct

| FACTORS TO DESCRIBE IDENTITY | CHARACTERISTICS |
|------------------------------|--|
| Self-image | Confidence and courage |
| | Independent |
| | Being present, being focused |
| | Language growth |
| | Open-minded (after experience) |
| | Patience |
| Self-esteem | Acknowledgement of overall growth |
| | Adventurous |
| | Trusting self, reassurance of ability, learning about self |
| | Motivation |
| | Pride |
| | Anxiety about speaking abilities |
| Ideal self | Desire to acculturate, adaptation |
| | Empowerment |
| | Being positive |
| | Leaning into the unknown or unstructured, spontaneity |
| | Open-mindedness (desired result) |

Following AT, the data were analyzed to see how the mediation of the different components of the AT model (subjects, tools, object, community, division of labor, and rules) impacted the outcome (identity development). Data were analyzed based on direct or indirect references to the community, rules, division of labor and tools.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The research question examines how students perceive and demonstrate their identity through the process of creating a DS during their SA experience. Results show that students reported the acknowledgement of overall linguistic gains during the course of their SA experience, ranging from an increased ability to communicate in Spanish, to feeling proud of employing extra-linguistic tools to express their ideas. In addition to reporting the students' perception of language improvement, (e.g. understanding native speakers with less difficulty, and achieving more fluency when narrating in multiple tenses) they also discussed personal gains in independence, confidence, and the feeling of knowing oneself. An overall analysis of the data provides an idea of the students' perceptions. Because of the different transactions among the factors of the activity system (relationship between subjects and community, the mediation of tools and artifacts when developing the content of the DS and reflections about their experiences, and the impact of the rules in how they develop the DS) and the data documentation, it was possible to determine the occurrences and frequency of identity references to establish general tendencies, which are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants' identity references (with at least 10 occurrences) in relation to Rogers' self-concept among the different coded artifacts.

| | ROGERS' MODEL | EMERGING CODES | NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES |
|----------|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Identity | Self-esteem | Acknowledgement of overall growth | 32 |
| | Self-image | Language growth | 31 |
| | Self-image | Independent | 22 |
| | Self-image | Confidence, courage | 16 |
| | Self-esteem | Trusting self | 23 |
| | Self-esteem | Anxiety about speaking abilities | 22 |
| | Self-esteem | Adventurous | 11 |
| | Self-esteem | Motivation | 10 |
| | Ideal-self | Desire to acculturate, adaptation | 18 |
| | Ideal-self | Empowerment | 15 |
| | Ideal-self | leaning to unknown | 10 |

In all the data, three themes emerged in both foundational and upper-level students' work: (1) Finding Oneself; (2) Appreciation of Life and Experiences; and (3) Gaining Perspective. These three themes represent different connections and transactions among students in the activity systems. The main ideas expressed in the DSs are directly influenced by the learners' interpretation of the object (DS) as suggested by Oskoz and Elola (2014) through the relationship between subjects, community and rules, but also by the personal goal of the students in terms of what they want to communicate in their DSs, as Leontiev (1978) pointed out. These three themes are used to showcase the results.

4.1 Finding Oneself

While their individual DSs were unique to each other, the common theme that arose in both Rosa and Maria's tasks and final artifact was Finding Oneself over the course of their respective SA experiences. In the case of Rosa, she underlines the life-changing nature of her experience by moving, for instance, from dependence on others to independence. Maria, on the other hand, begins her DS saying she feels overwhelmed by a sense of being out of place in the new culture, yet concludes her DS stating, "I have become someone who is not afraid to lose myself to find myself once again." Maria also emphasizes her spoken feelings with written text in red in to refer to herself in her DS (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Maria's DS (2:04- 2:07)

Rosa, visually links the space of her SA location with her self-perceived identity growth (Figure 3). In Reflection 1, she writes, "I think that this picture will show exactly where my life and personality has changed for the better." Rosa uses the map in the background for 20 seconds while she describes how she has evolved as a person, representing how the tools (e.g., DS software) mediate between the subject (the students) and the object (the creation of the DS).



Figure 3. Rosa's SA location (DS, 1:23-1:43)

For these two students, there was a convergence on several identity characteristics within Rogers' self-concept construct. In terms of self-image, both students reported, most notably, the acknowledgement of overall growth. Regarding participants' self-esteem, anxiety about speaking abilities was the characteristic most often reported in both participants. For Ideal Self, empowerment was the characteristic most discussed. These constructs will be addressed individually in the following section.

An acknowledgement of overall growth was the Self-Image characteristic most prevalent. Rosa's linguistic and personal evolution is seen in her responses to the questionnaire administered. She began her sojourn projecting a desire to grow in confidence and a sense of her capabilities, writing:

I think it will shape me by showing me what I am capable of doing. I know that back in the United States I do not push myself to do things because I am comfortable with where I am. However, while I am abroad, I am constantly in a situation that will push me and will show me what I can do. (SV1)

Here, Rosa reflects on her past while projecting the capacity she observes for identity development even from her first week of SA experiences. Halfway through the semester, Rosa notes, "I feel like I am finding out more about me than I did before. I know that I am easily influenced by those around me and back at home, I would not have discovered what I am capable of." This statement shows a clear recognition of overall change in her sense of identity, clearly differentiating from her recollection of her past self by the relation between her experiences with those of the at-home and SA communities. In her DS, she denotes having developed a new feeling of independence, as well as in her final questionnaire:

I think that this experience has opened up my mind to being more accepting. Back in the United States, I was a bit more closed minded and did not really give much thought to anything than what I was used to. After being here, I can see that there are more ways of doing things. I am glad that I am now able to look at situations and come up with solutions that are different than the ones that I used to think of. (SV2)

These reflections suggest the impact a SA experience can have on a L2 student. Rosa reports feeling more confident, open-minded, aware, and more capable of problem solving. For example, she highlighted a new ability to make her own choices (buy something, go somewhere) while navigating new places and situations, or being able to quickly make decisions to overcome travel-related challenges. She illustrates these feelings in her DS by figuratively using an image of butterflies flying from a jar while describing herself, no longer able to fit the small-city mold (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Rosa's image of butterflies (DS 2:31)

In SV2, Rosa discusses why she chose to use this image, stating, “before coming to Spain, I was like a caterpillar and after coming here I have transformed into a new person.” In the case of María, she also began her SA experience with a desire to find herself, a theme that persisted from her first reflection to the concluding statement of her DS. During the first week of SA Maria wrote, “I am a firm believer that you have to lose yourself to find yourself and that is exactly what I plan to do” (R1). Just like Rosa, Maria self-reported gains in independence and self-awareness. Halfway through her SA, she stated:

I have learned a lot about myself. I think this experience has really pushed me to become a more independent person, but also has made me more willing to grow and make connections with people. (SV2)

Both students also reported on self-image as it relates to language growth. Maria and Rosa each articulated a progression from fear to having pride in their ability to communicate in Spanish. Rosa wrote:

I think my ability to communicate with people is something meaningful that has surprised me. I have been in situations where I learned that I knew more Spanish than I thought I did. I always doubted my speaking abilities because I have been super scared to make a mistake. (SV3)

This statement suggests a shift in self-image, progressing from a person yielding to doubt to an individual who is able to embrace mistakes, and see her ability to communicate her ideas and connect with others despite those mistakes. Rosa similarly expressed a paralyzing

fear of being confronted with a language barrier with her host family, thus writing:

Meeting my host mom for the first time was exciting and nerve wracking. Then come to find out she does not know a word of English. I think that was the scariest part, having no way to communicate with her besides the bare minimum. (R1)

At the outset of Maria's SA experience, she demonstrated an awareness of her own ability to communicate in Spanish, and pride for having learned this skill in such a short amount of time. This awareness is the results of mediation within the activity system by examining SV2 and the DS. "I have had an amazing time here during this [SA] experience...I have also studied very hard here and picked up a new language in just a few short months" (SV2). She uses an image of pulsating sound bars to display her journey of becoming familiar with new sounds and linguistic codes (Figure 5).

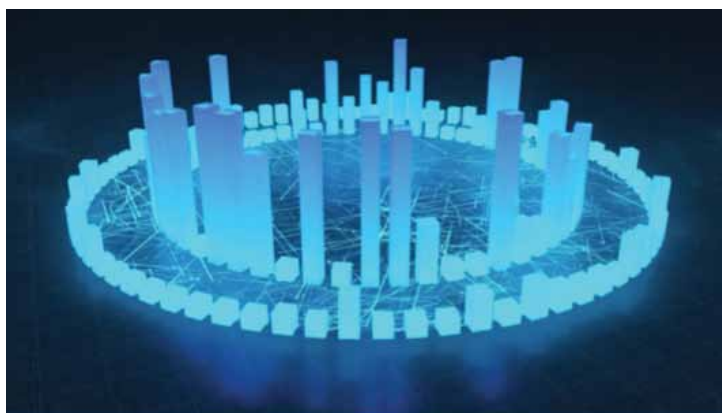


Figure 5. Maria's image of pulsating sound bars (DS, 0:30-0:34)

Both expressed feelings of fear produced by a self-perceived inability to communicate at the onset of their SA experiences. However, they each articulated observing language growth and were pleased with their abilities to express themselves and communicate with others.

In terms of the Ideal Self, Maria stated, "I am an adventurer, I am a wanderer, I am a traveler. I have become someone who is not afraid to lose myself to find myself once again." She highlighted who she believed she was through text layered over images in her DS. (Figure 6)

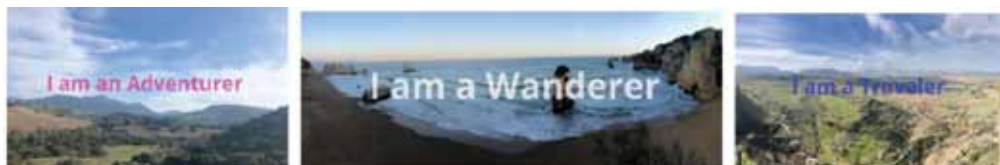


Figure 6. Maria's self representations (DS, 1:53;1:56;1:59)

Rosa's DS highlighted the character changes she experienced as a result of her sojourn, which allowed her to become her Ideal Self. Concluding her DS, Rosa affirmed, "This experience has given me independence, adventure, and courage. This is the new Rosa, one who knows who she is even when she doesn't know where she is" (author translation).

These results demonstrate self-perceived identity developments in both Rosa and Maria in their self-described journeys of Finding Oneself. They were able to overcome fears and factors that once held them back from communicating, lean into uncertainty, embrace independence, and ultimately feel empowered by the new construction of self they each created amidst unfamiliar settings. The results speak of the interrelationships between subject and community while managing at-home and SA rules, showing the dynamic interrelationship of the components of the AT model.

4.2. Appreciation of Life and Experiences

This section documents Appreciation of Life and Experiences as described in Ava and Samantha's DSs. Both students describe realizing an appreciation for their SA experiences and relationships formed, embracing differences, and being present in their surroundings. As with the previous two participants, there was a convergence on several identity characteristics within Rogers' (1959) self-concept construct within the Appreciation of Life and Experiences topic. Ava recounted the moment during a trip to an English-speaking country when she realized that Spanish had become her new normal. Thereafter, she reported feeling able to breathe in the remaining moments, appreciating every second of her new family and home. Her DS music choice reinforces this sentiment. In *Humble and Kind* by Tim McGraw, the singer longs for "five more minutes" or "a pause button" to be able to take in life's fleeting moments. Samantha documented becoming aware and appreciative of the similarities in her cultural experiences instead of becoming frustrated by differences. Regarding self-image, both students reported an acknowledgement of overall growth as well as language growth. Under self-esteem, trusting self and motivation were the most common characteristics observed. For Ideal Self, both students centered on adaptation or the desire to enculturate.

Within self-image, acknowledgement of overall growth and language growth were salient themes in students' written reflections while creating their DSs. Ava, in her second questionnaire wrote:

I am intrigued to see how far I have come in my [SA] experience. I am excited about the Spanish language that I am learning and how it is helping me better communicate with my new family and friends.

This quote demonstrates her perception of overall growth and her excitement about her progression in the ability to communicate her ideas. Similarly, Samantha describes finding an appreciation for this unique time in her life as well as an ability to see her overall growth despite sometimes feeling frustrated. She reflected:

I am glad I took this opportunity to go abroad while I've had the chance. It has definitely not been what I thought it would be and I have not always been the most content since I've been here, thus far, I have learned a lot not only about Spanish, but myself, culture, and Europe in general. (SV2)

Additionally, Samantha noted shifting from concentrating on differences to being present in the moment. She begins her DS presenting multilingual audio recordings of the following statement (subtitled in English):

It's easy to focus on the differences between people (Finnish) when they speak a different language than your own (English). They think about things in alternative ways (Swedish), and grew up around different cultures and expectations (Spanish). But when you are given the opportunity to learn about their lives and experiences (Norwegian), you realize differences in the language or home country (German).

In SV1, she writes, “as time has gone on, I don’t even think about what is different or the same about the culture I grew up in and the one I live in now, but now I focus on what I enjoy about being here.” Samantha represents this shift of focus with images of cats and dogs in conflicting and loving relationships (Figures 7 & 8). She states, “every time we interacted, we found more ways we were similar” (author translation).



Figure 7. Cats and dogs conflicting relationship (DS, 1:27-1:33)



Figure 8. Cats and dogs loving relationship (DS, 1:34-1:38)

In terms of self-esteem, trusting self or learning about self and motivation were the most common characteristics observed. Samantha described forming relationships with locals

as a turning point in her SA experience, and how the bonds of this community served as her motivation:

A big part of what made me enjoy my time in Spain was meeting new people, because at the beginning of this semester, I was really down. I began to feel better when I started meeting up with these different guys and talking to them about their lives back home, their languages, and their passions. These times are what I want to remember most about my time in Spain and what better way to reflect on them than to do an entire project about them. (Q3)

This quote shows a direct relationship between the subject and the community within the activity system, one that led Samantha toward a place of acceptance and appreciation of herself and the community. In a similar fashion, Ava also highlighted community relationships as important to her SA experience writing:

Without realizing it Seville had become my new home, and soon, this would be the place filled with the people I will miss. I had so many expectations for my [SA] trip, but like most things this was something I could not prepare for. Family is not always blood and Home is not always a place it's a feeling, or a bond. (DS)

From Ava's host family to her friends, she articulated that people are important to her idea of home, wherever that may be by including images of them in her DS (Figures 9 & 10).



Figure 9. Ava's host family (DS, 2:05)



Figure 10. Ava's friends (DS, 2:08)

For Ideal self, both students centered on adaptation. Ava offered a concrete example of her self-perception of adapting:

I have learned to enjoy the slower pace of the Sevillian lifestyle. At first I was frustrated that most of the city shuts down during “siesta” but throughout the time here I think it has helped me relax and take time to myself. (SV2)

This quote underlines positive attributes found in an experience that was once frustrating. Similarly, Samantha offered examples of day-to-day experiences that were once challenging. She described her feelings of adaptation in her second questionnaire:

Two months ago, I would have said I wasn't adapting well to anything (the language, the people, how business/food/streets worked). But now, halfway through my time here, I would say that I have grown more comfortable with everyday exchanges. I'm not put on edge to go in a store and buy a candy bar, use a map to find a new place, or take a bus. I am confident enough in my Spanish to have a simple conversation with a native speaker and not completely mess it up.

Both participants moved from criticism to appreciation of life and experiences during their SA sojourn, acknowledging self-perceived growth. These outcomes are supported from the dynamic interrelationship between the diverse components of the AT model; mediation of tools to bring completion to the DS, but perhaps more importantly, the relationship between the participants and their communities and the rules that come with each.

4. 3. Gaining Perspective

This section documents Gaining Perspective as an emergent theme described in Amanda and Michelle's DSs. Both students described turning unexpected situations into new ways to see their experiences. Amanda reflected on overcoming depression by learning to see life through the eyes of a child, documenting what children in her internship taught her. In Michelle's case, she documented overcoming loneliness and feeling overwhelmed by focusing

on friendship. As with the previous participants, there was a convergence of several identity characteristics within Rogers' (1959) self-concept construct.

Amanda and Michelle discussed self-image most often in terms of the acknowledgement of overall growth. In her R3 Amanda wrote:

This [SA] experience has challenged my view of independence, and the way I see myself as an adult. I have lived "away from home" for four years now, but it was always just a couple hours drive away. Being on another continent for almost 7 months has put pressure on me and my life. But this pressure has forced me to evaluate who I am..., and who I am becoming as I mature into an adult. I have defiantly had some hard moments while abroad, where all I wanted to do was buy a plane ticket home. But things such as finances, school, and the motivation to push through has stopped me. I have grown immensely as a person and a student.

Michelle's perceived gains describe her overall growth through a shift in perspective and a choice to be present. She wrote:

The moment I started to be present and to live in the moment is when I started to feel most like myself and the person I want to be. I went from being an itinerary making control freak to being able to go with the flow and just be present in the moment. Studying abroad has changed me into the person I didn't know I needed to be, but I am so glad it's who I've become. (DS)

Both participants expressed contentment with who they became over the course of their SA experiences.

In terms of self-esteem, trusting self and motivation were the most common characteristics. For Amanda, learning about herself came paradoxically while teaching young people in her internship. In her DS, she recounted learning about herself and gaining new perspectives through experiences with children:

I reflected. I thought about the difficult time I was having emotionally, personally and realized that when I went to school, the emotional turmoil went away. The kids weren't worried. They were carefree and they were laughing and smiling and crying and living. Yes, I was there to teach them, but I was the one who learned something. (author translation)

She illustrates this sentiment in her DS with videoclips of interactions with her students (Figures 11 & 12).



Figure 11. Amanda and her students (DS, 1:48)



Figure 12. Amanda and her students (DS, 2:12)

Through relationships with others, Amanda learned to trust herself and found new motivation. Furthermore, Amanda marks this turning point in her DS musically, shifting from silence to the song *Alive* by Kehlani.

Similar to Amanda's internship experience, Michelle discussed the role of friendships in helping her to learn about herself and be present. Like Amanda, she describes her turning point through a discovery of an appreciation of the people and relationships in her life, stating, "The people. That is who has made...studying abroad in Spain one of the best experiences of my life" (DS). With her choice of mode (music) she demonstrates her feelings in the object (DS) by using an instrumental version of *No Place* by the Backstreet Boys to illustrate that it is people, not places, that mean home. Both participants found motivation in others, which led to reflection and new perspectives.

Both students document perspective shifts, suggesting growth in their ideal selves. Michelle, in her second SA questionnaire describes her perception of gains in acculturation:

I have learned language and adapted the lifestyle here, rather than making the people around me adapt to mine. Specifically, with food, I never would have thought I would be eating half the things that have become my favorite. (SV2)

Michelle described a willingness to step outside her comfort zone and lean into the unknown, leading to her description of her Ideal self, one who can be flexible, adapt, and find joy in experiences. Amanda cites living with a family to her description of enculturation, writing:

I had no idea what the culture of Spain was like when I arrived. Now, especially with the experience in the host home, I have been given a direct line of access to the Spanish culture, specifically the Sevillano culture. Seeing their attitudes about the home and living space reinforces the social life. I was able to learn how to cook many common Spanish dishes and be surrounded with the Sevillano accent through my family. (SV3)

Both participants articulated adapting to experiences in their host cultures as opportunities to develop more open-minded ideal selves.

Each of the aforementioned topics, finding oneself, appreciating life experiences, and

gaining perspective, represents different connections and transactions that each student engaged in, in relation to other components within each activity system. The connection between the AT components (subject, artifacts/tools and object) was key in the attainment of the outcome. Yet, in a SA experience, the communities (contexts such as classroom and new community (i.e., host family, friends) that surrounds the students) also impact the way in which students see themselves and the world as well as the rules inherent to the task and the division of labor among students and with the instructors. The interconnectedness of these components and the creation of the DS allowed students to express their self-perceived growth as suggested here.

Regarding identity exploration and awareness, these participants were able to reflect upon and articulate their SA experience through their multi-step course project of developing DSs. Unlike previous studies in identity in SA abroad settings (Garcia-Nieto, 2018; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Tullock, 2018; Vinogradova, 2014), the current study was able to provide students' with opportunities to reflect on their perceptions of their personal growth through the ensemble of diverse semiotic resources and modes (DSs). As in Gregori-Signes' (2008) study, participants in this study were able to share their stories and voices, had the opportunity to share their views publicly in the classroom and in dynamic contexts (e.g., family household, Seville, other areas of Spain). Similarly, as Vinogradova (2014) pointed out, these students involved themselves in a process of identity construction, in which their abilities, points of view, and cultural knowledge were represented in the final product they created. A unique aspect of their DS is that not only do they articulate aspects of identity growth, but they do so in a multimodal manner, showing empowerment in their stories. These outcomes are brought to life due to the constant relationship between the AT components that shape the students' perceptions, practices, and reflections.

5. CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how digital storytelling allows students the opportunity to reflect upon their self-perceived identity development as a result of their SA experiences. Through the DSs, students were able to elaborate on specific aspects of their identity growth such as self-perception, self-esteem, and their perceptions of their ideal-selves. Rogers' constructs emerged from the constant and dynamic interaction (and mediation) of the components presented in the AT model, providing a space for students to articulate their SA experiences in their DSs. It is important to note that the data analyses showed the dynamic actions students performed within the activity system. Using AT as a theoretical framework while also including a multimodal method of communication showed that students fully engaged in the SA sojourn and DS process and completed it perceiving overall growth beyond an academic experience.

Although the six participants provided invaluable data, it would be interesting to include more participants with different characteristics (e.g., gender, age, heritage language, students' major, etc.), in additional settings, learning other languages and cultures. Furthermore, the study took place during one academic semester, researchers could expand this study to

include analysis of students' perceptions of gains in identity development both leading up to and following a SA experience through DS creation, thus exploring a more longitudinal perspective of these overlapping concepts. In their stories, there are clear examples of intercultural reflection, highlighting the potential of this tool (DS) to investigate intercultural competence in SA settings.

Undoubtedly, the twenty-first century education urges educators to integrate technologies and multimodal tools to address the needs of new generations of students who communicate digitally. As researchers, we consider that DSs offer a powerful venue for students to develop and articulate in their L2, their identities at home or study abroad environments. As teachers, we see that tools such as DS offer a unique space for reflection, articulation, and documentation of the students' awareness of their own identity growth in SA settings. Grounded in AT and following multiliteracies tenets and multimodal practices, this collective case-study offered a significant example to continue leveraging the place of L2/SA programs in higher education.

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