



Creative Potential for Positive Social Change: an Interview with Dr. Ioana Literat

Sarah F. Keenan-Lechel¹ · Carolina Torrejón Capurro² · Danah Henriksen² · The Deep-Play Research Group

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Originality is the best form of rebellion.

~ Mike Sasso.

We need to harness these creative modes of expression and interests that young people have in order to amplify their political voice.

~ Dr. Ioana Literat.

Introduction

As we move toward the end of our fifth year of interviewing creativity experts about how they understand the role and potential of creativity, it has been a delight to see the many ways in which creativity has been taken up and examined through various lenses. These past five years have seen major shifts in our social and political landscape. As our lives are rocked by a pandemic and myriad implications stemming from the 2020 election, continuing to tug on this thread of creativity has offered some helpful guideposts. For example, in 2016 we published an article within this series featuring the scholarship and perspective of Dr. Mark Runco (Richardson et al. 2016). His observation about the tensions between

openness and conformity and the impact they can have on creativity seemed newly apt when held up against the current realities of remote schooling and campaigns of disinformation online. Striving to be intentional in how we engage with online platforms to build and create rather than fall into group-think is more important than ever and speaks to the work done by the scholar interviewed in this article, Dr. Ioana Literat.

In this article, we spoke with Dr. Literat about how she layers theories of distributed creativity onto her internet research agenda to examine how youth use online spaces and digital media to make sense of current events. As follows, we share our discussion about her path to engaging in creativity research through the use of digital media and a dedication to amplifying voices. We explore how her work has changed and sharpened around participatory creativity as she saw shifts in creative outcomes and conversations around the political landscape of recent years.

Dr. Literat studies youth online creativity and the political role that online creativity plays within the spaces for interaction granted by the internet. In her most recent work, Dr. Literat is trying to better understand the intersections between online creativity and political expression with the purpose of further identifying and analyzing ways in which to reach and support youth and validate their voices.

As an Assistant Professor in the Communication, Media, and Learning Technologies Design program at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Associate Director of the Media & Social Change Lab (MASCLab), Dr. Literat has co-authored many peer-reviewed journal articles that discuss the dynamics of youth engagement and online participation. Further, she has collaborated with numerous scholars who share her same interest in understanding what the colliding forces are when looking at agency, empowerment and voice in the context of youth activism: the search of the how. Beyond her scholarly work, she has developed a game called *LAMBOOZLED!*, which addresses the issue of fake news. In the game, the objective is to collect as “much evidence as possible to figure out whether the news stories are real or

The Deep-Play Research group is a loose collective of faculty, education professionals, and graduate students across institutions in Arizona, California, Hawai'i, Michigan, and Wyoming. Participants include: William Cain, Danah Henriksen, Sarah Keenan-Lechel, Rohit Mehta, Punya Mishra, Carmen Richardson & Melissa Warr.

✉ Danah Henriksen
Danah.Henriksen@asu.edu

Sarah F. Keenan-Lechel
skeen721@gmail.com

Carolina Torrejón Capurro
ctorrejo@asu.edu

¹ MiSTEM Network, Lansing, MI 48933, USA

² Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

fake.” It is a tool that enhances skills such as handling information, analyzing stories and identifying fake news.

As the interview unfolded, we were able to identify themes in connection to the different theories of creativity and how they relate to Dr. Literat’s scholarship. The topics presented here highlight the impact online spaces and digital media have on the way youth makes sense of current events. After presenting some of the key themes, we discuss how technology and creativity work together to amplify youth voices and the implications for education when identifying the role of online creativity in telling people’s stories. The ideas shared in this interview are characterized by four core themes or areas, all of which come to bear in her scholarship, including: a social collective view of creativity; the importance of empowerment, voice and agency; political engagement and creativity; and the role of technology and creativity in education.

Social Collective Creativity

Dr. Literat’s path to Teachers College at Columbia University came by way of her being a film major in her undergraduate studies at Middlebury College, where she was interested in “the potential of media to stimulate positive change, to empower people, to stimulate agency.” As her classmates focused on Hollywood, Dr. Literat’s attention moved toward using media in creative ways that supported people in telling stories of both personal and collective significance. After spending time working with digital storytelling in India, she joined Dr. Henry Jenkins at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication to explore the theories behind these threads she saw around media, empowerment, and voice.

While at USC, Dr. Literat supported a key project in the Annenberg Innovation Lab—digitizing the 1.3 million square foot AIDS quilt. She explained:

The AIDS quilt had fallen into a process of cultural amnesia. Generations that didn’t have that connection with the AIDS crisis in the 80s and the early 90s were starting to be removed from it and the quilt itself... The quilt is literally molding and rotting because it’s textile. We started thinking about ways that we could use digital media creatively to keep that cultural connection going...I was steeped in these stories of people that had died. I knew the squares by heart and where to find them—it was very emotionally impactful, and I could see the power of the collective aspect of creativity because the quilt was so powerful. It had this immensity where it’s square next to square next to square—literally stitched together, and it tells this collective story in a creative and very impactful way.

This notion of creativity as a social and collective action is critical to Dr. Literat’s very conception of creativity, and it diverges from the more individualistic psychological representations of creativity seen through the latter half of the twentieth century (Glăveanu 2014a, b). This more social conception of the collective power of creative action has emerged more strongly in recent years and it distributes the creative process and agency away from just one person, to many.

The idea of co-creating pieces of art and harnessing the collective power of many voices in creative products informed Dr. Literat’s burgeoning research agenda. She began to ask questions about how the internet does (or doesn’t) change the opportunities for this kind of creative undertaking. Recognizing the internet offers both a “context, locus, and medium” (Literat 2018, p. 1168) for creative activity, Literat proposed a framework to understand the influence of the internet on the lifecycle of a creative product. Walking through stages of creation, distribution, interpretation, and remixing with a variety of online / offline, professional / vernacular case studies, Dr. Literat traces the impact of the internet and its effect on creative production and consumption.

This notion of creativity as “remix” aligns well with a transdisciplinary conception of creativity and connects to one of the most central transdisciplinary skills honed by creative people—that of “synthesizing” or creative synthesis (Henriksen et al. 2015). As Dr. Literat points out, the opportunities the internet opens change the possibilities, and digital tools can support creative and collective synthesis of ideas.

Henry Jenkins’ (2006, 2009) work significantly influenced Dr. Literat’s views on creativity, and she noted that he “came up with this idea of participatory culture and the need to pay attention in a very respectful and grassroots way to the myriad, complex ways in which online communities make stuff—and make stuff together.” As she pointed out, Jenkins was one of the first scholars that paid attention to fan communities and adopted a serious academic lens to consider pop culture and grassroots popular phenomena that had not been given significant attention previously. She commented that “he encouraged this way of looking at online dynamics - especially *online creative dynamics* - with passion and with respect, and really trying to understand what they’re doing from a very humble place.” And because she was interested in the online aspect of this work, Literat started thinking about the online equivalent of an AIDS quilt—trying to understand how the internet could help facilitate this collective type of creativity.

This led her to an interest in crowdsourced art and a line of research that examined how artists use the internet to engage the public in co-creating art. But as this work progressed, she realized that she “lacked a deep and nuanced understanding of the basic theories of creativity from psychology or sociology.” She began collaborating with noted creativity researcher Vlad Glăveanu (also interviewed earlier in this series, see Keenan-Lechel et al. 2019), and reflected on how this advanced her

theoretical grounding and moved the work forward. It brought her, “an internet scholar, together with this very traditional creativity researcher—I study memes and he studies folk art.” (See Literat and Glăveanu 2018; Glăveanu et al. 2018; Literat and Glăveanu 2016 for more on these joint efforts).

Much of her work has been grounded in the notion of distributed creativity, a theory focused on the social, material and temporal dimensions of creativity (Glăveanu 2014a, b), saying, “to me, it was a very ‘aha’ moment reading this because what I saw online was just such a pragmatic example of it.”

Empowerment, Voice and Agency Via Creativity

An important piece of this work around collective internet creativity was spurred by a fascination with the empowerment that it affords people who traditionally may not have had a voice and agency, as Dr. Literat commented, “I became really passionate about using media in creative ways to tell stories of personal and collective significance, and really interested in the theoretical questions behind this. These connections between media and empowerment and voice.”

This focus on voice and empowerment stems from an interest in what people actually *do* with creativity or how it affects them or changes things. One of the driving forces in her research trajectory in the creativity space, which may stem from her background as a producer of creative works, is an interest in what she calls “the stakes of creativity.” While she believes in starting from a strong theoretical foundation, Dr. Literat noted that “what I’m most interested in and what really drives me as a scholar is that next step—the ‘so what?’ factor,” or how creativity plays out in ways that actually affects people’s lives and the world around us. The particular voices and lived experiences that have emerged through her work are often those of young people, and this ties into education and civic engagement as well.

Although Dr. Literat’s work is rooted in communication research, her scholarship includes explorations of digital participatory practices across a variety of domains. This ability to speak to multiple audiences is a strength of her scholarship. She notes:

Given my interest in youth and learning, my research makes valuable connections between education and other relevant fields, like communication, Internet studies, and creativity research. I believe there is much to learn from studying young people’s informal practices of online participation, and that doing so sheds light on processes of creativity, political expression, political socialization, activism and more.

A core aim here has been to find insights from online spaces and consider how they might inform a deeper and more

holistic understanding of young people’s social, cultural and political lives, both online and offline. With this focus on youth voices and empowerment in online spaces, adults have a role to play here. She emphasized the importance of adults supporting youth voices in these spaces, commenting, “it’s really important for young people to know that adults—especially adults in positions of authority like teachers and parents—really see these ways of expression as meaningful, because they are personally meaningful to young people.”

Dr. Literat notes that the world overall is “a system that really privileges adults as the holders of power.” Because so much of the lives of youth are dictated by adults, one way in which they can actually exert power and exert agency is through activism (Liou and Literat 2020).

Dr. Literat firmly believes in the empowering potential of online spaces and digital creativity, saying, “everything that I do is with the aim of helping, especially young people, reach their full civic potential and really understanding how we can support them as civic actors.”

Her focus has always been on how to harness creative modes of expression and harness the interests that young people have in order to not silence but amplify their political voice, and this political engagement through creativity and new media has been a major force in her work.

Political Engagement and Creativity

As Dr. Literat’s work unfolded, the connection between creativity and political expression occurred almost organically for her. After the 2016 election, she began to explore how youth were making use of online creativity as a potential political tool for expression and engagement. As she noted, “in the lead up to the 2016 election and right afterwards all of these spaces turned super political. So that’s when I really dove deeper into exploring this connection between online creativity and politics.”

Her fascination with this connection led her to examine the countless creative spaces and artifacts young people were using for these purposes. As Dr. Literat discussed, these spaces were not only used for general creativity, but also for “engaging in political discussion and to express themselves politically and civically.” She observed how young people were using everyday platforms such as TikTok or online fanfiction and memes to make sense of the world they were living in (see, for example, Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2018 or Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019). Dr. Literat also emphasized the nature of young people’s worldmaking and creative expression. She explains:

Creativity—especially online creativity and online creative expression—plays a huge role here and what I’ve consistently found across contexts, across case studies,

across political moments, is that for young people politics is filtered through their own interests—through pop culture, through their own creative modes of engagement online.

A key objective of Dr. Literat's research around creativity and political expression lies in the idea of validation. She has sought to understand the role of creativity in the way in which young people voice their political views. In this regard, she noted that the aim is to "better understand how we can reach them. How we can support them, what are some of the opportunities and challenges. And to really try to validate that type of political expression." On the same note, she comments on the importance of reaching young people by addressing politics as a personal endeavor, "if we are trying to reach them in civics class you know, talking about the three branches of government and all that, that's very abstract and removed from their experience."

Dr. Literat discussed the concept of "civic imagination," created by Henry Jenkins that talks about the idea of collectively imagining a better future as the first step towards having an improved future (Jenkins et al. 2020). In this sense, the different creative spaces and tools youth make use of to express themselves are acting as a channel for imagining a world where their political views are heard and validated. These youth activists are taking the resources they have available to them, to change adults' perspectives in regard to the role young people should or should not have in politics. As Dr. Literat notes, "youth activists are seen through an adultist system," and adults often do not pay enough attention to how young people are connecting with each other to talk about what matters to them.

Creativity, Technology, and Implications for Education

One important reflection Dr. Literat makes about creativity is that "creativity now is not divorced from day-to-day life. There's no special time and place for creativity, but rather it's so seamlessly integrated." Although creativity has long been considered a desirable quality or skill (often for instrumental reasons), it is now perceived as a fundamental component of who we are as human beings. Again, Dr. Literat expressed her interest in the stakes of creativity, how creativity functions in different contexts and how it impacts our life. The seeking of the "so what" as she explains, "what do people do with memes, what role does online creativity really play in people's lives, in people's lived experiences." This is relevant to education, which seeks to prepare young people to contribute to the world around them, to affect their society in productive ways. She notes the relevance of some of these creative, popular youth-oriented modes of expression in

classrooms, "for using something like Scratch or fanfiction in a civics classroom. I think young people appreciate these connections to their interests...For those involved in civics education, how could you use, for example, fanfiction to activate them politically?"

She referenced Henry Jenkins' concept of the civic imagination as a critical concept for education in terms of civics, noting that:

A lot of the work young people are doing online, using resources from popular culture, is toward activist or civic aims. They are using stuff like characters from Wakanda as metaphors, as resources to make sense of what's going on and to imagine a better future.

Dr. Literat notes how crucial it is to be cautious when it comes to thinking about creativity and the role the internet plays in that relationship. She explains:

I really try to avoid a technologically deterministic stance, because that's always a danger when you ask about how the internet changes things—there's a danger, a risk in thinking it changes everything—that it's unprecedented. There's a tendency to think that these dynamics are unprecedented. And to a certain extent they are.

In trying to tease these apart, she focuses on considering "what's really new and special about online creativity and what are some cultural dynamics, social dynamics that can be traced back to offline creativity as well." Certainly, technology has also helped and positively contributed to the study of the phenomena of creativity. As Dr. Literat mentions, technology "has definitely widened creative participation" allowing these spaces to be reached by a larger number of young people who now recognize the internet as a key element for collaboration and co-creation.

In the context of education, there is much consensus about the importance of supporting students in developing their creativity, and using technology as a means to accomplish this. The connection between the two is undoubtedly critical in today's world where the use of the internet has expanded to different levels of our daily lives.

As Dr. Literat reflected, the internet plays a fundamental role in youth daily experiences; it is the vehicle for empowerment and expression. For the field of education, she emphasizes that adults must recognize and validate the different communication systems young people utilize to make sense of the world around them and consider how these can be a productive part of creative learning. Without the integration of technology inside the classroom, the opportunities for learning and developing creative thinking skills is minimized. The reasoning behind it?

Educators often struggle to see youth from the youth's perspective. Instead, they address young people's needs through an "adultist" lens.

Conclusion

Going forward, Dr. Literat would like to further develop a "meme-based visual research method" (see Liou and Literat 2020) that could be used to better understand the relationship between online creativity, empowerment and political participation of young people. The overall trajectory of her work ties creativity into how people (particularly youth) think, relate and affect the world around them creatively through digital and online platforms and spaces. This is critical for those interested in education and technology, as we seek to understand how youth see their world and communicate and express through technology, as well as how they use it to make their voices heard and affect their world. As Dr. Literat commented:

I care about applications of creativity, especially as it comes to young people and especially as it comes to politics and also learning. And they're related...I care about the creativity aspect, but I also care about the youth and education and civics aspect. I care about these larger conversations about, what does this mean for democracy?

Recent years have shown that we are at a critical point in navigating through a tumultuous and troubled political landscape, and grappling with the meaning of democracy in the U.S. and global societies. There has perhaps never been a greater need to bring creativity and civic engagement together and to leverage the power of technology for connection and communication. Dr. Literat's work has much to say and to offer on these points, as do the youth she studies in their hopes of a better future.

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