

# Adolescent identity through authentic stories: Action research

By Camilla Elliott

## Snapshot

During Semester 2 of 2018, 12 Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) boys at Mazenod College participated in an action research project to determine how an exploration of their own cultural heritage might encourage a deeper sense of Identity. Their maturity as 18-year-olds gave the boys a new perspective on family stories and the motivation to gain deeper meaning through adult conversations. As a result of analysis and interpretation of the boys' responses to questionnaires, Interviews, and their final video, it was apparent that the majority experienced a growth in self-knowledge and understanding.

## Introduction

Action research can have a direct impact on classroom practice. It 'permits teachers to investigate their own practice and to discover what will and will not work for their students in their classrooms' (Mertler, 2017, p.22). As school libraries diversify to a changed role within schools, it is an effective research method as it provides a link between practice and the achievement of goals. It's flexible. In employing inquiry-based learning strategies, it also provided a scaffolded process whereby students could build confidence as their journey progressed.

This project grew from an opportunity to be involved in a guided action research cohort with the International Boys' Schools Coalition, an organization committed to high quality research in boys' education. Whilst the organization specifically addresses boys' education, this particular research could be applied equally to boys' or girls' learning and was an opportunity to undertake a quality action research process within a guided program.

## The question

The question at the heart of this action research project was:

*How might an exploration of the stories of Year 12 boys' cultural heritage encourage a deeper sense of identity?*

It arose from heightened media reporting of the lawless activities of inter-racial conflict between youth gangs in Melbourne suburbs. Disaffected youth finding power in negative behaviour. These young people came to mind as I read about successful personal storytelling projects that had delivered positive outcomes for university undergraduates and K-12 students in the United States (Zehr, 2018; Vitali, 2016). The telling of personal stories had been 'a way of building

relationships and community in acknowledging, recognising, and validating students' funds of knowledge' (Vitali, 2018, p. 27). This literature provided me with the idea of conducting an action research project that explored the concept of storytelling with a group of Mazenod College Year 12 VCAL boys. Potentially, these students could be leaving school with less than optimal feelings of achievement in their educational journey.

**I saw this as an opportunity to assist the boys to understand themselves and each other as a diverse cultural mix at a critical time in their lives.**

An exploration of the stories of their cultural heritage, in this instance, focused on the boys' immigrant backgrounds and, to that end, their cultural identity. Through conversations with family members, they engaged with parents and grandparents to hear stories of the experiences, joys, and hardships endured in making a new life in Australia. I saw this as an opportunity to assist the

boys to understand themselves and each other as a diverse cultural mix at a critical time in their lives. I believed that through personal storytelling they would gain an increased understanding of themselves, their peers, and society.

## Exploring the literature

As students prepare to graduate, their achievements, attitudes and identity to this stage will be carried into adulthood. As this was a relatively reluctant group of learners, the research of Reichert & Hawley (2010) and others on successful strategies for boys' education were examined to support the practical completion of the project. The literature reviewed in preparation for the action also explored the importance of identity in the life of a student and storytelling as a learning model.

In reporting their research findings, Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt (2002), state that success in improving boys' learning outcomes involved expanding repertoires of practice that 'enhanced boys' sense of self' and 'engaged with the cultures with which they were familiar' (p. 163). Focusing on the social diversity of their own families as immigrants provided them with a real-life, meaningful situation.

In writing about the importance of storytelling for undergraduate teacher education, Vitali (2016) suggests that 'drawing from students' family experiences, family stories become the content and context for learning and teaching' (p. 27). The strength of family knowledge as stories is a rich resource for learning. Further, Zehr (2017) found that 'telling stories helps us understand ourselves and each other, and build community' (p.13), while also serving to support a students' social and emotional development. Vitali (2016), in introducing storytelling to pre-service teachers, shared the reflection of one student who stated:

**The strength of family knowledge as stories is a rich resource for learning.**

Sharing our stories changes us. It makes us feel aware of what we actually care about most in our lives. It reminds us that our depth of feeling parallels the depth of feeling which our fellow human beings must also feel. (p.42)

King & Gurian (2006) echo the above findings, stating that 'quite often, boys do their best work when teachers establish authentic purpose and meaningful, real-life connections' (p 58). Storytelling, however, is a complex process consisting of a range of elements. If students have not been high achievers throughout their school life are to successfully complete a storytelling project, they will require a structured process.

As stated by Kolk (2012), digital storytelling is a positive and popular learning activity in that it 'pushes students beyond creating slideshows or presentations about a topic, requiring them to incorporate their opinions and perspectives' (Conclusion). In using the project as a personal exploration for the boys, it was evident that the journey would influence success in delivering a finished product. The research of Reichart & Hawley (2010) recommends that a framework for learning is essential for success as 'boys want clear rules and directions. They want relevance - a clear line drawn from their lessons to their lives and feelings' (loc. 195).

**...that immigrants are influenced by, and are 'always mindful of, two homes: their community of residence (where they immigrated to) and their community of origin...**

Zehr (2017) insists that storytelling belongs in the classroom because 'telling our stories helps us understand ourselves and each other, and build community' (p. 13). Binkowski (n.d.) quoted Eduardo Díaz, the executive director of the Smithsonian Latino Center, as saying that immigrants are influenced by, and are 'always mindful of, two homes: their community of residence (where they

immigrated to) and their community of origin (where they emigrated from).' Smith (2017) states that 'creating a narrative of our lives helps us make sense of the world and our place in it' (p. 104). Furthermore, Smith asserts that 'stories are particularly essential when it comes to defining our identity - understanding who we are and how we got that way' (2017, p. 104).

Robin (2008) considers that personal narratives are amongst the most popular forms of digital storytelling as they can 'revolve around significant events in life and can be emotionally charged and personally meaningful to both the author and the viewer' (p. 224). The digital format for presentation is both popular and accessible to students. Ohler (2013), an expert in digital storytelling in education found in his research that:

Stories help us make sense out of the chaos of life. Over and over, I watched students and teachers use the storytelling process to sort and synthesise the immense amount of information in their lives. In the end, the stories they told were crystallised visions of what was most important to them, whether it concerned a life event or a unit of instruction (p. 78).

The opportunity to gain new skills at this late stage of their school-based learning journey was

diminishing as the learning environment of this cohort of students was designed to polish their skills of autonomy and independent decision making.

Meaningful conversations with parents, grandparents, and other family members, and listening to their immigration experiences at this stage of maturity, opened a new layer of understanding and self-awareness for students. Through conversations, they heard of the sacrifices of previous generations, enabling them to more fully understand the impact of cultural diversity and personal hardship. As Leadbeater (2017) states, this sense of shared agency and collective responsibility matters: 'It helps individuals to place themselves in a larger social whole; to feel a sense of belonging and identity; shared achievement and purpose' (p.7).

**...It helps individuals to place themselves in a larger social whole; to feel a sense of belonging and identity...**

As a cohort of immigrants, the boys in this project had the opportunity to reflect on the effect of their families' immigration stories and cultural heritage and reproduce these as digital artefacts. It was, therefore, worthwhile to conduct an action research project to support these students on the exploration of their cultural heritage as a formative exercise in developing a deeper sense of their own identity and creating a family record. While existing research explores the impact of digital storytelling in general, the focus of this research project was on a particular cohort of school leavers. It had the potential to show the impact of providing them with an insight into their identity at a critical time in their lives.

## **Making sense of their world**

I conducted this action research in collaboration with the regular class teacher and through my role as Head of Library and Digital Learning. The focus group was chosen as representative of students who had limited classroom celebration in their learning journey. They were, on the whole, reluctant learners who would benefit from the opportunity to undertake an authentic, personal assessment task. This topic appealed to me, therefore, as an opportunity to assist students to understand themselves and each other as a diverse cultural mix at a critical time when they were about to leave school.

**...make connections with family and exercise critical and creative thinking skills to produce their own story.**

It was anticipated that with a heightened sense of their own identity and that of their learning peers, the boys would develop an increased understanding of themselves and the society in which they lived. Through exploring and telling their own immigration stories, many of which they had heard throughout their lives, they might make connections with family and exercise critical and creative thinking skills to produce their own story. Hence, through this activity, it was anticipated that the boys would

experience the realisation put forward by Cooper and Collins (1992) that 'storytelling becomes a vehicle for discovering who we are, for making sense of our world' (p.2).

## The action

It was appropriate to explore my project by way of an action research methodology as it provides a systematic and rigorous process.

The focus class for research was the Mazenod College Year 12 VCAL class studying the subject, 'Personal Development Skills.' An inquiry-based method of learning provided a scaffolded process to guide the boys through various phases of gathering information, opening conversations with their families, and producing the final video. By supporting them in producing an authentic project that tells the personal story of one of their family members, the application of an action learning method guided my own teaching process.

I factored in a 'boyology' focus by tapping into the boys' willingness to use computer technology and found the students responded positively to the scaffolding. Furthermore, King and Gurian (2006) note that boys are more motivated to learn and complete class work if they believe the work is authentic, has purpose and will be appreciated by the teacher. The final product, therefore, was a video from their personal immigration story, which they were encouraged to share with their families.

**...boys are more motivated to learn and complete class work if they believe the work is authentic...**

As a Pathway to Learning, this project sought to develop skills and confidence in the boys. It introduced them to the value of their cultural heritage and gave them the tools to bring those stories together. The VCAL Work Requirement that the boys undertook was to 'Demonstrate an awareness of social diversity within a complex project' Specifically, the elements of this requirement are demonstrated when the student can:

- Demonstrate an understanding of social diversity.
- Describe the benefits and challenges of a diverse society.
- Apply knowledge of social diversity to planning a complex project.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used to take account of social diversity within a complex project.

## Data collection

Data collected were both qualitative and quantitative. The small size of the class and the relatively informal nature of interactions offered opportunities for conversation and the sharing of stories.

Methods used to collect data included:

- Interviews with the boys;
- Researcher observations (achieved through spending a reasonable amount of time in the classroom. According to Mertler (2017, time spent productively observing and interacting and engaging with participants develops trust and assists the research process);
- An exit survey to obtain feedback on the boys' attitudes and feelings toward participation;
- Final video story that provided comments and opinions;
- Field notes recorded each week during the course of the project;
- Class attendance, since inconsistent attendance made successful completion difficult for some boys;
- Noting the countries of origin of the boys or their families as evidence of the cultural complexity of the class;
- The boys' generational position as Australian citizens, i.e. new, first or second generation, or long-term citizens; and
- Individual reasons for migration.

Data were collected throughout the eight-week research period as students progressed through the work requirement. As a story about their own life or that of a close family member, the boys' stories were distinctly authentic and genuine.

## **Dealing with data**

Data were reviewed and coded into categories and analysed to determine connections and relationships within the findings, continually ensuring that it addressed the research question. Mertler (2017) supports teacher-librarians' research instruction processes as he stresses the importance of maintaining focus and of asking oneself how the information helps one understand one's research topic and answer one's research question. Accuracy and credibility of the data were supported by comparing data from student surveys, classroom observations and student interviews. Mertler (2017, p 142) recommends this process of data triangulation as 'an inherent component of mixed-methods research designs.' It also assists in identifying convergence and divergence in those data as a given finding is supported by integrating inferences and demonstrating that independent measures of it tend to agree with each other or at least do not directly contradict each other' (Mertler, 2017 p. 142). Feedback and guidance from the regular subject teacher, who was familiar with the boys, were also considered in the data analysis process.

Data from the pre-project survey indicated that while some boys knew stories through strong family ties, boys from less functional families had only vague knowledge of the details. Of the 12 participants who completed the initial survey, all boys knew their country of origin. They were less certain, however, of the year of arrival in Australia, with eight of them indicating they 'need[ed] to check' or 'don't know.'

**I provided scaffolded literacy tools such as KWL charts, note-taking grids and timeline templates to facilitate the process.**

The boys were required to create a video of their immigration stories; a process that involved interviewing family members. It became apparent that this project was taking them out of their comfort zones when a number requested to 'write an essay as it will be easier than a video.' Aware of the findings of Crowder & Nesloney (2018, p. 112, who stated that 'when you challenge students and

present with activities that depart from the norm, there will be some grumbling,' I provided scaffolded literacy tools such as KWL charts, note-taking grids and timeline templates to facilitate the process. Furthermore, my provision of a scaffold supported Reichert & Hawley's (2010) finding that 'boys do best when the process is highly structured' (p. 152).

## **Discussion of results**

On analysis, three themes emerged from the coding and categorisation of the quantitative and qualitative data:

1. A boy's identity is influenced by the experiences of his family unit.
2. The project provided boys with the opportunity for conversations.
3. The boys developed an appreciation of their family's sacrifice.

### **A Boy's identity is influenced by the experiences of his family unit**

Data indicated that families had originated from 10 different countries, so the cultural mix was diverse. Family celebrations are opportunities for repeated storytelling, thereby cementing a foundation that influences the formation of an individual's own identity. It was interesting to note that the role of cultural identity in family life varied considerably from traditional celebrations to no cultural acknowledgement at all.

Vitali (2016) states, 'Stories are aural, oral, literary human expressions; human extensions and human technologies designed to explain who we are, how we come to know, how we negotiate meaning and how we communicate' (p. 30). It was, therefore, important that the boys be given support in gathering stories and, when necessary, digging deeply for them.

As a class, we also discussed the role of family cultural practices. Data gained from the exit survey confirmed the importance of traditional ceremonies as it was not available as a point of reference when absent. Boy I responded that his Indian culture 'has no role in my life, I identify as an Australian, that is my culture.' Boy H, on the other hand, identified strongly as both Mauritian and Australian. In his video, he spoke of food, family, and celebration as an important part of his culture: 'Members of the family speak Creole when we have parties and celebrations.' Boy H regularly celebrated and was proud of his Mauritian culture but also strongly identified as Australian.

Through the feedback survey, Boy J indicated that his parents were 'happy to revisit their immigration stories' and he was interested in having the conversation with them as an 18-year-old. He commented that he 'hadn't talked to them about this sort of stuff for a long time.' He identified dominantly as Australian but listening to his family's Vietnamese refugee stories made him 'see the importance of maintaining the link between the two cultures.'

Boy K, the only multi-generation Australian in the class, was initially reluctant to speak about his family, but eventually focused on his grandfather and spoke of the family's love for him. He reflected with pride on his grandfather as a positive role model. This reaction is noted in the observation of storyteller, Michael Thompson, who is quoted by Vitali (2016) as saying:

Sharing our stories changes us. It makes us feel aware of what we care most about in our lives. It reminds us that our depth of feeling parallels the depth of feeling which our fellow human beings must also feel (p. 30).

It became evident throughout the project that speaking with family members about their experiences filled gaps in the boys' knowledge and provided them with an extended lens into their own identity.

## **The project provided boys w an opportunity for conversations**

Seven of the 12 boys used the suggested interview questions and our class discussions about timing, place, and preparation for family interviews to initiate conversations with family members. For some, it was a difficult topic to approach. Reichert and Hawley (2010) explain the value of conversations such as these in that they bring 'to clear consciousness matters of deep personal importance, clarifying and energising boys' awareness of realities and values' (p. 173). They are building blocks in identity formation.

Boy I, who didn't acknowledge his Indian heritage, had never previously spoken to his mother about her early life in Australia. His parents separated when he was young. He said, 'it was difficult to approach my mum about the topic since I never talked to her much about it' He commented that the suggested interview questions 'helped me work out what I already knew' and 'I learnt my family history and why it is special.' Boy E, who interviewed his grandmother, said it was 'a long time' since he'd had such a conversation with her and now 'understand[s] what she went through to get here'. He expressed a greater appreciation of the hardship.

Other boys had similar positive experiences and spoke of the value of having these conversations as 18-year-olds. In some instances, they were of a similar age to that of their parents or grandparents when they had come to their new country. As Boy I commented, 'I've done these projects before but because I'm older this time, it makes a difference'.



# The boys developed appreciation of their families' sacrifices

There is a range of motives for emigrating from your homeland to another country. Some are seeking a better life, while others are escaping conflict and persecution.

Responses to the exit survey questions:

*'Do you have a better understanding of why your family came to Australia?' and  
'Do you have more understanding of their challenges?'*

indicated an increased understanding by the boys on both counts. As young adults, they were receptive to a deeper level of knowledge and able to appreciate the significance of feelings and emotions.

Boy H learnt that his grandparents had visited prior to their emigration to Australia, motivated by the requirement for his 'grandpere' to 'join the army.' He commented that 'it is a journey to come to live in another country.' In interviewing his grandmother, Boy E learnt that life 'was difficult' commenting that he learnt by speaking to her that 'it helps getting closer.' The action research project provided that opportunity for a number of boys.

Some stories were surprising. Boy F was proud to learn that his aunt had set up her own dumpling business 'which is still run as the family's business.' On the whole, however, life was difficult, and boys commented on a growing appreciation of their family's courage and sacrifices, stating, 'I now understand what she went through to get here' (Boy B), 'they weren't happy' (Boy G), and 'racism was quite prevalent, especially for people with dark skin' (Boy C).

Three boys felt they did not learn anything new about their family by completing the project, while nine of the 12 boys reflected positively, saying they now had more knowledge of their family background.

## Conclusion

The very act of creating the video story at this stage of their lives put the boys back in touch with their family stories. It provided the opportunity to look closely at their roots in Australia through adult eyes and to ask questions in the context of their growing maturity; questions that would not have occurred to them as children. I believe that as a result of this action research project, the boys are leaving school with a more complete knowledge of their identity and the unique immigration story of their family. Our stories make us who we are. By re-engaging with the reality of their family's immigration experience and life prior to emigrating, these boys know their story better and have deeper insight into their own identities.

**Our stories make us  
who we are.**

## Reflection statement

This project broadened my appreciation of the value action research as a methodology for implementing and tracking classroom strategies.

I was encouraged by the involvement of the boys, which was initially tentative but grew as they gained new knowledge and understanding of their family stories and developed a growing appreciation of their role in that story. They also valued the inquiry-based model of instruction with scaffolded learning support.

**...ability not only to look, but to see; not only to hear, but to listen, not only to imitate, but to innovate; not only to observe, but to experience the excitement of fresh perception.**

The project exposed the boys to creative and critical thinking, which according to Cooper and Collins (1992), 'derives ability not only to look, but to see; not only to hear, but to listen, not only to imitate, but to innovate; not only to observe, but to experience the excitement of fresh perception' (p. 18). The boys stepped into life beyond school with a deeper understanding of themselves and those who laid the foundations of their lives today.

A final positive outcome of the success of this action research project is the decision to incorporate it into the curriculum of Year 11 VCAL Literacy at Mazenod College. Completing this unit of work with Year 11 boys in Semester 1, 2019 once again resulted in positive outcomes and is timely in that most of the boys have another year of school prior to graduation.

Finally, teacher-librarians are perfectly situated to support the introduction of this type of authentic project as an enhancement to VCAL student success. The action research model is an ideal process to apply to library programs as a mechanism for investigating and evaluating to improve both learning and teaching.

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