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Jane McDonnell

## Finding a Place in the Discourse: Film, Literature and the Process of Becoming Politically Subject

This paper reports on the role of the narrative arts in young people's political subjectivity and democratic learning. Drawing on theoretical insights into the process of subjectification and the relationship between politics and aesthetics, the paper discusses a number of findings from an empirical research project carried out with young people in two arts contexts. Interpreting these in the light of a theoretical framework that privileges a performative understanding of subjectivity, the paper argues that narrative art forms such as literature, film and television play an important role in the ways young people construct and perform their political subjectivity, and that this is an important part of their overall democratic learning. The implications of this for democratic education are discussed and the paper concludes with the suggestion that we need to rethink political literacy, civic engagement and democratic learning in aesthetic and imaginative terms.

### Keywords:

political subjectivity, arts, democracy, democratic education, political literacy, civic engagement

### 1 Introduction

The process of subjectification, the means by which people become who they are, has received considerable attention in the educational literature over the past two decades. Important work in the sociology of education has troubled stable notions of identity to focus instead on the performances that people engage in as they take up particular subject positions. Often based on theorisations of gender and sexual identity, such research has drawn attention to the myriad performances that young people engage in via the various discursive resources available to them in their everyday lives. Crucial to such discussions is the view that identity is not so much acquired or given, but performed or enacted, and that young people assume different subject positions in different circumstances as part of a fluid and ongoing process of performing their own identity. Such theories represent an important moment within both sociology and education. In freeing up understandings of the person from fixed categories of identity, they also highlight the educative potential of the process of subjectification itself.

This paper makes a specific contribution to these discussions by illustrating the role of the narrative arts in young people's performances of *political* subjectivity in particular, and in turn their democratic learning. It charts how art forms such as fiction and film contribute to the

ways in which young people learn to take up subject positions as democratic citizens and members of society, and engage in democratic learning. In order to do so, the paper engages with theoretical work on the nature of democratic learning (Biesta 2006; 2010), the relationship between politics and aesthetics (Mouffe, 2007; Rancière, 2004; 2007) and the role of the arts in the relationship between democracy and education (McDonnell, 2014). Based on empirical research carried out with young people between 2006 and 2008, the paper demonstrates how narrative art forms including film, television, and literature played an important role in these young people's performances political subjectivity and, in turn, their democratic learning. In doing so, it offers insights into the ways in which democratic education might best address the actual experiences of young people in relation to politics, democracy and citizenship. The paper argues that we cannot think about young people's political literacy and civic engagement without also thinking of them as imaginative, creative and cultural beings whose political subjectivity and democratic learning is played out within a world of discourse and narrative that is both enabling and constraining.

### 2 Subjectivity, identity and education

The performative understandings of subjectivity outlined above have often been taken up within the sociology of education to illuminate the kinds of identity work that goes on in schools and other educational settings. Examples include the work of Youdell (2006a) and Hey (2006), both of whom have drawn on Judith Butler's theorisations of gender and sexuality to explore the ways in which young people perform their identities by taking up subject positions from amongst the range of social and cultural resources available to them. Youdell's (2006a) work for example has illustrated how various ethnic subject positions were taken up in at a 'multi-cultural' day at an Australian high school, as young

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people variously performed their identities as ‘Turkish’, ‘Aussie’, ‘Lebanese’ and ‘Arab’. In doing so, she illustrates the performative nature of identity within an educational context. Hey (2006) meanwhile has illustrated how the use of language in schools played into particular performances of identity amongst girls, picking up on how ‘the performative language of gender and class found in the girls’ vernacular, terms such as “boffin”, “hippies” and “slags” formed part of, ‘the much wider, contested distribution of cultural and thus material resources’ (2006, p. 513).

Crucial to these views of identity construction as an ongoing set of performances is the concept of subjectification, as a process in which people become who they are through engagement with discursive and cultural norms. Hey’s (2006) work in this area is particularly interesting because she argues for an educational dimension to the process of subjectification itself. In her words, young people ‘learn to identify with places in discourse’ (2006, p. 446) as they continually enact and re-enact their identity. Building on Hey’s (2006) work, it is possible to go beyond the use of performative theory to interpret performances of identity within educational contexts, to see the process of subjectification as an educational site in itself. The research reported in this paper aimed to explore this via a focus on young people’s performances in relation to their identity as citizens and political beings, and to understand the relevance of these for their democratic learning.

### 3 Political subjectivity and democratic learning

The work outlined above was helpful for the research, highlighting how a person’s identity and subjectivity can be thought of in performative terms, as something which is enacted differently in varying circumstances. It also highlights the educational potential of this view, demonstrating that the ways in which people take up particular positions over time is also a learning process. In order to theorise the young people’s political subjectivity in particular, and their democratic learning, the work of Biesta (2006; 2010) was employed in the research. In his (2010) reading of Arendt he argues against an individualistic and psychological understanding of the democratic person, towards a more collective and performative understanding of democratic subjectivity. What is particularly interesting about this argument is that he shows very clearly how it is possible to see political and democratic subjectivity as a quality of interaction, rather than an attribute that individuals possess, echoing the performative theory that has been influential in recent conceptualisations of identity.

Building on Arendt’s concepts of action and political existence in the public sphere, he stresses the important conditions of plurality and unpredictability in making such existence possible. For Biesta, political existence is the space in which democratic subjectivity can occur as people have the freedom to ‘bring new beginnings into the world’ (Biesta 2010, p. 559) and respond to the beginnings of others in order to create something new.

This has important implications for democratic learning and democratic education. Rather than seeing the task of democratic education as one of preparing young people for political existence and democratic engagement, Biesta (2010) turns the argument around, insisting that political existence and democratic subjectivity are the start point for democratic learning, not its outcomes. On this view, democratic education is principally concerned with supporting people to learn from the experience of political existence and democratic subjectivity, as well as with providing opportunities for people to experience these (Biesta, 2010, p. 571).

Elsewhere (2006) Biesta has set this view in historical context. Charting theories of the relationship between education and democracy from Kant through to Dewey and beyond, Biesta notes that this relationship has most often been conceptualized as one in which education acts as the handmaiden or catalyst of democracy. Since the Enlightenment, education has been seen as the primary means of promoting democracy and ensuring that citizens can make well informed decisions in the exercise of their democratic rights. On this view, education is something that exists *for* democracy. Dewey’s philosophy has, in contrast, framed democracy as a means through which children and young people could be best educated. Here the emphasis has been on education *through* democracy, and the cultivation of democratic practice within educational settings. Both of these views can be seen in approaches to democratic education in the UK. The view of education-for-democracy has animated mass political education programmes in mainstream schools, such as citizenship education, which seeks to instill the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for active citizenship (Crick, 1998). Meanwhile the view of education-through-democracy has found form in the philosophy of A.S. Niell and the tradition of democratic schooling, and more latterly in the area of student voice (Fielding, 2004; Rudduck, Fielding 2004).

Biesta’s (2006) work is helpful for understanding the landscape of democratic and political education in the UK but it is also useful for thinking through innovative and alternative approaches. He argues that both the above traditions have focused too much on producing democratic citizens rather than on exploring the actual qualities of citizenship, democracy and political experience for young people today. Elsewhere, he has argued that citizenship education in schools (which was introduced as a statutory subject for secondary schools in England and Wales in 2002 following the Crick report and which was explicitly designed to address the ‘problem’ of young people’s political ignorance and apathy) have focused too much on teaching young people the right kinds of knowledge, attitudes and skills to be good citizens. Drawing on important insights and principles from critical pedagogy, he has argued instead for an emphasis on young people’s actual experiences of citizenship and democracy in everyday life, and what they learn from these. These ideas have been expressed



in Biesta and Lawy's concepts of 'citizenship-as-practice' (Lawy, Biesta 2006) and 'democratic learning' (Biesta, Lawy 2006) and have been illustrated in empirical research into young people's experiences (Biesta et al., 2009).

This research worked with a similar understanding by focusing on the actual conditions of young people's political, democratic and civic engagement to understand their democratic learning. In particular, it sought to explore how the arts might play a role in this learning, as a significant and distinct element of young people's experiences in the world.

#### **4 Political subjectivity, democratic learning and the narrative arts**

In order to explore the role of the arts within young people's democratic learning, the research focused in particular on the relationship between the arts and young people's political subjectivity. The research worked with the understanding that the arts are not periphery to such subjectivity, but are in fact central to it. Elsewhere (McDonnell, 2014) I have argued that the work of Rancière (2004; 2007) and Mouffe (2007) are particularly helpful in conceptualising this, as their theories imply a very close relationship between the political and the aesthetic. Mouffe (2007) frames this in terms of hegemony, highlighting the role of art and culture in creating and maintaining capitalist power relations. She therefore sees the use of artistic strategies within political activism as important for their ability to disrupt the symbolic and cultural frameworks that support the dominant, capitalist order (Mouffe, 2007, p. 5).

Practical examples of this can be seen in the aesthetic strategies of political activist groups and new social movements. The musical interventions of Pussy Riot and the adoption of Guy Fawkes masks, taken from the film 'V for Vendetta', by members of the Occupy movement offer just two examples from contemporary political activism. Barnard (2011) has argued that the tactics of the 'freegan' movement in New York (such as 'dumpster diving' in combination with public speeches condemning mass consumption) represent acts of political street theatre designed to draw attention to the damaging excesses of capitalism (2011, p. 421-422).

Rancière's view of the relationship between politics and aesthetics is more complex. Rather than viewing the arts as a useful strategy within political activism, he sees political and democratic subjectivity as aesthetic processes in and of themselves. This can be seen in his view of democracy as a fluid movement that is embodied in specific political acts, which disrupt the status quo. He argues that democracy is, 'only ever entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts' which are, 'singular and precarious' (2006, p. 74) and which shift the grounds of politics. The civil rights movement in the United States of America is illustrative of this, and Rancière refers to the actions of Rosa Parks, and the ensuing boycott following her refusal to give up a seat on a bus, to illustrate the point about how democracy occurs through a process of

political subjectification. He argues that in taking the action, Parks and the boycotters really acted politically and became politically subject, thus changing the political landscape and creating a new, supplementary kind of political subject (2006, p. 61).

Interestingly, he uses the metaphor of theatre to describe such political action, arguing that this political subjectification involves a process of 'staging' (2006, p.59) the contradictions and dualities that exist within a given political order; in this case between the equality enshrined in United States constitution and the inequality found in the state laws of Alabama at the time. By using this theatrical metaphor, he emphasises the aesthetic dimensions of political subjectification as something which forces us to see and experience political reality anew by 'bringing into play' (2006, p. 62) old tensions and taken-for-granted contradictions. This view is most clearly expressed in his concept of the 'distribution of the sensible' (2004, p. 12) and his claim that 'politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (2004, p. 13).

For Rancière then, political subjectivity is itself aesthetic. But he also goes further, to argue that the arts can play an important role in preparing the groundwork for democracy by opening up 'channels for political subjectivisation' (Rancière, 2004, p. 40) that are disruptive and dis-unifying. Via quite a specific history of art and aesthetics, he argues that both art and politics today create 'fictions' which allow certain ways of being, seeing and doing. What is most interesting, in terms of democracy, are those instances in which the arts (and literature in particular) perform a disruptive rather than a unifying function. Rancière describes this as 'literary disincorporation' from imaginary communities (2004, p. 40) and refers to nineteenth century literature such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as examples of how fiction contributes to such reconfigurations by employing a particular kind of equality of the written word. By adopting a linguistic approach that prioritises depiction rather than storytelling, Rancière argues, (the literary equivalent of impressionism), Flaubert's prose breaks down the hierarchies of artistic representation and mirrors the political equality contained in the story of Emma Bovary herself, as well as in its free circulation amongst the general population (2004, p. 55-56).

Whilst quite opaque and esoteric in some ways, Rancière's work highlights the importance of literature and fiction in opening up new ways of being, seeing and engaging with the world that also have a political significance. This has important implications for education. The political dimensions of literature have long been of interest to educationalists. Research into the stereotyping of gender roles and sexuality in children's literature (see for example Youdell, 2006b) are emblematic of this, as is Giroux's (2011) critical theory of film as a kind of 'public pedagogy' that sustains and occasionally subverts capitalist power relations. These



interpretations tend to focus on the ways in which narrative constrains political possibilities, however. Rancière's work is more optimistic, illustrating how particular narrative tropes and artistic techniques open up new political possibilities that have more to do with democracy and equality.

## 5 The research

The research aimed to explore the relationship between young people's democratic learning and their engagement with the arts; both in terms of their participation in arts contexts and in more diffuse forms of engagement such as reading novels, listening to music, watching television and going to the cinema. Democratic engagement was seen as an important platform for the young people's performances of democratic subjectivity and their democratic learning, and was conceptualized broadly as something that can occur both at the micro level of everyday interactions with others, and at the macro level of political and civic participation in wider society. Findings relating to democratic learning in the specific arts contexts, and to the aesthetic dimensions of a boycott that some of the young people in the study took part in, have been reported elsewhere (see Biesta et al., 2010; McDonnell, 2014, respectively). This paper, however, focuses on the more diffuse ways in which the young people engaged with the arts (particularly film, television and creative writing) and the role this played within their performances of political subjectivity and democratic learning.

The research took the form of a longitudinal study between 2006 and 2008 and was carried out with a cohort of eight young people drawn from two settings; a gallery education project in South West England and a performing arts course at a further education college in the North East. Five young people from the gallery project took part in the research, all aged between fourteen and fifteen at the start of the study. Three young people from the performing arts course took part, aged between eighteen and twenty four at the start of the research. Although some of the data relate to contemporary issues and politics at the time of the research, the findings relate to the dynamics involved in the processes of democratic learning and arts engagement, and continue to be relevant. Whilst the details of the young people's engagement are of its time, the principles and processes have more lasting validity.

## 6 Methodology

The research was carried out as an interpretative study, employing an adapted version of grounded theory based on the work of Charmaz (2006). Whilst building on Strauss and Corbin's classical model, and in particular on their inductive approach to analysis, Charmaz' adaptation avoids the positivism found in their work by emphasizing the emergence of findings through a gradual process of building meaning (Hodkinson, 2008). In particular it involved the construction, rather than the discovery of findings, employing strategies such as

sharing emerging themes and categories with participants, and the redevelopment of these in the light of participants' views, as part of the interpretative process. The research progressed in spiraling rounds of data collection and analysis, each informing the other. Categories were constructed through increasingly more analytic phases of coding, making use of the constant comparative method and of memo-writing to gradually construct more analytic codes and categories. Broad areas of interest, including experiences of political and arts participation, were initially used to guide the data collection process. However, themes and categories emerged from the data as the research progressed.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interview, with participant observation also carried out in the context of the gallery project. Individual interviews were carried out with each of the participants at least three times over the course of the research. Interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the young people's experiences, interpretations and feelings, with the aim of achieving a holistic representation of the people, settings and meanings involved in the research (Cohen, Manion 1994, p. 272; Denzin, Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). They also allowed the possibility of responding flexibly to the participants' articulations within the research setting. Initial interviews were carried out as quite open conversations exploring a range of interests and experiences. As the research progressed, these took on a more structured nature, focusing on emerging categories from the data analysis. Questions were asked to follow up on themes emerging both within the interviews and from previous rounds of data analysis. Five core categories were gradually constructed through this iterative process, and the analysed data were then interpreted in light of the theoretical framework for the research to arrive at some 'substantive theory' (Charmaz 2006, p. 55) about the processes involved in the young people's experiences and learning.

An acknowledgement of the relational quality of the interview setting (Holstein, Gubrium 1995; Byrne, 2004) meant that the interview data were treated not as uncomplicated reports of an underlying reality but as important constructions in an ongoing interpretative process. The findings presented here therefore offer one possible interpretation of the young people's experiences and learning. Additionally, given the theoretical influences informing the research, the interview data were treated as sites in which performances of subjectivity might also occur. Here, the research drew on performative and post-structuralist theory to analyse the use of language within the research process. Youdell (2006), for example, has argued for a recognition of the 'discursive agency' of participants in ethnographic research and attention to 'the moments in which subjects are constituted and constituted subjects act' (2006, p. 513) whilst Butler has noted the importance of 'errancy' in what young people say in the research setting as they recite existing discourses and subject positions (2006, p. 533). Schostak has advocated paying



attention to the 'repunctuating' of routinised language that occurs in the interview setting (2002, p. 210). Where appropriate therefore, data analysis involved paying close attention to the participants' use of language.

The aims of the research were explained in detail to the participants in advance of the research, and participation was voluntary. All participants were informed and reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. It was also made clear that their choice whether or not to participate in the study would not have a detrimental impact on their studies. Participants were informed of how the data would be used and disseminated. Data were stored safely and efforts were taken to ensure confidentiality, including carrying out interviews in private spaces where possible, and not sharing the data in with anyone in its raw form. In the findings presented below, the data have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

## 7 Findings

The data analysis resulted in the emergence of five categories; decision-making, participation, creativity, identity and change. These were then interpreted in light of the theoretical framework to arrive at findings relating to the young people's democratic and political engagement, their democratic learning, and the role of the arts within these. Findings relating to each of these areas are presented below, to illustrate the ways in which the narrative arts were implicated in the young people's performances of political subjectivity and their democratic learning.

### 7.1 Democratic, civic and political engagement

One of the main findings of the research was that the arts contexts under study offered the young people opportunities for democratic engagement at the micro level, through their interaction with others. This was a common feature of both the performing arts course and the gallery project, as the following comments from Leanne and Tommy, respectively, show:

'at the end we always make sure the last decision is as a group so there's no one like saying, "oh well I don't want this da da da da da." Everyone's got their own opinion whether they like the idea or they don't and then we sit and think together and think of the right, like a good solution.' (Leanne)

'We all sort of put in equal ideas and stuff and basically it came to like a good project and yeah...we all like took them into consideration definitely and no one was like left out if you know what I mean.' (Tommy)

Interpreted in the light of Biesta's (2010) reading of Arendt, these instances can be seen as examples of political existence and democratic subjectivity, as the young people's collective interactions led to the emergence of something new. However, the findings also demonstrated that this was a difficult process for many

of the young people. One of the important elements of Biesta's (2010) argument about the nature of political existence and democratic subjectivity, is that it is dependent on particular conditions; including plurality, unpredictability and freedom. Often the young people had to overcome existing attitudes to these; particularly a distrust of unpredictability and the tendency to adopt more imposing or passive stances in their approaches to collective decision making, as the following data in relation to the gallery project illustrate:

'everybody did make a contribution it's just her like being the leader...she's just sort of the person who likes to speak in front of people and stuff.' (Tommy)

'we often had those silent moments...when we were like, "erm, yeah, really don't know what to do.'" (Claire)

The research also highlighted the young people's political and civic engagement at the macro level. An important finding here was that many of the young people felt more comfortable with civic engagement through volunteering and charity work than they did with more explicitly political action, and expressed a disaffection with mainstream politics despite their interest in political issues. Daniel's experiences exemplified this:

'I'm so excited about Obama...I'm happy he's going to be the first black president, I think it will like change the world.' (Daniel)

'No, I refuse to vote because it's...I would vote if the lib dems had a chance in the running but I don't think they ever will so I'm not going to vote because I think it's pointless, I mean my one vote's not going to help anything.' (Daniel)

Despite talking about politics with family members, having a deep-seated concern for equality and justice, and taking an interest in global issues, Daniel's actual participation took the form of charity and volunteering:

'I like to do as much as possible. I was a steward for the great north run. I've been talking to my friends and my girlfriend and we're going to walk from the top of Scotland to Hastings for charity next year.' (Daniel)

He also advocated charity rather than political action as a way of tackling the global issues that he was so concerned about:

'all the people that are starving in Africa and stuff, I just think that if we don't get something done about it, it's just going to ruin the human race and like all this global warming I think it's just going to get worse and worse if we don't like put charity in...put money into charity to get research and stuff and try to change it.' (Daniel)



Participation for the young people in the study tended to involve these kinds of civic engagement rather than explicitly political action. There were some exceptions to this, most notably in a boycott organized by the young people in the South West in response price rises in their school canteen, which I have reported on elsewhere (McDonnell, 2014). One or two participants also expressed an interest in local politics. On balance, however, civic forms of participation were more common.

## 7.2 Democratic learning

One of the most prominent findings in relation to the young people's democratic learning was the growing acceptance and comfort with inclusive, democratic ways of working exhibited by the young people in the gallery project. Whilst many felt uncomfortable with the responsibility for making collective decisions at first, they became more confident with this over time and found ways of achieving a balance between the competing interests in the group. This also appeared to have a lasting impact on their attitudes and behavior, as Jacob's comments below indicate:

'well I think it just sort of helped us to take into account that we can't just think about our own ideas, you have to think about other people's ideas and how they think things should fit together.' (Jacob)

The young people from both settings also demonstrated more confidence in contributing to collective discussions and taking on active roles in public, as they moved through different educational contexts and felt more ability to speak up for themselves. Claire's comments in relation to the gallery project offer an example of this:

'I think it's given me more confidence probably and the way that you can just give your ideas and things, no matter what people think and just get your word out there and your ideas and how if, how you can just take control of a situation if you can see it's not going anywhere, rather than just kind of think, "oh, no-one else is saying anything, we'll just like go and...if you know what I mean?" (Claire)

Dean articulated a similar process, citing the freedom enjoyed on the performing arts course as an important factor in allowing him to come forward and be himself:

'I thought well if I give my ideas it might not be right but since I've come to college and started to be my own person and had the space to do that and be an individual, I thought well, "why not?"' (Dean)

Interpreted in the light of Biesta's (2010) reading of Arendt, these experiences can be seen as part of the young people's performances of political subjectivity, including their ability and willingness to become subject by taking action in the public sphere. Claire's reflections

can be seen to demonstrate learning *from* the experience of political existence and democratic subjectivity in the form of an increased willingness to participate and create more of these opportunities in the future. Dean's experience also illustrates the educational dimensions of subjectification itself, as highlighted by Hey (2006). The experience of becoming his 'own person' can be seen as an important performance of subjectivity, and one which was an educational experiences in itself for Dean, also leading to new sorts of behavior in his interactions with people in the future.

This was not a universal experience, however. For some, being exposed to more opportunities for collective decision making served to reinforce existing behaviour:

'I just maybe realized that I'm not really the person who'll speak up most in front of everyone and I just sort of sit there and take it all in and make a contribution if I want to.' (Tommy)

This is not to say that such experiences were not important within the young people's democratic learning. Tommy learned something different, but no less important than Claire and Dean, as a result of encountering opportunities for political existence in the public sphere.

## 7.3 The narrative arts and democratic learning

An important finding in relation to how the narrative arts were implicated in the young people's democratic learning was that an engagement with these sometimes fed into their performances of subjectivity in ways that had an impact on their experiences of democratic and political engagement at the micro and macro levels. One example of this was Daniel's engagement with comedy and cinema. He saw his engagement with films as central to his sense of identity:

'Well it just left me sitting in the house watching movies all the time and it made me think, "right, this is what I like doing" and I criticize a lot of movies now because I think, "that shouldn't work like that" and "that's not right", so it's like a main part of me now, watching movies.' (Daniel)

His comment about film being, 'like a main part of me now', illustrates how Daniel was, in Hey's (2006) terms, taking up the subject position of film buff and 'learning to identify with places in discourse' (2006, p. 446). This sense of identification through a particular art form extended to his love of comedy, which also had an impact on his interaction with others:

'Yeah I like being comical about things. I'm always up for a laugh and I like to make people laugh, it's why I get on with people. My best mate, he's called Martin, he's in my class, I get on with him really, really well because he's a...he's a chav but I get on with him because he's like a comedy kind of person and I like



getting on with people who are comedian types and we're stuck together like glue now because we're like some kind of comedy act.' (Daniel)

The significance of this for democratic learning, understood in terms of learning from the experiences of political existence and democratic subjectivity (Biesta, 2006; 2010) can be interpreted in one of two ways; on the one hand, Daniel's engagement with comedy can be seen as facilitating political existence by making him more able to engage with plurality. On the other, this identification through comedy could be seen as a barrier to genuine political existence; it was after all a sense of affinity and similarity that enabled Daniel to relate to the classmate he also saw as a 'chav', rather than a positive engagement with difference and plurality. In either case, the example illustrates how the arts can enable and preclude different kinds of interaction in the public sphere and impact on the ways in which people interact. To this extent, film and comedy played an important role in Daniel's democratic learning.

Another example of the narrative arts playing a role in the young people's democratic learning was illustrated in Dean's reflections about his future. Projecting a view of himself and his potential economic success based on stories from both 'real life' and television, Dean drew on the models and templates available in narrative culture to think through important personal and political issues:

'I've got like friends of the family who've got...who haven't had a really good life, have been poor through life and stuff with their family and then they've come out of that kind of life and got good jobs and then made money themselves which has made me, which has really inspired me because I've thought, "well, if they've been through it..." and then I've seen a lot of people on TV do it.' (Dean, interview 3).'

In exploring these potential life trajectories, Dean was able to engage with important questions about his own place in society and the political community. In doing so, he was exercising a degree of political subjectivity and, like Daniel, learning to, 'identify with places in discourse' (Hey 2006, p. 446).

Dean's reflections also illustrate the importance of Rancière's insights into the ways in which the narrative arts create fictions and provide 'channels of political subjectivisation' (2004, p. 40). Although Dean's reflections were primarily related to his personal goals and not directed towards broader political changes, they did, however, relate to more macro-level political and social issues about life chances and economic security. Importantly, they also had to do with equality. Through an engagement with certain stories, Dean was able to see himself as being just as capable of positively shaping his own future as those who had 'come out of' a particular kind of life and 'got good jobs', tellingly illustrated in his reflection that 'well if they've been through it...' His comments demonstrate that assuming

one's equality with others and imagining oneself and one's political circumstances differently is something which can take place through an engagement with narrative, in this case mediated through popular art forms such as television.

A final example of how the narrative arts were implicated in the young people's democratic learning is illustrated in Claire's increasing acceptance of unpredictability in her interactions with others, and her willingness to participate in the public sphere, as noted above. For Claire, these were accompanied by a growing acceptance of experimentation as an important part of the creative process. This was something she learned from her participation in the gallery project, where experimentation was a normal part of the artistic process under the guidance of the artist-facilitator, as Emma and Jacob's comments below illustrate:

'Laura [the artist] would like tell us a few things and to think like almost like backwards towards...like just look at things differently as you try and come up with an idea and stuff...just like experimenting.' (Emma)

'You'd start out doing something and you wouldn't know where that would actually end up.' (Jacob)

At first, Claire felt quite disconcerted by this since it represented a different approach to art making than she was used to in her experiences at school:

'I feel like there should be something more, "this is our art", not, "oh yeah there's this and there's this little thing here and we did this", but I know there's the book but that's kind of more like a collection, it's almost as if it should lead somewhere but it hasn't so...' (Claire)

However, Claire became more comfortable with this over time:

'I think everyone did really enjoy it as well because it was nice not to have to plan everything out...yeah, it was quite interesting how we could just do that.' (Claire)

This also appeared to translate into a more positive attitude towards experimentation and spontaneity in her engagement with the arts elsewhere, particularly in creative writing as part of an English course at college:

'I'm not as fussed anymore, like with English, we're doing like writing in different styles of people and the first one I did linked really well to this author and so I was just like, "fine, I'm just going to do that" and just sort of set my mind on that, whereas as we've gone through and looked at different things, I've been inspired by different things and was sort of happy to leave something behind and start on something new and just sort of try different things.' (Claire)





In this sense, Claire's democratic learning, seen in her increased acceptance of unpredictability and willingness to participate in the public sphere, was intertwined with her learning about the arts and the creative process, as expressed in her subsequent practice in relation to narrative and fiction.

## 8 Discussion

The findings support existing research into young people's actual citizenship (Biesta et al., 2009), and demonstrate the role of the narrative arts in particular within young people's democratic learning. They demonstrate the ways in which film and television fed into the young people's performances of subjectivity as they 'learned to identify with places in discourse' (Hey, 2006, p. 446). They also show how this was connected to their ability and readiness for the kind of political existence and democratic subjectivity that Biesta (2010) refers to in his reading of Arendt. Such connections were both positive and negative; the research shows how the arts can stifle plurality as well as how experimentation in the arts can mirror unpredictability in the public sphere and even contribute to an increased readiness for such unpredictability, and therefore for political existence. Following Rancière's insights into the ability of fiction to create 'channels of subjectivisation', (2006, p.39) the findings also show these narrative arts fed into the young people's performances of political subjectivity, providing channels through which they were able to negotiate their developing sense of themselves as democratic citizens and members of the wider political community.

The research has important implications for democratic education. On a theoretical level, it indicates that in order to understand the ways in which young people act and learn to think of themselves as social and political actors, it is also necessary to understand their engagement with popular culture and the narrative forms that surround them in their everyday lives. This also suggests that we need to think of political literacy differently; not just as a set of knowledge, skills and dispositions, but also as a general political awareness and engagement, and perhaps even a literary practice that is experienced in aesthetic ways and has an imaginative power. Importantly, the research also shows that young people's participation took different forms and that civic engagement was favored over the more overtly democratic and political. This is an important insight that merits further attention. In particular, it would be interesting to explore whether engagement with the narrative arts support some forms of participation more than others and to investigate possible links with either civic engagement or more overtly political participation.

On a practical level, the research suggests the value of employing narrative within efforts at democratic education. In mainstream schooling, this might involve the study of fiction, film and television within citizenship lessons for example. On a more holistic level, the renewal and development of cross-curricular strategies that make connections amongst subjects such as media

studies, literature and citizenship could be a useful strategy. Alternative traditions such as democratic schooling could also make use of the insights offered. Critical literacy practices that engage young people with reading, writing, viewing and critically discussing their responses to fiction and film could make a positive contribution to radical approaches to democratic education. These strategies and practices could be useful in terms of allowing students to explicitly consider their own developing political subjectivity within a world full of both diverse political experiences, and narratives that shape our understanding of, and engagement in, it. Schools and other educational contexts could also make use of the narrative arts to help encourage positive attitudes towards the kinds of unpredictability and spontaneity that can create the conditions necessary for democratic subjectivity. In this way, the narrative arts could contribute towards schools providing more opportunities for political existence and democratic learning.

## 9 Conclusion

The research reported here offers an illustration of the ways in which the narrative arts played a role in the particular performances of political subjectivity enacted by a number of young people engaged in the arts over a period of two years. It also demonstrates how these impacted on their democratic learning. The insights it offers are limited to a small number of cases and some of the findings are specific to the historical and political context of the UK at the time of the research. In their particularity, they are not generalisable to young people as a whole. However, in illustrating the processes involved in the ways young people take up positions within available discourses, they illuminate the role of the narrative arts in young people's democratic learning. As well as carrying some important implications for educational practice, the research points to some very interesting theoretical questions about how we conceptualise political literacy, democratic participation and civic engagement. At a time when the most radical forms of political activism amongst young people make explicit use of artistic strategies, and debates over the educational impact of fiction, film and television continue to be hotly contested, these questions are highly pertinent. This paper makes a specific contribution to these questions by offering some insights into the real impacts of the narrative arts within young people's democratic learning and by opening up new questions about the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of their civic and political engagement.

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