

Refugees, Languages, Creativity

(Language and Multilingualism Lab, University of Thessaly)

Reflection on the 'value' of a Participatory Filmmaking Project for young people with refugee experience making home in Scotland

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Background

Filmmaker and animator Simon Bishopp and myself, Katja, an independent researcher based in Glasgow, are currently running an 8-months long participatory filmmaking project for young people with refugee experience who are making home in Glasgow. The project is called 'Scotland Our New Home'. **(Slide 2)** We are teaching a group of 15-20 young people the technical and artistic filmmaking and storytelling skills they need, in order to be able to make their own films and tell the stories that are important to them. **(Slide 3-4)** Simon and I are funded through Creative Scotland - the former Scottish Arts Council - and have teamed up with the New Young Peers Scotland, **(Slide 5)** a group founded by Lorraine Ward, a social worker for Glasgow's Children and Families Social Work Department, Lyn Ma, a senior ESOL lecturer at a Glasgow Clyde College and Vicky Burns from Ypeople, a children's charity working with care-experienced young people. Together, Lorraine, Lyn and Vicky have founded the 'New Young Peers Scotland', with the aim to train and support young asylum seekers and refugees to become peer mentors for other newly arrived young people in Scotland. Simon and I are delivering the filmmaking project 'Scotland Our New Home' as part of their training programme.

Our project participants are a culturally and linguistically highly diverse group of 16-25 years old 'unaccompanied' young people with mixed interests and abilities, who are either asylum-seeking or already possess refugee status in the UK. Most have reached the UK from countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the DRC, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Vietnam, unaccompanied by their parents or another caregiver, and are under the guardianship and care of the local authority (Glasgow City Council). All young people are all at least bilingual, but most of them are multilingual, and are speaking more than two languages. Some have just arrived in Glasgow and have only started to learn English as an additional language to their already rich linguistic repertoire. Other young people have resided in Glasgow for longer, and are now involved in a range of vocational and academic education programmes, which reflect their multiple interests, skills and personalities. Some currently complete their college ESOL course, others take their Highers/A-levels at college, train to be car mechanics, take preparatory college courses in art, business, accountancy and computing or study pharmacology and engineering at university level.

'Scotland Our New Home': The animations

(Slide 6) Our 'Scotland Our New Home' filmmaking project built on a previous creative project with Hameed, Ruwayda, Mohamad and Florida, four New Young Peer Mentors who wanted to communicate the hopes and challenges that their life in Scotland entails - in the medium of animation. Assisted by their ESOL teachers and myself, they produced a voice-over script, which animator Simon translated into hand-drawn images that he animated into two short films. Their creative collaboration resulted in two distinctly different animations. The first film, for children of primary school age, uses saturated colours and is drawn in the clean lines reminiscent of modern children's animation. It tells of the young people's hopes and challenges through the eyes of a girl who makes home and finds friends in Scotland. The second animation, more suitable for a teenage and adult audience, is drawn in a more surrealist style. **(Show second animation)** The young people's ESOL teacher Lyn, who first presented the animations to the involved young people and their peers in her ESOL class, reported that they were moved when watching the films for the first time, some of them were tearful, others silent. The young people told her, that it was the first time they had seen anything that told and showed how they felt about what is happening to them, and that explained why they were 'here' (in Scotland).

Both films were launched at Glasgow City Chambers in 2017 where the New Young Peer Mentors were awarded the Saltire Youth Award. The second animation was award-nominated at the Glasgow Southside Film Festival and has since been shown - by the young people, their social workers, teachers and myself - at a number of youth and social work conferences in the UK and abroad. The young people have actually last presented it earlier today at a youth conference in Glasgow.

Art as fabulation

What kind of art-making happened in our animation project, which was the predecessor to our current filmmaking project? Hickey Moody (2013: 125) writes in her book 'Youth, Arts and Education', that art projects for and with young people can only really consider themselves as having created 'art' when they have created fabulations. Fabulations, she writes, 'create sensations and ways of relating to young people through art that do not reinforce stereotypes or dominant popular narratives' (125). **(Slide 7)** Fabulations 'present young people to communities in ways that extend the modes of representation attached to their existing social roles' (123). Did the animations fabulate beyond the young people's social role? Simon's material, image and sound-based 'translation' of the young people's written script was a movement of aesthetic translation that did not merely render the young people's voices into 'documentary-style', illustrative imagery. The young people's narration and Simon's images and music - both in their distinct material form, style and language - folded into a new short film texture. **(Slide 8)** The animations fabulate in the sense that they operate in a space between fiction and reality - imagining and hinting at possible futures. Although the animations clearly reference the challenges that the young people face as refugees making home in a new country, they are not 'documentary pieces' that required the young people to reveal any personal stories or re-tell specific issues or incidents in their lives. The animations do not articulate a fixed narrative or stereotype, as much as they are material articulations of past and present ways of being, feeling and hoping, folded into future possibilities (Hickey-Moody 2013). As the young people's say in their last line: *"We want to give back to Scotland, Our New Home. We want to be part of a Scottish community"*.

But Simon and I kept asking ourselves: had the animation project taken the possibilities of fabulating *beyond* the young people's social roles, far enough? **(Slide 9)**

The most powerful thing about youth arts practices, Hickey-Moody (2013) writes, are that they can articulate new images of youth, who are commonly represented in popular culture in ways that reinscribe marginalization (125). Given the young people's positive reaction, there is clearly a sense on their part that a 'new articulation of youth' came into being through the animations, in a way that they felt wasn't in existence before. But despite their felt connection to the images that accompany their voiceover, the following two questions kept Simon and myself thinking:

Did the animation project facilitate a creative environment that prescribed in what social role the young people had to write their voiceover-script - namely, as 'refugees making home in Scotland'? How much space were they *really* given by us to 'fabulate' beyond their social role as refugees? **(Slide 10)**

I am not diminishing the value of the project, especially given that the young people are obviously proud of the films. Simon and my self-critical questions served us more as a catalyst for reflection on the concepts and pedagogic practices that we wanted to base our subsequent, and now current, film project with the young people on. Our reflection was guided by this subsequent question: **(Slide 11)** what exactly are the potentials and possibilities that arts projects *can* and *should* offer to young people? These possibilities and potentials of arts practices, with so called marginalized young people, we concluded, have to be first conceived and formulated in 'aesthetic' rather than 'socio-cultural terms'.

Art as technology of salvation

But how exactly could an exclusively socio-cultural formulation of 'value' limit an arts project's potential and possibilities? Hickey-Moody (2013) cautions us against uncritically employing arts practices, as what she calls a 'technology of salvation (...), a method of saving, improving or occupying particular demographics of young people' (147) - particularly those considered at risk or vulnerable. Such socio-cultural rather than aesthetic focus, Hickey-Moody (*ibid*) suggests, can be embedded in 'assemblages of governance, composed of media discourses of moral panic and educational and psychological discourse of risk' (*ibid*).

(Slide 12) Arts practices, she writes, when used as a 'technology of salvation' can run the danger of becoming a form of social control and a way for young people of having to 'develop accounts of themselves as marginalised yet manageable' (147). Theatre practitioner and scholar Rea Dennis (2007) has equally pointed out that the act of 'developing accounts' with project participants who are refugees is no neutral affair and requires careful consideration, so as not to 'fix' participants' stories in naturalistic representations of trauma that bind participants to a fixed social role or speaking position.

Dennis writes:

The personal story in the refugee context represents a complex, cultural, political and social currency. (...) It is thus necessary to question how theatre [or arts practices more generally] translate to the refugee context where people are required to tell their stories – over and over and over again. Who is listening? (...). The refugee context is structured around the repeated requirement to tell within a culture of institutional disbelief (...); a story is represented as currency to earn the next stage of entry. (Dennis 2007: 357)

(Slide 13)

Like Hickey-Moody (2013), Dennis (2008) emphasises arts projects' responsibility to facilitate 'aesthetic transformations' (213) of trauma, instead of unconsciously modelling an institutional, deficit-oriented set up, in which the 'refugee subject' might be expected to tell 'authentic stories' to the 'non-refugee witness' in the name of empowerment and art. Such conscious or unconscious expectation of 'linear' narratives, Dennis (2007; 2008) notes, can run the risk of fixing participants' identity positions, without acknowledging the multiplicity of individual histories and psychological situations hidden underneath the blanket 'refugee story'. 'Art-making in the asylum context, Dennis reminds us, demands aesthetic transformation of the testimony into representations that reach beyond naturalistic representations of trauma' (Dennis 2008: 213). The value of art-making with young people can then not be defined in socio-cultural terms only. The very 'purity' of a moral claim of empowerment, social justice or social change in the name of youth art and 'helping young people', might run the risk of pre-empting such transformations, rather than creating them. An overemphasis on 'salvation' through art projects, might then lead us facilitators to, consciously or unconsciously, require young people to develop only 'linear' or 'fixed' accounts of themselves, which satisfy narratives, of either trauma or of social transformation, or both, but in the worst case, might leave too little room for open-ended re-invention and fabulation on young people's own terms.

Art as affective pedagogy

Given the complexity of art-making, storytelling and 'developing accounts' with young people who are, or at least were, repeatedly required to tell and re-tell, and tell and re-tell their personal story in an institutional context like the UK's Home Office:

How can we formulate the value of art-making and storytelling with young people, if such value cannot be unproblematically articulated in socio-cultural terms? Art projects' value, I conclude, has to be considered in aesthetic terms first. This is because art-making has the potential to foster 'belonging, community and learning' through 'aesthetics', through material articulations of and experimentations with form and style (Hickey-Moody 2013).

(Slide 14) Art-making teaches through acts of material making and the building of aesthetic connections with other 'makers', in a way that, as Hickey-Moody describes it, mobilizes young people's affect (Hickey-Moody 2013: 146). Art-making is an 'affective pedagogy'; one that reconstructs young people's subjectivities through material acts of making, on their own and with others. And as material acts of 'making stuff you care about' they potentially affect young people's sense of self and of belonging.

[Such] affective pedagogy [is a] pedagogy of possibilities . . . It is a pedagogy that aims to not predefine its outcome (even in terms of some imagined value of emancipation or democracy) but to empower its students to begin to reconstruct their world in new ways, and to rearticulate their future.

(Grossberg 1997: 387, quoted in Hickey-Moody 2013: 120)

Did our animations stand as an 'affective pedagogy' that opened up possibilities for young people's re-articulations of new subjectivities, worlds and futures?

Due to the time restrictions of the animation project and the technical proficiency needed to draw and animate images in the computer, the young people worked exclusively on the script and voiceover. There was no time for them to learn much about the techniques and conventions of animation. There was no time for them to experiment with new ways of expression through the movement of images and sound. No time to learn something about themselves in the process of making, no time to learn something about their perception of the world, to learn something about their ability to reassemble their world and views through images, movement and sound. No time to learn something about their friends' abilities to create. No time to enjoy the process of building a community that 'belongs' through material articulations of form and style, and the good feelings associated with making something that you personally care about.

At the same time, however, the animations gave the young people an idea of arts practices' *potential* to articulate through new textures of images and sounds, and beyond tightly narrated social or identity roles, even if they did not undertake these articulations entirely themselves. It gave them a first sense of how art-making might turn personal experience into fictions, more universal stories and hopeful fabulations that reach beyond naturalistic representations. In that sense, the animations might be understood as a 'gift exchange' between Simon and the young people: together, the young people's script and Simon's aesthetic translations, hinted at the possibilities of future art-ful fabulations.

Art as material technology

The aesthetic focus on young people's artistic and technical skills development in our current filmmaking project can then be seen as a result of Simon and my critical reflection on the animation project, which led us to ask bigger questions about the actual potential and possibilities of arts projects with and for young people with refugee experience. The young people's aim for our current filmmaking project is to make a series of films that can assist other newly arrived young people in the process of 'making home'. Resulting from the aesthetic focus of our current project, Simon and I are findings ways of teaching the young people the necessary, technical and artistic skills, so they can work towards their aim of making films for other newly arrived young people.

We are keen then not to employ our arts practices as a 'technology of salvation' first but as a 'material technology' (Hickey-Moody 2013); one that validates the practical process of learning the aesthetic skills necessary to create fabulations in film. We are creating a 'blended' filmmaking training that has developed from the young people's positive response to a range of youtube-style teaching videos on: *how to animate drawings in the computer, how to tell a story and how to draw out your ideas as storyboards for filming*. We are creating these online materials to support our weekly, practical sessions.

(Slide 15/Show teaching materials on website).

Despite our efforts to make our teaching as stimulating as possible, through this combination of video-based and practical learning tasks, it would be unrealistic to think that we can turn all our participants into competent filmmakers by the end of our project. It would be unrealistic to even say that they will be fully able to independently execute all the technical tasks and roles necessary to make their films, without our assistance.

The point of emphasising the young people's artistic skills development in *storytelling*, *storyboarding*, *camera operation*, *editing*, *production management*, and so on, is not to turn them into professional filmmakers within an 8-months project. We are keenly aware of the complexities and difficulties of acquiring the 'language of filmmaking' within our short project period, especially for those young people who have only recently been to the cinema for the first time. We are however encouraged that they are starting to make 'connections through aesthetics', when we see young people give themselves the permission to 'play' and experiment with this newly acquired, material language of film. So far, we have fabricated a range of 'experimental videos': **(Slide 16)** a music video for the song 'Happy' by Pharrel Williams, two 'scary' Halloween-themed short films, and a variety of short films about 'chocolate jealousy' based on the famous 'stand off' final scene in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Our 'experimental videos' cannot be easily related to refugee narratives of trauma and transformation. It is the fact that the young people were willing to 'play around' and experiment with filmmaking, on *its own terms*, that we considered 'valuable'.

Participatory Filmmaking as Caring Labour

Given our shift of focus away from arts practices as a 'technology of salvation' and towards a focus on aesthetic learning and making: How can such form of 'value' in artistic play and experimentation be formulated in a way that doesn't exclude socio-cultural aims entirely? How can we include a socio-cultural perspective for our current filmmaking project, without falling into those big value claims that could *limit* the young people's freedom of expression? I believe it is the *practical* action of 'playing for its own sake' that is the key to a formulation of value here, that includes both - aesthetic and socio-cultural perspectives. Anthropologist David Graeber, in his book *'Bullshit Jobs: A Theory'* (2018), writes that 'action for its own sake is the ultimate definition of freedom and also the common definition of play'. **(Slide 17)** 'Caring labour' - like nursing, teaching - even the teaching of filmmaking I suggest - is always directed at the enhancement or maintaining of somebody else's freedom. Simon and my 'caring labour', through our reflections on our project aims, our project planning and the development of online and practical learning tasks, tailored to the young people's linguistic and artistic skill levels, interests and viewing habits; this 'caring labour' might be similarly seen as being directed at the enhancement of the young people freedom; their freedom to play and fabricate their subjectivities, worlds and futures through film.

(Slide 18) Simon and my 'caring labour' is aimed at facilitating a learning environment that might trigger each young person's 'play' - the unfolding of their individually different creative and social powers - as opposed to their dutiful telling of a trauma or transformation narrative that aligns with a more collective social role or 'refugee' identity. Our caring labour is grounded in our practical action of creating a stimulating creative learning environment as well as our concern for each young person's freedom to 'play' and 'fabulate' through filmmaking, on its own terms, and as a consequence, on their own terms.

References

Online project resources:

'Scotland Our New Home' *Project Website*: <http://showmanmedia.co.uk/scotland/>

'Scotland Our New Home' *Animations*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tD--1v607Hs>

Books and Articles:

Dennis, Rea (2007) Inclusive democracy: a consideration of playback theatre with refugee and asylum seekers in Australia. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 12(3), 355-370.

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Graeber, David (2018) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. UK/US: Allen Lane.

Grossberg, L. (1997) *Bringing it All Back Home: essays on cultural studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hickey-Moody, Anna (2013) *Youth, Arts and Education*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.

Further reading on the same lines:

Noddings, Nell (2013) *Happiness and Education*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Noddings, Nell (1984) *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.