Media production and disruptive innovation: exploring the interrelations between children, tablets, teachers and texts in subject English settings

Abstract

This article concerns Key Stage 3 boys' and student teachers' responses to literature through the production of moving image, sound and photography in a formal context. The researchers' interests centre on media making with iPads and the ways in which young people articulate textual understanding through production. Under the guidance of their tutors, PGCE students and pupils engage with digital tools to explore new forms of cultural expression, inviting creative practice and critical thinking. The article incorporates multiple perspectives from: the children, the student teachers, the English and Drama teachers, the teacher trainers / lecturers in English and Drama, and a doctoral researcher interested in the distinctive nature of making with digital media and associated ontological issues. A sociocultural overview contextualises the study before an exploration of the ways in which pedagogies and epistemological understandings, often associated with non-formal media making, constructively challenge traditional Secondary English classroom practices.

Contextual Overview

The project has been a yearly collaboration over 5 years between lecturers at The Institute of Education (IoE) PGCE English & Drama Dept, BFI Education and a Lambeth secondary school. For the past couple of years this school has been under continual review from OFSTED who are concerned about its 'performance'. Indeed inspectors were present on the morning of the project but they were not invited to observe the creative media activities being conducted in the large Victorian basement of the school. It is arguable that these proceedings represent the unsettled juxtaposition of assessment and accountability, with realms associated more with open-ended, exploratory, collaborative project work, deemed in this account to be of more relevance to contemporary learning.

On a micro level, the project is set in an authorising environment, that is, within an English department that sanctions experimentation with: new pedagogies, multimodal expressions of understanding and open online access to teaching materials and students' work. The research indicates that this particular system runs in parallel with more traditional ways of working, presenting a daily challenge to the teachers and ever present tensions between concurrent disparate approaches to learning. Despite this, the Head of Department is committed to offering opportunities for students to engage with a variety of media and to experiencing autonomy and creative control in their learning lives.

Project Overview

The project comprised of 2 workshops involving Year 7 & 8 boys, a group of student teachers, some iPads, some props and the idea of responding to literature with socially-oriented media production. After an hour of experimenting with filming and editing on the iPads, two groups of IoE student teachers were respectively paired with Year 7 and Year 8 secondary school boys. The aim was for each grouping of boys and student teachers to create, over a morning, a short moving and still image piece in response to Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Year 7s) and Poe's *The Raven* (Year 8s). The former session took place in a BFI learning space, filming in and around the Southbank; the latter within the confines of a basement in the school itself.

The boys' English teachers had prepared them in advance of the workshop familiarising them with parts of the original texts and so they were already conversant with key themes of the Gothic genre. The workshops were co-ordinated by IoE lecturers supported by a

technician, all of whom are experienced in the organisation of this opt-in English and Film PGCE module. This was the first time that iPads had been used, and the first time it had run over the course of just one morning, or indeed, in the case of the Year 8s, over the course of just one English period. The latter setting resulted in particularly evocative work, set as it was in the basement of a Victorian building with many dark and peeling nooks and crannies. One of the class teachers was particularly interested in how the students would engage with Poe through film making, so as to reflect aspects of the Gothic: "its hostile nature, decay, imprisonment, madness, doomed love".

Methodology

For a deeper understanding of the dynamics of meaning-making with digital media in this complex urban secondary school environment, qualitative techniques drawn from the ethnographic tradition were employed. The article writers were positioned as participant observers performing a hybrid role: as educators developing multidisciplinary PGCE media production practices and as action researchers promulgating innovative teaching and learning strategies as a form of praxis. None of the participants in this research claimed to be expert, professional media practitioners which reinforced a climate of co-learning and co-design, congruent with the theoretical principles of social constructivism.

All the boys had been given parental consent forms with information about the study, about how it was to be conducted and what the expectations were. Photos were taken during the planning, production and editing of the texts, to record the various groups' progression. It was felt that this, along with close observation, would illustratrate the deeply collaborative and richly dialogic nature of production processes and exchanges within and between each group, as they unfolded. Once finished the short moving image texts were uploaded to Vimeo. Regrettably, time constraints limited opportunities for the boys to finalise their edits and some had to be finished by the student teachers.

At a later stage the clips were collectively viewed during the course of discrete interviews, led variously by the lecturers and the researcher. The interviews, which were recorded using a combination of audio and/or video, took place over the course of an English period and lasted several minutes each. The boys were asked to comment on their creative choices, on their sense of autonomy, on how it felt to be working and sharing knowledge with an adult unknown to them - whilst being in control of a powerful "multimodal mixing desk" (Burn, 2003). During interviewing, the boys awaiting their turn completed a questionnaire on their experience and some wrote thank you letters to the organisers.

The researcher was a PhD student in the second year of her research into young learners and media making processes. Her doctorate research prompted further triangulating strategies: recording the student teachers' responses and observations during the workshop plenary feedback session and a smaller focus group. Furthermore, the Year 8 English teacher whose boys were studying The Raven, was interviewed on a one-to-one basis about the value of the project and its outcomes; as were the English and Drama IoE lecturers who were developing the project, about their motivations for doing so. The findings from these interviews will be presented in her thesis.

The multi-layered design of this study was such that the research activities were covered from a number of different viewpoints, in settings both outside and inside the formal school environment. The diverse statuses of the individual research participants and the production of both multimodal and material texts for analysis, enriched the findings on many levels. On the other hand, issues of neutrality and objectivity were always present. It was questionable the extent to which the celebratory aspects of the research did not dominate, which is often the case in research settings which already buy into the merits of media production. For this

reason, the researcher selects an interview extract that engages with social ambiguity, while the lecturers reflect on the quality of the learning emerging from socially oriented practical media work as a response to literature.

'We can understand because we can see'
Theo Bryer - IoE lecturer in English and Drama

Our aim was, in part, to hone an approach to filmmaking so that it might lend itself to the default pedagogy of the English classroom. This may be a vain hope; the absence of Media in the new National Curriculum for England (2014) reflects suspicion of the power that digital tools of production offer young people to represent themselves to the community of their classroom and beyond, and to draw on their bodily and cultural resources to speak or write back to the texts they are studying.

We have been experimenting with structures that edge students into the processes of making artistic choices in shaping their work. What surprised me about the findings from this research was the ways that students found inspiration from much else beyond the stimulus that we offered and the constraints that we set that was within their physical, visual and cultural realm. We suggested that each group might focus on the dramatic action of opening a door – it was up to them to decide what then emerged. Barthes makes the point that:

> ..minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as signifier to a concept filled with a very rich history. (1993: 120).

Gestures and action become worthy of note - dramatic even, when framed by a camera. Despite the significant history of processes and signifying systems related to film and TV production, students' prior engagement with these media forms means that we, as educators, are less inclined to prescribe the ways that the content is interpreted. We are interested in what students choose to put in the frame and how they appropriate cultural material to do so. We also appreciate the ways that students' insights about appropriate content seem to constrain or direct the choices that they make; the camera exerts a certain discipline in this respect but with a very short time to make a film, everyone needs to know where to start.

The door opening is a motif that takes account of students' interest in what happens next in the narrative. It is also suggestive of an immediate build up of suspense and anticipation that encourages students to slow the action down and focus on the 'minute' detail: to feel the tension as they hypothesise about a possible climax. This focus on a moment of dramatic action is partly intended to facilitate the
Fig. ? Still from *The Shadow of The Raven*

processes of collaboration by foregrounding or offering up specific creative choices that the group needs to concern themselves with. So it becomes a formal device around which individuals can organise their ideas and develop their readings of the poem. In The Raven the 'tapping at my chamber door' that prompts 'fantastic terrors' that the protagonist overcomes in opening the door, strikes a chord because of its cultural location in different mediums. Here it is suggestive of a fear of the unknown and Gothic imaginings. In the medium of film it has other resonances - opening a door is an obvious motif from horror and slasher films, for example, Halloween (Carpenter, 1978) and the The Scream series (Craven, 1996-2011), The Woman in Black (Watkins, 2012) and Paranormal Activity (Peli, 2009), to which the boys made continual reference.

Fulfilling the joint roles of actor and spectator in the immediacy of a drama event enables individuals to critique their collective and individual contributions during the process of enactment. That the participants' view of the action is inevitably partial becomes an issue when working with more presentational drama-in-education strategies like the still image, which rely on an arrangement of bodies and faces in expressive ways to make meaning.

One of the students, Sam, mentioned that:

> many people think different ways about how they imagine a character in a book but when you act it out you can see how the other person imagines someone then... you could add to it not just by of your idea but mixing it with his so it ends up with a better result.

His emphasis here is on the physical embodiment of an interpretation in action that makes it visible to others and a process of 'mixing it up' that distinguishes these spontaneous yet negotiated re-readings. Alan's comment that, "we all have different ideas and then we can interpret them into one idea and make it into a really good film" is suggestive of the more prescribed approach to media production or drama, that assumes it will necessarily be preceded by some commitment to a plan in the form of a script or storyboard. A more spontaneous, improvisational process seemed to lend itself well to tablet filmmaking but we were also struck by what the technology added to this process. The process of reviewing their images meant that students had an opportunity to try out their ideas and then to respond to their own efforts, shifting between the roles of creators and audience in quick succession, so that they might judge whether their transformations were convincingly filmic and Gothic.

Freddie mentioned how wearing a mask helped to effect the transformation "It made the person that was watching the film think, oh yeah, he is the Raven, we can understand because we can see". It is not only the size of the tablet screen allowing for communal viewing (compared to LCD screens on digital video cameras) but the tablet's cultural function as a tool for viewing that is significant here, meaning that the still or moving images have the status of 'finished' product more immediately. Burn's observation (in relation to editing) that the provisionality of the digital realm begins 'to measure up to the ultimate plasticity of the mental image act' (2009: 40) is suggestive of the ways in which the affordances of the technology supports the conceptualisation of ideas. What we witnessed was focused reflection immediately followed by action, a redraft or a considered move forward and eventually an edit, at a similar pace.

Fig. ? Photo of *The Revenge* group

There were clearly many visual stimuli that intruded on the boys' communion with The Raven. The images were shaped and reformed through a process of negotiation that involved swift recourse to shared cultural reference points, particularly Scream 2 (1997, Craven), in the case of *The Revenge*. A negotiation of teacher and students' aims emerged from discussion about *Dead Man's Hands*, when Sam suggested that their black and white photos were reminiscent of 'crime investigation scenes' and Alan pointed out, 'also it's really Gothic'. The transformation of a blob of paint on the wall so that it looked like a drip of blood was suggestive of a more immediate visual frame of reference, relating to their familiar context. *The Revenge* group agreed that their film had started with looking around 'the actual room'. I was particularly arrested by Andres's enthusiastic observations about the penultimate image of *The Revenge*, the poignancy that he attributed to the magazine, next to the dead guard and Kyle's suggestion that it implied 'suspense'.

As we talked it struck everyone as very funny that actually the magazine just happened to be lying where Andres fell and then had accumulated meaning because we attributed it with more authorial intent. I was reminded of Burn and Parker's account of ''found' semiotic material' (2003: 24) becoming central to a film made by GCSE students. Burn and Parker attribute Metz (1974) with a definition of the 'pre-filmic' to describe the ways in which the components within a mise-en-scène become freighted with meaning, merging into the denotation of each shot. The boys' approach involved co-opting aspects of their world in an opportunistic and improvisational way. The results are suggestive of the way that a photo can have 'effects that exceed the constraints of its production' (Rose 2007: 20), a more

generous medium than writing in some respects.

Fig. ? Photo from The Revenge

What emerged most strikingly from this spontaneous way of working was how it prompted the boys to 'have a look' as Brecht suggested (to divert his actors from discussion) and to render their familiar school environment strange and convincingly filmic.

The heightened awareness generated by the creative potential and cultural associations of a camera and screen combined in tablet form enabled these students to disrupt school horizons and locate themselves in a cultural landscape that extended beyond their basement and the confines of the classroom.

Dead Man's Hands   The Revenge   The Shadow of the Raven

Responding to reading through making
Morlette Lindsay - IoE lecturer in English

As an English teacher I ask my students to engage with texts all the time; the problem with the current assessment regime in schools is that responding to texts, especially literature, means writing an essay. There is a contradiction here - students are asked to show their understanding of reading through writing about it. To respond to a text through making, using a different mode to writing, is therefore liberating for the students and teachers. In a previous project in the same school, an English teacher asked his students to pick a stanza from *The Ancient Mariner* to interpret in a short film, which he used to assess their reading of the poem. The film project using tablets proved to be an opportunity for students to be assessed on their reading, but more than this, it enabled their creative interpretation of a text, working collaboratively the chance to show how much they know.

The magic realism of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* lent itself to the brief the students were given: make your film about something that starts ordinary; then show a change, when something extraordinary happens. I had taught the Year 7 students involved for one term, so have prior knowledge about their work which, inevitably, influenced the way I looked at the films the students produced.

Let me start with one Year 7 group; Damon and Luke who made *And they were never seen again.* In the autumn term Damon had been mostly a reluctant writer and found lengthy independent writing a struggle. His first breakthrough was a request to write a scary story for Halloween during a fortnightly lesson devoted to creative writing. Damon produced a ghost story of quality (and several pages) – his writing showed he understands the genre. There was a dream sequence with a scary character but also featured references to the everyday, like his mother talking on her mobile phone. Another interesting feature was a small illustration of himself on the bed and another figure looking down at him – this reflected a sequence in the dream when he seemed to be outside his body and looking down at himself, sleeping and dreaming.

In Damon and Luke's film they successfully established a creepy, scary figure, making use of a mask that was offered for use amid a pile of possible props. I knew that Damon wasn't always that confident about speaking while Luke, his partner in making the film, is. The social relationship of the boys I felt had an impact on their achievement. Damon's ghost story showed me that this was a genre he understood and enjoyed writing; it is Damon who picked up the mask as a prop to kick off their story. I would argue that:

> their accomplishment is a function of the social relationships in this class, that to see it simply as individual excellence is to diminish significant aspects for their creativity, which occurred through their interactions with their peers (Doecke and McClenaghan 2011:83)

and in this case, also the interaction with the PGCE students who worked with them collaboratively.

The boys showed they understood suspense and the appearance of the mask at different points escalated the suspense. Choosing the mask as a symbol of something unknown or scary reminds me of Damon's story, alluded to earlier, with a scary unknown character. Just before the end of the film there is a shot of the mask – the boys explain in their interview that this is to show the point of view of this strange creature. This motif links with Damon's drawing of a person looking down on the bed as this shot is different to the rest of the frames where the mask is used – the mask is looking straight at the camera and the eyes are no longer empty – it is a scary image.

The film ended on what seems to be the ordinary – a young woman (a PGCE student) presenting the mask to them, asking if they know where it has come from. Their reaction to it showed that they feel its power, it scares them, they are aware of the power of the 'look' behind the mask, so they run away with the dramatic voice over: "And they were never seen again." The boys thus successfully achieved the brief: to make the ordinary extraordinary. They let us glimpse the mask during the film, as if it was something you see out of the corner of your eye (something Theo demonstrated to them while setting up the activity), and successfully used this technique to build suspense. When the adult actor presented them with the mask, it reiterated the brief of making the ordinary strange - just seeing the mask in her hand caused them to run away.

The film showed that they understood the structure of storytelling: how to build suspense and introduce different points of view. In conversation with the boys Damon pointed out that

he had picked up the mask, he understood its significance as a symbol, whereas Luke articulated what they were trying to achieve in showing us the mask's point of view, which is the scariest moment for the viewer. I would argue that these two students not only achieved the brief but also demonstrated their awareness of narrative structure, point of view and suspense. They were able to bring their prior knowledge of film, horror and symbolism to their making of this film. Essentially it was a collaborative process that enabled them to embody their understanding and create an end product - their *own* text.

Leonore   *The Mystery of the Masked Men*

"We want to do it"
Michelle Cannon - media education researcher

My research explores the context, processes and pedagogy related to media production in schools. I am interested in methodological tensions and the ways in which this study might relate to others in the field. In this respect, I was struck by Adamson's article (2014) in a previous edition of MERJ, in which he observes that "interviewing is deeply implicated into the construction of findings" (2014:50), no more so than in relation to interviews perceived as "potential sites of reflection on creative activity" (ibid, my emphasis). In such settings, there is pressure for students to collude and come up with 'the right answer' (described as "empty verbalism" by Vygotsky, as referenced by Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994), and equally for interviewers to be drawn towards the seductions of confirmation bias. To mitigate this, it is useful for the researcher to notice fleeting participant remarks that might illuminate a crack in an otherwise uniformly celebratory account. One such crack is explored below, in which the interviewer tries to draw out meaning from what the child participant somewhat hesitantly describes.

Linked with this notion of methodological fissure, Adamson (2014) draws on Jarvis' (2003) notion of facilitative 'disjuncture' in the learning process itself:

> When individuals' biographies and their current experience are not in harmony, a situation is produced whereby they recommence their quest for meaning and understanding. It is this disjuncture that underlies the need to learn. (Jarvis 2003, p.36)

It is argued in this commentary that a state of disjuncture or "disruptive innovation" (Pendleton-Julian 2009) is a fertile space for learning in its coupling of a print stimulus with a collective multimodal response. The boys produced, curated and assembled material and audiovisual resources into coherent patterns to make further meanings drawn from their own cultural repertoires (Potter 2012).

As Theo identified, seeming to act 'on impulse' and producing an immediately tangible artefact was a key factor in the success of the project, as was the uninterrupted flow of craftsmanlike activities facilitated by the iPad's integrated functionality. Although the word flow connotes seamlessness, this refers rather to the undiluted attentive mode witnessed in most groups. The actual 'jerky' creative processes of idea - (interruption) - action -

(interruption) - embodiment - (interruption) - review - redraft, were distinctly non-linear in character. The messy iterative nature of digital editing was in most cases fuelled and enriched by noisy, constructive dialogue and an enjoyable sense of shared purpose. This was the case for many of the boys, however, for some the short-lived nature of the project was a cause for frustration.

Disruption and frustration

Transcribed below is a section of a 7-minute interview with Isaac and Daniel (both Year 7) that betrays a sense of disappointment at being offered only a glimpse of creative media production. In our brief interview encounter, I made some immediate assumptions about Isaac as a self-assured individual whose opinions were perhaps rarely heard. I asked him and his partner about anything that had surprised them during the morning and Isaac replied with: "I was surprised that we thought about it so quickly". Many of the boys appreciated the opportunity to make an audiovisual text in a medium familiar to them, in a relatively short space of time, however there were further fine-grained findings.

[The QR code links to a 2 mins 52' audio clip, slightly longer than the extract below, which starts at around 40']

On being asked about the editing process, Isaac revealed meta-cognitive insights about being in a 'state of permission' for this practical work. The initial line of questioning below was deliberately abstruse in an effort to elicit as broad and as free a response as possible.

Michelle: Yeah. It does take ages, doesn't it? editing... And you've got... (pause) What do you think you've got to be, if you're ... if you're editing?

Isaac: You have to be focussed and ..um ... permitted to do it

Michelle: Permitted to do it

Daniel: And relaxed
Michelle: And relaxed. And what was that first thing you said?

Isaac: Focussed

Michelle: Focussed, right yeah. I like this word ... I like the idea of you thinking you need permission, that's interesting. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Isaac: That you can't just do anything, without ...well... you can't just do anything that you ... (pause)

Michelle: ... that you feel like

Isaac: Yeah, that you feel like. It has to be appropriate and (that...)

Michelle: Yeah. OK. Alright. So you're talking about following certain rules? Maybe? Are you? I'm not quite sure ... when you say permitted do you mean, you're given the permission to do it by a teacher or do you mean something else?

Isaac: Like, not permission but..

Michelle: Erm, I think I know what you mean. Erm, (pause)

Isaac: Like, we want to do it.

Michelle: Yeah. Yeah. You're allowed to just use your imagination, maybe? Is that what you mean? Just given a bit of freedom? Could you talk a bit more about that? Just kind of ... doing
Isaac: Like imagination ... you can think about anything you like, and dream about anything you like and no-one can stop you from doing that, so... it's a bit like that... the freedom to think about whatever er.. you like.. and then (pause) and then it's just, it's the same like that because we use our imagination to think about the story, so... we like freedom to, erm to think about what we like.

When asked for further explanation, Isaac seemed to move from a position of being 'permitted' to produce something 'appropriate' to feelings of unfettered freedom. This shift could articulate an appreciation of how constraints often occasion enhanced creative outputs. Furthermore, his quietly emphatic statement "We want to do it" seemed loaded with feelings of institutionally obstructed intentionality. He assumed the role of spokesperson ("We"), telling me that learning and making meaning in these ways, constraints and all, was something that they did in fact buy into, if only those in authority could understand that...

If indeed Isaac did use the word 'permission' in relation to being authorised to be creative - as, in the interests of transparency, I am aware that he may have been influenced by my enthusiasm to interpret it as such - then schools might question the wisdom of current instrumental curricular regimes. Interestingly, in the context of ethnographic documentary filmmaking, for one of Adamson's students the filmmaking experience had given her a metaphorical "permission slip" (2014:50) to ask certain questions of her family. Similarly Isaac experienced a liberating shift in orientation, a qualitative adjustment taking place in a supported environment where the boys' own cultural capital was shaped, shared and collectively valued.

Conclusion
Conjuring gothic imagery with iPads alongside stranger-adults in a time-constrained, co-designing encounter, the boys' traditional English lesson had been dramatically reconfigured, providing opportunities for a reciprocally rich and collaborative learning experience. The simultaneous negotiation of transmedia and social connection, in unfamiliar / repurposed environments enabled broad and relevant engagement with new literacy practices. Given legitimacy, the tablet's mobile tools of production can serve to mediate interrelations between human agents in contemporary schooling in a 'focussed' and 'relaxed' manner. The writers see no reason why school-age children should be marginalised from the processes of cultural production as both a learning strategy, and as a means of practising authentic social participation. School leaders' willingness to interrupt established practices and incorporate disruptive and constructive innovation with creative digital media, ultimately serves to propagate new meanings and widen the reach of cultural prosperity.

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Halloween, (J. Carpenter, 1978)

Paranormal Activity (O. Peli, 2009)

The Scream series (W. Craven, 1996-2011)

The Woman in Black (J. Watkins, 2012)

Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.

2. The images reproduced here are screen grabs from the pupils' films, which we have permission to reproduce.

3. Parts of this article appear elsewhere.