

Connected Communities

Writing in the Home and in the Street

Richard Steadman-Jones and Kate Pahl



Background

Executive Summary

This project invited participants from three areas of Rotherham to reflect upon everyday literacy practices and their place in the lives of communities.

The research team included academics from different areas of the humanities and creative practitioners working in various media. The work focused on three different kinds of writing: texts produced in domestic spaces (writing in the home), texts found in public spaces (writing in the street), and texts spanning the official and personal domains (documents such as passports and other textual artefacts).

The research had an important self-reflexive dimension and the team was particularly concerned to reflect upon the collaborative process itself with a view to refining the methods used in future participatory projects.

Key ideas to emerge included (1) The value of the concept of the 'provocation' – a stimulus that emerges out of arts practice but which, rather than representing an end in itself, constitutes a move in an on-going dialogue, (2) The value of using arts practice as a means of 'reframing' research so that the meaning and value of work becomes more negotiable and less prescribed in terms of instrumental values, and (3) The value of cross-disciplinary 'borrowing' as a way to enrich research practice.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Inspire Rotherham Literacy Campaign

Rotherham Youth Service

Bank Street Arts

Key words

Everyday Literacy

Ethnography

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Arts Practice

Provocation

Reframing

Writing in the Home and in the Street

Introduction

The aim of this project was to engage community members from three areas of Rotherham in a collaborative research process, whereby artists, academics, and local people worked together to investigate the role of writing in everyday situations. Our definition of everyday writing was broad and included texts produced within the home (diaries, cards, scrapbooks), texts found in public places (signage, inscriptions, graffiti), and texts spanning the public/official and the domestic/personal domains (passports, certificates, commemorative artefacts). The work was structured by two main questions:

- What role do everyday literacy practices play in the production of community and in individuals' relationships with communities?
- What role do these practices play in producing connections between local communities and larger configurations?

Beyond that, however, we wanted to treat the collaborative process itself as the object of enquiry and examine questions of method and value that we saw as critical in developing community-oriented research in the Arts and Humanities:

- Is the process of reflecting on cultural practices like 'everyday writing' valuable in terms of the concerns of community members or does it impose an external view of what is 'good for people'?
- The traditional humanities disciplines offer powerful ways of exploring texts and text-making, but what can they offer in the context of community-based collaborative research?

- What might be the role of artists in developing this kind of process? We suspected that, too often, academics treat artists as 'technicians' – what might be the value of academics and artists' 'thinking together' more actively?

The work fell into three strands, each focusing on one of the types of writing introduced above. In each case, one academic and one artist/creative practitioner engaged a small group of participants in a pilot study arising at the intersection of academic scholarship, arts practice, and participants' own concerns. The priority was to reflect on the experiences of all participants and the relationships that emerged among them.

Three Strands

Domestic Spaces

Here, Kate Pahl (KP), an ethnographer from the School of Education at Sheffield University, collaborated with Zahir Rafiq (ZR), a freelance artist working in digital media. Participants included children/young people, some of British Asian heritage and some from a white working-class area. KP, whose work is located in the New Literacy Studies (cf. Barton and Hamilton 1998), focused on how writing is conceptualised and materialised in the home, how these conceptualisations are connected with ideas about/experiences of community, and how a methodology using visual and participatory methods might broach these epistemological questions. The work was informed by the framework of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) and participants were involved in collecting data, selecting modes for presenting it, and developing 'reciprocal analysis' (Campbell and

Lassiter 2010). The data included FLIP camera videos, photographs, writing, scrapbooks, and drawings made by the young people. ZR worked closely with the participants for whom the process of working with 'data' in effect constituted a form of arts practice. The way in which writing was enmeshed in other modal forms (drawing, craft, textiles, gardening) and the everyday aesthetic categories on which the girls' writing drew (Light and Smith 2004; Saito 2007) became of increasing interest throughout the project. Materials produced in the research were presented in an exhibition at Sheffield University (May 2011, 'Inhabiting Space') and as part of a co-curated exhibition at Bank Street Arts, Sheffield (September 2011).

Public Spaces

Here, Richard Steadman-Jones (RSJ), from the School of English at Sheffield University, collaborated with Steve Pool (SP), a freelance artist. Influenced by linguistic work on the textual 'environment' (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, and Barni 2010) and ethnographic work on walking as research (Ingold and Lee 2008; Kusenbach 2003), they focused first on observing their own readings of urban textuality during walks through relevant parts of town. In particular, they became aware of specific sensory aspects of the process of walking/reading (cf. Pink 2008) and of the complex structures of appropriation present in urban texts (Bakhtin 1981). This led to their making a short film consisting of photographs taken during walks and a soundtrack of interviews relating not the locations themselves but to the concept of foraging – the practice of moving through space in search of something and becoming increasingly attuned to the distribution of the thing sought. (Thus, the experience described in the interviews stood in a metaphorical

relationship with the process through which the photographs were gathered.) Children at High Greave Primary School viewed the work and responded by making a film of their own in order to demonstrate a different view of the area's textuality and its relationship with their sense of community. They presented their film at both the ESRC Festival of Social Science (Sheffield University) and to the School Improvement Service. Thus, the first film constituted a stage in a larger process of arts practice conceived as a kind of 'conversation' (cf. Bourriaud 2002; Kester 2004).

Across the Official and the Personal

Here William Gould (WG), a historian of South Asia from the Department of History at Leeds University, collaborated with Irna Qureshi (IQ), a freelance writer and oral historian. Participants included members of a British Asian family interested in exploring their own history of migration. Following from research in which comparisons are made between oral-historical narratives and information from documentary sources (Portelli 1997, 2004; Tarlo 2001, 2003; Zamindar 2007), the work sought to facilitate the family's exploration of their own collective memory and its relationship with the textual souvenirs that they had preserved (including passports and medals). Once again, perceptual differences emerged as central. The medal, for example, could be 'read' in different ways (both in a linguistic and a broader semiotic sense): on one level, it bears a text that relates to specific historical events and encodes certain official ideologies; on another, it has acquired a personal meaning for the family that has preserved it. Furthermore, in telling the story of a family and its relationship with the communities in which it has lived over time, different readings of these everyday texts

can be prioritised and the various traditions of 'doing history' (from community-oriented oral-historical practice to university-based academic scholarship) position themselves differently in this sense. Hence, an important idea to emerge from this strand was the possibility of using collaborative work on textual artefacts to stimulate dialogue about the meaning of history in the formation of individual and collective identities.

Emerging Principles

The work led the team to identify key ideas that will inform future research:

'Provocation'

Humanities academics who value community-oriented research face the challenge of bringing the insights of their disciplines to projects – if one sees the disciplines as having nothing to offer, there is little point in coming to the work as an academic – while also resisting the temptation to assume authority on the basis of their 'expertise'. One way to respond to this challenge is by means of 'provocations'. The term is used here not to imply words or actions intended to arouse anger but to denote a carefully thought out stimulus that invites – or 'provokes' – others to articulate a point of view. It denotes a work embodying something of the ways of thinking developed with disciplines but in an open-ended, questioning, concrete, and thought-provoking form. The aim of a provocation is not to express academic knowledge in 'accessible' forms, an idea that verges on the patronising, but to ask a question and, in so doing, live up to the intelligence and curiosity of the audience. SP's film functioned as a provocation in this sense. Very much the result of collaboration between academic and artist – a process of 'thinking together'

rather than one in which the artist served as technician – it presented itself to the children as the result of an experiment that they might also make. John Law (2004) comments on the power of methods and practices to construct reality, and, in all three strands, the value of being open to the forms in which participants themselves chose to articulate their experiences of writing became very apparent.

'Reframing'

There is a risk that interventions in areas classified as 'deprived' will be structured around assumptions of deficit. Indeed, the topic of literacy practices is easily framed in terms of the need to promote literacy and improve educational standards. A valuable finding of the project was the productive nature of 'reframing' as a strategy for participatory research. Again, this is a way in which collaboration between academics and artists can be useful. In all three strands, the use of arts practices (film-making, digital art, working with narrative) allowed the value and meaning of the work to become more negotiable and less prescribed in terms of instrumental values. Much of the reframing was mediated through textual practices that we engaged in collaboratively. For example, in their video the children from High Greave School articulated a message about the way in which certain kinds of graffiti upset younger siblings. The work led to their approaching the local community police officer who arranged for the graffiti to be removed. Presenting their work to different audiences allowed the children to become experts in the field of 'street writing' and this contributed to a collaboration, still on-going between the School and the University, resulting in the production of an app on Home and Community Literacies by the Computer Science Department.

Cross-Disciplinary Concepts

A third idea was the need to find points of contact between the different disciplinary frameworks and approaches to arts practice present in the collaboration. When we met as a team to discuss progress, certain analytical concepts began to emerge as important – memory, identity, materiality, and aesthetics, for example. The disciplines vary in the extent to which they make use of these concepts. Thus, the idea that participants come to reading and writing with an aesthetics of textuality in their minds, is very significant in English but has been less so in New Literacy Studies. The collaboration led KP to introduce aesthetic concepts into her research and she presented on this topic at the 'Capturing Literacy' conference, Switzerland, 21-26 August 2011. While we did not wholly move into each other's disciplines, the cross-fertilizations meant that productive conversations took place and led to new collaborations and partnerships. For example, the current Connected Communities project 'Language as Talisman' emerged out of the 'Writing in the Home and in the Street' project with RSJ, KP, and SP involved. KP has since worked with ZR on a proposal for the Making of Community Engagement AHRC/ESRC Connected Communities call, and has asked RSJ to collaborate as a CI on this proposal.

Further Outcomes

A one-day workshop for artists about collaborating with academics – approximately 40 participants attended (30 September 2011).

Three articles in various stages of development/publication on the aesthetics of everyday writing and on collaboration between artists, academics, and community members.

Papers relating to the project presented by KP at AERA (American Educational Research Association) and UKLA (United Kingdom Literacy Association).

Material relating to the project presented at an exhibition held in ICOSS (Interdisciplinary Centre for the Social Sciences, Sheffield University) in March 2012.

A book, *Materialising Literacies in Communities*, under contract to Continuum and due to be written in 2013, to feature this research, and the writing in the home strand also to feature in the second edition of KP's *Literacy and Education*, co-authored with Jennifer Rowsell (Sage, 2012).

The research methodology is described in a forthcoming chapter on 'Literacy in the community: the interpretation of "local" literacy practices through ethnography' for a forthcoming handbook on the role of interpretation in educational research edited by Jane Mulderriig and Vally Lytra.

The focus on collaborative ethnography has also been taken into a proposal for a large grant through the Connected Communities programme, with a particular strand being about the 'Uses of Literacy' in Rotherham, drawing on this and the 'Language as Talisman' projects.

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