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'It's not what it looks like. I'm Santa': connecting community through film

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Abstract

The lived experiences of young people are becoming increasingly marginalised within the narrowly defined curricula of neoliberal contexts. Many young people are also cast within the media according to deficit discourses of youth which contribute to the fragmentation of communities and the limitation of interaction between generations. This article describes a film project in which young people living in an ex-mining community in the midlands of England worked in and with their community to create a representation of where they live. As part of the process, the young film-makers did more than connect to other people's memories as repositories of information; both as process and as product, their film can be seen to connect shared narratives of people and place, across time and space. We argue that this project offers a timely opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which we understand learning in and out of English classrooms.

Keywords

community; place; intergenerational; youth; film; media

In this article, we explore the rich potential for learning offered by creative collaboration between young people in and with their local communities. We describe work that emerged from *Right Up My Street: a Creative England* funded film-making project involving creative practitioners working with teachers and pupils across eight secondary schools in the East Midlands. 160 young people were involved in the project, developing the skills to create a short film based on their community. In doing so, the young people had an opportunity to take on a range of roles including writing, directing, producing, sound, costume and acting. These short films were interwoven as part of a feature-length narrative shown at a premiere event in a city centre independent cinema¹. As researchers interested in creative learning, we followed the work of the creative practitioners and learners across the schools involved in the *Right Up My Street (RUMS)* project. Our focus in this article is on a film created by pupils from one of the schools involved, who were all in Year 9 (aged 13-14) when they took part in the project.

The potential of film and media to engage learning is well established (e.g. Bazalgette and Buckingham, 2013; Parry, 2014). There is recognition in this literature of the pedagogical processes involved in working with media and film, and the affordances of these for engaging the creativity, voice and agency of young people. Vasudevan et al

(2010) note too the ways in which young people can powerfully engage media texts as a means of 'authoring new narratives' to challenge dominant (and often deficit) discourses around youth. We would argue that the individual films created as part of the *Right Up My Street* project are all examples of this happening.

Our aim here, however, is to examine closely a richly resonant representation of community which results from intergenerational collaboration. Through a close focus on the narrative constructed by this group of young people in and with their community, we aim to explore some of the reasons for the resonance it has had for participants of all ages, as well as on subsequent audiences, as a narrative which brings together the past and present of a community whilst also offering a version of the future in which younger and older members have a central role. We argue that the film, both as process and as product, is an example of the potential for deep learning facilitated by the opportunity for young people to work in and with their community in a way where the focus is on 'learning to do and be, rather than what they will be learning about' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 232).

The place of literacy learning

To explore the ways in which this film project resulted in a text of particular resonance, we bring together firstly an understanding of literacy as socially constructed, multimodal, plural, vernacular and critical. The young participants in this project were invited to work with each other, and with others from outside their school, in a complex interplay of mode and form which emerged from oral, written and visual texts created in an intergenerational context. This is in contrast to mandated and instrumental forms of literacy which dominate practice in schools within England and further afield. This sees an increasingly narrow curriculum in English outlined by a prescriptive version of literacy as a response to a collection of canonical texts and the reproduction of particular modes and models of language through speech and writing, based heavily on 'accurate' grammar and spelling (McIntyre and Jones 2014). Throughout the process, and in the final product, the literacies engaged by the *RUMS* project represent what Lankshear and Knobel (2011, p. 253) describe as 'points of connection with human lives as trajectories'. Inherent within this concept is an understanding of lived experience as dynamic, and of the need for learning to be responsive to this. As such, we argue that opportunities for powerful literacy learning are those which emerge from opportunities for co-construction and negotiation of lived experiences.

The *RUMS* project focused on creating texts about the communities in which its participants lived. There are close connections, therefore, between the texts produced, the places from which they emerge, and the people whose lives are represented within them. Drawing on the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998: 23), we understand literacy practices to be inherently social actions: 'things which people do, either alone or with other people, but always in a social context – always in a place and at a time'.

Our understanding of the richness of the film we explore here is based on its very close association with people in place and we argue too that a large part of its power is in its representation of that place. We acknowledge, of course, that the concept of place is far from simple, and it is one which has been the focus of academic debate across disciplines for decades. Our reading of this film about young people and their community is rooted in an understanding of place as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell,

2004, p. 5), which results from the 'interplay of people and the environment' (p. 11). As such, we ascribe to the creative process of making this film, as well as its resultant text, the potential to be *place making* (Jones et al, 2013). Massey's (2010) description of place as a 'spatio-temporal event' is also helpful to our understanding of the resonance of the film we explore here and its representation of human lives within a community. Within this concept lies the potential for practice to be representative of constellations of what we might describe as specific, local and contemporary realities. Key to Massey's concept of place, however, is the link between realities in a given context and multiple others across space and time, which includes a past from which these realities emerge, a present that is part of how they are currently negotiated and a future upon which they may have an impact.

We understand the resonance of this film about a community to be largely rooted in a reading of it as such a 'spatio-temporal event' and one which, both in its production and its viewing, is part of a continued (re)creation of a community. The reading of the film which we present here begins with the local and the specific, as we outline the plot and the ways in which this emerged from narratives particular to the young film-makers' memories of their community and those of the older generation they interviewed. We consider the film's symbolic resonance in terms of what it shows us about the community in which the young filmmakers live. We also explore the ways in which the film engages with narratives which move beyond this particular space and time. This multidimensional resonance is where, we argue, the film represents a powerful outcome for learning which can inform the ways we, as educators, understand not only young people's acts of creative representation in English classrooms, but also their active engagement with the wider worlds in which they live as critically literate members of their community.

Before this close reading, we offer further context for the project and our involvement with it.

Context

The research from which this article draws involved us as participant observers of the project over six months, from an initial workshop held at the local cinema, where young people experienced different aspects of film making, through to observing interviews with community members in schools, to scriptwriting sessions, filming and final screening. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with students and community members who had taken part in the project. Data is presented here from researcher field notes and participant interviews, as well as from our interpretation of the film as a product of the project.

As outlined above, drawing as we do on Massey's notion of space-time and a position on literacy as a dynamic and socially constructed practice, we are mindful as we write about this film of the need to account for the multimodal aspects as well as the multidimensional potential for its resonance. In offering a close reading here, therefore, we attempt to partly account for this through detailed description and still images from the film, all the while acknowledging the reading offered here as only one 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey, 2010: 12). Our argument is, indeed, that the richness of the text which resulted from the process of this film project means that this particular story

about a particular place at a particular time is, in fact, one which is, with each viewing, 'always in the process of being made' (p. 9).

The school is a large, oversubscribed comprehensive school in a small ex-mining town in Derbyshire, England. As the young people started considering ideas for the story they would create about their town, they shared their perceptions of where they lived and went to school:

My mum always says that there used to be a massive market up there and there used to be a lot more [here], but slowly, slowly everything's turning into a takeaway or a charity shop.

Will

I don't see [the town] as the best place in the world – but I think it's because no-one's bothered enough. I wish [it] was better.

Claire

I went to a welfare² with my family and there was these old people dancing around to old songs and you think, 'that's how I'd like my community', and you go round to some jitty³ or some wall and then you see everything being trashed up and pulled apart and that's what it really is.

Sarah

They appeared to be aware of deficit models not only of their town but also of their own place in that community:

We've heard it for so long, we start to believe it. If you walk into a shop these days and there's more than one of you they think you're a threat and going to rob them or something, but you're actually not. But you start to believe it and think 'someone in our group could possibly rob the shop'. Because you've been forced by the media to think that teenagers are so bad and everything that you start to believe it yourself.

Ellen

In many ways, this project engaged with themes prevalent in research involving youth and media, and especially what Vasudevan and Campano (2009) have termed the 'social production of adolescent risk'. We believe that the film we discuss here adds a further dimension to the possibilities afforded by arts practices by bringing together participants across generations. This was the only storyline within the *RUMS* feature film as a whole that did not show young people in front of the camera. Instead, the young film-makers developed a script which centred on two senior members of the community. They held auditions at the school to cast actors for these roles. The role of the protagonist, Charlie, was played by a local resident, Gordon. He acknowledged his hesitation at the beginning of the project:

If you were to listen to the media, I don't need to tell these guys what people say about teenagers and anti-social behaviour and all that sort of thing, and you can hear that much of it on the news and in the newspapers and things, and you begin to start to believe it. And you begin to, if you're with a crowd of teenagers,

or there's a crowd of teenagers approaching you, you can begin to get a little bit nervous. And when I knew I was coming [to the school], to talk and work with these teenagers, it was a bit unnerving.

Gordon

There were several opportunities over the course of the project for the senior participants to engage with young people in ways which would challenge some of the prevalent (negative) discourses outlined above.

The first part of the project required young people to collect stories about their place to inform the script writing. The creative practitioners set up interviews with older residents of the town, which took place both in the school and in community centres such as a senior citizens' lunch club. At these meetings, we witnessed the young people's developing engagement with the resources of their shared community.

Will: It was quite interesting to actually listen to people and find out their life stories and that it's not just an old person, you've actually got a story behind it.

Mark: Like that guy who used to be mayor.

Claire: When he said he'd been in the Houses of Parliament twice, I was like 'what?' How come people like this aren't being appreciated and known? He's just sat there and no-one seems to be interested. [...] To find that person's been to the Houses of Parliament is amazing, but to them, they'd probably find it amazing the subjects that we can do. We're not taking interest in people's lives.

Here, Claire describes what happened as a result of the group listening to the stories being shared by the local community:

We asked older people, and they had so many stories to tell, like the man who said he was Santa, we'd watch it back and someone would say something then we'd all say 'yes, I remember that'. Then we'd all have our own stories springing off just one comment. Like he said, 'I used to be Santa for the rotary club⁴', and then everyone was like, 'I remember that coming down my street'. So many stories sprung off a sentence. I think that's really how we got where we did with the script and the personality.

For these young film-makers, 'one comment' - the story of the rotary club Santa - provided a 'point of connection' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011) which stimulated their engagement with their community as a resource for learning. This comment became a conversation, and this conversation became a collaboratively created representation not only of a shared memory of a particular time and place, but also of a wider narrative of this community's past, present and potential future.

What was evident at this stage of the project was that it provided space and time not typically afforded by the normal school day for young people to listen, to appreciate and to know and take an interest in histories which they came to realise were part of their history too, part of a shared narrative of place. The need for pedagogies which allow for this kind of practice is something we hope will be illustrated as we now turn to our close focus on the richness of the outcome in this instance.

The film

At one level, the plot devised by the young people for their short film is simple. Charlie, a widower, lives with his dog, Neil. He is telephoned by his friend, Dave, who informs him that a full dress rehearsal will take place of the Christmas charity float which tours the locale with Santa Claus on board. Charlie is the local Santa. Charlie is taken aback by the timing of the call, as it is April. However, he resigns himself to the task and unearths his costume and we see him dolefully donning the outfit whilst despairing that his reduced frame no longer represents the avuncular figure of Santa. He sets off to the local soft furnishing emporium in order to buy a cushion to use as padding for Santa's paunch. Whilst trying out different cushions, he is accosted by a store detective, suspicious of his motives, until a shop assistant comes to his rescue. Charlie takes a shine to the shop assistant, Sally-Anne, and the following scenes depict a sequence of thwarted moves towards the establishment of a romance (see Fig 1). The last shot is of the pair walking off together into the mists of the hills over the town.



Fig 1: Charlie meets Sally-Anne

Santa: connecting to community

There was enthusiasm amongst the young film-makers for the shared memory of Santa which had, as Claire's observation above shows, much resonance with the immediate audience in the script-writing meeting. It also resonated with the creative practitioners, and with us as researchers, as we observed the unfolding process of making the film. Importantly, it resonated with the audience of the final film too. We aim here to explore why this may be so.

In their choice of Santa Claus as a central figure in the narrative of their community, the young film-makers can be seen to harness a figure which is familiar across cultures. The symbolic resonance of this figure can in some ways be accounted for by drawing on Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the structure of myths. For Lévi-Strauss, commonalities in myths across cultures can be attributed to what he terms 'mythemes', or the kernels of the

myth. He notes that whilst myths may not represent 'scientific' reality, the configuration of central figures, actions or themes act to represent meaning which may resonate across different cultures, whilst also reflecting a very specific local context.

As a representation of their community, the young film-makers' focus on the figure of Santa could therefore account for some of the resonance of this story, for themselves as well as for their audience. Across cultures where the figure of Santa Claus is recognised, there may be variation such as the name by which he is known, the day on which gifts are left, the colour of his costume and so on. That said, he is generally seen as a magical figure which transcends time and space to bring gifts to children at a time of festivity. As evidenced in this film, the figure of Santa also has very local meanings and traditions, such as the Rotary sleigh tour. Individual families can also often develop their own traditions and practices around Santa, such as where gifts are left, or the means by which he enters the home. Through the development of the story and character of Charlie as Santa, the young people have appropriated the symbolic meaning of this figure across layers of resonance, from global to local. The shared symbolic figure of Santa allows both children and adults to make meanings together. As such, the group has chosen a powerful metaphor for a benevolent view of intergenerational community. Indeed, as Lévi -Strauss (1978: 23) notes: 'there is affinity between a [mytheme] and the kind of problem that the myth is trying to solve'.

However, we would argue that it is also in the ways in which these young film-makers have reappropriated the figure of Santa that the potential lies for the film to create alternative narratives for community. Massey (2005), in challenging a structuralist view of time and space such as that represented by Lévi-Strauss, warns of the danger in essentialising cultural meaning to 'try to hold the world still'. This, she argues, 'eliminates also any possibility of real change' (p. 38). The memories that Claire describes above as 'springing off just one comment' relating to the local charity float motivated these young film-makers partly because of the currency of their local cultural meaning. However, in the process of making their own narrative, we argue that the film-makers did more than *connect to* such memories as repositories holding the meaning of the story of their community. They can also be seen *to connect*, across time and space, a wider repertoire of cultural reference, actively harnessing the dominant and shared narratives of their own community in order, to use Massey's image, to 'crack them open to reveal the existence of new voices' (ibid p. 42).

In their choice of protagonist, the film-makers immediately connote the celebration of the innocence of childhood and a belief in magic. Interestingly, and poignantly, this is reversed in their text by the children using the myth of Santa to offer emotional redemption to the adults in the story. Unlike the character who circumnavigates the globe to visit every home, the opening shots of the film, which are accompanied by the doleful soundtrack of *Whispering Grass* by the Inkspots, have the audience on the outside looking into the home of a lonely and isolated man (see Fig. 2). We also see Santa as marginalised as he sits on the bed in his ill-fitting suit: a scene depicting empty domesticity (see Fig. 3)

The magic which is part of the myth of Santa is cast by these young film-makers in what is essentially a prosaic context. The setting is a small ex-mining town in April rather than deep winter in the magical fairy-lit snowscapes of Lapland. Working alongside the creative practitioners, the young film-makers borrow shot composition and soundtrack from gritty realist films depicting disadvantaged communities. Charlie's despair over his

ill-fitting Santa suit, which hangs loosely about his frame, could be seen to symbolise a disconnect between the traditional view of a bountiful Christmas scene of over-indulgence and plenty and the realities of a forgotten community where there is not enough to share. He attempts to redress his lack of rotundity by buying a cushion at the local branch of a soft furnishing chain store with connotations of affordability and value. This leads to his finding an emotional connection with shop assistant Sally-Anne: a further act of redemption on the part of the young film-makers as they recast Santa as a hero in his own rom-com. The traditional symbolism of the magic associated with Santa is replaced by Charlie's new-found love and the young film-makers can be seen again to have reappropriated the narrative of their community through their play with the conventions of genre.



Fig 2: Opening shot of Charlie at home.

With a central figure so deeply associated with childhood, the central role of play in the film is also interesting to note. In many ways, the young film-makers' narrative of their community can be seen as being 'out-of-place' (Creswell, 2004). In playing with genre, this film made by young people exposes the adult construction that is the myth of Santa Claus. However, this well-known artifice of humanity and generosity is presented as being central to real human connection. We are presented with a Santa Claus who is unhappy because he has no-one. However, becoming Santa, for Charlie, leads to finding emotional connection to others (see Fig. 4). A character associated with representing one particular time of year becomes central to an emphasis on what is vital to community throughout the year. A figure renowned for travelling across the whole globe is depicted communicating, albeit tersely, with a broad local accent and in the local dialect, including the characteristic local term of endearment, 'm'duck'. Being 'out-of-place' contributes to the literal humour of the situation, with the rehearsal for the Christmas charity tour taking place on an April afternoon, for example. However, it is also represents the ways in which the young film-makers have actively reappropriated elements of the narrative of their community in order to present their alternative. The

resonance of the film, we argue, lies in this openness of possibility, in the ways in which the film connects to references which range across different times, and from the global to the local. With each viewing, an audience draws from this constellation of references in order to connect together a new narrative.



Fig 3: Charlie tries on his costume.



Fig 4: Charlie, on the float, spots Sally-Anne.

The power of film to connect community

Far from presenting a single view of their community as a specific geographical location at a specific time, we argue that these young filmmakers have been able to present their 'place' as a 'spatio-temporal event' (Massey, 2010). That is to say, by engaging with

narratives from *within* their community, they have been able to create a narrative of their community by bringing people together around the means of collaborative authoring. This includes the young people making the film alongside the older members of the community, as well as the audience itself, which we argue contributes to the process of making the narrative upon each viewing. The central role of active co-construction was emphasised by Gordon when he reflected on the project with the young film-makers before the screening:

At the end of the day, when you see me on that screen, when we all go for this screening, it's not just me that you're looking at, it's you. You gave this chap all his characteristics. Every move you'll see me make, every sigh, when I turn and look and I look surprised, or when I'm nervous, it isn't me, it's you. It's what you've created. All that I am doing is bringing Charlie alive for you. I was going to say it's all you, but no, we'll say it's us. It's we.

Drawing on Lankshear and Knobel's model of literacy as 'points of connection', we consider the film we have explored here to represent powerful potential for learning in two ways. First, it has allowed young people to '*connect to*' historical resources around their community and to learn from these. However, it does more than allow young people to access knowledge through a model of curriculum based on the fixing of meanings. It also provides learners with the means '*to connect*' times, spaces and realities together in a collaborative acts of creation and the making of meanings. Our aim is not to dichotomise here; rather, we suggest that at a time when education is narrowing, particularly in the case of mandated schooled literacies, there is all the more need to recognise the power of learning which '*maintains points of connection to human lives as trajectories in ways that are often lost by hiving off formal education into contrived spaces, time frames and idiosyncratic ways of doing things*' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 253).

This film has young people at the heart of making their community: literally through their representation of it as well as through their physical engagement with others. Their learning alongside their community involves more than enhancing their own experience; it also represents a collaborative development of understanding across generations:

To be honest, we've learnt so much off each other, and not just about the film, just genuinely people knowing stuff, and it's been a good experience just to go out there and talk to people and know everything they know and how everything works from their point of view.

Ellen

I've had my time, I'm a senior citizen, but after doing this, I think I'm going to refer to myself as senior student. And you were my teachers. You've taught me a lot.

Gordon

This project has meant that these young film-makers and their story are not at the margins of this community, a common feature of the '*restorative*' model of young people and media. Neither have they presented a version of their town and its senior residents which merely reproduces discourses of deficit. Rather, they are central to the '*place*' of the whole community as created by their film.

The process of making this film involved learning which had a 'real' context and application, as argued for by Lankshear and Knobel (2011:253), who call for 'grounding learning in situated practices where participants learn to do and be in purposeful ways'. For these young film-makers, the real purpose was brought about not only by an immediate deadline and real audience at a red carpet premiere (see Fig. 5), but also by the fact that they were learning to do and be part of the community outside their classroom. Engaging with the stories of their community led to the opportunity for these young learners both to consider dominant meanings and also to reappropriate them to create new ones. This includes not only the content of what they learn, but also the very means of working, using resources which emerge from their community and working alongside others of different generations. As such, this project has granted learners 'access to the means, contexts, and tasks that are integral to generating knowledge, not simply to content transmission and abstracted activities of application' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011: 212).

We think this out of school project has demonstrated what happens when opportunities are created which challenge the reification of 'knowledge' represented by the increasingly constrained curricula of neoliberal contexts. At a time when modes of learning are often predicated upon ideologies which frame knowledge as a fixed entity and the identities of learners are predefined, finding ways of engaging in collaborative projects with real purposes and outcomes and which draw on the resources offered by communities has the power to change the ways in which we consider English learning in and out of the classroom.

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¹ <http://www.greenshootsnottingham.co.uk>

² A 'miner's welfare' i.e. a community centre funded originally by workers from local industry and traditionally used for purposes of meeting, socialising and education.

³ 'Jitty' is a local term for an alley or passageway

⁴ The Rotary Club is an international organisation with branches which organise fundraising events at a local level for charitable causes.