Language, creativity, and remix culture

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Introduction and definitions

This chapter builds on our particular understandings of five central concepts: ‘creativity’, ‘remix culture’, ‘language’, ‘learning to be’, and ‘appreciative systems’.

Creativity

As the contributions to this book demonstrate, ‘creativity’ means different things to different people and is valued by them for quite different reasons. While seeking a final, definitive account is pointless, there is strong support for the idea that creativity involves producing something that has value for, or is appreciated by, people beyond the creator, which is regarded as being of high quality or excellent of its kind by those who are competent to judge, and which is in some way new, innovative, and/or surprising or unexpected.

As is often noted, creativity does not occur in a vacuum; it always arises within some context, and involves drawing on resources, purposes, challenges, and so on that already exist, and then doing something that transcends what already exists. As Negus and Pickering (cited in Thurlow, 2014: 169) state, creative acts are ‘usually shaped by convention’; creativity involves ‘giving form to the material we draw on and transform, and this cannot be done without reference to existing rules, devices, codes and procedures’. These materials, together with the rules, devices, and codes, are the properties and resources of the domain or field of activity within which the creators work and upon which they draw in order to produce and innovate. This domain or field is also populated by other participants who are aware of these same properties and resources – knowledgeable insiders to the field and activity – and it is they, first and foremost, who appraise and recognise instances of creativity. Of course, the fruits of creative and innovative production can be recognised, and appreciated, and enjoyed by all manner of people outside the original field of endeavour to different degrees and in different ways. But to the extent that ‘creativity’ is a matter of esteemed appraisal, the initial appraisers are informed insiders to the field.

Three related points about creativity are important for the present discussion. First, it is important to acknowledge a spectrum of creative production, from major innovative achievements through to more everyday contributions that constitute incremental improvements, changes, or originality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Florida, 2012). Secondly, creativity is always...
supported to a greater or lesser extent by others within a domain and by shared cultural stock, as noted already, and creative achievement often reflects collaborative endeavour by groups or teams rather than individuals (Robinson, 2011). Finally, those who see creativity as a defining feature of our times – as integral to meeting contemporary challenges, handling unpredictability, and as a key to prosperity and advantage – emphasise the importance of a socialising component to creativity: that creativity can and should be nurtured by providing appropriate learning contexts and opportunities (Florida, 2012; Robinson, 2011). From this perspective, the kinds of popular cultural remix practices and ‘communities’ engaged in and inhabited by research subjects in the studies on which we draw in this chapter can be seen as important socialising environments for fostering creative capacity.

**Remix and remix culture**

‘Remix’ has long been a word in English, but in the sense under discussion here, the term entered everyday use from the 1970s, referring to the practice of taking ‘samples’ from analogue audio tracks (tape and later, with DJ scratching, vinyl) and putting them together into new musical products that nonetheless retain the ‘identity’ of the borrowed ‘samples’ in some recognisable form (Jacobson, 2010: 28). In this sense, the ‘mix’ component of ‘remix’ referred to the sound engineer’s mixing console in a recording studio. Like all key subsequent forms of media remixing, music remix moved from analogue to digital format with the development and everyday uptake of digital electronic technologies.

Once the term ‘remix’ had entered everyday language in this sense, it took on wider and narrower uses, and was applied retrospectively. In the wider sense, ‘remixing’ involves processes of taking any kinds of cultural resources, and combining and manipulating them into new (kinds of) blends and products. As such, remixing is something that we do all the time. As Lessig (2005) explains, remixing is the basis of culture – of cultural development, sustainability, enrichment, and well-being. We see a film and then retell the plot to our friends, mixing in our own commentary and evaluations regarding how much we loved or hated it, and referencing other films that we have seen or different actors, thereby remixing the creativity of the film’s director into our own lives and ways of seeing and valuing, etc. For Lessig (2005), ‘every single act of reading and choosing and criticizing and praising culture is in this sense remix’ and ‘it is through this general practice that culture gets made’. This broad sense of remix has sometimes been used in arguments designed to try to win some concessions from copyright and intellectual property restrictions, and to inform efforts to build ‘remix culture’ (to be defined shortly).

The narrower and more specialised sense of remix with which we are concerned here grew from the early 2000s as new technical and participatory developments played into popular cultural media productions and expressions on an escalating scale. ‘Remix’ is used to name diverse popular media practices, including music remixing, political commentary media remixing, film trailer remixing, fan film remixing, machinima, anime music video (AMV) remixing, photoshopping, fan art, fan fiction, game modding, web application mashups, and even fan-based cosplay or live action costume role plays, to name just a few. As in the origins of music remix, participants in these media remix practices use the original source material in ways that remain clearly recognisable within the new work – that is, remixes are ‘identifiably indebted to previous work in ways that pervade large portions of the work’ (Stedman, 2012: 108).

When we speak of ‘remix culture’, we mean the idea of spaces that enact a general openness to, and support for, digital remixing practices. It is what Lessig and others refer to as ‘Read/Write culture’ (as distinct from a ‘Read Only culture’, in which a minority of
‘professionals’ create cultural items for a majority to consume by reading, viewing, and listening to them), in which the many who ‘read’ the resources of their culture also ‘add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them . . . using the same tools the professional uses’ (Lessig, 2008: 28). Remix cultures can operate at a large, nationwide (or wider) scale through to smaller-scale, (sub-)cultural group levels. They comprise a kind of ‘creative commons’, making resources, advice, and tools available for contributing to the culture. Remixed additions – especially by amateurs and novices – are welcomed and encouraged; this is a collective space in which to share, contribute, and use cultural resources made readily available to everyone.

Digital remix culture is marked overall by a generosity of spirit concerning media resource sharing, and a willingness to have others take up one’s original work and make something else of it. At the more ‘micro’ level, fans or aficionados themselves develop specific support materials and online spaces to resource particular shared interests or passions. There is a willingness to share content and content sources, and to provide troubleshooting advice and feedback on remixed works, and to share know-how and expertise with others. Much of this idea is reflected also in the idea of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Language

We view ‘language’ broadly as a ‘set of social conventions, shared by a group of people, about how to communicate’ or exchange meanings (Gee & Hayes, 2011: 6). This is a helpful conception of language for talking about remix and creativity. It admits the full range of communicative modes and registers, resonating with Kuhn’s (2012) identification of remix as ‘a digital utterance expressed across the registers of the verbal, the aural, and the visual’. It also emphasises conventions, which are shared or communal properties and have to be acquired within contexts of being socialised into proficiency.

Language in this sense self-evidently includes everyday spoken language. It also encompasses written language in the ordinary sense of literacy, as well as an expanded sense of written language relevant to communicating ‘multimodally’ by means of digital media. Digital technologies function on the basis of foundational programs written in programming language or code. Once we are at the level of the screen, ‘writing’ with keyboard, mouse, or touch are all communication modes on the same plane. We click, key, or drag for sound, for text, for colour, for animation, for whatever. But to communicate meanings successfully from this plane, we need to master the relevant conventions germane to whatever discourse, genre, or practice we are in at the time.

Language and creativity intersect at different points and in different ways, which are nicely illustrated within the cultural worlds of remix. Sometimes, the focus might be on how language mediates the pursuit of creative ends, such as asking questions or sharing information within a forum. Sometimes, the focus might be on language as the creative product itself or a substantial dimension of it, as with a work of fan fiction or a fan film trailer. Alternatively, a digital remixer might employ creative forms of language (for example poetic language forms) within the pursuit of a larger creative end, which itself consists in language. Exploring language and creativity in remixing involves considering all such combinations, and others besides.

Learning to be

The more creative a process and outcome is, the more it will reflect deep learning in a sense that enables ‘real understanding, the ability to apply one’s knowledge, and . . . to transform
that knowledge for innovation’ (Gee, 2007: 172). Deep learning involves what Gee (2007) calls ‘learning to be’ (and not simply ‘learning about’ in the sense of learning facts, and where they come from and who believes them). ‘Learning to be’ involves taking on an identity – such as be(com)ing a biologist, or a tailor, or a chef, or some kind of media remixer – and coming to see the world and act on the world in the ways that biologists, tailors, chefs, and particular kinds of remixers do. This is so, says Gee (2007: 172), because:

[I]n any domain, if knowledge is to be used, the learner must probe the world (act on it with a goal) and then evaluate the result. Is it ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘adequate’ or ‘inadequate,’ ‘useful’ or ‘not,’ ‘improvable’ or ‘not’?

To make such judgements, learners must develop ‘appreciative systems’ (Gee, 2007: 172)

**Appreciative systems**

The concept of ‘appreciative systems’ comes from design theory (Schön, 1991, citing Vickers, 1978). When we are creating or producing something within a field of activity, aiming to get it as good as we can and as right as possible, and perhaps to create something that is significantly new in the process, we make ‘moves’ in our work, in the light of what we know and what we have available, and then make qualitative judgements about what we have done. We make these judgements on the basis of appreciative systems that are relevant and appropriate to the activity in which we are engaged. These are systems of ‘beliefs, values, norms, prizings’ (Schön, 1991: 12) that we have developed and which are shared by groups, affinities, and sometimes by entire cultures. Gee (2007: 172) describes them as value systems that are ‘embedded in the identities, tools, technologies, and worldviews of distinctive groups of people . . . who share, sustain, and transform them’. We are initiated into them, become committed to them, master them, and enact them as a consequence of taking on identities within fields of activity, striving within those fields, and interacting with others in the field and heeding their expertise. Fields of remix practice are, precisely, examples of contexts within which we develop appreciative systems as part of learning to be.

**Background to remix and historical perspectives**

As noted earlier, popular cultural creative activity involves diverse types of remix practice. By way of background to our wider discussion, we briefly identify and describe some of the more popular and commonly researched types: fan fiction, game modding, machinima, AMV, video remixing, and photoshopping.

Fan fiction – or ‘fanfic’ to its aficionados – is the name given to the practice whereby devotees of some media or literary phenomenon such as a television show, film, video game, or book write stories based on its characters. Most fanfic is written as narrative, although songfic and poetryfic are also popular forms, and some fan fictions are carried as manga drawings and animations. Fanfic writing can be classified into a number of different types. The most common of these include in-canon writing, crossovers, relationshipper (or ‘shipper’) narratives, and self-insert fanfic (for example Black, 2008).

Game modding uses a video game’s imaging and strategy engines (underlying software) to create fan-generated ‘modifications’ to the game. These may expand a level in the game, create new levels by introducing further layers of complexity or difficulty to the game, or even create a new game altogether. Typical modifications include adding a new mini
adventure or quest for player characters to complete, or developing original resources such as new characters, weapons, enemies, mini-storylines, etc.

Machinima (machine + cinema, with a hint of anime) involves remixers using three-dimensional video game animation engines and on-screen recording software to create films. These animated films can be fan homages to the originating game or may have very little to do with the original storyline. Machinima films can be created using a scripting editor that enables the remixer to write small ‘programs’, or scripts, for the game engine to follow and which, once running inside the game, will automate what characters say and do (see, for example, ScriptEase for Neverwinter Nights). The remixer then ‘films’ this pre-programmed action and splices these clips together to create a video, adding sound effects and voice tracks once the editing is done. Alternatively, creators manipulate player-controlled characters like puppets and record the resulting action, before splicing different ‘takes’ together into a final video.

Anime music video remixes are a popular practice within anime (animated Japanese cartoons) fanship. Most anime conventions, for example, include AMV competitions or screenings (Ito, 2010), and many AMVs posted to YouTube attract hundreds of thousands of views. Anime music video remixes comprise snippets of anime edited together and synched to a soundtrack of the remixer’s choosing (typically a Western/Euro song). Anime music video remixes can sample clips from within one anime series or film, or across several. These short videos use the soundtrack and anime clips to tell a story connected to the original anime, or a new story altogether, or can convey a message (for example the remixers’ feelings about war, friendship, betrayal, etc.), or examine characters’ biographies or relationships in ways that add to the original anime, and so on (Milstein, 2007). The remixes can be used for social critique or parody, but mainly celebrate the original anime on which they draw.

Video remix is a large, loose category of different ways of re-editing existing or ‘found’ video into new forms. ‘Shreds’ take an intact music video and painstakingly recreate – in a deliberately amateur way – some or all of the soundtrack, carefully synching on-screen action with the new soundtrack to parody the original. Political video remix uses news clips to create social commentary (for example video of national leaders edited to look like they are having an affair). Film trailer remixes resequence clips from a film to create a trailer that presents the film in a completely different light (for example Mary Poppins as a horror film). Other types include dance, queer, and commercial video remixes, among many others.

Photoshopping involves manipulating images using digital image editing software to create a new image. Image remixing takes various forms, including adding text to images, creating photo montages that mix elements from two or more images, changing the image content itself in some way, and changing image properties (for example changing colours or image focus, manipulating brightness levels or shading, etc.). Photoshopping is often done for fun or humour, to express solidarity or affinity, or for political/activist purposes.

Historically, once ‘remix’ entered everyday talk riding on the back of music remix (for example dub, scratch, rap, DJ, hip hop), and particularly once copyright cases began impacting on media remixers, scholars began applying the term retrospectively to historical cases such as Shakespeare (Pettitt, 2007), Virgil (Gruber-Miller, 2013) and literary, political, and philosophical authors at large (for example Frosio, 2013). They reoriented long-standing scholarship on the ‘borrowings’ of famous figures in terms of what is significant for the affordances of digital technologies, especially in relation to copyright law and infringement. Looking beyond the canon and to more recent history, researchers working with a remix perspective have traced the history of fan fiction in its current form at least to the Star Trek
fandom from the 1960s (Black, 2008), and of video remix genres such as vidding (Tushnet, 2011) and fan music video genres such as AMV (Springall, 2004) to the 1980s.

Thus the recent history of remix spans analogue and digital technologies. Research addresses both media, although unsurprisingly the bulk of studies deal with digital remix. Nonetheless, bodies of research and remix creations from the analogue period drawn on by authors such as Tushnet (2011) affirm the inventive uses of available tools and workarounds, and the imaginative, informed, and rhetorically powerful mixing of video resources, to achieve widely appreciated multimodal narrations prior to digital media tools becoming the norm.

Similarly, scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) do the same work for analogue (print-based) fan writing. Indeed, Jenkins’ landmark work on ‘textual poachers’ can be read as a treatise on analogue fan creativity across fan writing, fan music, fan art, and music video remixing – showing how creativity spans processes and outcomes, as endorsed by the frame developed in our opening section. Jenkins carefully documents the development and maintenance of fan practice communities in ways that show how conventions, support and sharing systems, feedback, and evaluative protocols developed across multiple practices and genres; he appraises, from the standpoint of a literary scholar and critic, the creative quality of specific fan works (see, for example, Jenkins, 1992: 177–84); he describes the ‘bringing-into-existence’ of entirely new creative practices and genres; and he captures specific instances of creative symbol use, such as the appropriation of the / (forward slash) symbol to name the genre of fan writing focused on same-sex relationships among key characters (for example Kirk and Spock, or ‘K/S’, within Star Trek fandom).

As noted, however, most research on remix addresses digital creations, which will be addressed in the central section of this chapter concerning research on remix and remixers.

Key issues and topics

Among the many issues and topics attaching to remixing and research on remix activities, five are of particular interest here:

- copyright and intellectual property laws;
- digital remix as an under-researched activity;
- the importance of researchers having ‘insider’ credibility;
- the fact that creativity means many different things to many different people; and
- the impediments posed to language and creativity by existing education policies and practices.

The most obvious issue concerns copyright and intellectual property law, legal infringements that may arise for remixers, and the restrictions that Read/Only culture entail for the development and enrichment of Read/Write culture grounded in the value of creative activity and production (Lessig, 2008). Ignorance of copyright law and its actual application can itself curtail remix activity when fear of infringement impedes participation – yet where the law itself provides some degree of flexibility (for example for educational use) and where flying beneath the radar is tolerated (Knobel, Lankshear, & Lewis, 2010: 222–3). Moreover, developments such as creative commons licensing arrangements offer important alternatives for creating remix. Such alternatives simultaneously enlarge Read/Write culture, enrich remix communities, and build the conditions for seriously creative production (Lessig, 2008).
Secondly, to date, digital remix activity – being so recent – is absolutely under-researched, let alone in terms that are explicitly concerned with language and creativity. Most research so far focuses on music remix, much of which is tangential to a focus on language and creativity. At best, available research speaks ‘indicatively’ to the theme of language and creativity – something with which we have had to wrestle in writing this chapter.

Some writers (for example Stedman, 2012) emphasise the importance of researchers avoiding ‘drive-by’ outsider studies of remix practices in general – and fan remix in particular. They indicate the importance of making research intentions clear to participants from the outset and of knowing how to convincingly demonstrate one’s insider credentials to potential participants. Beyond this, from the perspective of studying creativity in remix, the approach that we have taken here implies that some degree of ‘insiderliness’ is probably required in order to make statements about the creative status of instances of remix activities and creations.

Among its advocates, we find very different perspectives on the nature and significance of creativity. Some associate creativity with the pursuit of individual self-expression, uniqueness, and untrammelled exploration. They value creativity intrinsically, and nurture it by fostering free and open discovery, and ‘letting go’. Others also value creativity intrinsically, seeing creative outcomes as ends in themselves, in virtue of their beauty, excellence, and sophistication, but at the same time seeing such products as the fruits of discipline, learning, and of knowing rules, conventions, and extant achievements very well in order to push beyond them. Still others – and this may well have become the most influential view – see creativity in more pragmatic-instrumental terms: as the driving force in an age that faces deep challenges (economic, environmental) and unpredictability (Florida, 2012; Robinson, 2011). This view also emphasises discipline and deep learning grounded in knowing the conventions, standards, and achievements of a field, but privilege ‘applied forms’ of such awareness through fertile interactions among technological, economic, artistic, and cultural creativity (Florida, 2012: 6). Approaches to researching language and creativity, within remix practices or anywhere else, will vary considerably across such perspectives, as will research outcomes.

Finally, regardless of the perspective taken on the nature and significance of creativity, advocates of creativity are likely to see current formal education policies and practices as inimical to fostering expansive and productive relationships among language, creativity, and cultural engagement in activities such as remix (Florida, 2012; Gee, 2007; Robinson, 2011).

Researching remix and remixers

In surveying the research literature, peer-reviewed and research-based publications were located using the Google Scholar search engine, and the Proquest and J-Stor databases. A range of search terms and combinations of search terms were employed. Besides the primary key terms of ‘remix’, ‘language’, and ‘creativity’, a number of cognate/related terms were employed for each. Hence, remix was searched using terms such as ‘bricolage’, ‘hybrid’, and ‘mashup’, as well as the names for remix types, such as ‘machinima’, ‘Photoshop’, etc. Language was searched using ‘discourse’ and ‘literacy’, along with specific concerns with composition, narrative, and authorship. Creativity searches were buttressed with terms such as ‘originality’, ‘imagination’, and ‘innovation’. An initial pool was reduced to thirty studies that we believed could plausibly be seen to substantially address aspects of language and creativity in remix. These provided a good spread of research approaches across theory, design, data collection, and data analysis.
Most studies investigated adolescents engaged in self-chosen remix pursuits (for example Black, 2008; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2007), undertaken in out-of-school spaces such as fan fiction sites and purpose-built online forums, with researchers ‘finding’ their participants online and rarely meeting them in person. Gustavson’s (2008) study of a turntablist using a school space with permission during breaks and study periods is a notable outlier. Several studies investigated remix activity within literacy, art, and media classes in schools (for example Burn, 2009), after-school programmes (for example Ahn et al., 2012), and universities (for example Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), while some covered remix practices of people within larger contexts of being online (for example Ito et al., 2010) and in whole-community settings (for example Ahn et al., 2012; Diakopoulos et al., 2007; Durga, 2012; Hayes & Lee, 2012; Keegan, 2010). Others analysed texts or sites, such as films involving remix and remixing remixes (for example Cheliotis et al., 2014; Frölund, 2011).

To best convey the kinds of insights into language and creativity afforded by this research, we will briefly render three typical core cases.

**Case: Nanako**

Tanaka Nanako was one of several anime fan fiction writers whom Rebecca Black studied on FanFiction.net over a three-year period (Black, 2008). A native Mandarin speaker, Nanako moved to Canada and began learning English just two-and-a-half years prior to Black’s study commencing. Nanako had long been a fan of anime and was pleased to discover the anime fan fiction community on FanFiction.net at age 13, shortly before Black’s study began. FanFiction.net is an English-dominant, online community in which authors post their fan narratives and readers can write reviews. Black found Nanako ‘exceptional’ in terms of the popularity of her writing. When the study concluded, Nanako, at age 16, had ‘developed a considerable group of readers and avid followers’ and had ‘over 6000 reviews of her 50 plus publicly-posted fan fiction texts’ (Black, 2007: 120). These numbers suggest that Nanako’s work was rated highly by other fans within this community.

Initially, Nanako spent much time reading and reviewing other people’s fan fiction to gain a sense of how these texts were written and to make connections with other writers before posting her own stories (Black, 2008). She mainly wrote romantic ‘in-canon’ fanfics, taking characters from within the same anime and exploring romantic relationships not developed in the originals. Her first stories drew on models provided by other popular fanfic writers. Hence one early narrative included pop song lyrics to help to convey mood, reflecting the influence of one of her favourite fanfic writers (Black, 2008). Later stories were longer, more complex, used more polished language and refined plots, and also integrated some Japanese and Mandarin language content. Nanako was learning Japanese at school and found that including Japanese character dialogue added valuable cachet to anime fanfics. Her stories also began capitalising on Chinese anime characters, and she wrote their dialogue in a form of Mandarin (for example a Chinese exchange student who appears in the Card Captor Sakura anime). At the close of Black’s (2008: 94) study, Nanako explained that she was planning a crossover fic between Card Captor Sakura and the book/film Memoirs of a Geisha, to inform readers about Japanese and Chinese history.

Nanako’s earliest stories showed that she understood the remix culture enacted on FanFiction.net. She used author notes to explain a story, to thank reviewers, and to seek constructive feedback. These notes showed that she grasped the practice of declaring non-ownership of characters taken from anime, and the practice of ‘borrowing’ (with acknowledgement) other fanfic authors’ original characters and remixing them into a story of her own. Her notes
regularly expressed appreciation for reviewer feedback, and time taken to read and respond to her stories. Nanako also included Japanese expressions in her author notes, such as Konnichiwa as a greeting, or gomen nasai to apologise for sloppy grammar and spelling. She used ‘manga-fied’ emoticons to underscore meaning and to express affiliation with anime fandom (for example, ^_^, a variation on :)). Including Japanese and anime markers in her notes helped to cement Nanako’s alignment with other anime fans. While some fanfic aficionados deride author notes, arguing that a story should stand on its own (Black, 2008), Nanako used her notes as a social space in which to highlight connections with other fanfic authors, to thank her ‘fans’ for adding her to their ‘Favourite Authors List’, and to acknowledge how much she appreciated others enjoying her stories. She also understood the value placed on regularly adding chapters to stories-in-progress and posting fresh stories. Nanako regularly revised her texts in light of comments and suggestions, again showing that she valued others’ feedback. Likewise, she understood the importance of supporting other writers and regularly posted reader feedback for others.

Reviews indicated what others valued in Nanako’s narratives. Some commented on narrative developments, for example ‘This is really interesting, the plot is thickening every minute!’ (Black, 2008: 89). One reader focused on more technical aspects and writing: ‘Congratulations! I deem you another Han Yu Ping Ying champion! :D’, referring to Nanako’s proficiency in phonetically spelling Chinese (Black, 2008: 88). Another wrote, ‘You use different languages in just the right places . . . it makes the story complete’ (Black, 2007: 131). Many wrote about how much they loved her particular romantic pairings and her narratives, begging for more: ‘Will the season finale be followed up by a sequel? I hope!’ (Black, 2007: 131).

To summarise, Nanako drew on existing anime and took up unexplored romantic pairings in fresh, new ways that were valued by her community of anime aficionados. That her stories attracted so many reader reviewers indicates their perceived quality and popularity within the community. Nanako’s language use carried her ability to tell a good story and to achieve an esteemed final product. She also used language creatively within her remix: characters spoke in Japanese or Chinese (with translations provided within parentheses). She wove in different genres, for example song lyrics and email messages sent between characters. She wrote her author notes and narratives with the values of the anime fanfic community in mind, which meant attending to anime fan preferences, quality of plotlines and character development (in keeping with the characters as they appear in the original anime), and observing standards for spelling and grammar. Cases like Nanako’s remind us that simply researching final remix products risks overlooking important ‘insider’ values, practices, and interactions that contribute to the quality and take-up of the remix, and how these play out in creative practice.

**Case: AMV remixers**

Mimi Ito, a cultural anthropologist, has long been interested in anime fans and their practices. Her research reports case studies of anime fans and their AMV production (for example Ito et al., 2010) through to larger-scale studies of the ‘social structure of the contemporary AMV scene’ (Ito, 2010). Ito (2010) observes that, prior to 2005 and the launch of YouTube, AnimeMusicVideos.org was a key space within which to access fan-made AMVs, to share editing tips and video resources, and to exchange constructive feedback. Within this space, veteran AMVers willingly shared their expertise and newbies felt welcome to ask on the forums for help with technical problems. Part of the allure of AMV remixing, Ito (2010)
argues, is that the availability of computers, and sound and video editing software, means that more and more fans see AMVs as something that they can produce themselves for their own and others' enjoyment; for example ‘My first video took about two and a half hours to make and it turned out extremely horrible. But I loved it’, said a remixer calling himself or herself ‘Gepetto’ (Ito, 2010).

The anime industry has been lenient with copyright laws, seeing these videos as a form of free advertising and promotion. Typically, AMV remickers are drawn to the practice through their anime fanship and develop their technical video editing skills along the way, usually by means of emulating more polished AMVs. ‘Insiders’ to AMV remixing soon become aware of what constitutes a ‘good-quality’ AMV. For example, clichéd anime + song pairings are to be avoided – especially *Dragon Ball Z* anime paired with any Linkin Park song, as one AMVer found out the hard way: ‘[Experienced AMV remixers] were accusing me of not being very creative because the anime has been so overdone’ (Ito, 2010). In our own study of AMV remixing, ‘Dynamite Breakdown’ spelled out key elements of the appreciative system to which he attends in his own work (Knobel, Lankshear, & Lewis, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). These included: careful synchronisation between on-screen action and the soundtrack, with serious value placed on being able to lip sync characters’ mouth movements to the song lyrics; ensuring consistent resolution quality across all of the clips used; matching the chosen song to the kind of anime drawn on, unless a clashing effect is wanted; recognising the importance of sharing videos and advice freely, and leaving feedback for others on AMV.org and YouTube; and taking time when creating an AMV and working on innovative editing techniques, regardless of the software being used, to name a few. Thus, while AMV remixing is open to anyone, there are nonetheless obvious standards that set good-quality or innovative AMVs apart from the rest.

Language-wise, AMVs can be ‘read’ as personal interpretations of anime storylines, especially from a non-Japanese standpoint (Ito, 2010). Dynamite Breakdown works hard to ensure that he authors an engaging narrative that stands on its own, while at the same time adding layers of meaning for those familiar with the source anime. Colour and the mood of a song are used to convey information, too. Dynamite also superimposes words over clips at times to emphasise the message that he wants to convey (for example ‘Trust’, ‘Courage’). Some AMV remixers use song lyrics and video clips to speak to inequality (for example the portrayal of women in anime), or to comment on the futility of war and so on. Lessig’s (2008) point about young people ‘writing with images’ is exemplified in the world of AMV remixing.

The research of Ito and others suggests an AMV is considered by remixers to be creative when it has a seamlessness that tells a whole new story or message, but looks as though the anime was tailor-made for that specific video. Anime fans consider AMVs ‘successful’ when they evoke emotional and appreciative responses in viewers – because the video resonates with their own fanship of an anime, the video is thought-provoking, it brings together different anime in innovative ways, or the remixer has used unexpected visual effects to weave clips together. Ultimately, however, AMV remixing is all about participating in a particular fandom, regardless of the quality of the remix or the status (newbie, veteran) of the remixer.

**Case: Machinima**

In machinima, scope for creativity exists at several levels: the story being told; the ways in which constraints and affordances of the animated actors, props, and settings available are used by the remixer; and how the ‘aura’ of the original game is built into the story.
Andrew Burn (2009) documents the case of Britta Pollmuller, an artist, animator, and teacher, and her work in an after-school programme with a group of 13–17-year-olds as she helps them to create a machinima movie inside the three-dimensional virtual world, Second Life. Britta found the automated animation functions (for example the walk cycle), and the flexibility of being able to create settings and props, and to modify and dress avatars, etc., appealing as an animation medium and began teaching herself to make machinima within Second Life. She learned from members of the Second Life machinima community, and attended machinima festivals and seminars within Second Life. She participated in an Ed Wood festival (entrants have 48 hours in which to create a machinima responding to a supplied film title), winning first prize for her horror animation. Britta worked collaboratively with others to design, script, and film her prize-winning machinima, which influenced her subsequent approach to machinima work with students.

Britta became involved in the Open University’s (UK) Schome project (school + home), which owned an island with building rights within the Second Life ‘Teen’ grid. Britta and her group of teens met in the ‘Teen’ grid for two hours each afternoon, five days a week, throughout the three-month project. They used much of this time to brainstorm their film idea, develop props – either finding them in-world or creating them using Second Life’s building algorithms and scripting tools – and write their script. Burn (2009: 153) says that they needed to ‘beg, borrow, steal, as well as design, invent and transform’. Britta explicitly taught participants filmic language and galvanised the group as a film crew (working on everything from costume design, through setting up camera shots, to editing, etc.), which she saw in terms of ‘professional apprenticeship [rather] than amateur production’ (Burn, 2009: 153).

The group created a 12-minute machinima about the 1937 Hindenburg airship disaster (inspired by an airship that Britta had brought with her from the open Second Life grid and which was previously her avatar’s home). Britta consciously acted as ‘technician’ for the group (Burn, 2009: 147), and challenged them to think about what they were filming and why – especially if it was a topic or ‘move’ that had become clichéd in media or popular culture. Collaboration on all aspects of their film – down to camera angles and costume details – was a key element of their work together.

Language played a central role in their virtual world sessions, with everyone using public and private chat to make decisions to troubleshoot, to get organised for filming that day, to role play their script development, and so on. They also engaged in learning the scripting language needed for building items in Second Life, such as understanding prims, vectors, x, y, and z axes, what it means to ‘rez’ something, and so on. The storyline itself took the historical narrative of the Hindenburg disaster, and blended it with murder and thriller genres, to produce ‘a mysterious saboteur who kills a guard and plants the explosive which destroys the ship’ (Burn, 2009: 148). Burn (2009: 147) construes creativity as being able to ‘rework remembered or found cultural resources into something new’, attributing this quality to the students’ machinima.

Main research methods

Research addressing remix culture, language, and creativity comprises a disparate, loose-linked assemblage of work spanning varied disciplines, fields, and informing theories. Disciplines include sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and education. More specific fields include composition and rhetoric studies (for example Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), English and foreign language learning studies (for example Black, 2008),
literacy studies (for example Thomas, 2007), media studies (for example Ito, 2010),
communication and journalism studies (for example Diakopoulos et al., 2007), and games
and education studies (Hayes & Lee, 2012), in particular. Given that many researchers do
not yet speak explicitly in terms of ‘remix’, it was necessary – as explained earlier – to
identify the phenomenon, in addition to relying on how it is named in order to generate a
substantial corpus of studies to review. That said, an interesting trend exists in composition
and rhetoric studies whereby an overt focus on ‘remix’ and ‘remix culture’ appears to have
gained significant ground in recent years (Church, 2013; Jones, 2015).

Most studies focus on remixers rather than remixes. This is surprising, given the ready acces-
sibility of digital remix productions (videos, music tracks, artworks). It is also advantageous,
however, since our own study of media memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) – one of the few to
examine remix artefacts apart from their creators – revealed limitations resulting from not
documenting remixers’ design and meaning-making decisions, values, and strategies. A number of
studies examine sites and ‘affinity spaces’ dedicated to particular remix practices, or to remix
based on fanship associated with particular media or video games (for example Keegan, 2010;
Lammers, 2012; Stedman, 2012). These typically include interviews with remixers or their
forum posts as data. This focus on remixers is a positive methodological trend, because remix
research is not reduced to mere ‘text analysis’, and instead asserts the importance of process,
design, and attention to what is valued within specific remix practices.

The most common research design that we found is case study. These tend to focus on a
single user – for example Barb and her fanfic writing in Trainor (2004); Gil and his turntable
music remixing in Gustavson (2008); Jack and his work in a fan community in Curwood
(2013) – although multiple case studies are not unusual (for example Chandler-Olcott &
Mahar, 2003; Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010; Magnifico, 2012). Ethnography – ranging in length
from twenty weeks to four years – is likewise a popular methodological approach, although
specific cases from these ethnographies are often written up for publication (for example
Black, 2007; Ito et al., 2010; Lammers, 2012; Thomas, 2007). Other research designs include
interview- and survey-based studies (for example Ahn et al., 2012; Diakopoulos et al., 2007;
Stedman, 2012), analysis of online forum posts (for example Hayes & Lee, 2012; Lammers,
2012), and remix video analysis (for example Frølunde, 2011).

Most studies to date have been conducted either fully online or in non-school spaces.
Nonetheless, we found a growing body of studies addressing remix, language, and learning
within formal contexts, such as school classrooms, university coursework, or after-school
programmes (for example Ahn et al., 2012; Burn, 2009; Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010; Lacasa,
Martínez, & Méndez, 2011; Thomas, 2010).

Data collection methods include documenting online spaces through participant observa-
tion and artefact collection, interviews (conducted in person, in groups, via email or Skype,
or instant messaging), surveys, collecting bounded sets of forum posts, and collecting remix
products – including comments or posts about these artefacts. Data analysis methods range
from variants on discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics, through semiotics
and multimodal analysis, to basic and thematic coding strategies.

Surprisingly, we found no remix studies documenting and analysing what remixers
*do* as they do it – that is, recording the actual creative process through which a remixer
goes to produce a final, polished remix. This is a serious oversight from the standpoint of
understanding the interplay of language and creativity. Such studies illuminate the specific
design decisions that people make and their reasons for making them at key points in the
process, especially in relation to how they wittingly collocate or juxtapose sound, images,
and shared understandings of the original remix resources in order to create meaning.
Some basic recommendations for practice

When creativity is viewed in the kind of way in which we have understood it here, two points immediately arise. The first is that, in many ways, the practices and communities, or affinities, of remix instantiate much about the ‘logic’ of creativity. They represent paradigm reference points for people engaging in the sorts of processes and in the sorts of ways exemplified in classic cases of creative endeavour. If we were looking for ‘sandboxes’ to nurture what people such as Florida (2012) and Robinson (2011) see as the creative potential capable of being stimulated and developed in all people, then it would be difficult to imagine better options for sandboxes than popular cultural remix practices. Equally, when we are looking to understand ‘from the inside’ how ordinary people proceed on their ways to developing and refining their creative capacities, remix practices represent an obvious choice – except that, to date, this choice has apparently not been obvious to many researchers.

The second point is that ‘creativity’ can be seen as part of a larger family of concepts drawn on to express ideals for learning and personal development in the twenty-first century. These include broad concepts such as deep learning, thinking like a designer, and becoming expert problem solvers, as well as many of the more specific candidates for ‘twenty-first-century skills’.

When we put these two points together, and ask where research momentum and critical mass have been achieved in investigating ‘new learning’ phenomena at the intersection of everyday people in their everyday worlds, the focus on games studies stands out – particularly within the area of education and language use. The achievements of dedicated research programmes focusing on games and learning are outstanding, and continue to flourish. We would argue that developing dedicated research programmes with a remix focus is an obvious strategy for enhancing knowledge and understanding of relationships between language and creativity.

We would urge the ‘insider principle’ at the practical level for implementing good remix, language, and creativity research, too. One of the fundamental lessons to be drawn from the success of games studies research is how much it owes to researchers who have themselves been gamers. This extends Stedman’s (2012) point about ‘insiderliness’ being important for gaining entry to the field in the first instance. It asserts the idea that relevant experience is important for knowing the places to look for what we do not know and for reflecting upon what we do not know, but think might be important for us to know. Researching remixers and their remix practices effectively from the standpoint of understanding the dynamics of language and creativity will benefit from researchers being, to at least some extent, remixers themselves.

Finally, as noted in the previous section, in order to understand the dynamic interplay of language and creativity within remix practices, it is important to document and analyse what remixers say and do as they say and do it. Outside the ambit of remix studies, Andrew Burn (2008) provides an excellent introduction to what this involves, how it is done, and what may be gained from doing it in his account of studying a 14-year-old youth engaging in designing a computer game, Rebellion. Burn shows the kind of richness that can be brought to a focus on language, multimodality, and creative activity by bringing an ethnographic approach to the research. And while Burn himself was not a fully fledged game designer at the time, he certainly had sufficient relevant cultural knowledge of video games, as well as digital multimedia proficiency, to plan the nature and scope of data collection effectively. Hence his account also illustrates our previous point concerning ‘insiderliness’. Consequently, studies like Burn’s investigation of designing Rebellion represent the kind of research of which we hope to see more for the field of popular cultural remix.
**Future directions**

While there has not been space in which to develop the theme beyond a mention here, ‘creativity’ is a contested concept in the sense that there are multiple, long-standing, and competing discourses of creativity. Currently, however, the ‘creative economy’ and ‘creative industries’ variant probably rules the roost. At the same time, however, it typically glosses the concept of creativity itself, ignores competing traditions, and subordinates creative endeavour to a set of instrumental-pragmatic ends. These latter are important, but the argument from this perspective ends up advocating the integration of historically central aspects such as literary, artistic, and cultural creativity, with their connotations of intrinsic worth, into a worldview that rarely gets beyond considerations of economic and technological growth, and ideas of sustainability compatible with those considerations.

By contrast, research in the area of language and creativity – as reflected in this volume – resists a reductionist approach and provides an important corrective. Peters and Besley (2008: 103) conclude a discussion of academic entrepreneurship and the creative economy with the claim that, in the current conjuncture, ‘we need to creatively revisit “creativity”, its historical conceptions and its philosophical underpinnings’, and at the same time seek a better understanding of how some (academic) institutional practices ‘encourage and harness talent in individuals and communities while others constrain or prevent it entirely’. Over-domination by a single creativity paradigm is likely to constrain or prevent forms of creative endeavour emanating from alternative value positions and visions of a good life. It is important to note here that one of the central messages communicated by research subjects engaged in media remixing is their passion for their interest and the extent to which they pursue it to the limits as an intrinsic end – as activity in which they live richly, and with a sense of personal vocation and fulfilment. Whatever the future directions of researching the intersections among language, creativity, and remix, we would hope to see as many creative revisitings of creativity as possible.

While the stock of research studies of remix practices remains small and some practices are minimally represented, we were nonetheless surprised to find no studies whatsoever of people creating serviceware mashups, or ‘apps’: the process of mixing together two or more application programming interfaces (APIs) with each other and/or available databases to leverage what already exists for the purposes of doing something new. Given the ubiquity of apps, and the disposition of many fans to create apps as resources to be used productively for building the affinities to which they are committed, and given the interesting ways in which language – not least language as programming – plays out in creating apps, we anticipate future research in this area.

Finally, while it may take some time, we anticipate learning within formal institutions to gradually include opportunities for digital remix creation within their curricula (Erstad, 2013; Jenkins, 2010), and with such shifts will come further opportunities and incentives for enacting and understanding how language and creativity may be related, and for improving practice in the light of what we find. Effective change that genuinely enlarges scope for creative achievement will not come easily, however, since we are inevitably limited by our imaginations. Some of the challenge involved is nicely captured by Stedman’s (2012) report of a hypothetical college course on remix culture, mooted in a 2010 article in the future-oriented magazine *Wired* under the description of ‘Seven essential things you didn’t learn in college’ (or school, for that matter). Stedman (2012: 107) notes how, paradoxically, the course emphasises students writing essays that analyse remixed cultural artefacts, yet includes only a lone sentence referring to some actual creative composition activity, which was ‘dropped in at the end of the article’.
For future directions in formal learning to tap productive links between language and creativity, there is likely much to be gained from paying attention to cases of creative achievements by analogue and digital media remixers, and their cultural contexts of production, learning, sharing, and interaction.

**Related topics**

computational approaches to language and creativity; creativity and digital text; creativity and discourse analysis; creativity and Internet communication; creativity and technology; everyday language creativity

**Further reading**


An ethnographic study of Cassie, a 16-year-old fansite moderator, with an emphasis on writing and social purposes.


This volume presents twenty-three case studies from a three-year ethnographic study of integrating new media into their lives and learning within home, after-school programme, and online settings, with close analysis of group dynamics.


This is the original scholarly account of fan remix practices within analogue participatory culture. Centred on de Certeau’s concept of poaching, from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, it draws on diverse theory to provide close analysis of creative production of media texts.


Peppler surveys research literature on youth digital media production and their interest-driven learning. Peppler makes research-based recommendations for inviting, sustaining, and supporting arts-oriented activities within school and a range of youth-oriented project settings.


Based on a seven-year study, this book provides rich examples of how young people remix cultural material within processes of creating identities online. It uses methods of textual, visual, and social-psychological analysis to describe and understand how participants made sense of their identities and their locations in wider communities.

**References**


