

Special Issue Editorial Introduction: “Praxidents,” the Arts, Technology, & Multimodalities: Expanding Discourse, Research, and Practice

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Praxidents, Practitioner Research, and Possibilities for K-12/Academy Dialogue

To begin this Summer 2014 issue of *Perspectives on Urban Education*, we return to the Winter 2014 Response Piece, “The Transformative Power of Taking an Inquiry Stance on Practice: Practitioner Research as Narrative and Counter-Narrative” (Ravitch, 2014). A professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Ravitch makes a compelling argument for practitioner research, how it can offer knowledge located in context and exist as counter-narrative in higher education, challenging the nature and practice of research in the academy. In this issue, practitioner and Penn graduate student A.J. Schiera, inspired by Ravitch’s article, responds, presenting his experiences navigating the tension between his teacher-self and academic-self in “Practitioner Research as *Praxidents* Waiting to Happen.” As Ravitch points out in her response, the tension can come from “within a system that confers dominance on certain forms of knowledge, expertise and types of research over others.” In his article, Schiera makes sense of this tension through the construct of praxidents.

Schiera operationalizes praxidents as “accidental intersections between teacher values, actions, and reflections, and the academic discourses that happen to overlap

with them.” The notion of praxidents aptly frames the phenomena of teachers who unknowingly engage in practitioner research as they connect their practice to academic discourses. Praxidents can happen when teachers take the time to reflect on their practice and strive to go “deeper and further.”

In his conclusion, Schiera raises two key questions: first, “How do we capitalize on the praxidents that so regularly surface in teachers’ practice?” and second, “How do we help teachers see that the intellectual work they do in their planning, the creative work they do in their instruction, the cognitive work they do in their reflection, and the social-emotional work they do in building relationships with their students are jumping off points that beg for investigation – and have a home in the academy?” Other inquiries emerge, such as how a praxidents framework can encourage K-12 teachers to search for serendipitous opportunities to make meaning of practice, and how praxidents can inform higher education researchers enabling them to more successfully connect to and support the development of K-12 teachers as educators and emerging practitioner researchers. In Schiera’s account of praxidents, he describes teachers trying to engage in academic discourses. Such an approach can result in the teacher internalizing a deficit

view, seeing himself as lacking the skills and knowledge of research. In doing so, the epistemic privilege (Campano, 2007), insider status, and agency of teachers can be diminished. There is a need to find a balance in the conversation between teachers and academics, such that teachers can receive technical support and engage in dialogue with academics. At the same time, academics can value and learn from the data and local knowledge generated from practitioners. Collectively “going deeper and further” in praxidental spaces affords more nuanced understandings of teaching and learning that may not be available from the interpretive studies “done to” teachers while at the same time affording teachers the benefits of the expertise and theories offered by the academy. As Schiera encourages, these “connections are waiting to be made.”

Following Schiera’s “Practitioner Research as Praxidents Waiting to Happen,” Sharon Ravitch illustrates some of these connections as she reflects and responds to Schiera’s piece. Ravitch examines research dissonance as an artifact emerging primarily from the academy and directed at practitioners. This reification of research and knowledge hierarchies perpetuates a deficit view of teacher/practitioner/local knowledge and blocks possibilities for a reciprocal and generative discourse between practitioners and academics. As Ravitch suggests, the tension that emerges from the discourse creates opportunities to examine foundational inquiries and to engage with questions such as: what constitutes research and data, what constitutes “rigor,” and how can the research methodologies, frameworks, and knowledge bases of practitioners and

academic researchers influence and inform each other? Through viewing “teachers as transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988) with much to offer both in and out of higher education, the academy can be positioned for profound transformation itself. Ravitch ends her commentary “May the dialogue continue!” In that spirit, we encourage future submission to *Perspectives* that take this discourse both “further and deeper.”

The Philadelphia Photo Collective: A Multimodal Response Piece

In preparation for our fall issue on Philadelphia schools—and in connection to this issue’s multimodal theme—we’ve chosen an almost entirely visual “article” as this issue’s Response Piece. The images collected here are the work of the Philadelphia Photo Collective, a group of professional and amateur citizen-photographers, and represent the last images of several Philadelphia schools slated for closure in the spring of 2013.

We think these photos exemplify both the power and the meaning of the concept of multimodality. Consider, for instance, Harvey Finkel’s image of a woman leaning against the interior wall of a school. Her coffee cup is on the floor, a brightly painted children’s mural behind her; she’s digging the heel of her hand hard into her eye socket. Alone, no text could quite capture the palpable sense of weariness, resignation, and sadness that permeates this image. Yet without the text it might not be clear that the image is taken in a place soon to be permanently emptied of the voices of staff, children, and parents. Even with both text and image, this particular photo remains ambiguous: is this a woman whose next

task is to find a place for a child to attend school? Is she a displaced staff member, or an exhausted union organizer?

The images in the Collective that include students are even more arresting. Jill Saull's "Sheppard Elementary School" is an image of a classroom mid-lesson: students' hands raised enthusiastically, walls covered with instructional materials, and the teacher intently engaging with her kids. This image is a poignant one that confounds the many deficit-oriented stereotypes of urban schools and urban students—that teachers aren't hard working, that schools are schools unsafe, and students unengaged. But at the same time it presents no easy answers to the viewer: instead it begs the question (among many others) of where these kids will go when their busy classroom empties out and their building is closed forever. These images are not simply about buildings or students or teachers; rather, they are about the unraveling of the warp and weft of communities in the wake of school closings.

As you examine the photos, we encourage you to imagine possibilities for responding, whether in a dialogue with the content or through presenting connected content in a multimodal fashion—perhaps through images, video, art, print, or audio recordings. We hope that your responses will continue the conversation about the ramifications of school closings, particularly in urban contexts, and also raise consciousness about contested spaces in education reform and the shifting urban education landscapes in this city and across the nation.

Trust, Empathy, Multimodality

The aim, in this issue of *Perspectives*, was to deliberately include a significant range and variation in the articles related to the topic of multimodality in order to illustrate the power that a multimodal mindset (and multimodal *practices*) can confer on teaching and learning. We include traditionally written, formal academic pieces that study the use of multimodality in educational settings as well as articles that use multimodal means (photo and video, in particular, but also online journals and blogs) to represent and display knowledge generated by the researcher(s). There are articles focused on how multimedia can be used to teach future teachers as well as how it might be employed in K-12 settings, and what the outcomes of these multimodal projects are.

Movement towards technology in the classroom and a wealth of (sometimes distracting) digital tools may seem to some a sign of progress and to others a frightening trend with potential to undercut the critical connection between teacher and student and amongst classmates. Collectively, in fact, these pieces beautifully illustrate that an embrace of technology and multimodality does not inevitably lead to a cold, lifeless classroom. Rather, they show that multimodality in the classroom—wielded by thoughtful teacher-leaders—has potential to imbue learning environments with a sense of possibility, deeper learning, and empathy.

Simon *et al.* give an excellent example of collaboration between graduate and K-12 students and professors in the making of art

as a way of understanding, on a deeper level, Elie Weisel's well-known Holocaust memoir, *Night*. This piece is an illustration of how the actual making of art—not just the viewing of it—takes students to a deeper level: they are not simply reading words on a page, but engaging with another human being in empathy. The students' written reflections indicate that the act of engagement also made them think more deeply about how they would ask their own students to engage with this (and many other) books.

Sarah Hobson's piece provides not only an extensive review of the literature of this emergent field of multimodality, but also a valuable first-person account of teaching the future teachers of a generation that is "growing up digital." Of particular interest is the opportunity to read (and watch!) as Hobson's students make meaning of their work in multimodal forms. As in Simon *et al.*'s piece, Hobson's emphasizes that deeper understanding was achieved through students' process of making videos and splicing together images, sounds, and themes to find connections across the works of literature they were reading (and would eventually be teaching).

In a study of the use of the micro-blogging site *Twitter* in a teacher education program, Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont and Cramer have given us yet more evidence of the importance of students' feeling connected to one another in the learning endeavor. The authors' findings contradict received wisdom that says that social media participation automatically increases sense of community. In shattering this assumption they call into question the idea that the presence of diverse

forms of technology alone is automatically "good" for classrooms and students. Instead, their findings presage the overall argument advanced in Peloso's piece: that thoughtful, deliberative integration of new classroom elements (such as social media) is critical to their success as a learning tool.

Warren and Lessner's contribution to this issue is to reinforce that trust and empathy are foundational to any classroom's healthy functioning. Though an article on empathy and trust in the classroom may not seem consonant, at first glance, with this issue's multimodal theme, it is easy to see that a lack of trust and empathy can undermine the power that is demonstrated by multimodal learning in many of the articles here (e.g. Block, Hobson, Simon *et al.*). This is particularly evident when we consider how multimodal learning works: to create, to reassemble, to draw, paint, or bring an idea up from the depths and into the world in some form, we must reveal a little something of ourselves. But we must feel safe to do so, and this requires trust. There is a dialectic developed between the building of trust and the production of powerful multimodal work with deeply-felt significance to individuals, groups, and beyond, one that sees heightened trust leading to more powerful production, then to greater trust, and so on. To enact multi-modality requires vulnerability, which in turn, requires empathy.

The Praxis of Multimodalities

Many of the pieces in this issue have a pleasingly "how-to" feel, sometimes with a focus on concrete steps and other times on the development of tools and

practices for both incorporating multi-modalities and exploring how one might assess students' learning through their products (e.g. short films, blog posts, video games, visual art pieces, etc.). Current Philadelphia teacher Joshua Block contributes a practical look at how to integrate everything from blogs to iMovies into the teaching of history, and while he (and other) contributors acknowledge the distraction that these digital technologies can pose, he also observed that in his classroom, "some of the most powerful and insightful projects came from students who had been struggling academically."

Jeanne Peloso's piece on integrating aesthetic education into literacy practices presents the reader with a framework of ten critical capacities that thoughtful educators should look to in both developing their own curriculum and in evaluating their students' learning. This more theoretical contribution proves to be an enlightening companion piece of reading to the several articles in this issue that focus explicitly on classroom practice, and the notion of trust is a common theme for Peloso. In particular, the emphasis here on noticing deeply and questioning, exhibiting empathy and reflecting—four of the 10 critical capacities—clearly resonates with Warren and Lessner's discussion of the multifaceted nature of empathy and the need to minimize what they term "perspective divergence."

As trust, empathy, and critical reflection are important with multi-modal work, the arts are often the medium for its implementation. Art is often spoken of as a "universal language." How might the use of

the arts have potential to bridge the divide between students' native languages and the language(s) they seek to learn? How might the arts and multimodal means smooth the path for students learning to wield both languages with comfort and proficiency? Rodriguez and Matas address the story of the implementation of Proposition 227 in California, the passage of which severely curtailed the ability of English language learners to get instruction in their home languages as they were transitioning from English learners into master speakers. This piece, with the Hasty and Fain article in mind, shows how teachers of a group of linguistically-diverse language learners used not only the students' home languages and English to improve their facility with the latter, but also employed multimodal means, in particular soft collages and the technique of "cultural x-rays." The contrast in these pieces speaks to the great—and some might argue, still untapped—potential of drawing multimodal means of teaching and learning into a more diverse range of classrooms.

Multimodality is in the doing

Despite a focus on the relatively new terrain of multimodalities, this issue attends to the same central question we must always ask ourselves: how do we make our schools better? Authors featured here view the use of multimodalities as a way of addressing the dearth of student voice in the classroom, as a way of connecting students more deeply to material and to one another, and as a way of getting students to "take more risks and uncover more levels," as a potential means of preparing future teachers, and as an example of "connected learning"

that transcends classrooms and connects to the world.

We think that this issue of *Perspectives* makes a significant contribution to the discussion of what is meant by *multi-modality*. However, we also believe that it may not be useful to strive towards a single definition of what “counts” as multimodal, instead allowing the notion to be shaped by available technologies—digital and otherwise—as they evolve, and limited only by the imaginations of the intrepid educators and learners who employ them. We believe, in other words, that *multimodality is in the doing* and we argue that the ontological experiences of multi-media work surface truths—for students and teachers—that probably would not be unearthed in a traditional paradigm. We invite readers to consider what a range of media such as film, video, and photos, might accomplish that traditional written scholarship does not.

Finally, we note that this issue’s focus on multimodality in education has forced us, as Editors, to consider more deliberately the possibilities of an online journal and how this format may help to both challenge conventions in academia, draw in greater readership, make academic work more accessible to a broader range of audiences, and invite greater participation in the production of knowledge from a wide range of students, practitioners, researchers, and thought-leaders.

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