



Media Production and Disruptive Innovation: exploring the interrelations between children, tablets, teachers and texts in subject English settings

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Abstract

This article describes Key Stage 3 (11-14 years old) boys' and student teachers' responses to literature through the production of moving image, sound and photography in a formal context. The writers' interests centre on media making with iPads and the ways in which young people articulate textual understanding through production. Under the guidance of their PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) lecturers, student teachers and pupils engage with digital tools to explore new forms of cultural expression, that invite creative practices and critical thinking. The research incorporates multiple perspectives from: the children, the student teachers, the English and Drama class teachers, the Teacher Educators/Lecturers in English and Drama, and a doctoral researcher interested in the distinctive nature of making with digital media and associated ontological issues. A socio-cultural 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 an annual collaboration over 5 years between teaching staff at The Institute of Education (IoE) PGCE English & Drama Dept, the British Film Institute (BFI) Education Department and two local secondary schools. The school involved in the project this year (2014) has recently been under continual review from the Office of Standards in Education (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 Edwardian 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 relevant 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 pupils' 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 pupils to engage with a variety of media and to experience autonomy and creative control in their learning lives.

Project Overview

The project comprised of 2 workshops involving Year 7 & 8 boys (11-14 years old), a group of student teachers, some iPads, some props and the idea of responding to literature through socially-oriented media production activities. After an hour of experimenting with filming and editing in iMovie on the iPads, IoE student teachers were paired with small groups of boys. The aim was for each composite group to create, over a morning, a short moving and still image piece in response to Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) (Year 7s) and Poe's *The Raven* (1845) (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. It is worth pointing out that although we use the term 'film-making', digital video production references the cultural practices associated with the film medium.

The boys' English class 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 two IoE Teacher Educators, supported by a technician, all of whom were experienced in the organisation of this opt-in English and Film PGCE module. This was the first time 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 an Edwardian building with many dark, peeling nooks and crannies. One of the class teachers was particularly interested in how the pupils might engage with Poe through film-making so as to reflect aspects of the Gothic: 'its hostile nature, decay, imprisonment, madness, doomed love.'





Figure 1: Year 8 boys experimenting with Gothic photography under the basement fire escape

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 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 illustrate 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 on the second day; although all embarked on the edit, some had to be finished by the student teachers.

At a later stage the clips were collectively viewed on the iPads at the same time as the interviews. Relevant groups of boys were assigned one of the two lecturers or the researcher and were interviewed using semi-structured questioning in as informal a way as possible. All the interviews, lasting several minutes each, were recorded using a combination of audio and/or video, and took place in the school library over the course of an English period. The moving image texts proved a fruitful focus of attention and the boys were asked to comment on their creative choices, on their sense of autonomy, and on how it felt to be working and sharing knowledge with an adult unknown to them – all the while manipulating a powerful ‘multimodal mixing desk’ (Burn, 2003). In addition, during interviewing, the boys waiting their turn completed a questionnaire on their experience and some wrote thank you letters to the organisers.

The PhD researcher was in the second year of her study related to young learners making with digital media. Her doctorate 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 class 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 teacher educators who were developing approaches with film, 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, problematic 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 already buying into the merits of media production. For this reason, the researcher has selected an interview extract that engages with social ambiguity, while the teacher educators 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 Teacher Educator & Lecturer in English and Drama)

Our aim was, in part, to hone an approach to film-making 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 pupils into the processes of making artistic choices in shaping their work. What surprised me about the findings from this research was the ways that student teachers and pupils found inspiration from much else beyond the stimulus that we offered and the constraints that we set, located 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, pupils' prior engagements with these media forms mean that we, as educators, are less inclined to prescribe the ways that the content is interpreted. We are interested in what pupils choose to put in the frame and how they appropriate cultural material to do so. We also appreciate the ways that their insights about relevant 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 pupils' interest in what happens next in the narrative. It is also suggestive of an immediate build up of suspense and anticipation that encourages them to slow the action down and focus on the 'minute' detail: to feel the tension as they hypothesise about a possible climax. This attention to a moment of dramatic action is partly intended to facilitate the processes of collaboration by foregrounding or offering up specific creative choices that the members of the group need 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' prompting '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 *Scream* series (Craven, 1996-2011), *The Woman in Black* (Watkins, 2012) and *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2009), to which the boys made continual reference in interviews. The boys' responses suggest that their images were shaped and reformed through a process of negotiation that involved swift recourse to shared cultural reference points, particularly *Scream 2* (Craven, 1997), in the case of 'The Revenge'. Yet Kyle also suggested the bars in their images were indicative of being 'watched over by "*The Raven*"' and feeling 'trapped in his thoughts'. A similar negotiation of teachers' and pupils' aims emerged from Sam's suggestion that the black and white photos in their film 'Dead Man's Hands' are reminiscent of 'crime investigation scenes' and Alan's that, 'also it's really Gothic'.

Fulfilling the joint roles of actor and spectator when improvising drama 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 pupils, 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... 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 followed by 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 and the form of storyboarding in action that we recommended (starting with a single image and using that as inspiration for the next). We were also struck by what the technology added to this process. Being able to review their images together meant



that pupils had an opportunity to try out their ideas and then to respond to their own efforts, shifting between the roles as 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 tablet functionalities supported the conceptualisation of ideas, in this instance. 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.

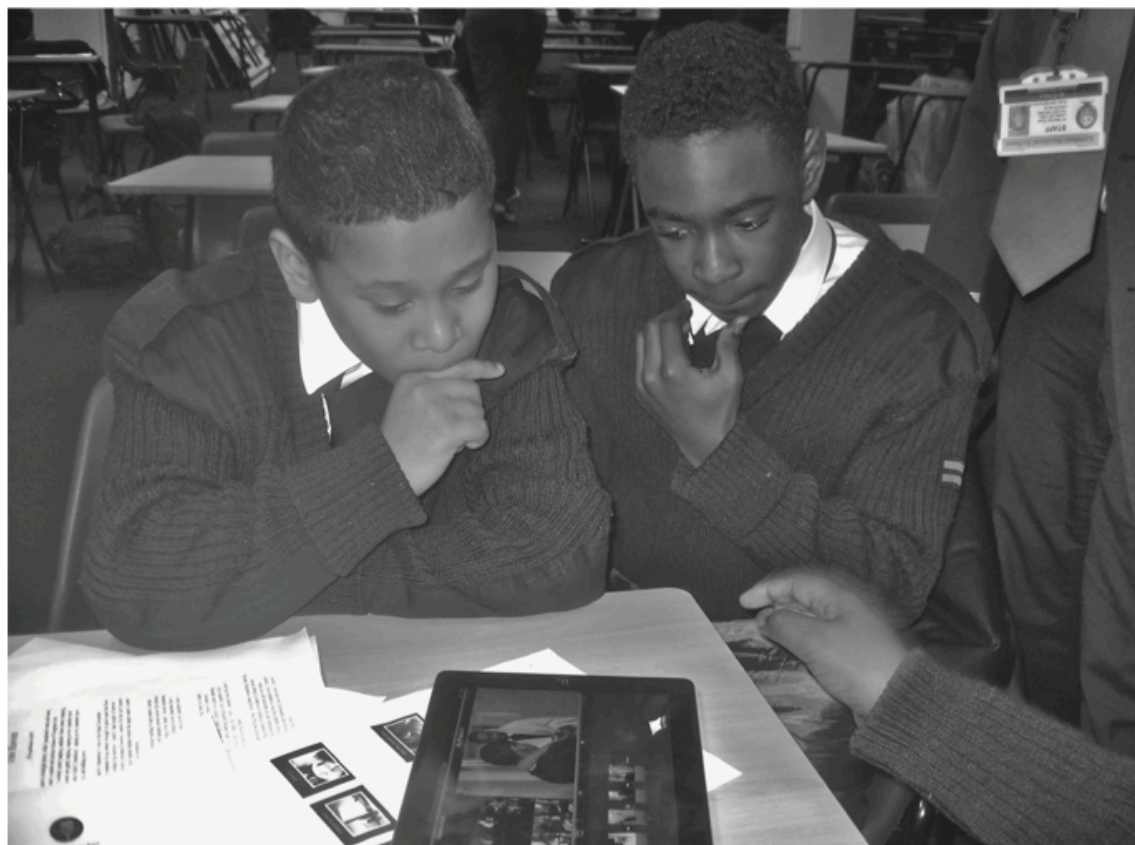


Figure 2: Year 8 boys editing their film 'The Revenge' on the iPad



There were clearly many visual stimuli that intruded on the boys' communion with *The Raven*. Surprisingly 'The Revenge' group agreed that their film had started with looking around 'the actual room'. Similarly Sam and Alan's 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. 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 (Fig.3) 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* that may be 'incidental' as Barthes suggests, become freighted with meaning, merging into the denotation of each shot. The boys' approach involved co-opting aspects of their environment in an opportunistic and improvisational way. The results are an indication 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.



Figure 3: Photographic still from the end of the boys' 'The Revenge' film



What emerged most strikingly from this spontaneous way of working was how it prompted the boys to 'have a look' through the processes of creative negotiation - as Brecht suggested and to find ways to render their familiar school environment strange and convincingly filmic. The heightened awareness generated by the creative potential and cultural associations of a camera, screen and editing software combined in tablet form, offered opportunities for the pupils to disrupt school horizons and locate themselves in a cultural landscape that extends beyond their basement and the confines of the classroom.

Responding to Reading Through Making **(Morlette Lindsay - IoE Teacher Educator & Lecturer in English)**

As an English teacher I would ask my pupils 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 potential contradiction here - pupils 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 pupils and the student teachers. By way of example, in a previous project in the same school, an English teacher asked his pupils to pick a stanza from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and interpret it in a short film, which he then used to assess their reading of the poem. The film project using tablets proved to be an opportunity for pupils to be assessed on their reading, but more than this, the collaborative nature of the work facilitated their creative interpretation of a text, offering them the chance to collectively show how much they knew. Similarly, the magical realism of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* lent itself to the brief the pupils had been given: to make a film about something that starts ordinary, then show a change, after which something extraordinary happens. I had taught the Year 7 participating pupils for one term, so had prior knowledge about their work, which, inevitably, influenced the way I looked at the films they produced.

The Year 7 boys who made 'The Mystery of the Masked Men' narrated their story with intermittent frames of a masked figure. In the autumn term Damon had been 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 his writing showed he understood 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.



The boys' film successfully established a creepy scary figure, making use of a mask amid a pile of possible props. I knew that Damon was not always 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 about; it was Damon who had 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.



Figure 4: Student teachers and Year 8 boys filming with the mask

The boys showed they understood suspense and the appearance of the mask at different points escalated that suspense. Choosing the mask as a symbol of something



unknown or scary reminds me of Damon's story alluded to earlier, with the unsettling 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; this shot is different to the rest of the frames where the mask is used as the mask is looking straight at the camera and the eyes are no longer empty – it is a disturbing image.

The film ends on what seems to be the ordinary – a young woman (a PGCE student) presenting the mask to them, asking if they knew where it had come from. Their reaction to it shows that they felt its power, it scared them, they were aware of the power of the 'look' behind the mask, running away as a dramatic voice-over intones: '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 seen 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 shows that they understand 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 pupils not only fulfilled 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.

'We want to do it'

(Michelle Cannon – PhD researcher)

My research explores the context, processes and pedagogy related to media production in schools. I am also 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 (Volume 4, number 2) of *MERJ*, in which he observed 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.). In such settings there is pressure for pupils 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: 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). Commentators in the field increasingly invoke the practices of creative practitioners as inspiration for the ways in which pedagogy might respond to new technologies (Thomson *et al*, 2012).

As Theo has 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 craftsman-like activities facilitated by the iPad's integrated functionality. Although the word 'flow' connotes seamlessness, this refers rather to the ontological quality of attentiveness witnessed in most groups, whereas the iterative creative process was replete with interruptions:

idea - (interruption) - action - (interruption) - embodiment - (interruption) - review and redraft.

The comparatively messy non-linear 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 ephemeral 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 (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.

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, erm... 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 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 'dream' – 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 film-making, for one of Ross's students the film-making experience had given her a metaphorical 'permission slip' (2014: 50) to ask certain questions of her family. Similarly Isaac experienced a liberating, if wistful, shift in orientation, an ontological adjustment 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 connections, in unfamiliar or repurposed environments enabled broader engagements 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, as the boys suggest. We were struck by how the tablet's portability, multifunctionality and cultural associations facilitated a speedy and improvisational approach to film-making that could be accommodated within the school timetable. We question why school-age children should be marginalised from the processes of digital 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, widening the reach of cultural prosperity.

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Note

Parts of this article appear elsewhere.

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