

Sin Fronteras

Boy

Students create collaborative websites to explore the border

■ BY GRACE CORNELL

Around one table, four 4th-grade girls chat quietly as they write on their laptops: Ruby interviews Alejandra about her experience crossing the U.S.-Mexico border as a 6-year-old. Meanwhile, Cindy turns notes from an interview with her uncle into a narrative about his immigration experience. Next to them, four boys work on the *Sin Fronteras Boy* website, a choose-your-own-adventure story about a boy who tries to cross the border and becomes a superhero after his mother is grabbed by *la migra* (immigration agents). I am working with the indigenous peoples group, helping Roberto understand a recent article about the U.S. government's attempted seizure of Lipan Apache land for the construction of the border wall, while Karolina looks for photographs of the Lipan Apache, Yaqui, Kickapoo, Yuma, and Tohono O'odham peoples, all tribes that are currently affected by U.S. border policy.

We are hard at working making wikis—simple websites that can be collectively written and edited. Wikis are easy to set up through hosting sites like wikispaces.com or pbwiki.com, and are usually free for educators. Once a wiki has been created, members can add content, create new pages, and make changes to the content. This allows students to write collaboratively, adding to and revising each other's work. (Teachers can also track students' individual contributions.) The three wikis created by the 11 English language learners in my reading group are very different from each other, ranging from the fantastical to the deeply personal. However,

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all explore our central question: How does the border affect our lives?

It is an important topic for these students, either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants, living in a largely Latina/o community in Oakland, Calif. The goal is for students to improve their writing and their English language skills through working together. It is also for students to come together as a classroom community to support each other in exploring the sensitive and controversial topic of U.S.-Mexico border policy. I do my best to facilitate a collaborative writing experience by encouraging the group members to outline and research the websites together, read and discuss each other's contributions to the wikis, and revise each other's pages. As students work collaboratively to make their websites, they write and talk their way into not only a deeper understanding of the English lan-

guage, but also of the world they live in. They begin, slowly but surely, to identify injustices and construct their own imaginative visions of a more just world.

How Does the Border Affect Our Lives?

During the first several days of the project, we read three picture books about immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border: *Super Cilantro Girl*, by Juan Felipe Herrera; *Friends from the Other Side*, by Gloria Anzaldúa; and *From North to South*, by René Colato Laínez. Students used Post-it notes in the books to record questions and connections, which were often to their own families and their own life experiences. Then I asked the students to walk around the room and write responses on chart paper beneath three key questions:

- What is the border?
- Why does the border exist?
- How does the border affect our lives?

Afterward, I read some of the students' responses aloud and conducted a whole group discussion centered on these three questions. It was quickly apparent that my students knew that the border was an imaginary line or a fence between countries, but they could not articulate why it existed. Its effects, however, were clear from the comments scrawled on the chart paper: "It hurts us because our families are in other countries." "It affects us because if we don't have money or a home we can't go to the United States and have a better life." "It affects your



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life because you risk yourself and you go to jail and don't have any money when you get out of jail and you go back to your country."

We next pulled out the computers and got familiar with how wikis work. We looked at examples of wikis created by students as well as large wikis

like wikipedia.org and wikihow.com. I showed the students how to edit an existing page and how to create and name a new page through wikispaces.com. That was all the introduction needed. They soon figured out for themselves how to change the look of a page, add pictures, and comment on

each other's writing. At this time we also talked about important rules for internet safety and appropriate behavior. They picked pseudonyms to use on their websites to protect their privacy (which I use in this article as well).

Once we had the basics down, I initiated a whole group brainstorm

‘How come Yaqui people in the United States can cross into Mexico whenever they want, but the Mexican Yaqui often cannot get visas to come to the United States?’

on chart paper of topics for border-themed websites. I asked students to talk to each other about what they would like to learn about the border, and then suggested some topics that lend themselves easily to a wiki format: encyclopedias, choose-your-own-adventure stories, and book reviews. Then I opened the floor and let students brainstorm. They suggested a dictionary of words related to the border, a website that chronicled the history of the border, a collection of interviews, and a website about borders around the world, to name a few. I steered them away from ideas that would not work well as collaborative writing projects (a large map of the border, for example) by explaining why these topics might not be ideal and suggesting ways of folding them into other topics (a history of the border website could include maps). At the end of the brainstorm, we starred four or five topics that seemed the most promising.

Next, I asked the students to form small groups around the ideas that most interested them. I trusted them to do this organically by getting out of their seats, talking to each other, and choosing groupmates and a topic at the same time. One group immediately latched on to the idea of a choose-your-own-adventure, creating their hero, Sin Fronteras (without borders) Boy, modeled on Super Cilantro Girl. Another group decided to create oral histories by interviewing family members and writing their immigration stories as narratives. The final group wanted to write about how the border affected the Mayans and Aztecs. Not wanting to guide with too heavy a hand, I let them research and find out for themselves that the Mayans and Aztecs lived far away from the U.S.-Mexico border. With the help of a guest teacher with ties to the Native groups of the Southwest, they turned their research to the current indigenous peoples who are affected by the border today.

‘Sin Fronteras Boy’: Real Writers in the Real World

The *Sin Fronteras Boy* website (sinfronterasboy.wikispaces.com) was by far the simplest of the projects. It involved little research for the participants beyond reading some choose-your-own-adventure books to get a feel for the format. Then the boys let their imaginations run wild, creating powerful villains, exciting battle scenes, vivid illustrations, and both good and bad endings for the story. It was a meaningful experience for these children, a few of whom were somewhat reluctant writers, to truly get to write creatively and elicit the help of their friends.

Perhaps most significant was the realization that they were writing for real audiences and creating a story that other people would get to read and enjoy. This is part of the beauty of wikis as an instructional tool: they give students the sense that they are doing real writing, in a real-world genre and for an authentic audience.

As time went by, the students’ participation in the authentic task of creating websites began to change their concepts of themselves. Jimmy, a student in the Sin Fronteras Boy group, exclaimed on several occasions, “We’re comic writers!” Another student, Nina, wrote in her autobiography, “I feel like an author because I am writing like one.” For an English language learner reading and writing two years below grade level, this was indeed a meaningful statement.

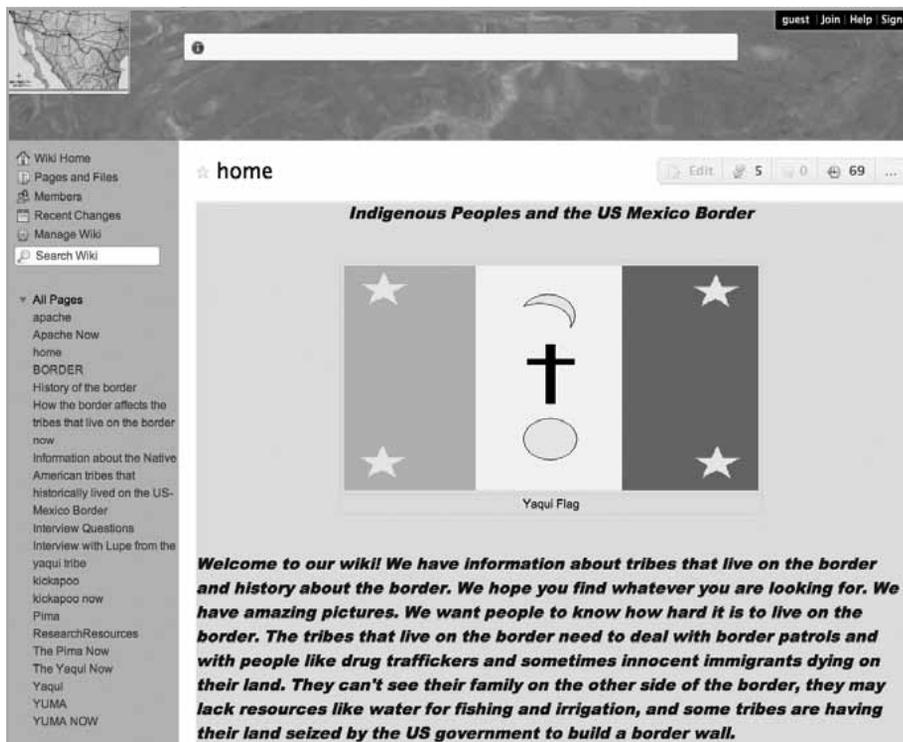
The students also talked about how their writing improved when they were writing something that the whole world might see. Mario explained that, when writing for the world, he “put big words in it . . . so I can sound interesting.” Nina remarked, “I add more things and . . . do my best grammar and punctuation and periods.” Roberto explained: “That really changes how I write because then the pages would be longer. I would have written more,

lots more.” When asked why he would write more if many people were going to read his writing, he responded simply, “Because they inspire me.”

Oral Histories: Family Connections

The oral histories group (oralhistoriesdelafrontera.wikispaces.com) was driven, from the beginning, to tell their families’ stories about crossing the border. They made lists of people to interview, drafted questions, interviewed one to four people each, and then turned those interviews into vivid narratives of participants’ often difficult experiences crossing the border. In this way, the girls’ parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings became involved in the project. Alejandra spent hours talking to her dad about the details of his experience crossing the border. Her final narrative described how her father had almost died when he was left behind in the desert by his *coyote*, and painfully recounted the nights alone in the United States when he had gotten drunk and cried out of loneliness for his wife and children back in Mexico. As Alejandra interviewed her father, mother, and brother, and was interviewed herself, she kept telling me that this was the first time she was remembering her experience crossing the border as a 6-year-old. Cindy also felt a sense of rediscovering her family history: “Although they live with me, I’ve gotten to know more about the persons’ lives that I interview.”

After their first round of interviews, the group designed a second set of interview questions to ask family members what they thought should be done to “change the current border situation.” To their surprise, not all of their family members advocated getting rid of the border, saying that “countries need to have borders” and “not just anyone should be able to cross.” However, those interviewed also stated



Above: Home page of the *Indigenous Peoples and the U.S.-Mexico Border* wiki.
Below: Spanish home page of the *Oral Histories of the Border* wiki.



that their own lives would be better if the border didn't exist, and they could cross freely between the United States and Mexico to find work and see their families. This left the group pondering what sort of border policy could be fair, safe, and humane.

The girls in the oral histories group decided on their own to make their website completely bilingual. They found the work of writing in Spanish challenging, constantly exclaiming how much they had already forgotten. But there was also a sense that they

were rescuing their Spanish language skills, reteaching themselves and each other, often with the at-home help of their parents. In turn, it was deeply meaningful for them that their families could read their websites.

Indigenous People and the Border: Asking Hard Questions

The indigenous peoples group (indigenoupeoplesandtheborder.wikispaces.com) did by far the most research. Their topic—the current struggles of Native American groups on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border—was a complex one. In order to scaffold their research, I spent a good deal of time finding and printing relevant websites and news articles. Sometimes the reading level of these articles was so complex that I needed to summarize them or highlight the key points. We read the articles together, discussed them, and sometimes used graphic organizers to analyze the information.

Through this process, I watched the students in the group grapple with unfamiliar ideas and contradictory information. They struggled to understand the complex relationships among the Native American tribes, the U.S. government, and the Mexican government. They drew parallels between the ways that the border separates them from family members and the way the border has cut several Native American tribes in half. They asked poignant questions: “How come Yaqui people in the United States can cross into Mexico whenever they want, but the Mexican Yaqui often cannot get visas to come to the United States?” “Why does the U.S. government think it can just take people’s land away from them to build a big border wall?” “Why is the United States building a border wall anyway?” The answers to some of these questions led them to difficult realizations of ways that the United States discriminates against some and

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privileges others. Throughout the course of the project, they worked to wrap their minds around the struggles and perspectives of groups of people whose experience with the border is both similar to and profoundly different from the experiences of members of their own communities.

Developing a Sense of Social Justice

The most challenging aspect of the unit was the tension between cataloging social injustices—writing narratives of undocumented immigrants, reading articles about Native Americans whose lands or resources had been confiscated due to the U.S. government’s border policies—and analyzing these injustices as situations that could, and should, be changed. When I talked with my students about these issues, I sometimes had the sense that they saw their reality as fixed. Although they could recognize injustice, they didn’t immediately assume that they could do anything about it.

Not wanting to push my own views onto them, I chose to counter this by asking questions—constantly. When they told me stories about the border or recounted what they had learned about the political issues involved, I asked them if they thought the situations they described were fair. When they explained to me the way things worked, I wondered aloud if there was anything anyone could do about that.

Sometimes there were sudden sparks of passion, moments of “that’s not fair!” or “isn’t that racist?” or “maybe we could write a letter!” These were fleeting, but recurring. As the project continued, students began to construct, through repeated discussion with me and with each other, a sense that things didn’t have to be the way they were: People shouldn’t have to risk their lives walking through the desert to support their families. Native American tribes shouldn’t lose their land or natural resources because of failed border policy. People should

be free to live the lives they choose.

For example, in early April, Nina’s autobiography page focused on her excitement about using a laptop and writing a web page. By mid-April, the page included a reference to her “messaging the president” and “trying my best to convince the president to let Mexican people come to the United States.” Her May revision, completed with my help and the help of other students, showed a more distinct sense of history:

Long ago, California was part of Mexico. Now California is part of the United States of America and Mexican people try to cross the border. However, sometimes they can’t come because the government won’t give the Mexican people the papers that they need to cross the border legally. . . . It’s not fair because these people may need to see their families in the United States and they want to have a better life and a better job.

Her final draft ended with the rallying cry, “Yes we can change the government and the president’s mind!”

Writing Development

Although a deeper understanding of social issues was a priority for me in this project, measurable academic growth in writing was the other primary goal. To measure students’ developments in English language writing, I had them complete 40-minute pre- and post-writing assessments. I was amazed at the improvements. Across the board, students wrote longer pieces with more complex sentences. All but one student’s rubric score for the traits of quality writing went up between the pre- and post-assessment.

These improvements to students’ individual writing are reflected in the successive drafts on the wiki as well. This is a first draft of the home page of the *Sin Fronteras Boy* website:

Here is a little summary about the book At the Biggining, SINFRONTERASBOY is a normal boy.He be-

comes a SUPERHERO. THERE IS A BORDER CALLED MR.BORDER. Why does SINFRONTERAS became a superhero.? He his going to save his mother.He is going to save his father. He lives in Mexicali,Mexico. This a choose your own adventure.You can choose your own first,second,and end. There are a.b.and c. Some of them are funny.We even have alittle bit of rap if you read begening of the story fast.

After many revisions, expansions, and edits, done by all four members of the groups, and several conferences with me, the final version looked like this:

This is a choose your own adventure story created by four fourth grade boys studying the border and how it affects people’s lives. You can select your own beginning, middle, and end. On each page, you can pick between a, b, and c.

Here is a little summary of the story. At the beginning, SINFRONTERAS BOY is a normal boy who lives in Mexicali, Mexico. Unexpectedly, he becomes a SUPERHERO. There is a big, bad, mean border called Mr. Border who doesn’t let people pass to the other side. Sinfronteras Boy is going to save his mother from la migra (immigration police) and fight against Mr. Border in order to make a world in which people can be free.

Some of the pages are funny and some are sad. YOU can always come and read! Everywhere, anytime!! We think this story is great for everybody! We are writing this story so they can take the border away and people can be free and come into the United States if they want to have a better life. Some people do not know how the border affects the lives of people who do not have papers. Those people cannot cross it to support their children. This is a story that you will read, and it will knock your socks off!!! Not even an author has written a story like this one! This story is the one!!!

This final draft shows many im-

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provements from the initial paragraph: It is full of exuberant voice, organized in a logical way, and highlights the main ideas of the website. Such distinct improvements in students' writing over the course of the unit illustrate the great things that happen when children are allowed to write for authentic purposes and real-world audiences, work collaboratively, exercise choice, write about topics that are relevant to them, and engage in inquiry around genuinely complex social questions.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson that I took away from this experience, and one that I hope to share with other educators, is the feasibility of engaging students in authentic writing about culturally and socially relevant subject matter through the use of the internet. Wikis are a particularly promising technology because of the ways in which they facilitate collaboration while allowing teachers to monitor individual student contributions. However, collaboration must be encouraged strategically and specifically. I was lucky to try this project with a group of students who I had already worked with for most of the year, and who already had some training in collaborative work. As anyone who has ever tried to set up cooperative learning situations knows, a great deal of community building is necessary before students will work productively and noncompetitively with each other. Even in the case of this project, near the end of the school year, when deadlines loomed and I was no longer as focused on the teaching concepts of collective authorship and collaboration, students' deeply rooted assumptions of individualism and competition began to reassert themselves. It was a reminder for me of the important role that teachers play in establishing the type of community in which students can act as both co-teachers and co-learners.

I was also lucky to be able to work with a small group of students in a setting in which I could devote myself entirely to literacy instruction. However, I have also worked as a classroom teacher, and I believe that group projects like this could be incorporated into a classroom setting. Even in a school with no laptop cart, where students have access to just a handful of classroom computers, this type of project is feasible: Groups could take turns using the computers during the writing block. They could work during computer lab time if available, or even at home or after school. The beauty of wikis is that participants can write asynchronously—they can collaborate over time and distance by editing each other's work, sending messages, and posting discussion threads, all without needing to be in the same place at the same time.

However, the most important lesson that I learned from this project was that students, when allowed to inquire into topics that are deeply relevant to them, can become powerful-

ly engaged in projects that force them to question their worlds and their conceptions of what is fair. Teachers play a fundamental role in this process. They do this by asking the right questions at the right times, and also by creating classroom environments in which students are encouraged to tackle difficult subject matter and allowed to work as a community to construct their own ideas about the ways in which our society is unjust and their own alternative visions of the future.

Although my students' nascent sense of themselves as social agents has not yet blossomed into definite action, I think certain seeds were planted. I continue to be moved by my students' dreams and visions of a world that is free and borderless, dreams that they shared on their websites. And I hope that they will continue to develop an enduring concept of themselves as wiki writers, real-world authors and researchers, and potential social activists with the power to make concrete changes in their worlds. ■