

Research in depth

Multilingual Digital Storytelling

Vicky Macleroy describes the development of the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project

This research review charts the journey of the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012-ongoing) and how our research has contributed to debates in the field of multilingualism, storytelling and digital technology. What is it about this approach to learning that has continued to capture the interest of children and young people from very different backgrounds, cultures and experiences? How has digital storytelling changed the way children think of and use their languages? How has our understanding of multilingual digital storytelling changed over time?

As our learning is increasingly being moved online it is an important moment to think critically how we make use of digital technology and how children and young people make sense of these digital spaces. Our collaboration began with a Council of Europe project in the Language Policy Division on ‘The Linguistic and educational integration of children and adolescents from migrant backgrounds’ (2010) and producing a study and resources for this project on ‘Professional development for staff working in multilingual schools’ (Anderson, Hélot, McPake & Obied/Macleroy, 2010): <https://rm.coe.int/16805a1cb4>. The idea and scope of literacy pedagogy was extended in this study to include the concept of multiliteracies, to account for the ‘the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate’ (Cazden et al. 1996: 61).

Building on this research project, Jim Anderson and I started to question the way literacy was approached in schools and we co-authored an article for the NALDIC *Quarterly* on ‘Languages, Literacies and Learning: from monocultural to intercultural perspectives’ (Anderson & Obied/Macleroy, 2011). We argued that learning could now take place at a distance and children could collaborate with learners across wider contexts and increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cummins, Brown and Sayers, 2006). From this perspective,

... distinctions between different domains of learning become more fluid and links are developed between home and school; study and leisure; local and global. Participating in creating multimodal texts can situate learners as agents and active in developing their own literacies. A plurilingual child’s learning becomes part of a far wider picture, and their language repertoire is extended to the development of bi- and multi- literacy (Anderson & Obied/Macleroy, 2011).

Jim Anderson and I were teacher educators for PGCE Modern and Community Languages and PGCE English and Goldsmiths, University of London became a leading partner in ‘English as an Additional Language Programme, TDA, Secondary EAL project (2011-2012)’. Jim and I carried out research with our student teachers into the extent to which schools support the development of students’ plurilingual and intercultural skills and, second, the extent to which digital literacy including critical perspectives were supported across the curriculum. We found that curriculum pedagogy was predominantly monolingual and monocultural in orientation and while there was some good practice in use of digital media, this was patchy and often lacking a critical dimension. Surveying the research literature since the multiliteracies model was conceived, it was striking that whilst research into multimodal communication and its place within an expanded semiotic landscape was receiving considerable attention, there was relative neglect of the multilingual strand and its significance within new designs of meaning.

In continuing to survey research in the field of digital literacy, Jim and I came across the practice of digital storytelling and the California-based Center for Digital Storytelling now known as ‘StoryCenter’ (<https://www.storycenter.org/staff>) which founded the digital storytelling movement (1993). The digital storytelling movement emerged alongside the development of the Internet when opening up access to digital media production tools and distribution opportunities of the web became linked with an emergent movement of media justice and media activism. Digital storytelling, as well as being based in local communities, began to bring into being new communities and stories. Joe Lambert, founder and director of the centre, believes in the power of story: ‘Being the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world, is a fundamental idea in democracy’ (Lambert, 2013: 2).

Our next step was to think about how we could extend digital storytelling to include multilingualism and our particular interest in teaching languages, English and EAL and we came up with the notion of ‘Multilingual Digital Storytelling (MDST)’. We set out these ideas in our book on ‘Multilingual Digital Storytelling: Engaging creatively and critically with literacy’ (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016):

MDST provides a means of nurturing and reflecting multiliteracies in practice. It recognises the power of storytelling and the space stories offer both for self-representation and for engaging with otherness. It draws on affordances of the digital medium for multimodal composition and for collaborative and dialogic ways of working and sharing across boundaries of home, school and community. And it values and supports multilingual repertoires (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016: 4).

Table 1: Deconstructing MDST (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016: 4)

An Approach to Intercultural Communication

Multilingual	Digital	Storytelling
different sounds, words, scripts and patterns	multimodal affordances and design	composition and critical review
different cultural meanings	boundary crossings (school – home)	recognition and reproduction of genres
self-representation (student voice)	collaborative, dialogic orientation	generation of ideas, forming a point of view, presenting to an audience
repertoires (socially, individually)	learner regulated	syncretic identities
connections between languages – metalinguistic awareness	connectedness within the online space (locally and globally)	intertextuality (making connections within and between texts)
translanguaging and dynamic bilingualism	youth culture (self-discovery and belonging)	situated learning within communities of practice

Jim Anderson and I then had to convince funders that multilingual digital storytelling was a viable and practical way to re-engage teenagers in language learning and make critical connections across sites of learning and across subject disciplines. In reviewing the literature and looking at research studies across a range of language learning contexts, we summarised the main overall research findings regarding the value of digital storytelling as: engagement of learners in facing challenges involved in reading and writing; linking oracy and literacy and structuring of the writing process; space for students to explore and express different cultural influences in their lives; bridging learning across contexts; confidence and

affirmation of identity through an authentic task aimed at a real audience; and enhancing communication skills, experimentation and risk-taking through integrating drama with digital storytelling (Anderson, 2016, 33-34).

Our research was initially funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (2012-2014) and framed by the following research questions:

1. What is the significance of multilingual digital storytelling for young people and their learning?
2. What is an appropriate pedagogical framework for carrying out multilingual digital storytelling work in schools?
3. What are the implications for policy and teacher professional development?

Our multilingual digital storytelling research has always been a collaborative and dialogic process involving lead teachers and researchers, and later student co-researchers. In shaping each stage of transformative practice. We have always started the process by critically viewing a selection of digital stories and asking learners and teachers: what makes a good digital story? Our digital stories are archived on the project website and a film sample can be viewed here along with an overview of the Critical Connections project from its launch in 2012: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/2019/08/19/project-summary-and-film-sample/>.

Working with lead teachers in mainstream and complementary schools in England and with partner schools in Algeria, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Palestine, Taiwan and the U.S.A. we were continually surprised by the hard work, commitment and creativity of these young language learners. We filmed, photographed and recorded the process out in schools and these were the key research strands that we identified from the research data:

1. Language learning, multilingual repertoires and identity
2. Multilingual composition and creativity
3. Culture, international partnerships and active citizenship
4. Learner autonomy, critical thinking and student voice
5. Engagement and motivation
6. Sites of learning: school, home and online
7. Transformative pedagogy
8. Curriculum policy, planning and professional development

Key research findings were identified under these strands and presented in our research flyer (2014): https://goldsmithsmdst.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/critical-connections-flyer_web.pdf.

We also created a Handbook for Teachers with our Research Assistant, Yu-Chiao Chung, and the lead teachers on the project. Gabriele Budach, Associate Professor in Teacher Education, Language and Diversity at the University of Luxembourg wrote in the preface:

Enjoy the fruits of multilingual digital storytelling presented in this book and discover how learning was stimulated in so many facets and layers. Meeting the spirit of the 21st century, the project succeeded in engaging students and their interest in digital technology. But far beyond the fashion of the day, for many of them it also became a life changing experience. It has been eye-opening to witness how imagining and creating stories, with others or individually, helped students to find pleasure in learning languages, to feel more confident about their own multiple linguistic and cultural identities and to share freely their experience laid open to the eyes and ears of a critical public. This is maybe the most outstanding achievement of the project to have unlocked in students a hidden potential which multilingual digital storytelling was able to bring to shine. (Budach, 2014)

Handbook for Teachers: https://goldsmithsmdst.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/critical-connections-handbook_web.pdf

We secured a second phase of funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (2015-2017) and the multilingual digital storytelling project was launched as a global literacy project to boost 21st-century literacy in schools using digital storytelling (Figure 1):



Figure 1: Goldsmiths launches multilingual digital storytelling project

Jim Anderson and I started the new phase of the project (2015-2017) with the following:

This work has demonstrated how creating and sharing digital stories in multiple languages can offer a rich context for school students to develop their plurilingual, intercultural and digital skills that represent an essential part of 21st century literacy.

The project is about an integrated and inclusive approach to language learning involving English mother tongue, English as an Additional Language (EAL), foreign and community languages.

It challenges the view that growing up with more than one language in the home is a disadvantage and provides a space in which bilingual/multilingual skills are nurtured and celebrated and where bridges are built between learning in school and out-of-school contexts.

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/critical-connections/>

We had started to build up a strong project team and in this new phase of multilingual digital storytelling we had 4 new partners: British Film Institute (BFI); National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE); British Museum and Museum of London. We were also creating a strong network of lead project teachers and schools and working across primary, secondary and complementary schools. We recognised the crucial importance of media training but also the importance of engaging with media tools in active and creative ways. We combined all our media workshops (lead by Jo Van de Meer, BFI) with drama approaches and activities (lead by Chryso Charalambous, Drama educator). We also worked with 6 lead teachers (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Greek) in partnership with the British Museum and Museum of London to develop bilingual resources around cultural objects and museum artefacts based on an innovative, cross-curricular approach to language-and-culture teaching. We have shared some of the teaching and learning resources here:

<https://mdstmr.wordpress.com/>.

Over the years we have had new schools joining the project and some schools such as the Peace School (Arabic complementary school in London) who have been part of the journey

from the outset. We have always emphasised that schools can start very small and that it is the story and children's experiences with making and creating their own films which is central. We started the project with secondary-aged children but have opened up the experience to younger children and, again, been continually surprised by the digital and language skills children have displayed.

Teachers are key to fostering children's multilingualism in schools and Dominika, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher in a London primary school, completed a module on 'Teaching Languages in Multilingual Contexts' where we lead a session on multilingual digital storytelling. Dominika was keen to implement the project in her primary school and selected her EAL class with two young Estonian siblings, Säde (6 years old) and Uku (8 years old). The EAL teacher fostered collaboration between the siblings and created a workshop environment where the siblings were encouraged to imagine, experiment and come up with their own ideas. Dominika set up the circle of digital storytelling with a hypothetical idea – what if things could talk? The siblings explored where objects could be from; the languages they could speak; what they could say and then moved to their own lives and discussed journeys, family, memories, country, languages, school environment, how to fit in, and belonging. The Estonian word for belonging, *Kuulumine*, was written on a post-it note and stuck on the classroom wall and the siblings added their own post-it notes to the wall. The siblings discussed the rewards and difficulties of belonging to particular groups and thought about the message they wanted to communicate in their own digital story. The EAL teacher used picture books with the siblings (*Lost and Found* by Oliver Jeffers; *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman; and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak) to explore sadness, anger, loss and friendship and how together the words and images convey a state of mind and powerful feelings.

These siblings collaborated together to create a bilingual digital story about belonging with the voice-over in Estonian and the subtitles in English. They surprised their parents, teachers and peers with their complex and imaginative understanding of multilingualism and the emotions and experiences of living in different languages.

The lost boy and girl: <https://vimeo.com/220341659>

The collaborations we have developed with complementary schools in England have been particularly rewarding over time and brought in a range of languages to the multilingual digital storytelling community (Arabic, Bulgarian, Croatian, Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil and Turkish). Our multilingual digital storytelling community has also been expanded and transformed by our links with schools in other countries and the sharing of digital stories in annual film festivals at the British Film Institute, Curzon Cinema at Goldsmiths and Deptford Cinema (2013 – 2020).

Jim Anderson and I were able to gain new funding for the multilingual digital storytelling project from Language Acts and Worldmaking (AHRC Open World Research Initiative) for 2018-2020. We held an international conference on 'Multilingual digital storytelling, museum artefacts and the arts: Creative pathways to language-and-culture learning' (June 2019) and an international digital storytelling festival on Mythical Creatures and European Folk Tales in partnership with the University of Luxembourg and Museum of Fairy Tale Museum, Cyprus (June 2019). Michael Rosen, poet and professor of children's literature, opened the digital storytelling festival performing his poems about mythical creatures.

<https://languageacts.org/related-projects/may-2018-call/multilingual-digital-storytelling-museum-artefacts-and-arts-creative-pathways-language-and-culture-learning/>



Figure 2: Deptford Storytelling Project 2020

The Deptford Storytelling Project 2020 was a novel experience for all those involved as we moved out of classrooms and schools and set up the project in the centre of the community. The project was run across different sites in Deptford: Deptford Cinema (a community-led cinema); the Albany (a performing arts centre); Deptford Lounge (a local library and community centre); and Goldsmiths, University of London. This placed the project in the heart of the community and opened up the experience to people from many different ages and backgrounds. Jim Anderson and I worked in partnership with Lucy Rogers at Deptford Cinema. Different languages, voices, poetry, dance and ceremonies were used by the filmmakers to tell their stories about families, friendships and communities:

<https://languageacts.org/related-projects/may-2019-call/deptford-storytelling-project-2020/>

Professor Catherine Boyle, Primary Investigator for Language Acts and Worldmaking, commented on the Deptford Storytelling Project 2020.

This project doesn't come from nothing. It comes from the long experience of its directors, from their work over decades in education, in multilingualism, pedagogy, in the skills of storytelling. This work is also something we need to heed more insistently in education. It is needs to come more forcefully into practice in language teaching and learning; into the centre, not the periphery ... We need to see this experience and knowledge as part of a curriculum and not as add-ons that schools are not able to find the capacity to accommodate, no matter how much good will and desire there is. The academic, theorised responses and work that come from these projects is urgently in need of a space in the wider discourse about education in languages at all levels. This is a project about how languages live and how storytelling educates us (<https://languageacts.org/blog/deptford-storytelling-project-2020/>).

In 2020-21, we have gained Public Engagement funding from Goldsmiths, University of London, for an international multilingual digital storytelling festival (June 2021) on the theme of 'Our Planet'. The film festival will also include a multilingual poetry workshop for all young filmmakers. We are working with primary, secondary and complementary schools in England, Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg and Taiwan across the age range (5 – 18 year olds). This is the link to the main project website:

<https://goldsmithsmdst.com/>.

Do get in contact if you are interested in your school becoming part of the 'Our Planet: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Festival 2021'.

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