

Symbiotic Learning Partnerships in Youth Action Sports

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Abstract: Reporting on an ethnographic study of youth media production at an action sports camp, this paper describes the symbiotic learning partnerships formed between teen skateboarders and teen videographers necessary to collaboratively demonstrate mastery of both tricks and video capture/editing. Symbiotic learning partnerships emerge when partners are, as one participant says, vibing with one another: when they are deeply invested in the production of a collaborative media artifact that they will jointly distribute across social media. When vibing with one another, skaters and videographers fall into collaborative, rhythmic cycles. This collaborative mastery is illustrated specifically through a focus on the cycles of reflection and nurture that skaters and videographers enter into when honing their respective crafts. This paper advances understanding of youth digital media production in the rich, yet understudied, action sports community, drawing out potential implications for the design of digital media learning settings, broadly.

Purpose

Action sports—skateboarding, BMX, snowboarding, etc.—have a long, intimate history, with digital media production (Hutchins, Meese, & Podkalicka, 2015; Hutchins, 2016). Increasingly, digital technologies and networks make both the production and dissemination of authentic videos, photos, and stories possible (Thorpe, 2014, p 70). Recording, editing, and publishing “one’s peers ‘in-action,’” Thorpe (2014) writes, “is part of the everyday experiences of many groups of committed action sports enthusiasts” (p. 70). Still, as youth digital media production research is nascent, much of the literature focuses on individual efforts, especially in out-of-school settings, as those efforts propel youth down interest-driven pathways (Ito et al., 2013). Through an ethnographic study of youth media production in action sports, this paper analyzes *the symbiotic partnerships* formed between teen skateboarders and videographers necessary to collaboratively demonstrate mastery of both tricks and video capture/editing. This collaborative mastery is illustrated through a focus on the *cycles of reflection and nurture* that skaters and videographers enter into when honing their respective crafts. In the end, this paper advances understanding of youth digital media production in the rich, yet understudied, action sports community, drawing out potential implications for the design of digital media learning settings that promote equal educational opportunity for youth, as per the conference theme, through an overt focus on symbiotic learning partnerships.

Theoretical orientation

The guiding focus on symbiotic learning partnerships is informed by the interdisciplinary new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2007). The new mobilities paradigm offers an entry point to consider the partnership between learning and the moving, sensing body. This entails attention to the corporeal engagement with other bodies and technologies, practices of movement (i.e. biking, skating), as well as events of movement (i.e. commuting, sitting in traffic)

Within the new mobilities paradigm, however, there is an ongoing interest in passengering (Adey, 2012). Etymologically, the term passenger dates back to the 15th and 16th centuries where it marked both the person who travelled, as well as the person, or thing, that enabled the travelling. Within cultural geography, a number of studies have investigated the experience of the passenger (Laurier et al., 2008; Bissell, 2010; Adey et al., 2012). These studies note that the “bodily experience of the passenger...is not simply one in which [the body] is an anonymized parcel of flesh...shunted from place to place just like other goods” (Thrift, 2004, p 266). Rather, for one to become a passenger, one is always in the emergent process of “being” or “becoming with” (Bissell, 2010, p. 270). In fact to talk of “fellow passengers might gesture to the fraternity of togetherness that emerges through moving with others” (Adey et al., 2012, p. 171). Passengers are always “becoming with” someone or something—other riders, other drivers, other things.

Overall, both the new mobilities paradigm, and the embedded theories of passengering, enable me to consider the ways in which skaters and videographers “become with” one another through their symbiotic partnership during the experience of digital media production.

Method

The study of symbiotic learning partnerships was situated at a 12-week long summer action sports camp (hereafter Camp) located in the Northeastern United States. Camp offers opportunities for youth—and adults—to hone skills related to action sports, including skateboarding, BMX, parkour, tumbling, digital media, and more. Campers choose one focal track for the week (i.e. Skateboarding, digital media), learning alongside peers, teen interns, instructors, and professionals.

My analytical interest was drawn to the collaborative partnerships that emerged between photographers/videographers and athletes (i.e. skaters, bikers). This paper hones specifically on the symbiotic learning partnerships that emerged between a camper-turned digital media intern named Erich and a skateboarder named Markus. Erich is a 17-year old videographer. Having attended Camp for two years, Erich earned his role as intern by producing a video “edit” that was deemed high quality by his instructors. Because of his success, Erich was invited back to Camp as an intern, producing video footage and edits for Camp that would be used for marketing and social media purposes. Similarly, Markus, an accomplished 16-year old skater, impressed instructors in previous years, and was thus invited to attend Camp, acting as an informal instructor throughout the summer for younger campers. Prior to the summer, Erich and Markus did not know one another. Over time, however, they developed a solid partnership that shaped their symbiotic learning together throughout the summer as Erich repeatedly shot video of Markus while Markus skated.

I observed Erich and Markus shoot/skate together for over ten hours throughout the months of June and July—each collaborative session taking roughly an hour as Markus sought to land a specific trick or “line,” a pre-planned string of numerous tricks, and Erich sought to capture the line accurately and artistically. Typically, tricks and lines take about one hour to film. Rarely, does the skater land a trick or line on the first try. Rather, there are many starts and stops, falls and scrapes, all of which offer numerous opportunities for the skater and videographer to communicate as well as to refine their respective approaches.

Data collection followed qualitative methods of observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. Oftentimes, I set up my video camera behind Erich, capturing him capturing Markus. In-between tricks, I would talk with Erich and Markus, learning more about their respective techniques, their goals for the shot or trick, or about their interactions with one another. I frequently spoke with Erich, Markus, and others about my observations and these conversations served as member checks.

Analytically, I employed the constant comparative method, beginning with open coding at the outset of my data collection, before subsequently refining codes and constructing/refining categories. Importantly, these categories were iteratively produced, and dependent upon my full immersion at Camp: hanging out in the staff room together, going on golf cart rides to ramps and skateparks together, watching skate videos together, and more.

Findings

Symbiotic learning within reflective and nurturing cycles

In action sports, like skateboarding, symbiotic learning partnerships emerges as skaters and videographers “become with” (Bissell, 2010) one another. Skaters and videographers, enter into this “fraternity of togetherness” (Adey, 2012) as they each seek to hone their respective skill-sets: Videographers continuously alter their technique in order to capture the best possible image; Skaters continuously alter their technique in order to help produce the best possible image. As one skater put it:

If you’re not down with the guy you’re filming with; if you’re not vibing with the guy you’re filming with; you don’t vibe with the guys you’re shooting photos with; you’re not gonna get the trick...It has to be a symbiotic partnership in the long run. Like, I’m producing for you, but you help me with everything that goes on in that situation. It has to be symbiosis at the end of the day.

In the following, I explore what it means to “vibe with someone you’re filming with” through an analysis of the symbiotic partnership between Erich and Markus. Specifically, I explore two facets of this “symbiosis.” First, I analyze the reflective cycles that they enter into with one another. Then, I analyze the ways in which videographers nurture both the skater and the trick within those reflective cycles.

Reflective cycles in symbiotic partnerships

Figure one depicts a common sequence in symbiotic partnerships.



Figure 1. Stages of reflective cycle, including failed attempt at trick (top) and reflection (bottom).

Erich halts filming as Markus, having failed at his trick (an alley-oop back lip) on the vert ramp, lays sprawled on the ground. Quickly, though, Markus bounces back up and walks toward Erich. Together, Markus and Erich then enter into a reflective cycle by watching and discussing approximately 15 seconds of film together, including Markus dropping in and onto the ramp, his first attempt at the trick, and his subsequent fall. They will enter into this cycle nearly 15 times throughout their hour-long skate sessions. A regular conversation such as the following ensues, as Erich and Markus review the clip:

E: What happened there?

M: I tried to pull it around, but it didn't quite work out.

E: Ah, yeah, you didn't get [the board] far enough. I mean, I assume you're gonna land right in front of me right...

M: Yeah, sorry about that.

E: It's all good...

Erich's initial question—"What happened there?"—invites Markus both to critique his now-failed trick, as well as to approach Erich to discuss it. They enter into a reflective cycle. Markus upon watching and viewing his error, recognizes that he didn't turn his board far enough as he was spinning in the air. Erich, while helping Markus think through his own trick, also reflects on his own practice as he asks Markus to clarify where he is going to land. In doing so, Erich seeks to anticipate where Markus will land so he can ensure he has directed the camera to the right place at the right moment. Thus, the reflective cycle serves both skater and videographer as they each seek to hone their respective craft.

Nurturing cycles in symbiotic partnerships

The reflective cycles also open up opportunities for the videographer to nurture the athlete towards success. Skater-videographer partnerships, then, become relatively intimate, especially as the skater struggles to overcome challenges. "Knowing how to approach people," Erich notes, "is important, especially when they're mad." Reflective cycles, then, become moments to offer support and guidance for the skater. For example, as Markus walked over to talk with Erich after one failed trick, Erich worked to build up Markus' dwindling enthusiasm, sensing his frustrations: "This line is easy for you, man. It's like that alleyoop lipslide, like you had the other time. I think it's sick, though, like back to back (from last week)."

Furthermore, in "becoming with" one another, skaters and videographers must keep lines of communication open at all times. One skater, for instance, noted that he could no longer shoot photos with a specific videographer "because he wouldn't talk to me when I was mad." Beyond discourse, however, embodied gestures of support also serve their purpose. When not verbally supporting Markus, for instance, Erich regularly put a fist out for Markus to fist-bump (Figure 2). The fist-bump, then, both closed off the conversation while simultaneously urging Markus toward success in his next attempt at the trick.



Figure 2. Fist bump closing off reflective and nurturing cycle.

Overall, it's a "collaborative process," one photographer said, in that the skater and photographer/videographer both want the best for the other. By entering into both reflective and nurturing cycles with one another, then, videographers and skaters generate feelings of camaraderie—of being in this moment, doing this trick, at this time, together, until fully satisfied with their respective outcomes.

Significance

To date, digital media production, especially in dynamic informal, out-of-school settings, has predominately underscored individual efforts (Nacu et al., 2016; Halverson, 2013). While collaboration is certainly built into regular activities, research has not yet explored long-term learning trajectories evidenced in the symbiotic partnerships that dominant action sports, of which Erich and Markus are a micro-sample. Moreover, designed learning environments often further facilitate individual "pathways" for learning. Such designs, then, are potentially myopic as they re-instantiate individualistic "imagined geographies of learning" (Leander et al., 2010) that operate in traditional school settings. The action sports community, then, and the powerful symbiotic partnerships that encourage both reflection and nurturing therein, offer new possibilities to continue to re-imagine learning settings—both in and out of school—that could potentially promote equal educational opportunities for all youth.

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