

Exploring Ideological Becoming for Youth of Diverse Backgrounds: Documentary Practices as Internally Persuasive Discourse

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Abstract: This study explores how youth of diverse backgrounds grappled with varying civic perspectives in a documentary storytelling curriculum in a multicultural context. Our findings indicate that documentary making is a generative context for learning, where students critically examine the perspectives of their audience and interviewees against their own through dialogic addressing and responding, and in so doing generates new understandings.

Introduction

Given the enormous diversity that exists in our society today, the need intensifies for educators to create transformative environments that exploit the learning potential of encounter with differences within a multicultural framework. Much work has been invested in understanding the nature of these divides by examining in detail ethnic, cultural and social-class differences, and advocated a reconceptualization of the heterogeneity of human experiences and practices as fundamental to learning (Gutiérrez, 2008; Rosebery, Ogonowski, DiSchino, & Warren, 2010). However, these studies tend to focus on particular groups of learners rather than a diverse mix. Limited attention has been devoted to understanding the potential for learning from ideological differences in multicultural contexts, particularly how to support youths to deepen engagement with variegated views through intentional design and employment of tools and artifacts.

In this study, we look at how a class composed of youth from diverse populations grapple with contentious social issues in a documentary storytelling curriculum. The curriculum is informed by funds of knowledge (FoK) research (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and aims to bring in knowledge, experiences, and ideological resources from different spaces, especially spaces that are historically marginalized. These foci are reflected in our deliberate choice of documentary storytelling on issues such as immigration. Multimedia storytelling can promote the presence of resources, artifacts, knowledge and experiences from students' families and communities in the educational context (Honeyford, 2014). Socially oriented documentaries, in particular, have the potential to cultivate youth's civic understanding and engagement in ongoing societal conversations.

We find Bakhtinian ideas of dialogism and internally persuasive discourse (IPD) helpful in thinking about how the curriculum in general, and the documentary making process in particular, have the potential to create a space for deep engagement with ideological differences. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that one's ideologies develop when she comes into contact with available resources (discourses, practices, people, etc.) in her environment. A learning space rich with multiple perspectives can fuel learning as it affords plentiful opportunities to develop one's ideologies and expand understanding of the world. However, multiplicity of voices does not guarantee ideological growth. Particularly in terms of social controversies, much too often the engagement ends up with the monologism, where singularity of viewpoints, rather than dialogic meaning-making, dominates. In order for learning to take place, we must "struggle" (Bakhtin, 1981) and dialogically test a diversity of related ideas in relation to our own. IPD is where such ideological struggle occurs through critical examination and dialogic addressing and responding, and in so doing generates new understandings and expands one's ideological horizons. In this study, we first seek to understand the complexity of the ideological environment of the class, given the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds and experiences, as well as our intentional design in accessing critical perspectives. We further hone in on one focal youth group's engagement with these perspectives as they produced *The Process*, a short documentary profiling the challenges that a Latino immigrant in their community experienced in obtaining legalization of residency.

Methods

The study emerged from a 10-week documentary storytelling project with a 12th grade social studies class located in an urban school district. Thirty students of diverse racial and ethnic affiliations, from different immigrant populations as well as nonimmigrant backgrounds, worked in teams to produce a short documentary on how immigration policy affected people in their community. Our data set includes field notes, video recordings, and student work. We also conducted interviews with each student group at the end of curriculum, which involved watching students' documentaries together, stopping after each cut and discussing students' choices. In order to identify the array of perspectives that emerged in the process, we used a hybrid approach of

inductive and deductive coding to analyze transcribed class sessions by turns. Then, we analyzed the focal group's interview in conjunction with the multimodal transcription of their video, focusing, as informed by the theoretical frame of IPD, on: 1. Production choices, where they explicate how and why certain elements are included; 2. References to class discourses, where they refer to particular perspectives raised in class; and 3. References to experiential resources, where they refer to personal experiences or those in their community, and the knowledge gained from these experiences.

Preliminary findings and discussion

The class conversations were rich in diversity and comprehensiveness of discourses, ranging across humanist, reciprocity, legal, and resource security perspectives, as students were afforded both opportunities to express their ideas drawing on their FoKs and to be exposed to multiple social voices of the world. Nonetheless, competing positions emerged along restrictive versus non-restrictive stances toward immigration, and few substantial relationships between elements of divergent discourses were established. During the documentary production process, on the other hand, the focal group not only engaged with all the above major perspectives that emerged in the class, but further extended and/or complicated these viewpoints through drawing on the testimonies of their interviewees and/or their own experiential resources, while also responding to the ideological conflicts in class by problematizing the opposing claims posed by their peers. More fundamentally, they restructured the relationships between the restrictive and the non-restrictive stances towards immigration through extending their humanist stance to address the theme of legalization.

Our analysis reveals the ways in which documentary making affords the opportunities of critical examination and dialogic engagement—through dialoguing externally with their interviewees and with their audience, and internally with themselves. As documentary filmmakers develop their ideas, they have to consider the audiences' viewpoints to craft an effective message. In our case, the focal group set out to inform their audience (mainly their classmates) of immigrants' struggles given the ideological conflicts in class. As they were constructing their documentary narratives, they referenced opposing viewpoints raised in class and consciously formulated responses to their peers. Using concrete testimonies from their interviewees, they problematized the definition and responsibility of illegality, repositioned them as people of resilience, which enabled deeper discussion within the legal and the resource security perspectives. The interactional space between the filmmakers and their interviewees is also dialogic. While filmmakers might preplan who they will interview, they must recognize and examine their interviewee's viewpoints in relation to their own as they bring their perspective to bear on what their interview subjects have told them. Though the focal youths' stance aligned with their interviewees, through dialogizing with them, the students got to see how a familiar idea (e.g., struggles of undocumented immigrants) unfolded in different contexts, and created new understanding by connecting, juxtaposing or contrasting these experiences and viewpoints. Voices of their audience and interviewees, through the IPD supported by documentary practices, become part of the focal students' consciousness and shape the lens through which they come to understand the issue of immigration.

Conclusion

These early findings suggest that documentary making is a generative context for ideological development as it supports the creation of an IPD. In this space, students critically examine the perspectives of their audience and interviewees against their own through dialogic addressing and responding. Building on previous research that underscores heterogeneity as fundamental to learning, this study further points to ways in which we can, through deliberate design and employment of tools and artifacts, foster youths' productive engagement with differences in a multicultural context.

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