Personal and social capabilities in early adolescents' literacy practices at home

Georgina Barton | University of Southern Queensland

Michelle Ronksley-Pavia | Griffith University

ABSTRACT

Much literacy research has explored how young people's literacy practices at home and in their communities may be more diverse and engaging than those experienced at school. What is less known is how the skills learnt through these diverse literacy practices may contribute to building early adolescents' personal and social capabilities. This paper gives evidence for the development of personal and social capabilities in adolescents' life literacies, such as coding games, playing video games, making movies, and learning through YouTube. Students participated in activities related to technical, functional, interpretive, creative, and interactive skills. We found that these practices revealed three themes of identity formation: social roles, friendship networks, and peer solidarity. The paper then discusses how these relate to personal and social capabilities, and considers implications for teaching practice in schools. Given the complexity of today's world, as well as the Australian Curriculum's general capabilities that include personal and social proficiencies, we believe it is timely that this case study is reported.

Introduction

For some time, scholars have explored young people's home and community-based literacy practices (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Many advances were made in the field of literacy research and education through ethnographic investigations in homes, communities, and workplaces (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003; Mills, 2010a). Such work was orientated by a socio-cultural approach to theorising literacy practices in communities across social and cultural borders. Often referred to as New Literacy Studies, this scholarship points to the need for schools to acknowledge the range of literacies that students engage with in their own communities such as digital and multimodal, rather than to privilege schooled literacies (Street, 2014; Mills, 2010b). In this sense, digital and multimodal literacy practices can be defined as using technology and/or two or more modes for communicative and meaning-making purposes (Kalantzis, Cope, Chan & Dalley-Trim, 2016).

Despite extensive research that argues for bridging in- and out-of-school literacies, particularly in relation to twenty-first century skills, there is limited research that discusses the skills learnt by young people at home and how these relate to the development of personal and social capabilities. These skills include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social management (ACARA, 2012a), and are attributes identified as necessary in today's complex world. This paper consequently presents a case study of the types of multimodal and digital literacy practices early adolescents engage with at home. It aims to reveal the types of skills being developed through these practices, and how these relate to the development of personal and social capabilities. It analyses these data by exploring a Connected Learning approach (Ito et al., 2013), which is about 'access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity' (p. 4). Such an approach links students' interests, networks, activities, and achievements in- and out-of-

school, and is most suited to young adolescents when 'individuals form interests and social identities' (p. 8). The research questions for this study are asked in the context of a case study that involved six participants, ages 12 to 14, in Australia:

1. What multimodal and digital literacies do early adolescents currently engage with outside of school?
2. What skills do they develop as a result of these engagements?
3. To what extent do these learnings align with the *Australian Curriculum: General Capability – Personal and Social Capabilities*?

The paper explores how a Connected Learning approach might align with personal and social capabilities as highlighted in the *Australian Curriculum: General Capability,* and what the implications might be for classroom practice (ACARA, 2012).

What is already known about home-based literacy practices

There is consensus across the literature that adolescents from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, and communities engage in literate practices with authentic purposes that benefit the user (Bulfin & North, 2007). Studies have also noted how these practices help adolescents to make sense of their culture, life, and identity (Brock & Boyd, 2015; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). According to Lewis and del Valle (2009) identity is 'connected to an essential concept of self' (p. 308). Ito et al.'s (2008) three-year study, for example, examined young people's new media participation. The research found that young people engaged in such practices to extend friendships and interests. It was also self-directed and peer-based as the students aimed to explore new media through trial and error, and to express their own identities. This type of social research is important as it replaces deficit views of adolescents who are often dismissed as 'illiterate' to being 'literate in different ways' (Smith & Moore, 2012, p. 745).

Another significant study explored how communities can support young people's literacy development (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo & Vacca, 2003). The research documented the importance of the social context, identifying a number of instructional techniques: developing personal competencies, making connections, encouraging participatory methods, and building research capabilities. Literacy practices, such as blogging, social networking, and using web profiles to share ideas (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011), enable students to engage with issues around self-identity and self-representation. Often, out-of-school literacy practices involve the pursuit of adolescents' areas of interests, such as popular culture. The versatility of the internet, social media, and mobile devices to bring multiple modes together creates new opportunities to make meaning in personalised and fluid ways. These multimodal literacy practices used by adolescents can empower young people to appropriate, recreate, and repurpose contemporary discursive resources (Hafner, 2015). They can also support the development of personal and social skills such as working with others, improving personal growth, and being critical readers (Luke, 2018; Barton, Baguley, Kerby & MacDonald, 2019).

Research continues to provide rich accounts of the types of literacies young people engage with out-of-school, but the evidence in this research and elsewhere (e.g., Pyo, 2016) suggests that some schools still largely ignore these vital, multimodal communication skills (Honan, 2012). In fact, Honan's (2012) work noted that teachers may not be able to see the educational affordances of these practices in terms of making them useful in the classroom. Early adolescents have been reported to engage with online digital media practices even younger than previously thought (Lu, Hao & Jing, 2016). Lu, Hao and Jing's (2016) study found that students used social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, for content consuming, sharing, and creating both in- and out-of-school. The authors also highlight a number of factors influencing students' social media use, such as individual and contextual factors, various opinions and attitudes towards social media, and self-

regulating behaviours. In addition to these aspects of adolescent literate practices, Lu, Hao and Jing's (2016) research documented the role of out-of-school literacy practices in creating and sustaining friendship networks, online social orders (e.g., ranking on leader boards), and notions of belonging – themes that directly link to a Connected Learning approach (Ito et al., 2013).

Adolescents need to experiment with varied social roles, where everyone can participate and be supported in developing a stable identity (Ito et al., 2013; Ragelien , 2016). These roles pertain to the nature of social activities and require a positive culture for students to develop social bonds among their peers (Lee & Lok, 2012). Such a culture supports adolescent acquisition of new skills that are production-centred, have a shared purpose, and are openly networked (Ito et al., 2013). This approach also opens up opportunities for critical discussion and positive reinforcement (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). Further, these skills can contribute to awareness and management of self and others (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

In relation to these outcomes, Scarcelli and Riva (2016) shared a typology of skills connected to digital media and technology use by young people which we have adapted here, including:

- Technical and functional skills – the use of software and hardware to navigate a web interface or use search engines;
- Interpretative skills – the ability to discerningly process and critique information found on the web, such as the results of a query; and
- Creation and interaction skills – the ability to create content in an original, social, and critical way, not just from a technical point of view.

This research analysed how these skill sets might align with the personal and social capabilities that are emphasised in the Australian curriculum (e.g., ACARA, 2012).

Aligning young people's literate practices at home with the curriculum

Internationally, it is noted how important it is for schools and educators to acknowledge the diverse ways in which young people communicate as well as the critical skills needed to adapt and adopt for success in the future workforce (Thompson, 2016). In fact, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) shares a vision of a literate world for all which includes the 'identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world' (UNESCO, 2019). Encompassed in such practices are the notions of self and social awareness particularly in relation to how young people might construct and manage their own social lives.

In Australia, the *Australian Curriculum General Capability: Personal and Social Capabilities* (ACARA, 2012a) highlights how and why it is important for young people to learn about themselves and others, including their communities. It states that:

> Personal and social capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills. (p. 1)

This process involves four key ideas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management. Amongst these concepts are sub-elements including: expressing emotions appropriately, developing self-discipline and setting goals, working independently and showing initiative, and becoming confident, resilient, and adaptable. Also included in the general capability (personal and social capability learning continuum) is the ability to appreciate diverse perspectives, understand relationships, work effectively, negotiate and resolve conflict, and develop leadership skills (ACARA, 2012b).

Understanding how these life skills might be developed through young people's at home literacy

practices can assist schools and teachers to acknowledge and embed such capabilities. We therefore analysed the habits of early adolescents' multimodal and digital literacies engaged in at home. We also collected and analysed interview data thematically to identify how these practices and beliefs aligned with important personal and social capabilities.

Research design and analysis

Six early adolescents were invited to participate in this study, through contact with their parents in a local community group. All agreed to participate and appropriate ethical approvals were gained from both the parents and students prior to the study's commencement. To gather data about the participants' at-home literacy practices, GoPro cameras were distributed to six young people – Abigail, David, Edward, Mark, Willow, and Zeb – to film their practices over one school week, and one week in a school holiday period. GoPro cameras were chosen as the students indicated their enthusiasm for new technologies when the project was explained to them. Barton and Bahr (2013) note that young people enjoy being independent and this choice of data collection allowed them to privately record and self-direct their responses (p. 68).

After the filming, the students were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to elaborate on the literacy practices they had recorded, including the valued purposes and skills that they learnt. Students were familiar with the language of digital and multimodal texts through their school assessment. Example questions included: (i) What types of digital and multimodal texts do you engage with at home? (ii) What skills did you learn when creating these types of texts? and, (iii) How do these activities relate to your personal and social development?

Data preparation and analysis firstly involved transcribing approximately thirty minutes of student interview recordings from each of the eight participants. The GoPro video data were uploaded and saved on a safe and secure website. The video data were replayed multiple times, coded and recoded to identify the literacy activities being engaged in by the participants. The narrative recorded on the video was also transcribed. Table 1 displays an example of the video analysis process. We also identified any specific skills that related to Scarcelli and Riva (2016) typology after viewing the video data multiple times.

The interview data transcripts were analysed to identify common themes among the six participants. Student responses were firstly coded and then combined into the personal and social capability themes: (i) identity formation; (ii) social roles; and, (iii) friendship networks and peer solidarity. The following sections outline the types of activities students engaged with at home and with their friends as well as the types of skills they learn and how both the activities and skills relate to personal and social capabilities.

What do young adolescents do and learn in out-of-school literacy spaces?

Through this study, it was found that early adolescents engaged in a range of multimodal literacy practices outside of school involving technical skills, creativity, and viewing media. These practices included using Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to communicate with friends through words and visual imagery. The students also played games with friends, both online and offline. They watched YouTube videos to gain knowledge about their key areas of interest, for example, watching gamers work through difficult sections in the games being played.

Touch-screen apps, such as TikTok (formally Musical.ly), were used to engage in gestural, musical, and sonic literacy practices. At times, the students used software such as Scratch (see Figure 1) to engage in coding – a contemporary skill for future workplace participation that integrates logic with multimodal authorship and narrative design (O'Brien, 2014).

Table 1. The video analysis process

Video snip (Willow, 140416)				
Timecode	05:52:28	05:52:37	05:52:46	05:52:54
Narration/ description	Student then watches video on iPod on Musical.ly of two well-known girls lip-syncing and dancing.	Student holds iPod up to camera and says, "We try to copy them (.5) I think we all know who Michaela is!" (A famous Musicl.ly celebrity).	Student continues to watch the pre-recorded and selected version.	"And what we ended up with was…So…I really love doing them especially with my friends. We like to see how many 'likes' we get."
Analytical theme	The student is searching for her favourite clip on Musical.ly—one that has been selected for her friend and her to copy.	The student makes a comment about a famous celebrity on Musical.ly— Michaela—showing an awareness of online social roles.		The student emulates the dance by Michaela and her friend with her own friend and posts it on Musical.ly by recording on the iPod. This relates to strengthening friendship networks, as the girls want many 'likes'.

Figure 1

The following discourse shows that this student, Mark (pseudonym), has developed a metalanguage related to using the software Scratch:

> So you would go to Internet Explorer, or whatever browser you use and then just type up here Scratch and go to the first one, the official site. I am pretty sure you don't have to log in – you can go in as a guest and click on create. It will let you choose any characters you want and click on the figurine and choose a whole range of animals/people etc. You will need to click on motion, for example 15 degrees, to create simple movements … See this here – this green widget will make the image move more. (Mark)

Most of the students video recorded their activities and uploaded and shared them through YouTube and they included making slime, recording game play, and how to create movies as well as the final products.

Aside from these digital and multimodal practices the students commented on other activities of interest including, but not limited to, sending emails to teachers, searching online for recipes, researching information for school assignments, and accessing educational resources in data management software, such as Moodle.

What skills are young people learning in these out-of-school literate practices?

The analysis of the coded video data and interviews revealed that these young adolescents were learning a range of technical, interpretative, and creative skills when engaging in digital and multimodal literacy practices out-of-school (Scarcelli & Riva, 2016). These are displayed in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Skills learnt and displayed by students at home

Technical and functional skills	Consumption skills	Creation and interaction skills
• use a diverse range of software and hardware including: coding programs, touch screen apps, movie making, composing emails, using touch screens e.g., iPad	• discerning the usefulness of YouTube videos in relation to their own interest areas and learning	• make movies, upload and share online • critique game play or performances with comments and/or other images and likes
• use a number of search engines (most predominantly Google or Internet Explorer)	• use search engines for relevant information websites for school assignments	• interact with others positively/ constructively through online gaming, apps (either directly or indirectly)
• use the internet to find useful information e.g., YouTube • use other technology tools, such as gaming consoles and controllers	• find information on topics needed for a range of social purposes e.g., finding a recipe for making slime	• record performances or game play e.g., lip syncing or dancing to songs, editing game play and uploading

Why do young people participate in out-of-school literacies?

Identity formation

It was evident that the participants experimented with different roles across a variety of communication platforms in the process of identity development (Belle, 2016). For example, all participants had created online profiles and identities across a number of platforms. Sometimes these identities were a hybridised version of themselves, such as inventing 'fake' names, ages, and other personal information for cybersafety. For example, the gamers would 'choose funny names' that became their 'gamer identities.' (Zeb interview)

There was similarly a drive to attain social status among their peers through established online social orders, such as leader boards. Willow explained: 'Yeah, lots of "likes" is a good thing to have, 'cause on Musical.ly there's a leader board … people want to be at the top of the leader board all the time.' Such identities contributed to the students' networked capital – their importance when gaming or interacting online.

Zeb, for example, spoke at length about his different approaches to game play. When he played with his friends he was mindful about supporting them, and winning with them as a team. Similarly, David spoke about feeling proud with what he achieved with his friends and how his 'ethical game play approach' would be different with people he did not know.

When you're doing well with your mates and you're all like, a collective group striving for one kind of goal and doing something like that, you get a real sense of teamwork and belonging, and you also get a real sense of self achievement because you're contributing to that goal. … And that is another great

thing, when you're not playing with your mates there's no connection or peer pressure to conform to anything, so you can just feel free to do anything. And if people are pressuring you to do stuff you just mute them, and they're gone. (David)

In this sense, Zeb's and David's identities and purpose as gamers changed depending on the context – they interacted with their friends in a stronger social sense than with other gamers they did not know.

All participants shared posts that included text and images with friends such as through Snapchat. Some of the participants shared up to 56 selfies per day. The creation of memes (using pre-existing photos and adding humorous text to them) was also prevalent, particularly with the older boys. The students commented that sending photos and creating funny text with them allowed them to express themselves comfortably with their friends. They trusted them 'not to share any ugly and 'lame' photos – plus Snapchat deletes them after 30 seconds so you would have to screen shot them.' (Mark)

There was strong evidence to suggest that participants were moving from dependence on their parents to independence with their peers (Poole, 2017). This involved understanding privacy issues when dealing with online forums (Hammond & Cooper, 2015). Students observed that:

We're not really allowed to post stuff because of our parents, because we are children, but maybe when we're older we might be able to … I'm not allowed to use Snapchat or Instagram yet, not until I'm 13. I was the first person in the whole school to start using Musical.ly, and then it sort of trended. (Abigail)

Yeah, people who once were saying it [Musical.ly] was lame, now have it. (Willow)

Both Abigail and Willow talked about the development of their identities and the shift from dependence to independence. Their online presence was still largely controlled by their parents' protective actions and was conscious of milestones toward independence in their use of media. For example, in the same conversation the girls explained how excited they were to be the first 'trendsetters' by using a popular app before their age-level peers, showing a sign of independence and personal identity.

Online social roles

The students explained the types of roles they undertook in their out-of-school literacy practices. Roles, such as collaborative meaning-maker, entertainer and presenter, designer and creator, gamer, team-mate, and competitor, all featured in their videos and conversations. They also reflected on these roles in relation to their perceptions of school. For example, Willow shared: 'At school you get told what to do. I have mixed emotions, as I feel like I don't understand it sometimes, and I get distressed about it'. Willow's response points to the need for greater volition in her roles and decision-making at school, while underscoring the associated negative emotions of confusion and distress – an intensified form of anxiety. Similarly, Willow was not alone, with the male participants, such as Edward, also reporting a similar sense of disappointment about how students are positioned at school:

Well if they let us expand our horizons, and let us actually teach them more instead of them being pretty much know-it-alls, then we could go further in our working … We could just say, 'We've already learnt that – how about we go onto the more complicated stuff?' (Edward)

The interview data also revealed that, due to teachers' reliance upon didactic teaching approaches, the students believed that they experienced greater opportunities to advance their communication and social skills on lunchbreaks and camps at school – times when they were able to communicate with their friends – compared to during instructional periods.

The students saw that many school literacy practices limited opportunities for their own voice and choice, and as such, assigned them with the role of listener, rather than as active learner. Other researchers have confirmed this sentiment including Exley and Willis (2016) who highlight the predominance of teachers as controllers rather than facilitators of knowledge and learning.

Strengthening friendship networks

It was evident from the data that students' participation in a range of multimodal and digital literacy activities contributed to strengthening their friendship networks. The students were also very clear about knowing how they could contribute positively to their online learning communities. This involved setting up and maintaining friendship networks. All of the participants talked about how excited they were to connect with friends via their multimodal literacy activities. David, for example, disclosed how he strove to get all 'As' on his subjects so he could game during the week with his friends, not just on Fridays. David clearly expressed a strong motivation to participate in out-of-school digital media practices because it was one of the only times in his life that he felt excited and happy. Interacting and collaborating with peers was a large component of the students' interviews. For example, Abigail and Willow talked about how they shared images and songs with each other, reporting positive emotions of happiness and excitement to know that their friends were available, even when they were geographically separated.

Solidarity and friendship networks were strengthened through building online connections with peers, including those that extended beyond national borders. They subscribed to famous overseas YouTubers, which was aspirational for the participants, as Mani noted: 'I do it [view videos] with my friends, and it just pulls us together so then we can experience more stuff outside of our boundaries'. Similarly, they maintained solidarity and belonging to the group through gaming.

What are the implications for personal and social capabilities at school?

The findings from this case study show that early adolescents engaged in a wide variety of activities out-of-school that played a critical role in their communicative, personal and social lives. Such engagement contributed to the students' own identities, roles, and friendship networks, both online and offline. Much research highlights literacy practices as diverse, building upon the multiliterate funds of knowledge and skills that students possess (O'Brien, Salinas, Reinhart & Paratore, 2018).

In exploring the skills learnt by students in our data it was also uncovered that many of the sub-elements outlined in the Personal and Social Capability learning continuum of the Australian Curriculum were also being developed (ACARA, 2012b). Our participants regularly commented on how they needed to display self-awareness and appropriately contain emotions when working with others, particularly online. They were also well aware of ethical issues related to online use such as privacy and predatory aspects in the population. The students noted their increased self-confidence as part of a social network, but also noted how this can quickly diminish when conflict arises (e.g., being timed out of a game, or blocked on social media sites by friends and peers). They believed that participation with others through these diverse literate practices was assisting them in understanding relationships and working collaboratively. The early adolescents consistently observed the need to make decisions through effective communication, requiring an ability to negotiate and resolve conflicts. The notion of leadership, while often associated with competition and leadership boards, also featured, but the focus tended to be more on collaboration and partnerships.

We believe that the types of activities that the students engaged in and the skills they learnt are useful for school learning and curriculum. For example, schools could also consider using varied approaches to learning including gamification processes. For example, designing activities into games – or problem-based learning (Cairney, 2002) to develop early adolescents' personal and social capabilities such as those listed in the Australian Curriculm (Barton, et al., 2019). Approaches to learning through group work and collaboration could also be prioritised, given the students regularly work through problems with each other through their connected literacy practices at home.

Ultimately, our study found that early adolescent students are engaging in a diverse range of multimodal and digital activities out-of-school that directly develop both their personal and social capabilities. There are opportunities to guide students toward sophisticated, mature, multimodal

communication practices, leading them to develop appropriate levels of personal and social awareness, and management with powerful relevance to contemporary times.

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Georgina Barton is a Professor of literacies and pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. She is the Associate Head of School – Research and teaches English and literacy education courses. Before being an academic, Georgina taught in schools for over 20 years and has been an acting principal, and a lead teacher in the area of literacy. Georgina also has extensive experience in teaching the arts in schools and universities and uses the arts to support students' literacy learning outcomes. She has over 120 publications in the areas of the arts and literacy including a book titled: Developing Literacy and the Arts in Schools.

Michelle Ronksley-Pavia is a Professional Experience, Inclusive Education & Special Needs lecturer and GIER Adjunct Research Fellow at Griffith University, Australia. Michelle lectures in initial teacher education and specialises in gifted and talented young people and inclusive education. Her research interests include: educational provision and differentiation for diverse learners through transformative pedagogical approaches; narrative inquiry; twice-exceptional children's lived experiences; and, initial teacher education engagement and belongingness.