Lines of thought: The emergence of meaning through collaborations and remix

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In this report on a specialised topic of remix and emergent learning we will demonstrate an open education project that emerged from the future. Using open and inclusive practices, a global group of educators engaged in some serious fun to collaborate and share digital and physical artefacts based on a poem. The poem itself was collaboratively created using open, online software, and allowed for serendipitous participation without the need to learn new skills. The set of work that was and is being created is beautiful, diverse, and far reaching. We discuss the practices of remix that this collaboration uses and show how these seemingly trivial experiences both nurture well-being, lead to serious learning, and have wide applicability in other, more formal, learning contexts.

Keywords: Remix, Collaboration, Emergent, Open, Inclusive, Serious Fun

Introduction

Digital storytelling can take many forms. One example is the DS106 Daily Create which has been run by volunteers for over nine years now (one of the authors is part of the team). This provides a space for regular practice of spontaneous creativity through challenges published to a WordPress blog (DS106, n.d.) and shared via Twitter. In January 2021 one of the authors tweeted a joke about writing a 106-line poem. The other author designed a collaborative challenge as a daily create prompt. The call out to participate was shared through Twitter, Facebook, and Mastodon social networks as well as direct invitations from the instigators.

The authors are regular practitioners in open, online spaces. Through interacting in common online spaces using hashtags such as lthechat, rhizo, clmooc, ds106 the authors welcomed this project to collaborate again and invite others to interact through creating and remixing.

We knew before we started how important collaborations such as this were for our own well-being, and the pandemic impact is also part of this story. Both educators and students' educational life are being impacted by restrictions placed on them across the globe. One author had recently lost her job in the HE sector and this project sustained a connection with other educators. Others struggling with the isolation of lockdown spoke about the need for meaningful connections and active involvement in creative activities.

Both authors have another commonality as co-facilitators in the Connected Learning MOOC (CLMOOC) community and have collaborated on other remix and reuse skills to tell digital stories. The authors and other members of the #DS106 and CLMOOC communities discussed the need for creative projects that brought people together, had few boundaries and followed the underlying genre of creativity and collaboration. We had recently co-designed other projects (ALT, 2021) and wanted to bring those same benefits to this project. Our ongoing aims are to promote non-toxic digital spaces and promote well-being through the ongoing joy of physical and digital creative play, and to do this in an open environment.

The collaborative project unfolded in ways that continue to amaze, inspire and nourish us. This has opened up a conversation about the power of online collaborations and the adaptability of these for more formal modes of learning. It started with a bird.

Daily Creative Practice

In January 2021, as part of a daily creative practice, one of the authors tweeted a joke about writing a 106-line poem. The other author designed an open collaborative challenge - to contribute lines of thought and

collectively write a poem that was exactly 106 lines long. This was serendipitously scheduled for a Saturday (DS106, 2021). Rather than create a theme to guide people, the only rules were to work together on a Google Doc and create 106 lines of the poem. One of the authors started the poem with the line "A bird flying through the sky" (Taleo, 2021a). With no requirement to identify the authoring, the Google Doc grew with contributions.

Over 48 hours, 44 people worked on a shared Google Doc making over 4,000 edits. As we watched the poem grow, we began to think of possible ways of collaboratively remixing it. Remix is a common practice in our online communities. By remix we mean the practice of altering a piece of media not by merely copying it, but by altering its meaning in some way: a remix is an interpretation that helps the audience to understand the original (Navas, 2012; Smith et al., 2016).

Emergent Learning

Draftback, a Google Chrome extension, provided a writing archaeology replay of the poem emerging. The final poem and remixes blur together, creating new segments and layers of meaning. Table 1 describes a summary of artefacts and remixes created that we are aware of. In the discussion below we highlight a few that resonate with us and may provide guidance for future educational use.

Table 1. Summary of work created

Type	Mode	Description
Daily Create	Individual	DS106 daily prompt image and words
Daily Create Response	Individual	Twitter response with project suggestion
Daily Create – Invitation	Collaboration	Build 106 lines of poem, shared in various open, social platforms
Blog post	Individual	Publishing the 106 Lines of Thought Poem (44 co-authors)
Call out – recording	Collaboration	Google Form to ask authors to supply voice recording
Sound Recording	Individual	Producer posts the voice recording of the poem (20 co-authors)
Hyperlinked image	Curation	3 physical remixes 11 digital remix artefacts and blog posts

Another member of the community suggested in a Tweet that the whole poem could be recorded (again as a collaborative project) and indicated that he would be keen to help make this happen. As a structured remix project, this was approached quite differently to the initial project while still using the ethos of open practice and inclusiveness. We decided that one of us would take the lead as producer, and collect the strands needed to weave a final recording. For this remix, the producer needed to manage the contributions and have the skills and software available to produce the final artefact.

The original poem was divided into segments of roughly equal lengths, blurring the lines of separation of the original authors into a readable format. A Google Form was created to ask for volunteers and collect recordings. Twenty people volunteered out of the original 44 authors and segments were sent out with some thought to alternating male/female voices and, in some cases, matching the author's original contribution in the text to be read. The audio responses were then collated and mixed by the producer resulting in a dynamic and touching recording. One author noted that it was the first time they had heard the voice of people they had collaborated with online for years.

The resulting publication was shared via Soundcloud, a music streaming platform, and at the time of writing has 78 views and spawned at least one more remix.

The poem resides as an open remix invitation. The open Creative Commons licensing on the original poem encourages remixes at any time. There is no prescription in the format for remix, providing freedom of choice in construction of remixes. Many of these remixes are done digitally, but some have been physical, and both types of remix have different advantages. Digital remix has the advantage that participants can engage without the constraints of space and other equipment, physical remix is more satisfying because it is tactile, visual and uses a different skill set.

One author has collected links to the contributions from the community and this provides an open resource for anyone to peruse (Taleo, 2021b). This displays a range of remixes from physical to digital. Contributions so far have ranged from digital enhancement, word clouds, poetry, music composition, video collages, papier mâché and a crocheted artifact.

One remix is a complete musical album with the cover artwork using a remix from one of the authors (DeVries, 2021). The musician has clearly stated an open license and free download on the album to match the original intent of the project. This is one example of the mutual understanding of the DS106 online community in the artwork and artefacts created and method of sharing on the social web.

In some cases, a remix has inspired another remix. One of the authors, Honeychurch (2021), created a paper folding game which was remixed into a digital randomiser tool (Hodgson, 2021). Some of the contributors' blogged about their remixes in reflective practice. Contributors used their own blogging or sharing platforms when a remix was created. We found that contributors used existing skills to remix the poem using a range of tools to create alternative formats.

Discussion

Remix is a critical skill. Digital remix is digital literacy. It can facilitate a deep read of the original as alternative forms are created. There are serious skills and practices underpinning this type of play within an online community of educators. We note this paper has the license to allow others to remix and in this section, we will discuss some of the educational theory behind these practices.

There is no simple characteristic or set of characteristics of remix, but it is not just an edit (shortening) or a copy. It is a mapping, and not a tracing, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it:

Make a map, not a tracing … A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same." "The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged "competence" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp.12-13).

Jenkins suggests that remix is typical of a 'DIY Culture' (Jenkins, 2010). The term DIY Culture is one that is often used to refer to alternative practices such as grass roots activism, or independent music and film making, and has all of the usual connotations of the well-known sense of make do and mend. It's a practice of making the best of what one has to hand - of responding creatively with a 'yes and' when a collaborator asks, 'what if …?' (Flinchbaugh, 2014). Remix is a process of iteration or repetition of variations on a theme, which can occur within genres as well as across them – as Deleuzian lines of flight – as altered perspectives which can result in a change in unanticipated directions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Sometimes remix might manifest itself as trivial banter with participants casually throwing memes at each other (we sometimes refer to this as playing meme ping-pong). At other times it might be really transformative creations. In CLMOOC this type of activity is an integral part of the creative play that participants engage with (Smith et al., 2016; West-Puckett et al., 2018). As Navas writes (2012), in these types of creative community, remix is a sort of cultural glue that binds participants together in shared practices of meaning-making, and it can lead to a type of serendipitous learning that cannot be scripted (Smith et al., 2016, p. 11). The poetry remixes are evidence of meaning-making from several participants.

A phrase that people in the CLMOOC community often use to describe their practices is 'serious fun'. Single activities are trivial on one level, but they are also based on, and can lead to, transformational learning and understanding. There is a considerable body of literature about the efficacy of games for learning - for example Whitton (2018) talks about the power of playful learning and the transferability of this to adult learning, and the use of Lego for Serious Play is well documented (Montesa-Andres et al., 2014). Serious fun builds on all of these phrases. It acknowledges the powerful learning that can happen when learners are free to experiment and highlights the importance of serendipitous emergence to learning. The learning in this emergent project is a co-creation of a poem and a deeper understanding of the poem content and how it relates to the authors.

As well as underpinning serious learning, remix is also fundamental to our well-being and has helped us to remain resilient in the face of the many challenges we have faced during pandemic times. Resilience is sometimes characterised as a need to toughen up (American Psychological Association, 2014). We resist this characterisation and offer a more humane alternative. For us, resilience is being able to find solace when all

around is bleak - it is knowing where to reach out, who and what to turn to. Our physical and digital remixes, our individual and collaborative endeavours, have sustained us and helped us to grow in friendship and in solidarity with each other. Sometimes life and learning is serious, sometimes it is fun. At its best, it is serious fun.

Conclusion

We have outlined the practices of online practitioners, collaborating spontaneously. This report shares a project that can be remixed for use in many different disciplines and contexts. In particular, to build connections between groups of learners in remote or virtual models of learning through encouraging serious fun. Poems and stories could be seeded by educators and given a specific theme to make them relevant to programmes and courses so that learners experience the power of serious fun in a more formal setting. Remix can be used to encourage the use of a variety of digital literacy skills and as a close reading tool. Using remix to reframe the story or poem can allow for emergent learning. These types of collaborations are powerful tools to build learning communities and instil a sense of trust and respect in participants.

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