

Research Update:

A multimedia study of learners' and educators' experiences of joyful literacy learning in an urban after-school community center

Background

The Amir Lopatin Fellowship supports my ongoing research investigating how joy is engaged for literacies learning in learning spaces such as urban after school community centers. My research asks how educators account for and design for joyful experiences in under-resourced and historically marginalized communities. Thanks to this fellowship, I began analysis via coding of my ethnographic field notes and began development of dialogical field notes, in conversation with participating educators. I also scheduled a number of interviews to follow up on particular emerging themes unveiled during the analysis of the data. The aim continues to be to empirically investigate the features of learners' joyful experiences in a literacy mentorship community organization whose designs center joyful learning experiences. In service of this goal, I have arrived at the following research questions to guide the process:

- 1) How do educators and learners in informal learning contexts privilege or constrain joy, as part of an affective landscape that is a site of negotiated power and culturally and historically situated?

- 2) How do learners and educators co-construct this affective and physical learning landscape via ideation, design, sounding, and other embodied activity?

Research Problem

Learning is pervasive and by nature, relational, embodied, and affective. This research project asks how affect, joy specifically, is engaged for literacies learning in designated learning spaces, such as after school community centers. The study asks how educators account and design for joyful experiences in under-resourced and historically marginalized communities.

I place three bodies of literature into conversation in my theoretical background on the essential contributions of joy to learning: (1) design of decolonial and liberatory pedagogy, (2) joyful learning, and (3) embodied aspects of learning. My focus is to establish in co-design with educational partners joyful and generative learning spaces and pedagogy, and to study how they facilitate learning to write in expansive and horizon-shifting ways. The research site is the literacy-focused non-profit organization Chapter 510 in Oakland, whose programs include free creative writing and bookmaking workshops, publishing opportunities for youth, and in-school book projects. Its emphases tend toward joy, making space for the whole, affective student to support their development of voice. It establishes a third space that merges students' at-home and cultural experiences with their educational understanding, creating an open, flexible environment for expansive learning that invites and respects learners' cultural funds of knowledge in addition to educational curricula. I was invited by leadership at the organization to work with them to understand how their pedagogy and orientation towards joy is experienced by the students that they serve.

Methods and approach

Initial study research methods involved use of field notes to record *third space* activities and social interactions, in addition to participant interviews, collection of learners' written works, and other approaches to gather students' and educators' reflections on their affective experiences with writing during Chapter 510 workshop activities, in which I served (and will continue to serve) as a participant observer and editorial mentor, paired 1:1 with one of the participating students.

Chapter 510 is a community based writing center in the greater Bay Area. They hold regular workshops most school day afternoons, which span different genres of writing, from journalism, to creative writing, to fiction, and nonfiction. They are committed to serving children from 3rd to 12th grade, particularly youth of color in addition to being committed to being a safe learning environment for queer youth as well. Their model centers publishing, and every project generates publications, from magazines and pamphlets, to books and newspapers. The center is also committed to hiring writers of color as "teaching artists". In addition, they are committed to a highly supported learning environment, and every student gets an "editorial mentor" in addition to the teaching team. Of note, the center is committed not only to equitable representation, but they are committed to strong pedagogical practices. The workshop in which I served as an editorial mentor, had an 8:3 student to teacher ratio for half the workshop, and for the second half, an 8:11 student to supportive adult ratio.

As I'm seeking to understand educational cultural practices that 1) express joy and 2) attune to joy, my research focus includes student and educator co-construction of joy which are also practices that privilege and foster learning-coupled joy. I gathered data by taking ethnographic field notes as a (co)participant observer, while serving as an editorial mentor for a

student in the workshop. I was particularly attuned to participant interactions in learning contexts and followed up with educators, asking them reflect in interviews and producing dialogical field notes from these conversations, as educators' meaning-making of the interactions in the classroom help me more concisely describe and understand the contours of the phenomena.

Thus far, I continue building on established working relationships with the five-teacher teaching team, meeting via videoconference or in person for dialogue to understand more about their goals, the organizational context of their pedagogical activities with learners, and how this research could contribute to both their practices and our understanding of joyful student learning within this context.

Important research artifacts include ethnographic field notes of workshop interactions, student writing artifacts, final products and presentations, and teacher reflections on workshop interactions via dialogical field notes. As illustrated earlier, there are two threads of research unfolding at once; 1) conversations and interviews with the Chapter 510 teaching team, and 2) in-workshop ethnography examining literacy mentoring practices and workshop participant interactions. Components of the analysis have been and will continue to be in collaboration with Chapter 510 educators, culminating in a reading or exhibition (photo-walk, etc).

Progress

I have done a significant amount of coding of the ethnographic field notes, interviews, and dialogical field notes and have seen some interesting patterns emerge. I have identified some preliminary findings, and these findings have served as course-correction or recalibration of my approach to understand this phenomena. Although joy continues to serve as a “north star”, I find

it useful to understand how affect is working more broadly in this learning context and it has proven a necessary and fruitful framework for understanding joy in particular.

In keeping with this framework, I focused on three vignettes, taken from the ethnographic field notes and triangulated with interviews and dialogical field notes. Each of these allowed me to look more closely at three aspects of pedagogical choices that enact what I'm naming "affective abundance", or a pedagogical space that allows for learners to engage more broadly and freely in learning that is affectively engaged, expressive and self-directed.

Preliminary findings

The first vignette involves students being led in a lesson by the lead teacher, Ms T. The lesson is a primer on different kinds of stories. In this vignette, I observed the lead teacher paying particular attention to students' articulated engagements. She did this by consistently engaging three particular practices: 1) she listened for every question, even if questions overlapped, even if themes overlapped from a previous question, and even when a question was non-verbal. This she accomplished by closely paying attention to every student's participation and embodied engagement. In one particular instance, she noticed a student's face contort quizzically as she posed questions. She called on him and waited patiently as he formed the idea into words. 2) Ms T responded to every student question, even if it required a pause in her presentation. Her demeanor was welcoming; she did not present as rushed or annoyed by the questions, and her answers were authentic and thorough. The third practice I found of note was Ms T's choice *not* to police student behaviors or time. She did not rush students, nor address student cross-talk. More important to her was identifying every question and ensuring every question was addressed fully.

I found these three practices to be essential to Ms T's teaching approach and consider this collection of practices a finding I'm calling "*every voice matters, every question matters*".

The second vignette involves a moment when students were engaging in self-directed work. Students worked at their own pace, in self chosen areas of the workspace. Some students milled about, talking about their work, most hovered near their workspace, thinking and writing. Ms T moved about the room, always close to the working students, listening to student conversations, glancing at their work progress and readily available for student questions. A student, puzzled by his work, asked a question out loud, to no one in particular. As Ms T moved toward him, two adjacent students asked the student very astute questions regarding his story, which helped him move beyond his stuck moment. Ms T observed the entire interaction, and allowed the students' shared expertise to stand. She did not endorse the advice, nor did she re-state it as teachers can sometimes do. She allowed students to co-construct expertise in the learning environment. Additionally, students approached the student in need in a patient and pedagogical manner reminiscent of the practices established by Ms T. Students were taking up modeled practices and pedagogy, and supporting each other, thereby co-constructing a richer and more abundant learning environment. Here I identify my second finding: *Ms T's space-making allowed for the co-construction of a plurality of expertise.*

The third vignette involves a very actively engaged room of learners. The lesson is a primer on titles, and how titles may serve to provide the reader with context and invite the reader into the narrative. Students were excited by the way Ms T had built the lesson, and some were so excited, they had stood up, or kneeled on their chairs. As the lesson progressed, some students had taken to pacing in place as they raised their voices in response to Ms T's prompts. I noticed Ms T was closely attuned to the quieter voices, and the students who were less boisterous, as a

way to include all voices in the discussion. When the voices reached a particular height, Ms T asked for “One mic!” and students immediately raised their hands to participate. Later when talking to Ms T about this moment, she shared that her attunement to learning, of students engaging and understanding the material, can sometimes look very lively and loud. Ms T sought out this form of engagement as a real-time indicator of learning. This finding I called: *embodied affective expression allowed*.

These three findings work together and are cumulative. Ms T modeled particular ways of being with each other as learners and created a space that allowed students to engage learning in embodied, emotional, and vulnerable ways. These three practices make up a space that I see as one of *affective abundance*.

Next Steps

In addition to exploring how *affective abundance* enables joyful and generative learning, my further investigations for the project will require multiple threads of research. One focus will be to learn more about the questions that preoccupy Chapter 510 educators re: writing and learning at Chapter 510. I am committed to engage with this site in ways reciprocal, respectful and fundamentally useful for the educators and students I work with. They have already requested reading materials to better understand third space, and I will do reading workshops with mentors this summer. Additional threads of research include ethnographic work with me serving as an editorial mentor in more workshops, interviews with other participating editorial mentors and educators, and survey work on joyful literacy learning developed in partnership with consultants.

Having completed the field work for an ethnographic study of the eleven- week workshop, and as I continue building relationships with members of the organization, I have proposed and Chapter 510 has approved a Social Design Experiment writing project, co-designed with Chapter 510 students and educators, exploring the relationship between joy and learning. It will be modeled after Chapter 510's in-house workshops, with weekly 60–90-minute sessions for 10-12 weeks. Workshop size will be typical of a Chapter 510 in-house workshop with 6-10 students. Middle school age would work well with this format. This requires initial work with Chapter 510 team to design the curriculum, and ongoing weekly collaborative time to refine and respond to student response. In broad strokes, the initial third of the workshops (3-4 sessions) will be ideating with students on joy and learning based on researcher-Chapter 510 co-designed activities and writing prompts, with the remainder of the workshop dedicated to writing and revising, based on student-generated concepts.

For purposes of generating easy to create and analyzable records of reflection by mentors and learners, I will compare and select among different software tools that enable students and teachers to post notes on a common page for the purposes of reflecting on their affective experiences during the community organization's literacy activities. Padlet is one possible choice given its ready access and simple user experience, and the notes posted by teachers and students can contain links, videos, images and document files. These features would enable mentors and learners to create interpretations of videos of their site activities and to share associated written works they were creating during their writing.

Conclusions

The data did allow me to explore my research questions, but more importantly it allowed me to course-correct, and spend meaningful time exploring affect more deeply and the ways it might contribute to joyful learning. I hold deep gratitude for the support of the Amir Lopatin Fellowship, which has supported the implementation of this research. I look forward to completing and publishing this research.

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