Published on *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education* (https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu)

LEARNING ABOUT RESEARCH FROM YOUTH MEDIA ARTISTS

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While school remains the most obvious and common reference point for research on learning, more and more urban education scholars are investigating life beyond school as a critical site for youth development, cultural production, and theory building (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Mahiri, in press; Maira & Soep, in press; Seyer, in press). I want to focus here on community-based youth media projects in particular, framing these sites in a new way: by considering them not just places worthy of study, but also models for research methodology.

For three years, I have been working at Youth Radio, a non-profit independent producer of youth voices in California, where young people create stories for various local, national, and international outlets including National Public Radio. Over the past twelve years, I have also studied more than twenty places like Youth Radio, both as a member of national research teams and independently, focusing on sites within U.S. cities where young, primarily working class media artists make videos, zines, spoken word poems, experimental audio essays, and other art works using digital technologies combined with more conventional textualities (Davis, et. al., 1993; Heath, 2001; Heath & Soep, 1998; Maira & Soep, in press; Soep, 2000, 2002, in press). Initially, I investigated these sites to understand how young people use language to produce and critique original work, and to draw out implications from these environments for learning theory. When I began working as the Education Desk Producer at Youth Radio, that focus began to expand.

At Youth Radio, teen reporters and media artists identify educational questions worth asking. In the last year, Youth Radio has produced national education stories including: the unanticipated effects of standardized testing on young people's everyday classroom experiences in "failing" urban public schools, how sexuality enters middle school curriculum and organizes social dynamics among peers, and the lengths to which families will go for access to decent public education-including faking their addresses and risking arrest to enroll their kids in out-of-district schools. Young people are recruited into Youth Radio's free after school program from local city high schools. After a series of introductory and advanced classes, they can enter the newsroom as interns, where they research topics, line up interviews, gather tape, write scripts, and produce stories that air on public radio shows, including some with audiences that number in the millions. Every step in this process is highly collaborative. Adult producers and peer teachers work with young people to prepare interview questions and outlines. In some cases we accompany them on field recording expeditions, and we periodically sit together at the computer to compose and review developing scripts. Later young people work in the studio with sound engineers to mix their pieces. Throughout a given story's development, the young producer consults with peers during weekly editorial meetings to pitch ideas, raise questions, and report progress on especially challenging projects. Young people initiate and ultimately create these stories, and very often they draw topics from their own everyday experiences. But these young media artists are also simultaneously learning for the first time how to frame stories for radio broadcast, so they rely on adult producers and experienced peers to facilitate phases of their process.

I began this work thinking that I would learn a great deal about urban education beyond classroom walls by studying and participating in a place like Youth Radio. I came to realize that I was also learning about educational research-an undertaking perhaps I thought I already understood. Young people and adults at Youth Radio engage in a process that looks very much like the picture scholars conjure when we say we want to work with youth as agents, and not only objects, of research. In our field, as in others focused on youth culture, scholars are increasingly seeking more reciprocal methods that provide alternatives to objectification on the one hand and romanticization on the other; some are putting technologies such as audio diaries, still photography, and digital video into the hands of youth living and learning in cities across the world (Cohen & Ainley, 2000; Lipsitz, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Still, we work in a tradition that largely excludes youth from actual participation in the research process, except as targets of analysis (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). When youth do play a role in carrying out research and creating policy, they might find themselves engaged on a relatively superficial level, as "token" participants brought in for quotation, consultation and approval but rarely regarded as initiators of ideas and action (McCaw & Forrester, in press; see also Fine, 1994). Often young people are asked to provide raw data-stories of their personal lives that can, if we are not careful, translate into sensationalized narratives that reify an image of urban youth as either folk devil or heroic survivor. We sometimes lose sight of the dividing line between involving youth in data collection and simply using young people's access to life-worlds from which researchers are excluded. It is easy to identify these potential problems with well-intentioned methodologies; working out these contradictions in practice is another matter. To move in that direction, researchers can benefit from turning to places where young people and adults already conduct inquiry and produce stories that have a significant impact on public perceptions and debates. Expanding our methodological models can go a long way to help us regard our own regimes of observation and investigation with enriched imagination.

A first step might be to readjust how youth media projects and community-based, urban education programs more broadly, are typically perceived (Fleetwood, in press). Non-school youth organizations hold appeal for many because they appear to be places where young people can "find voice" and break free from the institutional constraints they face in schools and other settings (Keifer-Boyd, 2000; Campbell, 2001). But no space of learning, or making, or interacting, is cut loose from histories, institutional realities, and concrete relations, especially when youth and adults are jointly engaged in producing original work for outside audiences. Places like Youth Radio contain some of the same intentions and tensions as do research projects that employ participatory methodologies.

So I am proposing here a thought experiment-to imagine, for a moment, that young media artists, working in collaboration with adults in projects like Youth Radio, are, in a sense, "producing" research. They observe and ask questions about environments relevant to their stories-perhaps a school classroom, or a homework session inside a teenager's bedroom, or a street corner conversation. They record their surroundings and interactions using various technologies, as well as old-fashioned note taking. Then they develop imaginative ways to tell their stories and share them with audiences. These phases of work bear much in common with academic research. Theory, it must be said, plays a different role in youth media than it does in adult academia, and yet researchers who intend to move beyond token inclusion of youth as junior field workers would be well served to engage young people's own epistemologies not as raw materials to be interpreted but as conceptual frameworks that fuel further analysis.

My own field work within youth media projects reveals a series of conditions characterizing these places with implications for research practice. First, stakes are intense for both youth and adults. This observation may be counter-intuitive, in the sense that often we tend to position non-school activities as outside the so-called serious academic subjects students study in school. Researchers have used the term "safe havens" to denote effective community-based learning environments (Davis et. al., 1993). That term describes spaces that allow young people to experiment and take the risk of committing to a project that actually matters to them and to a wider audience. At a place like Youth Radio, young people must meet the very real deadline of a radio show, and they know their own family members, peers, teachers, and public listeners will hear the work, hence they want it to be good. As researchers, we might push ourselves to include young people themselves, and their significant others (moms, dads, friends, and so on) in events where findings are made public, so youth who participate in carrying out the inquiry can feel like the outcomes have a place in their own lives. There is also the question of personal investment in the work. At Youth Radio, even in apparently distant breaking news or international coverage, young people tend to embed their investigations within local, often first-person narratives. One nineteen year old writer recently produced a feature on the war in Iraq by describing struggles within her own family; her father is applying for U.S. citizenship at the same moment that her brother is making plans to return to Mexico to remove himself from an American foreign policy he abhors. Her message about world events is infused with a sense of urgency due to the particular narrative approach she takes to the telling. Scholars who aim to work with youth as research participants need to find questions that matter to young people, to create the space for youth to connect topics of inquiry to their own lived experiences, and to make young people's performance on the project carry significant consequences.

Second, when youth media projects are at their best, participants continually scrutinize the criteria they and others use to judge their work. Young people are not simply "assigned" a topic and format for expression. Certainly it is our responsibility at Youth Radio to introduce interns to the primary genres of radio narrative-first-person commentaries, feature stories, non-narration pieces, and so on. And they eventually learn to recognize the qualities of a story that might appeal to an outlet such as National Public Radio. But we are also constantly reflecting on and debating the bases upon which the work is judged. These debates surfaced this year when we asked a young spoken-word poet to record a piece in our studio, hoping to pitch the poem to a major outlet. The poet works and performs with an organization called Youth Speaks, sponsor of local and national slams and a major educational force behind the current movement in the United States surrounding performance poetry. This particular poem, delivered in a head-spinning rush of words and images, is a full-frontal attack on the style industry, which the poet says uses child labor to commodify and sell youth culture back to kids at a price they cannot afford. We loved the poem, but we also knew it could never air in its original form, given Federal Communications Commission rules against profanity, and in light of its length, which surpassed standard time-slots. The poet's initial response when we suggested possible editing was a resounding "no." Perhaps we had missed the message of the piece, he asked, which critiqued the media's manipulation of a personal truth? He was not interested in changing the story. Rather than arresting our process in its tracks, however, the poet's concerns set off an exchange of negotiation and reflection on the standards shaping youth and adult media, the compromises worth making for the sake of finding an audience for one's work, and the editorial process as it plays out among youth and adults and across diverse art and media forms. When adult researchers working with youth close themselves off from these kinds of debates, they compromise the depth of their inquiry, and they miss an opportunity to learn from the insights young people bring to the tensions that arise whenever we aim to represent complex realities to a diverse public.

The third condition in place within youth media projects with implications for research methods centers on accountability - a buzzword today in urban education. Accountability is typically framed as a systematic process of evaluating whether an investment has paid off - for example, if re-allocations of a school's budget yield elevated test scores. But in youth media projects, as in participatory research, accountability can never be so straightforward. A distinctive feature of Youth Radio is its dual mission-the organization is both a youth development agency and a professional independent media producer, and that means we are constantly balancing our commitment to supporting the young people enrolled in our programs with the demands

of a competitive media marketplace-even one that operates in a public, non-commercial sphere. Participatory researchers also juggle at least two points of focus-collaborating in a meaningful way with research "subjects," and delivering articles that will pass rigorous procedures of peer review for publication. It would be naïve to suggest that these two commitments sit on an even playing field. The former has traditionally been much less important, when it comes to career advancement, than the latter, and I do not want to suggest here that a researcher should sacrifice publishing ambitions or theoretical sophistication in order to retain a youth perspective in their academic work. Quite the opposite, in fact. When researchers are accountable both to their adult colleagues and their youth collaborators, they are likely to develop observations with greater nuance and novelty, simply because the perspectives informing their work include those not typically included in traditional research methodologies.

Fourth and finally, the interdisciplinary character of media projects motivates youth involvement on multiple levels. I mean interdisciplinary not only in the sense that young people experiment with various symbol systems, including sound design, graphics, and creative writing, but also in the sense that they constantly shift among various roles. At Youth Radio, interns create narratives for broadcast-perhaps their most obvious role. They also influence agency-wide policy decisions, through participation in something called a "Leadership Group." Young people make presentations about the organization at conferences and public events. They recruit new students into the program. They help maintain the equipment and physical spaces that house their work. When young people in adult-sponsored arts collaboratives only supply "their own stories," and have no say over how and to whom those voices are edited and presented, and when they have no option to build on initial involvement by advancing into leadership positions, their learning can only go so far (Fleetwood, in press). The product suffers as well. The same can be said in participatory research. When young people do more than run audio-recorders and turn over their tapes to adults for analysis-when they actually participate in interpreting the recorded moments, and gain exposure to all the various dimensions of conducting research-not only do we expand our conventions for gathering and reporting data, but we also have the potential to produce narratives that both talk about, and function as, moments of education.

In this essay, I have deliberately side-stepped debates about what exactly differentiates journalism from qualitative research, even though I am, admittedly, treading on dangerous territory by drawing links between collaborative media making and the production of scholarship. Likewise, I have not emphasized the formal qualities of products that emerge from places like Youth Radio - experiments in sound and narrative - that are themselves models for new uses of the tapes stashed in the basements of so many education researchers. Other scholars (for example, Eisner, 1995; Lightfoot & Davis, 1998) have argued for artistically-grounded approaches to educational research, and I have not pursued that idea here only because the topic seems worthy of an essay unto itself. My point has been to turn away, momentarily, from standard research conventions only to look back at our own methodologies, with new insight derived from the imaginative practices of youth media artists. The young people we usually study in order to tell stories of education are, after all, storytellers themselves.

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