

From digital narratives to cultural empathy

A reflection on the impact of digital narratives on the development of intercultural understanding

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of digital narratives in promoting cultural empathy. Through a review of the literature and empirical studies, it concludes that interaction with digital narratives, mediated by interactive technologies, fosters meaning-making, reflection on cultural values, and dialogue among diverse perspectives. The integration of technological, narrative, and emotional dimensions enhances awareness of cultural diversity and the development of intercultural competencies, contributing to the formation of conscious and socially responsible citizens.

Keywords

Digital narratives, empathy, culture, learning, sensitivity, educational technologies



Fig. 1 Pedersen Cook, P. (2023). *Symphony of the Spirit: A Tapestry of Resilience and Hope* [digital artwork]. <https://www.artmaieur.com/netter-pedersen-cook/en/artworks/16858459/symphony-of-the-spirit-a-tapestry-of-resilience-and-hope>

Introduction

In a context of globalization and increasing mobility, contemporary societies require citizens capable of understanding, respecting, and interacting with different cultures. Cultural empathy is essential for intercultural dialogue and cooperation, involving understanding others from their own worldview. Digital narratives — videos, podcasts, blogs, or virtual exhibitions — provide immersive and collaborative experiences that foster this empathy.

According to Mulholland and Collins (2002), these narratives structure cultural experiences and involve the user as an active participant. Zhu (2011) distinguishes between intercultural awareness (recognition of differences) and intercultural empathy (understanding from the perspective of the other). Studies such as those by Ribeiro (2016), Liu and Chen (2021), and Silva and Cardoso (2023) highlight the pedagogical potential of collaborative digital narratives in promoting cultural sensitivity.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, theoretical, and interpretative approach, aimed at understanding the role of digital narratives in promoting cultural empathy and intercultural dialogue.

The sources consisted of a critical review of the literature and empirical studies on digital narratives and intercultural empathy. Research was conducted using the Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, covering publications from 2000 to 2025. Inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed articles addressing digital storytelling, empathy, and intercultural education. Studies that lacked an educational dimension or omitted the empathetic aspect were excluded.

The analysis procedure involved an exploratory reading and thematic categorization of the sources, considering narrative, emotional, and technological dimensions. Subsequently, patterns, convergences, and gaps in the different theoretical approaches were identified to understand existing trends and limitations in the literature. Finally, an interpretative synthesis of the gathered evidence was developed, integrating complementary perspectives that supported the critical discussion presented throughout the study.



Fig. 2 Map of Europe. (Source: <https://www.europeana.eu/pt/about-us>)

Results and Discussion

Digital narratives promote empathy and intercultural understanding by integrating emotion, technology, and storytelling, creating meaningful experiences. They encourage self-reflection and emotional expression, bringing the “self” closer to the “other” and fostering the sharing of perspectives. The collaborative creation of digital content, such as videos, blogs, or virtual exhibitions, stimulates cultural dialogue and the negotiation of meanings.

The effectiveness of these practices depends on appropriate pedagogical guidance, which ensures coherence and cultural sensitivity, as the use of technology without an educational framework can lead to superficial learning. Future studies should assess the actual impact of these narratives on intercultural empathy, exploring different contexts. When well-planned, they transform individual experiences into authentic cultural dialogues, promoting more inclusive and reflective learning.



Fig. 3 Humans of New York. (2025, October). Dear New York [Instagram post]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DP-Ft9nDXiH>

Conclusion

Digital narratives constitute effective pedagogical tools for promoting empathy and intercultural awareness. Their effectiveness depends on the active engagement of the user and the intentional integration of technology, emotion, and storytelling. Promoting cultural empathy requires collaborative projects that value respect, reflection, and openness toward others. By integrating education, technology, and cultural sensitivity, it is possible to cultivate citizens who are more empathetic, critical, and inclusive, prepared to face the challenges of interculturality.

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