The Role of Popular Screen Culture and Digital Communication Technology in Literacy Learning: Towards a New Pedagogy of Cosmopolitanism*

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Abstract: This paper discusses a trial project to explore the role of popular screen culture in student engagement levels, the capabilities of the smartphone camera for screen literacy learning, and the potential of digital Communication technology for cultural participation and global citizenship. It asks if screen literacy learning so framed could point to a new pedagogy of cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: screen literacy; mobile phone technology; pedagogy; cosmopolitanism

A global community of cosmopolitans will consist of people who want to learn about other ways of life, through anthropology and history, novels, movies, news stories in newspapers, on radio and television. Indeed, let me make my first entirely concrete practical proposal ... Do what people all around the globe are already doing with American movies: see at least one movie with subtitles a month. (Appiah, “Education for Global Citizenship” – 94)

Introduction

For the past twelve years, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET) has funded a suite of screen literacy learning projects for ‘at risk’ students from low socio-economic and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Mills, “Expanding Horizons”). With the aims of engaging students in learning and impacting positively upon their traditional literacy skills and capacities, these projects operated in the space where, as Mills outlines, old literacies meet new literacies, old media meets new media, screen culture meets other visual cultures, and theory commingles with praxis. Purposefully acknowledging the students’ existing knowledge and understanding of popular screen culture, they addressed challenges for literacy, identity and schooling for youth in the age of ‘new’ (i.e. digital) media. The latter has been characterised as a profound change in the semiotic landscape, worldwide, summarised by Ilana Snyder as a general shift from “page to screen”, and described by Bill Green in terms of a similarly paradigmatic shift for literacy from ‘print’ to ‘digital electronics’ and by Gunther Kress as a shift from ‘text’ to ‘image’ (Green,“Curriculum”).

Adopting a multimodal approach that looks beyond language to all forms of communication as has been variously discussed by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, Carey Jewitt et al. and more recently by Gunther Kress, these screen literacy learning projects took a ‘three-screen’ approach comprising cinema, television and computer. At the outset, they worked with a mainstream view of literacy pedagogy, as endorsed by NSWDET. Most recently, the pedagogical and conceptual framework for this screen-based work drew upon Bill Green’s tripartite (‘3D’) model involving the interplay of the operational, cultural and critical dimensions of literate practice and pedagogy (Durrant and Green; Green, “A Literacy Project”). For the past twenty or so

years, this model has provided the bedrock for media literacy learning involving media consumption and production competence (i.e., the operational), understanding the meaning systems in, and being able to construct one’s own meanings from, media texts (i.e., the cultural) and, at the same time, responding critically and responsibly to those texts (i.e., the critical). They also drew upon what, in a somewhat parallel development to Green’s earlier model, Andrew Burn would come to call a ‘3C’ model involving the cultural, the critical and the creative. In this, not only is movie-making yoked to critical analysis, but screen and literacy are conjoined, as are screen literacy, traditional literacy learning, popular Film and Television Studies and English Studies. All of these fields can and do stand alone but arguably, it was felt, they belonged together if the students were indeed to become properly screen-literate.

Popular screen culture – films and television programs which were not part of the respected and hallowed canon – was a crucially important aspect of these screen literacy projects. Following James Gee’s notion of ‘affinity spaces’, as well as his distinction between formally taught and informally acquired learning, specifically learning attained outside the classroom, the teachers involved in the projects were encouraged to publicly and explicitly value the knowledge and understanding which the students had acquired from their viewing of television and films in the home and local community environment (Finch). Thus the projects brought popular screen culture – something about which the students had learned a great deal outside the classroom – into the classroom. They then built upon their informally-acquired knowledge in the classroom, where critical analytical and production skills were taught.

For the movie-making component of the projects, the students followed an industry model: from concept and development through pre-production, production and post-production, culminating in exhibition, which took the form of a screening for family and friends in their local cinema. As most rural Australian towns have no local cinema, other venues such as the Returned and Services League (RSL) Club were used. Thus the students first brought their knowledge and understanding of popular screen culture into the classroom, and then took their enhanced knowledge, understandings and new production skills back in to the home and community, whence their original knowledge – and their passion – had started.

**Impact of screen literacy learning**

Researchers and teachers observed an immediate positive impact upon student engagement, and a significant enhancement in literacy levels. A positive impact upon the sense of self and identity that the students developed in relation to the rest of the class, to the school at large, and to their families and community, was also observed. This was of particular significance to students who hitherto, due to their low levels of engagement and literacy, had been held in low regard by their peers and, often, by their teachers. However, their sense of identity in relation to that which existed outside their local community, that is, to the nation and the rest of the world, appeared to be unchanged. In short, the students appeared to be relatively untouched by a global perspective.

This requires some elucidation, for popular film and television in Australia as in most parts of the world is nothing if not global. As Graham Nash and Kathy Mackey point out, Hollywood and the Internet are widely considered examples of the globalised culture that our students inhabit as ‘natives’. But how meaningful is this if they continue to act and imagine themselves as unconnected to the rest of the world? Certainly, in
terms of content, the students’ movies demonstrated knowledge of the global, indeed the 'glocal,' to use Roland Robertson’s apt neologism. For example, the students skillfully adapted Hollywood genres such as horror, the chick flic and kung-fu to their own local specifics. But a blinkered localism was manifest in the students’ lack of interest in viewing films made in other schools and other towns, in showing their films outside their immediate community, or in viewing and learning about films in a foreign language or genres specific to Hollywood or mainstream Australian cinema.

The students appeared to experience what John Tomlinson calls ‘banal globalism’. Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry argue that “‘banal globalism’, the almost unnoticed symbols of globality that crowd our daily lives”, might be “helping to create a sensibility conducive to the cosmopolitan rights and duties of being a ‘global citizen’ by generating a greater sense of both global diversity and global interconnectedness and belonging” (122). Our observations, however, suggested that the promise of such citizenship remained unfulfilled.

In short, the three screens opened up a world to our students but did not enable them to access, or participate in, the world. While the local links between school, home and community were expressly sought and valued, the projects failed to overcome a parochialism that disadvantages rural youth in many educational and societal senses. Not, of course, that there is anything intrinsically ‘wrong’ with the local or the parochial. Far from it. As explained above, the projects actively encouraged a local connectedness between school, home and community. There was, furthermore, an implicit understanding that, as Ulrich Beck argues, globalising is also a matter of situating and localizing. But the projects did nothing to actively encourage wider horizons. This did not synchronise with cinema, which has been a global phenomenon since its inception, it ignored the global cultural flows within the new eduscape (of which the students were clearly a part, although seemingly unaware that this was so), and it contradicted the increasingly transnational direction of contemporary literacy studies.

While the projects responded to what Carey Jewitt et al. argue is the “need to make curriculum knowledge ‘relevant’ by connecting with students’ out-of-school experience”, for our students, ‘out-of-school’ was located very close to the boundaries marked by their school fence. In the social terrain inhabited by our students, it proved difficult to determine the extent, or even if, their screen literacy learning was impacting upon “the social and political boundaries of English [learning] – determined by teachers, schools, Local Education Authorities, by policy and by diverse social interests – boundaries [that tend to be] tightly guarded and regulated by a highly prescriptive policy context”.

The images the students looked at and filmed, and the sounds they heard and recorded, provided the starting point to extend the horizons of their literacy learning, but they were unable to go further. The overriding need for teachers to deliver the outcomes formulated narrowly in the National Literacy testing system (NAPLAN) in all Australian schools, however, meant that many of the social and political boundaries of the English curriculum remained in much the same place, thus keeping the students in much the same place, and indeed ‘in their place’, as Richard Edwards and Robin Usher discuss (115-134). To make the social terrain for our students more equitable, we needed to dismantle the boundaries that preserved ‘localism’ – not because the home-community focus was not needed but because it came at the expense of the students seeing beyond the boundaries that denied them access to global citizenship. The
boundaries, which prevented the students experiencing or establishing a global-local dialogue needed to be porous.

**Adding value**

To address this issue, a trial screen literacy learning project involving teachers and educators in Australia and Japan was designed to add value to previous projects in two ways. First, it included the *fourth* screen: the mobile-phone camera screen. Second, it added a transnational framework by linking students in rural-regional NSW with similarly situated and (dis)engaged students in Japan. It was determined that students in both countries would use mobile smartphones to communicate with and learn from each other, both to record their films, and to distribute them to their counterparts in the other nation.

We selected Year 10 students in a medium-sized secondary school in rural New South Wales, at which most students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds for a seven-day trial the week immediately after the School Certificate exams ended. The significance of this is that the Year 10 cohort is an under-researched group within the total school population: literacy education attention tends to fall on the early and senior years of schooling, and more recently on the middle years, with little focus in particular on Year 10 as such. A further consideration was that in NSW students sit for the School Certificate at the end of Year 10 and this is widely seen as a ‘limbo’ period in their total schooling context, within the larger black hole of the junior secondary school (Sawyer, Brock and Baxter), particularly for students and schools classed as ‘educationally disadvantaged.’

**Why the fourth screen?**

In his discussion of the mobile phone, Gerard Goggin points out that this particular technocultural development offers possibilities for the co-ordination of activities and greater independent communication with peers (115). It was this, coupled with a desire to better understand, and contribute to, the theorisation of this emerging aspect of communications culture, that led us to the fourth screen. As Goggin argues, the coming together of the moving image and telephony in the form of the smartphone is evidence of the convergence of ‘formerly distinct communications platforms, technologies, audiences and cultures in which cell phone and mobile technologies are being fervidly embraced’ (162). The fourth screen therefore offers not only moviemaking technology but moving-image communication and sharing capacity as well.

We also wanted to address – perhaps pre-empt – a moral panic similar to the one that has developed around phone text-messaging and ‘sexting’ (Lumby and Funnell). Could, or would, the new practice of smartphone moviemaking be accused of posing a threat to literacy and also to cultural film values and canons, thus leading to a new generation of screen illiterates? The general intolerance of teachers towards digital phones was a further factor. While mobile phones are not banned from all schools, their use in the classroom commonly is. As Goggin explains:

- because of their prevalence and availability, their portability,
- their intricate incorporation into the patterns of everyday life,
- and increasingly, their function as media, mobiles [pose]

considerable challenges for the conduct and regulation of private
and public spheres, and the boundaries and relationships that pertain to and traverse these (115).

The argument for using the smartphone in our trial project was clinched by the principal of our participating school, which up to this point allowed mobile phone use in the play areas only. Recognising the existing conflict between teen culture and new forms of pedagogy, he observed: "mobile phones are in our classrooms now and they are causing us problems. Let us see if we can turn them into learning and teaching tools". In other words, rather than a threat, can they be seen as an opportunity?

Outcomes

Accepting that in so short a time we could not adequately gauge literacy levels, and that Japanese students could not participate until the following year, our aims in this trial project were confined to exploring the role of popular screen culture in student engagement levels, the capabilities of the smartphone camera for screen literacy learning, as well as the potential of the 'fourth screen' for cultural participation and global citizenship.

Engagement. As explained above, we targeted Year-10 students in the week immediately after their School Certificate exams. Until the announcement a year earlier of the raising of the school leaving age in NSW, the majority of this cohort had expected to join the ranks of school leavers once their exams were over. We thus anticipated very low levels of engagement. What we got, however, was a high level of engagement. For example, students volunteered assistance throughout all stages, supplemented the work of teachers, used their initiative to offer solutions and, often unasked, assisted each other. Some voluntarily took work home to do in order to complete their work on schedule – a rare occurrence in this cohort’s culture, as we were told. The students took time-keeping seriously, with almost all arriving on time for each class throughout the project, and several returning from another class although they had been told they need not. At the screening, furthermore, several students demonstrated hitherto unsuspected hospitality and social skills, voluntarily welcoming parents and guests and offering them refreshments.

There were some failures. After the first day, six students left because "it sounds like it’s going to be too much hard work". Some disappeared for one or two periods, or a whole day, for a variety of reasons such as romantic entanglements or because they were bored. More generally, the uneven nature of the filmmaking meant that not all were fully involved all the time. In the period immediately after lunch, engagement levels dropped very noticeably, making the planned learning and teaching during this period virtually impossible.

Mobile phone capability. The small cameras proved easy to use and several students quickly became skilled in their use – demonstrating, for example, an understanding that on such a small screen, the close-up was a more appropriate shot to use than the wide or long shot. Student enjoyment and engagement flowed partly from having access to the expensive, latest model smartphones, and also from a sense of transgression, as demonstrated by their decision to film themselves tearing down the posters around the school banning mobile-phone use...

The downside was that the quality of the image was not as good as had been hoped, and indeed proved inappropriate for screening in the large assembly hall at end of term, although this was of greater concern to the teachers than the students. A more significant problem was that the students’ government-provided Digital Education
Revolution (DER) laptops provided at times project-threatening incompatibility between camera and the editing software.

_Cultural participation and global citizenship._ As already mentioned, due to the time constraint in this instance we were unable to fully implement the global aspect by directly involving Japanese colleagues and students in a fully collaborative, transnational moviemaking project. However, the students were informed of this aspect of the project from the start, and were asked to make films for Japanese students their own age which would later be shown to academics and students in Japan. (This subsequently took place at the Australian Studies Association in Japan conference in Tokyo on 3 July 2011.)

After some initial protestations of ignorance, the students discovered they possessed considerable knowledge of Japanese popular screen culture which they shared with their fellow-students. Many had been avid viewers of the _Astroboy_ television series when younger, for example, and all knew about, although had not necessarily seen, the popular horror Hollywood movies _The Ring_ and _The Ring Two_, a remake and sequel of the globally successful Japanese film _Ringu_. Some students had even seen the Japanese original on YouTube, or extracts from it. These films offered a wealth of material to prompt further viewing and discussion of issues of importance to screen literacy learning, such as genre, the remake, national cinema, and other Film Studies concepts. Their existing knowledge of popular film and television was further extended by accessing Japanese moving and still images from cinema, television and news sources on their computers and on the smartboard. Preconceptions of ‘uncool’ Japanese school students were quickly swept aside by the downloaded images of cosplay teenagers at Harajuku.

**Student reflections**

At the end of the project, the students were invited to participate in a group discussion designed to encourage reflection and elicit feedback. The key teachers and educators were invited to engage in a semi-structured interview and to comment upon a draft report. This was then re-drafted to reflect all views and experiences.

From the student feedback, we learned that what had proved difficult for us, had also proved difficult for them. However, they went further than simply commenting on the problems they had experienced, making helpful suggestions for how the project might be improved for future students. In particular, they acknowledged the problem of student drop-out by offering ideas for implementation the next year. Prior hands-on experience of camera and editing, they told us, would “show them [i.e. future students] before who is good and who isn’t and they can choose them what are best with the camera or [those who] can do good sound or editing. That would save a lot of mucking about”. They recommended that future projects should include hands-on camera experience on the first day because “that way they’ll know there are good bits coming and they’ll cope with the boring bits”. They thought that future students should be shown more smartphone ‘mini-movies’, “to learn what works and what doesn’t from what others have done”. As for the problematic period immediately after lunch, they suggested it would be a good time for viewing smartphone mini-movies: “Then they can be sort of quiet and not be all stressed out, and learn at the same time”.

Their comments about future projects, in which they themselves would not be participating, demonstrated what their teachers suggested was an unusual degree of altruism among a cohort which, until now, had been regarded as disempowered and largely disengaged. The Head of English later commented:
... when I speak to the kids who were involved in the [trial] Screen Literacy project, I am beginning to realise just how much benefit they received from the experience.

Some of them were very negative "customers" [i.e. extremely uncooperative] and their whole attitude to me and to school now seems to be much more positive.

Cooperation was one of the most significant outcomes of the project. Movie-making is always an intensely collaborative process and several students commented that they were unaccustomed to the degree of cooperation that was required of them. The teachers and researchers also noted this outcome, with one commenting that the students “took collaboration to a whole new level”.

Transational collaboration

Upon hearing that their films would be screened in Japan, many of the students initially responded with caustic, xenophobic remarks employing racist stereotypes relating to physical appearance, military cowardice, and general Asian inferiority. Their ‘us against them’ remarks can be characterised as a mixture of ignorance (“Do they talk the same as in China?”), low self-esteem (“They won’t want see our films”), and sarcasm directed towards our ‘good’ intentions for their self-improvement (“We’ll make a crap film to show how crap our school is”).

Quickly, however, it became ‘cool’ to be involved in the transnational aspect. The first manifestation of this was the poster that three students designed collaboratively. Using photoshop skills, inside the screen of an enlarged image of a smartphone downloaded from the Internet, they wrote:

DO YOU USE YOUR MOBILE PHONE IN CLASS? We did! We made movies using this small screen. Literacy means not just reading and writing but viewing, listening and representing. We are showing our movies to family and friends this Friday and to students in Japan next year. ARE YOU JEALOUS?!

In the group discussion, the students suggested how the Japanese connection in future projects could be improved upon. Their use of ‘we’ and ‘them’ in their comments below refers to future Australian and Japanese students. This time, however, by placing themselves in the position of future students they expressed an empathy for others that they had previously lacked.

- “It would be good to be in touch with the Japanese students before we make our films so they know us and we know them.”
- “We could talk on Skype, or email, and have a special Facebook page then they could see us and us could see them.”
- “We could all text them 3 questions and they can text us their 3 questions, then we’d have to do, you know, research so as we and them answer properly.”
- “We can look at Japanese films and we can send them some Australian films to see.”
- “That way we could all see [i.e. in each other's films] what things we do different and what things we do the same.”

We heard no racism or xenophobia in their later comments. Rather, they demonstrated a valuing of dialogue, of civil conversation, and the sharing ideas and images outside their immediate community. Indeed, they suggested the making of another, wider, community of practice where ideas are shared with complete strangers.
Cosmopolitanism
There are numerous definitions of cosmopolitanism – many far from favourable – but in the context of this particular cohort, Ulrich Beck’s comment in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* is apposite:

What is enlightenment? To have the courage to make use of one’s cosmopolitan vision and to acknowledge one’s multiple identities – to combine forms of life founded on language, skin colours, nationality or religion with the awareness that, in a radically insecure world, all are equal and everyone is different (ii).

Until relatively recently, discussion of cosmopolitanism was trapped in a binarism between an idealised, borderless globalisation and fixed, bounded notions of nationalism and parochialism. Stephanie Donald, Eleanore Kofman and Catherine Kevin suggest that the present revival of interest in cosmopolitanism derives from “debates about mobility, belonging, and strangeness… [from] a rethinking of the nature of a global political community, and on the ethical bonds of hospitality in a mobile world which applies equally to the parochial or local and the global” (5). Closely aligned to globalization, cosmopolitanism involves the erosion of distinct boundaries and the emergence of internal globalization or dissolution of the nation state in the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ of social identities is constructed less negatively. Thus cosmopolitan tolerance, as Mica Nava argues, involves opening up to the “world of the other” and the “allure of difference” (19).

Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider suggest that it is only when cosmopolitan ways of thinking and perceiving become incorporated into people’s identities, rituals and dispositions that the former can become an effective force in the world (7-8). Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry find that this blending of universalistic dispositions and particularistic local cultures does seem to be occurring amongst certain social groups. But they also find that the relationship between visuality, mobility and the cosmopolitan suggests that this blending can radically transform the very character of the particular and the local in a way that is not necessarily an unalloyed civilizational gain: that humans are increasingly seeing and experiencing the world from afar, ‘at home’ only within the multiple mobilities of late modernity. In other words, there is a possibility of going no further than the limits of banal cosmopolitanism. They do not suggest, however, that there is an inevitable irreconcilability between cosmopolitan openness on the one hand and the local or parochial on the other. Bruno Latour’s solution, they point out, was to call for a form of cosmopolitanism that does not require us to leave our attachments at the door, one in which people are not asked to detach themselves from the particular – from their particular local place – in order to attain cosmopolitan emancipation.

Conclusion
The students’ comments support Bertram C. Bruce’s observation that participation in the kinds of collaborations that new communication technologies enable, demonstrated how considerations of globalisation lead us towards understanding the perspective of others. The project further points to the potential of popular film and television for literacy learning that uses the fourth screen to promote national cultural well-being. As
Martha Nussbaum argues, this must draw upon longstanding discussion concerning cultural literacy learning as a necessary aspect of educating for democratic and cosmopolitan world citizenship.

By combining mobility, communication technology, visuality and a desire to get to know and relate to ‘otherness’, screen literacy learning which employs the mobile phone camera, offers a concept and experience of cosmopolitanism which Kwame Appiah argues, calls for “a habit of co-existence” and “dialogue” with strangers (Cosmopolitanism, 155-74). This approach to literacy learning enabled our students to learn the value of Appiah’s notion of ‘ethics in a world of strangers’ while they actually practiced it. The students’ films and their reflections demonstrated Appiah’s notion of the cosmopolitan which celebrates the fact that there are different local human ways of being. And, as Beck acknowledges, “one of the most important presuppositions and implications of the cosmopolitanization thesis is the rediscovery and redefinition of the local” (88).

By ensuring that literacy learning involves practising such ethics locally and globally, might we not begin to address the uneven terrain that exists for educationally disadvantaged students? And might not this enable them to participate in the wider community of which they are, in fact, already a part, even though not necessarily, or knowingly, participating? The students own practice and their reflections in this trial project suggest that screen literacy learning which includes cultural production using the mobile phone camera could indeed empower currently disempowered student to become pro-active cultural participants and take their place in society as ethically aware global citizens.

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