Chapter 2: Connecting community through film in ITE English.

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Introduction

As the landscape of English is shaped by global educational reform, characterised by standardisation and performativity, the subject is increasingly defined as a prescribed skill set, and the lived experiences of learners is sidelined by a narrow, assessment-driven curriculum. Within this landscape, beginning teachers of English face the challenge of developing critical, research-informed practice. This chapter outlines the work undertaken by beginning teachers of English who took part in a voluntary collaborative film-making project during their training year. The project involved them working alongside learners in their placement schools, and with creative professionals, to produce short films exploring questions of community, place and identity.

The chapter begins with an exploration of the current place of English in the wider educational context, and in the experience of learners and teachers in English secondary schools. We then discuss three examples of films made by beginning teachers of English who opted to take part in the film project with young people in their placement schools. We examine both the process of the film project and the products made by those involved, and explore the potential for place in an English curriculum that engages creatively with community.

The Place of English in the contemporary policy context

Although subject English has been the focus of debate for decades, recent years have seen the particularly acute impact of neoliberal policy on the experience of learners and teachers in English classrooms. Within a wider climate of intense performativity, the subject itself has been increasingly reduced to that which can be measured by standardised assessment. Comber (2016: xiv) outlines the 'fickle literacies' that can dominate the experience of learners in this context; these include 'rote learning, repeated test preparation, copying […] and other challenge-free, thought-less activities, which will not build their capacity for academic learning and complex

literacies'. Writing in the context of New Zealand, Locke (2008: 308) also describes the impact of competency-driven regimes which are 'distorting students' understandings of genre, marginalising real-world textual practices […] and drilling students in arid and formulaic responses to literary texts'.

This reduction of the subject has left little space for the experience of young people to be included in English classrooms. In England, non-dominant voices have been further marginalized by the most recent iterations of the National Curriculum Programmes of Study (Department for Education, 2014). Speaking and listening have been abandoned as core elements of the English curriculum, which emphasises canonical texts of 'British heritage' at the cost of media, film and drama. Alongside a policy context which has shaped this model of the subject, deficit discourses of youth continue to pervade the media to the point where young people are further disenfranchised as members of the community whose experiences and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al, 2005) do not count as valid resources for classroom learning (McIntyre, 2016; Jones and Chapman, 2017; Jones and McIntyre, 2015; Vasudevan and Campano, 2009).

The impact of this context on the experience of teachers has been well documented across jurisdictions subject to neoliberal education reform (e.g. Sandretto and Tilson, 2015; Comber, 2012; Ravitch, 2010; Ball, 2003). We have explored elsewhere the particular experience of teachers new to the profession in navigating this landscape (McIntyre and Jones, 2014). The teachers in that study described how they perceived the experience of the learners in their subject:

> Ed: I think they now perceive English as a series of milestones rather than as something that is particularly coherent or, dare I say it, enjoyable.

> Will: [My Year 9s] have absolutely no idea of English outside the assessment focuses.

The place of English for learners in contemporary classrooms was, for these beginning teachers, often reduced to being fixed on the page of an examined text, or the whiteboard screen in a lesson preparing for assessment. The reduction of the

places engaged with in the subject is illustrated by Heather's comment about a theatre trip she proposed for her class, which was seen by her colleagues and mentor as 'risky':

> They have never taken any kids to the theatre before. I think they see it as 'we are going to read this play because they are going to sit the exam on it', not that students need to see it as a wider thing.

For beginning teachers of English facing the tensions encountered when navigating the enactment of a narrow, mandated curriculum and a culture of performativity, their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course provides a critical space in which to explore different possibilities. Turvey and Lloyd (2014) offer an account of a beginning teacher's exploration of learning rooted in the social relationships of his English classroom, arguing that '"subject knowledge" in English should not be seen as a stable, pre-existing entity' (p. 77). Allard and Doecke (2014) describe early career teachers' negotiation of their professional knowledge and values, the mandated curriculum, and the standards by which they themselves are measured in their practice; in doing so, the authors argue, these teachers are 'marshalling [their] knowledge *against* those standards' (p. 42, italics in original) and pushing at the boundaries imposed by a standardised curriculum. Paradoxically, in so doing, they are demonstrating how drawing upon diverse experiences in the classroom is central to meeting the standards agenda by which teachers are themselves measured. This work is not without challenge for those entering the profession, however. Will, a beginning teacher in our previous study (McIntyre and Jones, 2014), recognised that, in his placement school, 'it would be a very brave member of staff who would try to do things differently.' The film project we discuss in this chapter is one way in which beginning teachers are supported to explore the possibilities of doing just that.

Place in English: doing things differently

We approach the work we outline in this chapter with a perspective afforded by our experience as teachers of English now working as literacy researchers and teachers on a one year university-based postgraduate secondary English ITE courses. Our institution offers both a university-based PGCE as well as school-based routes. These programmes are informed by a conception of literacy in its broadest form and

beginning teachers of English are invited to engage with paradigms of literacy that include print, digital, multimodal and material resources drawn upon in a range of contexts. Within the core programme for all beginning teachers of English, there is recognition of the pedagogical processes involved in working with media and film, and the affordances of these for engaging the creativity, voice and agency of young people (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 2013; Parry, 2014). While the assessment of individual skills can dominate in contemporary English classrooms, this model of literacy includes participatory, collaborative and intergenerational practice. There is a strong emphasis on the local and the transformative potential of place-based pedagogies (Comber, 2016; Garcia et al, 2015; Jones and McIntyre, 2014; Jones and Chapman, forthcoming). Literacy practices are therefore understood as inherently social actions: 'things which people do, either alone or with other people, but always in a social context – always in a place and at a time' (Barton and Hamilton 1998, 23).

The power of the film project to engage learners and teachers in a collaborative disruption of the mandated curriculum is rooted in its close focus on people in place. The concepts of place and space are far from simple, of course, and have been the focus of academic debate across disciplines for decades, including a specific focus on their relationship with literacy (Leander and Sheehy, 2004). In our work with beginning teachers, as is made explicit in the film project, we understand place as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell 2004: 5), which results from the 'interplay of people and the environment' (ibid: 11).   As such, we argue that the creative process of making these films, as well as the resultant films themselves, have the potential to be place making (Jones et al, 2013). For Comber (2016: 101), 'the study of place affords complex opportunities for collective meaning making practices' which result in collaborative text production. This, she argues, 'can be a positive site for identity work, community building and the development of literate repertoires' (ibid: 103). The agency that is suggested by such a position on meaning making and text production is in direct opposition to the framing of the learner and the teacher in a mandated, performative culture. It challenges the new market discourse of education by reminding us that knowledge cannot be fixed. As Massey warns, the essentialising of cultural meaning 'to try and hold the world still […] eliminates also any possibility of real change' (2005: 38).

Massey's (2005) conception of place as a 'spatio-temporal event' is helpful to our understanding of the films we explore here and their representation of young people and their communities. Such a way of understanding place is important in two key ways. The first is that, rather than being a fixed, emotionally and ideologically neutral geographical point, place is representative of broad constellations of what we might describe as specific, local and contemporary realities. Equally important to this understanding of place is a connection between realities in a given context and many others across space and time; these include a past from which these realities emerge, a present in which they are experienced and a future which they will impact. As well as representing the places and communities that are important to them, these young film-makers engage narratives which move across space and time. The resonance of the films is also enriched by the meanings brought to it by the audience at each viewing. In making films explicitly about place, therefore, participants in the film project are involved in a continued (re)creation of that place. The multidimensional meanings and complex interplay of mode and form which are generated through engaging with place are powerful outcomes for learning in English classrooms. They can inform understanding not only of young people's creative work but also of their role as critically literate members of their communities.

We move now to discuss the film project in more depth. Following some background about how the project has worked, we examine films produced in three different schools. Through a focus on the role of place, we analyse how each film challenges dominant and reductive models of subject English and what this means to young people and the communities in which they live and learn.

The film project
Beginning in 2010 and running annually with each of our cohorts, the film project was devised to offer beginning teachers of English a way of engaging with their learners in authentic, purposeful, real-world contexts (Lankshear and Knobel 2011). The project involves trainees from across the ITE English routes at the university working in a partnership with local creative practitioners. All English trainees attend a workshop facilitated by the creative practitioners, where they learn skills of practical film-making and project management. The range of experience within each cohort varies hugely, in terms of practical skills and familiarity with film and media

terminology and practice. The emphasis in this workshop is on the range of roles needed to create a film and, as a group, the participants are invited to take on responsibility as script writers, the art department, sound and lighting as well as directing, camera work and appearing on screen. The focus on inclusivity, along with the accessibility of technical elements, makes the project easily transferable to trainees' own classrooms.

Beginning teachers can then opt to go on to develop a film-making project in their placement schools, identifying a group of pupils with which to work on planning and producing a short film of no longer than five minutes, using the media equipment available to them in their schools. More often than not, this equipment is relatively low-tech, low-cost and easy to use, such as FlipCams. One of the challenges faced by the young film-makers is learning how to creatively navigate the practical issues raised by the technology used, such as working with cameras with inbuilt microphones when filming shots at a distance from the actors, or the impact of the wind on sound quality when filming outdoors. The beginning teachers and their groups are free to choose the genre and content of their film, but a broad theme is given: 'This is my place'. Over the course of the project, which typically takes place in the Spring and early Summer terms, the beginning teachers who are leading film-making groups in their schools are invited back to campus for additional workshops led by a creative practitioner, with further input on filming, editing and project management.   Many of those who take part enlist the support of other colleagues or older students at school, in particular those working in the media and ICT departments, or studying media post-16. This support can range from loaning or demonstrating equipment and software to support with the final edit of the film.

At the end of the project, all of the young film-makers are invited, along with their teachers, friends and families, to a celebratory screening at an arts venue in the city centre. At this event, each group, led by the beginning teacher with whom they worked, is asked to share their experiences of making their film and they are presented with a certificate and an engraved 'Oscar' trophy, which has made its way to the trophy cabinet in some schools.

The films

The three films we explore here were all made by groups of students in Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14)[1]. One of the beginning teachers to have taken part in the project with a Year 7 group commented on why working with the younger pupils was important to her:

> Georgina: As is seemingly the case in schools entirely focussed on achieving a C at GCSE, KS3 is marginalised. We decided we wanted to change this and realised by not focussing on year 7 early on, as a school we often contributed to the 'switch-off' of students to English long before reaching KS4.

The examples we have chosen each focus on the school as the 'place' of the film, both in terms of its physical location and its topic. It is perhaps unsurprising that the school is such a key location given the restrictions on time and movement in a typical secondary school. Although there are some examples of films made during the course of the project which have used the school as a 'set' in a film such as a horror or a romantic comedy, in interpreting the broad title they are given, the majority of participating students choose their school as their explicit focus. In their representation of their school, the young film-makers present a view of it as 'the epitome of place in terms of it being a site of trajectories and negotiation' (Comber 2016: 23). Two of the films in particular show how the young film-makers deal quite explicitly with 'the situatedness of their school in its economic, social, cultural, historical, political and ecological environment' (ibid). The first of these is the film made by Lisa and her group at The Kingsville school.

'Our Place': The Kingsville School

Lisa made the decision to run the film-making project with her Year 7 class (aged 11-12) during one lesson a week over the course of the Spring term. She was keen for all members of the class to have a role and as a group they explored the significance of each different person's contribution to a finished film. The film they made was aimed at primary school children about to leave Year 6 and start secondary school (aged 10-

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for schools and beginning teachers

11). It is a film that therefore informs its audience about their new school. It also tells the story of the school's wider community, its history, and a vision of its future.

The film opens with a title frame reading 'This was our place' and a shot of two performers addressing the audience directly from behind folders made to look like learned tomes on local history. They give some of the history of the school and its community. The school was built in 1964 to serve the children of its surrounding villages, once inhabited by the workers of local collieries and their families. As the film informs us, the closest colliery to the school was closed in 1994. Although twenty years on since this, it is interesting to note that the pupils chose to open their film with this aspect of their local history. There is also reference to the legend of Robin Hood, described as 'just folklore, but still part of our story'.   The next scene is a depiction of a primary school classroom, and one of the performers addresses the camera with a tale of how he felt he hadn't fitted in initially, before eventually finding his 'place'. The film then cuts to a depiction of transition, with a shot of pupils approaching the school entrance and an interview with one of the group about how she felt about coming to Year 7 for the first time. We hear about this pupil's fears of being 'swirled' ('where the older children flush your head down the toilet'), before she is reassured that this is merely an urban myth and that everyone is friendly. Life in secondary school is depicted through shots of pupils moving up stairs and along corridors, and an interaction with a teacher (more of which later). The final scenes are introduced with the caption 'This will be our place'. In a fictionalised encounter, a doctor bumps into a prime minister and both realise that they went to the school.

'This is Our Place': High Bridge
Like Lisa at The Kingsville School, Ella decided to work on the film project with her Year 7 group as part of a wider module she had devised to explore genre. The film made at High Bridge was aimed at promoting the school to an outside audience as a place to learn. The school is located on a large estate in one of the most deprived wards on the edge of an already deprived city. Although small as a geographic location, the area is served by two secondary schools, one of which is a new build which attracts the greater share of intake and which has led to a falling roll for High Bridge, which finds itself not only having to work to challenge the wider discourses

of deficit which affect the community in which it is located, but also dealing with competition for pupils at a local level.

The film opens with a celebratory title frame - 'This is our place' - and takes the audience through a sequence of focuses throughout the school, framed around the experiences of students in the Year 7 group. One of the early comments heard on the film is made by one of the film-makers: 'just because the building looks old doesn't mean it is a bad school'. The film states that pupils at the school are 'adventurous', as it moves into a spoof wildlife documentary, with boys walking down the corridor as if it were a jungle and a voice-over huskily describing the fact that they are looking for a 'wild creature' (Figure 1). This wild creature is revealed, after much screaming and wobbly camera action, to be their English teacher, shown cheerfully greeting them at the door of their classroom. The film includes head to head interviews with the Principal, Deputy and Assistant Principals, a maths teacher, a PE Teacher (who is described in a caption as 'a former pro-cricket player'), and a member of the pastoral team. There are long and lingering shots of Cornflake, the school snake, who lives in one of the science labs, looked after by the science teacher, and is clearly a key presence in the film-makers' experience of their school. The film splices a range of voices describing the school and what it means to be part of its community with shots of the Year 9 girls (aged 13-14) dance group, students cooking, making pottery and learning in maths. There is a lot of pride evident in the film, from staff and pupils, and a strong message of being 'part of something that's bigger than yourself'.

It has been recognised that 'students' sense of belonging affects the extent to which they can embrace and negotiate the school as a learning space' (Comber, 2016: 23). This sense of belonging to a community is the focus of the third film.

'This is My Place': Silver Hill
Unlike the groups led by Lisa and Ella, the group at Silver Hill, led by Kirsty, met after school to plan and produce their film. They were all in Year 9 and were nominated by their English teachers to take part. Silver Hill is located in a rural village which serves a broad community, including the surrounding ex-mining villages.

Kirsty explained that the students 'interpreted their 'place' in school as meaning how many friends you had, whether you were bullied and how you felt when at school'. Of the three films we describe, this is the only one to feature a narrative storyline, although the plot features themes which are common across many of the films made as part of the project as a whole. It is also the only film without dialogue; the scenes are accompanied by a track by the musician Badly Drawn Boy. The film features a young male protagonist who arrives on the school bus one morning, and is seen in a series of scenes feeling isolated and being excluded from social interaction. We can assume that the boy is new to the school and trying to find his 'place'. The scenes depict different places around the school, including an English classroom and the dinner hall. In each, the boy struggles to find 'his place', ignored and excluded by his peers. The final scenes show him outside in the grounds of the school, where he joins a group of students sitting under a tree; the group get on well, passing away the rest of the afternoon as we cut back to the classroom clock showing the end of the school day. The final scene shows the new group of friends walking away from the school together (Figure 2).

Discussion

The project aimed to develop a range of skills amongst beginning teachers of English, including subject and technical expertise, experience of leading extra-curricular projects and creative collaboration with students and other colleagues, in and out of school. One participant explained the potential for classroom learning that she saw as emerging from the project; this includes examining film shots alongside sentence types in writing, 'relating English skills to students as more than reading books', and the 'soft skills' of working on and carrying the momentum of a long term project. For this beginning teacher, the project was 'a totally win/win situation', for her own professional development as well as for her students:

> Georgina: you get to learn about new aspects of the English curriculum and harnessing creativity and technology and they get a rewarding opportunity to showcase their work in a public environment with prestige and pride.

Our focus here, however, is specifically on the ways in which the ITE film project has provided the opportunity for the beginning teachers and their pupils to represent

themselves and the communities in which they live and learn, and the potential for such collaborative work in English classrooms to engage creatively with identities in place. We turn now to discussing three aspects of the films in relation to this focus. First, we consider how the films have engaged with the topic of place in relation to school. We then consider how the learners see English, and the potential for the subject represented by both the process and the products of the film project. Finally, we consider the transformative potential of collaborative working to disrupt the framing of learners as passive recipients of static knowledge suggested by currently mandated curriculum and pedagogy.

The place of school

Trajectories and negotiation (Comber, 2016) are strong themes in each film. We see characters involved in transition and movement across time, and the physical and emotional negotiation of 'my place', both individually and as a wider community of young people. There is a strong message communicated in each film that their place is a place for all. This is represented in the High Bridge film by the focus on the celebration of different subjects, including the practical and creative, rather than merely a focus on classrooms as the sites of reductive models of knowledge. For the High Bridge pupils, their place is also constituted by different people, across generations and hierarchies. In telling the story of their school, the young film-makers had to arrange to interview senior teachers, writing emails and holding meetings where they were the experts who knew what they wanted to achieve.

The films also represent the negotiation of place across time. Each has a sense of the school as a place which exists and which is joined by new members of the community who negotiate their place. School is also a place which remains after they leave, and this is directly addressed by the group at The Kingsville School, who expressly locate the history of their school within a wider context, but who also represent the way the school will stay with them as their 'place' when they have moved on in their own lives and find themselves as prime ministers and doctors. One of the teachers interviewed in the High Bridge film was herself a former pupil and makes connections to her own experience in terms of how the school has changed, but also what has, for her, stayed the same about this place.

The place of the subject

The subject of English is represented *in* each of the three films we have examined. English teachers are presented as an untouchable other, be they the 'wild creature' of High Bridge's wildlife documentary, or the stern gatekeeper standing at the door to greet her late students in Kingsville's film. In Silver Hill's film, the isolated protagonist is shown sitting alone in his English lesson, with the teacher framed by an over the shoulder shot as a distant figure writing on a whiteboard populated by wordy learning objectives (Figure 3). The English classroom is represented in each film by doors and corridors, students sitting alone at desks facing the front, and an infrastructure of whiteboards, paper and pen.

However, the subject as represented *by* the films, and the process of making them, challenges the reduced model so prevalent in the experience of learners and teachers negotiating the mandated curriculum in contemporary classrooms. Each film is the result of drawing on a range of resources, not all of which are directly represented by the official curriculum. Pupils involved revealed themselves to have sophisticated understanding of the grammar of film, and were supported to develop this within the focus of the project. There is clever use of devices to show the passing of time, for example, or the movement between locations. Stairs and doors are used to good effect in each of the films to represent advancement of the narrative (Figure 4). Kingsville is an excellent example of playfulness with genre, with the shift from historical documentary to a narrative representation of the future. The pupils' sense of genre is exemplified in their choice to include a 'blooper reel' to accompany their end credits. Such a device is usually reserved for lighthearted films, and its inclusion suggests attention to the conventions of the genre. However, we can also infer that the pupils feel the end product should include the playfulness and fun of the process itself. The 'blooper reel', where we can hear the laughter of Lisa alongside that of her pupils, reminds us that the process and product of the film-making project not only allows for mistakes to be made, but celebrates them as a key part of the story about place and identity.

The place of pupils

The young film-makers represent their place through the broad range of skills and knowledges which Comber (2016) sees as inherently engaged by place-based

pedagogies. Amongst the 'literacy repertoires' drawn upon are documentary, autobiography, public speaking, self-evaluation and interviewing, as well as the 'new hybrid genres' evident in the films themselves. The knowledge of place engaged in making these films is demographic, geographic, historical, sociological, cultural and linguistic (such as the use of the local term 'swirling') (see Comber, 2016: 64).

Ella outlined the roles undertaken by her pupils in making their film at High Bridge. The class consisted of eight Year 7 students who were placed in this group because of a range of issues, from diagnosed special educational needs to behavioural difficulties and disaffection elsewhere in the school. She described the way the project gave opportunities for each of the participants to develop in their own ways:

> Ella: Each one of these students requires something different in order to progress and the different tasks involved allowed them to each face their own challenges. Whilst they all reached their end point of creating a film, they made achievements along the way and these were a key part of the process.

Ella feels that the interview process involved in the project 'majorly contributed to the confidence' of High Bridge's film-makers in 'dealing with people in a position of authority – key skills for life after school'. Within the classroom environment, during the process of making the film, 'the relationships between students have strengthened so they felt reassured around each other to put themselves in more vulnerable situations.' The project also improved the social interaction between pupils about their English lessons: 'their parents attended the premiere where before they would have had limited involvement in a unit of work.' Ella's description of the impact of the project on her class suggests that their involvement gave them an opportunity for the focus to be on 'learning to do and be, rather than what they will be learning about' (Lankshear and Knobel 2011: 232).

Georgina, another beginning teacher involved in the project, reflects that the project 'allowed the students to show pride in their school and in the group. A project like this is brilliant for getting seemingly disparate students to work together effectively.' The collaboration which is a central feature of the project reframes power relationships in relation to knowledge and place. Learning is taking place in the

relationships between pupils and their peers, with sharing of knowledge and skills about film as well as their lived experiences of place, as well as teachers learning from their pupils and from creative professionals. The film project has seen many examples of hierarchies disrupted by the process, with senior teachers cast in different roles on camera, and also incorporating the finished product into the narrative they themselves present of their school, as in the case of High Bridge, where the film has been shown to prospective pupils and their parents, and to teachers outside the school in a presentation given by its headteacher.

Connecting community through film: the possibilities of place

The collaborations that emerged from the film project led to powerful learning in several ways. At a time when education is narrowing, particularly in the case of mandated schooled literacies, we argue that there is all the more need to recognise and to encourage opportunities for learning where 'students are not to be seen as objects to be moulded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility' (Biesta 2013: 1). This agency is central to the film project. In making films about what they saw as 'their place', young people were able to do more than merely *connect to* knowledge through a curriculum based on the fixing of meanings. Rather, they were provided with the means *to connect*, across time and space, a wider repertoire of resources drawn from both within and outside their English classrooms, in an act of what Comber (2016: 64) describes as 'reciprocal knowledge building'.

These young film-makers have actively reappropriated elements of the dominant narratives which exist within and about their communities and use these to present their own alternatives. The process and the product of collaborative film-making has exposed the structures experienced by learners in English classrooms, and, to use Massey's image, 'cracked them open to reveal the existence of new voices' (2010: 42). Education systems dominated by new market discourse can be stifled by aversion to risk. The participants in the film project, both pupils and beginning teachers, have been able to work within a space where they can learn from taking risks, with what they learn, where and how, and, as Biesta (2013: 1) notes, 'if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether.' We would argue that this facilitated a disposition towards risk-taking that extends beyond the time and place of the project itself.

In this film project, young people have been able to represent how they fit into a story of their community. These stories can stretch back in time, and across spaces far wider than the boundaries of the school campus and those imposed by mandated curriculum. We hope we have been able to demonstrate too that the films, and the process of making them, also represent new possibilities for the future.

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