“There was something inside of me that felt very proud of that work”:

The power of aesthetic experiences in secondary literacy education

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Introduction

Abstract

We talk about “meaning making” as one of the central tasks of literacy learning, but what is it, and how does it occur? My study suggests that powerful experiences with meaning making in literacy classrooms, and indeed, in school itself, have to do with expression and connection, with aesthetics and love. My interest lies in theorizing how aesthetic experiences impact students in a racially and culturally diverse urban English-Language Arts high school class that called for the production of critical digital texts: photography, podcasts, and documentary films.

Background

Aesthetic experiences are extras in schools, invited inconsistently, and not reflected in reports of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) even if they support student success in quantifiable ways (Peppier et al, 2014; President's Committee, 2011). My understanding of aesthetic experiences in literacy education is not limited to recognized categories of art, but includes instances of being artistically engaged in activity/work or creation with a "heightened vitality" (Dewey, 2005, p. 18), fully immersed while responding to and creating texts of all kinds.

With this understanding in mind, a sprawling theoretical and empirical field is consolidated into three overarching requirements for aesthetic experiences in academic settings: (1) critical and emotional reading of texts, (2) multimodal production that invites or attempts praxis/change, and (3) performance.

Frameworks:

- Dialogue
- Discourse studies
- Aesthetics

The Study

Setting Norris & Jones (2005), Scollon & Scollon (1998), and Wertsch (1998)

- Large, diverse urban high school
- 42 English & Social Studies students (grade 12)
- Focused on critical digital projects (photography, podcast, documentary film) on topics that challenged the status quo in some way, or educated the audience about a social issue

Data Sources

Data sources for the study include field notes and memos on classroom interactions, audio/video recordings and transcripts of discussions, individual interviews with participants, and student work.

Critical Ethnography

In this four-month critical ethnographic study, I sought to learn from student work, and the discourse and interaction patterns of both teacher and students as they engaged in several aesthetic and persuasive projects. As a participant-observer of interactions and cultures in the “multichanneled” social setting of a high school classroom (Emerson et al, 2011, p. 13), I continually worked against the positivist assumption that there is such a thing as a “classroom community,” singular, or even a collection of identifiable communities in a classroom space (Philip et al, 2013).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) & Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA)

I used CDA (Gee, 2011,2014) to analyze interview and interactional data, as well as MDA (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 1998; Wertsch, 1998) to research social practices, social change, and agency, analyzing ways that interactions are mediated through objects, setting, relationship histories, and trajectories.

Methodologies

Performance – Students had awareness of and concern for their audiences throughout production: peers, family, informants/participants, and the general public (e.g. YouTube, SoundCloud). The teacher actively sought a larger audience for the projects, & was also the toughest and most consistent audience proxy.

"Hey, i did this. I made this.” People are noticing it, arguing about it. It’s out there in the world. It was so hard. Sharing that story was an accomplishment. I just, yeah, that speech opened me up to being very uncomfortable, being comfortable in uncomfortable situations, so I’m very proud of that.

Implications

Aesthetic experiences in this classroom—sustained emotional and critical production & performance—we were not accidents. They came out of a challenging curriculum that was flexible (choice), and accessible (achievable) for all students. Participants were very clear about the difficulty and the pressure of performance, but all felt that they could, in the end, deliver. The success rate for the class was almost 100%. Such democratic aesthetic experiences hold enormous potential for identity transformation toward not only “poet-citizens” (Ingalls, 2012) but collaborative, problem-solving, producer-citizens. And though the construction of complex aesthetic and persuasive texts requires significant commitment of time and resources, the data suggests that it was the ambition of the projects that made them powerful for students, many of whom felt the burden of meaning making for a school project for the first time in their 12 years of formal education.

Findings

Implications