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## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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# I raise my voice: Promoting *self-authoring* among female students in Afghanistan through an online-based curriculum

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## Abstract

The Internet has given rise to opportunities to teach English outside of the classroom and reach a wider range of learners. This is particularly true for learners who come from areas where access to education is limited. This article will discuss a study that examines *self-authoring* development, a process of taking control of one's life to teach a female learner in Afghanistan through the interplay of language development and a digital tool called VoiceThread.

Keywords: self-authoring, digital tool, online learning, Learners' Lives as Curriculum, Afghanistan, critical thinking, intellectual sponsors

## Introduction

*"I learned if I stand, everyone will stand, other women in my country will stand."* When I read these words from Roya, an aspiring female writer in Afghanistan, who writes for a mentorship program called the Afghan Women's Writing Project ([www.awwp.org](http://www.awwp.org)), I am reminded of my role as a teacher: I seek to plant a small seed in the mind of my students in the hope that they will one day gain awareness of their abilities as powerful agents of change. Roya's desire to raise her voice is exactly what I wish for all my students who find themselves in environments where their voices are suppressed based on their race, gender, ethnicity, creed, or sexual orientation. More substantially, I believe in my students' capacity to make their own decisions and seek out opportunities for themselves.

Further, I choose to reach out to students whose beliefs (i.e., religious beliefs) and worldview may be significantly different from mine to foster dialog through exposure to a variety of perspectives. That is one of the reasons why I have involved myself in teaching students from other faiths, predominantly the Muslim faith. Indeed, as a teacher, I deem it important to learn about my students' faiths while sharing my own religious identity with them. Thus, my aim is to encourage reflection on both their beliefs and worldview, and by extension, to build mutual understanding and acceptance.

I began teaching female students in Afghanistan four years ago when I volunteered to provide English lessons online via Skype through a US-based non-profit organization called AIWR (Alliance for International Women's Rights) ([www.aiwr.org](http://www.aiwr.org)). AIWR's mission is to support women's rights and promote female empowerment through English language learning in areas where women's access to education is limited. To this end, AIWR partners with a vocational training center known as KIMS (Kandahar Institute for Modern Studies) ([www.theafghanschool.org](http://www.theafghanschool.org)) located in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to offer English classes online to male and female students at this center.

In this article, I will describe a study on the use of a CMC tool called VoiceThread ([www.voicethread.com](http://www.voicethread.com)) to promote self-authoring, a term coined by Hernandez-Zamora (2010) to refer to critical thinking skills development and the acquisition of language resources to take charge of one's life, within the context of an online class with a female student in Afghanistan. Key to this project was examining ways of cultivating self-authoring through a self-designed online ESL curriculum, and VoiceThread, a digital tool which enables users to record their voices, upload their recordings onto the VoiceThread website, add pictures or videos, and receive oral or written comments from other users. In effect, the primary goal of this curriculum is to provide learners with an awareness of their place in the world, as well as opportunities to make their own decisions and play a more active role in their learning process.

In the following, I present a brief contemporary history of Afghanistan, along with an overview of women's access to education in the country. Then, drawing on a body of literature that examines the interplay

between language development and digital tools, I investigate whether they can also contribute to self-authoring development. I describe the teaching context in which I piloted the project and provide a rationale for the topics included in the online curriculum. I finally discuss some limitations and recommendations based on the results of this project.

## **Background**

Afghanistan's contemporary history has been beset by the Anglo-Afghan war lasting from 1839 to 1842, a full-scale invasion launched by the Soviet Army in 1979, and the United-States' involvement in overthrowing Soviet forces in the 1980s. Between 1989 and 1992, Afghanistan experienced a civil war which resulted in its Soviet-controlled government being toppled and replaced by a group of US-backed guerilla fighters known as the Mujahideen. Yet another civil war ensued between 1992 and 1996 during which the Mujahideen ceded their power to insurgents called the Taliban. Upon ceasing control, the Taliban imposed over the following four years a brutal and repressive regime. During that period, the Afghan population was confronted with extreme hardship; women especially were subjected to inhumane treatment (BBC, 2014). While the US-led invasion ejected the Taliban from power and replaced with an interim government in 2001 under the guise of restoring peace and stability, to this day, Afghanistan is still plagued by ongoing violence (BBC, 2014). According to a survey conducted by the Asian Foundation (2012), three of the main issues that continue to ravage Afghanistan are: insecurity (e.g., attacks, terrorism), unemployment, and corruption.

In addition, the issue of women's rights has been slowly gaining traction in Afghan society. Although the country is still steeped in strong cultural traditions which dictate gender roles according to the patriarchal system, the advent of the internet has increased women's contact with the rest of the world, giving rise to a growing awareness of gender norms and alternative discourses about women's role in society in other countries (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013; Manganaro, & Alozie, 2011). Spurred on by women's movements from other countries that address the plight of women worldwide, an increasing number of Afghan women have begun to contemplate ways of transferring those alternative perspectives to their own culture to demand greater equality and involvement in decision-making at a local and national level (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013). Nevertheless, the notion of emancipation and self-determination prescribed by Western ideology does not sit well with certain Afghan women who disavow it, preferring to adhere to traditionally-ascribed gender roles (Manganaro, & Alozie, 2011).

Further, changes relating to alternative perspectives about women and women's greater access to jobs in the field of business, education, and politics notwithstanding, religious, ethnic, and historical forces continue to exert an influence on gender attitudes, thereby deterring progress towards the endowing of more rights to women (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013). To compound the problem, a great majority of women are faced with a multitude of violations to their basic rights which include forced marriage, rape, or child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Domestic violence in Afghanistan is pervasive: According to a survey by Global Rights (Clifton, 2012), more than 85% of women have been victim of domestic violence. Interestingly, a UNICEF report about Afghan women's perception of domestic violence revealed that 92% of the women surveyed justified a husband beating his wife (as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 12).

## **Literature review**

Integration of digital technology into the language classroom has recently become more commonplace. Indeed, a growing number of studies have focused on digital storytelling as a tool for enhancing language learning (Lambert, 2007; Ohler, 2008). Results indicate that learners involved in reflective thinking to evaluate and interpret the content of stories, made use of various types of literacies (e.g. multimodal forms of communication), improved their problem-solving skills, and established a community of practice (Ohler, 2008; Sadik, 2008; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

One digital tool used in digital storytelling tasks is VoiceThread. This particular CMC tool has been considered effective for fostering collaborative learning, motivation, language development, and active participation (Huot, 2014). Lee (2014) examined how the use of VoiceThread in creating digital news stories in Spanish increased Spanish learners' oral skills and content knowledge. Data showed that the use of VoiceThread

to discuss the news empowered the learners to express themselves, exchange information, and establish a sense of community (p. 338). However, as a limitation, Lee (2014) noted a lack of critical thinking skills development, inasmuch as not enough attention was paid to encouraging learners to challenge each other's opinions and ask thought-provoking questions. Thus, one can question what purpose this tool serves in the language classroom and how it can be used in a more meaningful way.

One of the primary goals of using digital tools such as VideoThread is to develop *self-authoring*, (i.e., critical thinking skills development) and acquisition of the necessary linguistic resources in order to free oneself from the burden of sociohistorical circumstances, to be able to speak for oneself and make one's own decisions (Hernandez Zamora, 2010). That voice can only come into being once individuals, who have been marginalized and have experienced feelings of self-inferiorization, are equipped with the necessary discursive practices (Freire, 2001; Hernandez Zamora, 2010). The purpose would be to become self-authors who are independent thinkers, unburdened by the beliefs and ideologies of institutions that perpetuate discriminatory practices. Thus, it may be worth exploring the choice of topics within a classroom setting and providing opportunities for individuals as language learners to express themselves on the topic and reach a level of awareness of their own place in the world.

## **The project**

### **Classroom context**

I piloted this project within the context of a one-to-one online English class which I taught to a female student named Mahida<sup>2</sup> using Skype under the auspices of a US-based non-profit organization called AIWR (Alliance for International Women's Rights) ([www.aiwr.org](http://www.aiwr.org)). AIWR's mission is to support women's rights and promote female empowerment through English language learning in areas where women's access to education is limited. To this end, AIWR partners with a vocational training center known as KIMS (Kandahar Institute for Modern Studies) ([www.theafghanschool.org](http://www.theafghanschool.org)) located in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to offer English classes online to male and female learners at this center. At the time of the study, Mahida had been studying English for about two years and her level of English was low-intermediate. Her goals were to improve her speaking and listening skills to be able to communicate more fluently in English and study abroad in the future. Our classes were held on Sunday and Monday morning from 7 AM to 7: 50 AM, local time in Afghanistan.

Mahida is part of a group of learners who were selected to study through AIWR and KIMS's joint online English program. The other learners in the program are either university students, homemakers, or young professionals. Their level of English ranges from Pre-Intermediate to Upper-Intermediate. The classes are taught remotely by volunteer English teachers from all over the world via Skype. In addition, they are held on two consecutive days for 50 minutes at set times either early in the morning, at 7 AM, or in the afternoon between 1 PM and 4 PM. Classes last for three months with a possibility of extending their duration. In order for learners to access their lessons online, they go to a computer room at KIMS where they are assigned a specific computer and given a headset. Because of the low bandwidth, learners and teachers are not recommended to use a webcam to communicate. They, therefore, have to resort to the chat box or the microphone.

Finally, once teachers submit their availabilities, the AIWR Volunteer Coordinator matches them with a learner and sends them an introductory email with a short profile of the learner. She includes guidelines about the learner's initial language assessment and the way to complete a monthly report on the student's skills and the topics discussed. There is also information about completing a three-month report detailing the student's progress in all four skills and a summary of the topics.

### **Rationale for the online curriculum**

My goal for the online curriculum was to incorporate topics that could foster self-authoring development and provide an opportunity for learners to share and record their opinions with the help of VoiceThread. To this

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end, I referred to Weinstein and Cloud's (2007) curriculum entitled *Lives Unfolding* which focuses on learners' identities as a means of exploring their place in the world and developing agency. Based on this format, I started with two units to assess Mahida's response, which would give me feedback on ways to improve it in regard to her language level and the relevance of the topics to her life.

In my first unit, I centered on the topic of identity as a means of underscoring learners' name as an expression of uniqueness. By identifying and reflecting on the meaning of their name, they would potentially begin to recognize that it reflects their cultural heritage and histories.

In the following lessons, I focused on raising learners' awareness of their place in the world by highlighting who they are as individual. The topic entitled "Who am I?" has two parts: The first part addresses identity by having learners listen to my recording through VoiceThread of a poem (see Appendix A) and notice the various adjectives. Throughout the poem, the pronoun "I" is omnipresent to embrace the expression of self, thereby serving as a jumping off point for learners to express their identity and relationship to the world. By using the pronoun "I" and selecting their own adjectives, they make a choice about the kind of attributes to give themselves. I therefore wanted to examine a possible transition from reliance on culturally ascribed characteristics to self-authoring tendencies whereby learners would construct their identities of their own volition.

The second part of the topic introduces a poem titled "Who are you?" (see Appendix B) to help learners become aware of the way in which their worldview is influenced by the sociocultural groups (i.e., communities) to which they belong. Through its many questions, the poem is meant to incite reflection on the meaning of life, death, compassion, and the pursuit of happiness. Those questions are then discussed after learners and teachers read the poem to encourage learners to share their opinions on it and explore other perspectives. Subsequently, they create and record their own poem on VoiceThread basing themselves on the original.

In the next lessons, there is a transition from the self to learners' communities. My goal was to shed further light on the impact that a community has on their values, attitudes, beliefs, and the way in which it shapes their worldview. In order for learners to notice the effect of culturally entrenched behaviors on their thinking processes, I incorporated a text that discusses the concept of community from another culture. As a result, they begin to discern different viewpoints, thereby causing them to reexamine perceptions that they had initially upheld as true and those of themselves in relation to that community.

The penultimate lessons serve to redirect learners' focus on themselves and their way of describing themselves in the present moment. Integral to these lessons is to trigger mindfulness by enabling learners to be present with their feelings and their surroundings through the use of pictures and language (i.e., use of the present simple and continuous).

The unit concludes with a topic about a specific person or *intellectual sponsor* (i.e., mentor) who was influential in the learners' life and to some extent, has shaped their views of themselves and the world. In those lessons, learners recount with language to describe past events (i.e. past simple and progressive) an example of a mentor who had a positive impact on them: The goal is for them to highlight how he or she instilled confidence in them and played a role in helping them to pursue their goals. By acknowledging their intellectual sponsor and their support, learners can begin to value themselves and their opinions, thus moving towards becoming self-authors.

The second unit centers on happiness, a topic which can promote positive thinking and feelings of self-worth. When learners are provided with an opportunity to discuss moments of happiness in their lives, they can be more amenable to thinking positively about themselves and directing their attention to areas in their life that are emotionally fulfilling and hopeful; more importantly, they can be more receptive to hearing and interacting with other perspectives, which in turn, can facilitate the emergence of self-authoring. As a result, they gain awareness of their place in the world, resulting in learners believing in their ability to make their own decisions (Freire, 2001).

This particular unit is divided into three parts: In the first part, the lesson addresses aspects in learners' lives that make them happy to put forward their sources of happiness and wishes for a better world. To this end, learners can articulate with positive-sounding adjectives what they believe happiness to be.

The objective of the next part is to think of strategies to develop a state of well-being by integrating activities which engage mind and body through kinesthetic movement (i.e., basic physical exercises) and basic

instructions in the imperative mood. Therefore, learners can move from expressing feelings of happiness to actively carrying out actions that reinforce positive thinking and are favorable to self-authoring development.

In the third part, learners can begin to share ideas and solutions about ways of spreading happiness in their community. As such, the topics discussed in previous lessons are meant to guide learners through gradually recognizing their ability to take responsibility over their actions and become agents of change. The use of the modal of advice “should” serves to emphasize that learners can impart suggestions to their community about ways of experiencing and sustaining feelings of happiness. In the final part, learners are increasingly stepping into their role as self-authors by conceiving of future goals using the future tense “going to” to further pursue happiness in their life and in their community. Consequently, they become more apt to consider ways of improving their community and effecting change.

This section has detailed the reasons for creating a curriculum by describing the various topics and the ways in which they can be instrumental in developing self-authoring. The next section presents the content of the online curriculum.

### Online curriculum content

I structured the lessons according to a set format that reflects the key tenets of self-authoring development:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schema-building activity with picture (i.e, <i>code</i>)</li> <li>• Pre-listening task: prediction of content</li> <li>• Listening: VoiceThread recording</li> <li>• Post-listening: comprehension and problem-posing questions</li> <li>• Focus on form</li> <li>• Controlled practice</li> <li>• Student’s own VoiceThread recording using target language and incorporating topics to reflect view of the world</li> </ul> |
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### Unit Plan

Unit 1: Identity	<p>a) Meaning of the name Discussion about the meaning of one’s name to foster reflection about one’s place in the world</p> <p>b) Who am I? Focus on parts of speech and question formation to describe one’s self in relation to one’s environment Analysis of a poem entitled “Who are you?” (see Appendix A) to encourage opinions on life, death, compassion, the pursuit of happiness</p> <p>c) Community Discussion about the meaning of “community” and common activities within the learner’s community. Focus on use of present simple and adverbs of frequency. Analysis of what a community is and the way in which it can shape one’s worldview, beliefs, and values</p> <p>d) A mentor Identification of a person who has had an influential role in the learner’s life</p>
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	Use of past tenses (i.e., past simple and continuous) to narrate a time in the learner's life when a mentor or <i>intellectual sponsor</i> impacted his/her life
Unit 2: Happiness	<p>a) What makes you happy? Use of fixed phrase: _____ makes me happy and a poem: "What makes me happy" to bring forward aspects in the learner's life that makes him or her happy</p> <p>b) Staying healthy Promoting happiness to engage the mind and body through kinesthetic movement (i.e. basic physical exercises) and basic instructions in the imperative mood</p> <p>c) My happiness plan Creating goals in the form of a plan, using the future form "be going to", to sustain the student's happiness and conceiving of ways of spreading happiness in his or her community</p>

### Limitations

Piloting this project proved very challenging, mainly due to significant connectivity issues: The weak internet connection severely affected the amount of class time: In some instances, the class had to be cancelled or was reduced to thirty minutes. In addition, Mahida's microphone did not always work, rendering communication with her very strenuous. Another salient issue concerned the use of VoiceThread: Owing to a weak bandwidth, Mahida was very rarely able to record her voice on VoiceThread, which made it difficult to investigate the effects of using a CMC tool on promoting self-authoring.

Thus, this experience brings to the fore the struggles of teaching under duress in an environment in which limited resources can interfere with learning and deter teachers from experimenting with digital technology to promote voice and agency. As such, it is crucial to be armed with boundless patience and flexibility. The next section will discuss teaching implications from this experience, coupled with recommendations for teaching in this kind of context.

### Teaching implications and recommendations

Findings from this pilot revealed the realities of teaching and learning under extreme conditions. Consequently, it has also caused me to think of alternatives to using digital tools in the lessons, my approach to assessing and recognizing self-authoring, and my role as a teacher vis-à-vis types of ideas introduced in my lessons.

For ESL/EFL teachers who teach online via Skype or through other computer software programs and would like to incorporate CMC tools such as VoiceThread into their lessons to teach learners in areas with low internet connectivity, one option is to have instructions for using VoiceThread already available and written in simple language (e.g. using imperatives and short sentences) along with a visual to copy and send. In so doing, learners are able to set up an account and make their recordings on their own time. More importantly, this can save time during the lesson and it enables teachers to focus more in-depth on key topics. In the event that the internet connection is too slow, they can send the lesson via email and tell learners to prepare the lesson, answer questions from the lesson, and then, return them. They will discuss the answers and check them together in the following lesson. Teachers can also expand on the topic by asking learners more opinion-based questions on the topic or questions about their experience recording their text and receiving responses from other users. To some extent, this kind of teaching condition lends itself to greater responsibility and autonomy on the part of the learner, which is one of the goals of self-authoring development.

If it is too difficult to use VoiceThread, it may be possible to replace VoiceThread with recording sessions on Skype. Teachers and learners can subsequently listen to an excerpt and discuss the student's answers. Similarly, if the student possesses a phone, the teacher can request that she record herself. Teachers could then create a blog or website through a site such as WordPress where learners could upload her recordings and

engage in a discussion with the teacher about the topic. There are myriad possibilities as long as that they can guarantee the preservation of the student's privacy.

However, in the event that teachers experience significant difficulties in implementing digital tools in their lessons, it is strongly advisable to forgo their use. In some instances, it may serve as a hindrance rather than an asset to language development and to teachers' ability to focus on their learners' progress. From this vantage point, teachers could set that plan aside and devote time to addressing topics that are particularly pertinent to learners' lives. While this means deviating from the original goal of the curriculum, these discussions can spawn a lesson that is far more compelling, personal, and in many cases relevant to learners' direct language needs. In so doing, teachers can truly build rapport with learners and demonstrate a genuine interest in helping them to develop their language skills and become self-authors.

Finally, this experience has taught me to be mindful of the type of content that I can integrate into the curriculum. Indeed, before piloting my project, I was strongly advised to modify the content of my curriculum to adhere to cultural guidelines provided by AIWR. As a rationale, it was pointed out to me that female students are part of extremely conservative families who are already making significant allowances by letting their daughters study English at this center. Further, the families are suspicious of their learning English, for they fear that their daughters will be inculcated with "Western ideas", thereby tarnishing their reputation. Because I did not want to put Mahida at risk, I consented to change the content to make it more "neutral". Therefore, I learned that before implementing any kind of curriculum, I need to take into consideration local mores and customs and present topics that while not controversial in nature can still generate discussion and promote self-authoring.

## Conclusion

In spite of the many unanticipated pitfalls throughout this piloting stage, I consider this experience to be extremely enriching; enriching because I was able to connect with a very brave young woman who took a tremendous risk in participating in this program to learn English. Moreover, I learned about the many hurdles of living in a conflict-ridden zone where educational opportunities for women are limited and where local traditions continue to dictate gender roles and women's status in Afghan society. While I may never truly grasp the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan, this project taught me to listen and allow space for Mahida to talk about her situation with an open mind.

As a concluding remark regarding the purpose of my project, I would like to mention that it enabled me to realize that self-authoring is a process that requires time and may not be so overt in its manifestation. There may have been moments when Mahida showed self-authoring tendencies that may not have been interpreted as such. The key to noticing them when they happen is being observant of learners' interactions with their teachers and the language content. However, the onus is truly on the learners to acknowledge their evolution over time and their journey to becoming self-authors of their lives.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 The student's name was changed for security and confidentiality purposes.

## Appendix A

### Poem: Who are you?

Are you a person or are you an animal? Are you an object or a person full of life who feels **free as a bird** or scared of your own **shadow**?

Are you a human being with feelings or are you **as cold as ice**? Do you only care about yourself or do you think of others?

Are you a shining star or are you **darkness**? Do you hate or love the person that you are?

Do you wake up and feel good or do you wake up and **wonder** why the sun rises? Are you glad to be alive or do you wish you were dead?

What do you believe in? Do you care what other people think about you when you ask yourself "Who Am I?" Do you know the answer or is your mind empty?

Ask yourself who you are and if you don't know, it doesn't mean that you are **lost**, it just means you have to go **deeper** to find the answer because we all have it inside us. We just have to try.

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## Appendix B

### My original text:

*I am.....*

*I am French-American.*

*I am a woman.*

*I am a teacher.*

*I am Jewish.*

*I am a daughter and a sister and a niece.*

*I am reliable.*

*I am compassionate.*

*I am an elephant that stands tall and strong.*

*I am me.*