

Research as Learning from Youth: Leveraging Collaborative Digital Tools to Position Youth as Experts on Themselves

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Abstract: This paper explores collaboration in a co-research team including teen interns and traditionally-credentialed adult researchers. Through collective redesign of roles and methods, the team leveraged common cloud-based collaboration and productivity tools to support positioning teen interns as expert researchers on themselves. Digital youth practices and formal research conventions were hybridized into a new set of “syncretic” research practices.

Introduction

CSCL research draws from a diversity of approaches, spanning a wide continuum of methodologies and theoretical underpinnings (Jeong and Hmelo-Silver, 2010). In most CSCL research, the theoretical approach, research methods, and analysis are designed and undertaken by traditionally-credentialed adult researchers. Building upon work that researches “with” participants, instead of “on” participants (Bang and Vossoughi, 2016; Gutiérrez and Jurow, 2016; Kirshner, 2015), our work seeks to reimagine the traditional assignment of power and expertise in research relationships, while leveraging common collaborative digital tools for learners (university researchers) to collaborate with experts (youth interns). This paper represents the collective research and writing of a co-research team comprised of members traditionally positioned as both “participants” and “researchers.” To clarify and delineate roles, the use of “we” in this paper represents the voice of the traditionally-credentialed adult researchers, except for youth-written sections indicated by *italics*.

Background, theoretical, and experiential approach

This project is part of a larger US NSF-funded cyberlearning research project seeking to create authentic contexts for young adults’ engagement in artifact-oriented, technology-based, science-data journalism. The specific context explored for this paper was an out-of-school, paid summer internship for 15 high school students at a Midwestern University. Youth interns (1) designed science data infographics for publication; and (2) conducted self and peer research as co-researchers within the multi-institutional partnership. This self and peer research served as the primary data collection for the internship, and youth co-researchers maintain refusal and co-authorship rights to research products directly derived from their work. Adult co-researchers served as internship program facilitators and as data managers and archivists of the youth-generated data and analysis.

Theoretical approach of adult co-researchers

We approach learning and identity development from a sociocultural perspective, drawing on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), notions of mediated action (Wertsch, 1998), and trajectories of identification (Wenger, 1998). We approach research as a form of learning, as CSCL when mediated through digital tools, wherein we foster youth agency and position ourselves as novices apprenticing to the domain, community, and practices of youth. Research as learning with youth is supported by symmetrical dialogue between youth and adults, fosters social relationships among the entire research team, and makes intangible cultural tools more observable (Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004). Youth have “funds of knowledge” that they have accumulated over time (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), and we position these funds as valuable expertise and students as brokers of this expertise.

Experiential approach of youth co-researchers

We believe that learning happens every day, all the time, in and out of school. We learn from friends, family, media, experiences, and, yes, school. The knowledge that “counts” for teenagers is usually the kind given to us by adults, and we are judged by how well we can repeat it. However, we are far more complex than our collective tests, report cards, and ACT scores could ever indicate. In schools, youth culture is seldom treated as important—in fact, it is often devalued as “distracting” and “off topic,” and we are told that it has no place in learning. As teenagers, we are constantly positioned as “who we will become” after some magical undefined period of

“adulthood” suddenly grants us the wisdom implied in the statement “when you’re older, you’ll understand.” Adults normally expect us to accept their words as “expertise,” unquestioned by our own experiences and knowledge. We find it puzzling that research that tries to understand our thinking process ignores so much of it.

Syncretic practices

During the summer internship, youth and adult co-researchers collaboratively designed and refined a set of “syncretic” research practices (Gutiérrez and Jurow, 2016), merging everyday youth communicative practices (the way interns naturally annotated media, wrote about themselves, used humor and sarcasm) and professional practices (found in research discourse and action). Youth interns communicated with peers and the adult research team, documented, annotated and reflected on daily activities, thinking processes, struggles and problem-solving strategies throughout the summer. This began with individual self-structured research logs and culminated in “Self-Case Videos,” narrated slideshows drawn from individual and collective datasets. Figure 1 details how everyday digital youth communication practices merged with formal research conventions in syncretic research practices. At left are the formal research conventions and practices, and at right are the youth practices and conventions with small visual examples. The middle column indicates the syncretic practices that emerged.

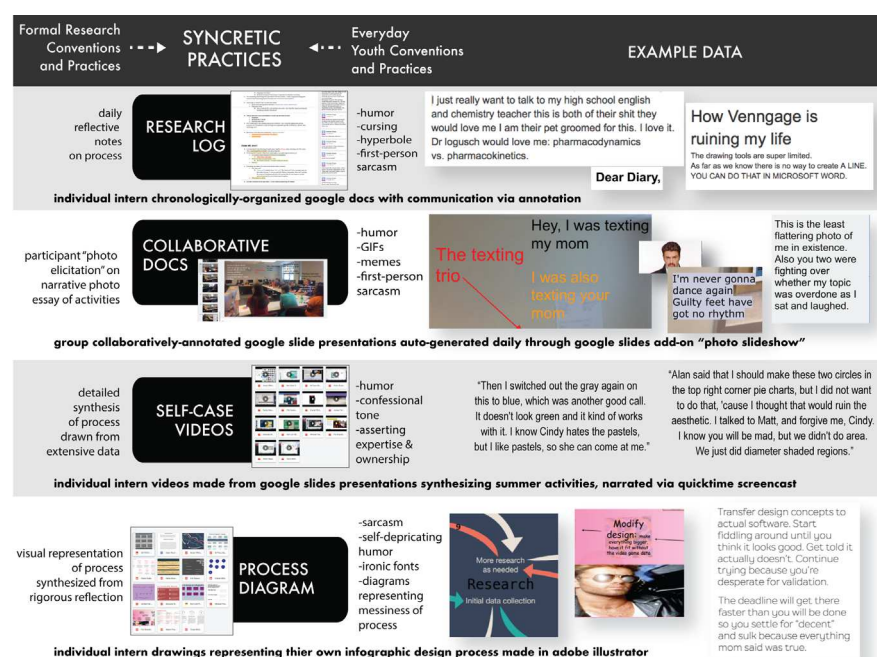


Figure 1. Syncretic Research Practices.

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