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

The Data

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

‘The Cage’

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

Other ideas
1. Blank out all the speech from the boy in the tracksuit.
2. Do the same for the speech of the staff member.
3. Ask pairs of students to act out the scenario – either based on the one that is scripted here or their own version of this or their own similar scenario.
4. Alternatively, blank out all the staff speech after frame 1 and invite suggestions as to how they would respond next.
5. Do you think the boy in the red tracksuit did lock someone in the cage? What makes you think this?

For staff training
1. What’s your overall impression of the scenario depicted here?
2. Is the staff member in the green shirt right to use the opportunity to talk about this earlier incident?
3. Imagine the conversation in frame 4 has taken place. If you were the staff member, what would you say next?

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

The Project

The Data

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The Process

Artwork by Andrew Chiu @AndrewChiu

The Impact

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

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

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

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

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