

URBAN YOUTH LANGUAGE, ETHNOGRAPHY AND IMPACT

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The Resource

As observers, we could see the potential value of these interactions as a teaching/training resource, both for staff development and for helping young people deal with issues inside the centres. They could be used as a prompt to discuss the impact of different courses of action and strategies in a given situation. However, written scenarios can be dull and inaccessible. What we needed was something vibrant, edgy and engaging. Enter artist Andrew Chiu. Each scenario was illustrated as a graphic novel/comic sequence, and we developed some suggested activities to be used with the young people or in staff training.

The Project

A variationist/interactional study into the language of urban youth and its role in the enactment of identities. The study included a year-long ethnography in two Manchester secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) learning centres. The centres we attended cater for 14-16 year olds who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education for disciplinary/behavioural reasons.

The Data

Much of the recorded data came from spontaneous interactions that would have been unavailable to us with a more traditional approach. The ethnography gave us access to fleeting, sometimes volatile situations in which language and (mis)communication played a crucial role, often in terms of things 'going wrong'.

'The Cage'

Discussion/activity questions and suggestions

1. Describe in your own words the story that is presented here.
2. How do you think the boy in the red tracksuit is feeling in frames 1-5? Why is he feeling like this?
3. How do you think the staff member in the green shirt is feeling in frames 2-6? Why is he feeling like this?
4. Do you think the boy in the red tracksuit did lock someone in the cage? What makes you think this?
5. Do you agree that the member of staff in the green shirt when he says that walking past someone in trouble and not helping them (standing up for them) is just as bad? (Frame 5)
6. If you were one of the other young people and knew what had really happened, would you say something?
7. Have you ever been blamed for something you didn't do? What happened? How did it make you feel?
8. Have you ever let someone else take the blame for something you did? What was it? How did it make you feel?

Other Ideas

1. Blank out all the speech from the boy in the tracksuit and invite suggestions as to what is being said.
2. Do the same for the speech of the staff member, or for all the speech.
3. Ask for ideas as to how the situation could have played out differently if their responses had been different.
4. Ask pairs of students to act out the scenario – either based on the one that is scripted here or their own version of this or their own similar scenario.

For staff training

1. What's your overall impression of the scenario depicted here?
2. Is the staff member in the green shirt right to use the opportunity to talk about this earlier incident?
3. Imagine the conversation in frame 1 has taken place. If you were the staff member, what would you say next?

Alternatively, blank out all the staff speech after frame 1 and invite suggestions as to how they would approach the situation.



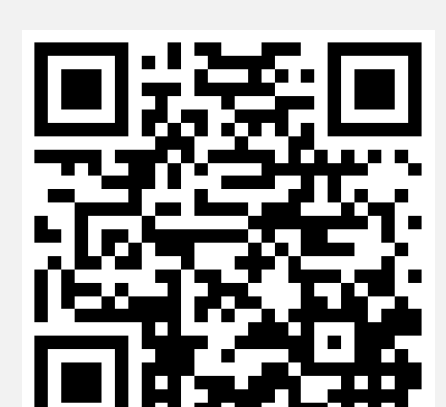
The Impact

The result is a set of resources that are of genuine use to the PRU. The activities have been designed in consultation with experienced PRU staff, and they are due to be trialled properly in September. With their 100% authentic speech, accessed through ethnography, they serve as an example of the real-world application of language variation studies, albeit in a slightly indirect way!

This is not the first project to use illustrated scenarios for intervention/training purposes. But it is unique in its combination of linguistic authenticity, artwork, and targeted activities.

There are countless additional contexts where this approach would be useful. I am currently working with colleagues exploring possibilities for their use in mainstream schools (for 'Citizenship') and youth justice.

I owe enormous thanks to the students, staff, and teachers at the two PRU learning centres. Obviously the project could not have been done without their support and good humour. The project was funded by a Leverhulme Trust project grant RPG-2014-059.



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'The Purple Pen'

(Selected questions)

Discussion/activity questions and suggestions

1. Have you ever been called a name you didn't like? How did it make you feel?
2. At what point does name-calling change from being 'just banter' to something more serious?
3. Do you agree with the staff member in frame 6?

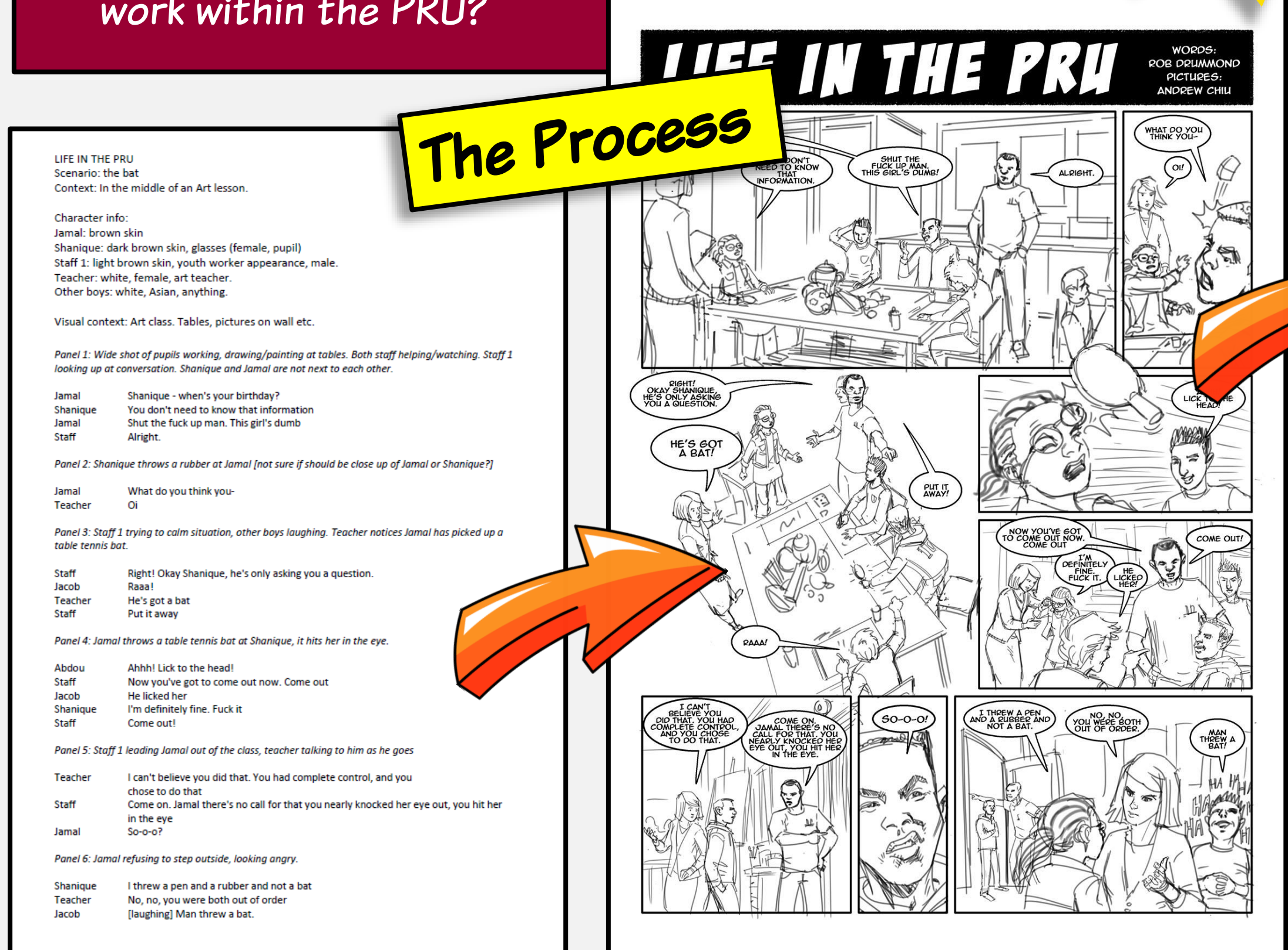
Other Ideas

1. Discuss which names for groups of (young) people are appropriate, and which aren't (e.g. Emos, Hoodrats, Roadmen, Chavs, Goths, Geeks, Nobodies).

For staff training

1. Was it appropriate for the teacher to use the term 'Emo'?
2. What stereotypes are presented in this scenario?
3. What's the difference between a stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination?
4. How might stereotypical, prejudicial, or discriminatory views impact on the way people work within the PRU?

Artwork by Andrew Chiu @AndrewChiu



The Process

