

m4Lit: a teen m-novel project in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The m4Lit (mobile phones for literacy) pilot project will create a mobile novel (m-novel), published on a mobisite in English and in isiXhosa, to explore ways of supporting teen leisure reading and writing around fictional texts in South Africa, using mobile media. The story will be published serially and invite readers to interact with it as it unfolds – teens will vote on and discuss the unfolding plot, leave comments, and finally submit a written piece as part of a competition. The study will contribute to the understanding of mobile literacies, from a new literacy studies perspective.

Author Keywords

mobile phones; m-novel; teenagers; South Africa; new literacy studies; new literacies; literacy

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the preliminary stages of the m4Lit (mobile phones for literacy) project, which will use a mobisite to publish a mobile novel (m-novel) written for South African teens, and made available in both English and isiXhosa, with the aim of exploring the role of mobile phones in teen reading and writing practices among isiXhosa speaking youth in Cape Town.

The project will focus on understanding how teenagers use Internet-enabled phones in reading fiction for leisure, how they discuss reading experiences with their peers in an online environment, and how they write and share their own story ideas. The premises for m4Lit are the following: First, internet-enabled mobile phones are already central to the many informal literacy activities of youth culture, particularly those associated with short message service (SMS) and instant messaging (IM). Second, such phones can potentially play a significant role in distribution of reading material (whether for formal education or for leisure). Third, phones can give young people in developing countries access to otherwise inaccessible reading material. Based on these premises, the m4Lit project will investigate the extent to which South African teens access the m-novel via their phones and integrate it into existing literacy practices, whether they choose to use their phones to engage in reading communities, to contribute to new participatory genres, or to develop audiences for their own creative work.

This short paper provides the background to the project, sketching the literacy and information and communication technology (ICT) landscape for teens in South Africa (SA), and describing key components of the project: the m-novel, the mobisite, and the planned research.

LITERACY PRACTICES AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

South African schools still struggle to teach the majority of children how to read and write, particularly in ways that help them to succeed academically (Fleisch, 2008:2). Fleisch (2008) reports the findings of a range of standardised literacy tests where study after study finds severe problems with literacy teaching in all but a small minority of middle-class schools. Despite 15 years of redress for the educational inequities of apartheid, this achievement gap reflects how social class still strongly conditions poor and working-class children's under-achievement. Classroom studies of literacy practices explain that teachers' reliance on drill-based pedagogic approaches to reading give rise to a 'highly circumscribed version of literacy' (Prinsloo, 2004:302). A switch to English medium instruction in early years does not develop children's abilities to make meanings in their home languages and heavy use of phonics leaves little time for reading stories (Pluddeman, Mati and Mahlalela, 1998).

Children's introduction to literacy practices before they go to school, and those they encounter in their leisure time play an important role in their future success at school. This differential access of middle and working class children to school literacy and artefacts such as books begins at home (Fleisch, 2008:64, Prinsloo, 2004), continues during pre-school (Prinsloo and Stein, 2004) and contributes to distinctive bimodal patterns of school achievement from the foundation phase of primary school (WCED, 2004, Moloj and Strauss, 2005) through to secondary school (Fleisch, 2008:25-26). South African studies show that, although many poor families are extraordinarily committed to literacy and education, there is no easy fit between the literacy practices many children learn at home, the practices entrenched in marginal

schools (where books, libraries and computers are also scarce), and those valued in elite contexts (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006, Fleisch, 2008:76). Thus literacy practices in most South African homes do not prepare children for schooling in the same way that middle class practices do, while most children's schooling sets them up to fail.

There are few studies of leisure reading among older township children. One small-scale study (Pretorius and Ribbens, 2005) of both lower-middle and working class children in grade seven and eight reports that all children enjoyed reading and had similar levels of access to newspapers at home. Nonetheless, the working class children (who attended a township school) reported little leisure reading of fiction, none had read a book at home in the previous year and few remembered their parents reading stories to them. This limited exposure to books means that learners are unfamiliar with children's literature or popular youth genres such as fantasy or comic books. A national survey found that, on average, South African children have access to about 32 books at home, but that almost two-thirds report having no books or less than five books at home (Moloi and Strauss, 2005). Such studies are primarily interested in the development of schooled literacy, and seldom consider other popular leisure literacy practices.

NEW LITERACIES

In contrast to this picture, the leisure literacy practices of wealthier teens in the global north are well documented. Studies show them reading and writing more than ever, in 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2003) (where fans gather to discuss their favourite movies, games, or books), through blogs, in messages on social network pages, in emails and instant messages, and via mobile phones (Lenhart et al., 2008). The popularity of these new conversational genres has given rise to a 'participatory culture' where 'consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content,' (Jenkins, 2006). These participatory practices and other new approaches towards literacy and digital media are often referred to as 'new literacies'.

Scholars tend to assume that all young people have access to computers, and that 'new literacies' develop through children's extensive out-of-school experience in using computers to access the Internet, digital media, and games (e.g. Snyder, 1998, Gee, 2003, Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu, 2008). In fact, these new literacies are far from universal, and there are complex relationships between local and global in digital literacy practices around the world (Snyder and Prinsloo, 2007). This becomes clear when we consider South African teens' extensive out-of-school mobile literacies.

Mobile literacies

Studies of children's 'new literacies' in the global north have yet to consider the distinct features of literacy associated with mobile phone use for the majority of the world. For example, mobile phones are discussed in only 4 of the 1315 pages of the mammoth *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, while a case study of mobile learning focuses on an atypical experiment in mobile gaming with a PDA (Coiro et al., 2008). This is a significant gap if we consider the extent of global mobile phone use and also levels of public concern (Thurlow and Pof, 2009) about how text messaging (SMS or texting) deviates from formal usage, and claims of a supposedly deleterious effect on literacy and language use. Seen differently, mobile phones have entrenched new uses for literacy, notably the reading and writing skills associated with texting (cf. Thurlow and Pof, 2009). Evidence from countries such as Japan suggests that, in addition to short discursive exchanges with intimates, young people also use phones to read and write longer texts, or m-novels. Young female audiences have made m-novels into major commercial successes – the most popular are published in print form as well. In 2007, five out of the top 10 novels in Japan were such m-novels (Onishi, 2008).

South African mobile phone use reached 90.16 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2008 (ITU, 2009). Popular language and literacy practices are adapting to mobile use, inflected both by global standards and local linguistic features and cultural content (Deumert and Masinyana, 2008, Deumert, Klein and Masinyana, 2008). Even Internet use has a local, and mobile accent. In the urban townships of SA, growing numbers of people, particularly young people, are accessing digital media and the Internet via their mobile phones (Donner and Gitau, 2009, Kreutzer, 2009). One of the factors driving this shift is a low cost mobile IM application known as MXit. According to a company representative, MXit has 15 million registered users, 13 million of whom are South African, and 49% of these are between 19-25 (Laura Hallam, 2009, personal communication, 14 August). Internet access is thus primarily associated with IM as a variant of texting, and MXit reports that its users send 250 million messages per day. The first local mobile book was published on MXit in May 2009 – *Emily and the Battle of the Veil*, a 300 page fantasy story for teens.

This study is informed by the framework of New Literacy Studies which sees literacy not only as a technique (the ability to read and write), but as a social practice which always takes place within specific contexts, and which is implicated in relations of power and identity (cf. Street, 1993; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). For example, many South African children encounter computers only in the context of the circumscribed classroom practices associated with school literacy (Walton, 2007, Prinsloo and Walton, 2008). South African mobile literacies take on a different character because the social contexts of phone use are radically different from those of computer use. The mere presence of a technology such as mobile phones or mobile Internet will not shift cultural practices in marginal contexts and make them resemble more highly valued activities in better resourced contexts elsewhere. Cellphones can now access the Internet, but this does not

mean that teens will want to use them to ‘leapfrog’ to elite literacy practices such as reading fantasy novels. This project investigates whether South African teens would want to use phones to read engaging fictional texts, or to write and discuss stories with their peers. From a New Literacy Studies perspective we will ask whether the m4Lit project has been able to make the right connections with existing sites for mobile youth culture, such as MXit (Bosch, 2008), and whether teens use the conversational architectures of social media to create hybrid genres combining conversational SMS-style dialogues with more extended texts of teen leisure fiction, despite possible associations with school literacies.

THE M-NOVEL

The m-novel will be aimed at a target audience of teens (14-16 years old), living in SA, who have access to GPRS-enabled mobile phones, and who want to read and write. The story will involve a number of fictitious characters whose adventures bring them face-to-face with real-life issues and who pursue popular teen activities such as graffiti, using technology and music. The story will be fun and youth-focused and avoid overt social or educational messages. A professional writer is developing the story through a series of workshops with teens. The story will run for 21 days in October 2009, with a 400 word chapter published per day. Each chapter will be written in short ‘cliff-hanger’ style. The core story is supplemented by extra content such as character profiles and word definitions. Every week prizes will be offered for the ‘best’ user comment (e.g. the most original or the best use of language) in English, isiXhosa, and text speak (or ‘MXit language’ as this is known in SA). Finally, readers will enter a writing competition e.g. ‘In between 100 and 300 words, tell us what you think should happen in the sequel to the story.’

The m-novel will be published in English and isiXhosa. Deumert and Masinyana (2008) and Deumert et al. (2008) have shown that English-isiXhosa bilinguals make regular use of three different languages/language varieties in electronic communication (e.g. SMSes, blogs, and wall postings on social network sites such as Facebook): English, ‘traditional’ isiXhosa and a hybrid mixture of English and isiXhosa (closely mirroring everyday language use in the urban environment). By providing the story in at least two of the language forms used by speakers, we wished to avoid the common pitfall of constructing literacy in a multilingual society through the dominant language only (in the case of SA this would be English). The isiXhosa version will be closely modeled on ‘general Nguni’ and can thus also be read by isiZulu-speakers (over 40% of South Africans speak a Nguni language at home, compared to only 8% who speak English) – this will increase the national reach of the story.

THE MOBISITE

The mobisite will include features such as story chapters, comments on each chapter, user polls per chapter and on general story-wide issues, a general ‘Express Yourself’ wall’ and a photo gallery, from which images and desktop wallpapers can be downloaded. In order to leave comments, vote, etc., users need to register with the site and create a social network-like profile page that includes basic information, status updates and a wall on which other users can write. Each of the four characters in the story will also have a profile page. The story is thus presented in a ‘lite’ social network environment and will investigate the notion that ‘[I]teracy skills for the twenty first century are skills that enable participation in the new communities emerging within a networked society’ (Jenkins et al., 2006). MXit users will also be able to access the mobisite directly from within MXit (a java application). This should widen the net of potential readers since many teens who use MXit do not browse the web from their phones.

THE RESEARCH

The m-novel will be widely marketed, but the research project will focus on responses from a group of isiXhosa speaking teenagers (aged 14-16 years) from two low-income, urban areas (called ‘townships’) in Cape Town. Sampling will occur by identifying areas served by schools in Langa and in Gugulethu where measures of students’ academic performance fall on the lower ‘bump’ in the bimodal distribution graph of the Western Cape Province’s literacy test scores (Fleisch, 2008:7). Such scores characterise the majority of low-income schools in the Western Cape, while middle class or uncharacteristically successful township schools are more likely to fall on the upper bump. Twenty-five teens from the catchment area around each of the schools will be identified and surveyed, all urban school-going youth who must own or have daily access to a GPRS-enabled mobile phone. Participants will be free to read the story in whichever language they prefer, and will be asked about their choices in in-depth facilitated survey interviews which will take place before and after the actual story. Survey interviews will collect data about both out-of-school and in-school literacies, and will investigate actual literacy practices associated with the use of mass media as well as print, digital and mobile literacies. We will also conduct a pre-story focus group with sixteen teachers from the two townships, and a post-story focus group with sixteen teens from the two townships. Quantification and statistical analysis will not be the only approach taken in the analysis of the data; situated understanding of literacy practices also requires an ethnographic, qualitative perspective.

Data generated through learners’ use of the mobisite will reflect the activities of a broader group of readers, not only the 50 in the sample. Such data will allow us to determine usage patterns for the different versions of the story on a national scale (involving a large, non-restricted sample). The mobisite statistics will include: how many users accessed the site (in total and by chapter), language version popularity, an understanding of how many readers read the whole story or

interacted by voting, commenting and discussing, and the number engaged enough to submit their own story.

REFLECTION

We are aware of two key risks, first, that the teens might not like the story, which would negatively affect uptake, and second, that the cost of mobile data access would force readers to stop reading and participating in the story.

Mobile phones are already causing a major sea change to literacy practices in SA and for the majority of the people in the world. The project findings will contribute to a broader understanding of this change, and will be informed by a developmental agenda (mobiles for literacy) as well as the new literacy studies (mobile phone use as new literacy practices). The project itself will have relevance for educators looking for alternative tools for literacy and communication development, learners in non-traditional learning environments (e.g. those with access to higher-end mobile phones but not books) and publishers who want to explore alternative channels of publishing.

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