Transmedia sensemaking: Exploring youth's epistemic resources for knowledge building communities

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Introduction

> *... something is happening outside the school: social and technological changes have reframed the meaning of lifelong (over time) and life-wide (across locations) learning (Sefton-Green, 2003; 2006; 2013), and the emergence of new participatory practices (Jenkins et al., 2006; Lange; Ito, 2010) has redefined the ways of learning and even the actual concept of 'media literacy'. In this context the idea of 'transmedia literacy' proposes a move from traditional media literacy –understood as teaching critical media skills at school (Potter, 2004; 2005)- to the analysis of practices of participatory cultures, youth-generated contents and informal learning strategies* ... From Scolari, Masanet, Guerrero-Pico, & Establés, 2018, pp. 802-803

As underscored by Scolari and his colleagues in the quote above, something important is happening in the ways that youth are engaging in contemporary global media ecologies, calling for a deeper understanding of youth-generated content, informal learning strategies, and practices cultivated within these new participatory cultures. My inquiry centers on how youth make sense of phenomena and construct explanations using a variety of cultural artifacts drawn from across multiple platforms and forms of media (e.g., news stories, YouTube clips, films, storybooks), what may be thought of as "transmedia sensemaking." To illustrate the concept, I draw from a case study of the media-based practices of a young boy over the course of several months. I am interested in how the epistemic practices and stances made visible in the case study relate to the types of capacities that are important for participating in knowledge building communities (KBC's), and whether youth may be developing resources in out-of-school spaces that may be useful in cultivating classroom KBC's.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the knowledge building literature is grounded in the context of "a changing world" --- an expanding knowledge society --- where governments are calling for educational systems to change in order to support knowledge creation (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014; Scardamalia, 2002). Another framing, particularly in knowledge building classrooms focused on science learning, has been to investigate ways to create classroom communities of inquiry that mirror disciplinary communities (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2012; Chuy, et al., 2011). The knowledge building work associated with both of these framings (my own work included) starts from the premise that what is happening in schools does not match what is happening in the wider *adult* society. There is also a growing literature in education and the learning sciences highlighting that what is happening in schools does not match what is happening in the wider *youth* culture (e.g., Ito, et al., 2020; Jenkins, et al., 2006; Luke, 2003). In the present paper, I want to move the lens to out-of-classroom spaces to better understand how youth are engaging in rich media landscapes, and explore what we might learn about the repertoires of practice (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) and capacities that youth are developing in relation to knowledge building. The intent is to more deeply understand youth assets and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), what some refer to as "digital funds of knowledge" (Marsh et al., 2005), observed in youth-driven contexts, in order to think about how we might build from youth approaches in creating knowledge building communities.

With regard to what is happening in the wider youth culture, Marsh and her colleagues (2005) highlight "Young children are immersed in practices relating to popular culture, media and new technologies from birth. They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of this world…" Research focused on youth in the "new media age" (Kress, 2003) points to changes in the nature of youth communication, play, and meaning making, and examines how youth develop of new types of identities, literacies navigational capacities, and social competencies. For example, "If we take remix in this broad sense – as processes of re-assembling, recontextualizing, and creating new meanings – then we begin to see remix practices not only on YouTube, fan fiction sites, or at the DJ table, but as an important part of young people's everyday media lives" (Burwell, 2014).

In the present paper I focus on transmedia engagement. Much of the transmedia research literature focuses on transmedia in entertainment contexts, particularly *transmedia storytelling* (Herr-Stephenson, et al., 2013). I am interested in emergent transmedia collections pulled together into cohesive forms by youth themselves, rather than

engineered experiences created by children's media industries. It is possible that these two types may be linked, as youth who are well-socialized into navigating transmedia experiences engineered by children's media industries may be developing a fluency in working across media forms to make meaning. The youth involved in the case study was experienced with popular transmedia experiences, which may have influenced how he used multiple platforms and forms of media for sensemaking.

Context and Methodology

The case study centers on the transmedia sensemaking practices of a young boy, Ronin (pseudonym), over 19 months from ages 9-11. Ronin and I have known each other since he participated in an after-school arts club run by myself and a colleague for local 2nd graders. We re-connected at a neighborhood art event 2 years later, where I learned about Ronin's passion for storytelling. I invited Ronin to work with me to co-design a storytelling workshop for elementary-age children. Typically, we meet 1.5 hours/week at either the university or in his family's living room. Both the university and Ronin's home are located in a Northeast urban neighborhood, rich with ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity among US- and foreign-born youth.

I would describe our meetings as engaging in a sort of "story makerspace," where we come together to explore different genres of storytelling. I am positioned as a collaborator, but I mostly let Ronin determine the course of our work, with him choosing story lines and suggesting genres. Across the 19 months, we have explored storytelling through creating our own stop-motion movies, comic books, puppet shows, and other story forms. Over the course of our collaboration, I have been struck by the ways Ronin works across multiple media forms to make sense of phenomena and to construct explanations. In order to begin to more fully understand what I saw as "transmedia sensemaking," I used the audios, computer-screen shots, and field notes across sessions to locate illustrative examples of such sensemaking.

Exploring Transmedia Sensemaking

In looking across the sessions, a typology of transmedia sensemaking instances has started to emerge. Some of the instances arose as part of our storytelling, some came out of unrelated conversations as we worked together. Below I provide a brief overview of a few transmedia sensemaking types drawn from this initial analysis, namely:

- connecting representations of a concept over time,
- in-world inquiry into math and science problems, and
- co-constructing the meaning of a concept.

Connecting Representations of a Concept Over Time

The meaning making and connections in this example occurred over several sessions, with Ronin raising issues concerning feminist perspectives which he framed in relation to a variety of cultural artifacts. These connections began as we were working on our first story about two friends who are separated then reunited. Ronin underscored the importance of not being like the "typical story" where a prince saves a princess. He told me how, in the animated film *Moana*, the main character saves herself, and that the *The Princess and the Frog* has a very independent princess. He suggested that one of our stories should have a boy in distress and a girl saves him. Another day Ronin shared Pixar's *PIRL* on YouTube, where he drew attention to how the relationships between boys and girls "switched." When I asked Ronin what *PIRL* was about, he replied, "Sexism. Because there's 'B.R.O. Capital' and then a girl came." Over our months together, Ronin often stated the need for our stories to reflect strong women, which he punctuated with references to Mabel from the *Gravity Falls* cartoon series or showing me a YouTube clip of satirical Disney Princess songs (Jon Cozart's *After Ever After*) or other relevant YouTube clips.

Ronin drew on Disney princess movies, related YouTube clips, along with movie shorts and TV series as part of constructing a set of concepts related to feminism. Using these cultural artifacts as material for his ideas, Ronin compared contrasting cases and pulled together evidence for his claims. Over time, he identified connections across popular media artifacts and artifacts he found in the online space of YouTube, and pieced together various representations of gender relations and positioning in the artifacts to construct knowledge.

In-World Inquiry into Math and Science Problems

This instance arose with Ronin sharing an interest that he has been developing over time.

Ronin: Do you know for some reason I like, I like these theories. Do you know videogames and, like, movies? They do a bunch of theories on them, there's so much math.

Author: What do you mean "math"?

Ronin: Like, science and all that, like a bunch of research. Just for, like, videogames and stuff. (Laughs)

Author: So, what's the, give me an example. Like what kind of math?

Ronin: Umm. Like do you know Mario the, like, Tennis Game? …They're seeing if it is actually possible for a tennis ball to break a tennis racquet. And they did it. And it's super dangerous if that actually happened. …And if it was, everyone would die. …So, the ball would move too fast that the air molecules can't move out the way fast enough so there's gonna be explosions. Same scenario with Sonic [the Hedgehog], he runs too fast. …If that happened in real life, there'd be explosions everywhere.

In order for me to better understand the reference, we went to *The Game Theorists* channel on YouTube to watch *Game Theory: How to BREAK Mario*! In the clip, the narrator, MatPat, de-constructs the *Mario Tennis Aces* videogame, analysing in-game tennis phenomena through scaling, frame rates, and pixel measurements. The clip is full of sophisticated formulas and computations, which MatPat both deftly and humorously explains through referencing a variety of cultural artifacts (e.g., Sesame Street, real-life TV tennis matches, the Periodic Table) and comparisons to real-life measurement tools. When the clip presented varying computations depending on the type of metal in the racquet, Ronin joked, "He forgot one metal, Vibranium…the strongest metal ever" (a reference to the *Black Panther* movie).

In the particular clip that Ronin and I watched, MatPat positions the *Mario Tennis Aces* videogame as a model for scientific reasoning. MatPat begins the clip by establishing through step-by-step calculations how the videogame world and the actions within it are "pretty darn close to real life." MatPat then shows how this veracity permits him to make the claim that the force with which Mario would need to hit the ball to break an opponent's racket would be impossible: "Nothing short of a particle accelerator could make matter move that fast." This shares a similarity to Holbert and Wilensky's (2019) work on "videogames as objects-to-think-with." Although the Mario game is not built by educational designers as a microworld like the videogames used by Holbert and Wilensky, MatPat achieves some of the same objectives with a commercial game, including a "focus on the construction of knowledge, on creatively probing problems and experimenting with solutions" (p. 37).

The clip engaged Ronin, and scaffolded him in connecting in-world inquiry with the game to problem-solving methods and tools. Although some of the mathematical formulas were quite advanced, Ronin had watched the clip numerous times, and followed the reasoning and ways in which math and science could be drawn upon to support investigations. Ronin also seemed to understand the mapping of the in-world game features to real life phenomena, providing a way to model interactions and to identify and reason with variables. Ronin's own suggestions for considering what would happen with a racket made of a strong metal like Vibranium, or how the phenomena related to Sonic the HedgeHog (both fictional referents), showed him joining in the reasoning process in valid ways, both scientifically relevant and in keeping with the YouTube channel's approach of drawing from popular media-based worlds to play with ideas and propose hypotheticals.

One of the things that struck me was Ronin's expressed interest in theories and how they can be used as part of working through problems. In fact, two of his favorite channels on YouTube are *The Game Theorists* and *The Film Theorists*, both run by MatPat, an American Internet personality. Both channels have video clips where MatPat focuses on a specific cultural artifact from film or video games, begins with a problem or hypothesis, and works through a series of strategic moves, such as making claims and supporting them with evidence, using analogies, applying mathematical formulas or scientific principles. MatPat weaves together an explanation that satisfies the problem all while incorporating humor, silly but related tangents, and connections to a wide range of popular cultural artifacts. Over the course of our time together, Ronin often made reference to ideas from these two channels. Ronin appeared to find these theories engaging and enjoyed the puzzle-like nature of the problems that MatPat generated and worked through. Sometimes, Ronin would find the relevant clip on YouTube and use it to supplement something he was explaining to me, providing an opportunity for us to look together at a clip and generate our own new questions and elaborations.

Co-constructing the Meaning of a Concept

About 8 months into our sessions, Ronin and I worked together to build a shared understanding of "eminent domain." It began with Ronin sharing something he had learned about the main character in the Disney film *Wreck-It Ralph*: "He [Ralph] was minding his own, if you wait until the very end of the credits, they give you song. It's about eminent domain… It's horrible. It happens to a bunch of real people." We were both familiar with the concept, but did not understand it deeply. Ronin directed me to use Wikipedia, and we read the definition together. He also asked me to find a YouTube channel where he had seen a piece on eminent domain in Wreck-It Ralph that he had found helpful. During the course of our joint exploration, we also downloaded the Pixar film *Up* to see if eminent domain was behind Mr. Fredricksen's loss of property.

Ronin appeared to bring this issue up in our conversation because he had become curious about the paradox of a story character who is portrayed as "bad," but has a secret that unlocks meaning underlying his actions, showing

that Wreck-It Ralph may not be what an audience has been led to believe. This seemed to be an interesting problem that moved Ronin to dig deeper and, drawing upon various media, he recognized complexity within the good/bad binary of film characters, placing a character's problematic actions in relation to contexts that felt unfair. Ronin's interest also led the two of us to search the Internet both for information (the Wikipedia definition) and additional cultural artifacts that might provide deeper insights into a new concept that had been introduced, "eminent domain." We both contributed cultural artifacts to the effort, and worked together from these various media forms to co-construct a shared understanding of the meaning of eminent domain.

Discussion

Dyson (1997), in a study of children's use of superheroes in classroom literacy activities, noted "A number of researchers have documented the tendency of young boys in particular in our society --- whatever their social class or ethnic background --- to appropriate material from popular culture for their oral and written stories" (p. 215). In current times, the Internet and access to a vast media landscape have expanded greatly the ways in which youth are able to share and manipulate material based on such cultural artifacts. Kalantzis and Cope (2012) contrast contemporary learners, who they refer to as "Generation P" (where the P stands for "participatory") to "an earlier generation of learners may have been more used to being passive watchers of stories at the cinema or on television; this was intrinsic to the producer–to–consumer dynamic in the 'mass media'" (p. 9). In today's Internet-supported participatory cultures, youth are able to connect with collectives engaging with popular culture through various media forms and in various ways, including online communal spaces devoted to CosPlay, fanfiction, and YouTuber's posting video-based artifacts deconstructing and playing with the ideas of films and videogames (Ito, et al., 2020; Jenkins, et al., 2006). Even though Ronin is not participating directly in the participatory culture of YouTube by generating and contributing his own artifacts, he can be seen as a peripheral participant in the online space. He immerses himself in this collaboratively-constructed dynamic media space, navigating across and interacting with a range of artifacts and channels, and developing a large catalog of resources to draw from. Offline, Ronin does generate explanations using the artifacts. He also orally discusses and elaborates on these artifacts with his peers (and collaborators like me), co-constructing in ways that can lead to further understanding.

Through following his interests in popular media, Ronin is learning how to navigate and build associations between knowledge objects across shared social spaces mediated by digital technology, what Jenkins (2010) refers to as *transmedia navigation*, "the capacity to seek out, evaluate, and integrate information conveyed across multiple media." Jenkins writes about the power of such activity, where "students need to actively seek out content through a hunting and gathering process which leads them across multiple media platforms. Students have to decide whether what they find belongs to the same story and world as other elements." Through navigating the various spaces, Ronin works across multiple forms of knowledge, analysing meaning and constructing an understanding of how the forms connect with one another. Reilly (2009) describes how working in this way opens up opportunities for youth to:

> … learn by searching and gathering clusters of information as they move seamlessly between their physical and virtual spaces. Knowledge is acquired through multiple new tools and processes as kids accrue information that is visual, aural, musical, interactive, abstract, and concrete and then remix it into their own storehouse of knowledge. (p. 9)

Further, Ronin's actions in the three examples of transmedia sensemaking indicate that he is developing various epistemic practices and capacities. These include making connections across knowledge objects, pulling together evidence for claims, considering different perspectives, and developing a feel for the use of theories in problem solving. Hakkarainen (2009) points out that "rather than arising from mysterious personal gifts or creative talents, innovation in discovery rely on collectively cultivated epistemic practices that guide and channel the participants' intellectual efforts in creative and expansive ways" (p. 215). Through immersing himself in the analytic approaches carried out on YouTube channels such as *The Game Theorists* and *The Film Theorists*, Ronin is becoming socialized into working with various media forms as knowledge objects, including identifying sub-texts of films, problem-finding and theory-building, and employing explanation-building strategies that incorporate math, science, and modeling.

The epistemic practices and capacities that Ronin is developing can be seen as assets or resources that may be useful in cultivating classroom KBC's. When we think about the types of capacities that are important for knowledge builders to have, Bereiter and Scardamalia (2016) point to the ability to make strategic knowledge building moves related to problem definition, idea development, idea improvement, and meta-discourse. While the capacities that Ronin is developing are not directed specifically toward advancing the frontiers of collective knowledge nor explicitly understood by him to be knowledge creating discourse moves, Ronin does appear to be

building a repertoire of strategic moves for constructing knowledge and advancing understanding. Further, in the third transmedia sensemaking example, our two-person effort to co-construct an explanation for "eminent domain" relates to the types of knowledge building moves found in "multi-player epistemic games" (Bielaczyc & Ow, 2014). Although Ronin may be engaged in simplified forms of theory-building and social knowledge construction, they do provide a foundation on which to build.

In addition, Ronin is coming to understand and function in spaces that support the social exchange of knowledge, which is also important in cultivating classroom KBC's and working in knowledge building environments such as Knowledge Forum (Scardamalia, 2004). Bielaczyc & Collins (2006) discuss how the free exchange of knowledge objects in a public space accessible to all members of a collective is a key characteristic of knowledge creating communities. The knowledge objects in the shared space become "our ideas," available to be worked on by members of the community. Hakkarainen (2009) underscores the importance of the "'material agency' (Pickering, 1995) provided by the learning environment," (p. 219), where knowledge-centered practices are mediated by collaborative, epistemic technologies that permit participants to transform ideas "into digital entities that can be further articulated, shared, interlinked, and extended in long-term processes" (p. 215). The particular sub-space of YouTube that Ronin works within can be seen to have similar characteristics, with the communal space involving at least two types of knowledge objects: *cultural artifacts* (CA's) and *analytical cultural artifacts* (ACA's). The CA's consist of popular media creations such as films and videogames, re-playable media-based "worlds" with multiple features, texts, and sub-texts (e.g., the Pixar short, *PIRL*). The ACA's are re-playable media-based analyses of specific CA's, typically employing problem-solving strategies and reasoning, and often drawing from other CA's and academic knowledges to support the analysis (e.g., parodies of Disney princess movies that ask "what happens after *happily ever after…*?," *The Game Theorists'* analysis of the Mario game described above). The communal space sometimes includes meta-level analytic artifacts providing commentary on or syntheses involving the ACA's. Ronin seemed quite comfortable operating across these various levels, watching films; searching for, drawing from, and elaborating on the ideas found in the ACA's; and also examining higher-level analyses of the ACA's (e.g., commentaries, news concerning YouTube channels or the film and game companies themselves).

Overall, my goal has been to explore whether the epistemic practices and capacities that Ronin is developing might provide insights into the resources that contemporary youth may have available for creating classroom KBC's. The parallels between KBC practices and spaces, and Ronin's developing epistemic practices and engagement in spaces that support the social exchange of knowledge, suggest that Ronin may be building a useful foundation to work from in joining a classroom that functions as a knowledge building community. It is also important to ask if Ronin's case suggests ways to expand our thinking around creating knowledge building communities with youth. One aspect to highlight is that the types of analytic artifacts that Ronin learns from seem to more valued in the participatory culture he is engaged with when they are clever and humorous, in addition to being insightful. Although I do not elaborate on this issue here, it does seem important to explore further the humor and playfulness with ideas involved in the knowledge objects constructed in this particular sub-space of YouTube, the role this plays in motivating Ronin's participation in this work, and the implications of humor and play in knowledge building. It is also critical to expand the work beyond a single case study in order to develop a broader sense of the ways that youth are engaging in contemporary media landscapes, and to study classroom implementations that incorporate and build from youth resources.

Conclusion

In moving the investigative lens to out-of-classroom spaces to focus on a single youth this paper attempts to deepen our understanding of the ways in which contemporary youth are engaging in rich media landscapes, and explore what we might learn about their developing repertoires of practice (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) and capacities in relation to knowledge building. The hope is that by better understanding the powerful forms of sensemaking that occur in youth-driven contexts (their "endogenous modes" of inquiry (Kiefert & Stevens, 2019)), that designers and teachers working to create classroom KBC's will be better positioned to be more inclusive of and build from youth approaches.

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