Writing and popular culture
Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield
Popular culture

...the daily, venacular, common cultural environment around us all ... the television we watch, the movies we see, the fast food, or slow food, we eat, the clothes we wear

(Browne, 1987:2)
Children’s popular culture
Areas of research reviewed

1. Child-led use of popular culture in the writing classroom

2. Teachers utilising popular cultural texts in the writing curriculum

3. Use/adaptation of out-of-school popular cultural practices for the classroom
1. Child-led use of popular culture

- Dyson (1994; 1996; 1997; 1999; 2001; 2003; 2006; 2008) - composition as a social process which draws from cultural toolbox. That inevitably includes popular culture. Children use these popular ‘textual toys’, to explore, construct and perform identities and position themselves and others in social groups and broker friendships.

- Vasquez (2005) - case study of a boy who sneaks in Pokemon under his teacher’s nose.

- Ranker (2007) - use of a writing workshop gave the space for children to draw from computer games etc in their writing.

- Newkirk (2002) - reports on Mike Anderson, a teacher who noted that children in his class drew on the discourses of: good versus evil; heroes and underdogs; action / excitement / adventure; magical powers; friendship.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong> Pupils draw on themes common in popular cultural texts e.g. good versus evil; heroes and underdogs; magical powers and friendship</td>
<td>Dyson (1999; 2001; 2003) Newkirk (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settings</strong> Pupils use settings from popular culture for their writing e.g. football field</td>
<td>Dyson (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story grammar</strong> Pupils develop narratives that draw on the story grammars of non-linear texts e.g. video games</td>
<td>Graham (2004) Ranker (2006; 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Textual forms/layout</strong> Pupils use and adapt layouts used in popular texts e.g. comics</td>
<td>Ranker (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is redesign, not replication.
2. Teachers introducing popular culture into the writing curriculum: film
BFI - Reframing literacy

* Worked with 70 LAs in England
* Professional development for lead practitioners on the use of film in the literacy curriculum
* Evaluation took place in 35 LAs
Activities with teachers

- Work on use of short films.
- Work on film production, including editing.
- A focus on linking drama work to film production.
- Writing of units of work based on specific short films.
- Work with individual teachers in their classrooms e.g. modelling, co-teaching.
Activities with children

- Group discussions regarding films.
- Drama techniques used to explore characterisation, plot, setting etc.
- Analysis of films using techniques such as zone of relevance.
- Creation of poems, lists, character descriptions, thought bubbles, stories and other text types based on films.
- Creation of storyboards.
- Writing text messages between characters.
- Writing opening sentences after listening to soundtrack.
- Development of advertising materials relating to films.
- Production of live action and animated films.
- Running film projects as ‘virtual’ businesses.
- Sequencing of stills.
- Re-editing films to change genre.
- Creation of trailers using short sequences from films.
Impact on pupils
Sustaining commitment – children had been:

- On task for longer periods of time, staying focused
- Prepared to have a go and so producing longer pieces of writing
- Demonstrating evidence of self-correcting/editing
- Demonstrating much less time wasting and much more enthusiasm to get on with the writing
Showing greater independence – children had been:

- Keen to get started on independent tasks
- Involved in producing their own resources
- Writing independently and choosing to write
- Focus groups have taken a more active role in group work
- Demonstrated improved behaviour/ working more happily with others
Enthusiasm, confidence, motivation – children had been:

- Demonstrating confidence developed in speaking and listening as well as writing. Some children who were not normally confident really ‘shone’, including children with special educational needs.
- Abandoning avoidance strategies and barriers, often psychological, were overcome.
- More confident to put their ideas down.
The films gave me more to talk about. I didn’t speak much in class before, but now I will.

Using films made me more confident to speak out because I knew there were no right or wrong answers.

I really enjoyed talking about the films – I had lots to say.
### Impact: Composition and effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary limited</td>
<td>More sophisticated vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative writing limited in ideas and complexity</td>
<td>More able to describe characters’ motives and feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing brief and lacking in detail</td>
<td>Development of narrative viewpoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorial voice missing</td>
<td>More understanding of the importance of settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective use of description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stories came alive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact: Text structure and organisation

Before
- Limited use of different text types
- Ideas written in isolation
- Ideas muddled

After
- Writing at greater length
- Greater independence in the writing process
- Improved structure including use of paragraphs
- Greater cohesion and consistency
- Improved presentation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Simple sentence construction</td>
<td>• More complex sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Limited sentence openers</td>
<td>• Variety of connectives used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Basic punctuation used</td>
<td>• Improved use of punctuation – both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accuracy and variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ideas linked more cohesively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effective word choice established</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One hot day in May, a loud cracking was heard in the woods. Some chameleons hatched out but one hatched out with a chainsaw. The other chameleons looked at him in disgust and then walked away. After a while, they went to get some breakfast. They had some insects. They were delicious. A minute later they plodded down to the beach. The chameleon was petrified because he panted through the wood's leaves. Eventually he got to the mountain. He tried to climb up the jagged scary mountain. Next he met the egal. Oh No! he thought. The chameleon was caching up but the egal was petrified and flew away.

I went to the USA because my Mum once lived there. We went to the beach and I splashed my dad in my swimming pool that I made.
Other aspects of popular culture teachers have drawn upon

- Comics and magazines (Marsh and Millard, 2000)
- Computer games (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2005; Beavis, 2004; 2007; Millard, 2005)
- Hip Hop music (Davies and Pahl, 2006; Meacham 2004; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2004)
- WWF wrestling (Alvermann, Huddleston, and Hagood, 2004)
3. Use/adaptation of out-of-school popular writing practices for the classroom: virtual worlds
Writing in homes and early years settings

- On-screen writing extensive/ on-screen writing minimal
- Multimodal/ focused on written word and still image
- Fluidity, crossing of boundaries/ limited to written page
- Multiple authorship/ primarily single authorship
- Child constituted as social writer/ child constituted as individual writer
- Shaped by mediascapes/ little reference to mediascapes
- Analysis linked to production/ analysis and production separate
Virtual World Registered Accounts Q1 2009

No data shown for worlds under 5m registered accounts. Includes estimates.

Copyright KZero 2006-2009
Permission required prior to republishing.
I predict that in ten years we will be faced with a group of socially withdrawn teenagers who are “addicted” to living in their virtual worlds. The window of opportunity to anticipate this problem and to implement research, regulation and intervention efforts is rapidly closing.

(Putnam, 1997, p211)
In the eyes of the debunkers, the “virtual” (the false, the inauthentic, the new, the disembodied) threatens to invade or pollute “the real” (the genuine, the authentic, the traditional, the embodied).

(Valentine and Holloway, 2002, p304)
Club Penguin

- Developed by an independent Canadian company in 2005
- Acquired by Disney Inc. for £350 million in 2006
- Aimed at children aged 6-14 years of age
- Has a two-tier membership structure
Moderator
Newspaper
Function buttons
Map
‘play as a generative site for developing the agency of the cultural producer or worker’ (Ito, 2006)
Moving on to look at the study, I will outline the methods used to explore young children’s use of Club Penguin. The school in which I focused the study was in a largely white working class area of Sheffield. One hundred and seventy five children aged five to eleven completed an online survey using Google Docs. Five and six year old children were helped to complete the survey where necessary. 52% of this sample reported using virtual worlds on a regular basis. I then interviewed 15 children across this age group in greater depth about their use of virtual worlds. Finally, I filmed 3 eleven-year old children, two girls and one boy, in their homes over the period of one month using Club Penguin, undertaking four visits to each child. I filmed them, over their shoulders or to the side of them, using Club Penguin from the time they logged on in each visit to the time they logged off. I talked to the children about what they were doing now and again. I analysed just over eight hours of video data from this process. I also interviewed these three children and their parents in depth. The families were given a gift token to thank them for their participation. The study was therefore varied in terms of methods used, which I feel is necessary in examining children’s use of virtual worlds. I did not have access to user data in ‘Club Penguin’ and so for the three eleven year olds, could only analyse the patterns of activities that I observed over the four visits I made to them. I did not conduct an ethnographic study as an insider as there is no facility in Club Penguin to identify oneself as an adult researcher, as is possible in Second Life, for example. All children’s responses have been anonymised.
What is the nature and extent of young children’s engagement in literacy and multimodal communicative practices in ‘Club Penguin’?
Purposes for literacy (Cairney and Ruge, 1998)

- Literacy for establishing or maintaining relationships
- Literacy for accessing or displaying information
- Literacy for pleasure and self expression
- Literacy for skills development
On the left-hand side of this slide, I consider the use of literacy in Club Penguin for establishing or maintaining relationships. Children used both safe chat and open chat to communicate with other penguins. This was not always related to age. Of course for younger children, the use of safe chat offered a means of communicating when they were at an early stage of learning how to write, so they were able to choose words and phrases that they could recognise as whole words rather than decoding. However, some older children also reported using the set phrases rather than writing, as sometimes when they tried to write phrases, other penguins would get bored and wander off! Children also used emoticons regularly to express their emotions and sent postcards to other penguins which expressed messages of friendship or communicated phrases such as ‘I like your igloo!’

There was evidence in the study that children also used the chat facilities in Club Penguin like an instant messaging system in order to communicate with people they knew. For example, 7-year-old Terence stated that: I send some [instant messages] to my cousins and once I said, “Hello, can I come over?” because he lives near Morrisons. Sometimes I say, “Can I come over, but sometimes his mum doesn’t let me...so I say, “OK, I’ll see you later”’. Indeed, my own young nieces recently moved to Italy from the UK and they tell me that they communicate with their English friends through Club Penguin. Perhaps, as we have seen with young people and adults who use their social networking sites for a variety of purposes such as blogging and chatting, younger children are trying to converge uses through these virtual worlds.

In the right-hand side of the slide, I have documented how literacy was used to access or display information. This ranged from the use of environmental print to navigate the virtual world, reading games instructions and clues on quests and reading catalogues in order to purchase merchandise for avatars and igloos, or just undertake a little window-shopping. Finally, children read the Club Penguin Times frequently to find out what was happening, or read jokes, stories and puzzles.
I send some [instant messages] to my cousins and once I said, “Hello, can I come over?” because he lives near Morrisons. Sometimes I say, “Can I come over?”, but sometimes his mum doesn’t let me, so I say, “OK, I’ll see you later”.

(Terence, aged 7)
Writing for displaying information

• Used chat facilities to broadcast information about events e.g. ‘Collage at my place on the map!’
Inevitably, children engaged in a wide range of literacy activities for pleasure and self-expression. They read poems, jokes and stories in the newspaper and read books in the library. There was also a lot of creative activity in that children reported submitting jokes and stories to the newspaper, being disappointed when they did not get printed. However, considering reports that Club Penguin attracts 30,000 such submissions daily, this is not surprising.

There are few opportunities for user-generated content in the world, which is perhaps due to the amount of work this would generate for Club Penguin producers in terms of moderation. However, this is a shame as it limits children’s creative productions. In this study, I observed penguin avatars creating collages, that is setting up scenes that they could take stills of and mashing these with a soundtrack. The children in this study reported searching YouTube for Club Penguin machinima and there are many examples there of children’s creative productions in the world.

There were examples of collaborative language play and literacy being integral to children’s play in the virtual world. I don’t have time to talk today about the play that I observed in Club Penguin, but if you are interested in this area, IM me and I can send you a link to a paper I have written about the kinds of play in which young children engaged. It will be of no surprise to all of you, who are aware of the affordances of virtual worlds, that Club Penguin lends itself to a rich range of play activities, including fantasy play and role play. I have had long discussions with early years educators about how ‘real’ this play is and I would argue that it is as real as the play you see happening in the role play area in kindergarten, it is just a different level of symbolic play. For example, in the role play area in kindergarten, a child might dress up as a pirate and use a wooden stick as a sword. In Club Penguin, it is the avatar, not the child, dressed up as a pirate and she or he might have the avatar use a virtual stick as a sword. There isn’t too much distance between those scenarios, I would suggest, in terms of symbolic play.
Writing for identity construction and performance
Writing for construction and maintenance of social networks
I undertook an analysis of the activities undertaken in the 8 hours of video I filmed of the three children using Club Penguin. This chart outlines that the most frequent activity, 28% of the time, was playing games, a figure which we would have expected. The second most frequent activity was sustained reading, at 15% of the time. I did not use eye tracking software but I did observe children reading texts and asked them questions to check comprehension. In addition, some of this activity related to the interactive books, in which children typed in pre-determined text. This contrasted to the skim reading I observed, which involved children flicking through the pages of the newspaper or catalogues. The children were sociable creatures and spent longer visiting other penguin’s igloos than in their own, often checking out the acquisitions of others, such as their flat-screen TVs. I was surprised at the small amount of time the children spent shopping, but then as two out of the three children were not members, this may have been due to the fact that they could only buy a limited amount of goods anyway.
So, looking at the practices overall, I want to draw on Steinkhueler’s work on the literacy practices related to ‘World of Warcraft’. She referred to a constellation of literacy practices which included both within-world and out-of-world practices. So on the right of this diagram, I have summarised the within-world literacy activities I have talked about so far. The left hand side of the diagram indicates a range of activities which move from the official fandom space to unofficial spaces. There are thousands of such spaces on the web. There are blogs, role play forums, fan fiction sites, chat forums and YouTube activity which all relate to Club Penguin. These sites are providing rich opportunities for children’s engagement in reading and writing activities that are meaningful to them.
Welcome to Fan Fiction - Track updates to this page by creating an account (free)

Clara: My name's Clara, I'm the leader of the Ice Club. I'm going to send you to the South Pole on a mission.

Me: Okay, I accept.

Clara: We need to find a way to stop the evil Mrperson from destroying the world. I've heard that he's planning to release a virus that will turn everyone into ice statues.

Me: That sounds like a serious threat. How can I help?

Clara: You're a member of the Ice Club, and you have powerful abilities. You can use your ice powers to stop Mrperson.

Me: I'll do my best. Where should I start?

Clara: First, you need to find Mrperson's hideout. It's hidden in the North Pole. You can use your ice powers to break through the ice walls and find him.

Me: Got it. I'll set out immediately.

Clara: Good luck. We need you to stop Mrperson before it's too late.

Me: I won't let him do it. I'll be back to report on my progress.

Clara: Good. Keep me updated.

Me: Sure thing. I'll let you know as soon as I have more information.

Clara: Great. Stay safe.

Me: I will. See you soon.

---

Clara: Clara here. I'm sending you to the South Pole to stop Mrperson. Remember, he's a dangerous enemy. Use all your powers to defeat him.

Me: Yes, Clara. I won't let him get away with his evil plans.

Clara: Good. We need you to stop him before it's too late.

Me: I'll do my best. Where do I find Mrperson's hideout?

Clara: It's hidden in the North Pole. You can use your ice powers to break through the ice walls and find him.

Me: I understand. I'll set out immediately.

Clara: Good luck. We need you to stop Mrperson before it's too late.

Me: I won't let him do it. I'll be back to report on my progress.

Clara: Great. Keep me updated.

Me: Sure thing. I'll let you know as soon as I have more information.

Clara: Good. Stay safe.

Me: I will. See you soon.

---

Me: Mrperson, you've done enough. It's time to stop.

Mrperson: You're not strong enough to stop me. I'm the Ice King. My powers are stronger than yours.

Me: That may be true, but I won't let you harm anyone else.

Mrperson: You're just a silly fool. I'll crush you like a insect.

Me: I'm not afraid. I'll defeat you and stop your evil plans.

Mrperson:挑战我吧，愚蠢的人类！

Me: Challenge me, Mrperson. I'll show you what I'm made of.

Mrperson: You're going to regret this.

Me: Not if I have anything to say about it. I'll stop you.

---

Me: Clara, I've stopped Mrperson. He's no longer a threat.

Clara: That's great news. We can finally rest easy.

Me: I'm glad it's over.

Clara: Thank you for your efforts. You've saved the world.

Me: It was my pleasure.

Clara: Well done. We need you to continue protecting the world from evil.

Me: I'll do my best. I won't let anyone harm anyone else again.

Clara: Good. Keep me updated.

Me: Sure thing. I'll let you know as soon as I have more information.

Clara: Great. Stay safe.

Me: I will. See you soon.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[image]</td>
<td>This takes place in and out of a Haunted Mansion at nighttime. Note: You can be ghosts but only if it says you can. You know the rules so I will just start.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Owen: I go on YouTube sometimes and they have like little presentations on...it’s funny because it’s like the funniest clips of Club Penguin and stuff and they fall and stuff.

Stacey: You can type ‘Club Penguin’ and it comes up and there’ll be like and there’s music in t’background and it can show you slideshows.
I will post some good CP videos here for you to watch.

From Ineit2

The Hamster Dance
omg I love yours videos my favorite one is the other side of me on youtube!! I love you so so much!! yay! please talk to me

**pucca109**

OOh AAH!

**pucca109**

URL REMOVED

Lionmaster27, Bobo, if you are reading this, click on this URL!

Ineuli2 says:
Please do not advertise on my website. Thanks!

summer109

hi um... I made a VID but it wont upload and I want u 2 see it.the name isso many penguins

**code0dd**

Summer, maybe I can help you.
If you're saving it as a WMV file, then it won't upload.
When you are done, click "Save to my computer" and save it as whatever, and then leave everything else alone. It should upload. Bye!

Edited by Ineuli2: To fix grammar to make comment more understandable.
new ethos (epoch) stuff

...active collaboration and participation, leveraging collective intelligence via practices like eliciting user annotations, distributing and wilfully sharing expertise, decentring authorship, mobilizing information for relatedness, hybridization, and the like.

(Lankshear and Knobel, 2007:20)
Writing skills

- Writing for known and unknown audiences
- Using language for particular effect
- Using text to negotiate, collaborate and evaluate
Multimodal skills fostered in CP

- Understanding of the affordances of different modes
- Ability to understand salience of visual images and icons
- Ability to manipulate images to achieve specific purposes
- Ability to navigate within and across screens
- Use gesture/ sound appropriately for purpose and audience
Drawing on these practices in the writing curriculum

- Children writing stories about avatars and their adventures
- Instructions for using a virtual world
- Club Penguin newspaper
- Comic strips based on virtual world
But - reduction of practices to production of closed choice of texts?
SJ: weve done loads of things on barnsborough
GP: its good real good
guy: yes GP
   SJ: newspaper reps taking notes flash back story
      loads!!
GB: we have been doing notes writing reports and doing
    a flashback
    story
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural capital model</td>
<td>Popular culture central to children’s identity construction and performance outside of school, therefore important to recognise within educational contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third space model</td>
<td>Children will bring their popular cultural interests into the classroom either officially or unofficially and create spaces in which home and classroom intersect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian model</td>
<td>Teachers can draw on children’s popular culture to orientate them to school writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recontextualisation model</td>
<td>Children bring their popular cultural interests into the classroom and recontextualisation of both vernacular and official knowledge occurs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research questions

- What kinds of recontextualisation occur across different modes? (e.g. tracing the transduction process across semiotic modes)
- What tools are drawn upon in this recontextualisation process and how can children learn to draw upon these tools more effectively?
- What implications does this theoretical model have for pedagogy, curriculum and assessment?
There is pleasure and power in learning to craft movement, sound and, yes, written words. But it’s the breadth of the symbolic repertoire, the sense of competent agency, and the social sophistication to shift one’s actions to suit local conditions, that allow children to become full participants in their presents and in their travels into their futures. (Dyson, 2003:3)