

“I Start Getting Deeper”: Voice Development as Evidence of Learning Through Art Making

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Abstract: The present study brings Halverson’s notion of a *representational trajectory* in conversation with a design research project in which a central part of the pedagogical approach directed students to have targeted types of conversations—in what I name *conversation spaces*—with peers about their art making processes. The overall goal of this study was to (a) understand how student voice was shaped by pedagogical decisions and co-constructed with peers in targeted conversation spaces and (b) articulate the relationship between the design of the targeted conversation spaces and student learning. Through tracing student interactions in conversation spaces, I argue that student voice developed alongside the representational trajectories with which they engaged and that this voice development illustrated pointed shifts in participation over the course of their experiences, therefore, showing evidence of learning through the art making process.

Introduction

During the art making process young artists make connections to new literacies by engaging in *representational trajectories* (Halverson, 2013)—the process artists go through as they first develop a narrative around what they hope to convey through their art, move to make sense of how tools of an artistic medium work to create desired forms, and end by balancing narrative and form in a final work of art. The present study brings Halverson’s notion of a *representational trajectory* into conversation with a design research project in which a central part of the pedagogical approach directed students to have targeted types of conversations—in what I name *conversation spaces*—with peers about their art making processes. Through following student conversations and interactions as they engaged with one another in the targeted conversation spaces, I argue that their voices developed alongside their representational trajectories and that this voice development represented shifts in participation over the course of their experiences, therefore, showing evidence of learning through the artistic process.

In tracing students’ artistic processes, this study highlights how targeted conversation spaces—including narratives about the art students were making, peer critique, and reflections on presenting to an audience—shaped voice development and supported learning through the artistic process. I name these discursive structures *conversation spaces* because through purposeful pedagogy, I created *space* within the curriculum for students to talk about the art they were making as they were in the process of making it. The overall goals were to (a) understand how student voice was shaped by curriculum and pedagogical decisions and co-constructed with peers in targeted conversation spaces and (b) articulate the relationship between conversation spaces and student learning. Using a theoretical perspective that positions student voice as developing across time and situation within a classroom (Lensmire, 1991) and operationalizing this voice as students’ perspectives and participation enacted through talk and choices (Furman & Calabrese-Barton, 2006), I pursued the following research question: *How did students develop voice as they made art and talked about the art they made with peers in targeted conversation spaces (i.e., narratives, critique, reflections on audience)?*

Voice development in art making as learning

In the present analysis, I define voice as an interactional accomplishment that can be supported in classrooms through purposeful design of participation structures and discursive practices. Such structures and practices here included different configurations of talk (i.e., partner, small group, and whole class) as well as targeted foci for student talk through conversation spaces (i.e., narratives about topics, peer critique of artwork, reflections on audience). Here voice concerned the actual words students used and how those words were co-constructed with others as they engaged with ideas, narratives, and tools of art to construct representations and articulate the meaning behind their constructions. To be clear, voice was how students came up with, developed, and articulated their creative expressions through conversation and engagement with one another using available artistic and cultural tools in the designed learning environment. This kind of student voice is impacted by the sociocultural context of the classroom and “is a dynamic construct closely related to how one learns” (Furman & Calabrese-Barton, 2006, p. 669). In the learning sciences, learning is commonly positioned as a change in participation within a community of practice. Here voice was a proxy for learning through the arts as it made student thinking and participation visible. That is, I traced how students were participating by analyzing how they talked about their processes in conversation spaces. Shifts in voice categorized by a change in how students oriented toward

artistic making became evidence of learning and transformation alongside students' representational trajectories.

Artistic and political voice

Working from the assumption that voice development could be evidence of learning, I further broke down how particular dimensions of voice—*artistic and political*—developed at a fine-grained level of detail throughout the course of a narrative-based art making process. By *artistic voice* I mean how students talked about blending their ideas with art media and tools to construct external representations, and by *political voice* I mean how students articulated ideas about issues that were relevant to and emerged from their experiences in the world. For artistic voice, I traced how students talked about taking materials and transforming them into mediums through engagement with their ideas and form and for political voice, I attended to how students talked about transforming topics into messages for an audience. These two dimensions of voice align with different rationales for arts education from expressionist (i.e., artistic) and reconstructivist (i.e., political) influences that complement one another in their synergy, thus creating a productive dialectic relationship that underscores the expressive and transformative potentials for art.

Methods

Overview of intervention. The study occurred during an in-school visual arts class with sixth grade students ($n=127$; 32 in focus class; 3 focus participants) at a public charter middle school in an urban context on the West Coast. During a unit that consisted of 20 lessons (ranging from 1 hour to 1 hour, 20 minutes each), students made art about self-defined social issues such as LGBTQ rights, the police, war, bullying, and DACA. Importantly, I was the visual arts teacher for this study and had known a majority of the sixth grade participants since they were in kindergarten as I had been their art teacher in their early elementary school years. Teaching the entire sixth grade class was an ethical decision I made connected to my beliefs about doing interventionist research in schools. In the present analysis, I focus on lessons three and four when students made abstract art about emotions related to their chosen social issues using watercolors, pastels, colored pencils, and paper. The guiding essential question for lessons three and four was: How do artists express emotion using elements of art like color, shape, and line?

Triangulating across data sources, including videos of students talking with peers, written artist statements, post-lesson ethnographic memos, and student interviews, supported my understanding of how student voice developed and how students showed evidence of learning over the course of the art making process. I used an iterative approach to video analysis on my own and in viewing sessions with colleagues. Drawing from the interaction analysis tradition, I worked up an understanding of the data and looked for students' perspectives and participation enacted through talk and choices (Furman & Calabrese-Barton, 2006) to trace voice development.

Findings

As students engaged with curriculum, materials, and one another, they developed their artistic and political voices, demonstrating evidence of learning through shifts in how they participated. Below I describe the artistic and political voice development of one student (Jo) as she interacted with peers in conversation spaces. A visual overview of Jo's artistic and political voice development during lessons three and four is in Figure 1.

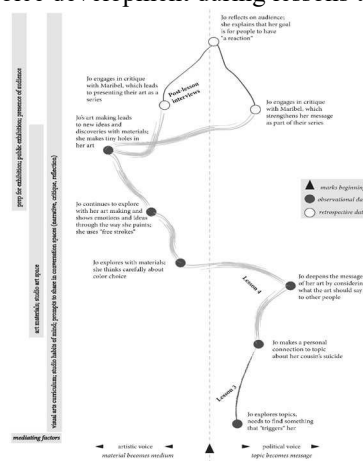


Figure 1. Overview of Jo's artistic and political voice development in her art making process.

Through two points in Jo's voice development below I show that: (1) political voice development is learning as evidenced through Jo's change in how she talked about transforming her topic from an intimately personal issue

into a message for a broader audience and (2) artistic voice development is learning as evidenced through how Jo talked about the affordances of materials to transform them into mediums and get “deeper” with her art making.

Political voice development as learning

When Jo began her abstract art making process, she first considered multiple topics, trying to find something “that triggered her,” as she explained to her table partner, Maribel. She landed on making art about her cousin’s recent suicide, focusing on the topic of “depression.” Prompted by my direction to share narratives in conversation spaces, Jo discussed the emotions connected to her topic with Maribel, deepening the story around her chosen social issue. After Jo explained that “it’s really sad because I didn’t really get to know him” and “it’s crazy because you just can’t get it out of your mind,” Jo shifted the way she talked about the purpose of her art and demonstrated evidence of learning in Excerpt 1 as she turned her personal narrative about her cousin’s suicide into an outward facing message about depression because she “[doesn’t] want that to happen to other people.”

Table 1: Jo’s topic development

| Turn | Speaker | Talk | Interpretation |
|------|---------|--|---|
| 01 | Jo | It's important to reach out to people and tell them about that or else you're gonna like hurt yourself. I don't want that to happen to other people, it's like a very negative feeling like your heart starts beating, you feel like you can't move- | Jo shifts from her descriptions of her personal narrative to begin to develop an outward facing message for an audience |
| 02 | Maribel | -it's like the ride- | Maribel helps co-construct interpretation with Jo |
| 03 | Jo | -like I think about it I feel just like- | Jo continues narrative |
| 04 | Maribel | -it's like a ride, there's this ride at the fair that you can go on, it spins around in circles so fast that on the inside you only feel like you can't move, like you're made out of metal- | Maribel adds to joint construction of meaning |
| 05 | Jo | -you feel like you can't move, you're just stuck there | Jo appropriates Maribel’s description and adds to their joint construction |

When Jo said “It’s important to reach out to people” and “I don’t want that to happen to other people” in turn 01, she shifted her participation from elaborating on a personal connection to crafting a broader social message through her art. Jo’s participation shift was co-constructed in conversation with Maribel as they built on one another’s utterances back and forth in turns 02-05 to create a shared description of visceral feelings tied to depression. Aligned with the Bakhtinian argument that all talk is dialogical, taking on the perspective of many voices, Jo’s voice included both her point of view and Maribel’s. Sharing in conversation spaces with Maribel supported Jo’s learning and fostered a shared experience of participatory appropriation in which learners participate with others and development is a dynamic process of change and transformation (Rogoff, 1995).

Artistic voice development as learning

As Jo continued to engage in the creative process, she moved from developing an idea for her art to working with materials to represent that idea. As Jo worked with oil pastels and watercolor in Excerpt 2 below, she accidentally ripped her paper. Her audible gasp in turn 01 indicated that the rip was not an intentional choice, yet she shifted from her expression of shock in turn 01 to incorporating the rip into the meaning of her art making in turn 03 when she explained, “I know, that’s what I was actually doing” to Maribel. Excerpt 2 shows Jo’s learning as an artist as she took materials and transformed them in ways that align with her evolving ideas for her art.

Table 2: Working with materials to represent ideas

| Turn | Speaker | Talk & Action | Interpretation |
|------|---------|--|--|
| 01 | Jo | <i>As Jo makes art, her paper rips; she gasps in shock</i> | Jo unintentionally rips her artwork |
| 02 | Maribel | Oh my god, no, you can use it into your artwork | Maribel offers support and guidance to Jo |
| 03 | Jo | I know, that's what I was actually doing, look; <i>Jo uses her fingers to spread the oil pastel and cover the hole</i> | Jo shifts orientation toward her art making from shock to one of confidence; accepts mistake |
| 04 | Maribel | But you can use the little hole right there as his mind is breaking | Maribel offers additional guidance to Jo |
| 05 | Jo | I know | Jo accepts Maribel’s offer |

| | | | |
|----|---------|--|--|
| 06 | Andrew | Don't you just hate that? | Andrew expresses empathy; positions her mistake as relatable |
| 07 | Jo | I like it | Jo doubles down on confidence with mistake |
| 08 | Maribel | When you put too much color in it and then it breaks | Maribel acknowledges Andrew's offer of relatability |
| 09 | Jo | I'm gonna do that, I'm gonna do that on purpose | Jo's confidence toward mistake continues to build |
| 10 | Andrew | It's like paper | Andrew notes affordance/constraint of material |
| 11 | Jo | See, that's what I do a lot, I start getting deeper and so the happiness is breaking apart because the depression is too strong and it's trying to fight the suicidal thoughts; <i>Jo makes more holes</i> | Jo asserts herself as an artist who gets "deeper" with her art as she appropriates Maribel's suggestion that something is "breaking"; Jo shows evidence of a dramatic shift in participation |
| 12 | Maribel | Like trying to fight the urge not to cry | |



In Excerpt 2 Jo both accepted the “mistake” of the paper ripping and incorporated the mistake into the meaning of her art. Jo appropriated and reframed the mistake as part of how she defined herself as an artist when she explained in turn 11, “See, that’s what I do a lot, I start getting deeper” and made even more holes in her piece—this time, on purpose. The exchange in Excerpt 2 reinforced the Bakhtinian notion of dialogical talk as Jo’s artistic voice took up Maribel’s push to “use the little hole right there as his mind is breaking” in turn 04. Jo took up Maribel’s talk in turn 11 when she explained that the “happiness *is breaking* apart because the depression is too strong.” The way Jo changed her participation in this excerpt mirrored participatory appropriation, by which Rogoff (1995) means “the change resulting from a person’s own participation in an activity, not to his or her internalization of some external event or technique” (p. 153). Importantly, here Jo and Maribel were not only becoming more legitimate participants within the art classroom but were also actively constructing what it meant to participate within the evolving community of practice defined through the shared art making activity.

Jo’s case provides a window into voice development. Across individual students, artistic and political voice development were mediated by: (a) how students arrived at topics through engagement with ideas in conversation spaces; (b) the level of personal distance students had from their topics; (c) the ways students co-constructed meaning with peers in conversation spaces; and (d) the ways students used materials to convey ideas.

Discussion

Jo’s voice development here has theoretical and methodological implications for the learning sciences in relation to theorizing learning through the arts and the design of arts learning environments. First, this study theoretically conceives of voice development as learning as evidenced through how student talk and orientation changes in relation to artistic choices as students move through learning spaces. Second, methodologically this study contributes to our understanding of how to design for learning environments that focus on creating arts discourse spaces, a valuable contribution since research on talk in arts learning environments primarily focuses on teacher-student interactions. Understanding shifts in participation and talk as part of an arts discourse space can be potentially transformative as students collectively make sense of how art works by discussing how the tools of art can be used for thinking, questioning, and representing their diverse ideas.

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