The Art of Belonging: Exploring the effects on the English classroom when poetry meets multilingual digital storytelling

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Abstract

This paper explores what happened in the English classroom when two innovative projects merged and spoken word poetry became part of multilingual digital storytelling. As a Spoken Word Educator and Teacher Educator, we wanted to explore the complexity of bringing together these multimodal art forms. Making a poem come to life though film is hard and the research presented here interrogates these processes through working with a group of 13-14 year old students in the English classroom. Spoken word, digital storytelling and multilingualism are positioned within their emerging research fields, but remain on the margins of classroom activities. The critical ethnographic action research project examined how learning in the English classroom could be different. In the process of bringing together spoken word and multilingual digital storytelling, these students interrogate notions of belonging and uncover stories that matter through emotional and creative encounters with personal and cultural artefacts. These young people discover a shared imagery across languages and cultures and reclaim ownership over learning in the English classroom. Foregrounding spoken word and multilingualism in the English classroom had a transformative effect on young people's self-expression and imaginative thinking. In creating *Belonging – A Spoken Word Film* these students assert their multivoicedness.

Key words

Spoken Word poetry multilingual digital storytelling identities belonging

Belonging (excerpt)

My legs belong to my feet most days

they belong to the road, they belong to the waves

and the waves belong to memories

and those belong to us.

My lips belong to my favourite words

and my words belong to everyone

and my words don't belong to anyone

and my words belong to silence

and my words belong to -

and my words belong.

By Sara Hirsch (written for the project in 2017).

Belonging was written by the co-author of this article and immediately captures the complexity of aligning poetry with filmmaking. Making a poem come to life through film is hard as students have to go through a process of re-imagining and re-conceptualising metaphorical representations. This paper explores what happened in the English classroom when two innovative projects merged and spoken word poetry became part of multilingual digital storytelling. These perspectives are presented here by, Sara Hirsch, the Spoken Word educator working in an East London secondary school for two years (2015-2017) and Vicky Macleroy, the director of the multilingual digital storytelling project. The Arts-funded Spoken Word Education Programme (SWEP) linked to the MA Creative Writing and Education ran from 2012-2017 in London schools and the Paul Hamlyn-funded Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (MDST, 2012-2017) ran in over 30 schools in the UK and overseas. The SWEP programme transformed professional poets into educators and Sara Hirsch was UK Poetry Slam Champion ranked third in the World in 2014.

The SWEP programme, which originated in Chicago, was brought to London in 2012 by secondary school English teacher, Peter Kahn. It was later handed to the renowned poet educator, Jacob Sam-La Rose, and was the first and only programme of its kind in the UK. Jacob Sam-La Rose (2013) commented that 'each spoken word educator is both a practising poet skilled in the writing and performance of poetry, and a trained educator with their own body of lessons, resources and pedagogical strategies'. Through mentoring, professional development, seminars and placements, spoken word educators bridged the gap between poet and teacher. Responding to a lack of creativity in the curriculum and a plethora of academic and emotional needs demonstrated by secondary school students, the programme placed educators in schools as a permanent force within English Departments.

Through group workshops, one-on-one interventions and poetry slams, these poet educators used spoken word as a tool to encourage confidence, creativity and communication through lessons that complemented the curriculum. The sessions were designed to develop literacy skills as well as giving space for young people to express themselves, explore aspects of their identity and engage with art and culture in a contemporary context. The programme often found a place within disadvantaged and marginalised communities and the motivation of most spoken word educators was to give a voice to the voiceless and help students to 'write into the silence' and to tell their story poetically (Macleroy, 2015).

Sue Dymoke, poet and English teacher educator, commissioned by the SWEP to externally evaluate the programme over 3 years (2012-2015) reflected upon how spoken word had made poetry a memorable learning experience for young people. Dymoke highlights the words of a teacher who stated 'students who have felt voiceless have been given a platform' and concludes that: 'engagement with Spoken Word Discourse had, therefore, not only changed students' views of poetry but also their self-perception' (Dymoke, 2017, p.238). Dymoke also noted that young people on SWEP 'began to use poetry as a vehicle for self-expression, secure in the knowledge that they might have something of value to say that others wanted to hear, especially if they could use language in exciting ways' (ibid, p.238). Dymoke recognised the genre's political nature and the young people's desire to experience a sense of freedom.

The Critical Connections MDST project developed from a similar ethos and underlying principles. Digital storytelling emerged out of a community activist approach to storytelling and the founder of the movement advocated that: 'Being the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world, is a fundamental idea in democracy' (Lambert, 2013, p. 2). The power of story to engage, transform and catalyse social action (Carmona & Luschen, 2014) was at the core of our work. We extended the process of digital storytelling to include young people's languages as well as cultures and argued: 'When stories are created in different languages or combinations of languages, they often carry greater cultural authenticity' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016, p. 1). We defined multilingual digital storytelling in our project as a short multilingual story (3-5 minutes) made using photographs, moving images, artwork, sculpture, objects, shadow puppetry, stop motion animation, green screen, poetry, dance and drama.

The project created connections across the teaching of language and involved Language teachers, English teachers, English as an Additional Language teachers, Art, Citizenship, Drama, Humanities, Media and Music teachers and Poets in Residence. The case-study examined here within the English classroom is part of the second phase of the project, Moving Forward with Multilingual Digital Storytelling (2015-2017), which involved over 1,000 young people, across primary and secondary age ranges (6-18 years old) and included over 15 languages (Arabic, Bengali, Bulgarian, Croatian, English, Estonian, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil and Turkish). The project theme (2016-17) was 'belonging' and young people worked towards an exhibition of their digital stories at the British Film Institute.

As a Spoken Word Educator and a Teacher Educator, we wanted to explore the complexity of bringing together these multimodal art forms and the effects on the English classroom when poetry meets multilingual digital storytelling. Poetry, multilingualism and digital technology have all come up against dissenting voices as they cross the threshold into school. The next sections will build on previous research in these areas and explore other ways of knowing and meaning making in the English classroom.

Making space for spoken word, digital technology and multilingualism in the English classroom

Poetry is a highly versatile and creative way of working with language, but this view of poetry seems distant from how poetry is encountered in the English classroom. Previous research and practice in the UK indicates that trainee teachers find the following three areas particularly difficult: 'teaching poetry, teaching EAL learners and developing intercultural practices' (Macleroy/Obied, 2013, p. 145). These are areas of English teaching where language is often steeped in emotion and contradictions, where orthodoxies may be questioned, and students may experience feelings of failure and uncertainty. This builds on poetry research carried out in 2010 that uncovered trainees' lack of exposure to poetry which led to a lack of confidence, capability and familiarity with poetry and, thus, deep concerns about the teaching of poetry (Blake & Shortis, 2010).

However, these perceptions and attitudes towards poetry are slowly shifting as spoken word and performance poetry starts to seep into the classroom. Young poets are changing the landscape of poetry as they play with its form, widen its audiences, and bring it back into their local schools. Poetry is also shifting across new borders in children's literature as writers experiment with narrative poetry for young adults. The following 3 verse novels by American writers were selected for the CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2019: *The Poet X* (Elizabeth Acevedo); *Rebound* (Kwame Alexander); and *Long Way Down* (Jason Reynolds). These shifts will slowly infiltrate classrooms as children engage with these texts for pleasure and take part in poetry slams in their schools. Schools still tend to marginalise these activities to extra-curricular spaces, but students recognise their value and importance. This blurring of the boundaries between canonical texts and everyday texts, questions the social and political boundaries of English and 'connects English with 'the experiences and technologies of out-of-school in ways that question the boundaries of canonical knowledge and what counts as socially valued' (Jewitt et al., 2009, p. 18).

Although there seems to be a strong shift towards opening up the classroom to out-of-school literacy activities such as slam poetry, digital media and multilingualism, the reality has been very different. Children and young people are often forced to chase after an illusory fixed literacy that seems distant from their own rich and noisy experience of languages and poetry. Craft (2011) described how the digital revolution is having a profound impact on childhood and youth in terms of identities, possibilities, playfulness and participation, but schools are resistant. Researchers and educators need to interrogate these borders and look carefully at how children and young people experience poetry in schools. There is a deep unsettling irony in the demands placed on young people to bring their own voice and interpretation to poetry read in the English classroom, when their own languages, voices and ideas are often silenced at the school gates. As school borders thicken yet again and 'more school space and time are devoted to one literacy practice: test preparation' (Sheehy, 2013, p. 407), we should look more closely at how ideas, people and other objects migrate across specific school borders. Toni Stuart, Spoken Word Educator and poet, shows we have the right to determine how our histories are told and the importance of engaging with poetry in ways that matter: 'In a world of increasing speed, creating spaces where we can slow down, connect with ourselves and each other, are vital. This is what writing gives me - a space to listen to and connect with myself and to listen to and connect with other people' (Stuart, 2015).

Blake (2013) coins the phrase 'poetry as a matter of spokenness' and in referring to spoken word artists, puts forward the notion of poetry as a social experience of voices which are part of a deep cultural heritage. She also brings in the idea of taking an ethical stance towards poetry by 'valuing what young people have to say about their lifeworlds and experiences, and giving them a valued opportunity through which to invite interaction about those' (ibid: 138). Joelle Taylor, Slam Poet and educator, states that 'slam is a doing word' and that poetry 'can prise words out of mouths long silent' (Taylor, 2015, p. 126). This bold approach to poetry creates school communities where students are encouraged to bring their own identities into the classroom, where 'dialects, languages and cultures are listened to, valued and explored' (Macleroy, 2015, p. 186).

In linking digital technology with poetry and social justice, Hughes (2013) recognises the transformative effect in the classroom: 'I have witnessed first-hand the power of the poem to give voice' (ibid: 167). Hughes was particularly interested in 'turning points' in the

adolescents' representation of identity and she also recognised the complexity of the task of finding or creating images that moved beyond the literal. Hughes reflects on the process: 'it is not a simple task to join visual images to words. It requires that the creator possess a new or different set of skills, including visual artistry and imagination' (ibid, p. 173). In interrogating the process further, Hughes found that students created their best digital poetry when they focused on the message they wanted to convey.

Young people engaged in working with poetry in this way are able to grasp the power of language and how 'repetitions, echoes, refrains, and wordplay combine to convey powerful messages to stir up audiences' (Dymoke, 2017, p. 228). Having a Spoken Word educator in classrooms demonstrates the importance of viewing home and school literacy practices as 'two-way traffic' (Kenner, 2000); integration as a 'two-way process' (Little, 2010); and young people as needing the freedom to move through these spaces to make sense of and shape their lifeworlds. Creating a dynamic literate environment in schools means including 'local knowledge and languages; widening access to multimodal literacy; and pursuing multilingual and multicultural policies, especially in education (Macleroy, 2013, p. 304).

Foregrounding multilingualism and spoken word in the English classroom

As mainstream education is becoming an increasingly hostile environment for active engagement with the arts (in this case poetry and films), it is important to dwell on the role of the imagination in learning. Phipps (2016) in approaching questions of migration, multilingualism and education draws on poetry and film as a guide to possible ways forward in language learning through creating spaces for dialogue, discomfort, critique and change. Phipps critiques the flattened out hegemony of text-based literacy which stifles the spoken word and disconnects learners from indigenous and precarious knowledge. Spoken word draws on poetic conventions found in oral traditions and young people are allowed to write about identity, origins and journeys as well as 'suffering and loss of loved ones; dislocation and learning' (Dymoke, 2017, p. 223). A young spoken word poet on our project reflected 'we don't get to talk about our insecurities or how we feel' (Project Student). Digital storytelling also comes out of an oral tradition of folk culture and Lambert asserts that a healthy community is grounded in belonging, in understanding and plurality (Lambert, 2013). Digital storytelling was chosen in this project because it shifts the focus of filmmaking to the agency of the storyteller and spoken word because it shifts the focus of poetry to the performance and both create a community where language matters. Digital storytelling is defined as possessing these seven components: self-revelatory; personal or first person voice; a lived experience; photos more than moving images; soundtrack; length and design (under 5 minutes); and intention - process over product (Lambert, 2013). Our project had a greater focus on collaborative creativity and extended digital storytelling into the field of multilingualism.

In our book 'Multilingual Digital Storytelling' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016), a theoretical perspective was set out that seeks to challenge monocultural discourses and recognise connections between languages. The project explored how language learning could 'move beyond a narrow, instrumental approach to one which is based on principles of dialogue,

personalised meaning-making and intercultural exchange' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2017, p. 494). The summarised findings from other research studies confirm the value of bringing together digital storytelling and language learning: 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, p. 34). However, across all these research studies there were few opportunities for students to draw on home languages in the digital storytelling process. Our research aimed to address this gap.

In presenting the multilingual turn in languages education, Conteh and Meier (2014) are concerned with how multilingual identities can be valued in schools and how multilingualism can serve to construct a sense of belonging. Young (2014) views teachers as key actors in this process who 'can and should play a key role in bridging the gap between home and school, be these linguistic and/or cultural bridges' (ibid, p. 106). Solé (2016) foregrounds the arts in repurposing language learning and presents 'The Arts of Language Learning Manifesto' which questions what happens to the self when it engages in language acts: the experiences, the sensations, the emotions, the silences, the memories in the art of feeling, wondering, dwelling and imagining.

However, as the active arts and project-based learning are becoming written out of the curriculum students themselves are becoming distanced from these ways of knowing and being. As young people become immersed in a fragmented and highly regulated form of education, they are losing ownership of their languages and the centrality of narrative in shaping identities: 'Have you may be noticed that … our lives are no longer feeling like stories?' (Basar et al., 2015). Lambert (2013) argues convincingly for the place of digital storytelling in making sense of experience in an age of 'infoglut' when the memory bank is overloaded. It is only when teachers and educators have the courage to walk outside the school gates and connect with communities, stories and poetry that matter to young people that multilingualism will be seen as the norm and playful experimental uses of language as vital steps in learning.

Project-based learning has been systematically taken out of the English classroom and now has to be reinvented, often in the margins, by teachers and educators willing to take the time and commitment to engage young people in riskier, more meaningful learning. Project-based learning is based on four interconnecting layers: placed; purposeful; passion-led; and pervasive (PHF, 2012, p. 8). This pedagogical approach informed the spoken word education and digital storytelling programmes in schools and enabled students, teachers and educators to 'uncover and draw upon what often were untapped funds of knowledge in the home and community' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016, p. 266). Cat Brogan, a Spoken Word Educator involved in the digital storytelling project, defined creativity as finding ways to reach our good stories in the writing of poetry: 'I believe voice-finding can be achieved through spoken word education, by encouraging students to find, make, share and transform what they already know about themselves and their worlds. The pupils must be able to bridge the gap between their experience of different languages and cultures when they enter the classroom and poetry may support them to express these powerful emotions' (cited in Macleroy, 2015, p. 186).

Fostering creative and critical engagement with digital practices was at the core of our multilingual digital storytelling project and Pahl and Rowsell's (2010) work on artifactual literacies helped us to conceptualise the ways that artefacts could be a link to students' everyday lives, poetry and cultural histories. In their theory of artifactual literacies, they put forward the idea that every object tells a story and that objects remain powerful in our memories especially in stories of loss, displacement and migration. In developing our own research in the field of poetry and digital storytelling, we noticed that children's different languages are often not heard in the 'circle of digital storytelling' and that multilingualism had to be explicitly promoted and celebrated.

Critical Ethnographic Action Research

This critical ethnographic action research study was conducted in a Year nine English classroom (13-14 year olds) at a secondary mainstream school in East London in 2016/17. In collaboration with the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project and with support from Goldsmiths, University of London, this intervention was designed to provide an alternative framework for students to engage with poetry and value multilingualism and digital technology within the English classroom. As well as developing an ethnographic research paradigm (qualitative, context-based, participatory, multi-perspectival and interpretive approach) we also sought to develop a more critical approach to our work. Action research sets out to change and transform practice and fosters a research approach that is process oriented, collaborative and emancipatory. Collaborative research recognises the importance of 'community-engaged learning and finds different ways to incorporate the multiple perspectives' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016, p. 140) into producing and transforming knowledge.

Poetry was integral to our research process. The poet/researcher in this critical ethnography framed the research study with her spoken word poetry and the multiple perspectives of the students in their poetry and spoken word film. Blackledge and Creese (2019), in presenting their large-scale ethnography, open up the research space to the voices of those involved in the project to meet dialogically and stand for themselves. The poet interrogates her position on the research project: 'The poet and the social scientist share commonalities in approach. Both ground their work in meticulous observation of the empirical world, are often reflexive about their work and experience, and have the capacity to foreground how subjective understanding influences their work' (ibid, p. 25). The poet believes poetry is a 'form of enquiry which challenges notions of authenticity, acknowledges complexity and contests the single, sacred account of events' (ibid, p. 25) and poetry does not merely represent experience: 'it can also create meanings which were unreachable by other means' (ibid, p. 26).

The resident Spoken Word Educator, Sara Hirsch, was allocated one hour-long session per week across two terms and worked independently with the students, with the English teacher's occasional support. At the beginning of the project, the intervention involved the entire class (around 28 students) but after a tumultuous start the group was split (a decision from the class teacher) and Hirsch was assigned a smaller group of ten students. These students were selected according to their engagement thus far, although in general the engagement level had been very low. The class was considered to be low ability and included several students for whom English was a second language. Most of the ten selected students

either spoke, or were surrounded by, at least one additional language at home and all of them were either first or second-generation immigrants to the UK.

According to the 2014 Ofsted contextual data report the school is placed in the highest decile for students on free school meals and for the percentage of pupils supported by school action plus or with a statement of SEN (Ofsted, 2014). The school's website maintains that although 54% of students qualify for Pupil Premium Funding (higher than the national average), 'there is a much greater level of disadvantage within the school population than is reflected in the headline figures of disadvantaged students' (Project School, 2016). When defining 'disadvantaged' we also took into account the disadvantage inherent in new arrivals, or students with low levels of English or specific language impairments. It has been proven that these linguistic deficits lead to marked effects on such students' written text (Dockrell, Lindsay, & Connelley, 2009). Therefore, when classifying the students as disadvantaged in this context, we have taken into account both social and economic factors.

At the start of the project Sara Hirsch had been working in the school as a Spoken Word Educator assistant for the majority of the previous academic year and so her presence was known by most, but not all of the pupils in the group. The Spoken Word Education Programme was long established in the school by Hirsch's predecessor, Cat Brogan, who had been in residence for the previous three years (2013-2016). The students involved would have all worked directly with Cat at various points since their arrival at the school and were familiar with spoken word poetry as both an academic and extra-curricular activity. None of the students had heard of a multilingual digital story, but Cat (with Hirsch's assistance) had undertaken the same project the year before, with a different group, and so Hirsch was able to show their final film (Fairness is … - a multilingual poem) alongside others from the Critical Connections back catalogue, to give context at the start of the project.

Main research question

What are the effects on students when poetry meets multilingual digital storytelling in the English classroom?

Research methods and research design

The project was conducted using a workshop approach and focused on creating a group poem on the theme of belonging which was then made into a digital story, incorporating the diverse languages and cultures of the students involved.

The process was split into three sections (pre-production, production and post-production) and followed the journey of the film from concept to completion. The students were given examples of spoken word poetry and as a group, analysed existing poetry films to help generate their own ideas. They were not exclusively instructed to write poetry at any point and instead encouraged to write in whatever form, language and style they felt comfortable with. The students worked with objects of personal and cultural significance, such as flags, photographs and items of clothing. These objects provided stimuli for creative writing which explored ideas around belonging, from the literal to the metaphorical. Through writing exercises, discussions and personal stories the students weaved their ideas into a coherent poem, which was designed to be spoken, moving between solo and multiple voices.

The poem was finished at the end of the first term and filming was completed during the second term. Director roles were assigned at each stage of filming after a workshop at the British Film Institute (BFI), where the students learnt about camera angles and filming techniques and all the students appeared in the final film. The film was edited by Sara Hirsch

with help from the students and presented at the BFI Critical Connections Film Awards in July 2017.

The research was collected through video footage, interviews with the students at various points throughout the process, field notes and the digital story. To ensure this research was ethically sound we have anonymised the research data, however, students were co-constructors of the project (Campbell et al, 2018) and their names were included and celebrated in the film. Hirsch had permission from parents to conduct this research; all students were aware of the project and could remove themselves at any point.

Belonging Poem

Excerpts from *Belonging*
By students at project school

I belong to my country, my City, my phone.
My phone is my security guard;
like a best friend, it is there when I am lonely.
My country is an artist, it paints the turquoise of my blood.

I belong to Facebook likes and Instagram.
Instagram is loud, a spectacular library
capturing your five star moments.
You can browse everyone's fake covers, skim read their best bits,
check out what they're doing, then double tap.
Why do some people's books get borrowed more than mine?
Dear social media. Stop trying to make us who we are not. We don't like it.

I don't belong to posh, to the Queen's language, to Britain.
This country is a difficult exam I haven't studied for.
I belong to Nigeria, to Jamaica, to Pakistan,
I am the representation of green.
I belong to Turkey.
I am the Hilal, I have the blood of the red,
I am the sound of the clear blue sea,
I have the perfume of you. I smell like adventure and youth.

Sensin benim evim [you are my home]
Sensi benim tarihim [you are my history]
Sensin benim geleceğimsin [you are my future]
Ama seni sen yapan benim [but I make you, you].

These are our stars that are shining,
this is our flag that is waves,
this is my nation that won't sink.

Aš priklausau Lietuvos žaliųjų sodaus
[I belong to Lithuania's green gardens].

I belong to being foreign in both places.

I belong to an unknown language,
hearing it is like trying to work out
a difficult science equation.

I belong to my family tree.
I belong to my grandad,
admit it you were playing hide and seek with me,
thinking it's a great place to hide
six feet deep under the ground.
How long were you planning to stay there?
It's not fair, you were cheating,
you can't just hide somewhere and never come back.

I belong to friendship; my friends are my life jackets.
I belong to family, to equality.

I do not belong to other people's opinions
and their opinions do not belong to me.

Belonging – A Spoken Word Poetry Film: https://vimeo.com/219976715/

Interrogating notions of belonging

Perhaps the most defining part of this process was the initial few weeks during which I encountered resistance, disengagement and apathy from the majority of the original group. When the class was presented with examples of spoken word poetry films, including the multilingual digital story entry from their school for the previous year (https://vimeo.com/169515185), they struggled to grasp the concept that they would be making their own version. When given the task of making notes in groups about what they liked and disliked about the films, many of the students seemed uninterested in the activity, writing nothing down and remaining distracted in the follow-up discussions.

These challenges continued into the writing stage and the students exhibited confusion around what it was that they were working towards and were therefore reluctant to offer their own ideas. After several cases of extreme behavioural issues, the English teacher took the decision to split the group and only allow ten students to continue working on the project. The students were selected according to their previous contributions and behaviour record.

It was this difficulty to connect with the group which provoked the most interesting question in this research study. Why should a group of disillusioned, 'underachieving' students feel that they belong to a project that they cannot imagine? Moreover, why should they feel as though they belong to poetry itself?

In a similar study in South Africa, researchers Maungedzo and Newfield (2006) attempt to reintroduce poetry into the English classroom after its removal in 1996 for being 'too difficult' (ibid, p. 71). In the introduction to the article the description of the school is

reminiscent of a prison. Beyond the barbed wire students can see old women sweeping the tiny yards of 'matchbox houses' (ibid, p. 72). This is a familiar reality. My students are only what they know and, like all of us, can only imagine themselves becoming the versions of the selves they see in the world. Where, if anywhere, does an arts project reflect their everyday reality?

A few weeks into the project, the class teacher reminded me that these students had never been to the BFI before. Even mentioning places such as, Goldsmiths, University of London, was so far from their lived experience that it was meaningless in convincing them that this project had any gravitas in the outside world, or indeed, in their own. The English teacher added that the students were constantly being promised things by parents, teachers, well-meaning authority figures, but 'these promises almost always fell through' (English teacher, 2017). To these students, this project was just another empty promise, which explained the disengaged attitudes and reluctance to commit.

The irony of how the chosen theme 'belonging' interacted with how the students saw their own involvement in the project, was a prominent takeaway. This problem was remedied in part through an organised visit to the BFI with the now smaller group. Once the students had seen that the building existed, that it was impressive, and that they were welcomed in and invited to use the technology to create, edit and view their own footage, they were able to find their own autonomy within the project and returned to school significantly more excited about making a film together. This enthusiasm was exhibited through verbal affirmations and an overall shift in the way they interacted with me. I felt as though we had established a trust that until then had been non-existent and they stopped seeing me as yet another eager adult and more of an equal. I was able to joke with them about the practice films they had made and I was greeted with smiles and conversation for the first time since the start of the project. On the train home one student opened up to me about her interest in politics and her aspirations for the future, which prompted me to encourage these themes in her writing. On reflection, I considered that asking students to write about belonging without first understanding how I belonged in their world, how they belong in mine and what themes and topics they feel a sense of belonging to was, perhaps, naïve.

Uncovering stories that matter in personal and cultural objects

Another turning point in the process was a session involving personal and cultural objects. The students were asked to bring in an item that mattered to them, particularly something that represented their culture. The students brought in flags, photos, scarves, jewellery and other items of significance and the majority of the final poem was written in response to these objects.

The prompts that the students were given ranged from free writes that were sparked by a memory of the object to exercises with more specific parameters. An example of a successful exercise was using the objects and photographs as physical metaphors for the students' sense of identity *(My country is an artist, it paints the turquoise of my blood).* Here the students were invited to use visual elements of the objects to represent their own emotions. By breaking down the object or photograph into a list of 'what we see' or 'what we feel', they

became less like precious belongings and more like artefacts, with physical components to offer a piece of writing.

Similar to the experience at the BFI, as soon as the participants were given permission to belong to the subject and bring something of themselves to the table, the level of engagement rose significantly. The same shift is mirrored in the South African classroom when the students were given the task of exploring 'praise poems' which celebrate their heritage. The article quotes their teacher, Maungedzo who comments on the pride the students felt when their poems were 'accepted in class' (Maungedzo & Newfield, 2006, p. 79). Because the students are representing themselves they have more of a stake in what is created and deeper empathy with the work of others (ibid, p. 78). By bringing in parts of their language, heritage and family, and without the threat of examination or failure, students in London and Soweto all felt more able to share parts of themselves poetically, as well as literally.

The students were able to uncover powerful stories through these belongings that had been missing from their earlier attempts at connecting to the subject matter. From a photo of his Grandad, Student W is able to connect the theme of belonging to his understanding of grief through a strong metaphor that is both relatable and poignant:

> I belong to my grandad,
>   admit it you were playing hide and seek with me,
>   thinking it's a great place to hide
>   six feet deep under the ground. (Belonging)

Student C wrote a short rap in response to Student W's poem which was about his mother passing away. This is not included in the extract here but parts of it were featured in the final film. This writing was informed, in part, by the sharing of my own poem on this topic. The fact that we were connecting on this level and that Student C and Student W felt comfortable in discussing their experiences of grief, in relation to my own disclosure of loss, demonstrated to me how this project was creating empathy and trust between myself and the students, but also between themselves and poetry as a means of expression: 'poetry can be a powerful tool for people, particularly young people, to express how they feel, often without needing to actually say it' (Hirsch, 2017, p. 22).

Other stories that emerged from the students' own objects spoke to their feelings of belonging, or not belonging, to their own cultures and languages.

> I don't belong to posh, to the Queen's language, to Britain.
>
> This country is a difficult exam I haven't studied for.
>
> I belong to Nigeria, to Jamaica, to Pakistan,
>
> I am the representation of green.
>
> I belong to Turkey.
>
> I am the Hilal, I have the blood of the red,
>
> I am the sound of the clear blue sea,

I have the perfume of you. I smell like adventure and youth (Belonging).

The students were encouraged to use details from their own objects to express their sense of self within the wider context of their culture or language. The images became rooted in the real; 'I am the representation of green' and avoided metaphors that did not relate to the people in the room. This allowed for a deeper connection to the text and also between the students themselves. I noticed conversations arising amongst the group around how they had shared experiences of feeling disconnected from elements of their culture 'I don't belong to…the Queen's language' which encouraged a sense of empathy which had started to develop amongst the group. Cultures in this context became negotiable and plural capturing 'individual and shared phenomena that are expressed, constructed and mediated through ways of behaving, thinking, feeling, and speaking' (McAlinden, 2014, pp.74-75).

Discovering shared imagery across languages and cultures

Another interesting reflection on combining poetry with filmmaking was the shared imagery created across languages, connecting students from completely different backgrounds through common comparisons. For example, Student M described herself as 'the representation of green' identifying her connection to her home country of Pakistan, whilst Student B shared this image when discussing her Lithuanian heritage.

Aš priklausau Lietuvos žaliųjų sodaus
[I belong to Lithuania's green gardens].

This shared conceptualisation of 'who we are' extended to the manner in which the poem was created. The students became much more communal in their approach as the project progressed and, as well as contributing individual lines to the final poem, they became eager to share ideas and write together to achieve a more cohesive piece. This process fostered 'interthinking' (Littleton & Mercer, 2013) and making joint sense of experience.

To create the poem we worked as a group over the course of several weeks. As the students responded to the theme we would add their words to one central document, editing together based on how the poem sounded out loud. Where there were gaps, we would come up with ideas together, while I acted as scribe. If the students liked a line or an image, we would then try to come up with other similar lines, adding them in to create a stanza. I allowed the students to self edit, rather than remove anything myself. This gave them a sense of ownership over the poem as a whole and a shared responsibility for the meaning and structure.

When the students were building the stanza that centred around social media, they generated ideas excitedly as a group, accepted offers from each other and shaped the lines together to create the finished verse. This is reflected in the text, with the use of 'we' throughout that part of the poem, bringing a sense of unity to the overall film. The lines are definite and confident: 'Dear social media. Stop trying to make us who we are not. We don't like it.' and speak to the sense of togetherness and shared values that were present in the group. This was a moment that truly encapsulated the theme of the project with each member of the team feeling able and willing to participate. Comparatively, just a month earlier, the group had been reluctant

to share even a word of poetry in front of the class. Poetry and filmmaking became powerful tools for collective creativity and friendship.

Reclaiming ownership over learning in the English classroom

A sense of ownership over the project transcended the writing and bled into the other parts of the film-making process. During the filming, everybody assigned themselves roles based on those outlined in the BFI workshops (https://goldsmithsmdst.com/professional-development/) and creating the film together was a fun and democratic process. I witnessed a dysfunctional group of teenagers transform into a team of productive and assertive young professionals over the course of a few months. Even the quietest students found a place for themselves behind the camera and by the final day of shooting there was a firm sense of friendship evident in the collective. This was documented in the final moments of the film which show the students lining up for the final shot, joking and laughing with each other, truly mirroring the penultimate lines of the voiceover: 'I belong to friendship; my friends are my life jackets. I belong to family, to equality'.

I am convinced from my part in this project that poetry and film can be crucial tools for educators to promote collective creativity and students' spoken word across languages. The true friendships that emerged through this project were founded upon a shared experience of expressing vulnerability and the tumultuous process, whilst challenging for everyone, resulted in a closer and more empathetic group of young people.

The group reflected at the end of the project and spoke enthusiastically of the experience, admitting they had not understood the purpose of the project but when they 'got it' they felt 'connected to each other and to poetry.' Through writing from their own experiences and finding their languages and cultures welcomed into their poetry, they were able to feel part of what is commonly seen as an elite community. One which they had certainly felt 'excluded [from], even as readers' (Maungedzo & Newfield, 2006, p. 80). Moreover, the student response (both the positive verbal affirmations we received and the film itself) demonstrate that by creating community through art will give permission to belong through doing, rather than telling.

When designing the poster for the BFI Film Awards they wrote 'We are so proud of ourselves for what we made' and 'Freedom is speaking our minds'. Connecting their experience of telling their stories with the concept of freedom, demonstrates an advanced understanding of the power of this work and, considering their stance at the beginning of the project, confirms the transformative nature of multilingual digital storytelling in the modern English classroom.

Conclusion

Disturbing the English classroom

This article sought to uncover what happens when poetry meets multilingual digital storytelling in the English classroom. Spoken word, digital storytelling and multilingualism are noisy, messy and collaborative and do not sit neatly alongside an English curriculum that seeks to standardise and control meaning making.

Through the poetry and filmmaking process and sharing of ideas and feelings, a disparate group of 13-14 year old students formed into a tight collective, proud to claim the words of *Belonging – A Spoken Word Film* as their own. In disturbing the normal expectations of the English classroom, this project gave these young people 'permission to celebrate their own identities, to take pride in their culture and to see their multilingualism as an advantage, rather than a hindrance' (Hirsch, 2017: 22). The collaborative creative processes of spoken word and digital storytelling gave students the courage to perform their languages and cultures in the English classroom:

I wanted to express that in the poem. That's where I come from and I'm proud because a lot of people can be made fun of (Student S).

It's good we're doing the film … so that we can tell people, so people know how you feel, so they won't treat you differently (Student M).

The line in Turkish is about feeling at home (Student T).

The spoken word film became both an aesthetic and research object (Escott and Pahl, 2017) reflecting the poetry, languages and materials it was constructed from. The effects on students of this process of making a spoken word film were captured in their poetry (as well as the reflections above) including their metaphor of friendship: 'my friends are my life jackets'. Phipps (2019), in her call for decolonising multilingualism, talks about becoming part of a 'befriending, community practice, a purposeful consideration of how the world around us is shared in speech (ibid, p. 92). In opening up the English classroom for young people's multivoicedness they discovered the power and versatility of language. Their multivocality brought together traces from personal stories, experiences, cultures and languages to construct new meanings: 'it is the speakers, not the space, who are in control of the languaging performance' (García & Li Wei, 2014). Students' emerging sense of agency played a vital part in this languaging process and negotiating their culture and identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). These two projects are gathering momentum as they prise open new spaces in schools and classrooms and the poet educator leads a new Spoken Word company in New Zealand and the teacher educator leads new projects on multilingual digital storytelling in schools and local communities in the UK and other countries.

Project website: https://goldsmithsmdst.com

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