

## **Inside-Out: Connecting In-School Literacy with Out-of-School Literacy**

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*R: There's something about talking about video games that doesn't seem quite as fun as playing them, is that right?*

*Interview with Omar, May 2014<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction: Taking an Inside-Out Approach**

The article begins with a quote from an interview with a fourteen-year-old male about his favourite video game, *Minecraft*, which he plays on average three to four hours a day. When the researcher finally realized that you cannot understand video game play by talking about it, you need to work inside it, watch a gamer in the moment, play it – let an insider view inform an outsider perspective, it changed the way that he understood the game. This notion of inside-out represents the message of this article: for school literacy to be contemporary, educators need to turn literacy teaching inside-out.

Any educator who stands in front of a class of children, adolescents or teenagers today can palpably sense that young people have different senses of what it is to read, write, speak, listen, and communicate than they did two decades ago. With new technologies, forms of communication, and wearable devices, the gap that has always existed between school and everyday life has widened exponentially. Although there have been some efforts to adapt to twenty-first century literacy practices within international policy and curricula (Burnett et al., 2014), we continue down the road of status quo in our teaching and learning of literacy work. In this article, we frame an inside-out approach to literacy teaching which builds on the work of other researchers (Hull and Schultz, 2001; Larson and Marsh, 2005; Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). The article serves as a bridge into the next section of the journal issue by presenting the notion of ‘inside-out’ to inform research and teaching and demonstrating how it works with a classroom vignette.

### **Literacy as Mobile, Participatory, and Messy**

Children nowadays are learning anywhere and anytime, which is a process called *ubiquitous learning*. Ubiquitous learning is a new educational paradigm made possible in part by the affordances of digital technology. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2008) with the advent of ubiquitous learning we can observe new moves. There is a new, liminal blur in the traditional institutional, spatial and temporal boundaries of education. In the past, when the notion of “learning” was associated with institutional sites, students had to be in the same place, at the same time, doing the same subject and staying on the same page to learn. The classroom was an

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<sup>1</sup> This interview excerpt taken from an interview by Dr. Rob Simon for a SSHRC-funded research study that Rowsell and Simon co-researched entitled, *The Minecraft Project: Exploring videogames as a platform for teaching, learning, and curriculum*. Also, pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of participants.

information place, transmitting content. Of course, even then looking back with different lenses, we know that that was never in fact the case. Rather, certain socially and institutionally significant forms of knowledge were the focus in “the classroom”. In the digital age, with ease of interaction and transmission of images, videos and voice, the significance of the “classroom” has changed. It may still be needed, though now in new ways, for new purposes. Learning is now more under the student/agent’s control; and that learning can happen anywhere, anytime.

This does not mean the role of the school is less important than it was some time ago. Going to school will, of course, remain important, but what we will choose to do when we come together may be different from what happens in classrooms today – these may be special times to focus, on face-to-face planning, collaborative work and community building.

As Dewey (1933) wrote, we do not learn from experiences, but we do learn from reflecting on experiences. Thus, one of the challenges that is placed for teachers in the twenty-first century is to find out ways to make the bridge between the experiences students are having in their life outside school and inside it as well. This means inviting the literacy practices in which students are involved outside the classroom to come into school, reflect on them and explore them in meaningful ways. Daniels (2014) argues that opportunities to merge everyday literacies with school literacies enable students to demonstrate agency in their learning.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) focus on new literacies and advocate for the intimate relationship between technology and new literacy practices and suggest that, because literacy is radically changed by new practices, we need to reconceptualise more traditional literacy practices at school. Students from an increasingly younger age have technological knowledge, skills and strategies that they bring into their classroom. This knowledge is often learnt and enacted external to the classroom within home and community contexts (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). This means that new literacies have revolutionised ways in which adolescent students represent and communicate their knowledge and ideas. Not only are students consumers of information, they are creators and contributors to the digital knowledge landscapes through digital environments and social media (Nagle and Stooke, 2016).

Mackey (2016) says that literacy is profoundly entwined with everyday life. It winds in and out of the material objects of our ordinary domestic lives in ways that are richly messy, sprawling and multi-focused. It is inextricably mingled with lots of tools of daily living in ways we take very much for granted. Hence, literacy provides a portal to the significant achievements of detaching and disembedding. According to Mackey, our understanding of its broader nature, however, will be more substantial and useful if we also attend to what embeds it and attaches it to the world of things that makes ordinary life. Consequently, creating spaces for students to draw on new literacies practices they are involved it provides them opportunities to use their imagination and creativity to combine print, visual and digital modes in multimodal combinations that can and should be applied in the classroom (Edwards-Groves, 2011). If students are learning anywhere, anytime, there seems to be “a school outside the school”. The school is being reinvented outside of school. For Kress (2003), “new learning” happens in complex social environments; always in interaction with the world.

Drawing on Kress’ (2003) sense of “new learning”, Rowsell and Wohlwend (2016) focus on participatory literacies. Participatory literacies are ways of interpreting, making, and sharing digital multimedia (e.g. games, video, images, animation) to connect with digital cultures. They produce interactive and improvised engagements by offering moment-to-moment interactions through voice, image, and action in paths much messier than the lines of print in books, which progress from left to right, top to bottom, and beginning to end in a story in a classroom writing

workshop. Learning to belong and contribute to participatory cultures requires understanding the social practices or the ways things are done in a given context.

## **Literacy as Permeable**

Dyson (1993) explores the concept of permeable curriculum that allows for the interplay between teacher's and student's language and experiences. There is no recipe to follow on what works best. Dyson challenges the standardization of learning and asks readers to push back the "curricular curtain" to wonder about the complex social and intellectual work in which children engage when they learn something new, especially when they become writers. A "permeable curriculum" actively invites children's personal interests, "unofficial" texts and vernacular literacy practices into classroom discourse and scaffolds instruction in academic literacy practices based on the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that children bring with them to the classroom.

The idea is that teachers can find out ways to work in their own contexts to enact a permeable curriculum in which the worlds of teachers and children come together in instructionally powerful ways. In doing so, they start to build a "shared world" in which students and teachers feel connected to, not alienated from each other. Having a "shared world" with students, teachers can work towards meaningful learning. Meaningful learning should be the core of the whole educational experience. Moreover, cultural connections, self-confidence, and attitude are considered as other important factors for teaching and learning in this "shared world". Mantiri (2015) reiterates the importance of teachers' roles in student learning. Teachers need to set the stage for learning by creating learning environments that foster meaningful experiential learning and where students can make sense of the whole learning experience.

The idea of learning at non-school environments has been called non-formal learning or informal learning. Sefton-Green (2013) poses the questions "Where does learning takes place?" and "How does learning takes place in practice?" These questions point to how experiences from formal and informal contexts might be related to each other. Informal learning describes individualized study undertaken at the learner's own speed and driven by the learner. Non-formal and informal learning tend to take place in contexts where teaching and learning are not usually understood to be the primary purposes of a place – in contrast with schooling. For Facer (2011), access to digital technologies amplifies the process of informal learning that has always taken place outside schools. It lowers the barriers to access information about emerging interests, and it offers resources for experimentation, play and feedback. For young people with access to digital technology outside school, such resources have the potential to intensify the impact and the reach of their informal learning. For these researchers such knowledge is framed more by the agency and direction of the learner than by the social practices usually employed in teaching.

Drawing on Kress' (2003) ideas about learning as a never-ending meaning making process, bringing a permeable curriculum in schools may facilitate meaningful learning, in which learners are seen as meaning makers. As Wilga (1989) puts it, students are not robots where they are to be primed or set in motion. Students are not there just to be stuffed with dull, tedious and repetitious materials and rote learning and regurgitate it whenever they are asked in schools. But they are individuals with their own interior motivation determining what they will learn or what they will not. Students usually learn what they need or want to learn, but they have a hard time learning something that they are unmotivated for (Mantiri, 2015).

The learners usually decide what they would like to learn, but having said that, a teacher can also play a role in influencing the motivation of a student to a certain extent. Brown (2001) emphasizes that teachers should not think of themselves as someone who constantly has to deliver information to students, but rather to be more like a facilitator of learning, setting the stage for learning to take place and motivating the students to use their thinking abilities and to help them to channel their abilities into something productive. Russell (1996) says that in a learning situation where the learning is authentic, meaningful and relevant, the learner uses metacognitive understanding to help overcome some of the frustrations of learning and bring such understanding to the task. Thus, motivating the students to learn, to enjoy learning and to engage them in learning is important and this can be achieved by using the skills and activities they use in their daily lives, and making them aware of the fact that these activities and experiences are also channels for learning.

In sum, when Dyson (2013) argues for a permeable curriculum, she defends the commitment each educator should have to build powerful learning environments for students. This is premised upon the recognition that powerful learning environments are more than intergenerational transfers of knowledge and that we can therefore be more flexible and creative in the roles that we ask children, teachers and other adults to play within them (Facer, 2011).

### **Teaching Vignette: “Going green”**

In the following vignette, Cristiane describes a teaching moment when she taught a grade 9 English class in a small city in Brazil with students who are 14-15 years of age. The classes were organized around the theme "Going green" and it was carried out in the spring of 2016. June fifth is Environment Day. Brazil is known for its natural beauty and vast expansions of forests, rivers, beaches, waterfalls, wetlands filled with wildlife and conservation areas that attract millions of tourists every year. But, at the same time, Brazil faces serious problems with pollution, deforestation, waste of water and endangered species. Having this in mind, as the “Day of the Environment” approached, Cristiane decided to plan English classes focused on this theme. In addition to working on the theme of the lesson, as a language teacher, she also focused on the genre "slogan" and the imperative mode of verbs. She wanted her teaching sequence to focus on the four skills students are expected to develop when they learn a new language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. As well, Cristiane wanted to add a new literacies slant to her teaching premised on the theoretical assumptions of multiliteracies and critical literacy. Critical literacy aims to foster the critical awareness of texts and ideologies and efforts to make students critical consumers and producers of texts (Monte Mór, 2011). The multiliteracies theory is concerned with multimodality and various modes of meaning production and construction of knowledge that comes in part from digital technologies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2008).

First of all, students watched a video created by the non-governmental organization WWF Brazil (World Wide Fund for Nature) called "It all comes around". The video has no sayings or subtitles. Except for the final scene in which viewers can read “It all comes around. Protect your planet. It’s not too late. Join us at [wwf.org](http://wwf.org)”, images and sounds constitute the film. It is about human actions on nature. Students were invited to make meanings from the video. Then, they needed to access an online forum and write their impressions on the video. They also had to comment on at least one student post.

Cristiane planned it to be a writing activity. Students reflected on the film and here are some examples of their reflections:

All we are responsible for preserving the environment, the video shows that when we destroy nature we are hurting ourselves. People think that the responsibility of caring for the environment is only of the government, but the simple fact of throwing the paper out of the trash already interferes in the environment and this act can be harmful to ourselves, as it was shown in the video. (Student A)

In my opinion, the ad video created by WWF shows an important theme on our lives. Nowadays, we are living in a society that only cares about money and the profit and this capitalism is devastating the environment. So, this video shows us that we have to take care of our planet or the nature will “fight against us” and we will cause ourselves destruction. (Student B)

After the film, Cristiane showed students posters created by WWF for their campaigns. Sitting in small groups, students discussed in English their impressions of the posters (their features, design, colors, audience, resources used, etc.) and also on the slogans they created (most of them using the imperative mode of the verbs) and how they work together to inform and help us make meanings. After the discussion, each group of students presented their poster to the class. In doing so, Cristiane expected them to practice their speaking skills. The following two images (Figures 3 & 4) are examples of theses campaigns.



Figure 1. Stop global warming



Figure 2. Tell Lego to dump Shell

To make the exercise more multimodal and aligned to new literacies, Cristiane played a song on the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle). First, students listened to the song because Cristiane wanted them to practice their listening skills to understand what was said in the song. Then, she showed them the lyrics and they watched the video clip of the song. Their task was to discuss how the ideas expressed in the song about the 3Rs could be applied in Brazil, in their city, in their school and in their homes.

### **3R's (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle)**

*Three it's a magic number*

*Yes it is, it's a magic number*

*Because two times three is six*

*And three times six is eighteen*

*And the eighteenth letter in the alphabet is R*

*We've got three R's we're going to talk about today*

*We've got to learn to*

#### **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (3x)**

*If you're going to the market to buy some juice*

*You've got to bring your own bags and you learn to reduce your waste*

*And if your brother or your sister's got some cool clothes*

*You could try them on before you buy some more of those*

*Reuse, we've got to learn to reuse*

*And if the first two R's don't work out*

*And if you've got to make some trash*

*Don't throw it out*

*Recycle, we've got to learn to recycle,*

*We've got to learn to*



Moving into more traditional literacy skills, Cristiane then focused on reading skills, and students read an article online in *The Daily Mail* about reducing and banning the use of plastic bags in Europe. In Brazil, all of the stores and supermarkets distribute free plastic bags and consumers can take as many as they want. After reading the news, students discussed in small groups the use of plastic bags in their region and if they considered how measures adopted in Europe could work in Brazil.

Moving back into new literacies, students then created a virtual poster using padlet.com, creating a campaign around the theme "going green". They could add all the sources that they wanted, like images, videos, sounds and write a slogan in English for their campaign to publish their padlet. Their virtual posters were then published so that students could see each other's production. As examples, here is one example of a student's production:

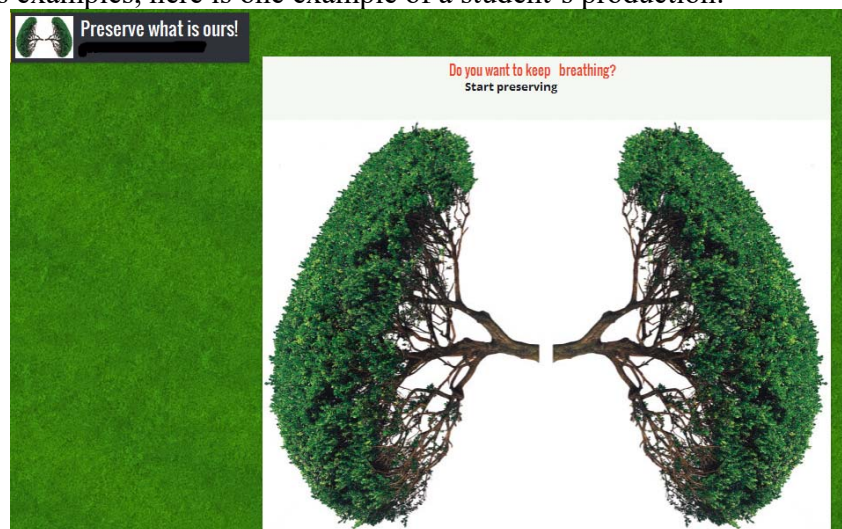


Figure 3. Preserve what is ours!

Cristiane's teaching vignettes strongly illustrate a liminal, permeable movement from inside schooling models of literacy premised on literacy practices that we hold dear such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking coupled with newer competencies that so many of our students bring into classrooms in abundance such as producing, designing, viewing, and working with images as forms of expression and representation. Both vignettes crystallize some very new competencies that students bring into classrooms that remain largely silent, even absent in teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

There was a time when schools were defined as the places where young people went to learn. However, there is a new ecology of learning opportunities for young people nowadays. As Sefton-Green (2013) reminds us, it is universally acknowledged across the social spectrum that schools in and of themselves are not the end-all and be-all of learning. We all know from everyday experiences that we can learn much more than simply the formal knowledge and subjects that are taught in school and the presence of digital technologies have presented a new landscape to learn and to teach.

It is time to recognize there is learning that takes place outside of school hours that is potentially more important, more generative than what happens at school. The learning in non-

school settings is theorized in two main ways. The first, in respect to young people's interests, enthusiasm, and motivation. The second, along an emotional axis in terms of their relationship with others. So, learning in non-school settings provides more agency to students and individual choice, that is frequently denied in formal settings (Sefton-Green, 2013). Yet, it does not predict the end of schools. Facer (2011) argues that the emergence of a rich educational ecosystem outside school walls carries the potential to "access" learning remotely and the recognition of informal learning in digital cultures that will not do away with the need for physical institutions like schools. Rather than heralding a demise of the school, the socio-technical change over the years make a physical, locally connected school even more important. The local school will be more important because we will need to create accessible space where we can work out how to cope with the disruptions in relationships and the rapidly changing socio-technical practices. The local school will also be important because we will need curriculum and pedagogy that teach us how to live with our collective and multimodal knowledge resources. Such a school could plausibly be built upon the new relationship between a school and its wider ecosystem.

To understand wider school ecosystems in a digitally-informed society, we have to explore the new learning contexts that emerge. Context is more than where learning takes places. Context encompasses the set of relationships – visible, invisible, inherited, and assumed - in which the social interactions of the learning take place (Sefton-Green, 2013). Vadeboncoeur (2006) describes how learning is realized through participation in everyday social practices. Learning occurs in context and context defines what counts as learning. She suggests the construction of an approach to identify and describe a context or a participation framework for mapping the context of learning. This sheds light on our view that what students are learning in their everyday life outside of school should also be counted as learning and as such be invited into classrooms.

As Sefton-Green (2013) argues, schools are not just about education in the narrow sense of acquiring knowledge or learning skills; they are also key places where the young learn social behavior and where attitudes, expectations, values, and norms are transmitted, acquired, negotiated, or rejected. And it is exactly because of these reasons schools should be reinvented in terms of out-of-school learning. We need to look at informal learning – that is learning pursued in the home and in leisure activities – and see how those experiences and kinds of learning are developed in not-school surroundings. They might help us understand better and imagine the contributions to the broader ecology of learning opportunities available to young people today. Looking at how informal learning developed at home, by one's self or as part of an interest-driven community might be valorized and further developed through not-school experiences.

The study of young people's learning with digital technology outside school makes visible how different children's informal learning is from schooled learning. There has been evidence that young people learn to use digital environments by trial and error, messing about, fiddling around (Ito et al., 2006). Rather than following a 'curriculum' led by an expert, learners out of school are supported by just-in-time help from peers, siblings and adults. In these environments, their learning can have a passionate intensity that can support them through periods of repetitive practice and commitment over long periods of time. This means they are motivated to learn. There is therefore a new educational ecology in our society. Lots of students are coming to school with expectations of playability, sociability and accessibility of information. The challenges educators will face are of deciding how to respond to a visibly different experience of learning outside the school setting. It calls for a reimagining of the school as a "mobilizing network" able to draw together and harness diverse educational resources for its students. The role of the school is to make visible the rich and diverse experiences that students bring into school (Facer, 2011). Educational change,



therefore, needs to be directed from the outside. Soep and Chávez (2010) explore the idea that the kind of knowledge produced in not-school sites can itself lead to curriculum innovation.

This paper aimed at addressing issues of an inside-out approach to literacy teaching which considers that in the digital age we are living in times of “new learning” or “ubiquitous learning” that highlights “participatory literacies”. The school is faced with the challenge of creating a “permeable curriculum” in which students and teachers experiences come to the classroom. We have to make an educational bridge between the school that exists outside school – the learning that is happening informally, and which cannot be considered inferior or less important or valuable knowledge - and the school institution – the place students go for education and meet teachers and colleagues, in order to spark students’ curiosity for learning. As Paulo Freire (2007) states, as teachers and educators, we should know that the most fundamental key for learning is human curiosity. It is what drives us to question, to know, to act, to learn. If we are able to spark young people’s curiosity, we will certainly contribute to their literacy learning.

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