

“Podcast Time”: Negotiating Digital Literacies and Communities of Learning in a Middle Years ELL Classroom

Digital literacy projects can help teachers create classroom learning communities that critically engage and respond to the social worlds of English-language learners.

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Suzanne (author) arrived at Dalare Community School (DCS) on a winter morning in 2007 to find the bustling and crowded grades 6 and 7 class she routinely visits nearly empty and unusually quiet as five students and their teacher, Ms. L., worked on various aspects of their podcast projects. Suzanne sat at the back of the room next to Patrick, who arrived at DCS as a refugee 16 months earlier. Patrick had written a story about an alien invasion and was ready to record it into the laptop computer’s GarageBand audio recording application, but he wasn’t sure how it worked. Gian, who is from northern Africa and has lived in Canada for three years, joined us. Usually easily distracted and resistant to reading and writing in the classroom, Gian mastered GarageBand and offered to help Patrick record his story. He sat next to Patrick and suggested he read through his story a couple of times while Gian got things set up on the laptop. Then Gian turned to Patrick and asked, “Are you ready? OK, read. Just be natural, man.”

This was podcast project time in Ms. L.’s classroom, in which students were invited to write a story, turn it into an illustrated book, record it into the computer, then upload it to a Web server for their grade 3 “little buddies” and other members of the school community to listen to while they read the book. On this particular day, the other 23 students in the class were in the library writing the provincial standardized tests for reading, writing, and numeracy. Patrick, Gian, and three other students were exempt from the test, because they still qualified for English as a second language (ESL) support provided by the Ministry of Education to eligible students. Canadian educators typically refer to English-language learners (ELLs) as ESL students. Twenty of the 25 students in this classroom were ELLs, the children of economic migrants from India, China, and the Philippines, and refugees from the conflicts in Afghanistan, Central Africa, the Sudan, and elsewhere. Eight students qualified for ESL support at the time of the research.

DCS, like other low-income, culturally and linguistically diverse urban schools in North America, struggles to create effective instruction for ELLs. Scholars have called for more research on strategies that support ELLs’ literacy

development in the middle years in particular (Ball, 2002; Hawkins, 2004), and a small but growing body of research has called for such research to focus on the promise and potential of multimodal literacy instruction, particularly digital literacy interventions, to engage middle-years learners in the hard work of developing academic reading and writing skills in English (Alvermann, 2002; Ranker, 2008).

The podcast project set out to address these research gaps and interests by studying a seven-month digital literacy intervention in a grades 6 and 7 classroom. Committed to exploring new approaches to meeting the diverse learning needs of their students, Ms. L. and the other grades 6 and 7 teachers at DCS extended their usual curriculum focus on written narrative using pen-and-paper technologies to incorporate spoken word, sound, art, and music in the form of learner-generated podcasts. The podcast project was part of a broader three-year study (Toohey, Neufeld, & Stooke, 2006) concerned with ELL students' uneven academic progress, particularly in the area of reading and writing competence in English. However, we were also interested in the potential of multimodal, multilingual, and digital literacy pedagogies to transform traditional monomodal (Jewitt, 2008), English-only classroom instruction. This article reports on the outcomes of the podcast effort in one grades 6 and 7 classroom and addresses three interrelated questions that guided the study:

- How did ELLs in grades 6 and 7 acquire digital and multimodal literacies in school settings?
- How did the podcast project build on and expand the resources available to students for school-based reading and writing?
- How was the project incorporated into a school setting typically oriented to traditional English print literacy?

We did not formally assess and monitor students' print literacy skills before and after the podcast project; our focus was not their print literacy skill development over time but rather the affordances of the podcast project as a digital and multimodal literacy instruction intervention.

Podcasting in Classrooms

The term *podcast* is a portmanteau of the terms *pod* (i.e., from the Apple iPod or the acronym for *personal on demand*) and *broadcast* (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2007). A podcast is one of several Web 2.0 digital social-networking tools, including blogs, YouTube, and Facebook, that provide platforms for the creation and sharing of user-generated content, often by means of portable media players, such as iPods and MP3 players. Many school districts regard portable media players as distractions, and some districts have banned them from schools. However, others have recognized that students' out-of-school lives are infused with such technologies and incorporate these applications into students' classroom lives to engage them in learning new content (Lee, McLoughlin, & Chan, 2007).

One of the attractions of podcasting as a learning tool is that learners can create content relatively quickly and easily, often collaboratively, with the intention and capacity to reach an authentic audience. Podcasting does not require a high level of technological knowledge, its product is reusable and portable, and it supports learning in that the creative processes involved "keep learners engaged for an extended period of time" (Lee et al., 2007, p. 505). Like other second-generation Web-based tools, the learning benefits of podcasting are attributed to its ability to "harness collective intelligence" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 2) by providing a context for collaborative knowledge creation.

GarageBand is a Macintosh-based recording software commonly used to create and record podcasts on Apple computers. As the students created their podcasts, they navigated the sound effects, music, and spoken word features of the software interface.

Research Design

The study adhered to established methods of ethnographic classroom research in which observations were prolonged and repeated, interview questions were developed from observation data (Spradley, 1979, 1980), and findings and interpretations were mapped closely to insights and themes from observational field notes, interviews, and member checking

The research team met regularly to reflect on the work of the project. We documented these research conversations and also conducted semistructured interviews with 13 students and their teachers at the completion of the project.

(Frank & Uy, 2004). As one of a team of teacher educators working closely with classroom teachers, Suzanne conducted 42 hours of participant observation in Ms. L.'s grades 6 and 7 classroom during the 2007–2008 school year, observed 24 podcast project sessions, as well as the usual classroom lessons in language arts, and often hung out in the classroom during recess and lunch on cold, rainy, or snowy days when the students stayed inside. She documented the students' participation in the project at various stages, joining them during the recording sessions, asking questions about their work, and lending assistance with reading, writing, and technological tasks when asked.

The research team met regularly to reflect on the work of the project. We documented these research conversations and also conducted semistructured interviews with 13 students and their teachers at the completion of the project. The introductory vignette to this article constituted a generative moment in the research process, one in which students' reading and writing became visible as a process of collaborative, multimodal design (Mavers, 2007). We take up the account of this moment in some detail later in this article to illustrate three elements that seemed important for engaging the ELLs, who had more commonly avoided and struggled with English print narrative in school.

The first was the podcast production process itself, in which students drew upon a range of cultural and semiotic resources, indeed "whatever was at hand" (Kress, 1997, p. 31) to "make stories more real" (Patrick S., personal communication, April 12, 2008). The second element was the creation of "third spaces" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999), in which students' digital play, creativity, and close attention to one another's work emerged from the usual individualized, print-only, and teacher-led activities. As we elaborate later in this article, these third spaces

made possible the creation of a new kind of "community of learners" (Rogoff, 2004; Watkins, 2005) and thus new opportunities for collaborative knowledge creation. The third element was the nature of student engagement with conventional print literacy, in the context of their collaborative, multimodal work.

The following account of the generative moment in the podcast project was drawn from Suzanne's reconstructed field notes, as we did not have permission to audiotape all five of the students who were in the classroom that day.

A Moment in a Podcast Project

With Gian at the controls next to him, Patrick read his handwritten text into the computer. Suzanne saw errors in the written text as she read over his shoulder, but Patrick corrected them in the oral rendition, and the punctuation and spelling mistakes became inconsequential. There was some negotiation about where Patrick should stop reading to insert a sound effect, or "stinger" per GarageBand (the students have appropriated the terms *stinger* and *jingle* into their classroom discourse).

The stingers are a source of great amusement for the kids. They are short, sharp sounds from GarageBand's inventory that range from a short drum roll to a door closing to an alien beeping. They lend drama to the students' oral texts, or as Gian explained, "make it like real life and cool" (Gian, personal communication, February 9, 2008). Both boys read the text again together and decided that the logical place for the stinger was at the end of the section in which Patrick introduced his cast of superheroes who save their friends from alien attack.

With this decision made, another discussion ensued between Gian and Patrick over which stinger was most appropriate. Suzanne showed them where to find the alien sound effects. Patrick heard one he liked (the sound of two forms of electronic intelligence beeping at each other) and said, "That one's good! Put that one in." Gian had mastered the program's shortcuts, so he dragged and inserted the stinger to the assigned place in the sound track, displayed as a grid on the computer screen. "Okay," said Gian, "start reading again." Patrick got the giggles. Gian looked up, "What's the matter, man? Try again." Patrick looked

down at his text, but he couldn't stop laughing. Gian sighed, "Do you want me to read it for you?" "No, no, I will do it." Patrick pulled himself together and started to read.

When he reached a section where his character comes face to face with alien life, he asked for another "scary" stinger to be inserted. Gian and Patrick scrolled through and listened to what seemed like every sound effect in GarageBand's repertoire. Gian finally located a stinger that sounded promising. Patrick sat up: "Play it again." Gian had already pressed the replay key: "So, we like that one." "Yes." Patrick nodded his approval and Gian dragged and dropped the stinger into the desired spot in the grid. Patrick's text was free of conventional paragraphs up to now, but as he marked the location of the stingers in the recorded text onto his written page, he also reorganized his written narrative text into blocks of ideas. He sighed, "Now I'm going to have to type this up all over again."

Patrick continued reading his story and Gian offered evaluative comment: "You are reading a bit too softly. Isn't the guy supposed to be scared? There are silences here when you stop. Here, I can delete those." Both boys shifted their attention from Patrick's written draft to the grid on the computer screen. A gap in the grid signified the pauses in Patrick's oral reading. Gian highlighted them and pressed delete: "Okay, man, not so many silences. Try to read a bit faster." Patrick did not seem to take offense at the corrections from his classmate. He seemed to be enjoying the process, especially searching out and inserting the sound effects, and Gian, assuming the role of producer, was careful to defer to Patrick's judgment as the author. Patrick now had editing to do on his print narrative, and Gian went off to help another student.

Analysis

When Suzanne left the school on that winter afternoon spent with Patrick, Gian, Ms. L., and the others, it was with a sense of accomplishment and appreciation for the focused, collaborative activity that guided their work. This was not an ordinary afternoon in the classroom. Drawing upon this example, and others during the course of that winter, we elaborate in this section on the three elements that we believe

contributed to the students' engagement in reading and writing (Neufeld & Toohey, 2008): the role of students' semiotic resources in creating stories and podcasts, the emergence of podcast project time as a pedagogic "third space" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000), and the communities of learners that emerged within these third spaces as contexts for conventional reading and writing as well as more complex collaborative knowledge creation. We conclude with reflections on what all this suggests for promising literacy pedagogies for ELLs in middle school classrooms.

Students' Semiotic Resources: Expanding Repertoires for Creating Narrative Text

An important thread of educational research has been to identify strategies to revalue the semiotic resources of nondominant communities in school settings (Heller, 2008). In alignment with Van Leeuwen's (2005) social semiotic theories, we defined *semiotic resources* as "the actions and artifacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically...or by means of technologies—pen, ink, paper; computer software and hardware; or fabrics, scissors and sewing machines" (p. 3). The concept of resources denotes what people use or have access to as they make meaning in everyday social settings.

Studies in the vein of social semiotics are thus concerned with access to privileged semiotic resources, such as English print literacy, and the unequal value accorded nonprint, non-English semiotic resources in schools and other settings. Mavers (2007) and Kress (1997) reminded us that students' semiotic meaning making is agentive, in that students regularly select from their environments resources that are "socially, culturally and materially available" and bring these resources to school (Mavers, 2007, p. 156). However, many scholars have found that the cultural, linguistic, and popular culture resources of low-income, newcomer, and English-language learners are often devalued in school settings, with implications for equity in educational outcomes (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In the DCS podcast project, students' semiotic resources drove the design of their multimodal texts. These multimodalities included written narrative,

audiorecording, illustrations (many of which were in the manga cartoon style ubiquitous in students' popular culture), music and sound, photos, font colors and styles, and story genres and discourses of hockey game play-by-plays, epic *Star Wars* battles, and video game incarnations of car chases and pop stars.

The students spent a lot of time listening, evaluating, and more often than not, rejecting sound effects in an effort to create the right mood for their recorded podcast stories. At first, Suzanne dismissed this time-consuming search through the semiotic inventory of GarageBand as slightly off task, an end itself rather than a means to getting the podcast done. Yet the more project events she observed, the more she recognized this process as a playful initiation to the possibilities of the podcast as a multimodal text. Just as Trier's (2007) graduate students navigated YouTube hunting for evocative material, the students in the podcast project were "participating in a process of discovery rather than being involved in a more passive, spectatorial engagement" (p. 410). Students extended their semiotic repertoires (Nixon, 2007) as they came to appreciate the possibilities, and limitations, of various sound effects to convey their intended meanings and create the required mood and setting in their print narrative. We saw this in the work of Patrick and Gian as Patrick eventually selected a scary sound effect to evoke the mood of suspense he struggled to create in his print narrative.

Sometimes the podcast producer needed time to edit the sound track, and the work of reading and recording paused. These moments afforded conversation among the authors and producers about cultural and linguistic practices that students engaged in outside of school, conversations that rarely took place in the usual class routine. For example, one day in the school staff room, Amir was putting the finishing touches on a story about his Afghani grandfather. He and his production assistant, Halima, searched for music that "goes with Kabul" to accompany the recorded story. Suzanne suggested they check in the world music category, and Halima selected "Sanskrit," which turned out to be a tabla and sitar track. Halima approved: "This goes with the story, because we [gesturing to herself and Amir] are the same. We come from the same place in Afghanistan. This is desert music." As

Amir listened to the music, he moved his arms as if playing a drum.

Halima: Do you play tabla?

Amir: My Dad wants me to. He wants me to take lessons, because now my cousin is a famous tabla player.

Halima: You should take the lessons.

In fleeting conversations such as these, students usually known as struggling readers and writers were repositioned as historical and cultural subjects, knowledgeable and skilled in practices embedded in their transnational identities (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008). Encounters such as these have the potential to bring students' experiences of shifting global cultures and identities into classroom learning (Moje et al., 2000). Indeed, the popular culture images and story lines and the passions, preoccupations, and fears of students' everyday lives were everywhere evident in the multimodal tales of alien invasions, nail-biting hockey play-off games, heroic feats on the basketball court, friendship rivalries, and loneliness and immigration. However, these rich "repertoires of practice" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) resided primarily in the third spaces of the podcast work and were rarely taken up in a systematic way for whole-group learning in other areas of the curriculum.

Podcasting and Third Space Pedagogy

The concept of a "third space pedagogy" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999) resonated in our study as we observed social interaction in the regular classroom learning space shift when new resources, such as laptops, and the freedom to play with them during podcast project time became available. Gutiérrez et al. (1999) defined third space pedagogy as "a classroom community of difference that uses multiple mediating tools and makes use of all the spatial, cultural and linguistic resources of its participants" (p. 287). In this interpretation, the emphasis is on leveraging students' semiotic resources to scaffold them into school literacies and also to challenge and broaden "what counts" as school literacies (Moje et al., 2000). We acknowledge that the concept of third spaces as sites for students to

negotiate and resist colonized identities (e.g., Bhabha, 1994) may also have resonance here. However, within the limitations of our study aims and duration, we cannot claim that this was the experience of all the students in our study.

The research team acquired three laptops for use in the podcast project. Ms. L.'s grades 6 and 7 class had three desktop computers that students used for word processing, so the laptops were an additional, new resource introduced into the classroom, although they were shared with two other grades 6 and 7 classes. Few students at DCS had access to laptops or recording software at home, and they highly valued the laptops as a powerful cultural tool (Wertsch, 1991), the access to which afforded them opportunities to engage with digital equipment that most thought was "very cool." Podcast time emerged as a third space not only because students were drawing on discursive and cultural resources of home, school, community, and popular culture to produce their podcasts in ways they did not in other areas of the curriculum but also because students named distinctions between these pedagogic spaces by referring to "podcast time" and "class time." Podcast time signaled a shift in the usual composition of the classroom: The students knew as much or more than their teacher about how to accomplish the work, and they could leave the room, work in small groups, play with a fun tool they coveted, and learn a skill they valued and hoped to apply to their out-of-school lives.

Students' delineation of this third space from conventional learning spaces was also a function of the particular institutional arrangements governing students' access to multimodal resources. Indeed, Ms. L. also differentiated podcast time from the "usual curriculum," because although the students were "getting so much out of it" (Ms. L., personal communication, April 2, 2008), the multimodal aspects of the work were not easily integrated with the prescribed learning outcomes governing the curricula framework, with the effect that only the print narrative versions of the students' podcasts were assessed for formal reporting purposes. She was pressed to rationalize to herself the considerable amount of time spent on the project

given that it covered so few of the prescribed learning outcomes. She persisted, because "the kids are really working on their writing, handing drafts in, doing lots of reading" (Ms. L., personal communication, February 9, 2008).

During the winter and spring Suzanne spent at the school, she became aware of the awkward fit of the podcast project within the overall organization of learning and the work of Ms. L., the other grades 6 and 7 teachers, and the students to make space for it amid ever-changing schedules, the shifting availability of ELL support staff, last-minute space allocations, technical glitches, and the logistics of sharing laptops across three classrooms. All this highlighted the ways in which digital and multimodal technologies challenge the conventional curriculum, including the organization of space, student grouping, and access to equipment in classrooms (Burnett, Dickinson, Myers, & Merchant, 2006; Smythe & Toohey, 2009).

This may explain why some of the most productive multimodal work happened on the margins of the core curriculum. For example, the "in-between" time (Soja, 1996) of a rainy lunch hour spent in the classroom was also a time for getting multimodal work done without the laptops, which are locked in the cupboards when it is not podcast time. On one such day, eight students ate lunch gathered around the classroom desktop computers. Some were typing up their podcast stories or looking for images on the computer database that could accompany their texts, while others worked on their illustrations at nearby tables. The students chatted as they worked, leaning over one another's shoulders: "How do I delete this?" "How do I move this?" "Hey! Where did you get that picture of Ronaldo?" (the famous soccer player). They moved from text to talk to screen to images of soccer players and roses to dancing to the Soulja Boy music video that seemed to have gotten past the school firewall. As Brass (2008) found in her study of wikis in an after-school program, the in-between spaces of

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a school lunch hour or after-school program afford access to “textual and digital materials for the project that the official spaces of schools could not” (p. 472).

On occasion, students accessed computer images during regular class time, which resulted in disciplinary action or the computers being made “out of bounds” for the remainder of the class. The rules surrounding who could access what digital and multimodal literacy resources and when were still being negotiated by students and teachers as they made their way in new pedagogic territory.

These third spaces were not always harmonious spaces for collaborative learning. One afternoon in a walk-in resource closet, Halima and Maya, in grades 6 and 7, respectively, were “helping” Majeed record his story. They struck an exasperated pose as he read his text slowly and deliberately into the computer:

Halima: So, are you really going to read each line and then stop? If you read so slow, everyone will fall asleep.

Maya: Oh my God, just read it faster!

Majeed: Well, if I go too fast, I’ll make a mistake.

Halima: So then, a little faster, relaxed.

Maya: We can just bleep out the mistake, so read, just read.

Through the language play of teasing (Straehle, 1993), Halima and Maya were able to provide Majeed with direct and incisive feedback on fluency, style, and performance in discourse not available to, nor generally considered appropriate for, their teacher. Majeed may not have found this collaborative work particularly playful, even if it did seem to strengthen his resolve to persevere and, in the end, perform a fluent reading of which he was quite proud. Nevertheless, this event highlighted how power relations, including those of gender and the distribution of school literacy knowledge, were negotiated in the context of learning communities (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

A Community of Learners: Reading and Writing With and for an Invested Audience

Alvermann and Heron (2001) have noted that the serious work of improving literacy instruction for middle school and adolescent ELLs often overshadows the importance of play in this learning, particularly play that involves the reading and writing of interactive digital texts. We saw how Patrick, Gian, and others played with the GarageBand jingles and sound effects, experimenting with new combinations of text, sound, and image, laughing at the unexpected results, and then trying again. Tightly linked to this play is creative and collaborative work, wherein, according to Walsh (2007), “youth evaluate and rationalise their opinions; gather knowledge with/from others; share knowledge with one another; and transform their existing understandings as learners in a constant process of personal and social development” (p. 80). Indeed, as Kress (2003) observed, “much of what we regard as creativity happens as students move meanings across modes” (p. 36). Play and creativity pulled the students’ conventional reading and writing development along.

In the words of Ms. L., encouraging the students to revise and edit their written work “is like pulling teeth.” However, the playful learning communities that emerged during podcast time engaged most of the students in extensive revision and editing, a process that Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, and Nierlich (2008) attributed to “writing for an audience of their peers” (p. 506). We saw this dynamic at work when Patrick made corrections to his print and recorded text at the advice of an invested audience in Gian. The boys coconstructed Patrick’s text in mind of the audience of their grade 3 “little buddies” and the imagined community of peers, parents, and the school community who may listen to the podcast on their class website.

Suzanne observed a variety of revision and editing processes such as these, which are associated with success in conventional school-based reading and writing. These included thinking aloud when students worked through comprehension and semantic problems in their text (Kucan & Beck, 1997), recognizing the purposes and distinctions of various text genres (Alvermann, 2002), and engaging in sustained

reading and writing practice to promote fluency and confidence (Ball, 2002; Moje et al., 2000).

In an interview toward the end of the podcast project, (personal communication, April 28, 2008) Maya emphasized the impact of an invested audience and the role of repeated oral readings of her text on her writing practices:

Maya: [I] made a lot of mistakes [in her audiorecorded narrative] at first, but then when I rewrote it again, it made sense, and I was more— Yeah, I was shocked that it worked. I just did a couple of pieces *over and over and over and over and over again*, and I finally got it.

Suzanne: So, let's say you are writing a story, but you are not recording it, not putting it on the website or anywhere, do you often rewrite your work over and over and over again?

Maya: No, I just do it once and just hand it in. 'Cause it's when you know that people would read, so you do not want to make a mistake, or you would probably be embarrassed that somebody would come up to [you] and be like: 'Oh, you made a mistake on this word.' So you wanted to kind of just get it all, hit it right on that spot to a dead-end stop and everything. So, yeah, it was a really big challenge to do that, but we got through it.

Although experiences with more varied texts in the classroom is also necessary, this extended practice in critical reading and writing of their own and peers' narratives, "*over and over and over and over and over again*," supported the students to read and write to redundancy (Ball, 2002) and thus to acquire the depth of experience, confidence, and learning with print narrative that they required for academic success (Neufeld & Toohey, 2008).

Conclusion

In producing their podcast and accompanying books, Ms. L.'s students drew upon "whatever [was] at hand"

(Mavers, 2007, p. 155), including popular culture, the transnational cultural identities they negotiated on a daily basis, and their capacity for creativity, play, and collaboration. Yet, these resources and relationships largely remained within the third spaces of resource rooms and lunch hours. Within contemporary pedagogic discourses that privilege print literacy and frame the semiotic resources of ELLs as marginal to the core curricula (Hawkins, 2004; Taylor et al., 2008), it was difficult for teachers, and even the students themselves, to reframe students' multimodal literacy work, including their collaborative working relations, as resources for learning beyond podcast time. We conclude that this invisibility of ELLs' semiotic resources prevented "boundary crossing" (Gutiérrez, 2008) between the pedagogic spaces of podcast time and the usual organization of classroom learning. As such, the podcast project was perhaps more an example of pedagogic enrichment rather than the pedagogic transformation (Burnett et al., 2006) the research team hoped for.

In spite of these limitations, the project offered a glimpse into the pedagogic and transformative possibilities of digital literacy projects for creating classroom learning communities that critically engage and respond to the social worlds of ELLs. As Gutiérrez (2008) described, such communities are "characterized by the ideals and practices of a shared humanity, a profound obligation to others, boundary crossing and intercultural exchange in which difference is celebrated without being romanticized" (pp. 148–149).

Note

Dalare Community School is a pseudonym, as are all the student and teacher names.

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