

Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project

This two year project (2012-2014), funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, explored the significance of multilingual digital storytelling for young people and their learning. Goldsmiths researchers collaborated with teachers working in mainstream and community based complementary schools in and around London as well as overseas (Algeria, Palestine and Taiwan). The project involved primary and secondary level students studying a range of languages including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, English, English as an additional/foreign language, French, German and Greek.

A wide range of multilingual digital stories were created across various genres: traditional tale; fantasy; history and culture; personal interest/hobby; personal, social and moral issues/world news; reflections on school, local area and teenage life. These were shared within classrooms and schools, but also more widely across schools through the project website. They were also presented by students and their teachers at two film festivals held at Goldsmiths.

Within the reconstructed model of literacy developed by the New London Group (1996) two key strands were identified as significant. Firstly, the multicultural/multilingual and secondly the multimodal. Whilst, considerable attention has been devoted to the latter within the field, there has been a lack of serious attention given to the multicultural/multilingual strand in its relation to digital media and what this means for education. This reflects a broader issue, particularly in English-dominated societies, of the tendency to underplay the importance of language learning for



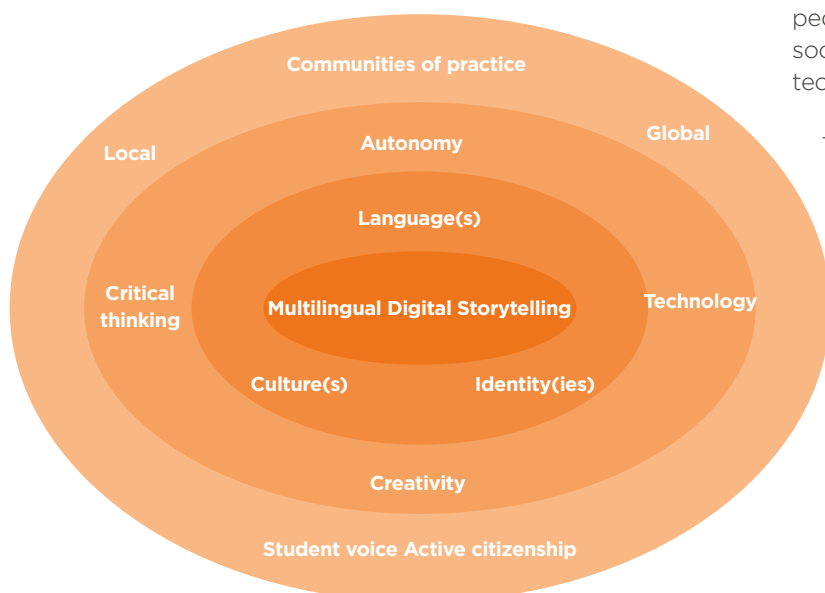
the modern world. Within this there is a failure to invest in the linguistic capital represented by children's home languages and the work of community-based complementary schools.

This exploratory, ethnographic study set within the context of mainstream and complementary schools in and around London as well as overseas has begun to address this gap. In the diagram below we seek to illustrate how our vision of multilingual digital storytelling fits within a broader communication landscape and educational context. Indeed we believe that one of the distinctive features of this project is the way it is situated within a transformative pedagogical approach and one which recognises social and cultural as well as intellectual and technological dimensions to learning.

The key research findings of the project and selected comments from students, teachers and parents are set out inside. Overall, this project provides important evidence of the contribution multilingual digital storytelling can make to young people's education. It also revealed the resourcefulness and creativity of teachers and students working within various constraints imposed by the education system.

“Digital storytelling gave me a way of expressing my creativity and imagination. If you give me a camera and a laptop, anything is possible.”

Student, Peace School



1. Language learning, multilingual repertoires and identity

The project:

- a. provided an authentic context for language learning where students have been able to personalise their work and gain a sense of ownership
- b. developed a range of language skills related to pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as well as encouraging students to move beyond the textbook to be more adventurous in their language use
- c. supported learners' metalinguistic awareness through composing in more than one language and responding to bilingual films incorporating a range of European and non-European languages, including children's home languages

“Creating the film for real people made me break the fear of speaking aloud in German and expressing myself.”

GCSE student, Sarah Bonnell School

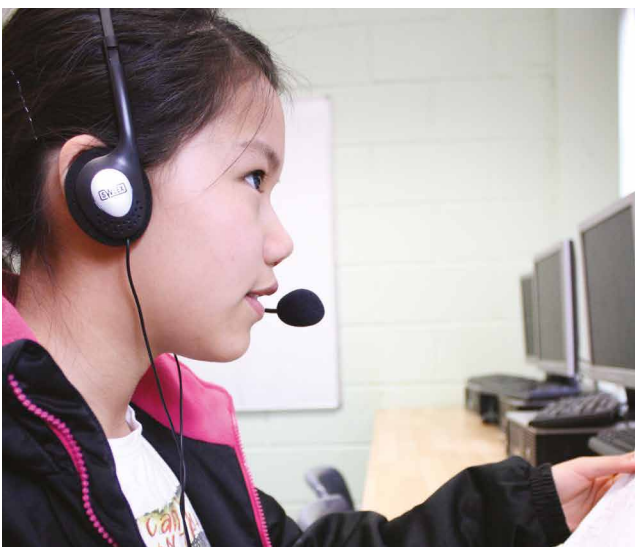
2. Multimodal composition and creativity

The project:

- a. developed a range of skills involved in multimodal composition including effective combination of different modalities and shaping of stories to engage a multilingual youth audience
- b. stimulated creative and dialogic thinking (questioning, hypothesising, experimenting, critiquing)
- c. improved students' digital media skills (digital photography – still and video, video editing, use of Photostory3, Moviemaker, VoiceThread)

“Normally, they say okay it's a project and they dive straight in, not really thinking about the process they need to go through. While doing this project they really thought about it and structured it.”

Teachers, St Michael's Grammar School



3. Culture, international partnerships and active citizenship

The project:

- a. enabled students to explore culture and identity in their own terms in flexible, critical and non-essentialised ways
- b. enabled students from bilingual backgrounds to deepen their understanding of the heritage culture
- c. built students' confidence in expressing their perspectives through their stories and sharing these with students in England and overseas both online and through film festivals

“I have learned many things through this project; I understood the diversity of teaching and learning. Watching the films from different nations and different locations of the world made me realise how wonderful connection is in the global nowadays.”

Teacher, Hua Hsia Chinese School

4. Learner autonomy, critical thinking and student voice

The project

- a. revealed the motivation and ability of young people to carry out creative digital projects when teachers put their trust in them and provide appropriate support, structure and encouragement
- b. the importance of student involvement in identifying criteria for evaluating digital stories and in ongoing review of digital stories created by peers within own institution and in other schools (making use of VoiceThread)
- c. demonstrated the value of involving students as co-researchers and how, with appropriate training, they can contribute in ways which are thoughtful and critical

“Through this project, not only did we extend our knowledge skills but we developed our skills to learn alongside others and co-operate with them to find out something specific. Collaborating with schools has been an incredible experience and has enhanced our social skills as well as our existing knowledge.”

Student co-researchers





5. Engagement and motivation

The project:

- revealed the motivating effect of activating learner agency and making space for students to draw holistically on their backgrounds to generate new knowledge
- demonstrated that when students are provided with learning opportunities that connect with their life experiences and involve presentation to an audience there is a positive effect on commitment and sense of responsibility to their work
- showed that when projects involve students in making creative choices and critical decisions this develops confidence and engagement

“ I took my camera with me all the time wherever I went. I didn't pay any attention to my surroundings and my life like this before. Because of this project, I actually feel that my life is very interesting and I am very happy to be able to share with students in the UK.”

Student, Fengshan Senior High School

6. Sites of learning: school, home, online

The project:

- showed how student motivation and learning can be enhanced when parents understand the purpose of school-initiated projects and how they can contribute
- revealed a range of different ways in which parents can support learners linguistically, culturally and in other forms
- demonstrated the flexible ways in which students and teachers can use digital media including email, texts, school blogs to work collaboratively on projects

“ ‘How can we help?’ – it's fantastic, it's just amazing and the children love it. They love it. It's not just going there, being dropped off, then that's it. After, then there's this follow up, this personal interest. I think it's very, very good because everyone's getting involved... ”

Parent, Hua Hsia Chinese School

7. Transformative pedagogy

The project:

- demonstrated clearly that, when teachers provide the space, encouragement and support for students to envision and create personal digital stories, quality of learning frequently exceed expectations
- showed that encouraging collaboration between peers is supportive for students when faced with the multiple challenges of multilingual digital storytelling, especially where students develop and apply their own criteria for evaluating work (including through use of VoiceThread)
- showed how multilingual digital storytelling can be embedded effectively within a thematic approach

“ The role of the teacher completely changed within this project ... and students had the space to make their own decisions. It wasn't just us taking leadership of the class, the students were making decisions, they had the space to be creative, they had the space to take it on and lead it themselves.”

Teacher, Peace School

8. Curriculum policy, planning and professional development

The project:

- showed the importance of professional development support to assist teachers in making the shift from a traditional to a more interactive student-centred approach and to develop the digital media skills required.
- revealed how students required some digital media training although skills were quickly developed and applied
- showed how schools can adopt different models for embedding multilingual digital storytelling work and provided evidence of the important role senior managers can play in extending and embedding multilingual digital storytelling in the curriculum in their institutions

“ Taking part in this project for two years, made me realise the importance of having a clear plan and deadlines. I found it much easier to embed multilingual digital storytelling in my scheme of work in the second year using the 10-stage plan designed by Goldsmiths. It is clear and gave me the essential steps needed to tailor my lessons and move into the project.”

Teacher, Sarah Bonnell School



The project and its impact seen from wider perspectives

“An interesting and necessary project – the project researchers’ enthusiasm and engagement was evident and very motivating.”

Dr Caroline Tagg (Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University of Birmingham)

“Loved the fact that the project has the potential to influence wider community and family as well as the child/young person participating.”

Iman Ibn Tahaikt (Advisory Teacher at Cambridgeshire County Council)

“I found the aspect of collaborative work very useful; e.g. between mainstream and community schools, schools and parents, students with other schools locally or internationally with the use of technology.”

Kausar Ali (formerly Urdu teacher, examiner and member of the Association for Language Learning’s World Languages Committee)



“This project is a model for others to follow. Multilingual Digital Storytelling is an inspired way for students to explore their own heritage. Never has the world needed young people to be so competent in understanding the world, but also themselves. I hope to work with colleagues here in New Zealand to begin something similar.”

Dr Susan Gray, Senior Lecturer (Faculty of Education, University of Auckland)

“It was very good to attend a conference with an open agenda about motivational language learning strategies, cultural messages and personal engagement with learning, rather than exam-focussed attainment-related procedures! It was also excellent to see such a diversity of languages represented by teachers.”

Steven Fawkes (Association of Language Learning)



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Overseas schools and teachers:

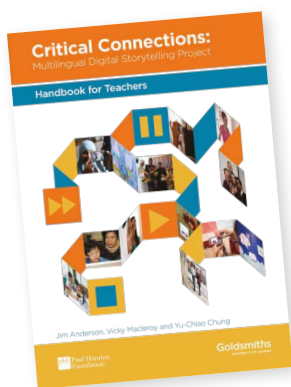
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Project advisor

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Further information and resources, including the Handbook for Teachers, are available on the project website: <http://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com/>