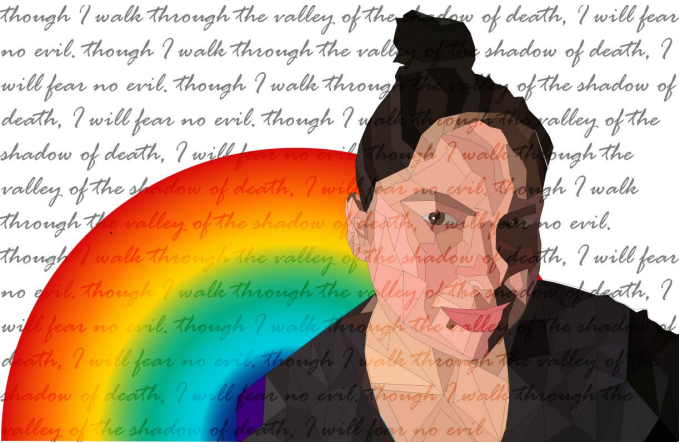


EMPATHY PORTRAITS | Digital Storytelling



Lansing High School | **JESSICA STRATTON**

Me

Empathy. Compassion. Social-Emotional Learning.

Inspired by the idea that a digital portrait project could become an agent for celebrating differences and building empathy for others, I disassembled an old project I was teaching and rebuilt it.

The redesign had two goals:

- (1) Include interactive technologies
- (2) Build Empathetic awareness

Low-Poly Portraits → Empathy Portraits

Ever since creating a course for beginner level digital art, I have been teaching the “low-poly” technique using a portrait. Low-poly just means you break your image down into simple shapes and fill the shapes using an eyedropper tool, taking the color from the original image. The first year was a trial: just figure out how to make the portraits. The second year (and many years after), the students had to create a portrait in which they selected a person they know in real life and respect, admire, or look up to. I even had students make tribute Adobe Spark movies and present their projects to the subject they selected for their work.

The transition to **Empathy Portraits** increased the vulnerability and bravery in the unit. Students are now required to find someone they know in real life who overcame an obstacle in their lives, interview them about it, and create a tribute portrait of the person. The obstacle could be anything from losing a friend to overcoming an addiction. The end goal is to set up an exhibition in which the artwork and students’ personal statements are displayed, with a QR code linking to the audio recording of the interview. After the live exhibition, the students will set up a virtual gallery archive of the portraits and interviews that can be shared and explored for years to come.

You

Insert Project Theme →

This can be any project that would require the students to do the following:

- Conduct an interview or give an oral report
- Gather or create visual representation(s) of their work
- Plan an exhibition of the project as a class and individually (how they would show their own work as part of the class’ exhibition)

Me

You

Scope →

- **Pique Interest**

I started by showing my students printouts of previous students' low-poly portraits and had them work in groups to determine (or guess) what they thought the project criteria was and also to rank the work based on qualities of success

- **Modeling**

I brought in a fellow co-worker into the classroom (planned ahead of time) and interviewed her in front of the whole class. I had a student time my interview to show the students approximately how long it should be.

I did prepare interview questions in this first year, but will give the students the opportunity to craft their own interview questions in the future. I also demonstrated how to take the reference portrait photograph they would need for their digital project. Interviewees were briefed about the project and then asked if they would be willing to participate by sharing their stories.

I also worked with my Library-Media specialist to teach the students how to use a variety of devices to record their audio interviews. He showed them several apps on their phones and a web-based recorder on the computer or chromebook. After the recording period, my Library-Media Specialist provided instruction on how to edit their audio files using Soundtrap. He also set up the free Soundtrap accounts through BOCES.

Scope →

- Plan your project
- Introduce the project
- Model the work
- Clear due dates for audio files
- Edit audio (Soundtrap)
- Make the work (visual representation)
- Reflect on the work
- Plan the Exhibit
- Install Exhibit
- Archive the Exhibit (Thinglink)
- Reflect as a class

- Interview Questions students were given this year. Students can also tweak these questions or re-write them, as long as they are able to respectfully draw out the story related to the unit.

- **Interview Questions**

Q→ Can you introduce yourself and your relationship to me (the digital artist)?

Q→ Tell us about yourself: What do you or did you do for a living? What is your family like? Do you have any pets? What do you like to do in your spare time? What is your favorite food or drink?

Q → Is there a time in your life in which you have had to overcome something that was hard for you? Are you willing to share that with me?

Q → Is there a symbolic element that reminds you of the difficult time in your life you shared with me? If yes, how does this element represent your struggle or resolution (or determination)?

Q → What advice do you have in general for people when they are struggling or going through a tough period in their lives?

Me

You

Scope →

- **Collecting student work**

Each student in my class has a shared folder with me in Google Drive, where they upload their files. Google Classroom can also be used to collect student work, however, I like to teach my students how to keep their Google Drives organized so they can find work again when needed. Each student has a main folder for the class and subfolders for each unit.

- **Making the Project**

In this particular course, students needed to learn the low-poly technique, practice it, and persist to complete the portrait.

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Students also needed to design a background for their portraits that referenced a part of their interviewee's story.

- **Reflecting on the work**

Students receive feedback throughout the project and also participate in a peer critique. When their project is completely done, students reflect on the entire project and write an artist statement that references their relationship to the person they selected and their reasons for interviewing that person. They also include insights as to what they learned from the interview and how that may have affected their thinking.

- **Sample student reflection and artwork**

My mom is a strong women who has had many challenges in her life and whenever a problems comes into her life she tries to make the best of it and not let the situation put her down.I asked my mom if I could use her in my empathy project for art because I knew that my mom has gone through a lot and she is a strong woman who has overcome those struggles in her life.

In my empathy artwork I choose to put wedding rings in the background of the portrait to symbolize her getting married a second time to my dad and how she has become so much more happier and how she is glad she had me with my dad. The pose that my mom was in showed that by her looking straight ahead and standing tall showed that she didn't let her struggles bring her down and overcame them by finding a way to become a better person and to become a stronger person.



My relationship to the person In my project is my mom and I am her daughter. She has been with me and supported me my whole life. anything I ever need I would go to her she has been my day one from the very beginning. We have always had a good connection we like to watch netflix with each other and go and get our nails done.

My response to my moms obstacle is that she is an even stronger woman than I thought and that she inspires me to never give up to always look ahead that better things are coming to never let another get you down that you should keep moving forward and to have friends and family be there for you in your time of need and that with people like that in your life it makes it easier to get through things and become the person you want to be.

- **Sample student reflection and artwork**

I met Jermaine last year during workouts for football. Ever since then we became really good friends with a ton of great memories.

I selected Jermaine because I already knew what he was going through and what he went through but not enough. I wanted to figure out what all went on and the whole life story.

After Jermaine had told me in the audio interview of all what happened I felt sad. I grew up with a father figure in my life and never left. Jermaine did not. I kind of put myself in his shoes and that's what really got me. See for me, my mom left when I was about 10 or 11, and then changed a whole lot. For Jermaine, his dad left at an early age, which means Jermaine probably has little to no memories with his dad. My thinking in the future will definitely be affected when it comes to these sort of topics because I went through it and Jermaine did too, and our reactions were kinda the same. So I could barely imagine what others are.

For my project, I did not do anything special with the facial structure for him. Although I did mess around with the background a bit. I first made the background black because 1: it really made the clothing look good and 2: Jermaine's story was kind of a dark sad one. I then put envelopes because Jermaine said his dad would mail pictures that his dad would draw for Jermaine and his family and his dad would mail them to him.



Me

You

Scope →

- **Planning the Exhibition**

Students are divided up into four groups for Exhibition Planning: Curators, Designers, Installers, and Publicity. In this case, we decided as a class that due to the theme of the project, we wanted everyone's work to be included, as it felt like work not selected by the curatorial team also meant the person's story wasn't significant enough. We felt it was better to be inclusive for this project. The curatorial team still had jobs to complete, such as writing the exhibition brief and picking a title for the show.

- **Designing and Installing the Exhibit**

These two teams work together to come up with the layout, prepare the work for exhibition, make the show signage, and hang the show in the exhibition space.

- **Celebrating the Work**

Students plan an opening reception for the work, where they can attend with their families, friends, the people they interviewed and made their work about, as well as other teachers, administrators, and community members.

- **Document the Exhibit**

The Installation team is in charge of photographing the exhibit. We take pictures from various angles of the exhibit, as well as use a Theta 360 or Garmin 360 camera to document the exhibit in a virtual reality setting.

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You

Scope →

- **Archiving the Exhibition**

Students are given student accounts on ThingLink and upload the following to the group (online) exhibit:

- (1) Their final portrait artwork
- (2) The edited audio file
- (3) Their written statement

*Due to COVID-19, we were unable to create the live exhibition and the archive in the way we envisioned. These plans reference what would have happened if we were able to be together in person.

- **Reflecting as a class**

Students review the physical exhibition and explore the online archived version. Students share their opinions and perceptions regarding what they think went well and what they think could have been improved. This discussion is recorded and saved by the teacher to share with future groups of students who will be planning a similar project. Students can also create self-reflective audio or video recordings, discussing their personal job within the exhibition and how they think they performed in that role. I have also used a Google Form to gather feedback from students, which does allow students to upload an audio or video file.

Sample Student Audio Reflection



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Target → I can create a digital image of a person who has overcome an obstacle in their lives.

Empathy Portrait Project Criteria

CONCEPT →

- Select a subject (a person) who has overcome an obstacle in their lives (must be someone you know in real life)
- Create a background that visually describes the subject of your work

COMPOSITION →

- Form is evident in the portrait
- Background elements are arranged to support the narrative

CRAFTSMANSHIP →

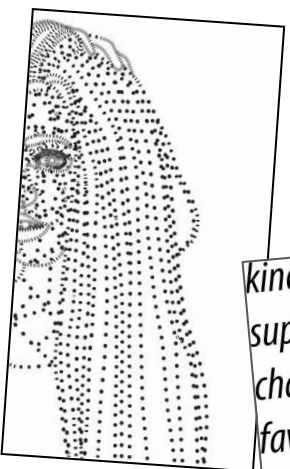
- Skill level with Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop is evident

Your finished Work Journal should include the following:

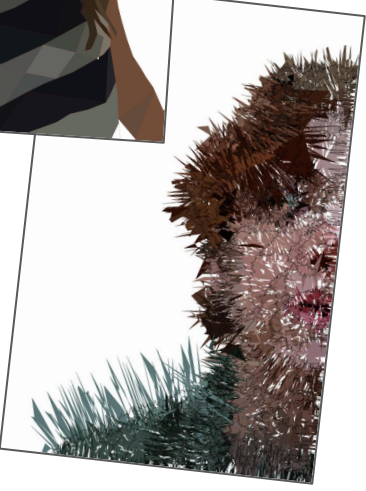
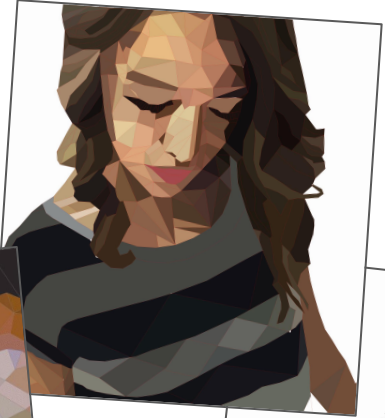
- Daily dated entries to your Process File
- Written Reflections (Artist Statement, Quick Writes, Notes on your own, Feedback from others)
- Alternate versions (experiments)
- Final Image

We will plan a way to share out work with our subject and possibly exhibit the work within our community.

End Product → A digital image that communicates to the viewer a narrative about the subject in the image.



kind, friendly, good, lovely
 superior, swell, admirable
 charming, delightful
 favorable, gentle,
 calm, Superdad,
 polite, hilarious, o
 trustworthy, kind, fr
 good, lovely, superio
 brilliant, charming
 favorable, ap



Highlight where you (or your artwork) lands on the rubric.

Geometric Portrait	Clip Artist	Trainee Designer	Junior Designer	Senior Digital Illustrator
<p>HEAD Concept Digital Portrait of a person who has overcome an obstacle in their life</p>	<p>I have a random person in my work</p>	<p>The person in my work is somewhat important to me and/or the background is lacking personalized details</p>	<p>My portrait illustrates the person I chose to portray; My work shows the person and a few details about the person.</p>	<p>My artwork is a tribute to the person I selected. I found an original way to show the person that includes elements of their story. The work is optimistic and hopeful and focuses on the strength of the person.</p>
<p>HAND Composition Form is evident in the portrait; subject matter is arranged to support the concept</p>	<p>I have lines on the face; my background is blank</p>	<p>I have lines and colors defining the face</p>	<p>The placement of the lines and values creates 3-dimensional form in my portrait; The subject matter is arranged to support the narrative in the work</p>	<p>I have high contrast in the values on the face, making it feel like it is popping off the page. I found an innovative way to arrange all the elements, yet the work feels cohesive (all parts work together).</p>
<p>Craftsmanship Ability to control materials</p>	<p>There are gaps in between the shapes</p>	<p>The face is put together well on a solid or gradient background</p>	<p>It is clear I can use Adobe Illustrator/Photoshop; My portrait is put together well and has evidence of some manipulation in the software programs</p>	<p>The portrait is put together masterfully in Adobe Illustrator/Photoshop; there is evidence of experimentation and multi-step processes in my end product. I figured out some techniques even the teacher does not know how to do.</p>
<p>HEART Consideration Engagement & persistence with project</p>	<p>I took the “easy” option and stayed in my comfort zone.</p>	<p>I worked hard but kept running into problems that stopped my progress.</p>	<p>I took a risk and tried something new and challenging. I worked through problems.</p>	<p>I was determined to make my project the way I envisioned it. I took many risks and learned new skills during the project.</p>
<p>SELF-REFLECT→ What was most challenging for you in the project and how did you work through it?</p>				
<p>TEACHER FEEDBACK</p>				