

Re-thinking literacy ontologies with young people in communities

Kate Pahl

University of Sheffield

Aims of this talk

- To consider how we define and understand civic engagement
- To re-think understandings of literacy as a mode of civic engagement
- To explore this through young people's collaborative artistic productions
- These can provide new and diverse cultural resources for civic engagement in a changing world

Literacy /research

- The idea of literacy and language as stable representational entities is being troubled by a relational turn (Burnett, Merchant, Pahl and Rowsell 2014, Leander and Boldt 2013, Ehret, Hollett and Jocius 2016).
- Equally, research methodologies have also been challenged from within traditional social science, as well as from posthuman and new materialist perspectives (Law 2004, Taylor and Hughes 2016).

Co-production/linguistics

- Co-production has created a space where participants co-design and lead research rather than become 'data' within it (Facer and Enright 2016).
- Understanding everyday knowledge of linguistic practices is vital in making sense of language and literacy in communities. (Escott and Pahl, 2018)

Aesthetic/everyday

The artful and the everyday are interwoven in young people's situated negotiations of social-relations-&-social-activity

Exploring everyday language involves attempting to capture ways of using language that are 'allusive and indirect, low-key, poetic, grounded in activity and background understanding' (Rampton 2010: 12).

Some questions for us to consider

- *How do you craft what you know?*
- *How do you speak/make what you feel?*
- *How do you build practice?*
- *How do you articulate action?*

Definitions and understandings of literacy have to step up and become disrupted in order to acknowledge and be shaped by how young people actually see the world.

Co-production is one way to do this.

My argument here

- Literacy events are creative acts that intervene in the world to make change happen (Massumi 2011).
- The literacy event is a creative interruption that can disrupt understandings of literacy (Hull, Nelson and Young 2013)
- Literacy practices are bound up with civic engagement as creative acts.

How do you craft what you know?

Lucy: Here, I have made a purse

And I can put my money and cards in it

And I have put lots of stickers

And three D stickers as well on

And I have put all my favourite things on this side

And I have put some things I hate and some things I like on
this side

I have got little gems and stars

And little animals and food on

And little signs that say keep out top secret (audio from film
4th August 2010)



The textile side of our heritage comes from the women in the family. We have older relatives that do appliqué, crochet, embroidery, sewing and knitting. (from the girl's mother's side their grandmother's sister and cousin and from their father side his two cousins who live close by) My younger sister Halima loves craft type of activities and buys the girls a lot of resources to do sewing and fabric work especially on birthdays, Christmas and Eid.

(Written text from the girls' aunt, Email, August 2010)

EDL don't belong in Rotherham

Rotherham is my home and I like living here and every time the 'Army of Hate' visits us they leave our community feeling vulnerable, the police have enough to deal with, without this unnecessary pressure added. The EDL's motto is 'Not racist, not violent, no longer silent,' Does anybody else see the irony in this? 'Not racist' EDL is a fascist group who are clearly Islamophobic; they are not silent when they are hurling racial abuse. Most Muslims in Rotherham respect the law and want to live peacefully if EDL allow us.

I write this sitting at home as EDL have disrupted another Saturday and created tension between communities long after they are gone, which hardly seems fair. *By Lucy (2014)*

How do you speak what you feel?

Lily

I was yanked away from my family and friends
My petals were pulled painfully away from me
I have now been left in the dark to be stood on
repeatedly

By Hafsah

The 'Taking Yourself Seriously' Project: exploring art and social cohesion



The Taking Yourself Seriously' project is an AHRC follow on project looking at **arts methodologies for social cohesion** .

This project is working collaboratively with three settings to look at ways in which the arts can enhance how we work in communities.

The settings include:

1. A group of Muslim women
2. A school
3. An adventure playground

Art as interruption

An artist produces an image, a poem, a dance that brings human narratives and meaning making to life. Artists interpret, understand and make sense of life events through the images they produce. 'I can only speak through my art work; my ideas are generated by my passion for artistry. (Nazia Latif conversation with Mariam Shah, August 2016).

How do you build practice?



How do you build practice: Art as community building

All of the young people returned to the significance of music, and how this brings everyone together; even if you speak different languages you can still communicate with others through the notes and rhythms, as you know what the next person is doing when they play their instruments. Their reflections on the importance of music lead them to add a plasticine circle to their collage. The young people each made a plasticine sausage that were joined together to make a circle. They said that the circle is because music brings people together. They wrote inside their circle “ Our music community that brings us together”. (Fieldnotes, Vicky Ward, Taking Yourself Seriously)

Art as residency



Residency as method

When people ask me what I'm doing at the adventure playground I will tell them I'm making a pirate ship for children to play on. It's not a real pirate ship though and it's not real art, it's first priority is as a piece of play equipment. On one level to demonstrate that the kids who play here are worth investing in, that play and the imagination are worth investing in.

I am working with the idea of being 'in residence' and what this can mean and the second is the role of theory in practice.

There is a craft to writing and a craft to making, words and wood are cut and hewn to shapes that fit together and support structures, pirate ships and texts. It's probably more important that I concentrate on making for a while as if this writing has holes in it nobody except me will care, the pirate ship however will need to be water tight and ship shape. (Steve Pool, from 'Taking Myself Seriously' blog)

Making and doing



Artistic approaches

Artistic approaches enable unheard stories to be told.

This opens up spaces for diversity and listening as a methodology.

The arts enable literacy to be done differently, across modes and within the body

Making can become a creative act, intervening within and across discourses

The arts as a mode of inquiry

- Artistic methodologies probe the surface of things, nuance and fine tune and listen to embodied, visual and oral responses so that literacy looks different.
- Working with media and making in forms such as film, poetry and visual art can then produce a new lens – young people’s own conceptual frameworks for what literacy and language could be.
- The arts encourage divergence and openness, as well as mess, uncertainty and unknowing, all vital tools in literacy research (Vasudevan 2010, Facer and Pahl 2017).

How do you articulate action: The arts as form of civic engagement

- The arts as a form of civic engagement, powering youth voice in spaces where this is urgently needed.
- The arts can offer as a place of future oriented change that encourages situated, relational and radical work.
- The arts as change agent; creativity being a force for transformation and provocation for young people in educational contexts.

How do you articulate action: Re-theorizing civic engagement

- *Modes of engagement*
- *Ontological questionings*
- *Cultural combinations*
- *Utopian visions*

Co-production lets in new knowledge production practices to enable these practices to happen.

These can disturb disciplinary knowledge production structures. They disrupt understandings of what we know and how we know.

Through this process, literacy looks different.

Modes of engagement: creativity

- Through language, visual arts, dance, music, or a multimodal combination of these...youth express themselves through performance, the production of artifacts and the stylization of their bodies. The aesthetic activities of youth.... join palpably the pleasures of making meaning with the pleasures of constructing and enacting a self. (Hull and Nelson 2009: 207).

Ontological questions

- We drew on young people's films as a lens to look at language and literacy practices with.
- Their perceptions of what is going on is refracted through their collaborative film-making practices
- As a form of engagement these assemblages tell us how language and literacy works from their perspectives. (Escott and Pahl 2018)

Why is language important?



Ninja story

After the written credits presented to the viewer, over which the soundtrack involves a boy singing, in a deliberately high-pitched voice involving lengthening of sounds: 'It's a Niiinja stooory', the scene cuts to the playground. Newsreader explains that 'in a world where talking is banned, one Ninja will not rest until he has screamed his guts out'. Ninja comes into view and jumps around, swinging a metre ruler as if it is a sword and makes high pitched shouts, before hiding behind a bench. Newsreader announces that Police Chief and his new Rookie 'are going to investigate the Ninja'. They discover Ninja behind the bench and capture him. Ninja asks why he has been arrested. Police Chief explains that there is a law against talking. When questioned about this he displays his 'Talking Permit', a piece of paper pinned to his top, which says 'Talking Permit' on it. Ninja escapes and runs away

Transcription conventions(5) = seconds pause

Narrator: A: (off-screen narrator) In a world where talking is banned
one ninja will not rest until he has screamed his guts out

Ninja: Woooo ahhhh

Newsreader: Police and his new rookie are going to investigate the
ninja

Police Chief (to Rookie): Did you hear that noise?

Police Chief: You go that way

Ninja: What's going on?

Police Chief: You're arrested there is a new law you can't talk

Ninja: How come you can talk?

Police Chief: Talking Permit [5] sorry it's the law.

Ninja as told by the objects

A piece of paper with 'Ninja Story' and credits written on it. A wooden bench. The ground. Grass. A ruler moves through the air over the bench as the bench is stood on. The bench then provides cover for the ruler. A sheet of ruled paper sways in the wind as it moves towards the bench. Another ruler moves towards the bench at the same time. The rulers and paper meet behind the bench and then move in front of the bench and stop. A piece of paper pinned to a shirt is pulled on. The blue and yellow ruler rapidly moves away from the bench.

Ontological questions: Learning from Ninjas

- Young people's perceptions of language and literacy in lived representational practice can be a key source of thinking for literacy and language research and this adds to an understanding of the field that works to incorporate what young people recognise as important into disciplinary understandings.
- When we co-produce with young people everyday understandings come to the fore, and our argument here is that this in itself can re-shape how we see literacy and language as a site of enquiry and could lead to new conceptualisations, drawn from the everyday, on what literacy and language could become. (Escott and Pahl 2018)

Cultural combinations

I come Rotherham, my mother too.

My father from the East, very traditional and authoritarian

The clash of two cultures – British – Pakistani

Leaves me questioning every action, every thought... (Lucy)

Cultural combinations: Making sense from a space of difference

Homi Bhabha's concept of third space as

- ...a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out to what is liminal in the historic experience and in the cultural representation, of other peoples, times, languages, texts' (2009: xiii).
- 'The cave of making can be a dark and desperate place.' (2009: ix).

I come from

I come from Rotherham

My mother is from Derby and my father is from
Newcastle

I come from the blusher of my cheeks

I come from my cherry lip balm

I come from delicious chicken madras and yummy
fish and chips

I come from my mum's tasty biryani

I come from my dad's fresh baked bread...

(Hafsah and Amina).

Combinational activity

- This 'may go some way toward illuminating what it means to be and become powerfully literate in the multiple sense, apropos of the socially, culturally and textually diverse literacy landscape in which we all live and interact'.

(Hull, Nelson and Young 2013 p. 222)

Utopian visions

...cosmopolitan literacies can function as key building blocks in worldmaking, intertwining the multimodal and the creative with the ethical as people imagine themselves in relation to others and the world.

(Stornaiuolo 2015)

IMAGINE

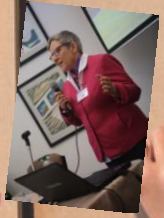
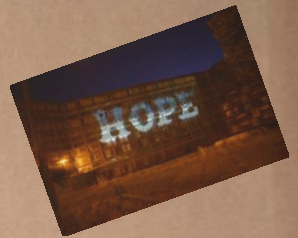


EXHIBIT
LOWD

TEA

...ined T...

where we can think about society but also



Living on my Street

My street is a very long street.

It is very multi-cultural.

On my street live English, Irish, Pakistanis, Scottish, Indian,
African, Afghans, Italian, Polish, Slovaks and Spanish

It's good to meet and mix with other people, and learn about
each other,

We all get on with each other.

We don't argue.

We accept everyone.

My street is the best street in Rotherham.

Amina

Thanks to

- Amina, Christian Ehret, Hafsa, Hugh Escott, Nazia Latif, Helen Mort, Steve Pool, Aliya Qaddar, Zanib Rasool, Shahin Shah.
- Referenced article:
- Escott, H. and Pahl, K. (2018) 'Learning from Ninjas: young people's films as a lens for an expanded view of literacy and language'
Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education