

Empowering Transformative Agency Through Critically Experimenting With Arts in Public Schooling

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Abstract: The learning sciences face the challenge of conceptualizing how power suffuses educational contexts. By examining how artists and teacher partnerships design and implement arts-integrated curricula in public school classrooms, I take a step toward theorizing how power affects local systems of activity. Through applying lenses from cultural-historical activity theory, I argue arts-integration provides unique opportunities for students to exercise transformative agency as they critically experiment with bringing their broader sociocultural contexts into their classrooms.

Introduction

This writing serves as an initial reaction to a paper published earlier this year by The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, who challenged “that the rise of nationalism across the globe demands more explicit attention to how power imbues the purposes, mechanisms, and consequences of learning” simultaneously troubled our line of inquiry and resonated with the data in which we were immersed (p. 92). The research program presented here occurred at the behest of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) focusing on their Artist/Researcher Partnerships (ARP) Program, which pairs artists with teachers to create arts-integrated curricular units for students in CPS. By tracing the trajectory of experimental practices starting from opportunities for resistance (contradictions in activity) to the ultimate exhibition of their students’ work at Convergence (CAPE’s culminating exhibit for the ARP), the following analysis aims to provide a theoretical conceptualization of arts-integration practices as an empowering pedagogy that amplifies AR partnerships’ and their students’ resistance to power through critical experiments of learning.

Theoretical framework

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) supports analyses of power and resistance due to its focus on theorizing local contexts to support the generation of concrete solutions to unsustainable problems. From a presentation of CHAT as a theoretical framework by Sannino, Engeström and Lemos (2016), I employ three conceptual lenses in this analysis: (1) *object(s)* of activity; (2) *expansive learning through practical experimentation*; and (3) *transformative agency*. First, the defining feature of any human activity is its *object*, “a historically developing entity that is never fully attained or complete ... an object carries in itself the pervasive contradictions of its given socioeconomic formation” (Sannino, Engeström & Lemos, 2016, pp. 602-603). These contradictions require critical experimentation to resolve and transform, manifesting as *expansive learning* in the activity system, changing its components, their interrelationships or both. Expansive learning requires engaging in the practices of resistance and transgression through critical experimentation that abstracts meaningful tools from the contradictions confronting them. Ultimately, experimenting and expanding with activity requires empowering *transformative agency*, where participants “[break] away from the given frame of action and [take] the initiative to transform it” (Virkunnen, 2006, as cited in Engeström, Sannino & Virkunnen, 2014, p. 124). Within our context of arts-integration in public schooling, this theorization of power and learning serves as the conceptual basis for our research question: How do teachers and artists integrate the arts in their instruction to support the development of students’ transformative agency?

Methodology

During the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, we conducted a multi-site case study of AR partnerships participating in the ARP for CAPE. This report focuses on the work of two partnerships in two distinct schools, one for each school year of the research conducted to date. As an exploratory and comparative multi-case study, the following analysis applied an analytical framework outlined by Engeström and Sannino (2011) on four primary data sources: (1) pre-/post-implementation interviews, (2) classroom observations, (3) student artifacts, and (4) documentation created by the partnerships for their work with CAPE. Within their framework, the authors identified discursive manifestations of contradictions, two of which are represented here: (1) *conflicts*, which “take the form of resistance, disagreement, argument and criticism,” (p. 373); and (2) *critical conflicts*, which are the “situations in which people face inner doubts that paralyze them in front of contradictory motives unsolvable by the subject alone,” (p. 374). As we argued above, contradictions represent opportunities for

critical experimentation, so it follows that discursive manifestations of these contradictions point to potential arenas of resistance and transgression for the participating artists and teachers.

Findings

From the two cases presented here, enacting arts-integrated curricula required teachers and artists to both bring into focus the inherent contradictions of public schooling while providing students the opportunity to experiment with the conceptual and artistic tools employed in their curricula. This manifested in (at least) two distinct ways: (1) by focusing creative activity around addressing potential *critical conflicts of cultural/historical divides*, and (2) by expanding learning through experimenting with the *conflict of educational purpose*. The partnership at Sorenson Math and Science Academy (Sorenson; all names are pseudonyms) understood their project as a continuation of earlier confrontations between students and their local history, which challenged them to re-interpret contemporary issues of social justice through musical composition and choral performance. The director of the *A Capella Choir* at Sorenson, Robert Arzt, described their curriculum as exploring the question of “What can we learn through the process of investigating unfamiliar cultures through music?” Ultimately, they collectively chose to respond to former presidential candidate Gary Johnson’s infamous question of “What is Aleppo?” By learning and singing traditional Arabic songs taught to them by an Arabic musician, they could collectively resist that representation and powerfully rebuke the ignorance and antipathy towards refugees represented by that candidate. Confronting students with these *critical conflicts of cultural/historical divides* while providing them with new tools to transform their position from feeling powerless (e.g., not being able to vote) to having the agency to publicly resist allowed students to transform their performance into a display of solidarity with Syrian refugees. The partnership at McCrae Elementary Academy (McCrae) have gradually expanded the object of their curriculum, representing another way that arts-integration has developed students’ transformative agency. The artist of this AR partnership, José Alcides Rodriguez, described the progressive development of their curriculum, *Children Communicating Social Activism Through the Lens of Indigenous Art and Practices*, by stating, “In the beginning ... [we used art] as a symbol to communicate an idea ... [Now we’re asking students] how can we use it now as a form for change?” The gradual integration of new artistic disciplines—here the creation of *neirikas*, artwork based on indigenous beadwork—into the traditional curriculum by an artist with indigenous ancestry allowed the partnership to resolve the *conflict of educational purpose* by expanding the object of students’ learning from a basic exploration of symbolic representation to creating art that critically examines the problems troubling students outside of the classroom. As a result of this expansion, 4th and 5th grade students researched and represented global and local issues that they publicly exhibited, challenging audiences to grapple with concerns such as hate crimes, terrorism, dog fighting, and immigration.

Conclusion

The critical and transgressive experimentation of the two AR partnerships here fundamentally involved CAPE’s challenge of re-/presenting students breadth of experiences within the cultural and historical constraints of a traditional schooling. These teacher-artist partnerships *empower resistance* within their classrooms by providing opportunities for students to develop and enact their transformative agency. The conceptual and practical tools of artistic disciplines allow for students’ to expand classroom activity, confronting and resisting the normalizing power that consistently marginalizes, censors, and dismisses them. By deliberately designing curricula that expose students to underlying contradictions inherent in their classroom situations, we can allow students to exercise their agency to resist the normalization of the world as it is and transform it into the new possibilities they imagine and create.

References

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