

Bridging the divide: emergent digital literacies and collaboration

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Collaboration: background

A collaborative research project was advertised in the UK press in May 2006 naming two participating institutions, proposing the title: *Visual Art Practices: Digital Literacies and the Construction of Identities in Northern Ireland*, and stating that the research topic proposed must be in some area of visual art practice in the space of education.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for the United Kingdom offers collaborative awards in an attempt to bridge the research divide between academic and non-academic institutions, such as museums and media organisations, both commercial and public. As a knowledge transfer initiative it aims to generate fruitful research and knowledge in an area where synergies between potential partners exist but where benefits to the non-academic institution may not be apparent. Funding was secured in the scheme's second year by Interface, Centre for Research in Art Technologies and Design at the University of Ulster in Belfast, to develop a project with the Nerve Centre in Derry/Londonderry.

My own art practice had transformed in response to teaching fine art media and graphic arts - as digital technologies were introduced into art colleges in the early 1990's. A project exploring the stories of one globally dispersed family became the spur for a wider-angled 'multimedia' work in 2000. *Weird View* explored the family's wider social network in Lucan, Co. Dublin as a dual-screen, 'interactive narrative'¹. It recounted the interlaced social histories of a terrace of houses, told by residents past and present, and shared with wider publics via art gallery, local town hall, and the

¹ Combining video, digital animation and QuickTime VR. Developed with Valentina Nisi.

web². My research proposal outlined a collaboratively generated, multiple platform piece to be developed with young people at the Nerve Centre.

Participants

Interface's research explores participatory, dialogic and relational art practices: Kester, Bourriaud and indeed Bishop have produced key texts. While the term *interface* refers to areas across Northern Ireland where religious, social, cultural and political differences (dis)connect, between Protestants and Catholics / Loyalists and Nationalists, it further references the transdisciplinary nature of its research: negotiated across art and design discourses, practices and forms.

The Nerve Centre's origins were socially and community oriented, becoming a 'multimedia' centre where young people could make films, stop-frame Cine animations, and learn to play instruments. Over time it has become more digitally focused, and consequently a central player in the drive to embed creative digital media in the formal curriculum in Northern Ireland. It currently manages a number of initiatives, from Creative Learning Centres (CLCs), to the annual Foyle Film Festival. Through its CLCs it delivers digital media educational projects in-house and in schools, for pupils and teachers.

Negotiated research

The 'some area of art practice' situates the research in a relatively recent area of practice-led doctorates in visual culture. Practice, as central to the research inquiry, situates knowledge-production in its relevant professional context. Text-based to research-based output weighting is negotiated. An AHRC report outlined some of the practitioner/researcher's methodological challenges: projects which were too 'abstract', or too 'practical', or where the text took too 'reflective' an approach to personal art production, failing as a contribution to knowledge (Rust, Mottram and Till 2007).

In transdisciplinary practice-led research the text serves multiple purposes; as analytical interpretation of visual, non-linguistic modes of meaning making; as a

² <http://www.weirview.com>

translation to legitimise the research across constituent disciplinary areas; and crucially, in collaborative research, to engage in knowledge transfer dialogue.

Three months into the research a Nerve Centre funding proposal for an ambitious mobile film project was unsuccessful; my planned role disappeared. The next months were devoted to exploring potential projects. In September 2007 I was facilitated access to two schools participating in a wider project with the Nerve Centre involving the design, delivery and evaluation of digital media projects in six schools in Northern Ireland.

Research, says US art and education academic Elliot Eisner, is not about problem solving, but about coping with situations involving human relationships. He states that, for fruitful research outcomes, which elicit the required knowledge, a very open approach to research design is necessary, even saying that 'anything goes' (Eisner 2003: 55).

An adaptive and reflexive methodology was negotiated, affording me the agency to research, while offering the schools and participants digital skills teaching and my experience as art practitioner. Projects with the two schools involved tasks and output in accordance with the curriculum rubric of the MIA A level. Evolving slowly, the method afforded both micro and wider macro analysis over an academic year, loosely a form of media ethnography (see Born 2005). Research focused in on the tasks, evaluating students' understanding and skills relating to the uses and effects of digital media technologies, but crucially, came also to consider those of the wider institutions. The research path was an ongoing negotiation between Eisner's free approach, the institutional and curriculum constraints of the schools, and the research requirements of collaborative doctoral inquiry.

Why digital literacy?

In a contemporary media ecology where 'legacy media' are augmented and converging with those that are digital, participatory and 'spreadable' (Jenkins 2009) a 'palette' of digital media literacies is deemed necessary for effective engagement and communication. The meaning-making resources potentially synthesised into digital texts include non-alphabetic, visual, durational and interactive. Crucially, digital *texts* are not discrete multiple-media messages but loose, dynamic, assemblages of symbolic codes, accrued from diverse sources (geographic, cultural, economic) and

disseminated for social, expressive, public and commercial uses. And in networked publics such as social media websites, ideas in the form of digital texts, "get transformed, repurposed or distorted" (Ibid.). Cultural production, consumption and dissemination are changing at an extraordinary rate.

Henry Jenkins et al (2006) have outlined a three-part model of digital literacy: *access* relates broadly to what Jenkins calls the 'participation gap', having access and ability to employ tools for inclusion in a digital society; second, involves skills of *analysis* and interpretation; third, the '*ethics* challenge' relates to research, evaluation and an ability to anticipate the consequences of engaging. Other definitions add a fourth 'creative digital production' component (Livingstone 2003).

Private to public identity

The transitional period from childhood to adulthood is a time of great change. Physical, social and cultural transformation sees young people typically emerge from private into public life. This public/private transition is apparent in everyday practices of representation as private imagination and consciousness are materially represented and shared (Eisner 2002: 3). Digital networks and mobile telecoms media enable young people to generate and share digital texts in practices of identity play; their intensive use of the mobile phone over the last decade has seen its uses evolve from instrumental to social and increasingly expressive (Castells et al 2005); for example, as creative forms of 'textspeak' (Crystal 2008). But whereas text messages are typically communicated one-to-one, intimate, secretive and indecipherable to adults (Truss 2008), social media websites are public platforms on which young people experience social connectedness and explore identity. Their private to public transition here is amplified.

Northern Ireland: schools

The legacy of Northern Ireland's political history is a segregated school system divided largely by religion, with a small but increasing number of religiously integrated schools. Further segregation by academic ability measured through the '11 plus' transfers test took place until this year. Following Northern Ireland's ('Good Friday') Peace Agreement in 1999 and the (re)formation of the power-sharing Assembly, strategies were developed to foster economic and social transformation: creativity and education were central. A revised curriculum was designed to acknowledge the

impact of technology on the classroom. Additionally, a new A level *Moving Image Arts* (MIA), addresses the creative and digital media literacy shortcomings of the curriculum.

Corpus

The research practice took place over an academic year through active research in the two schools. One, a Catholic secondary school, situates MIA in the English department and is taught by an English teacher with media studies training. The second school, an Integrated College situates MIA in art.

Both schools were apparently happy for me to be involved, and I worked in the multiple role of researcher, participant, teacher and observer. The process enabled ongoing documentation of the research process through research diaries, documentation of student work, gathering of available classroom materials, including materials that I contributed and student responses to them. The research body also makes use of publicly available contextual materials relating to the schools, as well as educational, and where relevant, public and regulatory policy.

Flash intervention

MIA was conceived of with the objectives of art and design subject criteria; critical and creative abilities are tested through a 30 percent textual, 70 percent practical assessment weighting. An online exam of film clip analysis is designed to test the ability to 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of film language, forms, conventions, purposes and meanings' (CCEA 2007). MIA has been conceived of, largely as a film studies course, with practical work facilitated through the employment of digital tools, and network technologies utilised for some course delivery such as the assessment processes.

Essentially the production-side of the MIA syllabus is open: subject matter is not prescribed, nor are the digital technologies used. The former proved fruitful for content and discourse analysis for the research theme of identity. The latter, enabled me to introduce an element of technical and conceptual intervention.

Macromedia Flash vector animation software became popular in the early-growth years of the web when tiny data files were required for networked dissemination. It

shares conceptual models with digital editing software (timeline, libraries, layers) while enabling levels of interactivity, from simple 'rollovers' to complex database driven environments with video streaming. Such tools have spawned huge growth of the animated moving image on the web, on mobile phones, as well as on television through title sequences, advertisements and indents. One of the schools, with the Nerve Centre, agreed to purchase Adobe Flash licenses; while its visual language was familiar, when combined with conventional video, it generates innovative forms of moving image language.

Flash was already utilised in schools, advocated as part of an alternative vocational Occupational Studies curriculum, but it was not widely used. Through its use, I created an intervention to research the spaces between the MIA discourses and practices of conventional film language, production processes and animation, and those in the subject area of art. This gave a sense of ownership over the research, while fitting with the school's experimental creative ethos. Crucially it exposed, to those students who elected to use it, a new range of digital processes, discourses and skills.

Art practice: communities and singulars

A *communities of practice* approach to research is productive in emergent or transdisciplinary areas of research. Groups with broadly common purpose come together to share and deepen knowledge through ongoing dialogue (Wenger 2004: 4). It refers perfectly to the research environment of the art classroom where teacher/practitioner, researcher/practitioner and student/practitioners worked together over the duration of the MIA qualification.

'Singulars' however are school subject areas with discourses that are self-reflexive, which privilege and reinforce established practices and rules; a legacy of the organisation of knowledge in the nineteenth century (Bernstein 2000: 9, in Addison 2003: 62). Through cultural reproduction, teachers preserve the status quo due to familiarity with arts testing regimes, while students see the art room as a place of refuge, separated off from more academic subjects: art's popularity lends itself to unchallenging 'celebratory' rather than more 'critical' teaching (Addison 2003: 64).

MIA's intervention as a new qualification interfaces with established discourses in art and media studies, while also referencing a 'creative industries' vocationalism. It

privileges film language, employs a digital production cycle inherited from more analogue processes, and discusses the production of 'films' albeit using digital video. The technical, conceptual and pedagogic convergences and disjunctions make for interesting analysis. But crucially MIA's are also having a transformational effect on the subject's areas in which it is situated, as teachers embrace new forms of practice.

Another transformation is less positive. In 2006 content from the MIA specification was removed; 'representation and audience' was too challenging:

Clearly the study of representation and audience has been extremely demanding for both teachers and students and it is hoped that the removal of these areas from the specification will enable candidates to focus upon the analysis of film language in live action fiction and animation (CEA 2005: 4).

Aren't these the key competencies needed to participate purposefully and effectively in (a digital) society? A UK-wide sociological survey of young people states that 'Identities and positioning loomed large' in Northern Ireland (Henderson et al. 2007: 7), where 'identity positions' were typically ascribed or assumed by others. Issues of representation and 'audience' are central to the validation of meaning, realised as young people's digital texts, but also in everyday life through day-to-day representational practices and communication, online, in school, on the street. How are ideas made public? How is meaning interpreted and given validation?³ And while I have aimed to take a reflexive approach to the overall research process, I fully appreciate that these issues 'loom large' for me.

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³ Cultural Studies territory: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding 'circuit of culture' (representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation) 1973/1980

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