Rewriting traditional tales as multilingual narratives at elementary school: Problems and progress

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For several years children at Joyce Public School have been rewriting traditional stories from localized cultural and linguistic perspectives, creating innovative, individualized narrative forms with digital technology. Our experimental multiliteracies research project is a collaboration of school and university teachers and researchers following a guided action research paradigm. The study has as one of its stated objectives the development of multilingual story retelling as a means of inexpensively supporting home language maintenance, fostering language awareness and aiding English as a second language learning in a community of high linguistic diversity. This paper tells our story thus far, focusing on how we have approached the creation of multilingual stories in heterogeneous, urban language classes, discussing stumbling blocks that have forced creative problem-solving and showcasing successes.

Depuis plusieurs années, les enfants de l'école Joyce Public School réécrivent des contes traditionnels à partir de perspectives culturelles et linguistiques localisées, créant des formes narratives innovatrices et personnalisées avec des technologies numériques. Notre projet de recherche expérimental sur la multilitératie est le fruit d'une collaboration entre des enseignants de l'école et des professeurs et chercheurs universitaires sur la base d'un paradigme de recherche-action orientée. Un des objectifs de la recherche est le développement de la réécriture multilingue de contes en tant que moyen peu onéreux de soutenir la préservation de la langue parlée à la maison et de favoriser la conscience métalinguistique de même que l'apprentissage de l'anglais comme langue seconde dans une communauté à forte diversité linguistique. Le présent article rend compte de l'état actuel de notre recherche et discute de notre approche de la création de récits multilingues dans des classes de langue hétérogènes en milieu urbain et des embûches qui ont engendré une résolution de problèmes créative tout en mettant en relief un certain nombre de réussites.

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Introduction

Emergent Multiliteracies in Theory and Practice is a collaborative action research study to devise multiliteracies pedagogies that brings together teachers at Joyce Public School (JPS), an elementary school in an inner-city area of Toronto, and researchers at York University. The research project has as its overarching aim the exploration of contemporary multiliteracies in theory and practice. It aims specifically to create pedagogical processes for rewriting traditional narratives, using contemporary multimedia to:

- include diverse cultural perspectives in retelling stories;
- incorporate multiple languages
  - in support of multilingual acquisition, maintenance and awareness
  - to bridge the community and the school;
- explore new text forms using digital media.

Our project uses traditional children's literature as a fulcrum for creating new narratives. Children in the primary and junior grades are taught a traditional story of the teacher's choice that they will go on to rewrite from their own cultural and linguistic perspectives with the help of digital technology (cf. Lotherington and Chow, 2006). The research works toward creating innovative, glocalized narrative forms and supporting multiple language learning while teaching the traditional folk and fairy tales, fables and myths that pervade social expectations of common knowledge.

The research contributes to the development of a learning community: a multilateral collaboration bringing together teachers, university researchers, educational administrators and community members in pursuit of improved elementary literacy education. We have created a community of practice at JPS devoted to creating inclusive narratives that develop multilingual realizations of traditional stories from contemporary cultural perspectives. The children, who are the focus of the project, are experimenting with fresh new ways of telling well-loved stories. The teachers are experimenting with multiliteracies pedagogies.

Theoretical background

A number of theories underpin the work. We take our starting point from the landmark article written by the New London Group (NLG) in 1996 calling for new perspectives on literacy and education that take into account cultural and linguistic diversity within the new social order of the Information Age: a vision represented as *multiliteracies*. As the NLG (1996, ¶2) explain:

> [W]e attempt to broaden this understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include negotiating a multiplicity of discourses. We

> seek to highlight two principal aspects of this multiplicity. First, we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second, we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies.

Theoretical support for the use of multiple languages in education is abundant: Lambert (1974) theorized the socio-cultural and cognitive benefits of adding rather than subtracting languages in any second language learning situation as: *additive bilingualism*. Cenoz and Genesee (1998) expand this notion to *additive multilingualism*, projecting the complex acquisition of multiple languages to be mutually supportive when all languages are maintained. This perspective is premised on Cummins' (1981, 1991, 2000) description of a *common underlying proficiency*, which predicts a cognitive interdependence of accumulated linguistic knowledge supporting the acquisition of individual languages on deeper transferable communicative proficiencies, theorized as the *interdependence principle* (see also Cummins, this volume).

Bialystok (2001) has shown that bilinguals have an edge on metalinguistic awareness and problem-solving abilities. Cummins (2000) and Wong-Fillmore (2000) further indicate that maintaining children's multiple language proficiencies supports not only their language development, but their cultural identity and social confidence.

The study finds pedagogical support in reader response theory which projects the reader–text relationship as a personal response granting the reader agency to enter a narrative and create rather than passively receive a literary world (Rosenblatt, 1991). The reader's right to take ownership in narrative experience I have elaborated in the digital context using Ong's (1980) late 20th-century concept of secondary orality envisioned as a renewed orality in "a media-conscious world," differing from primary orality (e.g. story-telling) which he claims "cannot cope with electronic media" (p. 203). Secondary orality is dependent on literary form, and mediated electronically. Though Ong was writing for a pre-Information era audience, his theories are richly supportive of 21st-century literacies which include a plethora of digitally mediated conversational modalities. Ong's concept of secondary orality propels our momentum to create inclusive narratives that accommodate the cultural and linguistic realities of contemporary children learning to read using digital modalities for story-(re)telling. In this way, our project responds to Lankshear and Knobel's (2003) calls for digital epistemologies to describe learning in the digital era.

Educational context

Joyce Public School is in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which, according to its website, is the largest school board in Canada serving "280,000 day students in one of the most diverse and multicultural education systems in the world" (TDSB, 2007, ¶2). JPS is located in an industrial pocket of northwestern Toronto in a community of mixed housing. The population attending the school is typical of inner-city schools, characterized by low socioeconomic status and a high percentage of recent immigrants. More than two thirds of the children attending the school speak a language other than English or French at home and in the community, in which it is estimated that over 30 languages are spoken.

JPS has developed a focus on technologically enhanced learning as a means of addressing the socio-cultural inequities community children bring to curricular learning in the province of Ontario, where standardized tests will determine literacy and numeracy success. The school has been designated a pedagogically innovative school for its use of information and communications technology by federal and provincial educational agencies. Many teachers and the principal have been honoured with prestigious citations and awards for outstanding achievement in education. Given the multilingual, multicultural population of the school, its commitment to the development of technologically enhanced learning and the excellence of its teaching staff, JPS is an ideal context for multiliteracies research.

The pilot studies: Reinterpreting culture, exploring digital media

We conducted the first pilot study in 2004 to rewrite the story of *Goldilocks and the three bears* in Sandra Chow's Grade 2 classroom (Lotherington, 2005, 2006; Lotherington and Chow, 2006). We started the project with a focus on including children's concepts of culture and finding new ways of telling stories using digital technology. The children created deeply imaginative versions of the original *Three bears* story in which the main protagonist was envisioned as a space explorer, a robber, a shark, a poor little neglected girl — all characterizations that interpret the vandalistic vagrancy of Goldilocks and follow through with a story that interprets why a character would invade the home of three … bears, or aliens or goldfish.[1] For example, Figure 1 illustrates Goldilocks rewritten as a space explorer who invades the home of three aliens and finds three bowls of slime which taste like: mud, taffy with nails in it and … jello! This rewriting shows successful cultural reinterpretation of a food that few contemporary children would know and virtually none would consider sufficiently tempting to prompt them to invade someone's house: porridge.

We made a number of important discoveries with this pilot study. Most importantly: children's concepts of culture are grounded in the digital rather than

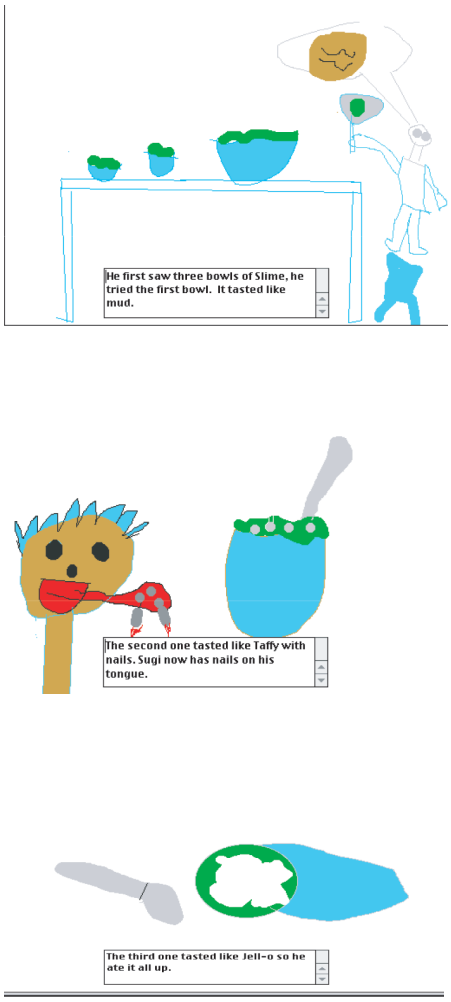


Figure 1: Sugi finds three bowls of slime

the physical world. Given that language and culture are intimately tied, what did this mean? Young children have only limited experience with comparative cultures in a multicultural society, especially given that multiculturalism is the normal state of affairs in the classroom. The envisioning and incorporation of culture in the stories that fuses curricular and children's understandings remains a compelling challenge in the research.

A pedagogical discovery was that the multiple setting changes of *Goldilocks and the three bears* created counter-productive complexity for children in Grade 2, still trying to understand what a narrative is. The following year, Sandra Chow decided to rewrite *The little red hen*, again in Grade 2, using the experience she had gained rewriting Goldilocks. *The little red hen* was rewritten as a contemporary play, in which students rewrote the characters, the materials, the setting and the genre, but retained the basic narrative plot and structure. Whereas in the original story, the little red hen wants to harvest the grain to bake bread for which she solicits help from other, lazy barnyard animals, the contemporary rewritten protagonists were making foods such as hot dogs, macaroni and birthday cake in castles, hospitals, deserts and under the sea with gargoyles, princesses, tigers and jellyfish. This time culture was more broadly interpreted by the children, though many rewritten versions retained obvious roots in Disney-mediated fairy tales. Group plays were scripted and acted with costumes, scene changes and props for student audiences, videotaped, converted to iMovie and given student voice-overs.

The pilot study rewriting Goldilocks was an introduction to how a narrative could morph into different digital forms that children are able to create with elementary technological support. As Sandra progressed in her Grade 2 rewriting of *The little red hen*, we came to the realization that we should be able to incorporate multiple soundtracks in selected genres, such as iMovies and digital game formats.

Creating linguistically inclusive digital narratives

In the third year of our narrative rewriting project, we were growing more comfortable with multimedia and with cultural infusion. Experimentation with digital media and cultural reinterpretation was leading us to interesting questions about how children think and how digital technology could be imaginatively incorporated in literacy learning, but we were still missing a quintessential piece: how could we help the children to create multilingual narratives?

Hornberger (2002) posits that L1 and L2 acquisition (in contexts of bi- and multiliteracies) are not linear developments, but correlational: "[O]ne language and literacy is developing in relation to one or more other languages and literacies" (pp. 37–38; see also Hornberger, 1989). Children in the primary grades were learning how to read and write, and many of them were learning English at the same time. The school had provision for English as a second language, French as a second language, and after-school international language classes in Cantonese and Vietnamese, which provided us with useful links. The teachers themselves spoke a variety of languages used by the children: Farsi, Greek, Italian and Caribbean varieties of English among them. All of these were useful, but there were many more languages spoken by children

in each class than there were teacher translators, a situation characteristic of classrooms in the TDSB.

Translation software

Our starting point was an investigation into the use of translation software, inspired by a class observation during which a teacher used an online machine translator to assist a newly arrived child who did not speak English in learning classroom routines. In one of his Grade 4 classes, I observed that not only could the child, who had recently arrived in Canada from Ecuador, read the teacher's morning message in Spanish, which welcomed him as part of the class, but the children in the class became familiar with basic Spanish greetings — a win–win situation. JPS is well equipped to implement a technological solution of this kind: it has wireless Internet; a mobile Mac laptop lab, though the machines are outdated, working on OS 9; and a library lab of newer desktop computers. All teachers at JPS are supplied with a laptop computer which they are encouraged to explore and use creatively in their teaching.

The upshot of initial investigations was that, for the level of text sophistication we were working with, online solutions with no cost to the project could be found. Options included the built-in translator widget for the dashboard (via Sherlock) of Mac OS X systems, useable through an automatic Internet link; or, with PCs and earlier Macs, direct online access at babelfish.altavista.com/, both driven by Systran and capable of translating short texts. Later versions of Microsoft Word also have a translate function driven by WorldLingo available under tools via language, and capable of translating larger texts. So machine translation tools were readily available.

However, as we began to play with machine translation we realized quickly how flawed the results were — to the point of being unusable (see Figure 2). We had been advised by individual providers we approached that all machine translators required post-editing. This had dissuaded us from paying large sums of money for translation software that would provide only a partial solution to our quest. Furthermore, we discovered that translation software companies sell in bundles of languages geared to business interests, so we could buy a global language bundle that included Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Swedish, Dutch, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, but this included languages we did not need (e.g. Swedish and Dutch). Furthermore, this assortment did not give us any assistance with languages of high need such as Tamil, Vietnamese and Turkish, not to mention languages not usually written, such as Guyanese Creole. The limited range in machine translatable languages available in software packages was also seen in the free online translators.

En français:	Il était une foix, il y avait une petite fille.
En español:	Une vez sobre une época, había une pequeña muchacha.
Em português:	Uma vez em cima de um momento, havia uma menina pequena.
In italiano:	Una volta, ci era une ragazza piccola.
Ελληνικά :	*Μια φορά κι έναν καιρό, υπήρζε ένα μικρό κορίτσι.*
По-русски	Once upon a time, была маленькая девушка.

Figure 2: Online translations of: "Once upon a time, there was a little girl."

TDSB resources

The teachers suggested that we turn to resources available in the TDSB, where continuing education offers programs in elementary international languages. The TDSB administrators I consulted were highly supportive, but unable to offer tenable suggestions for linguistically heterogeneous classrooms whose languages were only partially supported in after-school programs taught by itinerant teachers. Weaving international language teacher involvement into day schools is problematic as provincial education infrastructure tends to separate after-school international language courses from day-school curriculum.

Utilizing the resources of the community

We continued to brainstorm ways of meeting the multilingual potential of the children's creative digital narratives. In Sandra's Grade 4 class, children started from a different point: they based their rewritten narratives on a Chinese legend, creating a class version of the traditional story, *Old man Yu removes the mountain*. This project had a twist: the children employed a video games format, working with Professor Jennifer Jenson and her research and programming team at York University on their evolving website that enables narratives via a legomation game shell (see Figure 3). The children contributed characters and settings that the programmer has now programmed into the site.

The game format appealed to the students, whose work directly assisted the university researchers working on video games and education. Though they did not produce multilingual versions, Sandra had the class story translated into Chinese, so the text is available in a bilingual English–Chinese version (see Figure 4), though we found Chinese difficult to transport across programs and systems. Sandra's post-project ideas included the brilliant notion of a "spiral story", which begins in Chinese and is translated to English, whereupon the children create their own versions of the story and translate them back to Chinese — and/or into other languages. In other words, we begin with another language, and spiral through a multilingual story-telling adventure.

In Shiva Soutoudeh's Grade 1 class, children were reinterpreting *The three little pigs*, creating colourful plasticine story boards to illustrate their rewritten versions. Their story boards were a beautiful example of the intrinsic multi-

Figure 3: Legomation tool for programming narratives

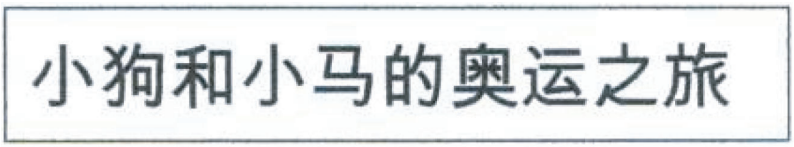


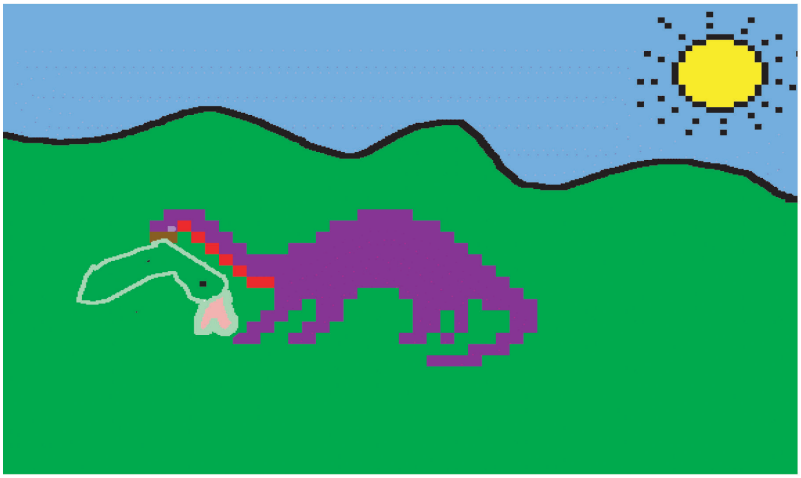
Figure 4: *Puppy and horse go to the Olympics* (title in Chinese version)

modality of literacies in primary education (see Figure 5). Shiva's well-paced teaching of *The three little pigs* included a measured transition from the canonical narrative into a written storyboard of eight sections, to individual versions based on the same storyboard template, to sculpted plasticine versions of the eight-section storyboard template, which were photographed for conversion into iMovies. The plan is to create bilingual and multilingual soundtracks using teacher-assisted translation, and parental interpretation of translated material. Given that the children also studied music in a digital music lab, the teachers wondered whether their own compositions could be utilized as musical background for the soundtrack offered in multiple languages.

In Michelle's senior kindergarten, children were learning and retelling Aesop's fable of *The lion and the mouse*. At age 5, children have not yet learned to read, but they learn the story and draw beautiful pictures. Michelle has discovered that collaborative story creation facilitates narrative learning, and she enables children of this age to retell imaginative and poetic story versions. Michelle created Power Point presentations of the children's retold stories, which she scribed for them. Figure 6 shows one child's retelling of *The lion and the mouse* as *The dinosaur and the snake*, which she had translated into Tagalog, with the assistance of a school staff member.

Figure 5: *The three little pigs* recreated as an undersea story in Shiva's Grade 1 class

A little boy who had arrived recently from Russia listened attentively to the story and joined in on class activities, though Michelle was unsure how much English he understood. One day he told Michelle that he wanted to tell her his version of *The lion and the mouse*:



The dinosaur captured the snakes. He was going to eat the snakes. The snakes cried out, "please don't eat us!" The dinosaur let the snakes free.

Hinuli ng Dinosur ang mga ahas at handa niya itong kainin, subalit nag makaawa ang mga ahas at sinabing, "parang awa mo na, huwag mo kaming kainin." Pinalaya ng Dinosur ang mga ahas.

Figure 6: Æsop's fable of *The lion and the mouse* retold as *The dinosaur and the snake* in English and Tagalog

The tiger and the chicken (by Igor)[2]

Once upon a time a chicken walked and a tiger saw him and wanted to eat him. The tiger went to eat the chicken and the chicken said, "Don't eat me please! I'm going to help you one day." The tiger laughed, "You are a little chicken; you are too small to help me." Then one day the tiger wanted to drink and he found a waterfall. He saw a porcupine and the porcupine hurt the tiger and the tiger roared. The chicken ran and told his mom that his friend was hurt. The chicken ran and ran and ran to find the tiger. He saw the tiger and yelled at the porcupine that he would throw him in the water. The porcupine yelled, "How come?" The chicken said. "You hurt

> my friend!" The porcupine did not listen and the chicken threw him in the water.
>
> The chicken pulled the pricks out of the tiger and they were friends.

I emailed the story to a doctoral student who is a native speaker of Russian, requesting a translation[3]. Her quick reply showed me that we had ready access to distance translations. Though machine translation was terminally faulty, digitally mediated human translations in languages using mutually available scripts in a word-processor were fine. Our learning community was no more limited by physical space than the children's cultural experiences were. Igor's story in Russian, his native language, follows.

> Тигр и тсыпленок
>
> Автор Игорь
>
> Однажды цыпленок гулял. Его увидел тигр и захотел его съесть. Тигр подошел, чтобы съесть цыпленка, и тут цыпленок сказал: «Не ешь меня пожалуйста! Однажды я тебе помогу.» Тигр рассмеялся: «Ты – маленький цыпленок. Ты слишком мал и не сможешь мне помочь».
>
> В один прекрасный день тигр захотел пить и нашел водопад. Там он увидел дикобраза. Дикобраз поранил его, и тигр зарычал. Цыпленок прибежал к своей маме и сказал, что его друг в беде. Потом цыпленок долго-долго бежал, чтобы найти тигра. Он увидел тигра и крикнул дикобразу, что он бросит его в воду. Дикобраз закричал в ответ: «Это еще почему?» А цыпленок ответил: «Потому что ты поранил моего друга!» Но дикобраз не послушал, и цыпленок бросил его в воду.
>
> Потом цыпленок вытащил иголки из тигра, и они стали дружить.

This small experiment showed us that translations can be effected in our digital community: the lack of on-site translators was a problem overcome.

Summary and conclusions

> [T]he term 'multimodality' refers to the fact that all texts combine and integrate diverse semiotic modalities. (Baldry, 2000, p. 21)

The collective experimental pedagogies of the teachers at JPS are aimed towards a vision of multiliteracies in practice to facilitate expressive, useful, proficient and flexible language and literacy development that prepares children for the digital communications of the future while welcoming the multilingual, multicultural realities of their lived experience. At the suggestion of the principal, we focused our multiliteracies research on narratives as a vehicle for

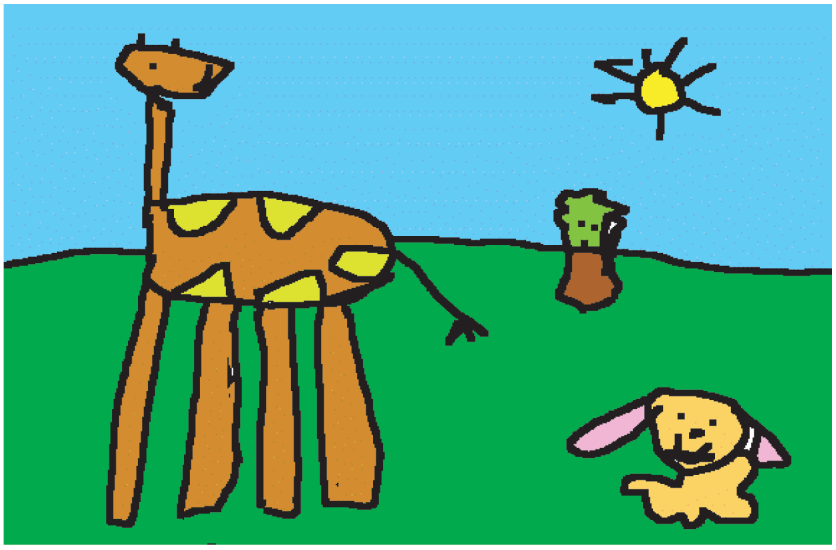
pedagogical experimentation. The teachers guided the children to retell traditional stories incorporating their cultural perspectives, and the linguistic repertoires of the school community, using digital technology to create the new text versions. We hypothesized that children would improve in their traditionally assessed English learning, in keeping with the principles of additive multilingualism (Cenoz and Genesee, 1998), and the interdependence principle (Cummins, 1981, 1991, 2000) that predict improved learning of both L1 and L2 in a linguistically supportive context.

Though our collective has guided children to create varied multilingual stories, we are still working towards linguistically personalized texts that will sustain the sort of supportive language pedagogy required to fulfill these theoretical projections. Problems encountered include poor machine translation, difficulties accessing international language teachers to support multilingual classrooms in day schools and unequal support for the many community languages children speak. We are still collaboratively working towards our vision of multiliteracies pedagogy, having experienced many stumbling blocks in the creation of multilingual narratives that I share with you here. However, these problems are instructive, and have spurred more sophisticated thinking around community and linguistic resources.

Where to from here?

We will be inviting parents and community members into the creation process of developing multilingual versions in different modalities, building constructively on research focusing on parent–child multilingual literacy programs in the Greater Toronto Area, such as the Parent Involvement in Education after-school project in Peel Board[4] in which children and parents read multilingual materials together (Schecter, Ippolito, Chow, Knowlton, Shiraishi and Khan, 2006). We plan to invite parents to read their children's multilingual versions on audio-visual soundtracks that will form part of the finished digital narratives. We are exploring translation possibilities through digital exchange with schools in other countries, whose students could work co-operatively in this project to co-develop narratives. We could then compile voice tracks of children reading their collectively retold versions in their native languages to create authentic multilingual texts that provide a language learning and language maintenance experience and set the stage for further language learning opportunities.

We continue to experiment and qualitatively revise pathways to teaching and learning socio-culturally and linguistically inclusive narratives. What we will eventually emerge with is not a set of products, cute though the children's stories are, but a pedagogy of multiliteracies, not for replication but for exemplification of the potential of digital technology for multilingual education within the global–local synergy that Robertson (1995) terms "glocalization."



They lived happily ever after.
The end.

Figure 7: Multimodality in children's narrative expression

Meanwhile, the children's beautiful, optimistic stories are highly motivating, and though life is never as neat as this kindergarten child shows in Figure 7, we are getting there.

Notes

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[1] See selected hypertext stories at schools.tdsb.on.ca/joyce/main/goldilocks/index.htm.
[2] Igor is a pseudonym.
[3] Thank you to Natalia Sinitskaya for providing the translation of Igor's story.
[4] See thornwood.peelschools.org/esl_website/text/pie_project.htm.

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