mStories: Exploring Modes of Participation in a Creative Storytelling Project

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ABSTRACT

Innovations in information and communication technologies (ICT) have emphasized new 'non-text' forms of literacy that include still and moving image. To date such new literacy practices have been researched largely within formal learning environments and through the use of typically desktop technologies. However, as mobile devices become increasingly ubiquitous, technologically convergent, and supportive of multimedia practice, there is a need for research and research methods that support understandings of mobile practice and literacies formed outside the classroom. In August 2011 a participatory creative digital storytelling project *mStories* was established with nine participants from across the UK and Australia. This paper reports on how participation in the project was shaped and structured by its participants and how participatory methods need to be adapted to accommodate the mobile complex and users' existing and intended practices.

Keywords

Mobile learning, creative, participatory project, methodology, digital storytelling

INTRODUCTION

In August 2011 *mStories,* a creative participatory action research project, was established by the researcher. Working with nine participants from Australia and the UK, *mStories* facilitates the creation and sharing of user generated stories created with mobile devices. In addition to supporting new creative practices, this project contributes to understandings of new multimodal and multimedia literacies as practiced with mobile technologies. Participants created their stories using multiple modes; and the project stories were showcased collectively on the *mStories* website (Figure 1).

Participatory action research is well suited to studying *practice* as a social phenomenon (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000) and similarly aligns well with one of the central research assumptions in which language and other meaning making systems are conceived of as a *social* semiotic system. However whilst it is important that research methods should align with both the philosophical assumptions of the research and the specific needs of the study (Myers & Avison 2002) *mStories* emerged as a project that called 'for the researcher to bend the methodology to the peculiarities of that setting' (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 5). In the case of *mStories,* the participatory action research model had to be changed and adapted to suit participants' needs for modes of interaction that were inherently part of what Pachler et al. refers to as 'the mobile complex' (Pachler et al. 2010a).

This paper reports on the different modes of participation found within the *mStories* participatory action research project and how these shape how we research new multimedia practices when participants' mobile behavior is so at odds with traditional participatory approaches.
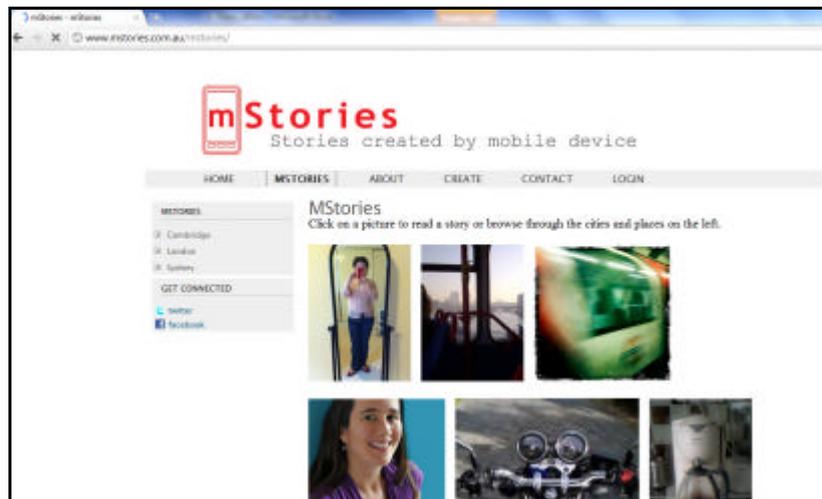
Figure 1. mStories Website, www.mstories.com.au

BACKGROUND

Literacy and the Mobile Complex

Traditional discussions on literacy have focused on the reading and writing of alphabet and character-based texts. However, innovations in information and communication technologies (ICT) have emphasised new forms of literacy that include still and moving image, and new modes of document reception and production (Clark & Mayer 2003; Pailliotet & Mosenthal 2000; Reinking et al. 1998). Where producing, printing and transmitting behaviours were once limited to the domain of the expert or specialist, new technologies have enabled individuals to make such authoring behaviours part of daily life. As a result much of our encoded language is multimodal (Kress 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Discussions on literacy have expanded beyond the traditional concept of printed text to encompass digital multimedia artefacts; this nexus between technology and literacy has emerged as an important area for research (Mills 2010).

Recent developments in mobile networked devices, such as the emergence of multimedia Smartphones, tablets and e-book readers, have led to changes in the way people use mobile devices. Mobile devices, such as smartphones, now enable everyone to produce and communicate text, image, audio, video and multimedia culture and meanings (Dyson, Litchfield & Raban 2010). Though people use their mobile devices to engage in new meaning-making practices, new literacies research to date has been focused largely on desktop technologies and formal educational environments. Recent research has begun to explore adult engagement with new literacies, and the informal learning of 'design' as a literacy practice (Sheridan & Roswell 2010), however little is known about how a device's mobility affects literacy practice. As smartphone ownership continues to increase (Llamas & Stofega 2010) and the semiotic landscape becomes increasingly visual and multimodal (Kress 2003) there is a need for understandings of multiliteracies research to be applied and extended to the multimodal meaning-making afforded by mobile devices.

Researching the Social through Participatory Projects

Though there is a need to understand how mobile literacy practices emerge, researching the mobile complex is difficult. For if research into the mobile complex is to avoid technological fetishisation it needs to focus not only on the technical innovation but on how such technologies are embedded into the everyday lives of its users and the socio-cultural conditions in which they exist (Pachler et al. 2010a). Understanding new literacies and the role the mobile complex plays in it has to understand a person's practice within its socio-cultural context. Furthermore, any study that attempts to understand new literacies, will bring with it assumptions on the nature of language and what constitutes human communication.

Taking its theoretical perspective from social semiotics this paper conceptualises language as a social semiotic. Drawing on the understanding that Halliday's (1978, 1985) social semiotic theory of language can be extended to non-verbal semiotic resources such as still image (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), art (O'Toole 1994), film and moving image (Iedema 2001), music (van Leeuwen 1999) and action (Martinec 1998), this study is grounded on semiotic resources enacting the social. Though as a study in literacy in the mobile complex this paper also aims to connect such semiotic resources with social practice and adopts participatory action research.

In a study that attempts to understand not only understanding human *practice* and mobile meaning making, participatory research methods are advantageous for empowering and engaging people. Participatory action research is well suited to studying *practice* as a social phenomenon (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000) and similarly aligns well with one of the central research assumptions in which language and other meaning making systems are conceived of as a *social* semiotic systems. However, as Miles and Huberman (1994, p.5) acknowledge, methodologies may have to be flexible to the peculiarities of that particular setting. In this case, it is the mobile setting that tests the typical modes of participation normally found within more standard action research projects.

mStories: An Evolving Project

Grounded in the participant's experiences and semiotic products, this *mStories* develops an understanding of literacy from the underrepresented adult user and the mobile technology that they use. Whilst there has been a significant focus on existing social networking platforms as a place for communication and expression, by building a site together and allowing participants to create their content without the social networking skeleton it was hope to explore potential and unexplored behaviours. However in identifying mobile meaning-making practices as ones that is situated, locative, and experiential in nature (Frawley 2011) this project had to be flexible to modes of participation that participants asked for, even if these modes of participation differed from those typically used within participatory action research methods.

FINDINGS

Preliminary phase

In line with more traditional methods of participatory action research, *mStories* was designed to be run over a set four-week period through weekly meetings, each of which was intended to be an iterative part of the participatory action research project cycle. Whilst this initial project design was methodologically sound, it failed in practice, as the meeting-based design did not accommodate the needs of participants, and their situated mobile practice. Despite this, this first phase of the project generated the participant interest and feedback that determined the identity and methodological approaches used in the final project (Figure 2). As the first phase of the project provided the motivation and feedback for the final project design, this section describes both preliminary and final phase of the project design.
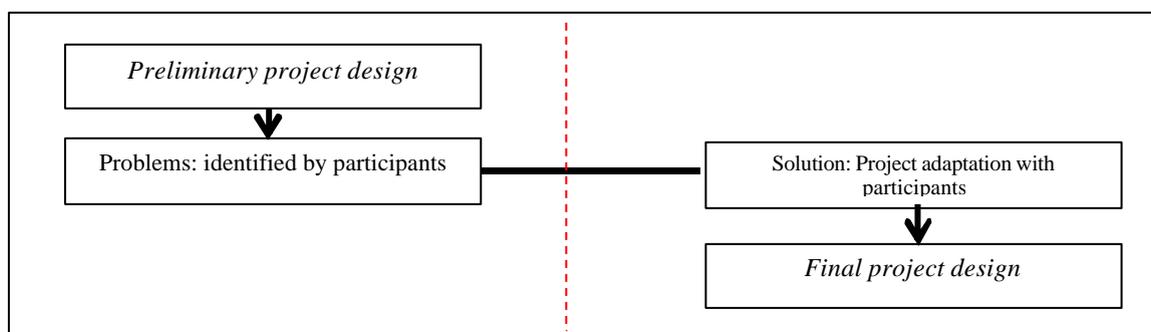

Figure 2. Participant Driven Project Design in Two Stages

The project was initially designed to run over a four-week period, focus on participants from local Sydney writers' networks, and be executed through a series of participatory weekly meetings that would be recorded. During this phase of the project, participants for the project were approached through the following sources: Sydney community writers' groups, independent northern beaches writers' groups, fellowship Of Australian Writers NSW Inc. (Northern Beaches Sub-branch).

As the project explored mobile multimodal practices through story production, writers groups were initially approached. The decision to focus on writers from a specific locale was based on the initial meeting-based project design. This phase of the project design generated interest from several writers, but also highlighted several problems with the meeting-based project design. Firstly, facilitating meetings proved difficult: both the meeting times and geographic focus restricted who could be a project participant. In addition some people did not want to attend meetings as though a survey found that they had never previously created an 'mStory' that they already had an idea of what they wanted to create. Secondly, during this recruitment phase several people from different locales who were not writers also expressed interest in being part of the project. These factors and participant feedback from this phase changed the methods of participation.

Final phase

Based on the issues identified by the participants and the researcher in the preliminary project design, group meetings were replaced with electronic means of individual to researcher participation. Instead of contributing to a group directed project, participants worked individually in producing their mStory and communicated with the researcher through electronic channels, such as: phone calls, email, text message, videoconferencing, online survey tools, the mStories website

The move from physical meeting-based participation, to electronic participation changed the project significantly. With no geographic focus, there was no need to limit the participation to one country. In addition to this, the project was also extended to non-writers through informal channels such as Facebook, email and word-of-mouth. Though writers were initially targeted as a group with an interest in creative story writing, many writers approached were hesitant about writing a story on their mobile phone: one potential member described the project as 'experimental'. When the project was extended to non-writers, an unanticipated level of interest was generated. One non-writer participant was recruited indirectly through hearing about the project from another participant; as a result only three out of nine participants were from writers groups. In this way the digital approach to participation not only suited the needs of the participants and their mobile practice, but changed the dynamic and identity of the project.

Final Participant Group
The final *mStories* project team was composed, in total, of nine people. Participants were from Australia (n=5) and the UK (n=4), the age range spanned from 21-25 to 46-55 and included male (n=4) and female (n=5) participants. Though writers groups were initially targeted, the final group contained only three participants who engaged in creative writing, either professionally or in their spare time.

CONCLUSION

In supporting the study and practice of mobile literacies, *mStories* attempted to use traditional participatory techniques such as face-to-face meetings, and iterative project development. However, participants of the *mStories* project wanted more autonomy, self-direction and distance support both their existing mobile practice and their new *mStories* practices. Emerging from this study is a need for methods that better embrace idiosyncratic practices and new practices that are emerging from mobile literacy practice. Participants of multimodal mobile stories were largely not from writers groups, and though none had produced an mStory before all had 'something in mind' and wanted a participatory project that permitted such new practice. Through adapting participation to include

distance and digital support the *mStories* project was able to support different modes of participation and research exactly how such stories are constructed within the mobile complex.

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