

## **A Moving Story from Dhaka to London: Revealing vibrant identities in young people's intercultural encounters with mobile art, embroidery and artefacts**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents three Bengali-English digital stories as vignettes and analyses young people's intercultural encounters as a moving story between Dhaka and London. The research case study is part of an international project, Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling (2012-present), which links language and intercultural learning with literacy, active citizenship and the arts. Researching and writing together, the lead Bengali teacher and co-director of the project interrogate how young people open up spaces for Sylheti, Bengali and English through intercultural encounters and the making of their digital stories. In adopting a critical ethnographic research model, a ground roots, process oriented, collaborative and emancipatory approach to research is fostered. The study centres on an after-school Bengali club (11-14 year olds) in a mainstream school. Setting up the project within a non-formal educational context opened up space for a more imaginative pedagogical approach and closer connection with intergenerational experiences in the home and community. The young people's multilingual digital stories revealed their vibrant identities and the complexity and multilayeredness of their encounters with cultural artefacts. Creating the digital stories opened up ways of knowing that were sometimes unexpected and emotive and profoundly affected the young people and their strong sense of becoming intercultural.

### **Setting the scene for multilingual digital storytelling around Bengali artefacts**

Researching collaboratively, the lead project teacher for Bengali, Shabita Shamsad, and the co-director of the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012-present), Vicky Macleroy, investigate how young people learn Bengali through creating stories around mobile art, embroidery and artefacts. This article explores how young people's digital stories reveal their vibrant identities and investigates the complexity and multilayeredness of their encounters with Bengali cultural artefacts. In the three Bengali-English digital stories discussed here the Bangladeshi-British students forge novel links and deep connections with their cultural heritage. These students find ways to frame these cultural stories and bring in the multisensorial nature of their worlds, 'the vibrancy of objects and the way these come together' (Pennycook, 2019: 85). Their Bengali-English digital stories depict these migrant worlds through Bengali artefacts and reflect the 'inter-relatedness of the movements of people and things' (Basu & Coleman, 2008: 313).

In arguing for a 'material turn' in migration and mobility studies the focus has shifted to this intersection and interaction of people and things and the importance of 'everydayness in making and understanding "migrant worlds"' (Wang, 2016: 5). The language learning of these Bengali students is 'bound up with real time activity' (Pennycook, 2019: 78) as they criss-cross borders between school, home, museum and community and begin to inhabit their languages. The young people enjoy the playful, creative element of making a digital story and realise how it helps them to learn new Bengali words; research their heritage culture; speak more fluently in Bengali; and become a 'real reporter' (see Figure 1). They work hard to

develop new media skills; read and write the Bengali script; and create an engaging 3-5-minute film in a bilingual version. Through this process, these students are actively constructing and framing what it means to be intercultural and coming to the knowledge that interculturality moves beyond experience and requires 'reflection, analysis and action' (Alred et al., 2003: 5).

Figure 1: Students on location making a Bengali-English digital story

These digital stories push language learning into spaces of dialogue, discomfort, critique and change connecting young people with indigenous and precarious knowledge (Phipps, 2016). In reflecting on how the making of the digital stories profoundly affects the young people, we interrogate the unexpectedness of these encounters. The research presented here reveals students' connection with artefacts as vibrant matter and how these shared encounters can 'admit a "playful element" into one's thinking' (Bennett, 2010: 15). There is a vitality and strength in the digital stories that comes out of role play, spontaneity and the 'imagination of improvisors' (Gallagher, 2010: 46). These young people have the desire to effect change and tell a good story.

Shabita Shamsad and the Bengali students are opening up dynamic and vibrant spaces for interculturality in their mainstream school setting (Central Foundation Girls' School) and changing how Bengali culture and language are seen and represented. The students attend an after-school Bengali club for 11-14 year olds as a bridge to the formal learning of Bengali as an optional school subject for older students. Their initial classroom encounters with Bengali are in the context of Non-Formal Education (NFE) where 'learning is linked with learning a culture' (Brennan, 1997: 192). In this article, we also consider how formal mainstream education could 'adapt strategies and processes that have been shown to be successful in the NFE system' (ibid: 198).

In discussing Linguistic Landscape research, Pütz and Mundt (2019) note there is not much evidence of 'LL researchers as activists who try to change spaces' (ibid: 34). These young people, with support from Shabita Shamsad, are slowly changing the linguistic schoolscape as they take the Bengali-English digital stories into school assemblies and present a powerful message about language rights to their peers.

They were asking us questions and they wanted to know more about it ... They were just really really interested in it (Student Shila, interview, 2018).

The outer walls of the language department display photographs and Bengali script from the pre-production stage of the digital stories including colourful and vibrant pictures of Brick Lane, Nakshi Kantha embroideries, rickshaws and rickshaw art. The International Day of Languages was transformed in the school with Bangladeshi food, art and costumes; a Nakshi Kantha workshop exploring traditional designs and sewing; and rickshaws. A Dhaka rickshaw was brought into the school yard and the community rickshaw driver opened up the experience of riding a rickshaw to other students in the school. Shabita Shamsad reflected upon the significance of these experiences for the students.

To have a little taste of Bangladesh in the school and understand their heritage and appreciate it here in London (Shamsad, 2020).

There is now a large framed poster in the foyer of the school celebrating the research project and showing how the Bengali students learnt to tell stories with needles and thread and art on wheels. The Bengali-English digital stories are opening up novel spaces for students to

represent Bangladeshi-British language and culture. The next section sets out the research context and the wider research project.

### **Research design and research context for multilingual digital storytelling**

The Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012-present) seeks to open up dynamic spaces for languages. The project has involved over 1,500 young people, across primary and secondary age ranges (6-18 years old), in creating and sharing digital stories in bilingual version (usually with English subtitles). The project includes digital stories in over 15 languages (Arabic, Bengali, Bulgarian, Croatian, English Estonian, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil and Turkish) and across the following themes: inside out, journeys, fairness and belonging. We adopted a critical ethnographic approach towards the research to support novel multilingual pedagogy that could be sustained and dynamic. Within this critical ethnographic research paradigm, we linked our study to ecological, collaborative and multimodal perspectives (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016). Lead teachers and researchers worked in a collaborative and dialogic relationship at each stage of the project (pre-production, production, post-production) and fostered the desire to find new ways of doing things. Critical ethnography often incorporates elements of action research which recognises the need for collaborative, experimental and imaginative research with teachers who have a right to question the educational system and its values and 'develop alternative models' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016: 137).

The case study on the Bengali-English digital stories (2015-2017) focuses on research carried out in a secondary school in East London. Shabita Shamsad reflected upon how the project opened the students' eyes to their local surroundings and culture and how they started thinking in a different way. Shabita Shamsad has worked within the Languages department of the school for seven years and is the only Bengali teacher in this girls' school where 86% of the girls are Bangladeshi-British. The students in the research project were third and fourth generation Bangladeshis and, therefore, their exposure to Bengali at home had lessened. The girls were fluent speakers of their dialects (Sylheti and Chittagong), but there were misunderstandings between the different dialect speakers and no experience of Bengali literacy (reading and writing). Shabita Shamsad reflects on barriers to learning Bengali.

Bengali speaking is not encouraged at primary school level. Bengali has a rich culture and history, but literacy is taught in a traditional way; parents cannot afford to visit Bangladesh so children lose that connection; and mother-tongue teaching of Bengali clashes with Arabic learning (retaining an Islamic identity is more important to parents than preserving Bangla culture). (Shamsad, 2019).

The Head teacher, Esther Holland, was very supportive of the project and recognised the importance of students developing literacy in their home language. Students learn Bengali in the after-school club (only French and Spanish are offered as languages in the mainstream curriculum for 11-14 year olds) as preparation for having the option to study Bengali GCSE classes (for 14-16 years old) in the mainstream. Setting up the project within a non-formal educational context opened up space for a more imaginative pedagogical approach and closer connection with intergenerational experiences in the home and community. A Bengali parent volunteer and two sixth-form students were also involved in the project in a supportive and collaborative role with the teacher and students. Shabita Shamsad had the challenge of engaging these girls with their home language which has a low status in the school and wider

society. Although Bengali was one of the most spoken languages in England and Wales (School Census, 2008/2012), GCSE exam entries for modern languages (2000-2012) have shown a marked decrease in Bengali (-49%) and Bengali is now a small-entry language which was not re-developed for post-16 study in 2017. Bengali is having to compete with more prestigious school languages (French and Spanish) for space in these students' lives.

Developing a dynamic and creative pedagogical approach was key to our language work with museum artefacts and a three-staged pedagogical framework was constructed: approaching; exploring; and creating. The research question investigated here looks at how the Bengali-English digital stories reveal young people's vibrant Bangladeshi-British identities through intercultural encounters with mobile art, embroidery and artefacts. The students were linking Bangla learning with cultural knowledge and starting to understand how Bengali culture has been adapted in East London. The research draws on interviews with the students; video footage and still images whilst creating the digital stories; storyboarding, scripting and subtitling; students' reflections on the stories; and the digital stories as artefacts. The following sections position the project within non-formal educational practices and research into migrant worlds and material cultures.

### **Non-formal education as a dynamic space for multilingual digital storytelling**

Opening up dynamic spaces for languages and literacies in multilingual digital storytelling is about moving away from fixed and bounded notions of language and communication and learning to make meaning across modes. Lundby (2008) describes how digital storytelling 'creates a new composition' through the multimodality of its stories and texts and challenges schools' notion of literacy. As they enter school, children and young people are often forced to chase after a fixed standard literacy that seems distant from their own rich and noisy experience of language. Much school-based learning provides little opportunity for experimentation and creativity, or openness towards uncertainty. In the majority of mainstream schools in England, students are losing the right to discover things for themselves through taking risks, working in and across their languages, and creating new ways of thinking (Macleroy, 2016).

Non-formal education seeks to be appropriate for the learners and their cultures and 'should not, then, reproduce the inadequacies of formal education' (Brennan, 1997: 188). Non-formal education is viewed as a way of connecting students with other ways of learning. One of the ways to reconnect students with culture and creativity 'must be to offer extra-curricular live and digital opportunities in a wider range of arts and creative skills and to offer children the chance to connect the arts, creativity, enterprise and technology' (Neelands et al., 2015). School doors are being closed shut against the vibrant cultures these multilingual students inhabit and teachers and researchers have to search for places in schools where students' languages, cultures and ideas can be embraced.

Schools can be places that foster opportunities for intercultural encounters and desire and where students, in creating their multilingual digital stories, learn to be confident to express who they are or 'what they are'. However, it is hard for multilingual students to achieve literacy across their languages and in her model of the Continua of Biliteracy, Hornberger (1989) sets out the complexity and multi-layered nature of these interactions. She calls for ideational and implementational spaces to be opened up in schools for multilingualism and social justice (Hornberger, 2010). Formal classroom spaces are still difficult to prise open in

mainstream schools, but what happens in the borderlands of school (after-school clubs) when children want to engage in non-formal educational practices about things that matter to them? A student in the research project reflected: ‘if you make a film, you should base it on something that’s important to you’.

The affective and joyful dimension of literacy is too easily smothered, scorned or derided but Claxton, researching children’s cognition, claims that ‘children’s success in life depends not on whether they *can* read, but on whether they *do* – and derive enjoyment from doing so’ (Claxton, 2008: 19). This sense of joyfulness and pleasure can be experienced in the shared space of non-formal education where peer relationships, humour and laughter become an intimate part of language and literacy acquisition as children discover how to ‘share a sense of absurdity and pleasure in the comic incidents of life’ (Dunn, 1988: 168). A student in the project reflected on their enjoyment of the shared humour of their digital story: ‘a funny part as well where everyone laughed’. Young people’s language use is replete with fast-paced talk and slang and their linguistic repertoire becomes more creative and experimental as they grow in confidence across their languages and discover ‘novel ways of expression and communication’ (Li Wei, 2019: 71) in these translanguaging spaces.

The after-school Bengali club became a dynamic and vibrant space where students chose to engage in meaningful non-formal educational practices across their languages: researching, storyboarding, scriptwriting, interviewing, translating and subtitling. Informal writing is seen as having the power to build confidence, support meaningful interactions, and deepen understanding through the act of shared writing where ‘writing becomes a way of being in the world’ (Yagelski, 2009: 7) and a way ‘to build community’ (Dean & Warren, 2012: 50). Young people in the after-school club in the research project recognised how the whole experience of creating and sharing their digital story had affected their self-esteem: ‘Boosted our confidence’ (Student Anishah, interview, 2018). These students were learning something affirmative about their culture that would often be overlooked.

In exploring the dynamic and vibrant nature of non-formal educational practices in the multilingual digital storytelling project, literacy became entwined with images of movement and physicality. Students were given the freedom to explore outdoor spaces and shape their intercultural encounters in local streets, parks and community settings. Becoming literate across their languages became connected with the action of the feet, the freedom to roam, and the act of knowing how to map their lifeworlds. This resonates strongly with Mackey’s concept of ‘foot knowledge’ and her story of learning to be literate where she was ‘surprised at a recurring nebulous mental image: it always involved the feet’ (Mackey, 2010: 325). Foot knowledge is seen as a vital way for children to interpret and make sense of their real and imagined lifeworlds.

The dynamic spaces of non-formal education can change how young people interrelate with material culture and digital technologies: ‘experimenting with new media and materials, while affirming ancestral values and their distinct heritage’ (Basu, 2013: 384). The Bengali students in the project were surprised at the stories they uncovered and the vibrant nature of the Bengali objects.

So it’s something that we didn’t realise until we made this film and we thought maybe we should share with everyone else so they know more about the rickshaw and how important it is to Bangladesh (Anishah, interview 2018).

## **Migrant worlds and material culture in the Bengali-English digital stories**

The project looked at what happens when artefacts are moved across school-home borders and museum boundaries and young people have the freedom to make sense of these objects through personal and intimate encounters. This crossover of artefacts young people encountered in their homes, communities and museums uncovered deep connections and a growing sense of the importance of these objects as holders of memories, heritage and belonging. Shabita Shamsad reflected on students' changing cultural perceptions.

These students see their identities in a small block – at home, as Bengali; at the mosque, as Muslim; at school, as British – and in most cases do not crossover these images, but the project allowed them to break the boundaries and explore identity as a whole person (Shamsad, 2019).

Working with objects with their own lives and stories was inspired by Pahl and Rowsell's theory of artifactual literacies (2010) and their notion of 'felt connections' where every object tells a story and objects remain powerful in our memories especially in stories of migration. These researchers recognise the affective in things and the way objects cross borders and 'connect worlds, as they travel through worlds' (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012: 50). Research findings from our project reveal how engaging with objects as they move through lives becomes an effective way of opening up intercultural spaces and 'building bridges between the familiar and as yet unknown territory' (Abdelhadi et al, 2019: 4). Basu (2013) also focuses on the dynamic relation between people and things and in discussing contemporary anthropological approaches to material culture identifies a theoretical and methodological turn towards 'understanding "things" as "things in motion"' (ibid: 378).

In this phase of the project (2015-17), we partnered with the British Museum and Museum of London to investigate Bengali artefacts and explore whether these artefacts could connect Bengali students with their heritage and a deeper more profound sense of identity. Museums are seen as key sites of learning and as having pedagogic power, but research shows that 'museum education is a field in flux' (Kristindóttir, 2017). Museums support non-formal lifelong learning, but they are criticised for what has been termed 'silent pedagogy' due to the silence of museum educators on 'the intrinsic quality of museum learning' (Kristindóttir, 2017: 433). Although the gallery tour is still seen as the main feature of museum education, other museum learning focuses on the encounter and these 'affective encounters' are described as a 'pedagogy of feeling' where objects promote introspective reflection and move people to action (Witcomb, 2015: 322). Our research project sought ways to engage Bengali students in 'affective encounters' with the Bengali museum artefacts.

Museums have been accused of promoting 'hierarchy over conviviality' (Mayrand, 2015) and seeing objects in terms of identification and conservation rather than as possibilities for social and community encounters. The new museology movement shifts the emphasis to the social role of the museums, interdisciplinarity, and using new digital technology. Museums are viewed as playing an integral role in community development and 'become a way of bringing people together to learn about themselves and others' (Mayrand, 2015: 117). Kristindóttir (2017) noted the need for a shift in museum learning towards critical pedagogy and reflective

practices. In this approach to museum learning, young people would be given the space to interrogate the often messy, conflicting and vibrant nature of cultural artefacts.

Our research project revealed the scarcity of Bengali artefacts in the museums (Nakshi Kantha; rickshaws and rickshaw art; artwork by Zainul Abedin), but the Bengali students began to uncover these Bengali cultural artefacts in their homes and community. The Bengali students brought cultural artefacts into school and shared their stories within the circle of digital storytelling.

I would like you to tell me more about, share in the circle, more information about the object you have in front of you because we will use this in the setting where we will be filming. This is all about our identities (Chryso, Project Drama Educator, 2017).

The Bengali students handled and interacted with the cultural artefacts, learnt to sew nakshi stiches and embroider their own Nakshi Kantha. As well as a shift in museum learning towards the affective experience, there is also a focus towards learning as performance and the integration of a range of practices that allow young people to ‘use their bodies and minds to interact directly with materials and objects’ (Hein, 2012: 38). The drama educator on our research project led interactive workshops through improvisation and role play and the media educator led workshops on framing and filming objects. Improvisation was adopted as a key approach in fostering creative interactions with objects as it allowed us ‘simply to live inside an imagined context to see what we could learn. Together’ (Gallagher, 2010: 43). Learning through improvisation was seen as enhancing pedagogy and bringing the social and performative together where students could feel free to think on their feet, transgress, and have fun with the serious goal of ‘social transformation’ (ibid: 46). Improvisation gave the Bengali students the space to think of creative and inventive ways to interact with cultural artefacts.

Developing our research work on digital storytelling around objects and museum artefacts we explored how Sylheti, Bengali and English could be brought into these spaces and used in students’ interactions, interpretations, and performances. Museums tend to be extremely monolingual places, but the museum educators linked to our project were keen to facilitate the development of bilingual resources, including digital stories, around museum artefacts. Martin and Jennings (2015) in writing about ‘Tomorrow’s Museum’ make the case for reaching out to multilingual audiences to keep a museum ‘relevant, vibrant, and learning’ (ibid: 92). In the following section of the article, we discuss the Bengali artefacts that became the inspiration for the three Bengali-English digital stories.

## **Student encounters with the Bengali artefacts in the three Bengali-English digital stories**

### **1. The Shaheed Minar Monument**

Figure 2: Shaheed Minar Monument in an Open-Air Museum in Altab Ali Park

The Shaheed Minar Monument formed the basis for the first Bengali-English digital story. Encountering the Shaheed Minar Monument in an open-air museum in their local park (see Figure 2) played a key role in how the Bengali students decided to make their digital story on languages and fairness. These students walked in their local community interacting with parts

of their heritage and uncovering stories of Bangladeshi lives. In their digital story, the Shaheed Minar Monument is described as a 'symbol of fairness' which reminds people of their right to speak their mother tongue. The students interacted with and interpreted this powerful symbol of the Bengali language movement.

The monument depicts a mother who is upset, head bowed down by the sight of the blood of her people, and protective over her four small children, the men and women of Bangladesh (Student, 2017).

Lingering, looking and reflecting upon this memorial provided space for these young people to understand the profound story of their shared language. Dhaka and London are both home to Shaheed Minar Monuments and their strong message of language rights and embodiment of 'the struggles and protests of language users' (Pütz and Mundt, 2019: 8).

## 2. Nakshi Kantha Embroidery

Figure 3: Nakshi Kantha embroidery in the British Museum

Nakshi Kantha embroidery formed the foci for the second Bengali-English digital story. Nakshi Kantha hold emotional and sentimental value and are passed down through the generations as a family treasure. These Nakshi Kantha act as a rich storytelling device surrounded by the family stories of how they were made and changed hands. The Bengali students on the project became intimately acquainted with these artefacts as they came across Nakshi Kantha in their homes and community, as well as museums (see Figure 3), and then became involved in the process of making their own Nakshi Kantha. These young people, often for the first time, experimented with the intricate and therapeutic art of embroidery and learned about the nakshi stitches and patterns. Nakshi Kantha embroideries hold memories across generations and local stories are recorded through the stitching. This was a local folk art and it was the ordinary village women who told their stories through these objects. The Bengal women gathered together materials from their everyday lives and made Nakshi Kanchas out of recycled materials and threads pulled from saris to embroider their lifeworlds. The Bengali students closely examined the different images and motifs woven into the embroidery and developed an understanding of language as 'embodied, embedded and distributed across people, places and time' (Pennycook, 2019: 77).

## 3. Rickshaws and rickshaw art

Figure 4: Rickshaws and rickshaw art in the British Museum

Rickshaws and rickshaw art formed the foundation for the third Bengali-English digital story. The Bengali students interacted and engaged with these travelling works of art (see Figure 4). Dhaka's rickshaws are viewed as 'the most colourful and artistic in the world' (Wheeler, 1998: 64). Research on rickshaws emphasises the colour and vibrancy of these objects: 'New rickshaws in Bangladesh are a blaze of colour. Every square inch is decorated. Tassels, tinsel and twirly bits hang from all parts ... The overall effect is spectacular' (Gallagher, 1992: 637). Rickshaw artists paint the idiosyncratic rear panels and these ornate panels are seen as an 'expression of pride and joy on the part of the maker' (ibid: 639). The joyfulness is reflected in the images that are often larger than life and in more vibrant colours. The

gaudiness of rickshaw art is criticised by some and rickshaw artists are usually local Bengal men who become painters at a young age watching their fathers invent fantastical scenes. The Bengali students in the project encountered rickshaws in Dhaka, in London museums, in their local community and in their homes (model rickshaws) and became intrigued by these cultural artefacts. The next section of the article focuses on the three Bengali-English digital stories.

### **Creating three Bengali-English digital stories around Bengali artefacts**

In this part of the article, we analyse the three stages (pre-production, production, post-production) of the digital storytelling process and how the young people's Bengali-English digital stories reveal their vibrant identities and intercultural encounters with mobile art, embroidery and artefacts. We have set out our pedagogical approach (devised in collaboration with teachers) for using multilingual digital storytelling for language learning in the 'Handbook for Teachers' (<https://goldsmithsmdst.com/handbook/>) and made our resources for filmmaking (created in collaboration with the BFI) available on the project website: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/professional-development/>.

#### ***I. Shohid Minar: Symbol of Fight, Freedom and Fairness, Bangladesh to Brick Lane***

There were six Bengali students (11-14 years old) making this digital story and they were given the chance to discover the Bengali language in objects, people and places. During the pre-production stage these girls stepped into their culture anew and scrutinised their identity in familiar places: community institutions named after famous Bengali personalities (Osmani Centre, Osmani School, Shapla Primary School, Bongobondhu Primary school, Kobi Najrul Centre); Bengali books and newspapers displayed in shops and local libraries; restaurants selling Bengali food; the oldest Bengali grocery shop; and Bengali clothes and music. The young people had wanted to explore different aspects of their Muslim identity in their digital story, but then became curious to find out more about their culture from the Bangladeshi community.

Even though most of the girls visited these places with their parents, for the first time, they realised the background story which was very emotional as they were reinventing themselves (Shamsad, 2019).

Shabita Shamsad reflected on how their walk in the local neighbourhood changed how the girls wanted to represent their culture.

They recognised the struggles, sacrifices and hard work their ancestors put into integrating the Bengali culture in the very heart of British culture (Shamsad, 2019).

Their Bengali-English digital story is predominantly made as a photo story with still images and narration. In the production stage, the girls took photographs, filmed and interviewed local politicians, restaurant owners and community activists and tried to find out about living with three identities: Muslim-Bengali-British.

In the post-production phase, the main message the students wanted to convey in their documentary-style digital story was the right to speak your mother tongue. The opening shots of the digital story move from the school to the school minibus as the girls set off to travel their local neighbourhood together. The girls capture the Bengali-English signage of Brick Lane and relate the story of migration from Bangladesh to England. Research informs the

girls' narration and during the next shots of local stores (Banglatown) and markets in Brick Lane the girls reveal the culture and history of the place and the urban symbols that 'construct and negotiate (minority) identities' (Pütz and Mundt, 2019: 11).

The girls uncover British-Bangladeshi culture symbolised in the local mosques and minarets; in the stores and billion-pound curry industry; in the markets, local streets and signage; and in the park. The story behind Altab Ali Park reveals the racism that British-Bangladeshis grew up with, but also symbolises their struggle and fight for freedom. This park is now an open-air museum and displays the story of Altab Ali in Bengali and English on large signage that borders the park. The Shaheed Minar Monument stands out as a strong symbol of Bengali heritage and struggle and the girls' digital story turns to this powerful object. In telling the story of the Bengali Language Martyrs they display a screen shot of a large wall in Dhaka with graffiti. The image depicts a language martyr still holding his protest banner lying dead in the arms of his friend and another shot shows the peaceful protest of students through the streets of Dhaka with banners written in Bengali about language rights: 'We want the State language to be Bengali; Bangla is like pearls in oysters / diamonds in coals. This is why all my dreams are around this language!'.

The girls re-imagine, re-mediate and re-present this struggle for their mother tongue in creating their digital story and uncover the profound stories of their cultural heritage and the hard lives of ordinary people. Their understanding of language becomes multisensorial as they touch, feel and frame their heritage culture and make sense of the 'material webs of human and non-human assemblages' (Pennycook, 2019: 85). In these affective encounters with vibrant objects from Bengali culture in their local London community, the girls become more confident about the power of their mother tongue and proud that Bengalis were a nation who fought for their mother tongue. Their digital story fosters empathy in practice and shows how empathy is 'dynamic across time and place' (Mercer, 2016: 101).

*Shohid Minar: Symbol of Fight, Freedom and Fairness, Bangladesh to Brick Lane:*  
<https://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com/film-awards-2016-part-2/>

## **II. Telling Stories through Needle and Thread**

The idea for this story emerged from the girls' interest in the patterns and designs in Eid clothes and their question: 'why do they have so many intricate designs?' This then led to a discussion about Nakshi Kantha and the girls started to share stories about their grandmothers making these embroideries. This digital story was created by eleven Bengali students (11-13 years old) through their interactions with Nakshi Kantha embroideries and the stories woven into these cloths. As well as the Nakshi Kantha embroideries in the British Museum, the Bengali students looked at sketches by the Bengali painter, Zainul Abedin, documenting the famine in Bengal. During the pre-production stage, an uncanny connection happened linking Zainul Abedin with the Nakshi Kantha stories. Shabita Shamsad came across a well-known Bengali folk tale from Dhaka, *Nakshi Kantha Math*, about a young woman who sewed her story of sorrow and grief into a Nakshi Kantha and on opening the book discovered the illustrations were by Zainul Abedin. In the production stage, the Bengali students made the decision to re-imagine and re-present the *Nakshi Kantha Math* folk tale using some of Abedin's illustrations. Their Bengali-English digital story is predominantly made using moving images and sound interspersed with some still images from the folk tale. Intergenerational interactions underpinned the pre-production stage as the girls interviewed parents and grandparents about Nakshi Kantha stories.

In the production stage, Shabita Shamsad worked closely with the drama educator to devise drama activities around the artefacts. Zainul Abedin's illustrations became part of sequencing, improvising and scripting activities in Bengali and the Nakshi Kantha embroideries became part of the drama through the stories woven into the cloth and the everydayness of these artefacts. Through improvisation and role play the girls connected more intimately with these cultural artefacts and framed their story through questions to a grandmother.

In the post-production stage, the main message the students wanted to convey in their dramatic digital story was how precious these objects are in the memories they hold and the stories that are told across generations. The dramatic reframing of the story begins in a Bengali home as the girls sit with their grandmother and playfully fight over the Nakshi Kantha. The girls have filled the scene with Bengali artefacts brought into the circle of digital storytelling: Nakshi Kantha on the wall and side table as framed embroideries; Nakshi Kantha as a cloth on the central table; Nakshi Kantha as a cover across the girls; a Bengali Paan dan (a box storing betel leaf); and a Bengali hand fan in the grandmother's hand. Meaning emerges from the girls' interactions with objects and 'the complexity of things that come together in the vibrant, changeable exchanges of everyday urban life' (Pütz and Mundt, 2019: 19). The dialogue is in Bengali with English subtitles: 'Stop; you will ruin the Nakshi Kantha; it is old and precious'. The girls want to know the reason and the grandmother replies: 'It takes a long time and hard work to sew a Nakshi Kantha. Every Nakshi Kantha tells a story'. The scene is set for the grandmother to tell the Bangladeshi village folk tale.

The girls re-tell the folk tale dramatically and intersperse the role play with still images from Zainul Abedin's illustrations. The girls ask questions to their grandmother which help to frame the digital story and create a convivial sense of intimacy as the grandmother slowly reveals the tragic story of two young people. As the story unfolds the young man has to flee the village and the young woman, heartbroken and lonely, starts 'expressing her thoughts through making Nakshi Kantha'. The Nakshi Kantha tells her sad story as the embroidery is placed on her grave. The girls recognise this art is passed down through the generations and decide to learn the skill of telling stories though needle and thread: 'We heard the story from grandma. Now let's ask her to teach us how to make a Nakshi Kantha'. The next scene is the girls sitting in a semi-circle all sewing their Nakshi Kantha embroideries and the digital story ends with the powerful message: 'Each Nakshi Kantha tells a story. We have only heard one story. There are so many stories to hear'.

Telling Stories through Needle and Thread: <https://vimeo.com/channels/mdst2017/page:2>

### ***III. Rickshaw and Rickshaw Arts: A Moving Story from Dhaka to London***

This digital story was created by six Bengali students (13-14 years old) through their dynamic interactions with rickshaws and rickshaw art. During the pre-production stage these students researched the history of rickshaws in Bangladesh, engaged with the museum artefacts, including rickshaw panels and artwork, and recounted personal experiences of rickshaw rides in Bangladesh.

We also saw some paintings. Something that I didn't know was that there was actually artists behind the rickshaw ... we thought deeply into something that actually is

important to us as when we go to Bangladesh we always ride on rickshaws (Anishah Student, 2018).

The documentary is in Standard Bengali with English subtitles and in the pre-production stage the students were gaining confidence to move from the familiarity of Sylheti spoken in their homes to the more formal Bengali for their digital story. These girls devised questions in Bengali to ask rickshaw drivers and rickshaw artists in Dhaka. Digital stories can open up spaces for the voices of ordinary people that are often unheard, but this may also lead to ethical questions about story sharing and how storytellers are listened to and understood (Hill, 2014: 24). In the production stage, Shabita Shamsad travelled to Dhaka and found rickshaw drivers and rickshaw artists to interview using the students' questions. These encounters affected and changed how the girls saw rickshaws and led to action to help the rickshaw driver.

During the production phase, the girls disconcertingly realised whilst on location filming that their interview questions would not work for the rickshaw driver in London. Shabita Shamsad reflected on how the rickshaw had become a 'vehicle of culture'. The rickshaw driver was a community worker and owner of the rickshaw using the rickshaw for community events and festivals and was a keeper of archives, photographs and books about rickshaws. The Bengali students were interested that the rickshaw owner, who was not from Bangladesh, could tell them so many stories about Dhaka rickshaws. A turning point in the filming was when the girls asked to ride the rickshaw.

I was the first one to go on. I think I really wanted to ride it. I really wanted to know how it feels to go round. I think it's quite hard when you see three wheels. It looks like it's quite hard to ride. I just wanted to know how it feels. I was really scared as well (Shila Student, interview, 2018).

The Bengali students discovered the rickshaw they were riding around the London yard and the rickshaw they had encountered at the British Museum were both part of an earlier exhibition on 'Traffic Art: Rickshaws from Bangladesh' (London Museum of Mankind, 1988-1991). This exhibition presented non-western artefacts (rickshaws) as art alongside an ethnographic exhibition of the culture and technology of the rickshaw business (Burt, 2019). The students uncovered many of the materials and photographs from this exhibition stacked in the London yard with no place to be displayed.

In the post-production stage, the main message the students wanted to convey in their documentary-style digital story was the how the rickshaw itself becomes a fusion of identities and culture on the move. The digital story moves between London and Dhaka in the midst of these two noisy cities as the girls uncover interconnecting stories linked by these 'mobile works of art'. The digital story opens with the two girls riding a Dhaka rickshaw in a community yard in East London with upbeat music playing and photographs of the rickshaw artist in the background. The girls re-present rickshaws in a positive way in their documentary: 'the three-wheel rickshaw is good for transportation and does not cause any pollution'.

The girls wanted to appear to be in Dhaka and skilfully framed the documentary as though they were in the street. This digital story is full of life, noise and movement and the footage from Dhaka tells a powerful story of the versatility of these vehicles and how rickshaws inhabit Dhaka streets. The moving images show rickshaws laden with goods and people as

they weave between the traffic with a cacophony of bells. The encounter with a rickshaw driver reveals the harsh reality of his life, poverty and loneliness: 'In this world, I have no-one ... No friends, I'm alone and helpless'. The documentary moves onto rickshaw art and the colour and beauty of rickshaws. The girls' perception of rickshaw art is changed by the encounter with a rickshaw artist in Dhaka and framed by their question: 'But have you ever thought about who creates all these things?' The rickshaw artist works in a small, poorly lit space with rickshaw paintings hanging in every corner of his room and his paints and brushes beside him. The bright colourful rickshaw art appears out of this small space: 'And today, these pictures have become part of Dhaka's streets'.

The documentary turns back to the community yard in London and the girls switch into English to interview the rickshaw driver. The girls record the story of a Dhaka rickshaw artist who sketched places in London whilst preparing for the exhibition on 'Rickshaws from Bangladesh'. These sketches were merged into his art on returning to Bangladesh and his family sent the Dhaka rickshaw to London. The digital story zooms in on the rickshaw art.

As you can see it's Tower Bridge ... and the traditional art of Dhaka. I'm very pleased; it's probably the brightest thing that comes into the East End (Rickshaw owner, London, 2017)

Rickshaw and Rickshaw Arts: A Moving Story from Dhaka to London:  
<https://vimeo.com/221881460>

### **Conclusions about implications of this work for formal education**

This article looked at how the Bengali-English digital stories created by the Bengali students within the context of non-formal educational practices could reveal the young people's vibrant identities as British Bangladeshis. The Bengali students' affective encounters with Bengali artefacts connected them with intergenerational stories about their language, heritage and culture. The dramatic digital story allowed the young people to interact directly with the materials and artefacts and understand the importance of continuing to tell their community stories. The documentary-style digital stories gave young people the freedom to explore outdoor spaces and community histories and their intercultural encounters became entwined with images of movement, materiality and intensity. This pedagogical approach to language learning links with the notion of decolonising multilingualism, taking to the streets, and becoming 'part of a befriending, community practice' (Phipps, 2019). These Bengali-English digital stories show how these young Bengali students were able to embody vibrant narratives of social engagement, activism and change (Hartley, 2017).

In reflecting on the role of non-formal education, Brennan (1997) believes a key factor is that 'learners are "comfortable" in a psychological as well as physical sense for the learning' (ibid: 198). The young people learning Bengali in the context of non-formal educational practices are gaining confidence to inhabit their languages and cultures in more formal educational settings. Creating the Bengali-English digital stories re-engaged these students with Bengali language and culture and supported these young people in studying Bengali (from 14-16 years old) as a modern foreign language within formal education. The Bengali students also felt the reach of the project was far wider.

I think making the film also made us think about lots of other stuff ... so making the film we could add a bit of that into our geography, history ... to be honest anything. It links to anything and everything' (Anisha Student, interview, 2018).

Project-based learning is also about creating and sharing resources. Shabita Shamsad has compiled a 'Bengali Resource Booklet' aimed at KS3 and KS4 learners of Bengali. The rationale for this resource is: to produce community language teaching materials drawing on the British Museum, Museum of London, and community resources exploring the lives of ordinary people; to value and capitalise on the prior knowledge and experience of bilingual learners and extend students' language learning and literacy skills; and to create a set of bilingual resources focusing on Bengali arts in different media. This resource booklet will be available on the MDST Museum Resources website: <https://mdstmr.wordpress.com/>.

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Project website: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/>

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