Digital Profiles in Poetry

An Updated Silhouette Project

Swift

Terrific

Unconventional

Dynamic

Enthusiastic

Noisy

Trustworthy

By Joanne Fortunato

Subject: Language arts, art, self-esteem

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators

Grade Level: 4–8 (Ages 9–13)

Technology: Digital cameras, PowerPoint

Standards: *NETS•S* 3; *NETS•T* II, III (http://www.iste.org/standards). *ELA* 6 (http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml). *en-Gauge 21st Century Skills* Digital Age Literacies—Visual Literacy (http://www.ncrel.org/engauge/skills/skills.htm).

Do you remember doing silhouettes when you were in kindergarten? You stood in front of a white piece of paper with a bright light creating your silhouette behind you and your teacher traced your profile as you tried to stand still?

When I asked the seventh-grade students in my computer class if they remembered this, almost all of them said yes. There is something powerful about a silhouette that inspires teachers to continue this tradition.

Middle school students are very egocentric and like nothing more than to talk about themselves. The silhouette activity combines these elements with computers to encourage students to increase their vocabulary and to view themselves in a positive creative manner. Though increasing students' self-esteem is important and certainly part of any teachers' job, teachers are under increased pressure to teach content standards. Many states have adopted English language arts (ELA) standards that include writing and analyzing poetry, self-expressive writing, and vocabulary building. Not only is this lesson motivating to students, but teachers will find that it is a wonderful way to meet ELA standards.

Creating the Digital Silhouette

First, I taught the entire class a few basic digital camera skills, just enough to get them started. Then, each student in the class used a digital camera to take a profile picture of another student. This ensured that each student had an opportunity to take a picture and have his or her picture taken. I spent a few extra minutes with the first student who took a picture, then that student passed along the instructions to the next student. This process continued until all the students in class had an opportunity to learn to

use the one camera I have available for student use. While students were waiting to have their profile taken and the picture downloaded, they worked on the poetry aspect of this project.

Students used a Sony Mavica digital camera that saves the pictures to an ordinary floppy disk. I gave floppy disks to groups of two or three students. After their pictures were taken, they took out the floppy and passed the camera along to another group. The first students downloaded their pictures to their computer from the floppy disk. This way they were able to begin tracing their profiles without having to attach the camera to a computer. Students were able to get all the pictures taken and downloaded in one class period.

If you do not have a Sony Mavica you will need to develop a system for getting the photographs to students. Because most cameras assign a number to each file name for a photograph taken, it would be helpful to keep track of the order the pictures are taken. This way it won't be necessary to open each file to see who was photographed. You can then distribute the correct file to the correct student quickly and efficiently.

Students can then insert their digital profile into a program that has drawing tools. Unlike the typical method of creating a silhouette, where someone else traces a student's profile, in this project each student traces his or her own profile. For this project, I used Microsoft PowerPoint. Students traced their profiles using the Scribble tool. For students to be able to fill their profile with drawing features such as gradients, textures, and pictures, they must trace very carefully and make sure all the lines connect. If they let go and then begin tracing again, the profile will not be in one

piece. Students typically did not do a very accurate tracing in the first pass. They touched up the tracing by using the Edit Points feature in the drawing tools in PowerPoint. This feature allowed them to edit their profile by adding, deleting, and moving points on the line. They often needed to zoom in to get the appropriate level of detail. Once students touched up their profile tracing to the appropriate level of detail, they deleted the digital picture, leaving the traced profile.

If you do not plan to use PowerPoint, other programs with drawing tools should have features similar to those mentioned above. For example, AppleWorks drawing application has a feature under the Arrange Menu called Reshape that will accomplish the same task. Or you can use Photoshop's layers to easily trace and then delete the original photo. You should consult the help menu of your software to find the features you need.

Enhancing the Profile

The ability to enhance the profile beyond just a silhouette is what makes this project so exciting for students. Once students completed tracing their profile, they used the drawing features in PowerPoint to change the profile to create a unique statement about themselves. For example, one student who describes herself as very patriotic filled her profile with a picture of the American flag. Other students used pictures that represented their favorite hobby or pastime. Many students added artistic effects such as gradients, shadows, and 3-D effects. One student even inserted the original picture of his digital profile inside the com-

pleted tracing. The possibilities are limited only by the imagination of your students.

Writing the Poem

This project presents an excellent opportunity for students to create a self-expressive poem. In this particular case, I asked students to create an acrostic using the letters of their name. For each letter, students wrote a positive adjective that described themselves. I told them up front that mundane words such as *nice* and *awesome* would not be acceptable. Students were encouraged to create a "look" for their poem. They were not allowed to just accept the look and colors the computer generated. I had already taught my students how to use the drawing tools in PowerPoint to manipulate objects. With just a few pointers and reminders, they were able to change everything from the color and position of the shadow to the typeface and size of the letters.

Students printed the final product on a color inkjet printer and glued it to construction paper, leaving a border. Students then hung their poems in the classroom or the school library. It was exciting to see the reactions of other students as they examined the finished projects. In fact, students in my sixth-grade class asked me when they were going to get to do the same project. When I told them it was a seventh-grade project, they were very disappointed that they would have to wait to do it.

Assessing the Project

I graded the final product on several criteria. (See the rubric on p. 30.) In

Armed with a digital camera and photo editing software, students can hone their visual literacy skills as they employ a new tool in learning content.
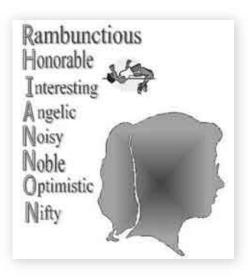
addition to spelling the adjectives correctly, students needed to know the meaning of each word. I made sure to ask students to verbally define words I thought they might not know the meaning of or understand how the word is used in context. The overall look and appearance of the poem and profile was also part of the grade. The appearance of the project should make a statement about the student. For example, I explained to students that soft pastel colors might indicate that a person is shy and bold colors might indicate that the person is outgoing.

Reviewing the Benefits

If you ask a middle school student to look up a word in a dictionary, you will typically get a groan or shrug for a response. However, when you ask them to use a dictionary to find adjectives that describe themselves, you get an entirely different response.

Students used two basic strategies to find words for their profiles. One strategy involved students describing themselves using words they knew such as *happy* or *smart*. Then, they used a thesaurus to discover synonyms. They picked a word from the list of synonyms that matched a letter in their name. Since thesauruses list words out of context, I required students to look up the word they picked in a dictionary to better understand the meaning and context.

Another strategy students employed was to look up words in the dictionary that started with a letter in their name. For example, David would just look through the list of words that start with "d" until he found one that described him. Surprisingly, students enjoyed reading the words in the dictionary.

As students completed this project, I was continually amazed at how much effort they gave to finding just the right word or just the right color. When students walk in the classroom, the first thing many of them do is ask about the poems on display. They continually make positive comments on the projects and share their comments with other students. When middle school students want copies of their projects to hang up at home, you know you

Objectives	Exemplary Performance (5 points)	Average Performance (3 points)	Low Performance (1 point)	Points
Spelling	There are no spelling errors.	The final draft has one spelling error.	The final draft has more than three spelling errors.	
Word Choices	All words show positive character attributes. No mundane words were used.	Most words show positive character attributes. Only one or two are mundane and simplistic.	At least four or more words are mundane and simplistic.	
Color Usage	Color choice strongly represents character attributes.	Some colors choices are evident. There appears to be some character representation.	Colors appear to be random and/or computer generated.	
Layout	The overall project is aesthetically pleasing and shows strong character representation.	Words are mostly legible. Profile shows some character representation.	Words are illegible and spacing is inappropriate. There is no character attribute representation.	
Total				

Rubric used to assess digital silhouettes.

have helped students create something they care about and that matters.

Looking Ahead

Like most technologies, digital cameras are becoming less expensive and easier to use. And you can use them across the curriculum.

- In science class, students can use the digital camera for time-lapse photography. For example, they could document the growth of a plant over a period of time and use the digital pictures in a presentation explaining the changes.
- As part of a unit on spreadsheets, students can create magnets, decals and bumper stickers to sell to their classmates. The products they create can use digital photographs.
- If you are able to take students on a field trip through the local community, the digital camera is a very useful documentation tool. They can photograph the historical sites and other points of interest. The pictures can then be used for a variety of purposes, including a Web page.

The use of photo editing software can greatly enhance the photographs you take with your digital camera. Photo editing software runs the gamut from most basic programs such as Windows Paint, which comes with most Windows operating systems, to sophisticated programs such as Adobe Photoshop. Microsoft Office programs also have some simple photo editing tools. The most commonly used tools are the cropping tool and the brightness/contrast tools, both of which are part of the Office Picture tool bar. The cropping tool allows you to really focus on the subject of the picture by deleting the extraneous information. Students often tend to take pictures with too much background.

Taking the picture is just the beginning of the process. The best part about a digital photograph is the simplicity of editing the picture to really capture the essence of the message. Armed with a digital camera and photo editing software, students can hone their visual literacy skills as they employ a new tool in learning content.

Resources

Dictionary.com: http://dictionary.reference.com
Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary:
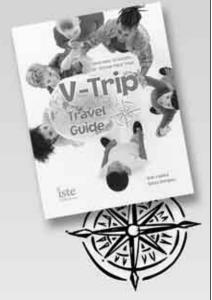   http://www.m-w.com/netdict.htm

Joanne Fortunato, MEd, is a middle school computer teacher and technology professional development specialist residing in the Albany, New York, area. She teaches computers to Grades 6–8 at Brittonkill Central Schools and presents technology workshops to many local area educational institutions. In addition, she is the co-author of two middle school computer books. Her focus is promoting integration of technology into the academic curriculum.