

Digital video production and learner identity

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Introduction

During the final Videomuseums conference in Athens in May 2012, I presented some of the work which I have been carrying out in the field of self-authored video production, in particular my doctoral study, which will be available at the end of the year in book form (Potter, 2009; Potter in press, due 2012). This was concerned with authoring strategies by younger learners making digital video productions about their lives. Some of the themes chimed with those of the Videomuseums work and others provide a theoretical counterpoint to the discussions at the final conference in Athens in May 2012.

My own work has been partly focused on developing a notion of “curatorship” or a “museum of the self” as part of lived cultural and literacy practice in new media. My doctoral study analysed the process and the productive output of a video project by young learners in two primary schools in which freely authored videos were conceived as a commemorative piece about their time in the school, celebrating spaces, relationships and memories; in the case of one group, this was just before leaving those spaces and relationships.

In one school the children produced 10 videos. They ranged from playful but incoherent excursions around the space of the school through to comedic, carefully edited parodies and, in one case, a quiet and reflective piece about time spent in the place and a deep friendship. All of them placed original footage alongside quotations and appropriation from favourite media, some of it on the soundtrack, some acted out for the camera. Improvisation and performance in the spaces of the school became hallmarks. Each video was a montage of modes and clips intended for reading by their classmates and families, markers of time spent in the school in different friendship groups or, in a couple of cases, as an

isolated person. The idea was that they would be representing their time at primary school before leaving in whatever form they chose, over a two to three minute production.

I screened sections of two short example films at the Athens conference: *Right, Let's Get On with the Show* and *This is Where We Used to Sit*, made by two boys and two girls respectively. They presented a contrasting approach to the task, one of them full of parody and comedy, the other one a tranquil and elegiac memorial to friendship on the part of the two girls. I have written about these in different contexts at different times (Potter, 2005; Potter, 2010) but in both cases I have used a form of multimodal analysis derived from the work of Andrew Burn and David Parker (Burn and Parker, 2003) to unlock some of the meanings inherent in the gestures and other modes in the production.

Other films in the set created in this project represented a range of approaches to the task. *Do Not Try This at Home* was a collection of parodies, walks around the school, interviews with teachers and with children. A group of four girls, high achievers in the class, who approached the production with a clipboard, detailed notes and shooting schedules,

made it. There was a degree of improvisation and play involved throughout and mildly transgressive behaviour, hurtling up and down the school hall on mats. *Me and Him Are Close*, made by a mixed group of girls and boys was a similar collage of faces and names, including a long sequence during which each child in the leavers' classes was named alongside a spoken, off-the-cuff, biographical sketch. A favourite teacher was pursued round the school paparazzi style looking for an interview. *In The Ball Pool*, made by four boys, was a chaotic journey through places in the school which featured rooms and favourite spaces which were normally out of bounds. The project gave them licence to roam with the camera into the "ball pond", a sensory area for children with special educational needs. Once they were in there a great deal of playful anarchy ensued. *Dance With Me* made by a mixed group of boys and girls visited many of the outdoor areas of the school including an exercise trail. There was a great deal of movement of the camera, some handheld interview shots with very much younger children, recalling time spent in the spaces lower down the school. *My Walk Around the School* made by one girl who started the project late, did not join a group and realised her own production was a single viewpoint representation of play in the spaces of the school and, as with *Me and Him Are Close* featured an extended chase of an adult around the school looking for an interview. *On Their Bikes* was another solo production, also by a boy who started the project late, after the groups had formed and similar in style and feel to the one above, though less idiosyncratic. It featured clips of the "ball pool" once again (see above), alongside shots of children completing their cycling tests (hence "on their bikes"). Once again, it was important to capture and interview a favourite adult. *The Two of Us* made by two of the boys was a record of friendship which had some technical difficulty over the sound in the beginning featuring the two protagonists running across the back field at the school. It went on to show a series of pratfalls and practical jokes with a continuous R.Kelly soundtrack playing. *Walking in to the School* was made by four of the boys and featured the only shots which included the world outside as they approach and enter the gates. Once again, R.Kelly provided the soundtrack to the excursions around the "ball pool" and some interviews with each other which were parodies of documentary filmmaking.

The suggestion I would like to make is that new media practices, such as these, reveal hidden aspects of lived experience. In representing their identity at the moment in time in which the productions in this were shot and edited the learners were also, in addition to responding to the commission to curate an aspect of their lives, putting down a marker of their changing identity. This is a powerful framing of video making in school, making explicit use of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which the children were able to bring in structuring their pieces and representing themselves. Active, agentive curatorship of media resources in production enabled some of these previously hidden experiences in the spaces of school around growing and changing to be represented in media remixes and reformulations. In this there is a degree of accordance with aspects of theories of identity (Goffman, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Merchant, 2005) as well as

with those of learner or student voice (Fielding, 2004). The authenticity of these voices may be difficult to prove and highly contested, as perhaps in the project outlined in the previous section, but, allowing for these debates, a key aim was to find a way to analyse carefully the video productions, as well as the associated interview responses, to see if activities and artefacts close to the lived culture of the learners were permitting control and curatorship of media assets. In this, it was important to adopt the view of active assimilation of such assets as derived by those working in the field of new media literacies (Robinson and Turnbull, 2005). However, the study aimed to pursue a different goal, investigating this active assimilation in terms of a kind of "curatorship" of media assets, implying collection, assembly and exhibition. This positioned the curatorship of media assets, self-produced (as in the actual shots in the video) or collected from other sources (the music, other images) as an active skill and disposition which bridges literacy practices and identity representation and is both evident and inherent in children's media production.

Whilst an adapted form of multimodal analysis was used to unlock the modes in the productions (Burn and Parker, 2003) there were further frameworks drawn from media literacy and socio-cultural theory (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986) which enabled a rich account to be constructed about the purposes, skills and dispositions of the learners as they represented their identity. With some of the similarities in form in evidence in the children's video productions, including parody of news and interviews, or anarchic free play interspersed with more obviously narrative forms, there were clear distinctions in terms of the successful use of expressive qualities across all of them. It was also possible to locate aspects of Street's proposed model of "ideological" literacy (Street, 2003) across all these practices, in the children's rich and active engagement with the productions.

Some of these issues have previously been addressed specifically in relation to younger learners (Marsh, 2004; Larson and Marsh, 2005) in arguing for a wide and inclusive definition of, and engagement with, new literacies; which takes into account the range of practices undertaken by young people with new technologies in the home and at school, such as we have seen in these productions. Marsh also points out that the necessary inter-disciplinary engagement between these domains is still in its earliest stages, certainly where the youngest learners in the education system are concerned (op. cit).

Evaluations of media production by children and associated instructional texts have sometimes focused exclusively on teaching formal aspects of narrative and editing concepts, drawn from the tradition of film language (Barrance, 2004). Whilst these are important elements to consider in pedagogy around the construction of meaning, it is no longer the only way of framing the subject for learners. In an era in which the short video form is growing rapidly, made and exchanged online, and sits alongside other media assets, readily appropriated and exchanged, we need a way of understanding children and young people's engagement with digital video as a rapidly changing social literacy practice in the experience of new media and popular culture

(Tyner, 1998; Street, 2003; Marsh and Millard, 2006). In the view of Sefton-Green (2005) and Buckingham (Buckingham, 2003) we further need to align this with a socialised view of creativity which is much more closely connected with group work, situated peer-review and an awareness of group roles in cultural production than with individual auteurs and the realisation of a personal expressive goal.

It is possible that, instead, building on viewing and evaluation in the very public spaces of YouTube, would allow an eliding of the process of media production with the end-product more closely. Writers are already commenting on the ways in which such spaces are changing the nature of the process of composition and consumption of media texts and are becoming a form in themselves, based more on cultural resonance and exchange (Davies and Merchant, 2007). Many of the videos in this project depended on the organisation of particular patterned communication which reflected the children's lived social experiences up to that point; how they had found their voice and exhibited the general, performed self in the spaces of the school. To an extent, this is how the children organised their short videos intended as vignettes and records of their lives up to the point of boundary crossing between schools. Recording these ways of being involved a process of assembly of the resources needed to represent both the anchored and the transient forms of identity (Merchant, 2006).

In this project, the autobiographical video explorations, one replicable piece of pedagogy is also the basis for research itself, namely, the finding of rich sources of data through self-representational work with younger learners in the setting which, by its nature, crosses the boundary between home and school. This finds a corollary in print literacy where thematic work around the self is often the earliest writing experience in schools but it moves this experience into an expressive mode in media with which the children are already familiar. The project pointed to a powerful and as yet largely untapped resource for moving forward with research and pedagogy at the interface between young children and their learning in the digital age. This resource is the literacy and cultural practices of the children themselves as they navigate both the boundary between home and school and the boundary between childhood, adolescence and beyond, into a world in which their curated selves will be ever

present. Certainly, although carried out with younger children, this project appears to chime with the very interesting productions on the Videomuseums project.

Note: Some sections of this piece have appeared in a different form as part of an article for the Journal of Lifelong Learning in Europe: Potter, J. (2011). New literacies, new practices and learner research: Across the semi-permeable membrane between home and school. In *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, Vol. XVI, ISSN: 1239-6286 issue 3/2011, Helsinki: Kansanvalistusseura, pp. 174-181.

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